



Take the Wheel

Author: *Natasha West*

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Description: When free-spirited socialite Ari Stark invites her no-nonsense chauffeur, Nancy Doyle, to be her date to her ex-fiancé's wedding, Nancy's first instinct is to decline. Pretending to be a couple with her boss? Risky. But Ari is persuasive — and Nancy could use the extra cash.

As they navigate the lavish wedding weekend, their fake relationship starts to feel all too real. Nancy uncovers a vulnerable side to Ari beneath her party-girl facade, while Ari discovers unexpected warmth in Nancy's reserved demeanour.

The chemistry between them is undeniable. But so are the obstacles. Ari lives in the spotlight. Nancy prefers to blend into the background. And neither of them were expecting this connection to feel so real. As tensions rise and secrets come to light, Nancy must decide: will she play it safe, or take a chance on something unexpected?

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One

Ari Stark woke with a start, her head pounding like it was trying to stage an escape. Fluorescent hotel lighting flickered overhead. She blinked, trying to remember where she was, but her brain wasn't playing ball.

Groaning, she sat up, rubbing her temples. She remembered the start of the evening just fine. Drinks at The Wobbly Stool with colleagues. That had petered out before she was ready to stop, but she soon found another lily pad to leap to. Some of her old buddies were making a night of it at Vault, a club on the water. Things were hazy after that.

She scanned the room for clues, but the only thing clear was that she'd slept in her dress, which was twisted at such an alarming angle it looked like it had been flung from a moving vehicle and landed on her by accident.

She had a disturbing thought and checked the other half of the bed. She was glad to see she was alone, at least.

Muffled voices passed outside the door: 'No, Michael, I don't know where your clean pants are, and if you ask me again, I'm divorcing you. No, I mean it this time.'

Southern English accent. Helpful. Not definitive. Could be London, could be the depths of Kent. Maybe she was still in her own city. That would be considerate of drunk-Ari. Sober-Ari could not always rely on that sort of consideration. Once, she'd been partying in London and woken in Amsterdam. She hadn't even had her passport. To this day, she didn't know how she'd achieved that. She'd spent all day in the

consulate until she was issued a temporary passport and packed off back home.

She staggered to the dresser, looking for the usual hotel stationary crap. Something that would say, 'Welcome to the Wherever You Are.' Nothing. Not even a passive-aggressive note about towel reuse.

Wait, what was she doing? She just needed her phone. Maps would fix this predicament. If she had it, that was. Again, phones tended to vanish when she made a night of it.

Ari's eyes darted around, panic simmering beneath the headache. She tore the duvet off, rummaged through the sheets, checked under the pillows... nothing. She rifled through the bedside table and found nothing but dust.

Dropping to her knees, she checked under the bed. More dust. A lone sock. Not hers.

She sighed and plunked herself down on the bed... and heard a faint clink. Her heart leapt. She reached between the mattress and the wall, fingers brushing cold metal—her phone.

She yanked it free. The screen was uncracked, surprisingly. She tapped it. The lock screen lit up with a message from Jake:

Where is this shitshow, anyway?

An apt question in the present situation, but he was talking about a separate shitshow she didn't have brain space for right now. She'd get back to him.

Maps. Open. Loading... and there it was. She was at the Rest Easy Hotel. Twenty minutes from home.

‘Oh, thank fuck,’ she exhaled, collapsing back onto the bed.

Next thing was next. It was time to text Nancy.

I’m at the Rest Easy Hotel. Can you pick me up? And bring some stuff?

Nancy replied almost instantly:

Of course. What stuff?

Ari could practically hear the cool, detached tone. Nancy, unflappable as ever.

Clothes. Makeup. She glanced around. Shoes too, please.

What’s the room number?

Ari went to the door and peeked outside, wincing against the hallway’s oppressive lighting.

28.

Be there ASAP.

Thank god for Nancy. Reliable, discreet, and nonjudgmental. It was a shame Ari had to pay for those qualities in her life. But better than nothing.

Feeling a surge of bladder-related urgency, she stumbled into the bathroom. A bottle of Grey Goose floated in a half-full tub alongside the damp hotel paperwork. She chose not to investigate further.

As she handled her bladder’s business, she fired off a text to Jake:

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The wedding is at her family's estate in Scotland.

Jake replied instantly:

How are you getting there?

Driving,she shot back, omitting the detail that Nancy would be doing the actual driving while Ari napped in the back seat.

That's gonna take forever. Can't we fly?he whined.

You can fly,she replied.I don't do flights within my own country. Bad for the carbon footprint.

A lie. She just hated flying. She could manage it for, say, a tropical paradise, but not when ground travel would suffice. There were trains, of course, which were the fastest way to get somewhere inland. But trains were full of people, and people were the worst. She didn't exclude herself from that.

I will, then. Give me the details,Jake said.

She had a shot of the invitation in her camera roll and sent it to him.

Ari went to lie down on the bed with her eyes closed. That felt worse—too much spinning. She put on the TV in the corner of the room and watched a daytime show. A woman found out her boyfriend was her long-lost brother. Ari found herself rooting for them. On the proviso they didn't try to breed, of course.

‘Ari, it’s me,’ a voice said through the door.

Ari jumped up and turned the TV off. She opened the door to Nancy.

Her dark green eyes were calm and unreadable, with just the barest hint of amusement at the corners of her mouth. She was a touch older than Ari, though didn’t quite know her age and would never ask. Ari would place her in her late thirties if pushed.

Not a hair was out of place in her sleek blonde bob, the sharp ends brushing just below her jaw. Dressed in a crisp, tailored blouse paired with neat trousers in muted tones, Nancy’s posture and outfit radiated a quiet authority.

‘Thank god for Nancy,’ Ari thought. She was the safest of hands.

Two

Nancy Doyle’s knock had barely faded into the hallway when the door creaked open.

Through the narrow gap, Nancy saw a pair of bleary eyes peeking out, framed by a wild tangle of hair. Arianna Stark. Ari. Even in her dishevelled state, there was a glamour to her.

Nancy supposed that was simply her good looks and easy confidence shining through. She was thirty-one, though she could have passed for twenty-one. She was absurdly and effortlessly good-looking, with high cheekbones, a smooth, olive complexion, a hypnotically large set of dark, almost black eyes and thick, long, coal-black hair.

‘Morning, Nancy,’ Ari mumbled, with as much contrition as she could muster, which was to say, very little.

Nancy stepped inside with her usual measured calm, taking in the chaos: rumpled sheets, a lingering scent of stale alcohol, and a scattering of miscellaneous debris.

As she surveyed the scene, she knew exactly why Ari had gotten hammered last night. It wasn't just another bout of self-destruction. There was an event on the horizon, rushing towards Ari. An ex of hers, Paris, was getting married, and for some reason, Ari had chosen to accept the invite to attend.

Nancy wouldn't have gone to something like that, but clearly, Ari had more pride than people realised. Which was why she was in this shitty hotel room, probably with a recollection of her night that was roughly the integrity of honeycomb.

Nancy walked in and placed a bag down. 'Clothes, makeup, shoes.' She paused. 'You lost your shoes?'

Ari looked around her. 'That remains to be seen. They could be in the room somewhere, for all I know.' Her phone buzzed in her hand. She checked it and rolled her eyes.

'Everything OK?' Nancy asked.

Ari tutted. 'It's just Jake. I gave him the invite, but he keeps asking questions. And it's like, at this point, I know whatyouknow, mate.' She picked up the bag and trotted into the bathroom. 'Give me ten,' she said over her shoulder and slammed the door.

Nancy thought it was telling that Ari was referring to Jake as 'mate.' Clearly, an unserious relationship. Not that Nancy would ever ask. Anything she knew about the inner workings of Ari's heart and mind was only ever gleaned. They were not close.

Nancy liked to see it as a warm working relationship, like bread and a toaster. The bread went off to get buttered elsewhere while the toaster waited for its next use. That

was Nancy in the car. Awaiting her next pop down.

Nancy knew about the upcoming wedding in Scotland because she was the one driving Ari there, who would be in the back seat of the silver Mercedes-Maybach S-Class. Officially, that was her job—driver.

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However, in the two years that Nancy had worked for Ari, it had turned out that there were a few additional bolt-ons which hadn't been in the original job description. Nancy's workday had her acting as an errand runner, last-minute reservation magician, finder of lost handbags, caffeine provider, and hangover supplies collector.

Nancy had accepted that working for Ari meant expecting the unexpected. Still, the paycheque was decent, and Ari, while chaotic, was never rude to her. You couldn't guarantee that with the moneyed. So she wasn't thinking about going anywhere. Not unless things with Ari took a downward turn.

But until that day, Nancy would do her job, take her money, and keep her distance from the worst of Ari's messes. It wasn't personal, and it wasn't complicated. The sweet spot.

Nancy parked herself on a chair and re-checked the route for the big Scottish journey while she awaited Ari. It was going to take a few days to get to Dunmore Hall, with one stopover. Though Nancy couldn't memorise the route as such, she liked to know what it was about. She could only hope that Ari wouldn't throw her any curveballs.

Ari walked out of the bathroom, stunningly fresh and quaffed. Nancy didn't know how the hell she'd done it.

'How do I look?' Ari asked.

'Very put together,' Nancy said.

Ari sighed. 'Wow. Sweep me off my feet with the compliments, why don't you?'

Nancy didn't engage. It was best if you didn't with Ari. 'OK, ready to roll?' she asked, standing.

'Yes. Though I'd love a—'

'There's coffee and painkillers in the car,' Nancy assured her.

Ari moaned. 'You're a legend. Never leave me. I would die in a week.'

'There's also water,' Nancy told her.

'I probably won't drink the water, but I appreciate the thought,' Ari said with a cheeky grin.

'I know you won't,' Nancy said agreeably. 'But I feel compelled to at least try to hydrate you.'

With one final glance around the dismal hotel room, Nancy opened the door wider and gestured for Ari to follow. Together, they stepped out into the corridor, leaving behind the remnants of a night that had been as unpredictable as the woman she was determined to help navigate another day.

Three

Ari moved around the room in a frenzy, clothes tossed into the suitcase without care. She didn't pause to fold or even consider. Whatever was closest went straight in, a mess of high-end fabric crammed together like the contents of a laundry hamper.

'We definitely heading out today?' Nancy's voice was light, but Ari could hear the concern underneath it.

Ari glanced over her shoulder, unfazed, and grinned playfully. ‘Oh, stop fussing. On the hangover scale, this one’s barely a five.’ Another pair of shoes flew into the suitcase, tossed in with an exaggerated flourish.

Nancy bent to pick up a jacket that had fallen to the floor. ‘It might be worth packing a little more... strategically.’

Ari laughed, not taking her eyes off the suitcase. ‘Strategic packing? Yes, that sounds like something I’m going to start doing any minute now.’

Just then, Ari heard the front door open. There was only one person with a set of keys besides Ari and Nancy, so Ari knew who the uninvited guest was. Dread filled her heart.

The sharp click of her heels echoed across the floor as she casually pushed past Nancy and entered the bedroom. Ari’s mother was among them.

‘You’re taking the week off?’ she began. ‘A whole week?’

Ari didn’t look up, her hands still moving, though at a slightly slower pace.

‘I’m just taking annual leave,’ Ari muttered, the words coming out brittle, already drained by the coming confrontation. ‘People do that. It’s normal.’

Her mother exhaled sharply. ‘Not for you. Not when you’ve been given an opportunity most people would kill for. Do you think I pulled strings so you could waltz out whenever you feel like it?’

Ari’s fingers tightened around a jumper sleeve, her knuckles going white for a second. She swallowed and exhaled, trying to remain unaffected.

‘It’s leave,’ Ari said, her voice a little slower now, almost like she was trying to make her mother hear her. ‘I got permission.’

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‘From your boss, who works for me and probably thought he had to. A week where I have to explain why my daughter, who I placed in this organisation, is too flighty to take her job seriously.’

Ari let out a short, humourless laugh. ‘I’m a glorified assistant, Mum. Let’s not pretend I’m holding up the foundations of the company.’

Her mother’s jaw tightened, the muscles in her face visible as she fought to contain her frustration. ‘You’re more than that.’

‘Am I?’ Ari muttered, finally looking her mother in the eye. ‘Because I spend most of my time scheduling meetings for men who don’t even look at me, writing reports no one reads, answering emails about things I couldn’t care less about.’

Her mother’s voice grew crisp. ‘It’s a stepping stone.’

Ari let out another breath, shaking her head. ‘A stepping stone to what? I don’t want your job. I would be shit at it, apart from anything else. God, you could have atleastput me on the creative side.’

Her mother met her gaze. ‘Creative is a dead end. Corporate is better.’

‘Creative is a dead end? You run a fashion brand,’ Ari said, mildly appalled.

‘You think you’re above me,’ her mother said. ‘That’s the problem, Ari. But I work hard to make sure you have all this.’

‘I’m not above anyone. I just—’ She stopped, pressing a hand to her forehead like it could smooth out the tight knot of frustration pressing against her skull. ‘I just think I should do something else.’

Her mother sighed, not unkindly, but also not with sympathy. ‘Then do. No one’s stopping you from carving your own path. But if you want my help, you’ll get it. Allof it.’

Ari didn’t respond to that. She couldn’t.

She could feel Nancy’s quiet presence in the room, though she didn’t turn to look at her. Nancy had seen this kind of scene too many times to count—the same push and pull, the same dance, Ari running away from what her mother demanded and Sandra Stark trying, in her unrelenting way, to mould her daughter into someone she couldn’t quite be.

Ari wondered if she’d ever find the strength to put a stop to it. But then what? She was useless. Her mother was right. She could leave any time and do her own thing. But she didn’t have her own thing. Unless you counted flirting and drinking.

‘Where is this wedding, anyway?’ her mother demanded, breaking the silence.

‘It’s in Scotland. It’s going to be a long journey,’ Ari answered, her voice flat.

‘You need a whole week for a Scottish wedding? How? It’s in this country.’

Ari smirked. ‘Don’t say that to a Scottish person, Mum. They’ll revolt again.’

Her mother didn’t respond, possibly not understanding that a joke had been made. If she had a sense of humour, Ari didn’t know where she kept it.

‘Whose wedding is worth all this?’ her mum asked.

Ari hesitated. ‘It’s Paris’s wedding,’ she replied, already bracing for the inevitable reaction.

Her mother didn’t immediately speak.

‘My ex-girlfriend,’ Ari added with a sigh.

‘I know that!’ her mother said quickly. ‘You burn through boys and girls at lightning speed, Ari. It took me a second.’

‘I was with Paris for two years,’ Ari reminded her, trying to keep the frustration out of her voice, but it slipped through anyway.

‘Then why on god’s green earth are you going to her wedding to someone else?’ her mother asked, baffled.

Ari didn’t want to answer that just yet. Not with her mother like this. She would answer later. For now, she just wanted her mother out of the room.

So, she lied. ‘I want her to know I’m happy for her.’

‘Who cares if she knows you’re happy for her? She’s an ex,’ her mother said dismissively.

‘That’s not how I think, Mother,’ Ari shot back, irritated.

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Her mother's lips curled, just slightly, a sneer that had become all too familiar. 'Don't drag your father into this. He was the one that left.'

'There wasn't anything to leave by that point,' Ari muttered.

Her mother gave a tight sigh. 'When you're back, we are going to have a serious talk about responsibility.'

'Oh, goody. My favourite,' Ari said. Though she would welcome it. She couldn't wait to get back and have a chat with her mother. By then, Ari might have some pretty interesting things to say.

But not now. She just needed this week.

'Enjoy your little jolly,' her mother sneered and turned, exiting just as grandly as she had arrived, leaving the room suddenly empty and eerily quiet.

Nancy was stood in the doorway, her presence still steady and silent.

'I don't know why I always let her get to me,' Ari murmured, barely above a whisper, eyes focused on her hands twisting in her lap.

Nancy paused. 'Parents aren't very ignorable people.'

Ari understood the subtle restraint in Nancy's words. She couldn't say more than that, not given who paid her. But Ari appreciated it more than she could explain.

After a beat, Ari stood up, her movements slower, less hurried than before. She walked back to the suitcase, pausing as she looked down at the jumble of clothes. 'I don't have enough shoes.'

Nancy turned to leave, giving her space.

'Thanks,' Ari said quietly before she could completely disappear. The word felt smaller than she intended, but it was sincere, nonetheless.

Nancy turned back to her, and they locked eyes for a moment. When it had gone on slightly too long, Ari said, 'Hey, why don't you go and get a drink? I might be awhile.'

'I could get the tyre pressure checked,' Nancy said. 'We still OK for a noon departure?'

Ari smiled. 'Yeah. No problem.'

'You sure?' Nancy checked. 'Because I can readjust my schedule if I have some warning.'

'You worry too much. Noon will be fine,' Ari assured her.

Four

They left at two-thirty. Nancy was pretty livid about that. But she was doing her best to let it go. What was she going to do, rip Ari a new arsehole? Tempting, but she already had enough arseholes to be going on with, given the visit from Sandra.

Nancy kept her hands steady on the wheel of the large Mercedes and her eyes on the road. She didn't need to look in the mirror to know Ari was suffering. The quiet was

enough of a clue. Ari was never this silent unless something was up. The movement of the car had done exactly as predicted. The hangover was more than a five now.

‘If you’re going to be sick, aim outside,’ she said.

A low groan came from the back seat. ‘You’re not funny.’

‘I’m hilarious. But I’m not kidding.’

There was a pause. ‘Wait, you’re doing the hat today? There’s no need.’

Nancy exhaled sharply through her nose. ‘It’s part of my uniform.’ She adjusted her grip, resisting the urge to pull at the brim of the chauffeur cap perched on her head.

‘But you loathe it. You despise it. You want to burn it.’ Ari shifted slightly, wincing at the movement but still smirking.

‘What gives you that idea?’

‘I see you stare at it with hatred sometimes when you don’t think I’m looking.’

Nancy stayed silent. Engaging would only encourage her.

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‘Your knuckles just went white,’ Ari observed.

Nancy forced her grip to loosen. ‘Your mother insists.’

That, at least, made Ari pause. ‘I thought you were just following some sort of driver code. That makes more sense.’

Nancy gave a slow nod, keeping her expression neutral. ‘I suppose she likes the aesthetic.’

‘She likes to keep people in their places, you mean,’ Ari stated. ‘But if it helps, you look good in the hat,’ she added casually.

Nancy couldn’t think of a single reply to that. She let the moment settle before saying into the rearview, ‘Rest. You look green.’

Ari made a vague noise of protest. Nancy let her gaze flick to the mirror. Ari’s head was tilted against the window, looking miserable. Nancy had lied. Anyone else would have been green, but Ari’s skin never let her look less than glowing.

Ari slipped a hip flask out from the centre console and took a sip.

‘You know,’ Nancy said, chewing, ‘most people in your state would be rehydrating. Maybe eating something with actual nutritional value.’

Ari, slouched, lifted a languid hand. ‘You’re assuming I want to feel better. Anyway, hair of the dog and all that.’

Nancy snorted. 'Hair of the dog is a myth.'

'Maybe, but it's gotten me this far.' Ari took another sip.

'This is going to be a hellish trip if we have to contend with the smell of vomit in the car,' Nancy told her.

'It's hellish anyway,' Ari shot back, screwing the cap back on the flask. 'So let's get comfy with the devil.'

Things went quiet after that for at least an hour. Nancy didn't mind silence, but Ari filled spaces as naturally as breathing. If she was quiet too long, it usually meant she was brooding. Nancy could already tell where her thoughts were drifting. The reason for this trip. The wedding.

She was about to make some half-hearted attempt at distraction when Ari's phone buzzed on the seat. She picked it up and groaned.

Nancy looked in the mirror. 'What?'

Ari didn't answer.

Nancy leaned back, watching her carefully. 'You gonna say something, or are we just sitting in suspense?'

Ari blinked and shook her head. 'It's nothing.'

Nancy considered pushing just a little. But Ari was already reaching for her flask again.

Nancy exhaled through her nose. 'Fine. Keep your secrets.'

Ari shot her a look. 'It's not a secret. It's just not worth talking about.'

Nancy concentrated on the road, flicking the odd look at Ari. She wasn't drinking anymore, but she was turning the flask in her fingers, her brow deep.

Five

Ari slumped in the back seat as the world rolled by. She'd been staring out of the window for the last half-hour, watching fields flick past, but she hadn't seen a single one of them.

Jake had cancelled. That was a problem.

Her phone was still in her hand, the last message glowing up at her.

Sorry, A. Last-minute gig. Prague. You'll be fine without me, right?

She turned the screen off with a sigh and let the phone drop onto her lap.

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Fine without him. Sure. In theory.

She'd known this whole thing was a long shot, just showing up with Jake and hoping it would work out. But now, without him, she was missing something crucial. That second set of eyes.

Ari tilted her head back against the seat, eyes closing for a moment. She could feel the steady hum of the road beneath her, the occasional bump as Nancy took them further away from home and closer to the wedding from hell.

She'd been doing the strong silent routine since she found out the bad news, but it wasn't her style. She needed to vent. 'Jake has cancelled,' she announced to the front of the car.

In the rearview, Nancy raised an eyebrow. 'Jake. Was that...'

'My date.'

Nancy's shoulders dropped in sympathy. 'Oh dear.'

She said it like she understood what that meant. Going to your ex's wedding was one thing. Going to your ex's wedding alone? From Nancy's perspective, it probably sounded like real loser shit.

If only it were as simple as social anxiety.

'What happened?' Nancy asked.

Ari shook her head as she typed a reply. 'Work thing. He booked some Prague job.'

Nancy threw the quickest glance over her shoulder as she navigated the motorway. 'What does he do?'

'Model. Actor.'

'Ah, so he's professionally handsome?' Nancy said.

Ari snorted a laugh despite her current turmoil. 'Yes. He's pretty good at it, too.'

Nancy gave her a long look in the mirror. 'You OK?' she asked seriously.

Ari held her gaze, then rolled her eyes. 'It's fine.' She pressed her head back to the cool window, letting her phone fall from her fingers.

She picked up her flask again, turning it between her fingers. Jake was supposed to be her cover, her buffer, the thing that made this whole plan seem reasonable. Without him, she'd have to rethink everything. But there was now she was backing out now.

She glanced at her phone again, nudging it awake with her fingertip. If Jake wasn't coming, then she needed someone else.

Her thumb hovered over her contacts, scrolling slowly. Who else could she take? It had to be someone willing to drop everything. Someone who wouldn't ask too many questions.

She sent a quick message to Claudia, who was technically an ex but had remained solidly in the 'friendly acquaintance' zone.

Hey, random question. Any chance you want a free trip to the Highlands this

weekend?

She pressed send, then immediately moved on to the next name. Marcus. He owed her a favour.

How do you feel about weddings?

By the time Nancy had pulled in for the evening to the Rosemont Regent, Ari had sent five more messages.

It was fine. Someone would say yes. They had to. Because there was no way she was going alone.

She needed an accomplice.

Six

The glowing sign for The Rosemont Regent loomed ahead as Nancy flicked on the indicator and turned into the sweeping driveway. It was the kind of place she wouldn't pick for herself. Too refined, too polished, too aware of itself.

A motorway hotel would've been easier. Just a bed, a door that locked, and a straight shot back to the road in the morning. No frills, no distractions.

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But when you worked for the wealthy, practicality was not usually at the forefront of their agenda. Not unless they were too drunk to know what they were doing and had staggered into the nearest Rest Easy Inn to recover from a heavy night. But if Nancy was on call, she was there to make sure the standards of good living were met.

Sandra Stark had made that clear from the start: ‘I’ve worked hard to get to my position. I want Arianna to live a life that reflects that. I know you’re not her babysitter, and you can’t force her to do anything. Just point her in the right direction. If you’re in doubt about what that direction is, think of how a princess would be treated. Not the kind locked in a tower. This isn’t Disney. But a real, working princess, who is always where she’s supposed to be and makes a show of being in touch with the people.’

Nancy had nodded, keeping her expression neutral. It wasn’t the first time she’d been given a speech like this. The wealthy never liked to think they were hiring glorifiedbabysitters, but they all wanted the same thing: someone to smooth out the rough edges and make sure their reckless, spoiled loved ones didn’t veer too far off course.

Ari would have been sickened to hear herself described in those words, and Nancy never repeated them to her. She had to sit somewhere in the middle of the two people—the one who paid her and the one she drove around—and keep them both happy.

So a place with harsh overhead lighting, scratchy sheets, and a vending machine for dinner wouldn’t do—Sandra wouldn’t like it. What exactly Ari wanted was hard to say. If she wanted to give her opinion, she did and would. But often, she just let

things go where they went. And that was wherever Nancy was driving her.

Nancy slowed in front of the entrance, putting the car into park. Ari didn't move at first. She was still scrolling through her phone, her face lit by its cold glow. Nancy took the opportunity to watch her, half expecting a reaction when she finally noticed where they were. But Ari just sighed, slipped the phone into her coat pocket, and undid her seatbelt with a quiet click.

Inside, the lobby was warm and quiet, all marble and soft lighting, designed to feel expensive without being ostentatious. The concierge greeted them with the kind of detached politeness that Nancy liked: efficient, discreet, no judgment.

Nancy slid the platinum card that Ari's mother had given her across the desk. The room rate barely registered. The part of her brain that was surprised at the excess had been switched off years ago. Sleep was all Nancy cared about now. It was a long drive. She was ready to go to the smallest room the place had once Ari was settled in the best.

Ari lingered beside her, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. She wasn't looking at Nancy or the concierge—just the phone she'd pulled out again, checking something with a frown.

'You're booked into two rooms?' the concierge checked.

Nancy nodded. The key cards slid across the counter. Nancy took them, passing one to Ari as she nodded towards the lift. 'Come on.'

The ride up was silent except for the soft chime of floor numbers passing. Nancy leaned against the wall, rubbing her thumb over the edge of her key card. She could feel Ari beside her, close but removed, her presence marked only by the occasional flicker of her phone screen.

Nancy didn't mind. She didn't need chatter to make her feel comfortable. The quiet was a nice place.

They stepped out into the corridor, their footsteps muffled by the thick carpet. Ari finally spoke, her voice low, like she was half-distracted.

'Nice place.'

Nancy glanced at her. 'Thought you wouldn't want another Rest Easy Inn after last night.'

Ari gave a small laugh, slipping her key card into her door. And she was gone.

Nancy watched the door click shut before turning back to the elevator and heading to a different floor.

Seven

Ari sat cross-legged in the centre of the vast hotel bed, phone in hand, jaw tight with frustration. The room was lovely—exactly the kind of place she liked, with crisp white sheets and a tasteful, modern touch—but she wasn't enjoying any of it.

She was too busy staring at her messages, waiting for someone to save her. She'd been watching rejections roll in all day, and now she was in the dregs of her contacts.

Last-minute favour, but a fun one. Fancy coming to a wedding with me? She asked Sophie, who was not a good friend, nor one she liked that much, but generally always available.

When's the wedding?

Saturday.

Oh, babes. That's in two days.

Yes, she was aware.

She flipped to another thread.

Elliot. Be my wedding date?

Wish I could, but I'm in New York until next week. Bad timing, sorry.

Bad timing. That was one way to put it.

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Ari sighed, rubbing her temple while scrolling through her contacts. There was no one else. No one she trusted to pull this off anyway. She needed someone who could walk in there like they belonged but also wouldn't ask why Ari kept disappearing.

Her phone buzzed with an incoming message.

I hope you're not stressing your lack of date. Get some sleep. It'll all work out.

Ari blinked at the words. Nancy knew she was stressed out and was being sweet. She wasn't paid to be sweet. It was just from the goodness of her heart.

Ari smiled and reread the message.

It'll all work out.

The lightbulb went off. Ari's stomach flipped.

She needed someone to accompany her to the wedding, someone with a cool head and a comforting presence. And she already had her.

If she could talk her into it.

Eight

Nancy surfaced from sleep to the sharp rap of knuckles against the door. She groaned, pressing her face into the pillow for a moment before peeling her eyes open. She checked the time on her phone. Too early for housekeeping.

She pushed herself up onto one elbow, her brain still sluggish. More knocking. Whoever it was, they weren't going away. She sighed and dragged herself up.

She opened the door to find Ari standing there, bright-eyed and suspiciously awake for this hour. She wore an oversized cashmere sweater in the perfect shade of soft cream, the kind that draped just so. Her wide-leg trousers were impossibly well-tailored—relaxed yet precise, skimming over her frame like they'd been cut specifically for her (because they probably had). On her feet, buttery leather loafers, understated but undeniably designer. The only visible jewellery was a slim gold bangle at her wrist, deceptively simple, the kind of thing that cost more than most people's rent. Even her hair, pulled into a deliberately loose bun, was effortlessly chic.

Nancy became abruptly aware of the fact that she was wearing nothing but her pyjama top. Eyes on the Fries was emblazoned across the front in bold. She tried not to look overtly embarrassed.

'You're up early.'

'And you're not dressed,' Ari said, stepping past her without waiting for an invitation. She barely glanced at the room before perching on the edge of the desk. 'I expected you to be the kind of person who sleeps in her clothes just to save time in the morning,' she said dryly.

'You think I just go back in the box when I'm not driving you like bloody Chauffeur Barbie?' Nancy muttered, pulling the door shut. She wasn't ready for this, any of it.

Ari being in this room made her vaguely unsettled in her own space. The room was fine for her, but with Ari in it, it suddenly felt tiny.

'Fair point,' Ari said, crossing her legs. 'OK. Look. I'm here with an offer.'

Nancy, in the middle of covering her PJs with a hotel robe, knew immediately she wasn't going to like it. 'I might sit down for this,' she said, tightening the belt.

'Not a bad idea.' Ari grinned, then shifted, leaning forward slightly. 'So. I need a date for this wedding.'

Nancy stared at her with zero understanding of why she was telling her something she already knew. 'Yes...'

'And I realised...' Ari gave a nervous little laugh. 'I realised I already had an option under my nose.'

It took Nancy much longer than it should have to click. 'Oh. Wait. No. Not...'

Ari nodded. 'Yes. You.' She put her hands up. 'I just need someone to stand next to me at this thing. That's all. And you have to hang around waiting for me in Scotland anyway, so...'

Nancy stood. 'Why on earth would you...'

'Because you're here. Because you're capable. Because I think you clean up well.' Ari tilted her head. 'And because I trust you not to make it weird.'

Nancy exhaled slowly. 'I feel like I should be flattered, but mostly, I just feel cornered.'

'It's a simple arrangement,' Ari said, spreading her hands. 'You get a weekend in a very expensive location and the satisfaction of knowing you've done a good deed.'

Nancy gave her a look. 'How is it a good deed?'

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‘Because I need you?’ Ari said, with more than a little hope in her voice.

The sincerity threw Nancy for a loop, and she simply stared, open-mouthed, for a second.

Ari laughed suddenly and loudly, clearly uncomfortable with her own honesty. ‘Think of it as... an entertaining way to kill time,’ she said, in a much more Ari way.

