

Pain in Teenage Love

All the Ways She Stayed, and the Love I Left With.

Jossef S.

Chapter 1

A NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN

My first novel, Matelda — In Silence We Forgive, scared me before I even started writing it. It took everything I had to finish. I loved it, and I'm still proud of it, not because it's mine, but because it felt real. The struggle, the hate, the war, the friendships, and most of all, the love, all of it felt true to me in a way that very few of the hundreds of romance stories I've read ever have.

I sent it to friends, and they loved it too. Some of them criticized me, but never the story itself. I know that every story finds people who love it and people who don't, and that's fine. Matelda will always be the book closest to my heart.

After I finished it and put it on Amazon, I needed something to pull me out of that world. Around that time, a friend sent me her diary, pages of notes, nothing organized, just fragments of her own story, and asked me to write it down properly.

So I did. It came together fast, but it felt beautiful, and it felt strong.

She asked to read it first before anything else happened with it. I sent it to her.

A few days later she sent it back. She'd gone through it and cut almost all of the dialogue. She told me it was too painful, that the dialogue burned, reading it back. But she still wanted the story out there. She wanted it to remind people what it was like to be a teenager, and what that kind of love, and that kind of pain, actually felt like.

So here it is.

I wish I could share the first version. I think you'll still feel everything in this one, though, because what's left is honest, unguarded, and real in a way I didn't write so much as carry over.

Thank you for reading.

— Jossef S.

P.S. If this story finds something in you, my first novel, Matelda — In Silence We Forgive, is available now on Amazon. It's a very different kind of story, love against the backdrop of a mafia war, but it comes from the same place this one does.

Chapter 2

The Morning Everything Tilted

The red car was at the curb again.

Nancy saw it through the screen door and her stomach completely dropped, that stupid, embarrassing twist like missing a step in the dark. She tried to tell herself it didn't mean anything. People parked on this street all the time. It was a normal thing for a car to do.

She shoved the screen door open anyway, moving too fast with her backpack hanging off one shoulder, and walked straight into her.

"Oh—"

Hands caught her. Fingers clamped onto her forearms, steadying her before she could even compute that she was falling. They were warm. Sure. It felt like Ruth's body already knew the exact physics required to catch her.

"Careful," Ruth said. Her voice was steady. Ruth was never startled.

Up close, she smelled distinct. Nancy didn't have the words for it yet, clean lavender, but beneath that, something much warmer. Like burnt sugar. Nancy knew she would spend weeks trying to figure out what that scent was, and she'd still never quite manage it.

"Sorry," Nancy muttered. It came out breathless.

"You're always in a hurry." Ruth hadn't let go. She just held her there, an arm's length away, looking down at her with an attention so sharp it felt like being read out loud. "Where's the fire?"

"There is no fire."

"Mm." The corner of Ruth's mouth twitched, not quite a smile. It looked like she'd caught Nancy in a lie and decided to let her keep it for now. "Okay."

She let go.

Ruth stepped past her into the house like she'd lived there for years instead of a few weeks. The cool morning air rushed in to fill the empty space where she'd just been standing. Nancy stood frozen on the porch, her heart pounding way too fast for someone who had just said four words to her little brother's new caretaker.

She couldn't move.

Behind her, through the mesh of the screen door, she heard Ruth's voice drift toward the kitchen, low, almost talking to herself: "She's going to be a problem."

Nancy's face burned hot.

She didn't know yet if Ruth meant it as a joke.

She didn't know yet that it wasn't.

Three weeks earlier, none of this existed.

Three weeks earlier, Nancy couldn't breathe for a completely different reason.

The air in her bedroom felt entirely used up, like someone else had already taken all the oxygen and left nothing behind. Something tight and hot pressed against the inside of her ribs, building and building until she felt like moving the wrong way would split her wide open.

Honestly? What she wanted—absurdly, desperately—was just for someone to hold her.

Above her, the ceiling fan turned in slow, useless circles.

Downstairs, the front door slammed shut.

The sharp clack-clack of her mother's heels hit the entryway tile. "Leo?"

No answer.

The refrigerator hummed. Ice rattled into a glass. Then dead silence.

It wasn't a peaceful quiet, though. It was the kind of silence that feels heavy, like it's just waiting for a fuse to blow.

A loud thud echoed from the living room, and then Andy's laughter burst out, bright, loud, and entirely nine years old. Her dad's voice answered him, low and warm. For exactly one second, Nancy actually smiled. Andy still thought their parents' screaming matches were just temporary weather. Something that would pass if you stayed inside long enough.

Then her mother spoke again.

"You're late. Again."

The smile vanished before Nancy even felt it leave her face.

She jammed her headphones on, blasting Bach's first cello suite, anything clean, ordered, and loud, and bent over her calculus homework, forcing her eyes to track the numbers on the page.

"Where the hell were you?"

She cranked the volume.

"Don't give me that bullshit, Leo. I called the gym. They said you left at four."

Higher. Higher.

It didn't matter. It never did. Nancy tore the headphones off.

The quiet they left behind was ten times worse, because now she could hear Andy. He wasn't laughing anymore.

"You're being paranoid," Leo said, his tone completely flat.

“And you’re a liar.” Her mother’s voice dropped into that quiet, controlled register that was scarier than yelling. “I saw the texts, Leo. I found the hotel receipts on your desk.”

Something inside Nancy went totally numb.

“Mommy?” Andy asked, his voice tiny.

A cabinet slammed downstairs.

Nancy pressed her palms flat against the wood of her desk, the rough grain biting into her skin. Across the room, her NYU acceptance letter caught the fading afternoon light. One more month. It was supposed to be her escape hatch, but right now, it just looked like a cruel joke pinned to the wall of a life she didn’t belong to anymore.

She reached for her phone. Her aunt Maya. Anyone.

Her thumb hovered over the screen and then just froze. She couldn’t do it. She wouldn’t even know how to explain the words out loud.

A floorboard creaked directly outside her bedroom door.

Footsteps. Heavy. Off-rhythm.

The door swung open.

Her dad stood in the frame. His beard was unkempt, his work shirt damp at the collar with sweat. His eyes found hers and just locked on.

“You okay, Nance?”

It was entirely too normal. Way too normal, way too late for normal.

She nodded anyway. What else was she supposed to do?

He walked into her room, leaving the door wide open behind him. The smell of cedar and sweat followed him in, his usual cologne, except tonight it just smelled like something trying way too hard to cover up a mess.

“They’re just words,” he muttered, dropping his hands to his knees. “Your mom’s just upset.”

“Stop.”

He actually stopped mid-sentence. He sat down heavily on the edge of her unmade bed like his legs had completely given out on him. One of his knuckles was split open, a tiny bead of dark blood gathering in the crease of the skin. Nancy looked away before her brain could start piecing together how that happened.

Downstairs, her mother’s voice climbed into a screech.

Then Andy started to cry.

Leo didn’t move an inch.

Nancy picked her pencil back up, her knuckles white. "I have a midterm tomorrow," she said to the wall.

"Yeah," he said, staring at his boots. "You do."

She waited for him to say something else. Anything real. He didn't.

After a moment, he stood up heavily. "Night, Nance."

The door clicked shut. Nancy sat alone in the dark, listening to her family implode one floor down. She didn't move, she didn't cry, and she didn't sleep for a long, long time.

The sound that woke her up at 2:00 AM wasn't a voice.

It was sharper than that, an explosive crack that split the night perfectly down the middle. Then a beat of silence. Then Andy screamed.

She was out of bed before she was even fully awake. She flew down the dark hallway, down the stairs, the blinding kitchen light at the bottom hitting her like a slap in the face.

She choked to a stop in the doorway.

Her mother was leaning against the counter, one hand pressed hard against her own cheekbone. She wasn't pressing it or rubbing it. She just held it there, looking stunned, like she hadn't decided what a person was supposed to do next after getting hit.

A drinking glass lay shattered on the tile. A puddle of water was slowly creeping toward the molding, dripping over the edge of the counter—tap, tap, tap.

Leo stood near the back door, his back to Nancy. His right hand hung loose at his side. Open. Still.

Andy was sitting on the kitchen floor between them in his dinosaur pajamas. He wasn't screaming anymore. He was making this tiny, ragged, hyperventilating sound, the sound of a kid rewriting, in real time, his entire understanding of the world.

Nobody was moving.

Nancy stepped straight into the space between them.

She faced her father. He was staring at his own knuckles like they belonged to a stranger. Then he looked up at her, and whatever was in his face was completely unrecognizable. It was too new, too ugly to have a proper name yet.

"Get out," Nancy said. Her voice didn't shake.

"Nancy, listen—"

"Get the hell out of this house."

He looked past her, targeting her mother's face. Whatever he found there finished him. His shoulders completely slumped. He reached blindly onto the counter, grabbed his keys, and walked out into the

dark.

The front door didn't slam. It just clicked shut, quiet, like he didn't even have the energy left to throw it.

She listened to his boots cross the porch. The gravel crunched. A car door opened, then thudded shut. The engine cranked, a perfectly normal, everyday sound that felt entirely obscene in the quiet. The headlights swept once across the kitchen window as he backed out of the driveway, and then he was gone.

Nancy dropped to her knees on the floor and pulled Andy into her lap. He was heavy, dead weight, burying his face directly into her neck. His little fists gripped the fabric of her shirt so tight his knuckles turned white.

She held the back of his head, whispering, "I've got you, it's okay, I've got you," over and over into his hair, the kind of lies you tell because there's literally nothing else left to say.

Behind her, her mother finally moved. She walked over to the sink, picked up a sponge, and turned on the faucet.

The water ran. Then she turned it off.

The kitchen went dead quiet. Down the street, a neighbor's dog started barking at the sound of the car driving away, bored with its own alarm. The puddle on the floor finished dripping.

Nancy didn't look up at her mother. She wasn't ready for her mother's face. She wasn't sure she'd ever be ready.

One more month, she thought, squeezing her brother tighter against her chest.

But looking at the broken glass on the kitchen floor, she didn't believe it for a single second.

Chapter 3

Fault Lines in the Morning Light

Nancy must have slept at some point, because there was a blank stretch of nothing and then it was morning, that flat, gray light through the curtains that doesn't promise a single thing.

The crack in the ceiling was still there. Same place. Light fixture to the corner, thin as a hair. The ceiling fan went around and around like it hadn't gotten the memo that their entire lives had changed since last night.

For a second, she didn't remember. Then it hit her all at once, her mother's hand pressed against her own cheekbone, like she hadn't decided yet what a person was supposed to do with a face like that.

Nancy closed her eyes again. It didn't help. It never did.

She lay there with the sheet twisted around one leg, a heavy, suffocating weight sitting right in the center of her chest. It wasn't quite grief and it wasn't quite fear, just a massive pressure that had been building for a while now, if she was honest. Longer than just last night.