Nancy still didn’t know what to say and decided not to say anything, trying to process this mad proposition.

Ari wouldn’t have Nancy’s silence. ‘I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking that you feel you have to do what I’m asking because I’m your boss.’

Nancy raised an eyebrow. ‘Your mother is technically—’

‘So I want to assure you that this is totally your call. No repercussions if you say no. But you’re not gonna, right?’ she asked, a tad nervously.

Nancy sighed, crossing her arms. ‘Why do I feel like you’re not telling me everything?’

Ari groaned. ‘Fine. I’ll pay you. Would a couple of grand swing it?’ she asked. ‘Call it five?’

Nancy paused. This was a mistake. It felt like a mistake. But Ari was looking at her like she was already halfway to a yes, and, worst of all, Nancy had the creeping

feeling she was right.

She pinched the bridge of her nose. 'This is a terrible idea.'

'But?' Ari prompted.

Nancy sighed. 'But I'll think about it.'

Nine

The car was silent. Not the comfortable kind.

Ari had tried to break it once or twice, but Nancy wasn't biting. She just gripped the wheel, eyes on the road, jaw tight. The muscles in her forearms flexed every time she shifted gears, and her shoulders hadn't relaxed since they'd set off. Even her hat looked pissy.

Ari couldn't read the tension. Was she looking like that because she was gonna say yes and she was angry about that? Or was she annoyed that she was in an awkward position that left her with no choice but to say no?

Ari decided to proceed from positivity. She would plan for the best.

Edinburgh designer dress shops, she googled.

She scrolled, flicking through photos. Too formal. Too frilly. Too not Nancy.

After she'd found something that seemed like it could work, she went back to watching the front of the car. Nancy didn't meet her eyes in the rearview. Ari cleared her throat. Nancy didn't say anything. Ari cleared again. Nancy remained silent.

Ari wasn't used to waiting. Or rather, she wasn't used to waiting like this, without knowing which way things were going to land. Normally, she could tell. Or she could push until it went the way she wanted.

This was different. Ari couldn't pressure Nancy. She was in a tough spot with their working relationship and Ari didn't want to be that kind of spoiled little rich girl, throwing her toys away for disappointing her.

Plus, people like Nancy were not easy to find. Her vibe soothed Ari. She couldn't afford to jeopardise that. There were plenty of people who could drive Ari. But making her feel comfortable was not something you could tick off.

The road signs for Edinburgh were getting more frequent. The last major stop before they hit the wedding venue. Her window was closing.

Ari glanced sideways. 'You're very quiet.'

Nancy sighed. 'I'm thinking.'

'Sounds painful.'

Nancy didn't bite. She just exhaled through her nose, fingers tightening slightly around the wheel.

Ari tilted her head. 'Are you going to answer soon?'

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The back of Nancy's head was unreadable.

Ari couldn't push, but she could charm. 'I've learned to read your body language from the back, you know.'

Nancy was intrigued and amused. 'Oh?'

'Your shoulders have been saying no this whole time, but your hands are thinking about it,' Ari told her.

Nancy's fingers tapped once against the steering wheel. A tic, like she was holding back a response.

The sign for the Edinburgh exit flashed past.

Nancy exhaled sharply. 'Fine. I'll do it.'

Ari grinned. 'Excellent. Take the exit.'

Nancy blinked. 'What?'

'We're going shopping.'

Nancy groaned but didn't argue. She just flipped the indicator and pulled off the motorway.

Ari sat back, smug. 'I knew you were going to say yes.'

Nancy shot her a look. 'You didn't.'

'And yet...' Ari said, flashing her teeth in a smile.

Ten

Nancy stood in front of the mirror, dead-eyed, while Ari fussed around her like a woman possessed.

'Turn.'

Nancy turned.

'Hmm.' Ari tapped a finger against her lips. 'It's good. But we can do better.'

Nancy resisted the urge to remind her that she had, at best, mild enthusiasm for this whole situation. Well, the money anyway. Instead, she yanked at the neck of the sequined dress she'd been stuffed into as if adjusting it might somehow make her feel less ridiculous. But it was no good. She looked like a mirror ball.

The shop was the kind of place Nancy would normally avoid on instinct. It was the sort of boutique where the staff looked at you like they could guess your salary within seconds. Ari, of course, fit right in.

'This one is fine,' Nancy said flatly.

'Not if you hate it,' Ari countered.

Nancy sighed and looked at herself again. It was fine. The cut was good, the fit was sharp. That was enough.

Ari, unfortunately, had other ideas. She gave Nancy a critical once-over, then flicked through the dresses on a nearby rail, the silk and chiffon whispering as they slid over each other.

Nancy closed her eyes briefly. She was tired. They still had a few more hours on the road before they reached the venue, and every minute wasted in this shop was another minute she wasn't in the car, getting this whole thing over with.

'We should go,' she said, pinching the bridge of her nose. 'We still have to drive—'

'We're staying in Edinburgh tonight.' Ari said it like it was already decided.

Nancy frowned. 'No, we're not.'

'Yes, we are. The festivities don't actually start until tomorrow, and the wedding is the day after. Today is just the big receiving. We don't need to be received.' Ari plucked another dress off the rail and shoved it at Nancy. 'Try this. Then we'll go have a nice dinner, and in the morning, you can drive us the rest of the way.'

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Nancy stared at the dress, then at Ari, who looked pleased with herself.

She inhaled slowly. 'I hate this.'

Ari shrugged and smiled. 'I know.'

'OK, that's it.'

'What's it?'

'I'm picking my own dress.'

Ari's eyes flashed panic. 'Oh, well...'

'You said it won't look good if I don't like it, yes?'

'Yes, but...'

'Then you don't get a say. Just let me choose.'

Ari moaned and rolled her eyes. 'Tell you what. You're going to need a few outfits. I'll pick... I'll help you pick what you want to wear to the wedding, and you can pick for the other days.'

'No. As I told you, I'm not Chauffeur Barbie. I will pick all my clothes, and you will pretend I look exactly like you want me to look.'

Ari turned over the offer. 'You drive a hard bargain.'

'I drive a Mercedes,' Nancy shot back. 'That's exactly why I'm putting down some boundaries on this. We're way out of the bounds of my job here.'

'Are you ever really in them?' Ari said playfully.

But Nancy was in no mood to play. 'I have to have a line, Ari,' she said curtly.

Ari's eyes dropped. 'I do know that,' she said.

'Then, please, for the sake of this working, respect the line. Go and sit in the car, and I'll purchase outfits for both days and put them on your mother's credit card. And when we are done, I'll come here and return them. OK?'

'Why would you return them?' Ari asked, baffled.

'Because I won't need them after this. And I don't like waste.'

Ari looked so thoroughly foxed at that comment that Nancy was sure she was going to argue. But then she shrugged. 'Whatever you say,' she said in a tone of obligingness that Nancy had never heard come out of her mouth before. 'Don't forget shoes,' she said, and off she went.

With one last glance at the door Ari had disappeared through, Nancy strode toward the nearest rack, already calculating how to get through this with her dignity—and her sanity—intact.

Eleven

Ari was eager as they pulled up to the hotel. The last hotel had been perfectly nice,

charming even, but this place? It was on another level entirely. She'd booked the extra night herself, choosing somewhere absurdly expensive—everything polished, gleaming, and dripping with opulence, the best Edinburgh had to offer. The kind of place that made the previous hotel look like a budget chain in comparison.

Ari wasn't just after getting what she wanted. She wanted Nancy to feel the difference too, to see that she was putting in effort, that this wasn't just about Ari's desires but about smoothing over the tension. She wasn't going to sour their working relationship over a weekend, not if she could help it. And if a bit of indulgence could get Nancy on board, so much the better.

The valet opened the door as they pulled up, and Ari swung out of the car, taking her time with the whole thing. As Nancy followed behind her, Ari could almost feel the scepticism radiating off her. She couldn't blame her.

'I've put you in the best suite they have,' Ari said.

'You're going overboard with this,' Nancy said, sounding like she didn't quite know how to take it. 'I don't need to be in a grand a night room.'

'Just think of it as... an investment in your mood,' Ari replied, smiling brightly as they walked up to the front desk. 'You need to be well-rested for tomorrow, right?'

Nancy just shot her a look. 'I'm already doing this. You don't need to sweeten the deal.'

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Ari handed the receptionist her card. 'I'm just being considerate,' she said, keeping the tone light. 'You'll feel better once you see the room.'

Nancy rolled her eyes but didn't say anything. She was trying not to be swayed by Ari's constant stream of sweetness, and Ari could see it, but she wasn't giving up.

'OK if I come and check out the room? Make sure it's what I paid for?' Ari asked.

Nancy shrugged. 'Sure. Fine.'

The room was sleek and stylish. The bed was massive and soft, the kind you could lose yourself in. The bathroom, too, looked like it could've been straight out of a magazine, all marble and chrome, with a soaking tub that could fit a five-a-side football team in easily.

Ari turned to look at Nancy, expecting a reaction. She wasn't disappointed.

Nancy was standing near the window, arms crossed, staring out at the city, her expression unreadable. 'Good god,' she said simply.

'This is a thank you because I'm grateful,' Ari said, walking over to her, making sure her voice was soft. 'This wedding is a lot of pressure, and I—'

'Stop buttering me up,' Nancy said firmly, turning to her.

Ari couldn't help but laugh lightly because it wasn't the first time she'd heard that from Nancy, and it wouldn't be the last. 'I'm not buttering you up. I'm being nice.'

'Mm-hmm,' Nancy said, clearly unconvinced.

'Fine,' Ari said, throwing up her hands in mock surrender. 'I'll stop. Just promise me you'll use that bath. I'm sure you could do with a soak with all that driving.'

Nancy sighed. 'Wouldn't hate a soak,' she admitted. 'What room are you in, by the way?'

'Oh, some broom cupboard down the hall. It was all they had left.'

Nancy tutted. 'I feel weird about that.'

Ari had to admit, maybe she was pushing it. Because she needed more than a date for the wedding. But if all went well, Nancy would never know Ari's true intentions at this god-forsaken bash.

'A table is booked downstairs,' Ari said, changing the subject.

Nancy raised an eyebrow. 'You're taking me to dinner?'

Ari tilted her head to the side, a cheeky smile on her lips. 'We have to eat.'

'Stop it,' Nancy muttered. But Ari caught the briefest flicker of a smile on Nancy's face.

'Fine, fine,' Ari said, holding up her hands in mock surrender. 'No more buttering you up.' She grinned and walked toward the door. 'But dinner's still happening.'

Nancy sighed, but Ari could tell she wasn't completely annoyed. She was starting to soften, just a little, and Ari could work with that.

Twelve

Nancy wasn't exactly sure what she'd gotten herself into.

As Ari led her through the hotel's elegant corridors to the restaurant, Nancy couldn't shake the feeling that she was walking into something a little beyond her. The chandelier that hung over the dining area seemed to glow a little too brightly, and the crisp white linens on each table made her feel like she was in one of those fancy magazines she'd never bought.

The maître d' led them to a table by the window, and Ari settled herself into the plush chair like it was no big deal, her bright, confident smile never faltering.

Nancy sat down more slowly, acutely aware of the difference between the two of them. Ari looked like she belonged in rooms like this. Nancy was only ever in them to collect Ari.

The waiter handed them the menus, and Ari flicked hers open with a flourish. 'Right,' she said with a grin, glancing at Nancy. 'You're going to want the foie gras and the lobster. Trust me on this one.'

Nancy froze. 'I... what?'

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‘Go on,’ Ari coaxed, eyes sparkling. ‘It’s the whole experience. Don’t worry about the price.’ She looked at her, an almost teasing smile playing on her lips. ‘It’s all on Mummy.’

Nancy shifted uncomfortably in her seat. She glanced at the menu, where all the prices were neatly printed next to the dishes. Each number seemed to grow larger the longer she looked at them.

‘This is a little much, don’t you think?’ Nancy said, glancing up from the menu. She hadn’t even ordered anything yet, and already, her stomach was tied in knots.

Ari looked at her like she was being ridiculous. ‘It’s not that much,’ she said, waving a hand dismissively.

Nancy’s throat tightened. She wasn’t used to this kind of opulence. But something in Ari’s smile, the way she looked at her like she was just so...

She wanted Nancy to be happy. For whatever reason. It wasn’t nothing.

‘Alright,’ Nancy finally said, forcing a small grin. ‘I’ll order exactly what I want.’

Ari’s smile widened. ‘That’s the spirit.’ She waved over the waiter, who had been lingering nearby, clearly waiting for them to make their selections.

As the waiter took their order. Nancy opted for a good old-fashioned steak.

Ari tutted and ordered lobster. ‘Oh, and whatever champagne you have.’

‘We have Krug Grande Cuvée?’ the waiter offered.

‘That will work, thank you.’

The waiter left, and Ari leaned back in her chair.

Nancy shifted in her seat again, suddenly feeling too warm, her hand gripping the edge of the table. They’d never sat across from each other like this. Ari was always behind her or next to her. Never across. It was strangely and disconcertingly intimate.

The champagne arrived. The bottle was popped and the bubbles poured. Nancy took a sip. It was pretty good, but probably not worth the price tag.

‘So,’ Nancy began, trying to ease the tension that had settled between them, ‘tell me more about this wedding.’

‘Tell me more about you,’ Ari shot back, eyes glinting with mischief.

‘That won’t be necessary,’ Nancy said with an eye roll, leaning back in her seat.

‘I know it’s not necessary,’ Ari drawled, her voice laced with dry humour.

Nancy sighed, her shoulders slumping just a little. ‘What is it you want to know?’

Ari raised an eyebrow. ‘Everything,’ she said, but there was a softness in her tone, an openness Nancy wasn’t sure how to handle. ‘How’d you become a driver?’ Ari pressed, leaning in a little. ‘I’ve never asked.’

Nancy let out another sigh, this one quieter, almost wistful. ‘Alright, fine,’ she said, her voice quieter now. ‘My dad was a black cab driver. Taught me to drive when I was eleven.’

‘Eleven?’ Ari repeated, shocked.

‘I had a growth spurt that year, so my legs could just about reach the pedals, and my dad couldn’t wait to pass on what he knew.’ She paused. ‘I think he’d been measuring me while I slept.’

‘Wow. The only thing my mother ever passed on was control issues,’ Ari said lightly. ‘Did you like it?’

Nancy smiled. ‘I loved it. Because he just let me take the wheel.’

Ari’s eyes never left Nancy’s face. ‘And you’ve done it ever since.’

Nancy shrugged.

Ari raised an eyebrow, pushing further. ‘And you never wanted to do anything else? Just... drive?’

Nancy shifted her weight. ‘It pays the bills.’

‘But you have other skills—’

Nancy shifted in her seat, an edge creeping into her voice now. ‘It wasn’t like I had a ton of choices, Ari. I could do it, so I did it. And it’s been reliable. That’s what my dad wanted for me. To always be able to make a living.’ She inhaled. ‘And I do still like it,’ she added softly.

Ari didn’t press further, sensing that she’d pushed Nancy just about as far as she’d go. For now, at least.

‘My turn,’ Nancy said.

Ari looked up from her glass, raising an eyebrow. ‘What do you want to know?’

Nancy shrugged. ‘Why do you need me? What exactly is my role?’

Ari didn’t hesitate, sitting a little straighter. ‘You’re my date.’

‘I need a bit more than that.’

‘I just need the support,’ Ari said. ‘If I look right, I can feel right. If I go stag, I won’t feel right.’

Nancy nodded slowly. She understood that. Nancy had never known wealth, but she had always understood the power of appearances. Looking pristine wasn’t about vanity; it was about control. A pressed shirt, a clean-cut silhouette, and polished shoes. It sent a message: I am put together. I know what I’m doing.

Even now, sitting in this over-the-top restaurant, she felt the familiar instinct to straighten her posture, to smooth down the fabric of her jacket, to make sure not a single detail was out of place. Ari could throw money at looking the part, but for Nancy, it was more than that. It wasn't about having expensive things; it was about precision. About never giving anyone a reason to doubt her or, worse, pity her.

'So,' Nancy continued carefully, 'it's just an image thing? That's it?'

Not a hardball question, but Ari hesitated. 'Yes, of course. What else could it be?'

OK. Interesting.

'I don't know,' Nancy said quietly. But that wasn't to say she was satisfied. Ari, for her faults, wasn't much of a liar. And she was lying right now.

But she didn't feel like she could push any further. This was as personal as they'd ever gotten, and Nancy didn't want to bend things to a breaking point. She didn't precisely know what the breaking point was with Ari. What she did know was that she was paid to help Ari. Be it driving or whatever. Whatever had simply gotten a little more complicated. Looking at it like that, standing next to her at a wedding wasn't all that wild.

Ari met her gaze again, and there was something in her expression. 'So, you're still doing it?' Ari checked.

'I already said I was.'

Ari nodded. 'Cool.' But she didn't look cool. She looked scared.

Nancy was really starting to wonder what was going on here. How bad was this ex that Ari was freaking out like this? And if she was a monster of some sort, why the

hell would Ari go to her wedding?

As their food arrived, Ari smiled at her, her usual confidence back in place. 'OK, since you wouldn't order lobster, at least try a bite of mine?' she cracked the lobster loudly yet somehow, utterly unselfconsciously. She picked some meat out and held it out to Nancy with a wry smile.

Nancy hesitated and then leant forward to be fed. Again, they were in a new and strange zone.

'Good?' Ari asked like she already knew the answer. But annoyingly, she did. It was bloody delicious.

Thirteen

The morning was clear and cool. Nancy stretched as she stepped out of the hotel lobby, lifting her face to the sun, letting it chase away the last remnants of sleep. She was wearing her day one outfit.

Her silk dress was a shade of deep sapphire. It had a classic silhouette, nipped at the waist, structured but with just enough movement to keep from feeling stiff. Nancy, feeling rebellious when she chose it, now felt nervous about how Ari would receive it. She hated that she wanted Ari to like it.

Ari, standing next to the car with her arms crossed, turned. She was wearing an effortlessly elegant midnight-blue midi dress. She looked Nancy up and down. 'Very nice.'

'I'll pass as a fancy person?'

'Nancy, you're a very fancy person,' Ari said with a smile.

Nancy didn't quite know how to take that. 'Fine. Wealthy, then.'

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‘You look like you were born into it.’ Ari’s gaze flicked over her, assessing. ‘Like you summer on yachts and complain about the temperature of your beluga caviar.’

Nancy scoffed. ‘I don’t even like caviar.’

‘Exactly.’ Ari smirked. ‘The ultimate rich-person move. Being indifferent to expensive things.’

Nancy rolled her eyes, but she couldn’t ignore the way Ari’s approval relaxed her. She didn’t want Ari to feel like Nancy was showing her up.

Ari opened the back door and went to get in. Nancy cleared her throat. Ari laughed. ‘Ah. Of course.’ She shut the door and went to the front passenger side.

‘Try again,’ Nancy said.

Ari’s smile slipped. ‘What?’

‘I was thinking you should drive.’

Ari barked out a laugh, shaking her head. ‘Sure. Or maybe I could sprout wings and fly us there?’

‘You can drive?’ Nancy checked.

Ari raised an eyebrow. ‘Technically.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘It means I got my license. But once I had it, I never used it,’ Ari explained.

‘Then why did you get it?’ Nancy asked.

‘I just wanted to know I could,’ Ari admitted. ‘But why would I...’.

Nancy leaned against the car, spinning the keys on her finger. ‘I need to get in fancy person mode. I can’t do that when I’m driving.’

‘OK...’ Ari said, suspicious.

‘And I could do with a driving break,’ she admitted. ‘My back hurts a bit.’

‘I see,’ Ari replied. ‘Well, since you put it that way...’

Nancy’s grin widened. ‘Yes?’

‘I need to keep my date happy,’ Ari said. ‘But I’m not a chauffeur, remember? If I’m driving, it’ll be on my terms.’

‘Deal.’

Ari smiled faintly. ‘Just remember, whatever happens... This was your idea.’

Nancy’s grin faltered ever so slightly. ‘I mean, how bad could it be?’

Fourteen

The car lurched forward with all the grace of a startled deer. Nancy braced herself,

one hand gripping the door, the other pressed into the centre console as Ari wrestled the vehicle into submission. It was a battle she was very clearly losing.

‘Alright,’ Nancy said, forcing a calmness she absolutely did not feel. ‘Nice and easy. No sudden moves.’

Ari’s knuckles were white on the steering wheel. ‘I know how to drive, Nancy.’

‘Doyou?’

‘We’re moving, aren’t we?’

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Nancy bit back a response as the car veered slightly toward the rumble strip before Ari yanked it back, overcorrecting wildly.

‘I just need to get used to it again. It’s been a while,’ Ari muttered.

‘What did you learn in, a panzer tank?’ Nancy gasped as the engine roared.

‘Shut up.’

Nancy grinned, though it was slightly strained as Ari took a turn at a speed that made the tyres protest. She wasn’t sure whether to be terrified or amused. Maybe both.

‘OK,’ Nancy said slowly, adjusting the air vent as if that would somehow stabilise the ride. ‘You know, there’s no rush. The wedding isn’t going anywhere.’

‘I just want to get it over with,’ Ari muttered, hunched over the wheel like she was expecting it to fight back.

‘Yeah, well, if we get there in one piece, I’ll consider that a major success,’ Nancy said, wiping a bead of sweat from her temple.

Ari’s response was to mutter something under her breath as she overtook a lorry in what Nancy could only describe as a reckless burst of confidence. She squeezed her eyes shut for a second.

‘Ari. That was not necessary.’

‘I had space.’

‘You had ambition. That’s not the same thing.’

Ari huffed, readjusting her grip. ‘This is kind of fun. I should do it more often.’

Nancy resisted the urge to cross herself. She realised Ari was speeding up as they approached a roundabout.

‘Brake.Brake, Ari. That’s not the pedal for acceleration—oh mygod.’

Ari slammed the brake so hard Nancy felt her seatbelt dig into her collarbone. They came to an abrupt, jerky stop just shy of the roundabout.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. The only sound was Nancy’s slightly erratic breathing.

Finally, Nancy cleared her throat. ‘You know, I think I’ve changed my mind.’

Ari turned her head slowly, eyes dark with suspicion. ‘What?’

‘I think I want to drive now.’

Ari’s face shifted into something dangerously close to a smirk. ‘Oh no. You insisted. And now you get to sit there and endure it.’

Nancy groaned, sinking further into her seat as Ari gleefully hit the accelerator too hard.

She couldn’t believe she’d thought this might be fun.

As Ari pulled up to the grand Scottish manor, the tyres screeched against the gravel driveway, a sound that echoed off the stone walls and sent a shiver down Nancy's spine. The manor stood like a regal sentinel, its turrets and spires reaching towards the sky. Though Nancy had driven for the rich, this was old money. It was its own world.

'You could have eased into the driveway, you know,' Nancy told Ari, her voice tight as she unbuckled herself.

Ari flashed her a grin, unfazed by Nancy's anxiety. 'But where's the fun in that?' She swung the door open, stepping out with an effortless swagger, her confidence radiating as she smoothed her dress down.

Nancy took a deep breath, trying to steady herself as she followed Ari out of the car. A valet took Ari's keys and drove the car quickly out of sight.

They both looked up at the grandeur of the manor. 'Sweet Jesus. These people are loaded,' Nancy muttered to herself.

The heavy oak doors swung open before they could even knock, revealing a tall, impeccably dressed butler standing in the grand entryway. He was older, with silver hair that had been combed back with precision. His tailcoat was pressed to perfection, his white gloves pristine. Nancy, having never seen a butler outside of a murder mystery, was floored by him.

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‘Ms Stark,’ he said, dipping his head in greeting. His voice was smooth and refined, carrying just enough weight to make it clear he was the gatekeeper to this world, if not a participant. His gaze flickered briefly to Nancy. ‘And guest.’

Nancy barely resisted the urge to straighten her posture. Ari, on the other hand, flashed the butler a winning smile, utterly unbothered by the formality of it all. ‘You remembered me, Laurence. I’m touched.’

‘You didn’t make the reception last night,’ Laurence replied, neither confirming nor denying Ari’s statement. ‘Were you detained?’

Ari shrugged. ‘Flat tyre. Sorry.’

‘Of course.’ He stepped aside, gesturing for them to enter. ‘Please, allow me to take you through to the garden. The guests are gathering for drinks.’

Without another word, he turned on his heel and led them down a polished hallway lined with ancestral portraits, past an ornate staircase that spiralled towards the upper floors.

Nancy kept her steps measured, resisting the urge to rubberneck at the sheer opulence surrounding her. She was not staff today. She was a date. Ari, however, walked like she owned the place, her stride lazy and confident.

Laurence pushed open a set of French doors, and they were met with the sight of a sprawling garden. The air was thick with the scent of freshly cut grass, and clusters of guests, who might as well have come dressed in outfits made of fifty-pound notes,

were already mingling around tables set with crystal glasses and carafes of chilled white wine.

Laurence stepped aside with a small bow of his head. 'If you require anything, do not hesitate to ask.'

Ari gave him an affectionate tap on the shoulder. 'I never do, Laurence. Super high maintenance, as you'll recall.' He nearly smiled as he left them.

'There she is,' Ari muttered from between gritted teeth.

Nancy spotted them across the lawn, surrounded by a gaggle of well-wishers. The bride, Paris—a vision in what Nancy, thanks to Ari, had learned was probably Valentino—with her hair perfectly styled and a bright smile plastered across her face, seemed to embody the very essence of joy. But only if you didn't look too hard.

Nancy squinted slightly, trying to pinpoint what it was that unsettled her about Paris. She was objectively stunning with symmetrical features, luminous skin, and the kind of effortless poise that came from a lifetime of being admired. But there was something about her perfection that felt utterly manufactured, like a face airbrushed just a little too much. Even her laughter, bright and melodic, had the careful precision of someone who knew how to be watched.

Nancy folded her arms. 'Well, she looks... euphoric.'

Ari let out a breath that sounded dangerously close to a sigh. 'Doesn't she just.'

Next to Paris stood the groom, cutting a square figure, muscles packed into more couture, looking equally radiant as he laughed at something one of the guests had said.

‘What’s his name?’ Nancy asked.

Ari looked blank. ‘Hold on.’ She took out her phone. ‘Oh, it’s Callum. Classic Scottish hunk name,’ she said with a little derision. She took a deep breath. ‘Ready to dive into the madness?’

Nancy smiled. Or rather, she bared her teeth. ‘Ready as I’ll ever be,’ she replied.

As Nancy and Ari approached the bride and groom, the air buzzed with excitement. Paris turned her attention to Ari, hereyes sparkling with delight. ‘Ari! You made it!’ she exclaimed, her arms opening wide for an embrace.

Ari stepped forward and hugged Paris. ‘Of course! I wouldn’t miss it for the world!’ she declared. Even Nancy nearly believed it.

Nancy stood slightly apart, feeling like an intruder in a moment. Paris’s eyes shifted to her, curiosity flickering beneath the surface. ‘And who’s your friend?’

Ari turned, gesturing towards Nancy. ‘Oh, this is Nancy. She’s...’ Her voice trailed off, and Nancy could see the wheels turning in Ari’s mind as she searched for the right words to introduce her. ‘My date.’

‘Nice to meet you, Nancy,’ Paris said, her tone friendly but with an edge of suspicion. She looked Nancy up and down, assessing every last square inch of her. ‘How do you know Ari?’

Nancy kept her smile plastered on her face. ‘Um, we met through... mutual friends,’ she stammered, scrambling to keep her answer vague.

‘Right,’ Paris replied, her expression remaining neutral, but Nancy could sense the lingering doubt. She looked at Ari. ‘I wasn’t sure if you were bringing anyone along.’

‘I ticked plus one,’ Ari reminded her.

Paris gave her a condescending smile. ‘Of course.’ She turned to Nancy. ‘Well, it’s lovely to have you here. What do you do?’

Nancy realised that she had no backstory worked out. Was she rich? She should probably be rich. ‘I work in the city.’

‘Oh, finance? You don’t look like a stockbroker. They’re usually so...pressed.’ Paris’s gaze skimmed over Nancy.

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Nancy swallowed. 'Well, I drink a lot. That helps.'

Paris laughed a little too loud.

Ari, sensing the tension, chimed in with a grin. 'She's drunk now.'

Paris's smile didn't falter, but her gaze softened with a hint of politeness. 'How hilarious. Well, enjoy the day.'

With that, Paris turned away, leaving Nancy feeling both relieved and a little unsettled by the encounter.

Ari's gaze flickered back to Nancy, her smile returning. 'That was good.'

'You sure? I didn't know what the hell to say.'

'You acted like you didn't give a shit what she thought of you. That's the only way to play Paris. You try to please her, she will gut you.'

'Jesus,' Nancy said. 'And she was your girlfriend?'

'Don't judge me. I was young and stupid. Well, younger.' Sadness flicked over her face. 'Anyway. Let's get a drink. I think we're going to need it.'

'Sounds good,' Nancy agreed. 'I can't method as a drunk stockbroker without a drink in my hand.'

Once at the bar, Nancy ordered a glass of champagne, the bubbles fizzing as she took a sip, hoping to calm her nerves. ‘Here’s to, er, stocks,’ she said, clinking her glass against Ari’s, trying to muster some enthusiasm.

Ari smiled. ‘You don’t need to be nervous. You’re doing great.’

Nancy gave a small nod, but she was grateful for the approval.

As they turned back to the festivities, she watched the partygoers for a moment, trying to get a read on how rich people acted. She’d seen it plenty, of course. But she’d never taken note.

She could have done with Richard Attenborough to narrate this party. He’d have laid it out for her. ‘And here, amidst the glittering crowd, we observe the rarefied ritual of the ultra-wealthy. Notice the subtle exchange of glances, the measured laughter, everything choreographed, a delicate dance of status. No one dares to break the unspoken rules. To do so would disrupt the balance of their world.’

She almost laughed at the thought. But then, her breath caught in her throat.

‘Oh no,’ she whispered, panic rising within her.

Ari followed her gaze, her expression shifting to one of concern. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘It’s my old boss,’ Nancy admitted, her heart racing.

Fourteen

Ari’s gaze darted to where Nancy was looking, at an older woman in a multi-coloured dress that was trying way too hard to be attention-grabbing and succeeding in ways its wearer probably didn’t want.

‘What the hell is she doing here?’ Nancy muttered under her breath.

‘Just stay still,’ Ari whispered, her eyes wide. ‘She can’t see us.’

‘She’s not a T-Rex,’ Nancy hissed. ‘Though it wouldn’t be impossible to make that mistake.’

‘Alright, then. Let’s keep moving,’ Ari suggested, gently nudging Nancy away from the bar.

As they wove through the crowd, Ari’s heart raced. Nancy’s old boss was here? If that led to Paris finding out Nancy was a driver, she might realise the charade. It would embarrass her, sure. But it also might make things trickier. Eyes might be on her more than they should be.

‘If Helen recognises me...’ Nancy’s voice trembled slightly, breaking Ari from her thoughts.