She wanted to talk to someone. The thought just showed up, completely uninvited.

Abe.

That hurt almost immediately. Abe would've shown up with bad coffee, worse advice, and the exact kind of presence that made things feel survivable just by occupying the same room. Abe, whom she hadn't talked to in eight months. They'd stopped speaking over something so small it was embarrassing to even think about now. A joke that hadn't landed as a joke. A line she didn't know existed until she'd already stepped right over it. And then Abe and Milo were just gone, and the quiet where they used to be had stretched out so long it became the normal shape of things.

She hadn't let herself really look at that void. Not until now.

Last year she had people. Now she didn't, and she'd told herself that was fine, temporary, even, because there'd be college soon, new faces, and a version of her that wouldn't flinch when she saw an old contact name.

Her hand moved before her brain could stop it. Phone in her palm.

Abe's name. Still there. Of course it was.

Hey. I know it's been a while. I know I don't really have the right. But last night—

Nancy stopped. She turned the phone face-down on the mattress.

No. She didn't get to disappear for months and then come crawling back the exact second her life fell apart. She didn't want to be that kind of person.

She put the phone down for real this time and looked over at her desk instead. The NYU acceptance

letter was still sitting there, propped against her lamp. For months, that piece of paper had meant an escape hatch. A door forward.

This morning, it just looked like a plan to abandon Andy.

She got up.

The house was quiet, not the peaceful kind, just empty.

Andy's door was open a few inches. She pushed it the rest of the way.

He was still asleep, completely buried under his weighted blanket, his hair sticking up in three different directions. One arm was flung over his head like he'd fallen asleep mid-game. His breathing was slow and steady. Completely fine. None of the wreckage had touched him yet.

She crouched down beside the mattress and brushed the hair off his forehead.

"Hey," she said softly. "Time to get up."

His eyes opened, blank for a second, the way they always were, and then he found her face and everything in his expression just settled, like a sail catching wind.

"Nancy," he mumbled.

"Yeah, it's me. Come on, let's go see if Mom made pancakes."

"Pancakes?" He sat up instantly.

"Maybe."

That was enough. He reached for her hand without even thinking about it, his small fingers wrapping tight around hers, and they went down the hall together. The floor did its usual loud creak under the third board from the top.

At the top of the stairs, Nancy stopped.

Voices from the kitchen. Low. Careful. Not better, just quieter.

She squeezed Andy's hand once and let go. "Go on."

He went.

The kitchen was too bright. It always was in the morning, that one window caught the sun directly and turned the room a sickly, blinding white.

Nora stood at the counter with her back to the room, her shoulders locked up tight near her ears. The smell of coffee was thick in the air. Two slices of toast were going cold in the toaster, untouched.

Leo was sitting at the table, still wearing last night's wrinkled clothes, both hands wrapped around a mug he wasn't drinking from. Staring straight ahead at absolutely nothing.

Andy climbed into his chair like none of this was happening, which, for him, it wasn't. "Is this mine?"

He was already reaching for the food.

Nora turned around.

The bruise looked ten times worse in the daylight. Dark, angry purple spreading under her eye, the skin swollen, foundation caked over it in a way that made it completely obvious, not less. A thin red line cut across her cheekbone.

“Good morning,” she said. Like that was a normal thing to say.

Nancy didn’t move.

Leo looked up. Their eyes met—hers and his—and neither of them said anything. There wasn’t a single word left that wouldn’t make it worse.

She walked over and sat down next to Andy, her chair scraping loudly against the linoleum. She reached for the toast and then let her hand drop without taking any.

Nora set a pan down on the stove harder than she needed to. The metal clang made Andy jump a little, but he forgot about it a second later.

“I called in sick,” Nora said to nobody in particular. “Thought I’d take Andy to the park.”

“The park?” Andy lit up.

“If the weather holds.”

Leo let out a heavy breath through his nose. His hands tightened around the ceramic mug. He didn’t look at Nora. Nora didn’t look at him.

Andy filled the silence, ducks, bread, the swings, his voice going a mile a minute, bright and a little too loud. It was like he was trying to paper over the whole kitchen with noise if he just talked fast enough.

Nancy picked up her cup. It was empty. She put it back down, and it landed louder than it should have.

She looked at her dad. This was the same guy who’d taught her to ride a bike, who still checked Andy’s math homework every Thursday without being asked. The same guy who’d come into her room last night and asked you okay, Nance, like he had any right to pretend things were fine.

What she felt looking at him wasn’t even anger anymore. It was worse. It was just total disappointment.

She pushed her chair back. “I need to get ready for school.”

Nobody stopped her.

She stood up, turned, and then paused, because Leo was looking right at her. Waiting. For what, she wasn’t sure. Forgiveness, maybe. Or just for her to look away first so he didn’t have to face the shame.

Nancy held his eyes.

Then, slowly, deliberately, she let her gaze drift over to Nora's face. And back to him.

Fix it.

She didn't say it out loud. She didn't have to.

His jaw tightened. His throat moved. And then he looked down, at the mug, at his hands, anywhere but her, and Nancy turned and walked out of the kitchen.

Behind her, Andy was still going. Ducks. Bread. The park.

In the hallway, she stopped and put one hand flat against the wall.

She looked back, just once, at the three of them arranged around that table, her mom moving around like motion could fix a broken marriage, her dad completely frozen, and Andy talking into the middle of the void like his voice alone could hold the house together if he just didn't stop.

Maybe the house had already cracked clean through.

Maybe they were all just standing in the wreckage, agreeing to pretend it was still a home.

Nancy turned away and stepped outside.

The morning air hit her, cool, a little damp, the scent of jasmine drifting over from the fence. She stood on the porch for a second and didn't move.

Down the street, a sprinkler clicked on. Somebody's car started up. A bird she couldn't name made one weird sound from the oak tree and then shut up.

The world was just going on. Like it always did. Like it had no idea, and wouldn't have cared even if it did.

Nancy breathed in, breathed out, and started walking.

At the end of the driveway, she stopped.

The curb was empty.

For one stupid second, her chest did something she didn't have a name for. Not relief. Not the opposite of relief either.

She kept walking.

Chapter 4

Fault Lines in the Open

By midday, the courtyard was doing its usual thing, sun beating down on the concrete, the smell of grease drifting over from the cafeteria, somebody's phone speaker buzzing out a song half a beat too fast. Groups of kids moved through it like they'd been choreographed, like they all knew exactly where they were supposed to stand.

Nancy stood with her back against the brick, off to the side, where she usually stood.

She was good at that. Standing off to the side.

Her eyes went across the quad without her really deciding to look, and then stopped.

Abe and Milo. Over near the far wall. Heads together, Milo's hands going as he talked, Abe nodding along with that focused look Nancy used to know better than her own face in the mirror. They looked completely normal. Completely fine. Like the last eight months hadn't happened to anyone at all.

Her chest did something tight.

She was already moving before she'd really decided to.

The noise of the courtyard sort of fell away as she crossed it, not gone, just distant, like everyone had turned the volume down. Milo saw her first. His face changed, surprise, and then something flatter, more braced. He said something to Abe without looking away from Nancy.

Abe turned around slow. Like she already knew who it was going to be.

Their eyes met.

There wasn't anger in Abe's face. That would've almost been easier. It was just, tired. Settled. The kind of tired that's been there so long it's stopped being new.

Nancy stopped a few feet away. "Hey."

Her voice came out weird. Smaller than she meant it to.

Neither of them said anything.

Milo crossed his arms.

"I know I messed up," Nancy said. "I know I just—disappeared. I should've said something, I should've—"

"Yeah," Milo said, flat. "You should've."

She looked past him, at Abe. "I'm sorry. I didn't know how to fix it, and I kept thinking if I just—gave it time—"

"You thought we'd wait around," Milo said.

“I just—”

“You didn’t think about us at all, Nancy. That’s the part.”

That one landed somewhere it hurt.

“That’s not true,” she said, still looking at Abe.

Abe spoke for the first time. “You don’t get to decide that.”

Calm. Tired. Done.

Somehow that was worse than if she’d yelled.

“I’m sorry,” Nancy said again, and even as it left her mouth, she could hear how thin it was. “I really am. I just didn’t know how to—”

“Stop.” Abe’s voice wasn’t loud. It didn’t need to be. “You don’t get to come back because you had a bad feelings. You left, Nancy. And it wasn’t even—you didn’t just leave, you made it really clear that we weren’t worth an explanation.”

“That’s not—”

“It is,” Milo said.

Nobody said anything for a second.

And Nancy felt it, not just the distance, but the finality of it. Like a door that had already been shut a long time ago, and she was only now getting around to noticing.

“I’m trying now,” she said, quieter. “Doesn’t that—doesn’t that count for something?”

Abe looked at her for a long moment. Something flickered behind her eyes, there, and then not.

“No,” she said.

That was it. Just no.

She turned to Milo. “Come on.”

Milo hesitated, half a second, then shook his head, slow, almost gentle about it.

“Forget about us,” he said. “It’s easier.”

And they walked off.

Nancy didn’t go after them.

The courtyard noise rushed back in all at once, like someone had turned the volume back up, laughing, footsteps, somebody shrieking near the cafeteria doors, all of it too loud and too busy with itself to notice her standing there with her back against the wall, hands curled up at her sides.

Her eyes blurred. She pressed the back of her hand against her mouth.

She didn't cry, exactly. She never really did. But her eyes were doing it anyway, quiet and stubborn, like her body had decided to do this whether she agreed or not. She let it happen because there wasn't anything else to do, the courtyard was emptying out, she had nowhere to be, and the loneliness wasn't really a feeling right now so much as just, where she was. The place she lived.

Then—a hand.

A white handkerchief, folded into a neat little square, held out by someone's fingers.

Nancy blinked and followed the arm up.

The girl was small, dark hair in a loose bun, round glasses catching the light when she tilted her head. She wasn't smiling, exactly. Just looking at Nancy, not pity, not really curiosity either. Something quieter than both. Something that didn't seem to want anything from her.

Nancy took the handkerchief. Their fingers brushed, cool skin, gone in a second.

"Thanks," Nancy managed.

The girl pushed her glasses up with one finger. "Only a few more days," she said, like they were already in the middle of a conversation. "Then we get to leave this place for the real world." A pause. "I promise you'll find way bigger things to cry about out there."

Nancy laughed, short, surprised, a sound she hadn't planned on making. She couldn't actually remember the last time something had made her laugh like that.

She looked at the girl properly this time. The line of her jaw. The way she stood, like she'd decided a long time ago she wasn't going to apologize for taking up exactly the amount of space she took up.

"I'm Clara," the girl said. "We're in the same art class."

Nancy's face went hot. She hadn't noticed. And somehow she knew, in the same second, that she should have.