‘She won’t,’ Ari replied, forcing a confidence she didn’t feel. ‘Just stay close to me. I’ll camouflage you.’

Nancy nodded, though her eyes betrayed her uncertainty. ‘I can’t believe I ran into her like this. The bloody odds!’

‘Law of sod?’ Ari suggested.

Nancy let out a mirthless chuckle. ‘Running into her is worse than dropping toast butter side down. It’s dropping anukebutter side down.’

‘That doesn’t make sense,’ Ari was compelled to point out.

‘I know!’ Nancy said, flustered. It was a new side to Nancy. Ari couldn’t work out if she was disturbed or amused by it.

‘Look, there’s a hundred people here. She probably won’t see you.’ Nancy managed a weak smile, but Ari could see the weight of the situation still clung to her.

‘Maybe. But if she does? What if Helen reveals that I’m not a rich partygoer but a workaday pleb? What then?’ Nancy asked quietly, glancing over her shoulder as if Helen might be creeping up on them.

Ari grabbed Nancy’s wrist and pulled her in close, dropping her voice to a low murmur. ‘Then we handle it. But you need to tell me why you’re this freaked out first.’

Nancy inhaled sharply, her fingers tightening around the delicate stem of her champagne flute. ‘She’s not just a bad boss. She’s the worst I ever had.’

Ari arched an eyebrow. ‘Really?’

Nancy gave her a flat look. ‘You have no idea. She holds grudges like it’s an

Olympic sport. And she loves to humiliate people, especially ones who've walked away from her. If she sees me here, she won't rest until she figures out how to ruin my day—if not my year.'

Ari studied her, searching her face for exaggeration. But Nancy wasn't joking. This wasn't just nerves. This was genuine dread. Ari felt a flicker of anger spring up. But she wasn't here to defend Nancy's honour. It was hilarious to even think of her coming to Nancy's rescue. She was ill-equipped.

'So she's a nightmare. Fine. But we're not going to let her get near you.' Ari's grip on Nancy's wrist firmed before she let go. 'We stick to the plan. We stay confident, we stay together, and if Helen approaches, I'll cause a distraction.'

Nancy frowned. 'Like what?'

Ari shrugged. 'I don't know. Set fire to a centrepiece? Start a fake row? Trip into the wedding cake?'

Nancy sighed, rolling her shoulders back. 'Sorry, I got a bit panicky there. I was just so bloody shocked to see her.' Embarrassment flashed in her eyes. 'I'll try to breathe.'

Ari regarded Nancy with surprise. 'I wouldn't have thought some backseat bitch could affect you like this.'

Nancy was shocked into a laugh. 'Why not?'

'I suppose I thought you were carved out of stone,' Ari admitted.

'Nobody's carved out of stone, Ari,' Nancy told her flatly.

‘But you never let me get away with anything.’

‘You get away with plenty, let me assure you. But it’s... different.’

‘Why?’

Nancy looked at Ari. ‘Because you’re... alright.’

A shocked smile slid onto Ari’s face. ‘I thought I annoyed you.’

Nancy smiled. ‘Well, yes. But you’re OK,’ she admitted. ‘As a human.’

Ari was stunned that the warmest moment between them was occurring under these bizarre circumstances. But she couldn’t help feeling a bit pleased. Nancy didn’t hate her. Maybe even liked her, just a little. That felt like an achievement.

‘You’re OK too,’ Ari told her.

Nancy chuckled. ‘Thanks.’

‘No, seriously. You’re my favourite driver. And I’ve had a few.’

‘Because I don’t ask questions?’ Nancy asked.

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‘Idolike that. But no, that’s not it.’

‘What is it?’

Ari smiled. ‘Not sure exactly. But something about you is very... comforting.’

Nancy’s mouth was a straight line. ‘I possess the qualities of a fleece throw blanket. Good to know,’ she said philosophically.

Ari felt annoyance. ‘Don’t underestimate the compliment.’ She wanted to add that hardly anyone in her life had ever managed to be a comfort to her. Because no one ever treated her like she needed it. But she didn’t want to make it weird. So she smiled her easiest smile and said, ‘You’re atleastcashmere, darling,’ with a wink.

Nancy laughed. ‘I’ll give you this, Ari. You’re an amusing date. Don’t let anyone tell you different.’

‘Oh, theyneverdo,’ Ari said.

Fifteen

Nancy had decided not to worry about Helen. Or she’d decided not to allow herself toadmitshe was worried, anyway. There were enough people around to keep a reasonable distance. It might be OK if Nancy was careful. And she believed Ari had her back, which was more comforting than she expected it to be.

But then people started getting shifted indoors. Nancy barely had time to register the

shift in atmosphere before it started. Subtle at first, a shift in the staff's movements, the way conversations softened as guests realised they were being ushered towards the next stage of the evening. The garden drinks had been languid, filled with polite laughter and champagne that never seemed to stop refilling. But now, as uniformed staff began murmuring invitations to follow the path towards the great hall, Nancy's stomach twisted.

Not just from nerves. She hadn't eaten any canapés during the drinks portion of the day, too worried that the moment she had a mouthful, Helen would appear and demand to know what she was doing here while Nancy tried to swallow dry pastry. Now, with a multi-course meal looming, the idea of sitting still, playing nice, and dodging scrutiny for hours made her fret.

As they stepped through the entrance and into a large hall, the sheer scale of the dinner hit her. The tables were a sea of silver and white, glinting under chandeliers that cast a soft, flattering glow. Hundreds of guests filed in, finding their places. Staff weaved effortlessly through the space, directing the flow of human traffic.

'Find our table yet?' she murmured to Ari, resisting the urge to fidget.

'If we look confused long enough, someone will seat us,' Ari replied.

Nancy exhaled, adjusting her dress. 'Confusion shouldn't be too hard.'

Nancy let out a breathless laugh, but her eyes kept moving, scanning for Helen, scanning for Paris, scanning for any sign that her cover was already wearing thin. As they reached their table, she forced her best effortless smile and took her seat.

The place settings were meticulous, gleaming silverware arranged with military precision, menus printed on thick, expensive card stock. Nancy barely glanced at hers, more focused on the people settling around them. No Helen. Just a middle-aged

couple who ignored them and their two teen kids, who were ignoring everyone to look at their phones. Helen hadn't taken her seat yet, which meant Nancy would have to watch like a hawk until she did.

Ari nudged her. 'It's OK to breathe.'

Nancy scoffed under her breath. 'I'm just—'

'Freaking out? Yeah, I can see that.' Ari reached for her wineglass, taking a deliberate sip. 'Relax.'

As the meal began, Nancy noticed something else. Ari was looking a bit furtive, her eyes scanning the room in a way that wasn't just casual people-watching.

Before Nancy could comment on it, Paris's unmistakable voice rang out nearby, effortlessly charming as she schmoozed guests she was passing. Nancy's shoulders went stiff, and she plastered on a pleasant expression as Paris arrived at their table.

'Darlings,' Paris purred, squeezing Ari's shoulder before turning her attention to Nancy. 'Enjoying yourselves?'

Nancy nodded, summoning what she hoped was the correct amount of ease. 'Sure.'

Paris's gaze lingered on Ari for what was almost an uncomfortably long time. Then she smiled, and the moment passed. 'Wonderful. The first course should be out shortly. Let's have a fabulous evening, shall we?'

'You know me. I can do no other.' Ari shrugged.

'Absolutely. It was the thing you were best at,' Paris said. She turned away on the comment, moving to the next table.

Nancy shot Ari a quick look. Ari just smirked and murmured, ‘Shereallyhates me.’

Nancy was desperate for more details. But she didn’t think they were quite there, so she didn’t say anything to that.

As the main course was being served, Ari suddenly stood, smoothing down her dress. ‘Back in a sec.’

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Nancy glanced up. 'Where are you going?'

'Bathroom,' Ari said casually. Then, just as she turned away, she leaned down slightly. 'If Paris leaves the room, text me.'

Nancy blinked. 'What?'

'I said, if Paris leaves, text me.'

Nancy was immediately on alert. 'Why?!'

But Ari was already gone, disappearing into the maze of tables. Suspicion prickled at Nancy's spine. What the hell was Ari up to?

Sixteen

Ari moved swiftly through the corridors of the second floor, her heels silent on the plush carpet. The estate was massive, an intricate labyrinth of hallways and grand rooms. She had slipped out of dinner unnoticed (at least, she hoped so), but finding Paris's bedroom was proving harder than she expected. She was sure she knew where it was. But it had been a few years now, and nothing was quite as she remembered.

She turned another corner, only to be met with another identical stretch of dimly lit hallway. Cursing under her breath, she stopped and tried to get her bearings. This was absurd. As a person who had grown up rich, even she thought the manor was way too much. It was easy to sympathise with the eat-the-rich crowd in a place like this.

A faint noise made Ari freeze. Footsteps. Her pulse jumped. The steps grew louder, steady and deliberate, and she held her breath, bracing for discovery.

Then, out of the shadows, a figure emerged. Ari's stomach lurched.

Nancy.

'What the hell are you doing?' Nancy demanded, her voice low but furious.

Ari exhaled, her heart still hammering. 'What are you doing?' she countered, buying herself a second to think.

'You first,' Nancy shot back. Her eyes were sharp, scanning Ari like she was trying to piece together a puzzle. 'Why did you want me to text you if Paris left the room? And why are you sneaking around up here?'

Ari had no immediate answer.

Nancy folded her arms. 'I'm not moving until you start talking.'

Ari sighed. 'Fine. But not here.'

Nancy narrowed her eyes. 'Then where?'

Ari glanced over her shoulder, the sense of urgency still thrumming under her skin. 'Somewhere more private. Or less private.'

Nancy hesitated, then nodded once. 'Lead the way.'

Ari did, with the unmistakable feeling she was about to get the reaming of a lifetime. Worse, it was probably fair.

Seventeen

Ari led Nancy through the twisting corridors until they found a small game room back down on the ground floor, tucked away from the main flow of guests. The heavy wooden door clicked shut behind them, muffling the distant sounds of laughter and clinking glasses from the hall. Ari turned to face Nancy, who was watching her with arms still folded, waiting.

‘Start talking,’ Nancy said.

Ari took a breath. ‘I didn’t come to this wedding for Paris. Not really.’

Nancy’s eyes flickered with annoyance. ‘I’d gotten that far. So why were you sneaking around her house like that?’

Ari hesitated, then said, ‘I’m here for my grandmother’s necklace.’

Nancy blinked. ‘Wait—what?’

‘She never admitted it, but I know she took it. She was furious when I broke up with her, and then suddenly, the necklace was gone. Doesn’t take Sherlock Holmes, does it?’ Ari explained calmly.

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Nancy exhaled slowly. 'Why didn't you tell me that was what this was all about?'

Ari's jaw tightened. 'Would you have helped if I had told you?'

Nancy considered that. 'Do you have a plan?'

Ari gave her a look. 'Obviously.'

Nancy arched an eyebrow. 'Which is?'

'Step one: find Paris's room. Step two: get my necklace back.'

'That's not a plan,' Nancy muttered. 'That's an objective.'

Ari shrugged. 'Details.'

'I didn't think you even cared about that necklace.'

'You know about that?' Ari said, surprised.

'You and your mother were arguing about once. I wasn't trying to listen, but... She was angry. And you were very casual about the whole thing.'

'Because there's not a lot else I can do when she gets going,' Ari said.

'But if Paris stole it, I don't understand why you didn't tell her what happened?' Nancy asked.

‘Youknowthat wouldn’t have helped anything,’ Ari huffed. ‘She wouldn’t have believed me. Or if she did, I still would have been to blame because I ended the relationship badly. Or if not that, there’d be some other way this was my fault.’

Nancy couldn’t argue with that. The woman would have pinned the Kennedy assassination on Ari, given half a chance.

‘If you know how she is, why do this? Why try to correct it? She won’t appreciate it,’ Nancy told her honestly.

Ari’s face set in a determination that looked alien on her. ‘I just wanted to see her face when she sees I got something right. I need it. Just one flash of surprise on that smug face. Just once.’

Sympathy swept over Nancy. But only briefly. ‘You should havetoldme.’

Ari’s shoulders slumped. ‘I just wanted to handle this on my own. I didn’t think you’d ever even find out. But now I feellike a fool, running around in formal wear like I’m in some crap heist movie.Ocean’s One.’

Nancy laughed despite the tension.

‘Are you going to leave the wedding?’ Ari asked.

‘Should I?’ Nancy asked seriously.

‘I hope you don’t, but I suppose I couldn’t blame you,’ Ari said helplessly.

‘Ari, Jesus,’ Nancy exclaimed, annoyed. ‘I deserved to know what was going on here. You’ve pulled me into a crime.’

‘Technically, there’s been no crime yet. And even if I find the necklace, it’s mine. I’m just retrieving it,’ Ari said.

‘I understand that. But it doesn’t mean we can’t get in trouble. You do see that, don’t you? Rooting around the bedrooms, looking through the family’s stuff? It’s dicey. At best.’

Ari nodded. ‘Right. But you’re already here, so why not help me out?’

‘Because I’m not getting a custodial sentence for you and your grandmother’s trinket,’ Nancy replied plainly.

Ari stared at her. ‘Fine. Let me get on with it, then.’

As Ari reached for the door, Nancy caught her wrist. ‘No.’

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Ari frowned. 'No?'

Nancy's jaw tightened. 'We're going back to the dinner, and you're going to act like a normal person.'

Ari's eyes narrowed. 'You're kidding.'

'Do I look like I'm kidding?' Nancy asked her. This was the closest she'd ever come to telling Ari what to do. But she was too angry to care.

Ari hesitated, then let out a frustrated breath. 'Fine. But I'm not dropping this.'

'Of course you're not,' Nancy muttered, pushing open the door.

Eighteen

The moment they stepped back into the hall, the noise hit them like a wave. Laughter, clinking glasses, the hum of polite conversation. It felt surreal after the hushed urgency of their stolen moment. As they approached the dining tables, Ari caught Paris's gaze across the room. A slow, knowing smile curved Paris's lips.

Nancy saw it too. She leaned in, voice low. 'She knows something's up.'

'She doesn't know anything,' Ari murmured, forcing a neutral expression as they reached their seats.

Paris was only a few seats down, engaged in easy conversation, but Ari could feel the

occasional flick of her gaze.

The table was a sea of polite small talk and forced laughter, but between Ari and Nancy, politeness had died.

‘You’re angry with me,’ Ari said quietly.

Nancy didn’t look at her.

Ari swallowed, pushing the food around her plate. Across the table, Paris draped her arms around her hubby-to-be and pushed into his neck. It was so staged. Ari wanted to be sick.

Ari sat stiffly; her fingers curled around the stem of her wineglass as the conversations at the table swirled around her. Nancy wasn’t looking at her, but Ari could feel the tension humming between them—loud. Across the table, Paris was the picture of the blissful bride, her gaze landing on Ari every so often with an air of quiet amusement. It made Ari’s skin prickle.

She had expected pushback from Nancy when she clocked the plan. Hell, she’d half-expected her to walk away entirely. But the look in Nancy’s eyes—she was disappointed in her. Ari hated how unbearable that felt. But there were bigger things at stake. She couldn’t let it sway her.

She forced herself to take a sip of wine, but it did nothing to wash away the unease sitting in her stomach. The necklace was somewhere in this house. She knew it. And whether Nancy liked it or not, she was going to get it back. Just not tonight. Nancy had put her fire out. But it wouldn’t stay dead. This wound went too deep.

Paris laughed at something her fiancé said, a smirk still playing on her lips as she flicked the smallest of looks to Ari. Ari resisted the urge to glare. She didn’t want to

give Paris the satisfaction of knowing she was getting to her.

But she was.

She hadn't thought about her and Paris for a long time. Not really. Not beyond the sharp pang that came with knowing Paris had taken something from her. But now, surrounded by the same kind of lavish celebration they used to mock together, the memories crowded in.

Paris had always known how to work a room. Even when they were together, Ari had sometimes felt like she was just one more person caught in Paris's gravitational pull. But then there had been the quiet moments, the ones that made Ari believe she wasn't just another admirer. Late nights curled up in Ari's flat. The way Paris's fingers would tangle in her hair absentmindedly, looking at Ari as if she was something precious, something worth holding onto.

And then it had ended. Messily. Painfully. In a way that left Ari wondering if any of it had ever been real.

'You look like you're about to set something on fire,' Nancy muttered under her breath.

Ari glanced at Nancy, who was still not quite looking at her. 'Maybe I am.'

Nancy finally turned, arching a brow. 'Yeah? You going to burn the place down before or after you steal the necklace back?'

Ari exhaled sharply, shifting in her seat. 'I told you, it's not stealing if it's mine.'

'Tell that to the police when you inevitably get caught in a place you don't belong.'

Ari clenched her jaw, forcing herself to keep her voice quiet. Even in the din of the room, she was aware of the wrong word ringing out. 'I'm not getting caught.'

Nancy shook her head and went back to picking at her food. 'Give it up. It's just a thing.'

‘You don’t get it,’ Ari told her.

Nancy didn’t respond to that, just took a sip of her drink, her expression unreadable. Ari wanted to push, wanted to force Nancy to understand it. Understand her.

But before she could, Paris stood, lifting her glass for a toast.

‘If you will allow me one quick toast. To love,’ she said, smiling as murmurs of agreement rippled through the guests.

Ari barely resisted rolling her eyes. The last thing she wanted to do was raise her glass in any kind of toast led by Paris, but the last thing she needed was to draw more attention to herself. She lifted her glass begrudgingly, taking the smallest possible sip as Paris’s gaze settled on her. Ari was annoyed because Paris really thought Ari was jealous of her and the stuffed Tom Ford suit she was about to wed. He could have her. Ari would have sooner crawled into bed with a cluster of tarantulas than ever touch Paris again.

Ari set her glass down with deliberate care. She wasn’t going to let Paris win. She could have the world’s most lavish wedding and have every person at it think that Ari was bitter about the one that got away. Ari gave no fucks about that. But Paris wasn’t keeping that necklace. Ari couldn’t live with that.

She wasn’t going after the necklace tonight, though. Nancy had her eyes on Ari now, and she’d make it impossible.

But this wasn’t over.

Nineteen

The great hall was alive with movement as the dining tables were cleared away, replaced by sweeping lengths of plush carpet. Staff worked quickly, shifting chairs and plates, while a team of technicians set up soft lighting that bathed the space in a warm, golden glow. A large chandelier was lowered to accommodate the change, and a polished wooden dance floor gleamed as it was laid down, stretching across the room. The air buzzed with anticipation as the space transformed, the hum of conversation blending with the soft thud of music soundchecks.

Nancy wasn't surprised to realise Ari was tipsy. Not falling-over-slurring-her-words drunk, but loose.

'I hate weddings,' Ari muttered, her breath warm against Nancy's shoulder.

Nancy resisted the urge to roll her eyes. 'I could tell by the way you drank half the bar.'

'Needed to do something,' Ari said, tilting her head back to squint at the ornate ceiling. 'It was either that or punch Paris in the face.'

Nancy let out a short, tired laugh. 'Then I think the drinking was the better call. Just barely.'

Nancy was still furious. But she was keeping a cool head. Someone had to. Ari had done some silly things in her time. But this? It was too much.

'You're staring at me,' Ari said suddenly, eyes narrowing as she swayed slightly.

'That's because I'm trying to figure out what the hell to do with you.'

Ari grinned, a little lopsided. 'You could dance with me.'

Nancy huffed. 'That's not happening.'

'Why not?'

'I don't want to.'

Ari pouted, an expression so ridiculous that Nancy had to look away before she smiled. 'Why?' Ari demanded, a touch loud.

Nancy sighed, glancing around the room. She needed to get Ari out of there before she got loud. 'Come on,' she said, wrapping an arm around Ari's waist. 'Let's get you some air.'

Ari leaned into her without protest, her body warm and pliant. 'Are you taking me outside to yell at me?'

'Tempting, but no.'

The cool night air hit them as soon as they stepped onto the terrace. The chatter and music from inside were muffled, and for a moment, everything felt still. Ari inhaled deeply, closing her eyes, leaning against a railing.

'Better?' Nancy asked, next to her.

Ari nodded, but when she opened her eyes again, there was something raw there, something unguarded. 'I loved her, you know.'

Nancy exhaled slowly. 'I know.'

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Ari let out a humourless laugh. 'You must think I'm pathetic.'

'I think you need to stop giving Paris so much power over you.'

Ari was quiet for a long moment. 'It's not about her anymore,' she admitted. 'It's about what she took from me.'

Nancy studied her. 'The necklace.'

Ari nodded. 'And everything it meant.'

Nancy didn't know what to say to that, so she just stayed beside her, letting the silence settle between them. Eventually, Ari leaned her head against Nancy's shoulder, and Nancy let her. Just for a moment. They watched the dance floor filling as a jazz band played.

'She invited me because she wants me to see that she won. She got the necklace and someone who wants to marry her.'

Nancy groaned. 'You don't even know she has it.'

'I know, Nancy. I do.'

'You don't.'

'Please don't be like everyone else in my life right now,' Ari pled.

‘What do you mean?’ Nancy frowned.

There was a long pause. ‘Telling me I’m an idiot.’

‘I didn’t say that,’ Nancy said quickly and firmly.

‘You don’t believe that I know what I know I know.’

‘Say that sentence five more times fast.’

‘Stop it. I’m serious.’

Realising she was right put a hitch in Nancy’s stride. Because when Ari was serious, you had to pay attention. It meant something important was happening. She was showing you something she rarely showed. The hurt inside her.

Nancy decided to take a risk. ‘What happened between you?’

Ari exhaled, tilting her head back. ‘She wanted in.’

Nancy frowned. ‘Into what?’

Ari let out a short, bitter laugh. ‘My world. My friends. The life I had before her.’ She shook her head. ‘She made it seem like she wanted me, but really, she wanted the people I knew, the connections I had. I thought she loved me. But she just wanted my life. She slid in and made it hers.’

Nancy stayed quiet, watching the tension in Ari’s jaw.

‘And then she started the games,’ Ari continued. ‘She’d twist things. Make me doubt myself. Make me feel like I was imagining it when things didn’t add up. She was

always lying about weird, stupid shit. Where she'd been, who she'd talked to, what she'd said. And if I caught her out, she'd just smile and act like I was being ridiculous. Like I was overreacting. And if I ever called her out, suddenly I was the one being unfair.' Ari let out a slow breath.

Nancy's fingers curled into her palm. 'And then?'

Ari's smile was cold. 'I tried to fix it. Can you imagine? I thought she just needed to be loved right. That's when I promised her the necklace. I wanted her to know I was all in. Until I found some texts on her phone to a mutual friend. One of my friends. They were shit-talking me. Paris was laughing at me. Said I was needy and desperate.' Ari frowned. 'Maybe I was. I don't know.'

Nancy felt something hard settle in her chest. She knew that feeling. That slow, creeping horror of looking at someone you love and realising you're only just seeing them for the first time.

'So you broke it off,' Nancy said quietly.

Ari nodded. 'And Paris didn't take it well.'

Nancy nodded. 'Yeah, I got that impression.'

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‘She was furious. Like I’d tricked her. Like I’d wasted her time.’ Ari’s grip on the railing tightened. ‘But the thing that really got to her? It wasn’t losing me. It was losing the story she wanted to tell. The one where I was the lucky one, where I was desperate to keep her. She hated that I was the one who walked away.’

Nancy realised something disturbing. ‘Your old friends, are they here today?’

Ari gave a haunting laugh. ‘God, no. I’m sure she ditched them long ago. There’s probably been several friend groups since then. I think people are only really fun to her in the beginning.’

Nancy’s brow deepened. ‘But you think she stole the necklace to... what? Prove something?’

Ari’s mouth twisted. ‘I think she kept it because she thinks it should have been hers. Because in her mind, I still owe it to her.’ She exhaled sharply. ‘And maybe because she knew it would drive me insane.’

Nancy studied her for a moment, then said, ‘Did it?’

Ari let out a humourless laugh. ‘What do you think?’

Nancy didn’t answer. She just reached out and plucked Ari’s hand off the railing, squeezing it once before letting go.

‘OK.’

‘OK, what?’ Ari asked.

‘Let’s dance.’

Twenty

Ari barely had time to protest before Nancy pulled her back inside. The shift from cool night air to the warm hum of the ballroom made her head spin, or maybe that was just the champagne. Either way, her feet dragged slightly against the polished floor as she let herself be guided through the crowd.

The music, which had been up-tempo as they reached the floor, suddenly changed to a steady, measured rhythm. Something intimate. Something dangerous.

It was a slow dance.

Ari twisted to look at Nancy. ‘This is your idea of getting me away from trouble?’

Nancy’s lips quirked. ‘Would you rather go back to the bar?’

Ari hesitated. The answer should have been yes. Instead, she let Nancy’s hand slide into hers, let the other settle at her waist, an act that felt unprecedented. They’d never touched like this before.

She felt the warmth of Nancy’s body, the way their connection shifted the air around them, pulling her into something that, at first, felt ridiculous. Stiff, awkward. She wasn’t even sure they were moving to the beat properly.

It was like neither of them could figure out the right distance to keep. Too far, and it felt silly. Too close and that was a whole other problem.

As the music swelled, Ari felt the champagne start to wear off. The giddy haze faded, and the reality of how close they were settled in.

‘Relax,’ Nancy said, sighing a little impatiently.

Ari scowled up at her. ‘I am relaxed.’

Nancy huffed a laugh, her breath warm. ‘Yeah. Sure.’

Ari had half a mind to step on her foot just to prove a point. Instead, she forced herself to let go of some of the tension in her body, to lean into the rhythm, to stop overthinking. The clarity that came with sobering up left her more aware of Nancy, of the way their bodies adjusted instinctively to move together.

She glanced up and found Nancy already looking at her. And Ari had a very dangerous thought. Worse, she saw the thought reflected in Nancy’s eyes.

Ari wet her lips. ‘I—’

Just then, Paris’s laughter rang out, cutting through the music.

Nancy let go—just like that. Stepped back and dropped her hands, shaking her head slightly as if clearing it. ‘Maybe call it a day there.’

Ari stared at her, confused. ‘Nancy—’

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‘You should get some water,’ Nancy said, voice clipped. And then she was gone.

Ari stood there, pulse still too high, breath still uneven. She could still feel the ghost of Nancy’s touch at her waist, the pressure of her palm against hers.

‘Shit,’ she muttered, stunned.

Twenty-One

Nancy leaned against the cool marble of the wall, trying to catch her breath while the music thumped around her, upbeat once more. All she could think about was the dance with Ari. What the hell had happened?

It was no big deal, she told herself. But the way Ari had melted against her, how warm and real she felt, was sending shivers down Nancy’s spine.

Stop it! It was just a dance. Just Ari. The party girl who sits in the back seat!

Nancy pushed away from the wall, forcing herself to navigate the crowd of partygoers like a pinball, trying to drown her thoughts in the pulsating beat of the music. She grabbed a drink from a passing tray and took a long sip. The sharpness of the liquor burned her throat.

Nancy’s gaze drifted over, and there stood Ari, alone at the edge of the crowd, her drink forgotten in her hand. Her shoulders were slightly slumped, her expression distant, as if she were lost in thought. The vibrant energy of the party seemed to pass her by.

There was something about the sadness in her posture, the way she stood so still, that struck Nancy in a way she hadn't expected. In that moment, she looked vulnerable, far more vulnerable than the confident, carefree persona she usually projected.

For a brief moment, Nancy's heart softened, a sudden rush of empathy flooding her chest. It was a side of Ari she'd rarely seen, and seeing it now was devastating. She wanted to hold her. She wanted to...

It was just physical contact. Which she hadn't had in a while. That was probably what it was. Her body was just reacting like Pavlov's dogs to the touch of an attractive woman. Which Ari was. You couldn't argue any other. Not Nancy's type, of course. She tended to go for much more serious types, like Tara, the intense journalist; Rachel, the driven lawyer; and Simone, the no-nonsense architect. Fun-loving, wealthy party girls had never been on the roster.

Yet, the more she tried to convince herself it was nothing, the less she bought it.

As she watched Ari, Nancy's heart raced.

Oh, for god's sake. It's not frustration, it's just the alcohol, she then decided.

That was even worse. Because, she realised, unlike Ari, she hadn't drunk a ton. She'd made sure to have a glass in her hand at all times, as per wedding protocol. But she'd nursed them. She was never tipsy at work, even if there wasn't a car involved. Even if she was on some mad mission to accompany Ari to her ex's wedding/stolen jewellery retrieval mission, she was on the job.

She was going back to her other theory. Rogue hormones and sex deprivation.

With a dramatic sigh, Nancy leaned back against the wall again, desperately needing to regroup. Ari was her boss. She had no business noticing the way Ari's dress clung

to her or the way her perfume lingered in the air between them. No business feeling the heat still prickling at the back of her neck.

Twenty-Two

The night had dragged on longer than Ari anticipated. But now, at last, they were free. Big lights on, music off. People were leaving the hall, heading up the stairs to the designated rooms.

Ari and Nancy found themselves in the hallway, staring at each other in a thinning crowd. Ari felt very fortunate she hadn't actually opened her mouth and said something dumb because it made it easier to pretend nothing had happened.

Ari glanced around again. 'So, where the hell do you think our room is?'

Before Nancy could respond, the sound of footsteps echoed down the hall. Laurence, the butler, appeared from seemingly nowhere. 'Your designated room is just upstairs. If you would allow me to guide you? Your bags are waiting for you.'

Ari smiled at him. 'Laurence, you are good,' she said. 'If you ever want to leave this place, promise me you'll call me. I could do with a good, um... Buttlings.'

Laurence smiled, turned, and led the way. Ari and Nancy exchanged a thick glance before following him, the winding hallways seeming to grow more intricate as they walked further into the manor.

As they climbed the staircase, Ari glanced at Nancy. 'That party was too long. I drank too much.'

'Everyone did,' Nancy said.

Ari took that to mean that they were just rolling right past the weirdness. Thank fuck.

They continued up another flight of stairs, and finally, Laurence stopped in front of a door.

‘Here we are,’ he said and opened the door for them.

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The room was small but undeniably elegant, with rich velvet curtains in deep burgundy that framed the windows. A queen-sized bed, dressed in crisp white linens, took centre stage. Their bags did indeed await them in the corner.

‘Goodnight,’ Laurence said and slipped off silently, like the service ninja he was.

‘Odd seeing this from the other side,’ Nancy noted.

‘What?’

‘Being served. I’m more comfortable on the other end, if I’m honest,’ she said.

‘Well, you could pass for rich,’ Ari assured her.

Nancy shrugged. ‘If you say so.’ She grabbed her bag and headed into the ensuite, shutting the door with a click.

Ari grabbed her bag and unzipped it, pulling things out haphazardly. She tossed her dress onto the back of a chair and grabbed one of her oversized sleep shirts, moving quickly to get changed.

She was decent by the time Nancy walked in, wearing her Eyes on the Fries PJ’s again. It was so oddly un-Nancy. Ari thought she might treasure the sight for some years to come.

But then she saw the look on Nancy’s face. Disconcertion. ‘Umm...’

Nancy was standing by the bed. The bed. Singular. Not two. Not even two singles pushed together. One large, undoubtedly luxurious, four-poster bed.

Ari blinked. 'Oh.'

Nancy sighed, rubbing a hand over her face. 'I should've checked earlier.'

'This is on me, sorry,' Ari muttered. She stared at the bed as if another one might materialise if she waited long enough. It did not. 'You're sure there's not a fold-out or something?'

Nancy shot her a look. 'Does this look like the kind of place with fold-out beds?'

Ari sighed dramatically. 'I suppose not.'

Nancy shook her head and sat on the edge of the mattress, testing it. 'Well. At least it's big.'

Ari eyed her, suddenly aware of how casually Nancy had just accepted this. 'You're not bothered?'

Nancy shrugged. 'It's a bed. We're adults. I assume you're not going to kick me in your sleep.'

'No promises.'

Nancy rolled her eyes. 'I'm too tired to care. If you want to make a big thing of it, you can sleep on the floor.'

Ari grinned, pretending that this whole thing was hilarious rather than what it really was. Unnerving. 'When you put it that way...' She shrugged and flopped onto the

bed beside Nancy, bouncing slightly as the plush mattress absorbed her weight.

For a second, neither of them spoke. It wasn't like they hadn't been in confined spaces before. They spent hours together in the car. But this was different. Unavoidably intimate in a way that neither of them had planned for. Ari didn't need that. Not tonight.

But at least she'd sobered up enough to behave herself. She was keeping her hands to herself. Nancy didn't deserve to be assaulted in the night. No matter how she'd looked at her for the briefest of moments. This whole situation was weird, Ari decided. And weird breeds weird. That was all there was to it.

Nancy exhaled slowly. 'Alright. Ground rules.'

Ari raised an eyebrow. 'Oh, this'll be good.'

'No stealing the duvet,' Nancy said. 'No sprawling across the whole bed. And no talking in your sleep.'

'How would I control that?' Ari asked mildly.

'I don't know. Figure it out.'

Ari smirked. 'Anything else, Sergeant?'

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Nancy gave her a deadpan look. 'Just go to sleep, Ari.'

Ari settled back against the pillows, pulling the covers up as Nancy shut the lamp off. The room was dim, the weight of the day pressing down on her.

Beside her, Nancy shifted slightly, getting comfortable. A beat of silence passed before she said, almost absently, 'You have to leave it alone.'

Ari was jolted. 'What?'

'The necklace.'

'Oh,' Ari said relieved.

'What did you think I meant?' Nancy asked quickly.

'Yeah, the necklace. Of course.'

No one said another word, for which Ari was very grateful.

Soon enough, the warmth of the covers, the soft scent of fresh linen, and the steady presence of Nancy beside her lulled Ari into an easy, dreamless sleep.

Twenty-Three

Nancy woke slowly, the hazy weight of sleep still clinging to her limbs. The room was dim, only the faintest hint of morning light creeping in through the heavy

curtains. For a moment, she didn't register anything unusual. Just the luxurious softness of the bed, the quiet stillness of the room.

And then she felt it.

A warm weight draped over her waist. The soft, steady breath against the back of her neck. The unmistakable press of another body close to hers.

Nancy froze.

Ari.

Somehow, at some point in the night, they had shifted. Nancy was on her side, and Ari had ended up half-curved around her, one arm slung loosely over her waist, their legs tangled beneath the sheets. The warmth of Ari's body seeped through the fabric of their sleepwear, her breath sending the smallest shiver down Nancy's spine.

She should move. She knew she should move.

Ari stirred slightly, nuzzling into the pillow. Then, her breathing changed. Her body tightened. Nancy didn't need to turn to know Ari was now fully awake.

A long, charged silence stretched between them.

'Well,' Ari said.

Nancy cleared her throat, determined to keep her tone neutral. 'Yes. Well.'

Another beat of silence. Then, Ari shifted enough to pull her arm back, just enough to give them both space. They rolled away from each other.

‘Sorry,’ Ari said. ‘I didn’t realise...’

‘It’s fine,’ Nancy said, trying not to sound as intensely nervous as she felt.

Before either of them could say more, a sharp knock rattled the door.

‘Ari!’ Paris’s voice was urgent, muffled through the heavy wood. ‘Are you awake? I need you! It’s a disaster!’

Nancy exhaled, half in relief, half in irritation. Ari groaned into her pillow. ‘Oh, for fuck’s sake.’

The knocking persisted. ‘Ari! Open up! I need your help!’

Ari threw the covers off and sat up, running a hand through her tousled hair. ‘Give me one minute, Paris!’ she called, voice hoarse from sleep.

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Nancy sat up as well, still trying to process everything. She could feel the lingering warmth where Ari had been pressed against her. But before she could fully untangle that thought, Ari was already rolling out of bed and stumbling toward the door.

As soon as she opened it, a silk-robed Paris practically fell inside, a whirlwind of barely contained panic.

‘It’s a disaster,’ Paris repeated, breathless. ‘Last night was jazz and tonight is supposed to be a DJ, to create the perfect balance of class and cool for the event. But the DJ quit. He just sent a text saying he’s not coming. His mother died. I know he can’t help that, but hereallyshouldn’t have let us book him if there was a chance of it.’ Paris shook her head without any self-consciousness.

Nancy raised an eyebrow. ‘And this requires Ari because...?’

Paris turned to her as if just realising she was there, then waved a hand dismissively. ‘Because she’s Ari! She knows people, and if anyone can pull a miracle out of thin air, it’s her!’

Ari groaned but was already reaching for her phone. ‘Alright, alright. Give me twenty minutes, and I’ll find you a replacement.’

Paris clutched her hands together as though Ari had just promised to save her life. ‘You’re the best. I owe you forever.’

Ari sighed dramatically, shooting Nancy a look that was half exasperation, half apology. She started pulling on a pair of Saint Laurent jeans. ‘Well. Looks like my

morning's going to be fun.'

Nancy, still sitting in the bed they had shared, just shook her head. 'You don't have to do it.'

Ari turned away from Nancy and swapped her bed T-shirt for an oversized Ganni wool jumper with bold stripes. Nancy realised that for a split-second, she was looking at Ari's nearly naked back and quickly turned away.

Ari turned, dressed and unaware of the brief panic she'd caused in Nancy, already scrolling through her contacts, muttering about which DJs owed her a favour. Then she was out the door.

Left alone in the room, Nancy finally allowed herself to breathe. She glanced at the empty space beside her, the warmth still lingering.

She flopped back onto the pillows with a quiet, muffled groan.

This weekend was going to kill her.

Nancy watched from the doorway of the great hall, arms folded, as Ari worked the room like a general orchestrating a battle. She had three different conversations going—one by text, one on the phone, and one in person with a frantic wedding planner who was clearly on the verge of tears. Ari, meanwhile, was calm, collected, and surprisingly competent. Nancy didn't get it.

'Why are you doing this?' she finally asked, cutting through the chaos. Ari barely glanced up from her phone.

‘Because I can.’

Nancy frowned. ‘That’s not a reason. You don’t even like her. Why are you helping her?’

Ari sighed, finally looking at her. ‘That’s why. If I act like I hate her, it’ll be obvious why I came. It’s better if I play along so she doesn’t suspect why I’m really here.’

Nancy tilted her head. ‘And why are you really here?’ she asked, wondering if the answer might be different in the light of day.

Ari smirked, but there was something measured in it. ‘To get my jewellery back, of course.’

‘Still doing that, then?’ Nancy checked.

‘Did you think I’d changed my mind?’

Nancy had suspected as much, but hearing Ari admit it was something of a relief.

Wait, a relief?

Nancy shook off the thought, focusing instead on Ari, who had already gone back to her messages. ‘You’re putting a lot of effort into this,’ Nancy said.

‘It’s called strategy, Nancy. If Paris thinks I’m just over everything and I have no qualms with her, she won’t see me coming. Just for once, she’ll be a step behind me.’

Nancy studied her, suspicious. Ari was good at covering, but something about the way she was throwing herself into helping Paris didn’t sit right. ‘You sure that’s all this is?’

Ari scoffed. ‘What else would it be?’

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Nancy hesitated. She didn't want to say it, but it was clawing at the edges of her mind. 'You don't still have feelings for her, do you?'

Ari rolled her eyes. 'Please never say that again. I will be sick.'

Nancy wanted to believe her. But that flicker of hesitation, however brief, lodged itself in her thoughts. And worse than that—worse than the idea that Ari might not be as over Paris as she claimed—was the way Nancy's stomach twisted at the thought.

Nancy was jealous.

She exhaled sharply, irritated at herself. Ari was her boss. Her chaos to manage. That was it. So why did the idea of Ari still caring about Paris make her feel like she'd just swallowed a shit smoothie?

Nancy straightened. 'Right. Well, don't let your strategy get in the way of actually getting your stuff back.'

Ari grinned. 'Wouldn't dream of it.'

Nancy turned toward the door, needing a second to clear her head. 'I'll grab us coffee. You look like you're going to need it.'

Ari beamed. 'You always know what I need.'

Nancy just shook her head, already walking away before Ari could see the flicker of frustration still lingering on her face.

Twenty-Four

Ari found Paris in the games room, taking grinning selfies. The second Ari walked in, the phone and the smile dropped. 'Well?' she asked desperately.

'I've found the perfect DJ,' Ari assured her. 'You're going to love him. He has a great vibe. He did my friend Jenna's wedding in Turks and Caicos. The floor was never empty.'

'Oh, thank god!' Paris said, relief washing over her features. 'I knew you would fix it. You were always so good like that. You knew everyone.'

Ari forced herself to smile. 'Yeah, I guess I did.'

'That time when that B-list actor dropped out of that fundraiser, you found me someone better with a day's notice. I knew then...' She paused. 'Anyway, different time.'

Ari could feel the manipulation seeping through Paris's words, but she didn't care. She needed to know what Paris had meant. 'You knew what?'

'That you and I would end up dating, that's all,' she said casually.

'Because I could help you?' Ari asked, a bitter taste filling her mouth.

Paris's smile tightened ever so slightly. 'More that you were resourceful. It's an attractive quality.'

'Resourceful,' Ari repeated, nodding to herself, feeling the sting of the truth. That's all she had ever been to Paris. A means to an end.

‘You know, I’m so glad you came,’ Paris said, trying for sincerity. ‘I wasn’t sure you would.’

‘Why not? All that was years ago,’ Ari replied, forcing a lightness she didn’t feel.

‘Well, I’m so glad to hear you’ve finally moved on,’ Paris smiled.

That rubbed Ari wrong. ‘Moved on? Me?’

Paris shrugged, a smug smile playing on her lips. ‘I know it was rough for you. Everything that happened.’

Ari’s annoyance grew. ‘Not sure what you mean by “everything.”’

Paris offered a condescending smile. ‘I didn’t want to end it, you know. You didn’t leave me a choice. But now I think we can both see it was the right call.’

The disbelief surged in Ari. ‘You ended it?’

Paris’s eyes narrowed, her confident facade beginning to crack. ‘Let’s not dwell on the bad times. It’s unhealthy.’

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‘That’s not what happened,’ Ari replied, her tone filled with an anger she’d promised herself she’d never give Paris again. ‘So don’t think you can gaslight me.’

Paris rolled her eyes. ‘Gaslight? Wow, that word is really getting its moment, isn’t it?’ She chuckled lightly, but it fell flat. ‘I never wanted to hurt you, but I had to think of myself. I’m glad you’ve found someone who appreciates you. Just like I have. Cal takes me as I am.’

‘You never wanted to hurt me?’ Ari echoed, shocked by the audacity. She had never forgotten Paris’s little ways but reliving them was another story. ‘You made it clear that your lies were more important than our relationship. Do you think I wanted to spend years being made a fool? Never really knowing what you wanted out of me?’

A heavy silence hung between them.

‘Maybe I shouldn’t have said that,’ Ari said, angry with herself.

Paris laughed at her. ‘No, this is on me. I shouldn’t have asked you for a favour. I forgot how you get when you think you’re owed.’

‘You can’t make this about a DJ, Paris,’ Ari shot back, her heart racing. ‘It’s about damage.’

‘What damage?’ Paris asked, a challenge lacing her voice.

Jesus, was this coming out? Here and now? That was no good. Ari wasn’t handling this right at all.

‘Say it,’ Paris said, her smile turning nasty. ‘What did I take from you?’

Ari realised that Paris wanted to be accused. The woman lived for these moments. She loved to have you say what she’d done wrong and then turn things around so much that you walked away feeling like you were the criminal. It was Paris’s idea of a good time.

But Ari was past the point of knowing a good idea from what she simply wanted to do. Which was to say it aloud. Call her a thief to her face.

‘Paris—’

Just then, the door swung open, and Nancy burst in, her presence a sudden interruption to the charged atmosphere. ‘There you two are! I’ve been looking everywhere for you!’

Ari turned, momentarily distracted from the confrontation. ‘Nancy, now is not—’

‘No, no, it’s fine,’ Paris interjected, her tone shifting as she plastered on a bright smile. ‘I was just catching up with Ari. But we’re done now. Aren’t we, darling?’

Ari shot Paris a glare, frustration bubbling beneath the surface. ‘If you say so, Paris.’

Paris nodded. ‘Yes. I think so.’ And she walked off.

‘I heard you yelling from down the hall,’ Nancy said. ‘I thought it best not to let it get too far.’

Ari nodded, her blood boiling. ‘Good call.’ She took a deep, ragged breath, collecting herself. ‘I think I just need to go back to the room for a moment,’ she said, already walking away.

Twenty-Five

Nancy hesitated briefly before deciding to follow Ari. She needed to keep an eye on her. The state she was in, someone had to.

Nancy followed in her direction and found her in their room. She discovered Ari standing over the bed, fists pounding mercilessly into a pillow. Feathers threatened to burst from the seams with each furious hit.

‘What the hell are you doing?’

Ari barely glanced up, her expression tight with determination. ‘Therapy.’

Nancy shut the door behind her. ‘OK, well, now you’ve killed the pillow. Can you tell me what that fight was about?’

Ari gave a hollow laugh, shaking her head. ‘Not now, Nancy.’ She threw the pillow aside and stormed over to the chest of drawers, yanking them open one by one.

Nancy folded her arms. ‘What’s that achieving?’

Ari huffed, pushing each drawer back in with force. ‘I need to slam something, and the door is too loud.’

Nancy frowned. ‘Ari—’

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‘This isn’t cutting it,’ Ari said, finally looking at her properly. ‘I’m finding that necklace. Right now.’

Nancy sighed, stepping forward. ‘No way.’

Ari’s jaw clenched. ‘You’re not stopping me.’

Nancy wanted to argue, but she wasn’t sure there was a point. She’d never seen Ari like this. Though she had her moments of temper, she was never so... locked on. Nancy didn’t know how to handle Ari in this mode.

Ari was already moving, slipping out the door and into the hallway. Nancy followed, irritation growing with every step. ‘Ari, for god’s sake. You don’t even know where her bedroom is!’

‘I’m sure it’s on this corridor,’ Ari said, choosing a door at random. Locked. She tried another. This time, the door swung open, revealing a man in a half-buttoned shirt and a woman in underwear, both frozen in mid-embrace.

‘Sorry!’ Nancy blurted, dragging Ari back and shutting the door in a hurry.

‘That one’s on them. They should have locked it,’ Ari told Nancy.

She barely hesitated before moving to the next one. Another door, another awkward encounter—this time with a woman applying a face mask, shrieking in alarm. She slammed it shut.

‘Oh my god, stop!’ Nancy hissed. ‘You’re going to get us arrested.’

Ari wasn’t listening. ‘I need that necklace.’

‘Right, but do you need to personally traumatise every guest in the process?’ Nancy snapped.

Ari ignored her, marching to another door. She flung it open to find an older man in silk pyjamas reading a book. He blinked. ‘Are you room service?’

‘Nope!’ Ari slammed the door shut.

Another door. Locked. Another door. This time, a teenage girl painting her toenails. She gaped at them, brush frozen mid-air.

‘Hey, I like your—’ Ari started before Nancy yanked her away and closed the door.

‘Stop it!’ Nancy begged.

Ari shook her head and opened another door.

Inside, two men were engaged in what could only be described as an impromptu wrestling match, one halfway through a suplex over the bed.

‘He said I couldn’t pin him!’ one of them said.

‘It’s not gay,’ the other one cried.

‘As you were,’ Nancy muttered, pulling Ari out and shutting the door.

‘I do feel bad about that one,’ Ari said. ‘I hope I didn’t stop them before they worked

out their real feelings.'

Nancy groaned. 'For the love of—' But Ari had already moved to the next door. Locked.

And then she opened a door to an empty bedroom. Above the bed was a giant portrait of Paris. 'Fuckingbingo!' she declared. She darted to the vanity, yanking open drawers.

'Ari, you can't just—'

'It has to be here,' Ari muttered, tossing aside a pair of earrings. She opened another drawer and stopped. Then she slowly pulled out a small velvet case and clicked it open.

Relief flickered across Ari's face for half a second. 'Oh my god. It's here.' She looked up. 'Nancy! I found it!'

'And what exactly do you think you're doing?'

Nancy turned slowly, her stomach sinking. This was bad.

Twenty-Six

Ari's brain short-circuited.

The staff member—a woman in a crisp uniform with an expression that could melt steel—stepped inside and folded her arms. 'Would you like to explain why you're rifling through someone's personal belongings?'

Ari opened her mouth. No words came out.

The woman's eyes flicked to the necklace. 'And what, exactly, do you think you're doing with that?'

OK. This was bad. This was very, very bad. Ari could talk her way out of a lot of things. But this? This was bad.

She cleared her throat. 'I'm...'

The staff member crossed her arms. 'Do I need to call security?'

Ari pressed on, forcing her most innocent expression. 'Look, this isn't what it looks like. I mean, I understand what it looks like, but that's not what's happening. You see, this necklace... Have you ever... You know how... The thing is...'

Nancy made a quiet groan.

Ari's mind scrambled for a good excuse. Nothing came to her. She could just

apologise. Except that would involve admitting guilt. She could make a run for it. Except she'd have to commit to a full-on sprint through a house full of wedding guests and security. Not ideal.

She settled for panicked silence.

Twenty-Seven

Nancy sighed. She was going to have to handle this.

It didn't take but a second to decide on an approach. She stepped forward, all charm and confidence. It wasn't a role that came naturally to her—smooth wasn't usually her style—but she was trying to channel what Ari would do if she weren't in a full-blown panic.

'You know what? I think there's been a bit of a misunderstanding.' She let out a breezy laugh, resting a hand lightly on Ari's shoulder as if they were merely caught up in some adorable mix-up. 'My friend here is just a bit of a disaster, bless her heart.'

Ari gaped at her. Nancy sighed, as if exhausted by the sheer complexity of the situation, and launched in.

'Right, so. I know how this looks, but Ari was returning the necklace. She borrowed it earlier because there was this whole mix-up with the bride's something borrowed. You know how these things go, emotions were running high, there were tears, and somewhere in the chaos, Ari ended up with the necklace.' She let out a breathy laugh, shaking her head like she couldn't believe it either. 'Naturally, the moment she realised the mistake, she wanted to put it back. Discretion was key—you understand—weddings are delicate ecosystems. One wrong word, and suddenly Aunt Patricia isn't speaking to the Maid of Honour, and the florist is

threatening to leave because of vibes. So, really, she was doing the sensible thing by slipping it back without causing a scene.'

Nancy widened her eyes, radiating weary patience. 'I mean, you can imagine what would've happened if she'd asked for permission to return it. It would've become a thing. People would overreact. The last thing anyone wants is to stress out the bride. So, technically, Ari was doing a service here. Just badly.'

Ari, catching on, nodded solemnly. 'Yeah. I can see that now.'

The staff member blinked, visibly trying to untangle the mess she'd just been handed. But Nancy looked so reasonable, so tired by it all, that pushing further would mean getting dragged even deeper. The staff member exhaled sharply through her nose and nodded. 'Fine. Just go back to your rooms. And don't touch anything else.'

'Oh, never again,' Nancy assured her, already steering Ari toward the door.

'Of course,' Ari added, already backing toward the door.

The moment they were out in the hallway, Nancy grabbed Ari's arm and dragged her toward the staircase. She flicked a look over her shoulder to see the woman lock the door.

'You are not allowed to talk your way out of things anymore,' Nancy whispered fiercely. 'I was in physical pain listening to you.'

'Hey, I was getting there!' Ari protested. 'I just needed a second round of excuses!'

Nancy groaned.

Ari sighed dramatically but allowed herself to be led away. 'Fine. But for the record,

I totally could've handled that.'

Nancy muttered, 'Yeah. That's what I was afraid of.'

'I had it. I bloody had it!' Ari cried, frustrated. 'It was in my hands.'

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‘That was the right one? You’re sure?’

Ari shot her a look.

‘OK, fine. You’re sure.’ Nancy sighed. ‘So, she did take it.’

‘You didn’t believe me?’ Ari said though she didn’t sound all that surprised.

‘I felt there was some room for error,’ Nancy pointed out as gently as possible. ‘Which is not the same thing.’

‘Well, no errors now. Just a thief and a liar,’ Ari said.

‘Yes, she is,’ Nancy agreed. ‘But that door is locked.’

Ari frowned. ‘I know.’

‘But it’s just a lock. And locked doors unlock eventually,’ Nancy said casually.

Ari looked at Nancy in astonishment. ‘You’re cool with me trying to get the necklace?’

‘It belongs to you,’ Nancy said.

Nancy felt the weight of Ari’s hand on her wrist. ‘Thank you,’ Ari said, her voice steady but quieter than usual.

The words settled into the space between them, and for a moment, Nancy wasn't sure how to respond. Most of the time, Ari was a whirlwind of confidence, always the one holding things together, but in that moment, she looked... different. Vulnerable.

'Yeah, well,' Nancy finally said, trying to shrug off the big moment, 'you're a bloody menace. But you're in the right.' She paused. 'Do you want some help?' she added casually.

Ari's eyes widened. 'What? Really?'

Nancy shrugged. 'That's my job, right?'

'It's really not,' Ari said emphatically. She took out her phone.

'Is this the moment to check Instagram?' Nancy asked, confused.

Ari put her phone away and smiled. 'The money we talked about is in your account. You don't have to do anything beyond this point. The contract is fulfilled. You can leave right now, and I'll see you for the drive home. No harm, no foul.'

Nancy baulked. 'You didn't have to...'

'I absolutely do,' Ari cut in.

Nancy's gaze drifted to the floor, her mind racing. She had always prided herself on being responsible, the voice of reason. But as she stood there, watching the excitement flicker across Ari's face, a flicker of something else ignited within her.

'You sure you don't just want to report the theft to the police?' Nancy checked.

'I don't see a world where they get that necklace back. The second they show up, that

necklace gets moved. And this place is huge. They wouldn't find it ifshedidn't want them to.'

Nancy nodded. 'I'm inclined to agree. With that in mind, I think we have to do this quietly and carefully. We work together and walk out of this place with your necklace.'

Ari's eyes sparkled with a mixture of disbelief and gratitude. 'Are you serious? You'd really help me?'

'Yeah,' Nancy replied, a smile breaking across her face. 'If you're going to take this chance, I might as well be there to make sure you don't get caught.'

Ari laughed, the tension lifting from her shoulders. 'You're a bad influence, Nancy Doyle.'

'I'm an idiot,' Nancy told her—and she meant it.

She knew this was dumb. But for Ari, this was about more than a trinket. She wanted to correct a mistake, maybe even claw back some missing self-esteem in the process. Nancy wanted that for her. It surprised her just how much.

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Nancy glanced toward the grand staircase, her heart thudding. They needed a plan.

‘So...’

They heard footsteps approaching, and Laurence, the butler, appeared. ‘Ladies,’ Laurence said, clearing his throat with a slight bow. ‘I trust you’re ready for the spa?’

Nancy blinked, caught off guard. ‘The what?’

‘All female guests are invited to attend a spa session to prepare for the wedding,’ he explained. ‘The men are horseback riding. Shall I show you the way to the spa?’

‘Guess so,’ Nancy said, swapping a look with Ari as they reluctantly followed him. Planning would have to wait.

Twenty-Eight

Ari had been so close. And she was determined to get back in that room.

Unfortunately, there was no way to do that when you were being herded into a silk robe and surrounded by the scent of lavender and the sound of Enya’s greatest hits.

Nancy was sunk into the plush lounge next to hers. The spa area by the indoor pool was packed with women in various stages of indulgence—some stretched out on massage tables, others with thick layers of green clay hardening on their faces.

Ari was getting coated in an avocado face mask. But she didn’t need glowing skin.

She needed to get back in that room.

‘Try to look like you’re enjoying it,’ Nancy muttered from beneath cucumber-covered eyes.

Ari suppressed a sigh. She glanced around the room, clocking Paris’s cousin in the corner getting a pedicure, and another woman—who Ari vaguely recalled as Paris’s Great Aunt Margot—having her nails painted a soft, bridal pink. But no one within five feet. This might be their best chance to talk.

The aesthetician finished making her into guacamole and left. Ari leaned towards Nancy. ‘OK. We need to get into Paris’s room. When?’

Nancy closed her eyes as though simply absorbing the spa atmosphere, but Ari saw her fingers twitch against the armrest. ‘It’s got to be when everyone’s distracted. The wedding is at five o’clock this evening. The men are off doing that gender-bullshit horseback riding thing now. If we can slip away now—’

‘No good. Some of the women might take the chance to nap, but others will be wandering around the house. We need them all occupied.’

‘You have a better idea?’ Nancy asked, barely moving her lips.

‘The dinner. That’s our best window.’

Nancy let a beat pass. Then, in the same low tone, she asked, ‘Any ideas how we’re getting back in that room?’

‘Nope.’

Nancy peeked out from beneath one cuke. ‘Not a natural criminal, are you?’

Ari smiled. 'We're not in prison yet.'

'Thanks to me,' Nancy said.

Ari nodded. 'You get full credit for that,' she said sincerely.

She wasn't used to having someone on her side, not really. The fact that Nancy trusted her enough to go along with this, to believe in her instincts, meant more than she could say. It gave her something firm to hold on to in the swirling chaos of this whole situation. Maybe she should tell Nancy that.

Maybe later.

'Look, here's the thing,' Nancy said, getting serious. 'We need a key to that room, or we need someone to unlock it. We also need to know for a fact that everyone is rounded up in one place.'

Ari was stunned. 'You want to get the necklace during the wedding?'

'You got a better idea?'

Ari opened her mouth, then shut it. She tapped her fingers against the armrest, thinking. 'That's risky.'

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Nancy arched an eyebrow. 'And slipping away unnoticed during dinner isn't?'

Ari exhaled. 'At least then, we're just two guests going for a wander. During the wedding, people might notice if we disappear. Two seats, empty. Screams out.'

'Only if Paris actually thinks you're here to rob her.' Nancy paused. 'Does she?'

'Hard to say,' Ari said. 'I don't know if she would ever actually think I'd try to take it back from her.'

'Then you're right. Too risky. Dinner it is. After the speeches.'

Ari nodded, and some avocado slipped off her face and onto her robe. 'Now, about getting past a locked door...'

'Yes. That's something else we need to figure out,' Nancy said.

Ari realised with a start that she was kind of having fun. Nancy was a great partner in crime.

Twenty-Nine

Nancy was looking at herself in the long mirror back in the room. Ari was in the bathroom. They were taking a break from planning the heist to get ready for the wedding.

Nancy stared at her ankle-length deep crimson dress, a daring slit up one leg. She had

to admit, she'd gone a bit mad with this choice. It was more than she could pull off. She adjusted the strap, wondering if it was too late to find something else.

The bathroom door creaked open, and Ari's voice drifted out. 'How do I loo...' she trailed off, clearly seeing something she didn't expect. 'Oh my god.'

Nancy swallowed, her nerves kicking in. 'Too much, right?' She wasn't sure if she could bear to turn around and face it.

'No. Not too much,' Ari replied, and there was a breath of disbelief in her voice. 'You look... I don't think I know enough words.'

Now Nancy did turn, finally facing Ari, but she didn't expect what hit her next. Ari was standing there in a dress—an elegant, deep green gown that shimmered in the light. The way it hugged her curves, falling just perfectly around her ankles, made Nancy's heart skip. Ari's hair was down, loose waves framing her face.

Ari's eyes locked onto hers, and for a moment, the air between them felt thick with something more than just a fashion check.

'You look...' Nancy began, but the words caught in her throat.

Ari raised an eyebrow, her lips curling into a small smile. 'I look what?'

Nancy's gaze flickered, unable to fully believe what she was seeing. 'You always look great, but that dress is...'

Ari's smile softened, but there was a little self-consciousness there, an unfamiliar shyness that took Nancy by surprise. 'You like it?'

Nancy stepped closer, the pull of Ari's presence undeniable. 'Very. I mean a lot. I

mean, yes.’ Nancy’s pulse quickened. ‘But I still feel like I went overboard.’

Ari’s eyes glinted, her tone playful. ‘Only if you call looking like you just stepped out of a movie “overboard.”’

Nancy laughed nervously. But she liked Ari looking at her like this.

Neither of them moved for a few moments. It was as though they were both frozen, unsure of the next step, caught once more in yet another shift in their relationship.

Finally, Nancy turned away, breaking the moment. ‘Ready to steal a necklace, then?’

Ari’s smile, cool and knowing, followed her as she turned. ‘I was born ready,’ she replied. She laughed. ‘I never thought I’d ever get to say that in real life. If I end this day clapped in irons, at least I’ll have that.’

‘Then it will all have been worth it,’ Nancy shot back.

And just like that, they had slipped back into their usual banter. But something in the air had changed, and they both knew it. Nancy didn’t know how long she could fight the change between them. But by god, she was going down swinging.

Thirty

Ari was back in the great hall, pre-wedding drinks.

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She stood near the edge of the grand ballroom, a glass of champagne dangling from her fingers. People milled about in clusters, women in shimmering dresses, men in pressed suits.

Nancy was next to her. Ari was doing her best not to sneak looks at her and only somewhat failing. But she had to focus on the reason they were here. She had to remind herself of it because, for one stupid moment back in their room, she had forgotten. Seeing Nancy in that dress, deep red, like a perfectly poured glass of wine, the slit riding just high enough to make Ari's mouth go dry, had momentarily scrambled her brain. She had recovered quickly, of course. But not quickly enough.

A waiter passed by, and Ari smoothly swapped her half-full champagne glass for a fresh one. If she had to suffer through this, she was at least going to do it with alcohol.

'You look like you're thinking too hard,' a voice said beside her.

Ari turned slightly, already knowing who it was before she even saw the smirk. One of the bride's cousins, something-something Barclay. He was good-looking in that generic, entitled way, the kind of man who was used to women smiling at him out of obligation.

But he wasn't talking to her. He was talking to Nancy.

Ari watched as Nancy offered him a polite smile. 'I think it's probably the normal amount.'