"I know," Clara said, reading it off her face. "I'm one of those people nobody notices."

She said it like a fact. No bitterness in it at all.

Something twisted in Nancy's stomach, close enough to shame that it might as well have been.

Clara shifted her bag on her shoulder. "See you around," she said, already half-turned to go.

"Wait—"

Nancy's hand shot out and closed around Clara's wrist before she'd really decided to do that either. Warm skin. A pulse under her fingers, slow and steady.

Clara went still. Looked down at the hand on her wrist. Then up at Nancy's face.

Nancy let go immediately. "Sorry. I—"

Clara's mouth curved, not mocking, not surprised. Something else. Knowing, maybe. Gentle.

Impossible to read all the way through.

“I’ll see you in art,” she said.

And then she walked off.

Nancy watched her go, the loose fabric of her shirt moving with each step, the easy roll of her hips, the way she walked like she had somewhere to be but wasn’t in any hurry to get there.

Nancy looked away. Her face was still hot.

What are you doing.

Not a question. More like, catching herself at something. She pressed the handkerchief between her palms and looked out at the emptying courtyard and told herself it was nothing. Just the leftover static from crying, from Abe’s face and Milo’s voice and eight months of silence landing on her all at once.

It was nothing.

She looked back anyway.

Clara was nearly at the doors, bag sliding off one shoulder, head tilted slightly like she was already thinking about something else entirely. Nancy looked at the line of her shoulders, the curve of her back—

—and this time she didn’t tell herself to stop looking.

Something moved through her. Slow, low, warmer than she expected. Not scary, exactly. Just unfamiliar, like finding a door in a room she thought she already knew, standing open, with light coming through from the other side.

She didn’t have a word for it.

She wasn’t sure she wanted one yet.

The doors swung open and Clara went through.

Nancy stood there in the empty courtyard, handkerchief in her hand, pulse going in her throat.

Then, right before the doors closed, Clara stopped. Turned. Found Nancy’s eyes across the whole empty courtyard like she’d known exactly where to look without checking.

She didn’t wave. Didn’t say anything.

Just looked. And smiled, barely, just the corners of her mouth. The kind of smile that knows something and isn’t going to say what.

The doors swung shut.

Nancy didn’t move for a second. Somewhere inside, a teacher was already talking, chairs scraping against tile, the day going on without her. She looked down at the handkerchief, white, folded, still a little warm from being in Clara’s pocket, and pressed it into her palm.

Then she went inside.

The house was quiet when she got home.

Andy was on the living room floor, action figures spread out everywhere, narrating some battle to himself in a steady stream that didn't need an audience. Nancy ruffled his hair on her way past and he leaned into it without even looking up.

The kitchen was empty. Dinner sat cold on the stove—somebody had started it and then just stopped. Her mom's bedroom door was closed.

Nancy stood in the hallway for a second.

Then she heard it. Soft. Broken up.

She opened the door without knocking.

The room was dim, curtains pulled against the afternoon light. Nora was curled on her side, her shoulders shaking. Nancy crossed the room, kicked her shoes off, and climbed onto the bed, pressing herself against her mom's back, her arm going around her waist.

"Mom."

Nora went rigid for a second. Then, slowly, she turned over.

Her face was swollen, eyes red, the bruise gone yellow-green at the edges now. Whatever was behind it hadn't faded at all.

"I think it's time," Nora said. Her voice came out raw, but steady. "I can't keep doing this."

Nancy didn't say anything. Just waited.

"I tried to keep this family together." Nora's voice cracked around the edges. "Not—not because I love your father. I haven't, not for a long time. I tried for you. And for Andy. I thought if I just—kept it stable, kept it looking normal—" She made a small, broken sound. "I can't anymore, Nancy. I'm so tired."

Nancy tightened her arm around her.

"It's been years," Nora went on, her jaw trembling. "The—the affairs. I didn't want you to know any of that. I didn't want you to have to see him like—like this. But I can't pretend anymore. I'm done pretending."

Nancy didn't say anything. There wasn't anything that would make it smaller.

"I'm not asking you to pick sides," Nora said quietly. "He's still your dad. That doesn't go away. I just need you to know—" Her lips pressed together. "I'm not the one who broke this."

"I know," Nancy said.

Nora reached up, her hands shaking a little, and cupped Nancy's face, her thumbs moving along her

cheekbones. That's when Nancy realized she was crying too, quiet, the way she always did. The way she'd learned to.

"I love you," Nancy said.

"I love you too." Nora's voice broke completely on it. "More than anything."

They lay there while the light outside shifted and the room slowly went dark around them. Downstairs, Andy's voice kept going, bright, oblivious, filling up the house with the sound of someone who didn't know yet what had already been decided.

Nancy held onto her mom and stared up at the ceiling.

The crack ran from the light fixture to the corner, same as it always had.

She'd never really noticed it before.

She wondered how long it had been there.

Chapter 5

Something New

The alarm went off and cut straight through whatever Nancy had been dreaming, sharp and a little too loud for the size of the room.

She reached over without opening her eyes and killed it, then just lay there for a second.

The house was doing its usual morning things around her, the fridge humming downstairs, her mom moving around in the kitchen, Andy's slow, even breathing through the wall. Nothing about any of that had changed.

But something had.

It wasn't that her dad's footsteps were gone from the hallway, or that the air didn't have that tight, held-breath quality to it anymore, though both of those were true. It was more that the weight in her chest had moved. Not gone. Just lighter, like someone had come in while she was asleep and quietly picked up one corner of it.

She sat up. Put her feet on the rug.

She didn't have to talk herself into it. That part, more than anything, felt new.

The routine was the same, brush teeth, hair up, backpack, but it felt different somehow. Less like going through motions and more like she actually had somewhere to be. In the hallway, she caught her reflection in the dark little mirror by the front door and almost turned around to look again.

Didn't, though.

By Thursday, she was waking up before her alarm, her heart already going for no reason she could name. She lay there in the dark for a second and didn't bother questioning it.

The mirror in the morning light was not kind. Dark circles. Hair doing its own thing. Her hands shook a little when she reached for her makeup bag, which, okay, she basically never used.

But today, she unscrewed the lipstick, barely-there pink, the kind that doesn't really commit to being a color, and put it on carefully. Mascara, just a little. She looked at herself.

Not a different person. Just, more there, somehow.

The closet took forever. She went through three shirts before landing on a gray sweater, jeans, the Converse that were basically falling apart at this point, and the little silver studs her dad had given her for her sixteenth birthday. She didn't think too hard about that last one. Just put them in.

Breakfast was toast and scrambled eggs, the good kind, where Nora actually left the yolks soft, which she only did when she was in an okay mood. Andy already had his textbook propped against the syrup, mouthing the words as he read. Nora put a plate down in front of Nancy and poured herself coffee, steam curling up around her face.

“You look nice,” she said.

Nancy froze with her fork halfway to her mouth. “What?”

“The sweater.” Nora’s mouth twitched. “It’s a good color on you.”

“Oh.” Nancy looked down at it like she’d forgotten what she was wearing. “Thanks.”

Something easy passed between them. Nancy almost didn’t trust it.

At the door, Nora’s voice stopped her.

“Come give me a kiss.”

Nancy turned around. “What? Why?”

Nora was already standing, arms open, somewhere between teasing and something softer. “Because I want one.”

They weren’t really a hugging family, never had been, but Nora’s eyes were clear and her smile wasn’t going anywhere, so Nancy crossed back and let herself get pulled in. Her mom’s hair smelled like the same shampoo it always had. The kiss landed on Nancy’s forehead and stayed there a second too long.

“He’s a lucky guy,” Nora murmured into her hair.

Nancy pulled back, frowning. “What guy?”

Nora just smiled. “Have a good day, sweetheart.”

The door clicked shut behind her.

Nancy stood on the porch in the cool air for a second.

It’s a girl, she thought.

And then she was laughing, quiet, kind of disbelieving, the whole way down the driveway.

The hallway at school was its usual chaos, loud and packed, and Nancy found herself scanning it without really meaning to, dark bun, round glasses, and every time it wasn’t Clara, her stomach dipped a little and then settled again. Not in the courtyard. Not by the art wing. Not in the library, where she ended up lingering way longer than she needed to, running her fingers along the spines of books she had zero intention of opening.

By third period, she’d told herself she’d stopped looking.

She was smiling anyway.

The art room smelled like turpentine and old paper, the kind of smell that gets into your clothes and follows you home. Nancy picked a seat by the window where the light came in long gold bars across the tables, set down her sketchbook, lined up her pencils.

Told herself she wasn't watching the door.

Then Clara walked in.

Late, unhurried, moving the way she always did, like she had nowhere to be and wasn't bothered about it either way. Her glasses caught the light as she scanned the room. Her eyes landed on Nancy, stayed a beat too long, then let go as she crossed over and sat down next to her.

Nancy's pulse was doing something loud.

Clara set her bag down, opened her sketchbook without looking up. The corner of her mouth moved.

"You're late," she said.

Nancy blinked. "Class hasn't started."

"That's not what I meant."

There it was, that floor-dropping feeling, except instead of falling, she just sort of... floated.

"Then what did you mean?"

Clara's pencil was already moving. "You've been late to noticing things." A pause. "Like the fact that I exist. In this class. Near you."

Nancy laughed, surprised. "Touché." She leaned in a little. "To be fair, you weren't exactly advertising."

"I wasn't hiding."

"No," Nancy said. "You were just, mysteriously existing in corners."

"That's kind of my whole thing."

"It's working."

Clara's pencil stopped.

"Is it?"

Nancy met her eyes. "Yeah."

Clara held it for one beat. Then went back to drawing like nothing had happened.

When the bell rang, Nancy took her time packing up. Clara closed her sketchbook with a soft thud and just waited, unhurried, like she'd already decided what was happening next and was giving Nancy a second to catch up.

"Do you want to—" Nancy's voice caught. She tried again. "Outside? Lunch?"

Clara stood, shouldered her bag.

"Lead the way."

The grass was still a little damp, sticking to Nancy's sneakers. They ended up under the oak at the edge of the quad, the light coming through the leaves in patches. Clara sat first, legs crossed, sketchbook on her knees. Nancy sat down next to her, leaving about a foot of space between them, careful, deliberate.

Neither of them said anything for a minute.

It wasn't awkward, though. It hummed.

Nancy unwrapped her sandwich. Clara pulled out a little container of strawberries, bright red against the plastic.

"You're still trying to hold everything together," Clara said, like she was commenting on the weather, and popped one in her mouth.

Nancy paused mid-bite. "And if I didn't?"

"Then you might find out what's actually yours."

Nancy put the sandwich down. "That's terrifying."

"Most good stuff is."

Nancy looked at her—actually looked—the way the sun hit her skin, the steady thing in her eyes, the little smudge of graphite on her thumb. "What if I don't know how to do that," she said. Smaller than she meant it.