Undeterred, Barclay continued. 'What's your name?'

'Agamemnon,' Nancy told him.

Barclay seemed to enjoy that. 'You should be enjoying yourself, not keeping your distance.' Nancy arched an eyebrow, and he replied coolly, 'Come on, give me your name.'

Ari felt a surge of annoyance. She knew Nancy wasn't truly interested, but watching Barclay lean in and try to charm her stirred something within Ari. She tried to convince herself that it was nothing, that she shouldn't care when Nancy remained so detached.

'Leave her alone. She's my date,' Ari told him.

He looked at her, surprised. 'Oh.' Then he leered. 'That doesn't need to be a problem, does it?'

'It is if I punch you in the face,' Ari told him. She felt a warning hand on her arm.

'It's OK. I can handle him,' Nancy said.

'Handle me all you like,' Barclay said, undeterred.

'Jesus, have some dignity,' Ari said to him.

'She likes me. I can tell,' he replied.

Ari was now ready to murder. 'Listen...'

'Go over there and wait for me,' Nancy told her.

Ari gave her a questioning look. Nancy nodded. 'I'll find you in a sec.'

Ari sighed, shot Barclay one last look, and walked away.

In that quiet moment, she caught herself stealing one last glance back at Nancy, her graceful, cool indifference stirring something unexpected inside. It wasn't just protective anger; it was a quiet, unsettling jealousy.

Thirty-One

Nancy fixed on Barclay, who looked like he thought he was truly about to get laid. 'I'm sorry. She gets jealous,' she said apologetically.

'That's fine with me,' he said. 'Kinda hot, actually.'

'It shouldn't be. She stabbed the last guy who hit on me once,' Nancy told him.

Barclay laughed. 'No, she didn't.'

Nancy shrugged. 'Luckily, she's rich. So, they paid him off. But he'll have a limp for a while. Maybe the rest of his life.'

The smile dipped. 'Stop it.'

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‘God, the blood...’ Nancy said with a haunted look in her eye. She turned to him. ‘It was the way she didn’t even blink. She just...’ Nancy paused here to let the tension build. ‘She just did it. There was no emotion in her. Her eyes were so calm.’

Barclay’s smirk vanished entirely. ‘Wow, that’s, er... I think I see my friend.’

Nancy exhaled slowly, watching him retreat. As the echo of his hurried footsteps faded, her gaze drifted across the room and landed on Ari. There, amidst the crowd, Ari was watching her. And she did look angry. Not stabby, probably. Something else.

‘Why did you make me leave you with that idiot?’ Ari murmured, coming back to stand beside her as they both pretended to admire a floral centrepiece.

‘I didn’t want a scene,’ Nancy said. ‘And you were going to make one. I sorted it quietly.’

Ari caught her eye. ‘I just wanted him to understand that you’re mine,’ she said. She blinked. ‘My date. My pretend date.’

Nancy swallowed the absolute panic that filled her. ‘So. The key. Where do we find one?’

Ari was quick to shake off the moment. ‘Well, obviously Paris has a key, but she won’t have it on her. The cleaning staff have it, as we found out.’ Ari’s gaze flicked around the room, scanning the guests. ‘I saw the father of the bride talking about security measures earlier. We should split up. One of us can—’

‘No,’ Nancy said quickly, surprising herself. ‘We stay together.’

Ari smirked. ‘You just don’t trust me on my own.’

‘Exactly,’ Nancy shot back, ignoring the way Ari’s smirk made something tingle in her stomach again. She was going to have to have a word with her body later. It was acting like a tit. She was in the driver’s seat. She wouldn’t let herself steer off course.

All she had to do was steal a necklace during a lavish wedding without letting Ari get under her skin.

Piece of cake.

Thirty-Two

The wedding pre-drinks were in full swing around Ari, the grandeur of the manor house making the whole thing feel like a scene from some period drama. However, instead of lingering glances and whispered love affairs, she and Nancy were planning to rob her ex-girlfriend.

It sounded a bit stupid when she thought of it like that. So she changed the genre. She was in a spy movie at a swank political reception. The necklace was the thingamabob that they needed to stop the terrorists from blowing up whatdoyoucallit.

Put like that, was it sexy? No. Still felt dumb. Better to just ground herself in reality.

She imagined the moment—the stolen necklace back in her mother’s hands. ‘There, see? I got something right,’ she’d say. And for once, her mother might actually be surprised. Maybe even shocked enough to shed a single, stunned tear.

That was what she wanted. To catch her off guard, to see the briefest glimpse of

something real. A crack in the usual annoyed indifference. Just a flicker of recognition that Ari wasn't a total disappointment. That, for once, she'd done something her mother couldn't ignore.

Once Ari had that? Well, she didn't know what she'd do with it. But she'd have it.

Nancy, standing beside her, was watching the room with quiet calculation, her cool gaze scanning the staff. Luckily, she hadn't noticed Ari's mad jealous moment. Things were weird enough as it was.

'There,' Nancy murmured, chin tilting ever so slightly toward a young woman in a waistcoat and tie, a ring of keys fastened to her belt. 'Permanent staff.'

Ari nodded. 'Nice catch. How do we do this?'

Nancy's gaze lingered on the woman. 'Subtlety. We create a diversion, slip the keys away unnoticed, and return them before she realises. No fuss, no theatrics.'

Ari grinned, already stepping away. 'On it.'

Nancy grabbed her wrist, holding her in place. 'Ari.'

'Relax,' Ari drawled. 'I've got this.'

Nancy released her reluctantly.

Ari slunk up behind the woman with the keys, moving with confidence. She was gonna do this so slickly Nancy would be stunned. But the timing was everything.

She bumped into her lightly from behind, murmuring, 'So sorry,' as she reached, fingers poised to unhook the keys before anyone even noticed they were gone.

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But before she could close her grip around them, the keyholder—who had, unbeknownst to Ari, been in the middle of handing someone a glass of champagne—jerked in surprise. The flute tilted sharply, and in a perfect arc of disaster, the entire glass of chilled champagne poured straight down the front of Paris’s Great-Aunt Margot.

Ari barely had time to register the shock before a shriek split the air. Margot recoiled, clutching at her drenched silk gown, eyes wide with fury. The keyholder gasped, fumbling an apology. Around them, heads turned, conversation stalling as the scene unfolded.

Ari’s stomach clenched. Not ideal. Not ideal at all.

Ari flushed with panic as she stammered, ‘Oh my god, I am so sorry! That’s on me! Here, let me—’ She tried to help, but the older woman was already dabbing at her soaked bodice. ‘Don’t touch me!’ she said heatedly.

Ari retreated quickly, slinking back to Nancy’s side, her shoulders hunched in embarrassment.

‘What was that?’ Nancy asked.

‘I was trying to distract her while I grabbed the keys.’

‘It was definitely distracting,’ Nancy said, her voice dripping with mock exasperation.

Ari looked at her with a sheepish grin. 'OK. Plan B.'

Nancy scoffed, crossing her arms over her chest. 'There was no Plan A, let alone a Plan B.' She watched as Ari, unfazed, began brainstorming her next move.

Ari collected herself. 'Right,' she said to Nancy with determination and casually drifted back toward the woman with the keys.

This time, she attempted an over-the-top stumble, aiming to bump into her and snag the keys mid-trip. Instead, she crashed into a passing waiter, sending an entire platter of hors d'oeuvres flying.

A prawn landed in her hair.

'Ari,' Nancy hissed, rubbing her temple as though she could physically will herself out of this situation. 'Stop.'

'OK,' Ari muttered as an irate wedding planner marched past, barking at staff to clean up the mess.

Ari sighed, pulling out the prawn and watching as the woman with the keys laughed at something another staff member said.

'Your turn,' Ari relented. 'If you think you can do better.'

Nancy gave her a pointed look. 'I couldn't do worse.' She approached the woman while Ari stayed within earshot. 'Excuse me,' Nancy said, stopping near the woman. 'I think I might have left something in the library earlier, an earring. Would you happen to have a key so I can check?'

The woman turned to her, a little amused. 'I'm afraid we don't let guests into rooms

unsupervised. But I'd be happy to check for you.'

Nancy sighed. 'That's very kind. I just hate to be a bother. It's sentimental, you see. A gift. I'd feel terrible if I lost it here.'

The woman hesitated. Then she smiled and shook her head. 'Rules are rules. I can go look now if you'd like?'

Nancy's eye twitched the tiniest bit. 'That's alright. I'll check later.'

She returned to Ari, and Ari had to physically bite her lip to keep from laughing. 'That was some excellent key-stealing. You really showed me.'

'Shut up.'

Ari grinned. 'I think we're both forgetting the obvious solution.'

Nancy exhaled through her nose as though bracing for nonsense. 'Which is?'

Ari beamed. 'Flirting.'

Nancy gave her a slow, measured look. 'Ari.'

'I'll be charming,' Ari said, checking her hair for further prawns. 'I'll be effortless. I'll be—'

'What if she's not interested in women?' Nancy asked.

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Ari smiled. 'Oh, a heterosexual, you mean? I've slept with tons of those.'

Nancy sighed. 'OK, let's say this is the way. Let's think this through. How far are you willing to take it? I mean, if it goes well. Are you actually going to...'

Ari's eyebrows raised expectantly.

Nancy frowned. 'You do know what the end of that sentence is, don't you?'

'Obviously. I just wanted to see how you were going to put it,' Ari said with a grin.

'I was doing a fade out,' Nancy said irritably. 'You were simply supposed to infer what I meant and not your understanding.'

'Have we met?' Ari asked dryly.

Nancy cleared her throat. 'So. How far are you going to take this?'

'Why does that matter?' Ari asked.

Nancy paused. 'I don't know. Perhaps it doesn't.' She turned away.

'You must have asked for a reason,' Ari insisted.

Nancy cleared her throat. 'Yes. The reason is that I need the plan. Details matter. We agreed with that.'

‘You need to know if I’m going to try and bang a staff member for access to the keys?’ Ari asked. She glanced back over at the woman in question, weighing it up.

It wasn’t out of the question in terms of attractiveness. But she’d never slept with someone for reasons of strategy before. She was a simple creature in that regard. Do I want to? Then I will. She wasn’t sure if she had this in her. To have sex for gain? Could she do it? Did she have to? She might. To truly get the woman’s attention off that bloody bunch of keys could require a full seduction.

‘I’m not sure,’ Ari said honestly.

Nancy nodded. ‘OK.’

‘What? Disappointed in me?’ Ari asked.

‘No. Nothing. Do whatever.’

That made Ari feel hurt in a way she didn’t understand. Not that she was letting it show. ‘Fine,’ she said. ‘See you on the other side.’

Thirty-Three

Nancy stayed just out of sight but close enough to hear the light chatter between Ari and the waitress. She didn’t want to listen, didn’t want to care, but she couldn’t help herself. Ari’s voice was as easy as ever.

‘Sorry I knocked into you,’ Ari’s voice drifted to Nancy’s ears, playful and smooth. ‘I guess I was just drawn in your direction.’

The woman laughed, a low, throaty sound that made Nancy’s stomach twist. ‘Oh?’ she said, leaning in a little closer, her voice just below a whisper.

‘Love a woman with a drink in her hand,’ Ari said, her tone dropping lower, warmer. ‘Even if it’s for someone else.’

Nancy’s heart pounded against her chest, the words a sudden jolt of something unfamiliar. She knew Ari was a born flirt, but hearing this side of her... It was too much.

Nancy’s gaze scanned the pair, watching how the waitress leaned in just a bit too close—her smile deepened as her eyes studied Ari with slow, deliberate interest. ‘Is that right?’ the woman murmured. ‘You always this charming, or am I just lucky tonight?’

Ari tilted her head, considering. ‘I’d say a bit of both.’ She let her gaze drop for a moment, just long enough to suggest she was taking the woman in properly, before flashing a smirk. ‘But luck’s a funny thing. It only lasts so long.’

The woman grinned, clearly enjoying the game. ‘And what happens when it runs out?’

Ari leaned in, just a fraction. ‘I’d have to get creative.’

Nancy barely breathed. She could see the way the waitress reacted, her lashes lowering, her mouth curving just enough to betray amusement. Ari was laying it on thick, and it was working.

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‘I do like a woman who can improvise.’

Ari let the silence stretch for a beat. ‘What about a woman with a taste for adventure?’

‘Depends what kind.’

Ari glanced around as if considering something forbidden, then leaned in just enough to make the other woman mirror her movement. Her voice was nothing more than a murmur. ‘You know the bride’s got the nicest room in the house.’

The woman’s brow arched, her amusement sharp. ‘She does?’

Ari shrugged, lazy and smug. ‘You know what they say. Weddings can leave people too tired to consummate the marriage. It’s a shame that room might not see any action.’

Nancy’s stomach twisted, heat and irritation pooling at once. The suggestion was blatant, bordering on reckless.

The woman exhaled a soft laugh, shaking her head. ‘Tempting,’ she admitted, dragging her bottom lip between her teeth. ‘But I’ve got work to do. And you look like trouble.’

Ari grinned, tapping her fingers against the bar. ‘Guilty as charged.’

‘Mmm. Thought so.’ She took a fresh drink from her tray and gave it to Ari, eyes

glinting. 'Better behave yourself, then.'

Nancy swallowed hard.

The woman was walking away, and Ari, unbothered, was lifting her drink to her lips, the corner of her mouth curling in satisfaction.

Thirty-Four

Ari leaned against the bar, her smile still firmly in place, though it felt a little too thin. She hadn't expected things to go quite that way, but that was the game, wasn't it? Always pushing, always testing the waters. The woman had pulled back, sure, but Ari could chalk it up to a lack of chemistry or maybe just a misstep. Nothing to lose sleep over.

Ari picked up her drink and took a slow sip, letting the cool burn of the liquor settle in her throat. The waitress had said no. Politely, with a smile, but still, a no was a no. Fair enough. Ari wasn't exactly heartbroken. It was all part of the game, and she could take a loss as well as a win.

But something about it didn't sit right.

Maybe it was the fact that she'd let herself push too far, had let the whole thing get away from her in a way she hadn't meant to. Maybe it was the way Nancy had been standing just far enough away to hear. Watching.

Ari turned, scanning the room until she spotted her. Nancy wasn't even pretending to look elsewhere. Her gaze was fixed right on Ari.

Ari slid up beside her, setting her drink down with an easy thud. 'C'est la vie,' she drawled.

Nancy tilted her head. 'She didn't go for that Ari charm, then?'

Ari exhaled a laugh. 'The problem is that she wasn't a rulebreaker.'

'Oh, sure.' Nancy shook her head. 'You should've seen your face when she turned you down. Very humbling.'

Ari rolled her shoulders, feigning nonchalance. 'Hey, I don't win 'em all. But at least I get in the game.' She turned to Nancy, smirking. 'Not like you, standing on the sidelines, watching.'

Nancy didn't flinch, didn't rise to the bait. 'That's what I do for you, isn't it? The ever-present observer to the Ari show.'

Something about the way she said it felt angry. A beat of silence stretched between them. Just a fraction too long.

Ari huffed a laugh and picked up her drink again. 'Well, you're welcome. Happy to provide the evening's entertainment.'

Nancy's lips twitched, that small, infuriating smile. 'Oh, you have. Though I have to say, I was expecting a little more of a fight.'

Ari raised an eyebrow. 'What, you think I should've tried harder? Put on some grand display? Maybe declared my undying devotion?'

Nancy regarded her thoughtfully. 'No. That wouldn't have suited you.'

Ari narrowed her eyes. 'And what would?'

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Nancy just smiled, slow and knowing. ‘Hard to say.’

Ari’s fingers tightened ever so slightly around her glass. That was the thing with Nancy. She had a way of landing a hit without ever making it clear she’d swung in the first place. It was a skill. An infuriating one.

‘Would you have done it? Slept with her?’ Nancy asked, and her tone was different. Ari could see she was done bantering.

Ari considered a joke but then shook her head. ‘No. I was planning to shove her in the bathroom and lock her in while I pillaged the drawers.’

Nancy paused for a split second and then laughed, and Ari heard relief in it. And she was glad she’d said it.

‘You didn’t want me pawing her?’ Ari asked, careful to keep her tone light.

Nancy shrugged. ‘I don’t want you to go too far for this. You wouldn’t feel right about using someone like that.’

‘You don’t think?’

‘I don’t,’ Nancy said.

She might have been right about that. But it wasn’t the main reason she couldn’t have slept with the waitress. But Ari wasn’t about to tell Nancy that she couldn’t see herself touching anyone but her.

Thirty-Five

‘OK, well, I think we’ve probably bothered that woman enough tonight,’ Nancy said. ‘Anything else is going to start to look weird. We need someone new to lift the keys from.’

‘OK, how about him?’ Ari nodded towards an older male waiter making his way through the crowd, balancing a tray of empty glasses with impressive ease.

Nancy considered him, eyes sharp. ‘Could be.’

Nancy straightened her dress, adjusting her posture into something more effortless, more natural. ‘Fine. Who’s trying this one?’

Ari’s grin widened. ‘Distraction and opportunity. You charm; I lift. Or do you want to swap?’

Nancy was surprised. ‘You think we can do this together?’

‘I don’t know why we tried it any other way,’ Ari said.

Nancy tried not to notice anything else you could read into that statement. ‘Alright. But let’s not overcomplicate things. You’re the thief, I’m the diversion.’

Ari clapped her hands together. ‘Great. I’m getting a taste for theft.’ She paused. ‘How do I know when the moment’s right?’

Nancy thought it over. ‘When I mention the bride, go in for the kill.’

They drifted through the crowd, slipping into their roles as if it were second nature. Nancy made her way toward the waiter. Ari, meanwhile, moved in the opposite

direction, looping around.

Nancy smoothed her dress, already moving toward the older waiter. She knew her in—what every hard-working staff member wanted to hear. And she should know.

‘Excuse me,’ Nancy said, catching the waiter’s attention. ‘I just wanted to say what an incredible job you and the staff are doing tonight. The whole thing is running so smoothly. Must be a nightmare keeping everything on track.’

The man blinked in pleasant surprise. ‘Oh well, thank you, miss. We do try our best. A wedding like this has a lot of moving parts, but it helps when the guests are cooperative.’

‘Oh, of course,’ Nancy said smoothly. ‘And I have to imagine you’ve seen your fair share of weddings working here. Must be a fascinating job.’

The waiter smiled, loosening slightly under the unexpected conversation. ‘Oh, I’ve seen three generations of the Cavanaugh’s get married under this roof.’

‘Wow,’ Nancy said, trying to look interested. ‘We were just saying how well everything seems to be handled. I mean, the bride must be thrilled—’

Ari didn’t need to hear the rest. That was her cue. As Nancy kept the conversation flowing, Ari shifted subtly closer, letting the noise of the room mask her movements. The waiter’s keyring hung just slightly loose from his pocket, attached to a belt loop but within reach.

Nancy watched as Ari let her fingers brush against the cool metal carefully, now a little practised from her first two aborted attempts. A quick flick, a shift of pressure, and the weight of the keys dropped easily into her palm. She curled her fingers around them, tucking them smoothly into the fold of her dress before stepping back.

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Nancy shot her the smallest glance, just a flick of her lashes, and Ari answered with the tiniest quirk of her lips. Done.

‘Well, I won’t keep you,’ Nancy said to their victim, her tone gracious. ‘Just wanted to pass along our compliments.’

‘Much appreciated,’ the waiter said, giving her a polite nod before returning to his duties.

As soon as he was out of earshot, Ari tilted her head toward Nancy. ‘Smooth,’ she murmured. ‘You really kept his attention.’

‘I’m achaffeur.’ Nancy arched an eyebrow. ‘Half the job is talking to people.’

Ari grinned, twirling the keys once between her fingers before tucking them safely away. ‘I thought you were more the strong, silent type.’

‘Depends on who’s in the back. You’re not one for banal bullshitting, so I don’t give it to you.’

Ari smiled. ‘That was a compliment. I think?’

Nancy nodded. ‘It was. Take it.’ Another one of those moments happened. Nancy cleared her throat. ‘What now?’

Ari leaned in slightly, letting her voice drop just for effect. ‘I take what’s mine, of course.’

Nancy didn't know if they were talking about the keys or something else entirely. But she didn't ask. Neither of them would. Not yet. She gave a soft laugh, feeling the heat in her cheeks. 'Let's just hope it was worth the trouble.'

Ari tapped the keys against her palm and said, 'Shall we?'

Nancy raised an eyebrow. 'But... We said during dinner.'

Ari looked around her, assessing. 'It's the right moment,' Ari appealed. 'You can be the lookout this time. Guard the door. This can be over in five minutes.' She sighed, her large, dark eyes pleading. 'I want this to be over with so we can... So I can move on.'

Nancy knew what the plan was. But she also knew Ari wasn't much for following it. And it was so very hard to say no to her. Growing harder by the second.

Thirty-Six

Ari's fingers still tingled with the buzz of their little victory, the keys now secure in her hand, but there was no time to savour the moment. Time to go and get her prize.

But as she began to push back out to the hall and up to Paris's room, there was a shift. She could feel the swell of people pushing against her. Because they'd heard something she hadn't.

She caught it the second time. The butler announcing the wedding was about to begin. Shit.

Everyone had been waiting for this cue. There was no escaping the tide now. Ari and Nancy were swept into the crowd, bodies moving, shifting, merging. And despite every instinct telling her to slip away, to make her escape while the moment was still

hers, Ari was carried forward, caught in the flow like everyone else.

She glanced at Nancy, and their eyes met for just a second. 'It's OK. We just stick to the original plan,' she whispered. 'Course five.'

Ari was livid. But also trapped. The pace of everything seemed to conspire against her. They could go now, but they'd have to be fast to get there and back before the wedding march started up. It wasn't worth it. Nancy was right. Stick to the plan.

Ari let herself be swept with the tide alongside Nancy. Their bodies bumped in all the worst (or best?) places, and they both looked away quickly. The chatter grew louder as the crowd murmured with excitement, eager for the wedding to begin.

The garden stretched out before them, the soft glow of fairy lights twinkling in the trees. But Ari's mind was elsewhere. It was everywhere. The keys, the necklace, Nancy. Her mind was a washing machine on full spin.

'I'm not good at waiting,' Ari muttered under her breath, barely loud enough for Nancy to hear.

Nancy's lips twitched, but she didn't respond right away. They both kept moving, barely keeping their footing as they were swept further into the garden and directed to their seats. 'Just hold on,' she said.

The seats were at the back, positioned in such a way that it felt like an afterthought. Yet still, they were stuck, trapped in the row with the other unimportant guests.

The murmur of conversation dipped into a hush as the quartet began to play, but Ari was still fidgeting, twisting the stolen keys between her fingers.

Nancy, ever composed, glanced at her. 'Would you stop that?'

Ari exhaled sharply but slipped the keys into her palm. ‘Sorry. I was just so close. I’ve waited years for this.’

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Nancy's eyes flicked toward the front, where a minister and the groom waited. 'Then you can wait another hour. We'll have time after.'

A man in front of them turned around. His breath smelled like whisky. 'Desperate to sneak off, eh?'

Ari felt her entire body tense, but Nancy, without even turning around, simply clasped her hands in her lap and said, 'Beg your pardon?'

The man chuckled again. 'Don't worry, darlings. Weddings do that to people. All that romance in the air gets the bloodpumping, eh?' He gave a crude wink. 'Hope you don't have to wait too long.'

Ari's face burned as the man's laughter rumbled low and knowing. She chanced a glance at Nancy, who still hadn't looked back, her posture a picture of cool indifference. But Ari caught the turn of her knuckles to purest white.

Then, as if sensing Ari's gaze, Nancy finally turned her head. Their eyes met, and for a single, excruciating second, embarrassment crackled between them. Neither of them spoke, but the moment stretched, filled with everything they weren't saying.

Then Nancy exhaled, barely a flicker of movement, and Ari tore her eyes away, fixing them straight ahead. Nothing to do but pretend it hadn't happened. Pretend her skin wasn't prickling. Pretend the man's words hadn't lodged somewhere uncomfortably deep.

Ari sighed, slumping back in her chair, but as she did, she felt the brush of Nancy's

fingers against hers. Just a fleeting touch, so quick it could've been accidental.

She glanced at Nancy out of the corner of her eye, but her expression was unreadable, gaze trained forward as if nothing had happened at all.

Ari wasn't sure if she was imagining all this. Was there something there? Or did Ari just want there to be?

Thirty-Seven

The wedding was happening. Nancy and Ari were stuck here, side by side, among the well-dressed guests who were already fidgeting, chatting, waiting for the ceremony to begin. Nancy wouldn't have minded too much about the delay. But Ari was antsy.

And why the hell had that drunk idiot said all that?! Nancy didn't need it in the slightest. She could only keep her eyes forward and wait for the awkwardness to pass.

The garden was beautiful in its own way. Perfectly manicured lawns, the kind of place you might see in a fairy tale if you squinted hard enough. But Nancy wasn't here for the scenery. She was here for Ari. If she could just keep her shit together, she could get what she wanted.

But then Paris appeared right next to them. She began her much-awaited stroll down the aisle in her grand gown, a vision of perfection on the outside. Her steps were slow and measured, but that wasn't what drew Nancy's attention. It was Ari's reaction to her. The way Ari's entire body seemed to stiffen, her eyes narrowing.

And then Paris caught Ari's gaze and winked.

The second Paris's wink hit Ari, it was as if the air was sucked from the space between them. Ari's face twisted in a kind of barely restrained anger, and before

Nancy could say anything, Ari was already pushing back, her chair scraping loudly across the stone floor.

‘Ari, sit,’ Nancy hissed, reaching out to stop her.

Ari was moving too fast, her back straight, her eyes blazing. ‘I can’t,’ she muttered, her words a low growl. ‘I’m getting my—’

Nancy grabbed her wrist, pulling her back down into the chair, forcing her to stay seated. ‘Don’t do this,’ she warned, her voice low and steady despite the rising chaos in her gut. She couldn’t let Ari ruin everything now, not when they were so close.

‘You’ve got to wait. You can get back at her later,’ Nancy said, her grip firm around Ari’s wrist.

Ari’s eyes flicked to Nancy’s, fury and frustration written all over her face, but she didn’t pull away. ‘I can’t just sit here,’ Ari snapped.

‘You have to,’ Nancy pressed. ‘Trust me, OK?’

She could feel Ari’s resistance. But Nancy wouldn’t let Ari be her own worst enemy. It was the same dance they’d always done, but there was more at stake now. If she could just calm her tits for this wedding, she could have her moment.

Ari’s chest rose and fell as she sucked in a sharp breath, and for a long moment, Nancy wasn’t sure which way the wind would blow. But then Ari’s shoulders slumped, just a little, and she reluctantly sank back into her seat, her gaze flicking to Paris, who was now standing next to the groom, a smile plastered across her face.

Nancy watched as the ceremony began, her attention still divided between Ari and the spectacle before them. Cal, the groom, was crying. Tears streamed down his face as

he gazed at Paris, his expression raw with emotion. It was clear to anyone watching that Cal's tears were genuine. He was overcome, moved by something deep and sincere. His hands shook as he held Paris's, but she didn't seem to know quite how to react. She stood there, stiff, her lips quivering as if she wasn't sure how to mirror his emotion.

'This is painful,' Ari muttered under her breath.

Nancy nodded while Cal poured out his heart to Paris.

'I used to think love was something that happened to other people. But then I met you. And suddenly, love wasn't this distant, untouchable thing—it was real. It was you. You are the person I never saw coming but somehow always needed. You make me laugh when I least expect it. You challenge me in ways that make me better, and you love me even when I don't make it easy. So today, I promise you this. I will always be your safe place, the person who stands beside you no matter what. I will love you fiercely and gently, with every part of me, for all our days. I don't believe in fate, but I believe in you. And I choose you, today and always.'

Nancy found her gaze drifting to Ari. She quickly flicked it away before Ari noticed. Not that it meant anything. Nancy was just looking at Ari while some words were said.

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Then it was the bride's turn to speak. 'Look, I could stand here and talk about fate or destiny, but we both know I don't believe in that stuff. What I do believe in is this. You and me. The fact that somehow, against all odds, we ended up here. You make my life more interesting. You make everything more fun. And let's be honest, I look really good standing next to you. So, I promise to keep making you laugh, to always let you steal my fries (within reason), and to stick around. Because, let's face it, nobody else could handle me like you do. You're my favourite person, and I plan to keep it that way.'

Everyone clapped. Nancy couldn't think why. This wedding was tragic. No matter how much had been spent, if it wasn't real love, it was a shit event.

Not that she'd know much about that. She'd never even come close. She'd never made it past a year with anyone.

She'd worked for Ari for longer than that, she realised. Two years. That connection, imperfect and complicated as it was, was the only thing that had lasted in her life.

Was that sad?

Yes. Because she was paid to be in Ari's company. This was a job. This was a job. She couldn't go getting silly like this over her boss just because they'd widened the boundaries of the contract, and Nancy had let herself get carried away with it.

But in the back of her mind, she couldn't shake the thought that maybe what she had with Ari could have been so much more.

In another life.

Thirty-Eight

Ari stood at the edge of the garden, gripping the stem of her champagne flute so tightly she thought it might snap. Around her, guests meandered through the manicured hedges to the faint notes of a string quartet while the bride and groom posed for two different photographers, signing the license.

All of it set her teeth on edge.

Because it was all so very Paris. This wasn't a wedding in the sentimental sense. It was a statement, a carefully constructed tableau. An advert for Paris's perfection. 'Look what I have, and look where you are,' the message whispered beneath every perfect detail. Only the groom didn't seem to be in on the joke.

Ari's jaw clenched. She wanted to cause a scene, to rip through this façade. Push someone into a pond. Slap a camera out of a photographer's hand. Pee in a bush. Do anything, anything, to ruin the vision Paris had created.

Her fingers twitched, itching to act. Her pulse throbbed against her temple. It would feel so good, just for a moment.

'Don't.' Nancy's voice was low, edged with something like amusement but mostly understanding.

Ari startled slightly; she hadn't realised Nancy was beside her.

'Don't what?' Ari bit back, though she already knew what Nancy meant.

Nancy raised a brow. 'Don't burn the place down.'

‘You don’t understand.’

Nancy’s gaze was unwavering. There was no judgment there, no smug pleasure, just quiet, deliberate steadiness. A kind of patience that made Ari feel simultaneously exposed and understood.

‘I think I do,’ she said.

There was something about the quiet certainty in Nancy’s voice that made Ari falter.

Her anger didn’t disappear, but it stopped feeling like it might spill over. The edges dulled, and the heat cooled.

She let out a slow breath.

‘I don’t get how you do that,’ she admitted, voice lower now. ‘You always know how to...’ she trailed off, searching for the words.

Nancy’s eyebrows raised. ‘Tame the beast?’

Ari barked a short laugh despite herself. Then, quieter, ‘No. Just... pull me back from the edge.’

Nancy studied her for a long moment, then said simply, ‘It never feels that hard.’

Ari blinked. ‘But I’m such a mess.’

‘You’re not a mess,’ Nancy said with such casual sincerity that it blew Ari’s mind.

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‘Maybe I’m not a mess around you because you balance me,’ Ari said, frightened to death of the words coming out of her mouth but unable to contain them.

Nancy looked like she was struggling for a response. ‘Maybe I do,’ she managed to say, not able to hold Ari’s gaze.

Ari’s stomach twisted in a way that had nothing to do with anger. A slow, unfamiliar feeling beating in her chest, something that made her feel unsteady in an entirely different way.

She realised that she had never wanted to kiss someone this much in the whole of her life.

‘OK, let’s talk necklace. We have a key, but we need to choose the moment,’ Nancy said suddenly.

Ari realised that whatever she thought might be happening wasn’t. And she needed to snap the fuck out of it.

‘Like you said. We stick to the plan,’ she said, sliding back into something like her usual self.

‘Fifth course?’ Nancy asked.

‘Fifth course,’ Ari agreed.

The great hall was a dining room once more, with glittering glassware and polite conversation, the warm glow of candlelight making everything seem nicer than it was. The string quartet had moved indoors and was playing softly in the corner, the delicate notes barely audible over the murmur of voices and the occasional peal of laughter. Nancy swirled the wine in her glass, only half-listening as the father of the bride tapped a spoon against his flute and called for the room's attention.

‘Before dinner, we’d like to say a few words,’ he announced, his voice ringing with pleasure at an opportunity to force people to listen to him. ‘And I know there are quite a few who would love the chance to toast our beautiful couple.’

Nancy suppressed a sigh. Here came the speeches, all varying degrees of tediousness. She shot a glance at Ari, who had already drained her champagne in preparation.

The speeches began, and they were exactly what Nancy expected. First, the father of the bride droned on about how proud he was, his voice thick with emotion and expensive whisky.

‘I can’t tell you how proud I am of my little girl,’ he said, gripping the table like it was the only thing keeping him upright. ‘Paris, you’ve grown into an incredible woman.’ He paused for a moment as if steadying himself. ‘I thought you might suffer without a mother, but look at you! We didn’t need her, did we?’

A ripple of discomfort moved through the room. Someone coughed. Nancy saw a few guests glance at Paris, whose polite smile remained fixed in place though the fingers of her free hand curled slightly against the tablecloth.

‘And, of course, we have my wife’s sister to thank. She stepped in when we needed her, and I know my wife—wherever the fuck she is—would be glad to know she had a good female role model. So, here’s to Paris and her wonderful new husband!’ he finished, raising his glass with a wobbling flourish.

The applause was scattered, uncertain. A few guests drained their glasses like they'd just endured something gruelling. Paris lifted her champagne, her smile unwavering, but her grip on the flute was white-knuckled.

Then came the maid of honour, who rattled off a slightly risqué but ultimately forgettable anecdote about the bride's university days. The best man followed suit, making the standard jokes about how lucky the groom was and how no one could quite believe he'd managed to convince Paris to marry him. The table chuckled obligingly, but Nancy and Ari weren't paying attention anymore.

That was until a new voice cut through the murmurs, a voice Nancy knew all too well. She stiffened, her body tensing involuntarily, even before she saw the woman who was standing at table two.

Helen.

'Good evening, everyone,' Helen began, her voice smooth and professional but with a sharpness that sent a chill down Nancy's spine. 'I'm Helen Bishop, and I have the pleasure of being Paris's aunt.'

Nancy froze, her heart skipping a beat. Aunt? Jesus, what were the odds? Actually, maybe they were pretty good. There were certainly some traits they seemed to share.

Helen smiled, her gaze sweeping over the room like a hawk eyeing its prey. 'As Mike said, I've been a big part of Paris's life, and I like to think I've helped raise her,' she continued, 'Watching her today, I couldn't be prouder of the woman she's become. Not only is she stunning, intelligent, and incredibly driven, but she's also brought an entirely new level of class and style to the events that I've had the pleasure of hosting through our charity foundation.'

Nancy's jaw tightened. The charity foundation. That was Helen's world. Always

screaming in the back of the car about some guest list or gift bag.

‘Paris’s involvement has been invaluable,’ Helen went on, her voice silky smooth. ‘She’s helped raise our profile and, most importantly, our donations. We couldn’t have achieved half of what we have without her tireless work. Truly, she’s transformed the way we approach charity events. Oh, and poverty alleviation, of course.’

Well remembered, Nancy thought.

The room gave her the applause she expected, polite and respectful but entirely hollow. Nancy didn’t clap. She couldn’t. The words sounded like a rehearsed performance, every one of them crafted to make Helen look good while she pretended to make Paris look good. If the room could have seen her on the last day of Nancy’s employment, screaming at her about being ten minutes late, throwing that coffee that thankfully had been lukewarm. A monster in couture.

As Helen sat down, Nancy glanced at Ari again. Ari didn’t seem particularly moved by Helen’s speech.

‘I can’t believe she’s Paris’s aunt,’ Nancy muttered under her breath, though she knew Ari didn’t need to be told. They’d both heard the same thing.

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Ari, leaning in slightly, gave a small, amused smile. ‘Our nemeses are related. How convenient for us.’

Nancy tried to smile back. Ari examined her, and her smile dropped. ‘She doesn’t have any power over you now.’

‘She was just a bad boss,’ Nancy said. ‘I’m overreacting.’

‘I doubt that,’ Ari said.

Nancy shrugged. But she appreciated Ari’s words. More than she could say.

The speeches went on. Nancy and Ari fell into a quiet game of commentary, whispering to each other between sips of wine.

‘What’s the over-under on someone saying, “You don’t just marry a person, you marry their family”?’ Ari murmured, tilting her head slightly towards Nancy.

‘Ten seconds,’ Nancy replied dryly.

Right on cue, the groom’s uncle cleared his throat and said, ‘Of course, marriage isn’t just about two people—it’s about two families coming together.’

Ari let out a small, delighted snort, quickly hiding it behind her napkin. For a while, it was almost enjoyable.

But then the bride stood up.

Paris smiled as the applause from the last speech died down, her perfectly manicured fingers resting lightly on the back of her chair. 'I just want to say a few words,' she said.

Nancy felt Ari go completely still beside her.

'I have to say, looking around this room, I feel so grateful,' Paris continued, eyes sweeping the room. 'It's incredible to be surrounded by people who have been part of our journey. And, of course, it means so much to have even our... past connections here, too. It's important to remember the lessons we've learned, isn't it?'

Nancy's grip tightened around her glass. That wasn't a speech. It was a knife slid right between Ari's ribs under the guise of civility. She didn't have an ounce of shame.

Ari was stone-faced, but Nancy could see the tightness in her jaw.

'To my husband, who reaps the rewards of all my mistakes,' Paris finished, and everyone clapped as she sat down.

And then Nancy did something completely nuts.

She rose smoothly from her seat, lifting her glass before anyone could react. 'A toast,' she announced.

Paris turned her head, expression wary, but Nancy smiled at her in the most infuriatingly pleasant way she could muster.

'To authenticity,' Nancy said, letting the word settle. 'To the kind of love that's real, even when no one's watching.'

The silence was heavy, the tension threading through the tables like a live wire. Nancy held Paris's gaze, watching the flash of irritation she tried to mask with a gracious smile.

'Cheers,' Nancy finished smoothly, tilting her glass just enough to catch the light.

And then her eye caught Helen's across the room. Nancy kept her face entirely neutral. But there was no recognition in Helen's eyes. Ari was right. She couldn't see who she was without a steering wheel in her hands.

Nancy finally lowered herself back into her chair, heart hammering a little too fast. That had been reckless. She knew it. She should have just let it go. But then Ari leaned in slightly, her voice low enough that only Nancy could hear.

'That was dangerous,' Ari murmured.

Nancy smirked, taking a slow sip of wine. 'You loved it.'

Ari exhaled a quiet laugh, shaking her head. 'I really did.'

And there it was again. That warmth spread through Nancy's chest, the pull of something unspoken between them. Something could happen between them. And it could happen tonight if Nancy wasn't extremely careful.

Forty

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The fifth course arrived in a flurry of white-gloved hands and hushed murmurs. Ari barely noticed the delicate arrangement of food set before her.

She turned to Nancy, keeping her voice low. 'Fifth course. You know what that means.' She paused. 'I should go alone.'

Nancy raised an eyebrow. 'You think you're ditching me now?'

Ari smirked. 'I think there's a lot of eyes on you now after that absolute knife in the guts of a speech.'

Nancy sighed. 'I know. I shouldn't have.'

'After you've spent all this time telling me to behave,' Ari said with a tut.

Nancy shrugged. 'Yep.'

'Thanks,' Ari said sincerely. 'It meant a lot to me.'

Nancy nodded. 'I couldn't just let her attack you.'

Ari sighed and smiled. 'So, you're coming with me?'

'You couldn't stop me,' Nancy said.

The faint murmur of the dining room faded behind them. Ari moved swiftly, her pulse steady as she reached Paris's door and pulled out the keys.

It took a couple of tries, but then the door swung open just enough for her to slip inside. Nancy followed, though she stayed at the door, her head poking out into the hall. 'Be quick,' she said.

Even in the dim light from the hall, the room was just as Ari remembered. Everything in its place, designed to impress. But Ari wasn't here to admire Paris's taste. The velvet case was where she'd left it.

Ari made a beeline for it, snapping open the case, fingers grazing the cool metal of the necklace. It was a delicate gold chain adorned with tiny, embedded sapphires. The locket, framed with a halo of deep blue and clear gemstones, had a surface worn smooth by the years. It had been a while since she'd seen it, but it was as lovely as she remembered.

Ari felt a rush of triumph, of pure exhilaration. She looked at Nancy, standing next to the door. 'We did it,' she grinned.

Nancy turned and returned the smile of triumph.

Then came the sound of footsteps.

Nancy reacted first, running from the door, grabbing Ari by the wrist and yanking her towards the en suite. She shut the door behind them, locking them in.

Ari held her breath. Someone was just outside, in the bedroom.

'Did they see you?' Ari whispered. Nancy shook her head.

Nancy pressed her back against the door, her breathing controlled and measured. Next to her, Ari was the opposite, heart pounding, every nerve alight. The rush of the theft still burned in her veins, making her feel invincible, untouchable.

Ari put the necklace loose in her purse and turned to Nancy. They were close, closer than they ever had been. Inches apart, in a dark room, alone.

The adrenaline, the victory, the sharp, dangerous thrill of it all surged through Ari, igniting something reckless. ‘Nancy,’ she whispered.

Nancy looked at her, whispering back, ‘Shush, you’ll get us—’

Ari pressed her lips to Nancy’s.

Nancy stiffened, surprised and pulled away. They looked at each other. Ari thought she was angry. And maybe she was. But then something shifted in Nancy’s expression, something hesitant. Her lips parted slightly.

Ari swallowed hard, the tremor in her body not just from nerves but from hope.

Nancy leaned in slowly, her eyes meeting Ari’s. For a moment, they just looked at each other, the silence hanging between them. Then Nancy kissed her.

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It was tentative at first, a soft meeting of lips as if both were testing the waters, unsure yet undeniably drawn to each other. Nancy's hand settled at the nape of Ari's neck, fingers threading through her hair, pulling her closer as the kiss grew more certain. It was slow but full of something that neither could ignore now. Something that had been building for longer than perhaps either of them realised.

The world outside ceased to exist. There was no Paris, no wedding, nobody outside the door waiting to catch them. Just Ari and Nancy, finally giving in.

And then footsteps retreating. The danger passed.

They broke apart, both breathing hard. Ari stared at Nancy, her lips tingling, her heart still racing for an entirely different reason now.

Nancy swallowed, looking like she wasn't sure whether she wanted to do it again or run for the hills.

'We should go,' she said, voice hushed.

Ari nodded, but she couldn't quite wipe the grin from her face. Because she knew, without a doubt, that Nancy had wanted this too. Whatever this was, it was mutual and real.

Forty-One

As they slipped back out into the corridor, Nancy was panicked.

She and Ari had kissed.

Her pulse was hammering in her throat, her body still buzzing from the heat of it, and all she could think was that she'd ruined everything. They'd struck a balance for years, and now Ari had tiptoed over the line, and Nancy couldn't remember where it was anymore.

Nancy stole a glance at Ari as they walked. She looked perfectly unbothered, smoothing her hair like she hadn't just completely upended Nancy's entire existence. She didn't look regretful, didn't look conflicted. Hell, she didn't even look like she was thinking about it at all.

Nancy was confused but unsurprised. This was just how Ari was. Never dwelling, never second-guessing. Just moving on like nothing ever touched her. She'd had an urge and acted on it.

Only Nancy was the overthinker. Only Nancy was the one swept up in it all. Only Nancy was the one who had felt something real. Just her.

'That was stupid,' she muttered.

Ari raised an eyebrow, the corner of her mouth twitching like she was already halfway to making a joke of it. 'Which part? The sneaking, the lying, or the kissing?'

Nancy shot her a sharp look. 'The kissing.'

Ari blinked. 'Seemed like you were into it at the time.'

'Jesus, Ari.' Nancy raked a hand through her bob, trying to steady herself. 'This isn't funny.'

‘I never said it was.’

But there was something in her voice, that same infuriating lightness. Like she wasn’t even remotely concerned about what it might mean, what it had already changed.

Nancy exhaled sharply, frustration rising like a tide. ‘You don’t care at all, do you?’

Ari cocked her head, eyes glinting in the dim corridor light. ‘About what?’

‘About this!’ Nancy snapped, motioning between them. ‘We’ve just buggered our working relationship.’

Ari bit her lip. ‘Yeah, sorry about that.’

Nancy clenched her fists at her sides. ‘Sorry about that?’ Nancy took a breath, trying to shove down the heat in her chest. ‘Right. Well. It’s done. But it doesn’t happen again. OK?’

For the first time, something flickered in Ari’s eyes. Something that looked almost like hurt. But then she laughed, the sound short and sharp. ‘Yeah. Sure. Lips on lockdown from now on.’

‘Everything’s a joke to you,’ Nancy muttered, turning away, desperate for space. But Ari didn’t let her have it. She stayed close, moving in step with her.

‘That’s not true,’ Ari said. But she didn’t say more than that.

Nancy forced herself to keep moving forward. ‘We can’t do this again,’ she declared angrily.

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‘Fine by me.’ Ari’s voice was smooth and easy. But when Nancy risked a glance at her, her jaw was set, her hands clenched into fists at her sides.

They walked in silence, the tension between them thick, unspoken.

Nancy had no idea how they were supposed to come back from this.

Forty-Two

By the time they slipped back into the reception, the final course was being served.

Nancy strode ahead without a glance, her back stiff with tension. Ari followed at a slower pace, rolling her shoulders, trying to shake off the frustration clawing at her.

They had spent all day trying to get this damn necklace back. All day sneaking around like idiots, getting closer in the process. And just for a moment, they’d had everything.

Everything.

And now, Nancy was angry about it.

Ari dropped into her seat beside her, her movements deliberately slow, deliberately casual. Neither of them spoke.

Around them, the reception was easing into the chaos of the night. Wine poured freely, laughter rolling through the candlelit room.

But at their table, the silence stretched taut.

Ari picked up her fork and took a bite of the delicate, artfully plated dessert that awaited her. She needed the calories after all the fighting and kissing. Suddenly, she felt Nancy's eyes on her.

Ari didn't react. She took another bite, lazily dragging her spoon through the last swirl of sauce, waiting for Nancy to speak.

'You're wearing it.'

Ari arched a brow. 'Hmm?'

Nancy's fingers gripped the white tablecloth. 'Are you kidding me?'

Ari reached up, letting her fingertips brush over the delicate chain she'd slid on as they walked through the hall. 'What?'

'After everything—' Nancy exhaled sharply, shaking her head. 'You put it on?'

Ari threw her a light grin. 'Wouldn't want it to get lost again.'

Nancy looked at her as if she'd never seen her before. 'You are unbelievable.'

Ari leaned in slightly, lowering her voice. 'I've spent years waiting to get it back. Now I'm gonna do whatever the hell I like with it.'

Nancy's jaw clenched. 'You're not this stupid. I know you're not.'

'Because you wouldn't do this?' Ari tilted her head. 'Well, I'm not you, Nancy. When I get what I want, I know what to do with it.'

Nancy's lips parted, but no words came out.

Ari was satisfied with the reaction, if not exactly happy.

Nancy swallowed hard, her voice quieter now. 'You know Paris will notice.'

Ari shrugged, settling back in her chair. 'Let her.'

Nancy let out a rough exhale. 'You just love causing trouble, don't you?'

'Only when it's fun.' Ari let her knee nudge against Nancy's under the table, watching the flicker of reaction in her eyes.

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Nancy looked away, her hands tightening in her lap. 'You're taking this risk for no reason. And I helped you, Ari. I wanted this for you.'

Ari felt her mask slip. 'I know that.'

Nancy's expression softened ever so slightly. For some reason, that made Ari feel worse.

'You know what?' Ari pushed back from the table, chair scraping against the floor. 'I need a drink.'

Nancy didn't stop her.

She knew why she'd put the necklace on. It was a fuck you to Nancy. Because she was hurt. And shocked by that hurt. Somewhere in the middle of that kiss, she'd wondered if it could be the start of something. Because Ari wanted Nancy. Deeply. Of course she did.

Nancy was the only person she'd ever been able to trust. It didn't matter if she worked for her. You couldn't buy what they had. Ari was realising that, more and more.

And now they'd kissed, and Nancy was angry with her. Ari didn't know what to think. She only knew that while they'd kissed, everything had felt so fucking right.

But it was the beginning and the end, it seemed. Because Nancy, very clearly, did not feel the same. She thought Ari was a child who didn't know how to handle delicate

things. Necklaces, love, whatever.

Doesn't matter. Ari rolled her shoulders back, smoothing the irritation from her expression as she weaved through the crowd towards the bar. It was a wedding, after all. Drinks were free, and she fully intended to take advantage.

She was halfway there when she bumped—hard—into someone.

'Oh, for—' Ari stepped back. Her words cut off as she looked up.

Paris.

Her sharp, perfect features twisted in slow realisation, her gaze dropping to the delicate chain around Ari's neck.

'You didn't,' Paris said, voice dripping venom.

Ari smirked. 'Surprise.'

Paris's nostrils flared. 'You stole that from me.'

'Oh, I stole it?' Ari let out a short, incredulous laugh. 'Bit rich coming from you, babe.'

Paris's eyes darkened. 'You absolute little—'

Before she could finish that thought, she lunged. Ari barely had time to react before Paris's hand curled around the chain and yanked.

The thin clasp bit into the back of Ari's neck. For a moment, she thought it might hold, but then—

Snap. The chain broke.

Paris stumbled back, triumphant, the necklace clutched in her fist.

‘Oh, you’ve done it now,’ Ari muttered.

Paris barely had time to laugh before Ari surged forward.

The next few moments were a blur. Hands grabbing, a stumble, the crash of a champagne flute hitting the floor. A gasp rippled through the crowd as tables jostled, cutlery clattering against plates.

‘What the hell is going on?’ a voice cut through the noise.

Nancy.

Ari twisted in time to see Nancy shoving her way through the onlookers, her expression shifting from annoyance to horror in real time.

Paris, ever the picture of elegance, straightened her dress and tossed her hair back, lifting the broken necklace in display to the room. ‘There’s been a crime!’

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Nancy groaned, pinching the bridge of her nose. 'Oh, forfuck's sake.'

'No, you know what?' Ari said, straightening her dress. 'Let's talk about who the thiefreallyis here, hmm?'

Paris's lips curled. 'Yes, we all know I stole your heart. Get over it. I have.'

'Oh, sweetheart,' Ari purred. 'Youwishyou still had that effect on me.'

Nancy grabbed Ari's wrist before she could get any closer, her grip firm. 'Donotstart a brawl at this wedding.'

Ari turned to her, arching a brow. 'Wouldn't bestartingone, technically.'

Paris scoffed. 'Grow up, Ari.'

Ari's jaw tightened, but before she could retaliate, someone new approached.

'Why,' said a voice, 'is there shouting?'

All three of them turned. Helen was among them. 'Anyone care to explain?' she asked.

Silence.

Ari flicked her gaze to Nancy, who was now looking like she very much wanted the ground to swallow her whole. She had turned her body away from Helen, trying to

hide in plain sight.

Ari, for her part, was starting to think this washilarious. She smiled, slow and wicked.

‘Well, funny story...’

And then a pair of hands grabbed her.

Forty-Three

Nancy stood frozen, her stomach sinking as two security guards flanked Ari and started leading her towards the exit.

Ari wasn’t fighting them. But her whole body was taut, her chin lifted in defiance, eyes glittering with a dangerous mix of anger and amusement.

Nancy, on the other hand, wasn’t remotely amused.

Paris had wasted no time spinning her tale, her voice ringing out to the hall, perfectly measured to sound both reasonable and wounded as she dropped the knackered necklace into her tiny clutch.

‘It’s honestly sad,’ she said, pressing a delicate hand to her chest as she addressed the watching guests.

Cal appeared at her side, the concerned husband. She took his hand, though she didn’t seem to notice he was there in any meaningful way as she addressed her audience.

‘I always knew she never quite got over me, but to go this far? Over a necklace? She gave it to me when we were together, sure. And when I ended things, I said I wanted to give it back to her. But she insisted I keep it. My god, if she’d asked me this

weekend, I'd have given it to her. And now I find out she's been creeping around my room, going through my things? I feel utterly violated. And on my wedding day.'

Nancy, keeping ten people between her and Helen, clenched her teeth so hard she felt her molars protest.

Paris barely spared her a glance as she continued, spinning her fiction with effortless ease. 'But I suppose seeing me move on was too much for her. It's the only explanation, isn't it?'

Nancy suddenly stopped giving a shit if Helen was going to recognise her. 'Oh, you've got to be kidding me,' she couldn't stop herself from saying.

That got Paris's attention. She turned, one perfectly arched brow lifting. 'Something to say?'

Nancy folded her arms. 'Yeah. What a load of bullshit.'

Murmurs rippled through the crowd, but Paris only sighed, like Nancy was some foolish child who just didn't get it.

Helen was looking at her directly now. Her expression still didn't betray recognition. Nancy was starting to think she was face blind. Either way, it didn't much matter now.

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‘Nancy, I get that you’re Ari’s little protector or whatever, but honestly—’ Paris shook her head with a pitying smile. ‘You don’t know what she’s like. You think you do, but she’s always been like this. Jealous. Petty. Toxic.’

Nancy’s fists curled at her sides, rage creeping up her spine.

Ari might be a lot of things—reckless, infuriating, a complete pain in the arse—but she wasn’t the villain Paris was making her out to be. And she certainly wasn’t some heartbroken, jealous ex trying to sabotage Ari’s wedding.

‘Where are they taking her?’ she demanded.

Paris’s father appeared. ‘We have a room,’ he said, barely glancing at her. ‘The police have been called.’

The police. Nancy felt a sickening lurch. Nancy barely had a second to process it before Paris’s voice cut through again, sharp and dismissive.

‘You should go.’

Nancy frowned. ‘What?’

Paris tilted her head. ‘You’re her guest. And I don’t want her guests at my wedding.’ Paris took a step closer, lowering her voice just enough so the words were only for Nancy. ‘You can go quietly, or I can have security escort you out as well. Your choice.’

Nancy's pulse pounded. She wanted to fight. Wanted to shove past Paris and go after Ari, to fix this, to stop it from spiralling into something even worse.

But she couldn't. Not in a room full of people eating up every word Paris was feeding them.

So instead, she did the only thing she could do. She turned on her heel and walked away.

Outside, the night air hit her like a shock.

The sounds of the party still rose right back up from inside—music, laughter, the clinking of glasses, like nothing had happened. Like a guest hadn't just been dragged off in disgrace and another discarded.

Nancy moved on autopilot, her feet carrying her to the young valet. 'Mines the silver Maybach.' He nodded and ran off.

He drove up a moment later, and Nancy got in and drove off the grounds of the manor.

She didn't get far, only a few hundred metres down the public road. Then she parked up on a dirt layby and got out of the car. She stood there, hands braced against the side of the vehicle, breathing hard.

She should leave. She'd been told to leave. But Ari was still in there. And as much as she'd created this entire situation, Nancy still couldn't bring herself to leave her.

Forty-Four

Ari paced the length of the small, shabby room, her hands clenched into tight fists. It was little more than a storage closet, piled high with forgotten junk, broken furniture, and the remnants of things no one cared to fix. Security had shoved her inside, confiscated her phone, and left her there with nothing but the echo of her thoughts.

‘Wait for the police,’ they had told her ominously. As if she could do anything else.

She could hear the wedding carrying on without her from a floor above. The low thrum of music coming from the DJ she’d arranged pulsed and feet bumped in rhythm. Nothing had stopped. Nothing had changed.

Except for the fact that she was locked in a bloody room. Wasn’t this illegal? False imprisoning, that kind of thing? She knew she wasn’t in Fritzl’s basement or anything, but still.

She spun, glaring at the locked door. She’d tried the handle already, but it wasn’t budging. She’d spent all day trying to get into a locked room and now she wanted out of one. It would have been hilarious if it wasn’t happening to her.

Nothing was funny anymore. Particularly not the thought of Paris standing in that reception hall, spinning her little lies to a rapt audience.

And Nancy...

The last thing she’d seen before being dragged off was Nancy standing there, watching it all unfold, her face tight with anger. Ari had thought for a brief, stupid moment that maybe she was angry for her. That maybe she’d say something, step in.

But as she was dragged off, Nancy didn’t say a word.

She had a limit, and Ari had been given a lot of space inside that limit. But she

couldn't help herself. She had to go too far. It had always been a problem. Only now it had cost her Nancy's respect.

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Ari let out a shaky breath and pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes. She was alone in this. She had no plan. No options.

Best-case scenario, she'd be slapped with some petty theft charge and her name splashed across every shitty gossip site for a week.

Worst case, prison. Because it was her word against Paris's, a natural-born liar who would do everything she could to make this bad for Ari.

Nancy had been right. This had been a terrible idea. And now it was over. Not just this plan, but them. Not that there had been a them to begin with.

She let out a bitter laugh and dropped onto a dusty chaise, staring up at the ceiling. She shouldn't have kissed her. She'd known it was a risk. But she'd thought that it was worth it, for where it might lead.

But Nancy had looked at her like she was a mistake.

Ari wasn't sure how much more of that she could take. Not only did she not get the necklace, but it was broken. Everything was broken.

Forty-Five

Nancy lingered at the open gates of the grand estate, looking up the drive to the entrance of the manor. The same security team that had dragged Ari off stood firm by the door, their expressions unreadable behind their earpieces and stiff postures.

Nancy exhaled, rubbing a hand over her jaw. She had no plan. But Ari never had a plan, and she was... well, locked up, actually.

But Nancy didn't care. She was going in. She was getting Ari out. Whatever had happened between them, whatever it meant or didn't mean, Nancy just couldn't help it. She cared about that woman. Idiotically so, it would seem.

The main doors were a no-go. But big estates meant service entrances, hidden staff corridors, and ways in and out that weren't meant for guests.

She crept through the gates and walked around the perimeter, keeping her pace casual, scanning for an opportunity. A catering truck was parked near a back entrance, staff in crisp white shirts moving in and out. That could work.

Nancy straightened her posture and strode toward the catering entrance as if she had every right to be there. Confidence was half the battle.

She slipped through the doorway, stepping aside quickly to avoid bumping into a frazzled server. The hallway smelled of roasted meat, the clatter of dishes echoing from the kitchen just beyond. No one paid her any attention—good. She kept moving, weaving past busy staff, her eyes sweeping the layout.

A set of double doors led out into the main reception hall. That was no good. She needed to stay out of sight long enough to figure out how to get to Ari. To find her at all. But as she edged forward, a voice behind her cut through the noise.

'Hey! You're not supposed to be back here.'

Nancy turned, heart kicking up a notch, and found herself staring at a sharp-eyed woman in a catering uniform, arms crossed.

Damn. Time to improvise.

‘Finally! Do you know how long I’ve been trying to find someone who knows what they’re doing?’ She shook her head as if the entire operation had been a disaster up to this moment. ‘They sent me to check on the seafood trays, and I’ve been running in circles because no one has a bloody clue. Tell me you at least know where the extra oysters are.’

The woman blinked, thrown off balance. ‘The oysters? Wait, aren’t you a guest?’

‘I’m the area manager. I like to keep an eye on my staff in a plain clothes capacity. Right! The oysters! The bride is having a fit because they’re not out yet. Do you want to be the one to explain that to her?’ Nancy leaned in slightly, lowering her voice as if they were in on the same frustrating secret. ‘Because I’d rather avoid that nightmare.’

The woman hesitated, then jerked a thumb toward the kitchen. ‘They should be in cold storage.’

‘Brilliant. I’ll check there.’ Nancy pivoted and strode off before she could be questioned further.

In the kitchen, she found another door that led to what looked like a service corridor. Nancy was pretty sure it would take her almost anywhere in the house.

Forty-Six

Ari was still mulling her mistakes on the chaise, eyes squeezed shut. Idiot.

The door opened with a quiet click. She didn’t look up. She knew it was no one she wanted to see.

Then a voice cut through the silence. ‘Ari.’

She exhaled slowly, dragging her gaze up.

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The groom stood in the doorway, Cal, still in his sharp wedding suit, his tie slightly loosened, as if the day had finally started to wear him down.

Ari gave him her most chipper smile. ‘Mr Paris. What’s up?’

His jaw tightened. ‘I just want to understand what happened.’

Ari sat forward, resting her forearms on her knees. ‘Let me guess. She told me I gave her the necklace out of the goodness of my heart, and now I’ve gone off the deep end because she got married? Maybe threw in a few tears?’

His throat bobbed. ‘She said you forced your way into her room.’

‘Well, that part is true, I guess. But I had my reasons.’

Cal shook his head. ‘I don’t know, Ari. You did have the necklace. And she—’ He broke off, rubbing a hand over his jaw. ‘She wouldn’t just make all of this up.’

Ari scoffed. ‘Wouldn’t she?’

A pause. A long one. He wasn’t stupid, just foolish. And there was a difference.

She held his gaze. ‘Paris’s a liar. And sooner or later, she’s going to turn on you, too. And the reason won’t make any sense. It’ll just happen. It’s who she is.’

His fingers twitched at his sides. She could see the doubt growing, the slow unravelling of whatever story he’d been clinging to.

Ari let out a slow breath. 'You know, I almost feel bad for you.'

His eyes snapped back to hers, sharp with irritation. 'I don't need your pity.'

'No?' She tilted her head. 'Then why are you down here? Why not let security handle me? Why not let Paris's version of events be the end of it?'

He shifted on his feet, hands slipping into his pockets, shoulders tight. 'I wanted to hear it from you.'

'No, you wanted me to give you an excuse to believe her.' Ari said. 'You married someone who lies as easily as breathing, and deep down, you know it. But you're in too deep, so you're doing what I did. You tell yourself it's not that bad. That there's another explanation.'