Clara reached into her bag and pulled out the sketchbook. Flipped through a bunch of half-finished drawings, stopped somewhere in the middle, turned it toward Nancy.

A figure, alone, at a table. Head down. Empty chairs all around. Hands clenched in its lap, shoulders carrying something you couldn't see but could tell was heavy.

Nancy's breath caught. "That's not me," she said. No conviction behind it at all.

Clara turned the page.

Same figure. But different, head up, hands open and resting on the table. And across from it, barely there, just a few light lines, another shape. A person. Not finished. Not detailed.

But there.

Nancy's eyes blurred.

Clara closed the sketchbook, quiet. "You don't have to be alone," she said. "Not if you don't want to be."

Nancy wiped her eyes, laughing a little, shaky. "You're impossible."

"Impossible?" Clara tilted her head. "Nope. Just Clara." The corner of her mouth went up. "You'll get used to it. If you want to."

Nancy looked at her, the sun in her hair, the patience in her face, the strawberries held out toward her, small and deliberate and somehow enormous.

She took one. Their fingers brushed.

Neither of them mentioned it.

“...okay,” Nancy admitted. “That’s a genuinely good strawberry.”

“Told you.”

“You’re arrogant.”

“And yet.”

Nancy smiled. “And yet.”

They stayed there a while. Talking. Not talking. Something building between them, slow, the kind of thing that builds when nobody’s trying to rush it.

The house was quiet that night. Not the heavy kind. Not the broken kind either.

Just quiet.

Nancy lay in bed staring up at the crack in the ceiling, light fixture to the corner, same as always. Except tonight it didn’t look like something breaking. Just something that had always been there. Part of the structure. Holding its own weight.

She thought about Clara. Her voice. The way she just, sat there, unbothered, pencil moving. You don’t have to be alone.

Nancy pressed her lips together, smiling into the dark.

Her phone sat on the nightstand. She picked it up. Abe’s name was right there, same as always.

Her thumb hovered.

Then she put the phone face-down again.

Not tonight.

Tonight she didn’t need to look backward.

She closed her eyes, and for the first time in longer than she could remember, the dark felt like rest instead of weight.

Chapter 6

Lavender and Caramel

The weekend showed up like something everyone had been holding their breath for. Saturday morning, Nancy wandered around the house finding herself smiling at nothing, the way the light hit the kitchen window, Andy humming through his door, the smell of coffee her mom had made and then forgotten about on the counter. She caught herself in the hallway mirror and the smile was still there. Weird. Unfamiliar.

Underneath it, something else. Not worry, exactly. More like that feeling before weather changes, when the air gets a certain way and you don't know yet if it means rain or just wind.

She ate cereal standing at the counter and didn't think too hard about any of it.

Nora was at the kitchen table with paperwork spread out, glancing up every so often to track Nancy around the room. The bruise had gone yellow-green now, mostly covered.

"You've been grinning all morning," Nora said. Not really a question.

Nancy poured more cereal. "Have I?"

"Like you're hiding something good." The pen tapped against the table, then stopped. "It's nice to see, that's all."

Nancy nodded, not really knowing what to say to that. Maybe she did know a secret, or was figuring one out. That you could be happy and everything else could still be true at the same time. Nora went back to her papers, something softer around her mouth than there'd been in a while.

By the afternoon, Nancy had texted Clara—park?—and gotten back one word: coming.

The grass smelled freshly cut, that sharp green smell that gets on your shoes. Nancy found a spot under the old oak where the ground sloped a little and the sky just opened up overhead. She lay on her back, arms out, and let the ground hold her up.

Blue. Just blue. That was it.

She didn't hear Clara walk up, just felt the shadow cross over the sun, then the soft thump of someone settling onto the grass next to her. Nancy kept staring at the sky, watching a cloud break apart and come back together, until she felt the hand.

Fingers found hers. Traced along her knuckles, slow, then laced through and held on. Warm. A little rough from drawing all the time. Nancy's hand closed around it without deciding to.

"Earth to Nancy," Clara said, in that voice like she was talking into open air and didn't expect an answer back. "Come in, Nancy."

Nancy turned her head. Clara was on her side, propped on one elbow, hair coming loose from its bun against the grass. Her glasses had slid down her nose. She didn't bother fixing them.

“You’re somewhere else,” Clara said.

The smile came back, rising from somewhere under Nancy’s ribs. “I feel found.”

It came out quiet, surprised her, a little, how true it was. Clara’s mouth moved into something that wasn’t quite the teasing smile Nancy was used to. Softer than that.

“Mystery Woman,” Clara said. Not a question.

Nancy blinked. “You actually see a woman? When you look at me?”

“Yeah.” Clara’s thumb moved in a small circle against Nancy’s palm. “A pretty attractive one, too.”

That just sat there between them. Nancy felt the heat crawl up her neck, but the sky was still blue and the grass still smelled like grass and Clara’s hand wasn’t going anywhere, so she let herself just have the moment, without picking it apart.

“Don’t rush this,” Clara said. Her voice had gone somewhere else, like she was remembering something instead of just saying it. “Enjoy being a teenager. While it lasts.”

“You sound like you’ve done a lot of growing up already.”

Something shifted in Clara, small, just a tightening around her eyes, her shoulders pulling in a little. “No room for a kid in my life. Not really.”

Nancy heard it, a whole history packed into eight words. She looked at Clara’s face, the careful lines of it, like she’d been built more for watching than for being watched, and tried to read whatever was sitting behind all that quiet.

Something happened to her. Something that made her grow up before she got to be young.

“I want to be in your life,” Nancy said. The words came out careful, tested. “However that—as a friend, as a—” She stopped, searching Clara’s face for some clue about which word was even allowed.

Clara’s glasses slid further down. She left them. “We’ll see,” she said. “Depends how good you turn out to be.”

“Good how?”

“Start by not being so confused all the time.”

“I’m not—” Nancy took a breath, felt it catch halfway. “I just don’t really get what you’re—what this is.”

Clara laughed, real at first, and then it twisted into something rougher, almost a cough. She rolled onto her back, and when she sat up again, she’d put herself back together. “You’ve got a dirty mind, Miss Harrison.”

Nancy smiled despite herself.

They walked back through streets that had gotten familiar without either of them noticing. Nancy's hand found Clara's without either of them saying anything, and they swung their arms between them like little kids, which felt completely ridiculous and also necessary. Every time their arms reached the top of the swing, Clara's fingers tightened, just slightly. Checking. Still there. Still real.

The sun was starting to go down behind the hills by the time Nancy got to her front door, painting the house in colors that didn't belong to this season. She could hear voices inside—her mom laughing, bright, unfamiliar—and another voice underneath it, lower, answering. She stood there with her hand on the door for a second, trying to fit this sound into any version of her house she knew.

She went in.

The living room sort of narrowed. Down to one point.

Her mom was on the couch, turned toward someone sitting in the armchair, her dad's armchair, the one nobody else ever sat in. Nora looked up, still smiling at whatever had just been said, and waved Nancy in like she was hosting a party.

"Oh—hey, sweetheart. Come meet Ruth."

Nancy didn't move.

The woman—Ruth—was already standing up, and the way she did it was just... right. Like her body knew something about geometry that Nancy's didn't. Short dark hair, falling in a way that looked soft without being shiny exactly. Skin that had clearly seen a lot of sun, not tanned so much as warmed, somehow. Green eyes that looked like they were already done figuring you out. A small nose. A mouth that held its shape even doing nothing.

And lines, at her eyes, around her mouth. Not aging her. If anything, they made her look more finished. Like a signature on a painting.

"Nancy." Her mom's voice, from somewhere far away, with an edge to it. "Don't be rude. Come say hi."

Nancy's feet moved on their own. She put her hand out and it disappeared into Ruth's, warm, firm, not trying too hard.

"Nice to meet you, Nancy." Low. Sure of itself. Like Ruth had never once in her life wondered if she belonged in a room.

Nancy opened her mouth. Something came out. It wasn't really a word. She backed up to the chair by the window, the one nobody ever sat in either, and sat with her knees together and her hands in her lap.

"Ruth's going to help with Andy," Nora was saying. "I go back to work Monday, and Ruth's going to be looking after him. We really lucked out finding her."

"Lucky for you, you're also paying me a lot." Ruth had settled back into the armchair like she'd been sitting in it her whole life.

Both women laughed. Nancy watched it happen, her mom's head tipping back in this almost-young way, and Ruth's laugh, quieter, but it changed her whole face. All that careful structure went warm.

Time did its own thing for a while. The two of them talked, schedules, what Andy liked, the neighborhood, and it all blurred together into background noise. Nancy couldn't stop looking at Ruth. Every time she looked, there was something new, the way her hands moved, small and exact, when she talked. The line of her jaw when she turned her head. The pulse going steady at her throat.

The room felt warmer than it had any right to be.

Then Ruth's voice cut through, easy, almost gentle.

"Do you always watch people like that?"

The room kept going. Something in Nancy didn't.

She looked up too fast. "What?"

Ruth was looking right at her. Not accusing. Not amused either. Just sure.

"Like you're trying to figure out how everything fits before you decide where you go in it."

Heat went up Nancy's neck. Her hands tightened in her lap. "I wasn't—"

"You don't have to explain it." Ruth tilted her head a little. "It's not a bad thing."

Nora laughed from the couch. "She's always been like that. Quiet. Off in her own head."

Ruth didn't look away from Nancy.

"No," she said, softer. "Not quiet."

That landed somewhere Nancy didn't have a name for.

She held Ruth's eyes a second too long. Something in her chest moved, small, but it didn't move back.

Then Ruth smiled, and just like that, it was over.

Ruth stood up. The whole room seemed to track the movement without meaning to. Goodbyes, thank-yous, plans confirmed for Monday. Nancy stood too, on some kind of autopilot, and somehow ended up right in Ruth's path on the way to the door.

The space between them closed.

Ruth moved the same unhurried way she did everything, and as she passed, her shoulder brushed Nancy's, barely anything, really, barely even a touch. But Nancy felt it go through her like something dropped into still water. Out and out.

The scent came after, lavender, clean, and under it something warmer. Caramel. Slightly burnt.

Nancy stood there while Ruth went to the door, while goodbyes happened, while her mom walked

Ruth out to say one more thing on the porch. She didn't move. Her shoulder was still saying something, somehow. Her lungs were still catching up.

When Nora came back in, she found Nancy in the same spot, staring at nothing, one hand pressed to her own shoulder.

"She seems nice, right?" Nora was already heading for the kitchen, already back in her evening rhythm. "Andy liked her right away. That's the main thing."

Nancy lowered her hand. The pressure faded. The room felt emptier now, like something had pulled back out, leaving the shape of itself behind.