His jaw clenched, but he didn't say anything.

Ari exhaled, shaking her head. 'Because she has this way of making you feel like you're the problem. Like every time she took something from you, your trust, your dignity, it was your fault for giving it to her.'

A flicker of something crossed his face. Recognition. 'No, she's not like that. She works so hard to give people things. You don't see that. The foundation...'

'Sounds like a good cover,' Ari shrugged.

He blinked. 'What do you mean?'

'She uses the charity, right?' Ari said.

He looked surprised. 'Every penny goes where it needs to be,' he said defensively.

‘No, I mean, she uses the image of the do-gooder,’ Ari told him. ‘It’s the perfect disguise for a narcissist.’

He looked away, staring at some fixed point on the far wall. ‘She’s not like that. You never really knew her. You didn’t know how to love her. That’s all she needs. I can do that.’

‘Look,’ Ari said, her voice quieter now. ‘I don’t care if you believe me. I’m done trying to convince people of the truth. But you should be thinking about what happens when it’s you in this chair. When she decides that whatever you’ve got is hers to take. And if you’re smart, you’ll start figuring out what that looks like now, before it’s too late.’

His fingers flexed at his sides, tension rolling off him. He looked like a man standing at the edge of a cliff, trying to convince himself not to look down.

Finally, he blew out a breath and dragged a hand through his hair. ‘I—’ He hesitated, then let out a rough laugh, humourless. ‘I have to go back upstairs.’

Of course he did. He wasn’t ready yet. Maybe he never would be.

‘Yeah,’ Ari muttered. ‘Have a great wedding.’

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Without another word, he slipped out the door, and Ari heard it locked again, leaving her alone with nothing but the weight of what might have just cracked inside him. But she couldn't save him. She couldn't even save herself.

Forty-Seven

Nancy had been down on the basement level for a while, trying doors, all unlocked.

It was a hell of a lot shabbier down here, where no one ever went but the staff. The flickering overhead light cast long shadows across the worn-out walls, and the musty scent of old storage lingered in the air. Nancy had a feeling this was the place to find Ari, a place far away from the polish and staging of the upper floors.

But so far, no Ari. She couldn't believe she was back where she'd started, looking for the right room.

Then she saw a door that had a padlock. Which was weird. She knocked.

A pause. Then, a quiet, wary voice. 'Who's there?'

Nancy exhaled sharply. 'Who do you think?'

There was a long silence, then the scrape of a chair. 'Nancy?'

'No, it's Beyonce. Yes, it's me.'

Nancy could hear a long sigh.

‘Are you OK?’

‘Yeah, great. You?’ Ari asked.

Nancy decided to ignore the sarcasm. ‘She called the police.’

‘Of course she did.’

‘She’s telling everyone you did this out of jealousy.’

‘Naturally.’

Nancy hesitated, fingers drumming lightly against the wood. ‘You don’t sound that worried.’

‘I am,’ Ari admitted. ‘But what’s the point? It’s already happening.’

‘I’m not sure how to get you out of here. It’s padlocked.’

There was a pause. ‘I’m not expecting a rescue. I’m just glad to hear your voice. I... I assumed you’d have left by now.’

Nancy swallowed. ‘You thought I’d just leave you here?’

Ari didn’t answer right away. ‘Wouldn’t have blamed you.’

Nancy scoffed. ‘Don’t be stupid.’

‘Why didn’t you leave?’ Ari asked her.

Nancy opened her mouth, then shut it. It should’ve been an easy answer. Instead, it

sat heavy in her chest.

‘Because I couldn’t,’ she said honestly.

Ari didn’t respond right away. When she did, her voice was quiet, careful. ‘I don’t know what to do.’

Nancy let out a slow breath, sliding down to sit against the door. ‘Me neither.’

Ari went silent, and for a moment, Nancy could imagine their backs to each other with only an inch of wood between them.

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‘What happens now?’ Ari asked.

Nancy huffed a laugh. ‘No clue. But I wasn’t gonna leave you to figure it out alone.’

Another pause. Then, so quiet Nancy almost missed it, came a little. ‘Thank you.’

Forty-Eight

Ari was sitting against the door, fingers absently tracing a square in the dust on the floor. Nancy had come back. That part still didn’t make sense. Was Nancy here because she wanted to be or because she felt like she had to be?

Nancy sighed on the other side. ‘You’re too quiet. That’s never a good sign.’

Ari laughed softly. ‘I’m thinking.’

‘That sounds dangerous.’

‘I guess you’d know,’ Ari shot back. She swallowed nervously. ‘Tell me what you’re rethinking.’

The pause that followed was so long that Ari wondered if Nancy was still there. But then Nancy asked, ‘Why did you kiss me?’

Ari’s breath caught.

‘Was it...’ Nancy hesitated. ‘Was it just to mess with me?’

Ari closed her eyes. The truth was right there, sitting on the tip of her tongue, but saying it meant letting it be real. And that was terrifying.

‘I wanted to,’ she admitted, voice rough. ‘I still do.’

More silence. Ari clenched her fists.

‘Say something,’ she murmured.

Nancy’s voice was quiet. ‘It was an impulse? Just you having some fun, right?’

Ari turned to the door. ‘I’m impulsive, yes. But it wasn’t that. Not with you. And I think you know that.’

Ari could hear the way her breathing had changed. Shallower now.

Ari swallowed. ‘You should go. You can’t get me out.’

‘Maybe not,’ Nancy said.

‘So, go.’

‘I only just found you.’

‘But you can’t do anything.’

‘No,’ Nancy said.

Ari waited for her to say, ‘Well, I tried,’ and then bid her adieu. But there was just more silence.

Forty-Nine

Nancy leaned against the door, arms crossed tight over her chest, but it did nothing to steady the strange, electric feeling running through her. Ari's words still hung between them, a live wire she didn't know how to touch without getting burned.

It wasn't that. Not with you.

Nancy had spent years perfecting the art of pushing things down, pretending they didn't exist if they were too messy, too complicated. But Ari didn't allow for that. She said things out loud and let them sit in the air until they had to be acknowledged.

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Nancy exhaled sharply. 'You're chaotic, you know that?'

A muffled laugh from the other side of the door. 'So I've been told.'

Nancy kept her palm pressed flat against the wood. 'You kissed me, and now you're telling me to leave,' she noted.

'You kissed me back,' Ari shot back.

Nancy clenched her jaw. 'So what?'

'So what?' Ari's voice was quieter now, and Nancy hated how much she wanted to see her face, read whatever expression she was making. 'You shouldn't have done that. Not if you knew...' Ari sighed.

'Knew what?' Nancy asked, confused.

'You think I don't know how this works? I get it, Nancy. I know what I am to you. Just a spoiled brat you drive around,' Ari said.

'I don't see you that way,' Nancy said, almost angry. 'Look, you were the one acting like it was no big deal.'

'And you told me I'd screwed up our working relationship,' Ari shot back.

Nancy groaned quietly. What the hell was happening? Did Ari really feel... God, this was all too much.

‘You know we don’t make sense,’ Nancy said eventually.

‘Maybe it doesn’t need to make sense?’ Ari’s voice was steady, but there was something raw underneath it. ‘That maybe it just is?’

Nancy let out a slow breath. ‘You’re not making this easy.’

Ari snorted. ‘When have I ever made anything easy for you?’

That made Nancy smile despite everything. She let her head rest against the door, staring up at the ceiling. ‘I don’t want to screw this up,’ she admitted. ‘Whatever this is.’

A beat of silence, and then Ari said, quieter than before, ‘Neither do I.’

Nancy shut her eyes. She wondered, not for the first time today, if she was falling in love or going mad. The trouble was that the difference was simply too slight.

‘So what do we do now?’ Nancy asked.

Ari exhaled. ‘I’ve changed my mind. Break me out.’

Nancy nodded, glad of something to do. ‘If you want me to, I’ll try. Might take a minute.’

‘Obviously,’ Ari deadpanned. ‘That’s why I’m still in here.’

Nancy stood and turned, checking out the lock. ‘I mean, it’s a padlock, which is possibly pickable. I just don’t have anything to...’

Ari jumped in. ‘You know how to pick locks?’

‘I’ve picked a couple,’ Nancy muttered. ‘Stole a car once in my teens.’

A dense pause passed. ‘What?’

‘Rebellious phase. Everyone has one.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me that before?’ Ari demanded.

‘You’d have enjoyed it too much,’ Nancy told her.

‘It’s a tiny bit funny. I’m not going to lie. You’re sostraightlaced.’ She paused. ‘Hold on, we could have just picked Paris’s door!’

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‘I’m not the artful dodger, Ari. It was one car, years ago. I don’t even know if I can do anything with this padlock. But I’m gonnatry.’ Nancy mulled. ‘Maybe we could pry it open with...’ She turned, scanning the dimly lit hall for anything remotely useful. A letter opener, a screwdriver, a battering ram.

Nancy had a thought. ‘That bunch of keys we lifted,’ she said. ‘Any chance it had a...’

‘They took it from me,’ Ari told her quickly.

Nancy tutted. ‘Damn. Well, what if we...’

Someone at the end of the hall spoke. ‘Nancy?’

Nancy’s stomach dropped.

The voice was unmistakable, sharp with familiarity and just enough disdain to make Nancy’s shoulders stiffen. She turned slowly to find Helen standing at the mouth of the corridor, arms crossed, eyes cold with recognition.

‘Well,’ Helen said, tilting her head. ‘Ithoughtthat was you.’

Fifty

Ari pressed her ear against the door, straining to catch the words filtering through the thick wood. Nancy was talking to someone.

The voices were muffled, but she could still make out Nancy's low, sharp tone. And the other voice... Ari wasn't certain but if she had to guess? She'd heard a voice like it before, during the speeches.

Helen.

She bit the inside of her cheek. If she was right, this wasn't good. She didn't know much about Helen, only what Nancy had let slip in passing. Former boss. Complicated history. The kind of woman who knew exactly where to press to make someone squirm.

Judging by the way Nancy's voice had dropped even lower, Ari would bet Helen was pressing now.

Ari flattened her palm against the door, willing herself to hear more. The occasional mumbled syllable cut through but not enough to piece anything together.

Her pulse picked up, her mind racing through the worst possible outcomes. Was Helen threatening Nancy? Had she called security? Were they physically fighting? Did Helen have her in a headlock? Was Nancy bleeding out from a knife wound?

Ari had to tell herself to calm down.

She swallowed hard, clenching her jaw. She hated this. Being stuck here, locked away like an afterthought while Nancy was out there dealing with whatever the hell this was.

A sharp burst of laughter rang out, but there was no humour in it.

Ari's stomach twisted. Nancy was in trouble. And Ari had no way to get to her. This day had started terribly and was doing its best to plumb new depths.

Fifty-One

Nancy's stomach churned as she stood frozen in place, her heart pounding in her chest as she stood looking at Helen.

'What are you doing here?' Nancy finally forced the words out. She hated how small it sounded.

Helen's eyes, cold and calculating, flicked over Nancy with an almost clinical detachment.

'You think you can just walk back into my family's home? You've got a lot of nerve,' Helen said.

Nancy's chest tightened. It shouldn't have. It had been years since that job, and she'd been young when she'd worked for Helen. She wasn't young now. She was confident and capable. She was determined to put that into her words. But they tumbled out in a rush.

'I came back for Ari.'

Helen's brow arched, a glimmer of amusement flashing across her face. 'The thief?' she said softly, stepping closer, invading Nancy's space. Her voice dropped lower, a sneer creeping into her tone. 'She doesn't belong here either. New money. I always told Paris she was a waste of time. You can't train them at all.'

Nancy clenched her fists at her sides, fighting to keep her voice steady. 'Wow. I forgot that you talked like this.'

Helen stepped even closer, her gaze like ice, chilling Nancy to the bone. 'What you fail to understand, Nancy,' she began, her voice almost a whisper, 'is that my world is

for the strong. Which is why you ran like a child over a simple spat.'

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Nancy felt the anger surge through her, hot and undeniable. 'You're not strong. You're a bully.'

Helen's face flashed with irritation, but she masked it quickly. 'Oh yes?'

Nancy took another shot. 'And your niece is exactly like you,' she mumbled.

Helen's eyes narrowed. 'What did you say about Paris?' she asked, her voice lowering into something darker.

Nancy stiffened. Her pulse quickened. She had to be careful. She wasn't here for this.

But she had a chance to reclaim something. If she could just hold her nerve.

'Paris,' Nancy said slowly, her voice dropping to a low whisper. 'She's a monster, just like you. I've been watching her. And that charity you two run? What a joke. You don't give a shit about anyone.'

'What do you know about that?' Helen asked, taking a step closer.

Nancy hesitated. 'What do I know?' she repeated, unsure.

Helen studied her for a long moment, her eyes cold, calculating. 'Staff. You people make me laugh. We give you everything you have. That's why you hate us. Because you know you need us.'

Nancy shrugged, trying to sound unbothered. 'You're a backseat bitch, that's all.'

You're nothing special.'

Helen took one quick step toward Nancy. Nancy, to her enormous shame, flinched.

Helen didn't do anything else. She didn't need to. Her smile grew wider. 'I'm going to find security,' she said, her voice cold. 'I think we're in the arena of trespassing now. Hope that police car is big enough.'

Nancy stood frozen, her chest heavy with dread.

Helen turned on her heel, heading toward the door. As she went, she gave Nancy one last look over her shoulder and started laughing. At last, she vanished from sight.

Nancy stood there, in the silence of the room, with the unsettling realisation that she was right back where she started, with Ari trapped. And now there was a timer on the situation. Security was coming to eighty-six her.

Fifty-Two

Ari's fingers pressed against the cool wood of the door, as though somehow that would help her focus, help her figure out what was going on. But it was just silence now.

Finally, after what felt like hours, there was a quiet shift outside. The sound of footsteps approaching, hesitant, and then Nancy's voice.

'Ari?' It was low, uncertain. She sounded... sheepish? It made Ari's stomach drop. What the hell was going on out there?

Ari leaned in closer to the door. 'Nancy? What the hell happened?'

There was a pause on the other side, and then Nancy's voice came again, quieter. 'It was Helen.'

'I thought as much.' Ari said. 'I hope you headbutted her.'

'Not exactly,' Nancy's voice was thick with frustration, but there was a trace of something else, too. Shame?

'She's gone for security. I might be joining you in there shortly,' Nancy said. 'I'm a trespasser now.'

Ari's jaw dropped. 'Then just leave!'

A little of the old Nancy jumped out. 'I told you. I'm not doing that. We've still got time. It's gonna take her a while to get back up. I can figure something out.'

'NANCY. GET THE FUCK OUT,' Ari told her.

'No,' Nancy said. And Ari knew that tone. There was no arguing with her. She was set on standing at this door until she was in as much shit as Ari.

Ari hated this. It was one thing that she was in trouble, but now the most stubborn person on earth was refusing to leave her. It was lovely and enraging.

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‘You can’t let her make things worse,’ Ari said firmly, her voice steady despite the panic threatening to choke her.

Nancy sighed loudly. ‘We just need to focus on getting this door open, OK? That’s the first thing. Just give me a minute. I’ll figure something out.’

Ari’s mind raced as she paced, her pulse quickening with each moment Nancy wouldn’t take herself out of this problem. The last thing she wanted was for Nancy to get caught up in something worse because of her. She could feel the weight of the situation pressing down on her.

Then, for the first time, Ari looked at the door. Really looked at it. And the idea of breaking free suddenly became pretty simple. Because there was more than one way to skin a cat.

Ari took a step back, sizing up the old door. It was decades old and worn out. Was she really going to do this?

‘Nancy? Are you having any luck with the padlock?’

‘Not yet. Just let me... err...’

‘Stand back.’

‘What?’

‘Stand. Back,’ Ari said.

‘I’m doing that, but what are you actually going to—’

With a sharp breath, Ari threw herself into the door, her shoulder colliding with the wood. It went even better than hoped. The hinges gave way with a loud crack, and before she knew it, the door swung violently open, the wood splintering around the hinges. Ari stumbled forward, her legs catching her as the door completely came off, collapsing into the space beyond.

Nancy’s eyes widened in disbelief. ‘What the hell?’ she gasped, her voice cracking with a mixture of shock and scepticism.

Ari stood frozen for a moment, staring at the now-exposed frame where the door used to be, the weight of what she’d just done sinking in. She’d expected a struggle, some resistance, but the door had crumbled like a dry cracker. Her hands shook as she took in the destruction.

‘Did I... did I just break down a door?’ Ari asked Nancy, stunned.

Nancy blinked at the door, then back at Ari, her jaw still hanging open. ‘I... I can’t believe you did that.’

‘Classic old money. These massive houses and no money for upkeep. Roteverywhere,’ Ari said, delighted with herself. She smiled at Nancy. ‘Thank you for coming to my rescue.’

Nancy looked at her as though she’d gone mad. ‘You saved yourself.’

It was true. Ari had done this. She’d gotten herself out. All it took was her own strength, her own will.

‘Come on. Let’s get out of here. We’ll use the service corridor,’ Nancy said, grabbing

her hand. And off they went, half-running, half-laughing, dashing through doors, their heels clicking on the marble floor of the deserted passageway. Ari's heart was racing once more. Not just from the sprint but from Nancy's hand in hers, warm and sure, like it belonged there.

They reached an exit. Nancy turned and said, 'This should take us back into the kitchen. We just need to wait for it to clear.' She put her ear to the door. 'Someone's faffing.'

Ari nodded. And then she realised they were alone—together—nothing in their way, and she didn't want to wait another second to say what she needed to say to Nancy Doyle.

'Is this a good moment to talk about you and me?' she asked.

Nancy looked at her. 'Not really, no.'

There was a moment of silence, an electricity in the air that neither of them knew how to break. Ari waited in it, hopeful.

Nancy sighed, long and deep. 'OK, I give in. What do you want, Ari?' Nancy asked.

'I told you. You,' Ari said instantly.

'But in what kind of...'

'Nancy, how much should I say right now? Because I'm trying not to scare you off.'

'Assume that you can't. Just say it.'

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Ari gathered her strength. 'I think maybe there's always been something here. I was just trying to ignore it because you're employed to drive my lazy arse around, and it would have been creepy behaviour to hit on you.'

Nancy nodded. 'That's true. It would have been. But I'm not being paid to drive you right now. I'm technically on the clock as your girlfriend. So, the question is... Is this just overtime to you?'

Ari didn't know if she should be offended. She decided to confirm her fears before letting that happen. 'Overtime?'

'I just need to know what I am to you,' Nancy asked, a tremor in her voice. 'Is it just a fling you want or...'

Ari looked into Nancy's beautiful ocean-green eyes. 'You want me to say it? OK. You asked for it. I don't want you to be in the front of the car. I want you to be in the back.'

Nancy frowned, confused. 'What?'

'Oh, for Christ's sake. That was supposed to be romantic.' Ari tried again. 'I want to be with you, Nancy. More than that, I want you to want to be with me. Because I don't know if I could ever deserve someone like you, and you're probably not too sure about that either, but...'

Nancy was agog. 'Ari! You don't know that I think you're the most incredible person I've ever met?'

Ari paused, shocked.

Nancy licked her lips. 'You drive me insane, yes. But...' Nancy's voice became softer now. 'I know I've been stubborn. I know I'm uptight. I know I've fought this.' She stepped closer to Ari, her hand reaching up, gently cupping her cheek. 'But it's not because I don't know if I want this. I think it's because it scares the hell out of me just how much I do.' Nancy's eyes were filled with fear. 'But...I... I don't know what the hell I'm doing,' she admitted.

Ari's heart skipped a beat at the weight of those words. She hadn't realised how much she needed to hear them, how much she needed Nancy.

'You don't need to. I can take it from here,' Ari said. And she moved forward and took Nancy's face in her hands. And then, before either of them could second-guess it, they kissed.

It was a kiss that said everything. A kiss full of all the emotion that had been building up between them for weeks, maybe even longer.

Ari's hands found Nancy's waist, pulling her closer as the world outside seemed to disappear. The weight of the house, of the lies, of everything they'd been through, it all melted away in the heat of that moment.

When they finally pulled apart, breathless and a little dazed, neither of them knew what came next. But for the first time in what felt like forever, Ari wasn't afraid of the future. She wanted to go forward.

'What now?' Nancy asked, her voice hushed, as if they were both waiting for the other to say it first.

Ari smiled. 'Let's get the hell out of here.'

Nancy nodded and pushed the door gently ajar, peeking through. 'Clear.' She pushed it all the way open and grabbed Ari's hand with a gorgeous grin. 'Let's go.'

Fifty-Three

Nancy and Ari slipped out through the catering entrance, the heavy door swinging shut behind them with a dull thud. The night air wrapped around them, cool and damp, scented faintly with cut grass and distant roses. Gravel crunched underfoot as they kept low, darting past bins and crates.

Beyond the service yard, the manicured grounds opened up. They moved fast but quietly, dresses hitched and shoes in hand, weaving through topiary and creeping along the edge of the hedgerows like a pair of teenagers sneaking home past curfew.

Nancy's heart was still racing from the intensity of their kiss. She couldn't quite shake the feeling that she was walking on air. But reality hadn't disappeared entirely.

'Are we going to be OK?' Ari asked her as they moved. 'I mean, will this follow me?'

Nancy could see the worry etched on Ari's face.

'I don't know,' Nancy replied. 'But you don't need to wait for the police. They don't have that kind of authority to keep you locked up like this. It might even be false imprisonment.'

'That's what I was thinking.'

'So, let's go. Fuck this fucking manor and every asshole in it.'

Ari looked up at her then. 'I don't want to drag you into this mess, Nancy. Moreso.'

Nancy stepped closer, her hands gently cupping Ari's face, forcing her to meet her gaze. 'You're not dragging me into anything. I'm already in it. You're coming with me. We'll get to Edinburgh and lie low. Just you and me. We'll figure the rest out later.'

Ari's eyes softened, but the tension in her shoulders remained. Nancy could tell that the weight of the situation was bearing down on her harder than she was letting on. 'And if they send the police after me? God, the embarrassment of getting arrested... My mother will scream herself into an aneurysm.'

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‘We’ll deal with that when we get to Edinburgh,’ Nancy interrupted, brushing a strand of hair from Ari’s face. ‘One step at a time.’

Ari hesitated for a moment, chewing on her lip as if weighing the risks. But then, slowly, she nodded. ‘Alright.’

There was still so much uncertainty hanging over them. But they couldn’t fix everything tonight.

Ari slipped her hand into Nancy’s, her grip strong. ‘Let’s go,’ she whispered.

And with that, they made their way quietly out of the gates and back to the car. It felt strange to be moving so silently, but Nancy didn’t care. The only thing that mattered was getting out of this house, away from the mess they’d found themselves tangled in.

When they reached the car, Ari held the shotgun door open for Nancy.

‘You’re driving?’ Nancy asked.

‘I’m certainly not letting you drive under the circumstances. You can’t be my driver. Not now.’

Nancy laughed. ‘I see what you mean. Alright. Take it easy on the clutch, though.’

‘I promise nothing,’ Ari said.

Nancy climbed in with an eye roll, and Ari slid into the driver's seat and started the engine, the low hum of the car filling the quiet.

But then the backdoor opened. Ari and Nancy turned, surprised, half expecting some security guard to grab them.

Instead, it was an elderly lady. Paris's Great Aunt Margot. 'Well, my luck is in. I got the first car!'

Nancy looked at Ari. Ari looked at Nancy. They both looked at the old lady.

'Err...' Nancy began.

Fifty-Four

'Just to the village, dear. It's not far.'

Ari stared straight ahead, unsure how to handle this. Nancy, beside her, had gone completely still.

'Right, the village,' Ari said finally. 'Of course. Love a good... village.'

She glanced in the rear-view mirror. Paris's elderly aunt, small, immaculately dressed, and possessing the air of someone who had never taken no for an answer in her entire life, smiled at her.

'Good girl. And do step on it. I've got several Afghan hounds at home by themselves. They're sweethearts, but I've always had this suspicion that they're one missed meal away from eating the cat.'

Nancy made a strangled noise. 'Ummm, Madam?' she said in a voice of forced

politeness, 'I think you might have the wrong idea—'

'Nonsense! Paris said there would be cars available. And this is a car, is it not?'

Ari found herself nodding. 'You got me there.'

Nancy elbowed her. 'You're being kidnapped by an old woman,' she hissed.

'What would you like me to do? Throw her out?'

'Yes!'

'Rude,' Margot said crisply. 'Now, what kind of driver are you, my girl? Chauffeur? Ride-share? I hope not one of those gig-economy disasters. No benefits, dreadful treatment.'

Ari opened her mouth, fully prepared to explain everything to her. But then it occurred to her it was probably quicker to comply. 'Fine,' she muttered, glancing at Nancy. 'We'll drop her off. How far's the village?'

'Ten minutes,' Nancy told her.

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‘Then let’s just go,’ Ari said, just as Margot gave a dainty little cough. Then another. Then a wheezy sort of inhale, followed by an alarming clutch at her pearls.

Nancy and Ari exchanged a horrified glance.

‘Er...’ Ari said. ‘Are you...’

‘Fine!’ Margot gasped. ‘Just...a little...tightness in the chest.’

Nancy’s entire body tensed. ‘Tightness?’

‘Nothing to fuss over!’ She gave another, more rattling breath. ‘Just drop me home, there’s a dear.’

Ari was already turning the car off. ‘Nope. Absolutely not. Not on my watch. You need to see a medical professional. Now.’

Nancy sighed. Ari was glad there was at least no argument from that side of the car.

‘You’re overreacting,’ Margot said, but her voice was weaker now, and she was pressing a hand to her chest.

Ari got the car started and took it jaggedly back into the grounds, parking up at the main entrance. The moment she came to a crunchy stop, Nancy leapt out of the car, yanking open the back door. ‘Out. You’re going back inside.’

‘I don’t—’

‘You aren’t dying in this car,’ Ari said firmly. ‘I cannot stress that enough. I have enough problems without adding homicide via kidnapping to the list.’

‘I would hardly—’

‘OUT!’

Between the two of them, they managed to coax, drag, and half-carry Margot inside.

As they stumbled back inside, past confused-looking waitstaff and gaping guests, Paris herself turned, mid-conversation, and spotted them.

She looked from Ari to Nancy. ‘How in the hell did you...’ It was only then that she took in the full situation. ‘Why are you carrying my great-aunt?’

Ari, panting, hoisted Margot a little higher. ‘She’s had a bit of a health situation.’

Nancy’s voice was tight with forced calm. ‘We need somewhere for her to sit down. And possibly a medic.’

Cal, now at Paris’s side, paled. ‘Oh god, she’s not dying, is she?’

‘Not if someone fetches a doctor,’ Ari said, shooting a look at the frozen, scandalised guests.

At that, people finally sprang into action. Someone fetched a doctor, who was apparently a guest. Someone else fetched a chair. Margot, now looking both peeved and slightly amused, was gently deposited through the double doors and onto a velvet-upholstered armchair back in the great hall.

Ari turned to Nancy. ‘I think we should probably...’ she began quietly with a nod to

the doors. But she didn't reach the end of the sentence.

'Lock those doors!' Paris told security. 'I can't have criminals running loose.'

They did as told, locking the heaving doors with a loud clunk.

Ari couldn't believe it. They'd been so close. But fate had bounced them straight back into the wedding from hell.

Fifty-Five

The lights were up, and the DJ had cut the music. He was fiddling with his decks, looking like a spare part.

The doctor, an older man with an air of weary patience, knelt beside the chaise lounge in the hall where Margot was fanning herself.

'I'm fine,' Margot murmured, irritated. But her colour was funny.

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‘Let me be the judge of that,’ the doctor said, pressing two fingers to her wrist.

Margot sighed dramatically but didn’t pull away. ‘My pulse is strong as an ox. If I drop dead, it won’t be from natural causes. It’ll be from sheer boredom.’

‘Aunt Margot, please,’ Paris’s father said, exasperated, hands on his hips. ‘This is serious.’

‘Oh, fine. Do what you must, Doctor. But if you tell me I need rest, I shall be very cross with you.’

Paris, hovering at her side, made all the right noises of concern. ‘Are you hot?’ she asked, taking a tiny paper fan from her clutch and fanning her with it before Aunt Margot could answer. To anyone else, she might have looked like a devoted niece.

But Nancy could see that Paris wasn’t focused on her Great Aunt at all. Her eyes flicked to Ari constantly, her jaw tense. She was not happy that Ari was loose.

‘While my aunt is taken care of, make sure she’s secured,’ Paris said, eyes locked on Ari. ‘She could be dangerous.’ She gave a nod to her security gorillas, and they formed a quick barrier around Ari, subtly penning her into a corner.

Ari rolled her eyes at the human prison. ‘Sweet Jesus, Paris. You won’t be happy until everyone thinks I’m Jeffrey Dahmer, will you?’

Nancy, though on the outside of the situation, did not let the men scare her. She stayed within arm’s length of Ari, glaring at one of the bald baboons. He looked away

nervously.

And then, as if things couldn't get any worse, Helen walked in.

'Oh, for fuck's sake,' Nancy muttered.

Helen looked at her in astonishment. 'How on earth did you beat me here?'

Nancy scowled. 'Not now, Helen.'

Helen ignored her, glancing around the room to make sure everyone heard her next line. 'You know, I was betting against you staying. I assumed you'd let her rot. You're not known for your loyalty to your employer.'

'Helen,' Nancy said, voice warning.

Though she didn't want to engage. She still felt embarrassed that she'd flinched earlier. It was crazy. How could this silly woman still have any power?

'You shouldn't be here,' Paris said, as though only just realising Nancy was there. 'You're upsetting my aunt.'

'Actually, she helped bring me in,' Margot said. 'And I'm fine, but perhaps it's good they did. Though I am worried about my pussy.'

The entire room tensed.

'She's got a cat,' Nancy explained quickly.

The sigh of relief was audible.

‘Perhaps you might head over there if I give you my keys?’ Margot asked Ari through her human cage, not picking up the situation remotely.

‘She can’t. She’s going to prison,’ Paris said loudly.

‘Oh, lovely,’ Margot said dreamily.

Paris squinted. ‘What?’

‘I remember leaving my cousin’s debutante ball in cuffs. Nowthatwas a party.’

Paris rolled her eyes. ‘No, it’s not that kind of thing. She tried to steal from me.’

Margot frowned. ‘What did she steal?’

Paris realised she had the room and made sure to project the next sentence. ‘A necklace she gifted me years ago.’

‘Fuck you, Paris. I didn’t give it to you,’ Ari muttered.

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Nancy reached past the big guy and put a hand on her wrist. Ari gave her a look to let her know she wasn't about to go nuclear; she just had to say something.

Nancy nodded, understanding. And in the middle of that unspoken conversation, it hit her. She couldn't believe she'd gone this long without realising this was a person she was absolutely in love with.

Jesus. What a thing to realise in the middle of this mess.

'Anyway, where the bloody hell are those police? We called them an hour ago,' the groom said.

Ari raised an eyebrow. 'Yes, I bet you want me out of the way, don't you, Cal? I'm such an inconvenient portent of your future.'

Cal looked away. Paris caught the exchange. But she didn't say anything.

'Helen, perhaps you could ring them?' Paris asked.

Helen raised an eyebrow. 'Can't you get your staff to do it?'

Paris sighed. 'If it's too much...'

Helen's jaw went tight. 'Fine.' She went into the hall, taking her phone from her purse.

'Your pulse is a little rapid,' the doctor murmured to his patient. 'And you're a bit

clammy.'

'It's called being the centre of attention, darling,' Margot drawled, but there was a slight breathlessness to it.

'Have you been feeling faint?' he asked.

She hesitated. 'Perhaps a little.'

Paris rolled her eyes. 'Why didn't you say anything earlier?'

'Because I didn't want a fuss,' Margot replied.

The doctor sighed. 'I'd like to check your blood pressure properly, and you should rest for a while. You may be a bit dehydrated.'

'Oh, how terribly dull,' Margot muttered.

'You should get her to the hospital and stop messing about,' Ari breathed.

Paris shot her a look. 'This is not your business.'

'I'm inclined to agree,' said the doctor. 'About the hospital, I mean.'

Margot tutted. 'I can't. The dogs!'

'I can go see to your dogs,' Nancy offered. Ari smiled at her.

'She can't go. She's as bad as Ari. She'll probably rob you blind,' Paris said to her aunt.

‘How dare you!’ Ari exploded.

Margot shot her great-niece a look. ‘Well, it’s not as if anyone else is volunteering.’

Paris rolled her eyes. ‘Where’s the help?’

Laurence suddenly appeared, his timing as impeccable as ever. Nancy had to wonder if he was wearing some kind of electroshock collar that was activated by the slightest signs of wealthy distress. ‘Madam, give me your keys and address. I shall see to it.’

Margot gave him everything asked—with a slight blush, Nancy noted—and off he went to stop animal carnage. Nancy thought there was probably some upstairs-downstairs history there. If things had gone differently tonight, Nancy thought she and Ari would have been laughing about that together.

Helen walked back in. ‘They’re busy. They won’t be here for another hour.’

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‘This is ridiculous! It’s myweddingday,’ Paris whined.

‘I don’t think the cops care about that,’ Nancy told her in a reasonable tone.

‘My god. Can’t you shut up!?’ Paris exploded her.

Ari didn’t know she’d moved until she was gripped by both arms. ‘Talk to her like that again, and these men will not be able to protect you,’ she said.

‘You see? She’s an animal,’ Paris said to the room. The room rumbled a sound of general disgrace.

‘You’re the animal. And athief,’ Nancy said.

Helen gasped at the word.

Paris looked at Helen. Nancy looked at Helen. Ari looked at Helen. One by one, everyone in the room was staring at Helen.

Helen looked back at everyone, her colour draining. She looked sicker than Margot.

Nancy wasn’t sure what had just happened. But it was something.

Fifty-Six

Ari couldn’t ignore it. Helen’s gasp had beenweird. It was sharp, almost involuntary, like she’d been struck.

Ari, Paris, and Nancy all turned to her at once, their scrutiny pinning her in place.

‘Something wrong?’ Ari asked casually.

For a fraction of a second, Helen looked truly unguarded, her usual smooth, cutting expression stripped away to reveal something raw underneath. And then, just as quickly, she recovered.

‘Just a touch of asthma,’ she muttered, shaking her head as if they were all imagining things. But she wasn’t quite meeting anyone’s eyes.

Nancy narrowed hers. ‘You don’t have asthma.’

‘I developed it after I fired you,’ Helen said quickly.

‘I quit. And show me the inhaler,’ Nancy said.

‘I will do nothing of the sort,’ Helen said, eyes dark with warning.

Ari, ever impatient, tilted her head. ‘That wasn’t asthma. You looked like someone had just spilt your deepest, darkest secret.’

Helen scoffed. ‘Don’t flatter yourself.’

But there was something in the way she straightened her posture, the way her fingers tightened around the strap of her clutch, that made Ari’s instincts hum. She was covering something. And it had nothing to do with Paris’s small-time theft.

Paris must have thought the same, because she stepped closer, her voice quieter now—lower and more deliberate. ‘Helen’s just shocked to hear such a baseless accusation of jewellery theft thrown at her favourite niece.’

‘Yes. That.’ Helen waved a dismissive hand, but she turned slightly away, angling herself towards the door.

‘I thought it was asthma,’ Nancy said.

‘That too,’ Helen said, exasperated. ‘Both things.’

‘Are you all quite finished?’ Margot cut in, her voice weary. ‘Honestly, I’d be better off watching Emmerdale.’

‘You need to get to a hospital,’ Nancy reminded Margot.

Paris’s frustration flared again. ‘Oh, do shut up, Nancy. If I needed your opinion—’

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‘You don’t,’ Margot interrupted. ‘But I do. Since the dogs are attended, I’ve decided I do want an ambulance.’

‘Great, someone call an ambulance,’ Paris said. She looked at her aunt. ‘Helen? You can manage that, can’t you?’ she asked, her tone tight.

Helen nodded. She wasn’t arguing this time. She got out her phone again and went about procuring an ambulance.

Nancy took the opportunity to step toward Ari, speaking past the guard, dropping her voice so only she could hear. ‘There’s more rot here than just you getting stitched up.’

Ari’s face was struck by realisation. ‘Oh, bloody hell. Of course.’ She turned to Paris. ‘Your new husband already told me. I didn’t click what he meant until right this second. “Every penny goes where it needs to be”. Weird way to put it, Cal.’

Paris looked at Cal. Cal cringed. ‘I just mean... Like I said. It goes where it’s supposed to.’

Paris tried a laugh. ‘Yes, of course.’

Ari laughed too, but hers was much more real. ‘Too late. I’ve nailed you. It’s the foundation.’ She paused for effect. ‘You’ve been thieving from it, haven’t you, Paris?’

Paris’s smile didn’t falter. But the words that followed were so carefully measured she could have been a robot. ‘I have no idea what you’re talking about,’ she said. But

the tension in her posture said everything.

The crowd started rumbling again. Ari couldn't say which way it was going. Nor did she care. She had Paris's neck under her shoe.

She looked at Paris from under a beefy arm. 'You'll take anything from anyone. Of course you'd stoop to that.'

Paris's jaw clenched, but she refused to look directly at anyone. Instead, her gaze darted between the door, the floor, the walls, anywhere but at the group of people waiting for an explanation.

'You're deflecting,' Paris spat, her voice low but cutting. 'Because you are the only criminal in this room.'

Ari said nothing to that. She just let things stew. There wasn't much more for her to say now.

But then Helen, having gotten that ambulance on its way, had something to say.

'This is absurd. Absolutely ridiculous,' she repeated, stepping forward with a strange, almost frantic energy. 'I mean—really, how could anyone believe—' She stopped herself mid-sentence. Her hands fluttered nervously at her sides like she was fighting an urge to run.

'This is all based on what exactly?' Helen continued, now standing a little too close to Paris, as if to shield her. 'Cal? He's—' She paused, but only for a moment, her mind clearly scrambling for some kind of excuse. 'He's not even heavily involved in the foundation.'

Everyone looked at Cal. He looked down.

Ari looked at Paris. But Paris wasn't saying a word. She wasn't backing up Helen's story, wasn't agreeing or denying anything now. She just stood there, silent, as the conversation spiralled around her.

Ari had to admit, she was enjoying herself. Watching this panic was lovely. But ultimately, she didn't think much would come of it. In the best-case scenario, rumours would forever swirl. Ari could live with that.

But it wasn't over.

Suddenly, Cal, who had been descending into a sweating mess for the last few minutes, lost it. 'I told her not to! But she said the events had to be spectacular. She said the budget needed to be taken from the donations. She said the next one would make enough to cover it all—'

'CAL!' Paris screamed.

And right then, there was a rap at the door. Paris ran to unlock it and found the police standing there.

'ARREST HER!' Paris screamed, pointing at Ari.

'ARRESTHER!' Ari and Nancy screamed together, pointing back at Paris.

'HOW DARE YOU!' Paris screeched, bolting toward Ari, raising her clutch purse, looking oddly like a cave dweller about to commit murder by rock.

The security men turned from Ari, now in the strange position of having to hold back the bride from the initial security problem. 'Calm down, madam!' one of them beseeched. But she was wild.

‘What the hell is this?’ asked a policeman, baffled.

Ari stepped away from the security men and their struggle to contain tantruming Paris and turned to find Nancy.

Instead, she bumped smack into Helen.

‘You,’ she said with cold fury and a raised hand.

Ari, ever a lover, not a fighter, turned her face away instinctively.

But the slap never came.

Fifty-Seven

Nancy finally saw Ari get away from that lunatic Paris. Luckily, security had the bride, just about. She was doing a fantastic impression of a toddler who’d dropped her ice cream.

Nancy took a step towards Ari to meet her, but people were moving around, the crowd freaking out, not sure what was happening. For a moment, Nancy lost sight of her.

But then a gap opened up, and Nancy saw something. Helen, with her elbow drawn back, her arm raised.

And it broke something in Nancy.

She was moving before her brain caught up, before the thought had even formed. One blink and she’d closed the gap, grabbing Helen by the wrist and spinning her, taking her down fast. Helen went down hard and ungracefully, arms scrabbling for purchase, and Nancy followed her, caught her arm, and twisted until Helen stilled under her.

‘You will nevertouch her,’ she said, and it didn’t sound like her voice. It was low and certain and shaking with something deeper than anger. She leaned down, pressing her words into Helen’s ear. ‘Do you hear me?’

Helen made a small, panicked sound. Her face was turned to the side, and Nancy could see the shape of fear in her expression now. Her mouth parted. Her pupils were blown wide.

Ari’s voice rang out behind them: ‘You saw that? Attempted assault, yes? The bride as well.’

Nancy felt the shift in the air more than she heard the officer’s response. The shuffle of boots. The soft metallic hiss of cuffs being drawn from a belt.

‘Come on, slugger,’ said a voice, and Nancy felt herself pulled gently away. She knew who it was before she turned around and saw her.

‘Are you OK?’ Ari asked as Helen was cuffed.

Nancy smiled at her.

And then everyone started getting hauled off.

Fifty-Seven

Ari sat stiffly in the cold, sterile interview room, the bright overhead lights reflecting off the table’s polished surface. She could feel the eyes of the two officers watching her closely, their expressions unreadable but disinterested, as if she were little more than a nuisance to them. She had given her name and her story twice already, and yet here they were, asking her to explain it all over again.

‘I’m just telling you what happened,’ she said, her voice tight, trying not to show how frustrated she was. ‘It was my necklace. It was taken from me. And I was just trying to get it back.’

The younger officer leaned forward, scribbling something down on his notepad. Ari didn’t know if he was actually writing or just pretending to look busy.

‘Right, so you’re saying you were... “stealing back” your necklace, is that it?’ he asked, his tone dismissive. He glanced at his partner, who didn’t even look up from his phone.

‘Yes. It was mine. Paris took it,’ she repeated, trying to stay calm. ‘And when she realised what I’d done, she got her security men to detain me. Illegally, I might add. They were trying to lock me in, but I wasn’t going to let that happen. So, I had to break the door to get out. It was the only way.’

The second officer, the older one with the greying hair, finally raised his eyes. ‘You kicked down a door?’

‘Firstly, it was rotted, so let’s keep that in mind,’ Ari said. ‘But I guess that’s probably criminal damage. I’ll take my lumps on that. But not for the necklace.’

The younger officer raised an eyebrow, but the older one just nodded, scribbling down more notes. ‘Security said—’

Ari clenched her fists under the table. ‘They were the ones who locked me in the room! They were the ones who took my stuff. I wasn’t the one being aggressive. They were. I was trying to get what was mine.’

The younger officer didn’t say anything for a moment, just tapped his pen against the table. ‘And you’re sure this necklace was yours? You have proof of ownership?’

Ari swallowed hard, her throat tight. 'I'm sure my mother probably has official paperwork...' She realised something. 'Look, did you have it?'

‘Have what?’

‘The bloody necklace!’ Ari said, exasperated.

They looked at each other. ‘You see a necklace logged?’ the older man asked. The younger man shrugged.

Then, the door creaked open, and another officer stepped in—tall, sharp-looking, with a suit to match. Ari immediately felt the shift in the air.

‘This is Detective Marshall from the fraud squad,’ the younger officer said, his voice taking on a note of respect. ‘He’s got a few things he wants to go over with you.’

Detective Marshall’s gaze flicked over Ari for a moment before settling into the chair opposite her, alongside the uniforms. He didn’t waste time with pleasantries. ‘I’ve been hearing about a charity fraud,’ he said, his voice low and controlled.

Ari blinked, taken aback. ‘So, that’s being taken seriously? I’m glad to hear that.’

Marshall leaned back, his fingers tapping lightly against his notepad. ‘Tell me your version of events.’ He paused, his sharp eyes studying her. ‘I’ve heard a lot of things, rather muddled. I’m just trying to get to the core of it.’

Ari swallowed hard.

‘Look, I want to explain all that, truly. And I know you don’t care about my little necklace amidst all this. But I want to know...’ She paused, forcing herself to stay

calm. 'What happened to it?'

Marshall blinked. 'I... I don't know what you're talking about,' he said, his expression blank.

Ari felt a sinking feeling in her stomach. 'What do you mean, you don't know? It was taken from me, from my neck, and you're telling me you don't know anything about it? A hundred people saw it happen.'

Marshall's expression didn't change. 'It's not my area. Ask the other officers.'

'I did. They're clueless.'

The younger uniformed cop looked incensed but kept his mouth shut.

Marshall tried to gain control once more. 'Look, I've got allegations of fraud, I've got attempted assault, but no one is talking about a neck—'

Ari's heart skipped. 'Nancy? Is she OK? Where is she? She's—she's not in trouble, is she? Because that was very obviously self-defence.'

Marshall glanced at the younger officer briefly, who nodded slightly. 'You and a few other people allegedly involved in the fraud itself are the only ones in custody at this time. Oh, and one lady is in the hospital, I believe, getting treated for indigestion. No one called Nancy is currently detained.'

Ari nodded, relieved. The officers on the scene had watched all that madness unfold and agreed it was self-defence, so hopefully, Nancy would come out of this unscathed.

Marshall's voice broke through her worries. 'Alright. Let's hear it again. Your

version of events.'

Ari sighed, exasperated but resigned. She leaned back in her chair, forcing her mind to settle and her voice to stay steady.

She started again, recounting the events from the beginning. She was so tired of saying it, so tired of trying to make them understand.

But she had no choice. She had to keep going and hope for the best. The necklace was probably gone for good, stashed who knew where in the middle of the chaos. Ari had to accept its fate. And hope her own wasn't too bad.

'And then you guys hauled everyone off,' she finished.

Marshall nodded. 'OK. Look, there's a lot of differing accounts for me to sort through, but I think for the time being...'

Ari frowned. 'What do you mean, differing accounts?'

Marshall raised an eyebrow. 'I mean, there were a hundred or more guests at this wedding, and everyone seemed to hear something different.' He sat back, already exhausted. 'This whole thing is a mess. I can't even begin my real investigation until everyone has been interviewed.'

Ari gave a surprised laugh. 'You've not talked to the DJ yet?'

Marshall frowned. 'The DJ?'

'Yeah. I've known him for years and one thing I know about him is that he records all his sessions. You can just watch what happened,' Ari told him.

Marshall's hangdog face was suddenly sunshine itself.

Fifty-Eight

Nancy sat on the cold concrete steps outside the police station, her arms wrapped tightly around herself against the early morning chill. The sky was beginning to lighten, the first blush of dawn creeping over the horizon. But its beauty was lost on Nancy.

Her mind kept drifting back to the scene inside the station, to Paris and Helen. She could still hear their voices as she'd been led down the corridor past where they were in two separate holding cells, yelling through tiny windows at each other.

'You told me it was fine!' Paris had screamed, her voice rising with each word. Her usual controlled demeanour was gone, replaced by panic. 'You wanted me to get big names. You wanted the splash! Not to mention the credit!'

'Fine? Don't be ridiculous,' Helen had fired back, her voice dripping with venom. 'You were the one who kept promising everything would work out! I'm your biggest victim in all this!'

Paris let out a mirthless guffaw of horror. 'What?!'

The anger and desperation were unmistakable. It wasn't just about who was to blame. It was about everything that had led them to this point, all the lies, the manipulation, the schemes that had spiralled out of control.

Nancy had quite enjoyed the brief show. But she wasn't amused now.

She took a slow, steady breath, her gaze lifting to the sky, worry in her heart. Were they pressing charges against Ari right now? Because Paris wouldn't hesitate to point fingers, if only to muddy the waters of her own guilt. Nancy could only pray that just this once, innocence and guilt were truly about to matter.

Her thoughts were interrupted as the door to the station creaked open behind her. She didn't turn around, not yet. She was scared she'd see someone walking out who shouldn't be.

'Nancy,' came a familiar voice, soft but insistent.

Nancy turned. 'Oh my god. You're out.'

Ari sat down next to her on the bench in her creased dress, close enough for Nancy to feel the warmth of her body. They breathed together.

Finally, Ari broke the silence. 'So, how was your interrogation?'

Nancy let out a short laugh, though it was devoid of any real amusement. 'Best fun since my last root canal.' She looked at Ari with a little more seriousness. 'How are you out?'

'They're not pressing charges. They didn't have a clue about the necklace. I guess Paris is frying bigger fish than me right now.'

Nancy's relief was deep. 'Thank fuck.'

'Praise be to fuck, indeed.' She sighed. 'I guess this was the best-case scenario. I'm out, you're out...'

‘And we’re together.’ Nancy’s words came softly, but they carried all the weight of the moment.

‘So... Shall we head back to that hotel in Edinburgh?’ Ari asked, her eyes dancing with mischief.

Nancy found herself blushing. ‘We don’t have the car.’

‘Sod the car,’ Ari shrugged. ‘Not like either of us could drive in this state of exhaustion anyway. We’ll get a cab. And I’ll tip the driver handsomely for the unsociable hour.’

Nancy smiled. ‘OK.’

Ari smiled. Then stopped smiling. ‘Oh. I don’t have my phone. The gorillas took it. I can’t ring anyone or pay for anything.’

Nancy laughed. ‘I’ve got it.’ She pulled out her phone, found a local company and ordered a cab.

‘Feels weird letting you pay,’ Ari said.

Nancy raised an eyebrow. ‘Well, you better get used to it. Fifty-fifty all the way now.’

Ari blinked, surprised. ‘Is it?’

‘Has to be.’ She paused. ‘As soon as I get another job, of course.’

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Ari looked saddened. 'Damn. Gonna miss you behind the wheel.'

Nancy regarded her carefully. 'Maybe you could drive yourself?'

Ari didn't say anything, and Nancy wasn't sure how she'd taken the suggestion. But then she nodded. 'Maybe I could. Maybe I could do alotof things for myself,' she said philosophically. 'Maybe Ishould.'

Ari turned to Nancy with a shy smile. 'One thing I want to check... Given you've been sitting outside a police station waiting for me, I was just wondering if that might make anything... I guess what I'm asking is how many rooms will we need at the hotel?'

Nancy could see the vulnerability in her eyes and wanted to get rid of it quickly. She wanted Ari to know she was in this with her. All the way.

'One room, Ari. Nothing has changed. I still...' A terrible thought occurred. 'I mean, ifyoustill...' Nancy trailed off, her heart skipping in anticipation.

'I want you,' Ari said immediately, her voice steady and sure, as if there was no room for doubt.

Nancy's heart jumped, a swell of emotion rising in her chest. She decided not to look away this time. 'I want you too.'

The moment was a touch too intense, and the pair started to laugh together nervously. The promise of them was so big, it was nearly overwhelming. But Nancy was ready

to stop fighting the inevitable. She was feeling ready for everything she and Ari might be.

Then she remembered something. ‘Oh, you haven’t mentioned the necklace.’

Ari shrugged. ‘It’s time to let that go. It’s been absorbed into the madness. Nothing I can do.’

Nancy coughed sheepishly. ‘Umm, well...’ She reached into her purse and pulled out the necklace.

Ari’s eyes grew wide with astonishment. ‘WHAT! HOW? WHAT?’

‘Paris’s clutch was just sitting on the floor next to her while those security guys wrestled her,’ she said, her fingers playing nervously with jewellery. ‘It was... easy. Everyone was screaming, Cal was crying. It was chaos. After they took her out, I just grabbed it and looked inside. And there it was.’

Ari’s mouth was a circle of joy as she held it aloft. ‘You stole it back? Again? In the middle of that?’

Nancy nodded. ‘I tied it around my neck under my dress so no one would notice.’

Ari’s eyes lit up in surprise and joy, her mouth opening in disbelief for a moment before she let out a laugh. ‘You were wearing that all through your interview?’

‘Yeah,’ Nancy said. ‘I just had to get it to you because I know how much—’

Before she could finish, Ari was reaching for her face, pulling her into an urgent kiss. Nancy’s body responded instantly. After a moment, Nancy realised just how carried away she was getting. She laughed breathlessly as they pulled back, feeling like she

could float.

‘We should stop,’ she said, a smile playing at her lips. ‘Before we get arrested for indecency outside a cop shop.’

‘I can pause,’ Ari promised with a smirk. ‘For now.’

Just then, the cab rounded the corner and pulled up.

Nancy took one last look at Ari and then squeezed her hand as they stepped into the car together.

Nancy told the driver to head to Edinburgh, and they’d figure out an address as they got closer. ‘Sure thing,’ he said and pulled out.

Nancy glanced down at Ari’s hand. ‘Hey, keep that necklace safe,’ she said as she buckled up.

Ari clicked her belt in and looked down at the item in her hand. She examined the clasp. ‘Guess I’ll need to find a repair shop.’

‘Can’t hand it to your mother in that condition,’ Nancy noted. ‘Or that’s all she’ll see.’

Ari looked at it again, examining the piece carefully in her fingers. ‘You know what?’

‘What?’ Nancy asked.

‘Kinda thinking once it’s restored, I might just, I don’t know, stick it in the post to her?’

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Nancy looked at Ari, astonished. 'Really?'

'I still really want to return it to her. It means a lot to her, I think. But trying to get anything else out of all this is... Pointless.'

Nancy smiled. 'If you think so.'

Ari nodded and looked out of the window, a slow smile on her lips.

As the car began its journey, heading toward Edinburgh and whatever awaited them there, Ari leaned in close, her voice soft but full of certainty. 'I'm gonna fall for you so hard,' she whispered in her ear.

Nancy squeezed her hand tighter. 'And I'll catch you.'

'We'll catch each other,' Ari said.

Fifty-Nine

A Few Years Later

Ari leaned against the reception desk, idly twirling a pen between her fingers as she watched the rain streak down the window of the small office. Outside, Edinburgh bustled in the early evening light, the streets shining under the glow of street lamps.

The phone rang. She picked it up. 'Horizon Chauffeurs, Ari speaking. How can I help?' She listened. 'Yes, we can accommodate that, I think. Let me just check...'

She checked the booking system on the screen in front of her. ‘Yes, we can do that. Three cars for the twenty-eighth is no problem.’

She took payment from the new client, updated the system, and said goodbye to what she hoped might be repeat business. Business was growing, slowly but surely.

Still, they were a long way from coasting. While Ari held down the fort, Nancy was out meeting an event planning company today, trying to obtain another contract. And Ari was hopeful she could do it. You couldn’t meet her and not know she was a safe pair of hands, after all.

Their setup wasn’t flashy. Just a few sleek cars and a handful of drivers they trusted, but it was steady, and it was theirs. Once the loan was paid off, of course.

They were lucky they’d found premises with something habitable attached to keep down costs. Their flat above the office wasn’t much, a tenth of the size of her old place. Small, a little drafty in winter, but cosy. Comfortable. The kind of place that felt like a beginning.

The phone rang, breaking Ari’s thoughts. She straightened, finding her professional voice again. ‘Horizon Chauffeurs, Ari speaking. How can I help?’

The voice on the other end was clipped, precise, and utterly self-important. ‘Yes, I require a driver for a business event. Prompt, discreet, and preferably not one who will attempt unnecessary conversation. I assume your company can meet these standards?’

Ari’s lips pressed together. ‘We provide a premium service, ma’am. Our drivers are highly skilled and professional.’

The woman made a small, unimpressed sound. ‘Can they shut up? The last one

couldn't.'

Ari hesitated, but only for a second. 'That's fine, we do quiet. As long as the driver is treated well, they'll have nothing to say.'

The woman sighed. 'Please don't tell me you're that kind of business. I need professionalism. I need to be able to speak my mind to my staff. Otherwise—'

'Thanks for calling. But I'm afraid we won't be able to accommodate your request,' Ari said instantly.

Silence. Then a haughty scoff. 'Excuse me?'

'Our business is built on mutual respect between clients and staff. If that's an issue for you, there are plenty of other services in Edinburgh that might suit your needs better.'

'Do you even know who you're speaking to?'

Ari smiled, though the woman couldn't see it. 'I don't need to.'

A sharp exhale came through the line before the call cut off. Ari placed the phone down with satisfaction, shaking her head. Some things never changed.

She checked her watch. Five o'clock. Time to knock off. She went to the door and locked it, turning the open sign to closed. But as she turned away, there was a sharp knock on the door. She rolled her eyes and reopened the door.

But it wasn't someone looking to book a car.

Her mother stood on the threshold, immaculate as ever, a parcel in her hand.

Ari exhaled slowly. ‘Mum.’

‘Arianna.’

The woman looked her up and down, taking in the simple blouse and trousers, the company logo embroidered neatly on her name tag. There was only one small blink of surprise.

‘I was up here on business. Wanted to see this for myself.’

Ari shrugged. ‘And now you have. Is that it?’

Her mother said nothing.

‘I assume my letter reached you. I never heard back, so...’ Ari asked, sharpness slipping into her tone. She hadn’t expected much of a response. But years of silence?

‘I’ve been busy.’

Ari gave a short, mirthless laugh.

‘But yes, I got your note,’ her mother added quickly. ‘And everything else. The credit cards, your keys. And one last little surprise.’

Ari swallowed. ‘Did it reach you in good condition? I had to have it repaired, and I was a little worried...’

‘I thought you lost it.’

‘No.’

Her mother’s gaze sharpened. ‘Your note didn’t make much sense. Your ex-girlfriend had it? The one in the news?’

Ari shrugged. ‘She did. But now she doesn’t.’

‘Do you think that changes anything? You left without notice. You made me look a fool.’

Ari nodded. ‘I’m sorry. But I wanted to change my life. And when you decide to do that, you don’t want to fuck around waiting.’

‘And this is better, is it?’ she asked, gesturing at the office. ‘You, wasting your potential behind a desk? Poor?’

Ari met her gaze, unflinching. ‘I’m more important here than I ever was in your world. I built this with Nancy. Who loves me.’

Silence stretched between them. Then, to her surprise, her mother nodded. Just once. ‘Well. Perhaps you’re my daughter after all.’

It was as close to a blessing as she was ever going to get. Not that she needed it anymore. Funny to think this might have mattered once.

Well, she was her own woman now. The only opinions that mattered to her were her own, Nancy’s, and the people that worked for her. If she had respect from those quarters, there was nothing more to be said.

‘Thanks for dropping by, Mum. Let’s keep in touch,’ Ari said politely.

Her mother’s forehead creased in an expression Ari didn’t think she’d ever seen on her mother before. Gun to her head, she might have said it was remorse. ‘I know that was sarcastic. But I hope we do,’ her mother said flatly. And out she swept.

Ari shut the door and pressed a hand to her forehead. The moment felt heavier than it should have. Maybe because it felt like an ending. Or maybe because it felt like freedom.

Ari locked the office door behind her, the click echoing in the quiet corridor, and climbed the stairs to the flat above. She’d barely kicked off her shoes when the door creaked open again—but this time, she was glad for the interruption.

She smiled as Nancy stepped inside, looking weary but satisfied. Her jacket loosened, and her hair slightly dishevelled from the long day.

‘Hello, you,’ Nancy said, kicking off her heels and rubbing her neck.

Ari went straight to her. ‘Hey, that’s my job,’ she said, slipping her hands around Nancy’s neck and gently kneading. The groan Nancy let out told her she was hitting the right spot.

‘How’d it go?’ Ari asked.

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‘Not bad. They’re letting me know. Felt good, though.’

Ari leaned in and kissed Nancy’s neck. The groan was even bigger. ‘You nailed it,’ Ari whispered into her ear.

‘You weren’t there,’ Nancy pointed out.

‘I know what I know,’ Ari said.

‘I guess I can’t argue with that,’ Nancy purred as Ari moved to her ear.

Later, in bed, the conversation resumed.

‘God, I hope we get that contract. It would really ease things. Might even be able to take a proper day off soon,’ Nancy said, snuggled into Ari.

Ari smirked. ‘You? Take a day off? I’ll believe it when I see it.’

Nancy rolled her eyes. ‘If I could be here every minute of the day, believe me, I would be.’

Ari pulled her closer, and they snuggled in the late, dimming afternoon.

‘What do you fancy for dinner?’ Nancy asked sleepily.

‘I’ll cook,’ Ari offered, squeezing Nancy’s hand. ‘You’ve done enough today.’

Nancy raised an eyebrow. 'You? Cooking?'

'Shocking, I know. But I do have some talents beyond answering phones and charming clients.'

'Charming, eh?' Nancy murmured, tilting her head playfully.

Ari grinned. 'You tell me.'

Nancy laughed. 'Don't think I need to. Alright, you cook. But if it's a disaster, I'm ordering pizza.'

'Deal.'

Ari slid out of bed and grabbed a robe, heading out to the small kitchenette. After a moment, she realised Nancy was standing in the doorway, watching her faffing about with pots and pans.

'Hey, mad question... Was that your mum I saw leaving earlier, or was it a hysterical fantasy?'

Ari paused, glancing over her shoulder. 'Your eyes did not lie.'

'And?'

'And nothing. She just wanted to ream me once last time. I let her for old times' sake and then kicked her out.'

'Did she mention the necklace?'

'Of course she did. Not that she was grateful. Not that I expected her to be.' Ari shook her head. 'Doesn't matter. It's with the person it should be. And so am I.'

Nancy smiled at that, but her smile dropped a bit. 'You alright?'

Ari considered it. Then she smiled. 'Yeah. I think I am.'

Nancy crossed the room, pulling her into a loose embrace and pressing a soft kiss to her cheek. 'Good. Now whip me up a feast.'

Ari rolled her eyes but leaned into the hug. 'Bossy. You're lucky I love you.'

'I know that much,' Nancy murmured. 'Even if you can't boil an egg.'

'I can boil an egg,' Ari said defensively.

'Technically. If eggs were meant to be boiled for twenty minutes.'

'Details,' Ari dismissed with a dry smile, holding on to the love of her life just that little bit tighter.

It felt good to know, that for the first time in Ari's life, she was exactly where she was meant to be. And she was right on time.