She thought about Clara, their hands swinging, the sky doing its impossible blue thing. Then Ruth's eyes, green, exact. The way time had only made her more herself, somehow.

The two pictures wouldn't sit together. Neither one would let go.

She was still standing by the window when she heard the car.

Her dad's engine, she'd known that sound her whole life the way you know somebody's voice without thinking about it.

Her stomach went tight.

The front door opened. Leo stepped in, looking too big for the doorway somehow, carrying himself like a guy walking into a place that used to be his. Duffel bag over one shoulder. His eyes did a quick pass around the room, checking what was still there—and landed on Nancy. Relief and guilt, about even.

"Hey, Nance."

"Hey."

Andy came thundering down the stairs before anyone could say anything else and threw himself at Leo with the full, uncomplicated force of a nine-year-old who hadn't learned yet to hold back with people he loved. Leo caught him, held on, and over Andy's shoulder his eyes found Nora in the kitchen doorway.

That look lasted less than a second.

It had years in it.

"Okay," Nora said, her voice doing its careful, even thing. "Let's all sit down."

The four of them ended up around the kitchen table, same table, same chairs, same window, same light, except none of it was the same and everybody knew it and nobody said so. Her parents talked in careful turns, words like arrangement and going forward and what's best for everyone, all the sharp edges sanded off. Andy sat with his chin in his hands, eyes going back and forth between them like he was trying to solve something nobody had given him all the pieces for.

Nancy watched her family rebuild itself in real time and felt the familiar tightness start up, across her chest, behind her sternum, the walls of the room leaning in slow.

She made it twelve minutes.

“I need some air,” she said.

Nobody stopped her.

The front steps were cool. The street had settled into evening, porch lights coming on, a dog barking somewhere, a sprinkler ticking away in someone’s yard. Nancy sat with her elbows on her knees, phone in her hands, and typed before she could second-guess it.

hi stranger

The reply came back almost instantly.

hey you

Something in her chest let go a little, just at the speed of it.

feeling confused. again.

good. now you can at least describe the feelings

not helping

not trying

Nancy stared at the screen. She didn’t have words for any of it, the arrangement, Ruth’s chair, her dad’s duffel bag, lavender and caramel still sitting at the back of her throat somewhere. She sent three emojis instead. Sad. Frustrated. Something that didn’t really cover it but was close enough.

A pause, then:

ok sorry. how can i help

don’t really know

Longer pause.

oh wait — sorry, confused. don’t worry. i know how to help with that

A photo came through.

Clara, up close, glasses crooked, face doing something so deliberately stupid, eyes crossed, cheeks puffed out, one eyebrow up near her hairline, that Nancy laughed out loud before she could stop it. The sound went out into the quiet street, surprised and real.

She sat there in the dark with her phone lit up and laughed until the tight feeling had somewhere to go.

it worked, thank you

goodnight, dear

goodnight

She went back inside. The kitchen had gone quieter, her parents' voices lower now, winding down toward whatever agreement they were putting together out of the wreckage. Andy had fallen asleep against Leo's arm, his face completely slack. Nancy stood in the doorway long enough to see that they were okay, as okay as any of this could be, and then walked through the living room without turning on the lights.

She stopped at the armchair.

Ruth's chair. The one nobody ever sat in.

Nancy sat down in it.

The cushion gave under her, softer than she expected. For a second, nothing. Just fabric. Just quiet.

Then she breathed in.

There.

Faint. Almost gone already. Lavender, clean and sharp, and under it that warmer thing. Caramel, gone soft with heat. A smell that didn't belong to this house. Didn't belong to anything Nancy had known before tonight.

Her fingers pressed into the armrest.

She closed her eyes.

For one second, it was so easy to just stay there. Let it sit. Not ask any questions about it.

Then Clara showed up in her head. Not gently, either. The stupid photo. The way her hand had fit into Nancy's like it already knew the shape of it. The sky, that impossible blue, their arms swinging.

Nancy opened her eyes.

Same room. Nothing had changed.

And yet.

This felt different. Not better, not worse than the Clara thing. Just sharper. More dangerous, somehow, though she couldn't have said why.

Her hand drifted up to the spot on her shoulder where Ruth had brushed past her. Still there. Still exact.

Clara is—the warmth, she thought. Room to breathe.

This—

She let out a slow breath.

This feels like it wants more than I know how to give.

She leaned back into the chair anyway. Breathed in what was left of the scent.

Stayed there longer than she meant to.

When she finally shut her eyes again, she was smiling.

She didn't really know why.

That, more than anything, was what kept her sitting there.

Chapter 7

The Red Car and the Amber Room

Nancy didn't get up right away.

The alarm had gone off. She'd killed it. Now she was just lying there, watching the strip of light from the curtain creep slowly across the ceiling.

She wasn't tired. She was replaying things.

The same loop, over and over, whether she wanted it or not.

A week ago, her life had been quiet in that empty way, not dramatic, not tragic, just airless. Days that came and went without leaving a mark. Thoughts she didn't follow too far because she already knew where they went. The kind of lonely that eventually teaches you not to want too much.

She'd moved through all of it like furniture. Present. Useful. Nobody really looking at her.

And then—

Not slow. Not gentle. Something had shown up out of nowhere and rearranged things, and now the person she'd been a week ago felt like someone she used to know. Hard to get back to, even if she wanted to.

Clara. Ruth. The park. The armchair.

Nancy let out a breath, eyes still on the ceiling.

How is that even a thing that happens?

No answer came, obviously.

She got up anyway.

Andy's door was half open. She knocked once and pushed it the rest of the way.

He was a tangle under his Star Wars blanket, one arm flung over his head, mouth open. She said his name. He groaned. She said pancakes. He sat straight up, hair flat on one side and standing up on the other, and looked at her with that direct, no-angles way he had.

"You look weird," he said.

"What?"

"Like your brain's loud." He scratched his head. "Bad dream?"

She almost smiled. "No. Just a weird week."

Andy shrugged, already swinging his legs out of bed. "Weird's better than boring."

Maybe, Nancy thought.

Downstairs, the kitchen smelled like coffee and warm syrup. Nora stood at the stove with her back to them, shoulders a little tight under her robe. Morning, morning. Andy went straight for the syrup. The pancakes were golden, stacked up high.

Nancy's stomach just closed.

She stood. "I'm gonna head out."

Nora turned. "You haven't—"

"Not hungry."

She didn't wait around for the follow-up.

The morning air was cool, damp, that smell of wet earth and far-off traffic. Nancy stepped outside, pulled the door shut behind her, and got exactly one step before she stopped.

The red car was at the curb. Clean. Polished. The early light catching its hood.

The driver's door opened, and Ruth stepped out.

Daylight changed her, clarified her, finding the auburn threads in her dark hair. She moved toward the house with that absolute certainty, her coat moving slightly with each step until she reached the porch.

Close. Closer than necessary.

The scent arrived with her, clean, sharp lavender, and beneath it, caramel warmed by the morning air.

"Good morning, Nancy."

Nancy's throat closed up completely. Her pulse stumbled.

"Morning," she managed. It was thin, barely a sound.

Ruth watched her for a beat, attentive and unhurried. "You don't want me to come in?"

Nancy blinked, realizing she was standing dead center in the entryway, blocking the screen door like an accidental barricade. Heat flooded her face.

"Oh—sorry—"

She stepped aside too fast, her shoulder catching Ruth's arm. It was barely a graze, but the contact went through her like an electric current before she could stop it.

"Are you okay?" Ruth asked, her voice low and genuinely concerned. "You look pale."

Nancy opened her mouth, but nothing organized itself. Her body just made the decision for her. She pushed past Ruth and kept walking down the steps, fast.

By the end of the block, her breathing still hadn't evened out. She stopped, hands on her knees, staring at the pavement.

What is wrong with me.

She didn't usually struggle to talk. Not with anyone, not strangers, not teachers, not even her dad in the middle of everything last week. But Ruth just took her apart before she could assemble her defenses, and by the time Nancy straightened up, Ruth had already gone inside.

She pulled out her phone.

you at school yet?

just got here. why

can i meet you

The three dots appeared. Disappeared. Came back.

you ok?

She wanted to type no. Wanted to type I saw her again and I can't think straight and I don't know what's happening to me.

just need to see you

A pause.

outside art room. 5 mins

Nancy let out a breath. That was enough.

Clara was already there, leaning against the wall by the art room door, glasses fogged a little from the damp morning. She looked up when Nancy got close.

"Hey," she said.

Nancy didn't say anything back. She just stepped in, and Clara's arms opened without being asked, and Nancy pressed her face into the shoulder of Clara's sweater, soft, smelling like fabric softener and peppermint tea.

Clara's hand moved slowly up and down her back.

"Bad morning?"

Nancy nodded against her shoulder.

"Want to talk about it?"

She shook her head.

"Okay."

No pressure. No follow-up questions. Just there. Warm and steady, not asking for anything back.

After a minute, Clara stepped back, her fingers finding Nancy's.

"Come on," she said. "We're gonna be late."

The day went by in a blur, chalk dust, fluorescent lights, half-heard explanations from teachers Nancy wasn't really listening to. But Clara stayed close the whole time. A note slid across a desk. A comment dropped right when it needed to be. A shoulder against hers whenever her attention started drifting too far away.

By the final bell, something in Nancy had loosened. Not fixed. Just quieter.

She slung her bag over her shoulder and turned to Clara. "Let's walk."

Clara blinked. "Walk where?"

"Anywhere. I just don't want to go home yet."

She said it plainly, no dressing it up. That was the thing about Clara, she was always a little amazed by it: how easy it was to just say true stuff. No careful packaging. Just the thing itself, and Clara took it without making a big deal.

Clara looked at her for a second, then took her hand.

"There's a bus," she said. "Goes the wrong way. Perfect."

Nancy let herself get pulled along.

She didn't know where they were going and didn't ask. The bus was older than the one they usually took, lumpy seats, windows smeared with other people's fingerprints. Clara put her head on Nancy's shoulder and watched the city slide by, streets Nancy didn't recognize, buildings packed closer together, a bodega with plastic chairs out front, kids chasing each other between parked cars.

Nancy just watched it all go past.

She wasn't thinking about going home.

That was enough.

Clara's neighborhood didn't try to be anything. Small buildings that looked their age. Cracked sidewalks. Voices drifting out of windows. Something frying somewhere close, the smell warm and rich.

Clara kept her hand the whole way.

Mr. Johnson was out on his folding chair by the kiosk, newspaper across his lap, looking like a guy who'd made peace with however long things took. He looked up when Clara called his name and his whole face folded into a grin.

"My favorite troublemaker." His eyes moved to Nancy. "And she brought company."

"This is Nancy," Clara said, pulling her forward a little. "My other best friend."

Other best friend. Two words. They landed somewhere in Nancy's chest like she'd been waiting on them without knowing it.

He pulled a paper bag out from under his chair, empanadas, still warm, smelling amazing. They sat on the curb and ate while Clara and Mr. Johnson talked back and forth and Nancy just listened, and the afternoon moved around them without any rush to it at all.

It was completely ordinary.

And something in Nancy that had been wound tight for days finally let go a little.

Clara's building smelled like old wood and something floral underneath, with a little bit of old cigarette smoke baked into the walls. The apartment itself was small and clearly lived-in, books everywhere with no real system, a crocheted blanket draped over the couch, a pile of shoes by the door in various states of matching up.

From the kitchen came the sound of something being stirred. Then Nany appeared, wiping her hands on her apron, face lighting up the second she saw they had company.

"Mi corazón!" She came straight over and took both of Nancy's hands in hers, small hands, knuckles a little swollen with age, warm and completely sure of themselves. "So this is the famous Nancy."

"She's exaggerating," Clara said.

"I remember everything," Nany said serenely, already heading back to the kitchen. "Sit. You'll eat."

Clara gave Nancy a small look—this is just how she is, sorry, also not sorry—and Nancy sat down and ate pasta in a tomato sauce that tasted like it had been going since that morning, and answered Nancy's cheerful questions without minding any of them, and kept catching herself watching Clara across the table with something she didn't try to name.

Clara's room was small, a single bed against the wall, a desk and chair, a bookshelf stacked with books and sketchbooks and jars of pencils. A corkboard covered in drawings and photos and pages torn out of magazines. A string of little warm lights along the top shelf.

Nothing pink, nothing red. Mostly blue and teal. Everything in its place, everything just itself.

Nancy stood in the doorway a second before going in.

It felt, she thought, like stepping into a mind that had already figured out what it was and stopped apologizing for it a long time ago.

She took the desk chair, the only chair. Clara sat on the bed, chin on her folded hands, watching her with that same unhurried attention she gave everything.

Quiet settled in. Not empty, though. Waiting.

"Best friend," Nancy said. "Did you mean that?"

Clara smiled. "If you're okay with it."

Something in her eyes said more than her voice did. Nancy felt it and decided not to look at it too closely yet.

“I don’t actually know anything about you,” she said.

“Not much to know.” Clara took a slow breath. “What do you want?”

“Everything.”

Clara’s fingers went still against the blanket.

“My mom died when I was a baby,” she said. No softness, no buildup, just fact, the way you say something you’ve said a hundred times. “My dad dropped me off here and that was it. Nany raised me. Her friends became my friends. I grew up around a bunch of old women, their stories, their long afternoons, all of it.” A small smile. “At some point I just stopped feeling like a kid.”

Quiet again.

Nancy sat with that. Thought about her own week, her own house falling apart, and understood—clearly, quietly—that suffering isn’t a contest, but it’s also not handed out evenly, and Clara had been carrying something heavy for a really long time without making it anyone’s problem but her own.

“Why me, though?” Nancy asked.

She hadn’t planned that. It just came out, the way true things do, without asking permission first.

Clara’s mouth curved. She pushed up off the bed, something loosening in how she held herself.

“Maybe I figured you were easy prey.”

“I didn’t know you were hunting.”

“I’m very subtle about it.”

“I would’ve put up a fight. If I’d known.”

“You can’t resist my charm.”

Nancy laughed, real laughter, from somewhere low in her stomach, and Clara laughed too, and for a second the room was just two girls cracking up at nothing, the amber light warm around them.

Nancy drifted to the window. The street below was quiet, a kid on a bike, an old woman pushing a cart over the cracked sidewalk.

She heard Clara cross the room behind her.

“I always saw you,” Clara said. Her voice had changed, lower, the teasing gone. “You never saw me, though. And I never had the guts to say hi.” A pause. “You seemed like you were from somewhere else. Somewhere I couldn’t get into.”

Nancy kept her eyes on the street.

She wanted to turn around. God, she wanted to. She could feel Clara right there behind her, close enough that if she turned, they’d be close. And if she turned, she might do something she couldn’t

take back. Reach out. Close the gap.

She didn't turn.

"So why now?" she asked.

A breath. Quiet.

"You're still from somewhere else," Clara said. "But you're not a stranger anymore."

Something shifted in Nancy's chest, slow, certain, like a door swinging inward.

She gathered herself up. Decided something. Stepped back from the window and turned fast, already opening her mouth—

"I—"

She didn't get to finish.

Clara had moved too, coming forward, a photo in her hand, mouth already open, and the space between them just wasn't there anymore, and their bodies met.

Soft. Barely even a collision. More like an arrival.

Neither of them stepped back.

Warmth. Clara's breath against her face, a little fast. The rise and fall of her chest. And under all of it, somehow, a heartbeat, hers or Clara's, no way to tell anymore.

They looked at each other.

Nancy's eyes dropped, just for half a second. Just one second she shouldn't have taken.

Clara's mouth.

She wondered.

Then she stepped back.

Clara's face had gone pink, cheeks, ears, all the way down her throat. She smiled, small and a little undone, and looked down at the photo still in her hand.

The quiet stretched out. Heavy. Full of everything neither of them was saying.

"I wanted to show you this," Clara said. Voice not quite steady. An out, for both of them. Nancy took it gratefully.

She looked at the photo.

A bunch of school kids in a field, everyone squinting at the sun. Two years ago, the museum trip in October. She recognized it right away. Recognized herself, younger, more closed off, not broken open yet.

“Where’d you even get this?”

Clara grinned, some of the color fading from her face. “Bought it off someone. My only proof you existed.”

Nancy laughed, a little too fast, a little too high, and looked at her own face in the photo. She hadn’t known Clara existed that day.

Clara had known she existed.

That sat in her chest and didn’t go anywhere.

They drifted back to opposite sides of the room, a quiet, mutual agreement that the last three minutes had been totally normal. Clara perched on the edge of the bed. Nancy sank into the desk chair.

“So,” Clara said.

“So,” Nancy said.

A beat.

“You gonna tell me what happened this morning?” Clara asked. “Or are we doing the thing where you don’t tell me and I act like I didn’t notice?”

“Am I that obvious?”

“You want to hide. Just—not from me.”

“Not from you,” Nancy agreed. She looked down at her hands. “I want to tell you. I do. I just don’t want to—feel like I’m using you. Running to you because of whatever I’m running from.”

“Stop.” Clara’s voice came out sharper than usual. “Don’t say that.”

“I just—”

“It’s not true.” Clara settled, steadier now. “And even if it was—that’s literally what friends are for.” A pause. “So. Tell me.”

Nancy looked at her.

“There’s a woman,” she said.

Clara went still. Not in a way you could really point to, just something locking, quietly, like a door closing somewhere in another room.

“Oh,” she said. Light. Too light. “Interesting.”

“She’s helping out with Andy. Started today. I ran into her outside this morning and she said—” Nancy stopped. “She said good morning and I just, couldn’t talk. I just stood there.”

Clara let out something close to a laugh. “So she says your name and you forget how language works.”

“Don’t,” Nancy said quietly.

Clara’s smile flickered. Faded. She pressed her palm over her mouth for a second.

“She’s—” Nancy looked for the word, the right one, the only accurate one. “Beautiful,” she said finally. “Really beautiful. Different from anyone I’ve ever—”

Something crossed Clara’s face. Quick. Almost not there.

When she looked back up, her expression had reset, but not all the way. Something underneath it now, tight, being managed.

“Of course she is,” she said.

Not unkind. Not warm either.

Nancy noticed. Sat with it.

“It’s not just that,” she said quietly. “It’s what it does to me. I don’t get what’s happening.”

Clara was quiet for a long moment.

“I think you do,” she said finally. “Or you’re starting to.”

Nancy shook her head. “If I do, I don’t know what it means.”

And that, out of everything she’d said all day, was the truest thing.

Because the question underneath all of it, the one she still hadn’t let herself say out loud, was louder now than it had ever been.

What does this make me?

She didn’t say it.

Clara watched her.

“Tell me about you,” she said softly. Not a deflection. An offer.

Nancy let out a breath. “That’s the problem.”

“What is?”

“You see me clearer than I see myself.” She met Clara’s eyes. “More honestly than I do.”

Clara held her gaze across the small amber room.

“I like what I see,” she said.

Nancy didn’t have anything for that. She just looked at those dark, steady eyes, patient, warm, already knowing, and felt everything loud in her go quiet.

It was getting late. The light through the window had gone gold and low.

“I should go,” Nancy said. “Before my mom calls the cops.”

Clara smiled. “She won’t.”

“She might.”

Neither of them moved for another second.

Finally, Nancy got up, grabbed her bag. They walked out together through the narrow hallway, past the living room where Nancy sat in front of the TV, a lamp throwing warm light over her chair.

“Bye, Nancy!” Nancy called, not even turning around. “Come back!”

“Bye, Nany,” Nancy said, smiling.

At the apartment door, Clara stopped, one hand resting on the frame—not closing it, just there—watching Nancy head down the hall.

Nancy walked slow. Each step a little deliberate, like something might still happen, like the right pause might give her a reason to stop.

She got to the stairs.

Turned back.

And stopped completely.

Clara was still in the doorway, hand on the frame, the amber light from her room spilling halfway into the hall. But her face, it was different now. All the steadiness was gone. All the teasing, all the careful grown-up-ness, gone. What was left was something Nancy recognized the way you recognize a language you grew up speaking.

Loneliness. The kind that’s gotten good at hiding. The kind that’s been hiding so long it almost forgets it’s doing it, until the guard slips, just for a second, right when someone’s about to walk away and there’s nothing left to perform for.

Nancy knew that look.

Had been that look. Plenty of mornings, in her own mirror.

She went back without deciding to.

Put her arms around Clara and just held on. Tight. The kind of hug that’s not about words, that’s just the thing itself.

She felt Clara freeze for half a second—surprised—and then something in her let go, and her arms came up around Nancy too.

“Thank you,” Nancy said, quiet, into her hair.

She stepped back. Held Clara’s eyes one more second.

Then she left.

Outside, the air had cooled off. Streetlights were coming on one by one down the block. Nancy walked without really picking a direction, the evening opening up around her, carrying two things she didn't have words for yet—

the feeling of Clara's arms, still sitting in her hands somehow—

and, underneath that, faint, patient, lavender and caramel, waiting.

Chapter 8

The Quiet Week

Nancy started waking up before her alarm.

Not by much, just a few minutes, but it was enough time to lie completely still in the dark and listen. She listened to the hum of the house, to the soft, rhythmic puff of Andy's breathing through the drywall, to the pipes groaning in the crawlspace.

Then she would throw off the blankets and get up.

She dressed in the dark, pulling on yesterday's jeans, a random oversized sweater, moving entirely by muscle memory to avoid the floorboards she knew would screech. The hallway was always freezing at 6:00 AM.

Every single morning, she paused right outside her mother's bedroom door. She didn't stay long. Just long enough to confirm there was absolute silence on the other side.

Then she left the house.

The air outside always felt heavy and damp, like the night hadn't fully cleared out yet. The yellow streetlights stretched her shadow long and thin across the concrete as she walked. She didn't rush. She just walked early. Earlier than she ever needed to be for school. Earlier than anyone else on her block.

That was how the rest of the week went.

No massive blowups. No giant life-altering decisions. Just small, quiet adjustments. She left early. She stayed out late. She took the long way home, consciously choosing routes that didn't let her think too much.

And she didn't see the red car again. She made damn sure of it.

School shifted into background static. Locker doors slamming, chalk scraping, fluorescent lights humming right above her head, it all just blurred together. Nancy stopped keeping her eyes glued to the tile floor when she walked down the halls. She stopped measuring the exact physical distance between herself and the rest of the world.

Instead, she looked for Clara.

Sometimes it was just a quick flash of her across the crowded quad, Clara with her dark hair loose for once, the sun catching the rims of her round glasses. Sometimes it was a quiet hour in the back corner of the library, sitting across from each other without saying a word, their sneakers accidentally brushing under the table.

It was enough. Honestly, it was more than enough.

At night, they talked on the phone.

Not every single night, but frequently enough that Nancy's day didn't feel entirely finished until Clara's voice had passed through it. Nancy would lie flat on her back, her phone pressed warm against her ear, staring up at the jagged crack in her ceiling while Clara talked about completely ordinary things. The art teacher's hands always being covered in charcoal. A woman in her apartment building who sang off-key while cooking pasta. A dog-eared fantasy book she was rereading for the third time, pausing to laugh quietly at lines that weren't even supposed to be funny.

Nancy just listened. Sometimes she'd answer, sometimes she'd just hum, letting Clara fill the room. Clara never pushed her to talk. The silence between them never felt empty; it just felt shared.

They only talked about Ruth once.

Nancy had dropped her name by accident, just a throwaway sentence about the new schedule with Andy, and Clara went totally quiet on the other end of the line. It was just a brief pause, but Nancy caught it instantly. Clara didn't say anything mean or weird, but her voice shifted. It tightened, just a fraction.

Nancy never brought Ruth up again.

On Wednesday night, the phone sat dark on the nightstand.

Nancy lay staring at her lamp, the yellow light pooling across her sheets. She could still hear Clara's laugh from earlier that afternoon. It had been a stupid joke about how Nancy scrunched up her nose when she was concentrating on a math problem, but Clara had laughed anyway, her whole face breaking open, her hand flying up to cover her mouth like she could trap the sound.

Thinking about it made something warm and heavy sink into Nancy's chest. She rolled onto her side, pulling the blanket all the way up to her chin, and buried her face in the pillow. It smelled like clean laundry detergent.

A soft, slow knock sounded at her door.

Nancy didn't move. The hinge creaked, the fabric of a robe whispered against the wood, and her mom stepped into the dim room. The mattress dipped as Nora sat down at the foot of the bed, her hands folded loosely in her lap. The lamplight caught the tired lines around her eyes, the faint yellowing of the bruise on her cheek.

"You awake, sweetheart?"

Nancy pushed herself up onto her elbows. "Yeah. I'm awake."

Nora studied her for a long moment, her eyes tracing Nancy's face. "You've been acting different this week."

Nancy's fingers curled into the sheet. "Different how?"

"Leaving before the sun's even up. Coming home right before dinner." Nora's voice was gentle, but there was a raw, careful edge to it. "It feels like you're avoiding this house."

"I'm not," Nancy said, a little too fast. She forced herself to take a breath. "I'm just... going through some stuff. School's a lot."

And then, entirely against her will, a smile pulled at the corners of Nancy's mouth. A real, unguarded smile.

Nora noticed immediately. Her expression softened, the tension leaving her shoulders. "Oh," she said, her voice dropping into something quiet and knowing. "That's good, then."

Nancy's face burned hot. She tried to look away, but Nora reached out, her thumb gently brushing over Nancy's knuckles. Her mom's hands were rough from years of dishes and stress, but her grip was incredibly soft.

"Do I get any details?" Nora asked.

"No. Absolutely no details."

Nora let out a low, genuine laugh. "Fair enough."

They didn't talk about Clara after that. They talked about Andy losing his favorite shoe, the new diner opening up downtown, and the time Nora tried to dye her own hair in college and ended up with orange streaks. Nancy felt her shoulders drop. Her breathing finally slowed down. It felt remarkably easy. Normal.

Eventually, Nora leaned over and pressed a warm kiss to Nancy's forehead. "Goodnight, sweetheart. Get some sleep."

Nancy watched the door click shut. The bedroom felt lighter. She sank back into the pillows, and for the first time in weeks, the quiet didn't feel like a threat.

By Thursday afternoon, things felt survivable.

Nancy leaned against the brick wall outside the art wing, her backpack dangling from one shoulder. She told herself she wasn't waiting, but her eyes kept tracking the sidewalk.

"Hey."

Clara's voice cut straight through the hallway chaos. Clean. Immediate.

Nancy turned. "Hi."

Clara tilted her head, her dark eyes evaluating Nancy behind her glasses. "You look nice today."

Nancy blinked. "I look like I do every day."

"No." Clara's mouth curved into that quick, wicked little smirk. "You only look nice on Thursdays. The rest of the time you look like you slept inside a laundry hamper."

Nancy bit her lip, trying and failing not to smile. "Wow. Thank you. I hate you."

"I'm just honest," Clara said.

“You’re rude.”

Clara stepped right into her space, slipping her arm casually around Nancy’s waist and pulling her into a brief, warm side-hug. “But I like you anyway.”

Nancy’s breath caught in her throat. She didn’t move away. She didn’t want to.

They didn’t go home after the final bell. They just walked, letting the afternoon stretch out, eventually ending up at the park. The ice cream line at the kiosk was entirely too long, the sun was surprisingly warm, and the air was thick with the sound of kids screaming on the playground.

They bought the exact same thing, mint chocolate chip, without even talking about it.

They found a bench beneath a massive, heavy oak tree that cast deep shadows across the grass. The ice cream was melting fast, dripping down the side of Nancy’s cone. She licked a drop off her thumb, completely distracted, watching a kid try to do a flip on the monkey bars.

“Hold still, you’ve got—”

Clara reached out. Her thumb brushed firmly against Nancy’s lower lip.

The touch lasted barely a second, but a sharp, electric jolt shot straight through Nancy’s chest. She froze, her eyes widening. She could still feel the exact spot, the precise warmth of Clara’s thumb, the terrifying softness of the gesture. It was a tiny thing, something that should have meant nothing, but it rearranged the air between them instantly.

Clara pulled her hand back down to her lap and took a bite of her own ice cream, her eyes fixed on the gravel path ahead. Like she hadn’t just done it.

“There,” Clara said. “Clean.”

Nancy swallowed hard. “Thanks,” she managed, her voice coming out a whisper.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” Clara asked after a long silence.

Nancy’s fingers tightened around her waffle cone. Tomorrow. Friday. She had spent the whole week explicitly not thinking about Friday, leaving the house before the sun came up specifically to avoid the reality of Ruth’s arrival. Tomorrow, she wouldn’t have school as an excuse to flee.

The ice cream suddenly tasted like cardboard.

Clara noticed the shift instantly. “Nancy? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Nancy forced out. She looked at her shoes. “It’s just... tomorrow I have to be home. With Ruth.”

The silence that followed was heavy.

Clara’s face didn’t change, but her fingers locked tight around her ice cream wrapper. Her shoulders went rigid. Then, like a curtain dropping, her expression smoothed into something bright and entirely fake.

“Well, you have to face your fears eventually,” Clara said. Her voice was too light. The smile didn’t touch her eyes at all.

Nancy’s stomach twisted with a sharp hit of guilt. The air between them had gone thick and uncomfortable. Clara kept her eyes glued to the path, her jaw set, her sneakers kicking at a loose pebble.

Nancy reached out, her fingers curling tightly around Clara’s forearm. She needed to anchor her, to pull her back before the distance got too wide.

“Just... be ready to answer your phone if there’s an emergency,” Nancy said, trying desperately for a joke.

Clara didn’t laugh. The silence after a failed joke is a horrible sound.

Nancy fumbled, her brain scrambling for the next thing. The right thing. “Maybe we could get lunch after? Tomorrow. Like... an actual lunch. Just us.”

Clara’s head snapped up. Her dark eyes searched Nancy’s face behind her glasses, wide, guarded, trying incredibly hard not to let herself hope too noticeably.

“A date?” Clara asked.

The word landed with a physical weight. Softer than a joke. It was an offer made with both hands open. Nancy hadn’t thought about it like that, it was just an excuse to escape her house, but seeing the look on Clara’s face made something inside her chest completely unfurl.

“Yeah,” Nancy said, her voice steady. “A date.”

Clara’s real smile returned. Slow, reaching her eyes, and staying there like sunlight breaking through heavy clouds.

“Okay,” Clara said, her grip on her napkin loosening. “It’s a date.”

It was enough to fix the damage. But as Nancy watched her, she knew it wasn’t enough to erase the phantom weight of tomorrow morning. Both things were completely true at the same time.

That night, Nancy couldn’t sleep.

She lay flat in the dark, her fingers tangled in her sheets, her mind a chaotic loop. Clara’s laugh. The warmth of Clara’s arm around her waist in the hallway. The sharp, terrifying prickle of her thumb against her lip. It felt safe. Solid.

And then, inevitably, Ruth.

Not a specific memory, just the presence of her. The low, confident cadence of her voice. The way the air in the living room completely changed shape the second she walked into it. The smell of lavender and burnt sugar that Nancy could conjure up in the dark without even trying.

Nancy pressed her palms hard against her eyes until she saw static. What the hell is wrong with you?

But beneath the panic, beneath the massive wall of guilt, a quiet truth finally surfaced. She didn't just want to run from Ruth. She wanted to see her. She wanted to stand in the same kitchen without her voice cracking or her body freezing up. She wanted to figure out who Ruth actually was when she wasn't too terrified to look.

She exhaled slowly, her hands dropping back to the mattress. She didn't know what this made her. She didn't have a name for it. But she was exhausted from running away from the question.

Maybe tomorrow she'd finally stand still long enough to hear the answer.

Morning came whether she wanted it to or not.

Nancy didn't leave early. She sat at the kitchen table, both hands wrapped around a mug of tea that had gone completely cold, her backpack resting against her chair.

Andy was chattering about a video game. Nora was moving around the stove. Everything was normal.

Until the pressure in the room shifted.

Nancy felt it before the door even opened, a sudden drop in the air, the way the kitchen feels right before a summer storm hits.

Then the scent arrived. Lavender, clean and sharp, and underneath it, the warm, distinct trail of caramelized sugar.

The screen door clicked. Ruth stepped inside, a pale sweater pushed up to her elbows, her dark hair a little messy from the wind. She set her keys on the counter and turned around, her green eyes locking straight onto Nancy.

"Oh," Ruth said, a small, knowing curve hit the corner of her mouth. "Good morning, Nancy."

Nancy didn't freeze. She didn't look down at the table. She met her eyes fully.

"Good morning," Nancy said.

Her voice worked. It was small, but it worked.

Chapter 9

The Date

The coffee shop was warm and slightly too loud, the kind of place that had been there long enough to stop trying. Mismatched wooden chairs scraped against the linoleum, and a chalk menu hung over the counter with half the specials rubbed out. Underneath the strong, sharp smell of espresso was the faint, heavy scent of something slightly burnt.

Clara was already sitting at the corner table by the window, both hands wrapped around a thick ceramic mug. Her round glasses were slightly fogged from the steam. When Nancy pushed through the glass door, the small bell chimed, and Clara looked up. Something in her face shifted, not surprise, just the quiet settling of someone whose waiting had finally ended.

Nancy crossed the crowded room and dropped into the mismatched chair opposite her.

“Took you long enough,” Clara said.

“Had to make sure I was worth the wait.” Nancy settled her bag on the floor and pulled at the sleeves of her gray sweater. “So. Who asked who out again?”

Clara didn’t hesitate. “You asked me. And you begged.”

“I remember it differently.”

“I’m sure you do.”

“I only asked,” Nancy said, leaning forward, “because I felt sorry for you.”

Clara’s mouth fell open. “Excuse me—”

“A charity date.” Nancy nodded with total seriousness. “Very noble of me.”

“You—” Clara pointed a finger at her, her cheeks turning a soft pink. “You are incredibly lucky I showed up.”

“Am I?” Nancy dropped her voice, her mouth twitching. “The jury’s still out.”

Clara sat back, crossing her arms, but the corner of her mouth was already giving her away.

“Unbelievable.”

Nancy grinned. “But you’re still here.”

“Against my better judgment,” Clara muttered.

The waiter appeared, clicking a cheap ballpoint pen over a notepad. Nancy picked up the laminated menu without opening it. “Caesar salad.” She glanced at Clara. “Same?”

Clara hesitated. It was a fraction of a second, barely visible, but Nancy caught it, the tiny, automatic pause that comes from a mental calculation. Checking prices. The automatic arithmetic that runs when

money isn't something you can afford to ignore.

"Same," Clara said.

Nancy set the menus at the edge of the table so the waiter could take them, moving the conversation along before the silence could draw attention to it. "And two black coffees." She looked back at Clara. "Unless you want tea?"

"Coffee's fine."

The waiter slipped away. Nancy reached for the sugar caddy in the center of the table, pulling out three white packets and arranging them into a perfect triangle on the laminate without thinking.

Clara watched her fingers. "You do that when you're nervous."

Nancy looked down at the paper packets. "I'm not nervous."

"The sugar says otherwise."

Nancy swept the packets to the side, flattening them with her palm. "The sugar is wrong."

Clara smiled, slow, private, the real one that reached her eyes. "Sure."

The food arrived, and the conversation found its own easy weight. Clara talked about her latest art assignment, charcoal portraits of inanimate objects, which she had taken as an invitation to sketch her grandmother's overflowing glass ashtray in excruciating detail. Nancy talked about Andy, who had successfully managed to talk Nora into a later bedtime through sheer, exhausting persistence. Then Clara pulled out a dog-eared fantasy book from her bag, the one with a faded dragon on the cover, and defended reading it for a fourth time with absolute seriousness.

Every so often, their hands brushed when reaching for the napkins. Their knees bumped under the narrow table. Nancy stole another sugar packet just to see Clara reclaim it with the focused intensity of someone defending stolen land.

At one point, Nancy noticed Clara's coffee mug was nearly empty. Without breaking her sentence, she caught the waiter's eye and gestured toward the cup. Clara didn't say thank you out loud, and Nancy didn't look for it. It was just an automatic thing.

Nancy realized, halfway through her salad, that this was the easiest hour she had lived through in weeks.

When the bill landed on the table, Nancy grabbed it first.

She didn't make a big deal out of it. She didn't make a speech. She just picked up the slip of paper, slid her debit card inside, and pushed it to the edge of the table before Clara could even unzip her bag.

Clara looked at the black folder, then up at Nancy.

"You got the empanadas at the curb," Nancy said simply, looking at her own hands. "Mr. Johnson's food doesn't count."

A pause stretched between them.

Clara didn't argue. She didn't offer a fake protest, which would have made it worse. She just looked out the window at the street, nodded once, and let it be what it was. Her jaw was set slightly, but her shoulders were relaxed.

Nancy tucked her card back into her wallet, her movements small and deliberate, and that was the end of it.

Outside, the air had cooled significantly, the sky turning a deep, bruised amber at the edges where the sun was dipping below the roofs. As they started down the sidewalk, Clara slipped her hand into Nancy's. It was unannounced and casual, their shoulders bumping companionably against each other as they walked.

"Where to?" Nancy asked.

Clara shrugged, her thumb rubbing against the side of Nancy's hand. "Just walk?"

So they did.

They wandered through the quieter residential blocks as the streetlights began to click on one by one. Clara talked about her grandmother Nany, how she made churros from scratch every Sunday morning, how the entire apartment would smell like cinnamon and hot oil, and how Clara used to stand on a kitchen chair as a kid just to watch the dough hit the pan. Nancy listened, her thumb tracing slow circles over Clara's knuckles, watching the way Clara's voice softened whenever she went backward into her memory.

They had been walking for ten minutes when Nancy said, without really planning the words first, "You know I almost didn't show up today."

Clara didn't look surprised. "I know."

"How?"

"Because you almost don't do most things." Clara paused, her grip tightening slightly. "And then you do them anyway."

Nancy considered that. "Is that a compliment?"

"It's just what I notice."

"Right. From the girl who spent two years working up the courage to hand a stranger a handkerchief."

Clara let out a sharp, surprised laugh. "That is completely different."

"Is it?"

"Yes." Clara bumped her shoulder against Nancy's. "Mine was strategic."

Nancy opened her mouth to say, 'But you love me,' ready to drop it as a joke, a piece of easy banter to keep Clara laughing. But the word stuck right at the back of her teeth. She didn't say it, and the

sudden absence of the phrase filled the small space between them like something physical.

Clara went slightly rigid beside her. She had felt the pause. She knew exactly what had almost been said.

Nancy cleared her throat, staring straight ahead at the pavement. “Strategic,” she repeated. “Right.”

Clara exhaled, her breath forming a tiny cloud in the cool air. Her hand didn’t loosen around Nancy’s. “Right,” she said quietly.

They kept walking.

It was completely dark when Clara finally stopped.

They were standing directly under a streetlamp at the corner of a quiet, tree-lined road, the yellow light pooling around them like a spotlight on the asphalt. Clara’s steps slowed to a halt, and she turned toward Nancy. Her free hand came up, her fingers curling tightly into the fabric of Nancy’s gray sweater.

“I want to tell you something,” Clara said. Her voice had lost all its lightness. The easy, teasing rhythm of the afternoon was completely gone, replaced by something heavy that had clearly been waiting for a long time. “But please—just let me say it. All of it. Don’t interrupt me.”

Nancy’s pulse shifted, a quick, steady thudding in her throat. She nodded.

Clara’s grip on her sweater tightened. “Promise me, Nancy.”

“I promise.”

Clara took a sharp, uneven breath. She looked down at their joined hands, then out at the dark street, then back to Nancy’s face.

“I was always no one,” she said. The words were small and entirely flat. “I was just lonely. And I knew that nobody around me would accept who I actually am if I said it out loud. I’ve known for a really long time. What I am. I’ve been carrying it around like a secret I had to hide, because every time I thought about telling someone...” She stopped, swallowing hard. “I know what I am, Nancy. I just haven’t been able to say the words until right now.”

Nancy held her breath, standing completely still under the yellow lamp.

“I’m not a normal girl who likes boys,” Clara said, her voice dropping into a rough whisper. “I like girls.”

The light caught the lenses of her glasses, turning them opaque for a second before she tilted her head and her dark eyes came back into focus.

“And I love you.”

Nancy felt her lungs freeze.

“I’ve loved you for a long time. Since before you even knew my name,” Clara said, her fingers

trembling against Nancy's arm. "I'm not asking you to say it back. I know where you are. I know your life is complicated right now. But please don't take these days away from me. Being with you is the only time in a long time that I've actually felt like myself."

Silence rushed into the street. A car passed a block away, its tires humming against the wet pavement. Someone's living room window was lit up across the road. The world was just continuing around them, totally indifferent.

Nancy didn't trust her own mouth. She knew if she opened it, whatever came out would be the wrong size, too big or too small, and either one would break something fragile.

So she didn't say anything.

She stepped forward, slid her arm around Clara's shoulders, and pulled her tight against her chest. She turned them both slightly so they were moving again, walking slow, Clara's head resting naturally against Nancy's shoulder. Nancy leaned down and pressed her lips to Clara's temple. Just once. Just a brief, quiet pressure.

Clara let out a long, ragged breath, her shoulders dropping as if she were finally setting down a heavy weight she'd carried for miles.

They walked like that for blocks, the streetlights blurring into lines of yellow gold through Nancy's eyelashes. Neither of them said another word, and neither of them needed to.

Eventually, they reached the corner where the neighborhood split. Clara's apartment building was three blocks to the left; Nancy's house was a mile to the right.

They stopped under the final awning.

Clara looked up at her. Her eyes were wide and dry. Whatever she had been carrying hadn't vanished, naming it didn't make it disappear, but it sat differently now. It looked less like a shameful secret and more like a plain, permanent fact.

Nancy's hands flexed at her sides, the cold air stinging her knuckles.

Clara reached up first, throwing her arms around Nancy's neck, burying her face into the collar of the gray sweater. "Thank you," she whispered, her voice low and rough. "For today."

She started to pull back, her hands sliding down Nancy's shoulders.

Nancy's hand shot out. Her fingers caught Clara's wrist, tugging her back into the space between them. Before her brain could talk her out of it, Nancy leaned down and pressed her lips directly to Clara's.

It was soft. Brief. Barely more than a second of contact, but it carried every single thing Nancy hadn't been able to find the words for all afternoon.

When they pulled apart, Clara's eyes were completely wide. Her lips were slightly parted, her face entirely open, no armor, no subtle smirk, no defense mechanics. Just Clara. Plain and unguarded.

They looked at each other in the dark. A slow, shy smile crept onto Clara's face, and Nancy felt her own mouth match it.

Then, without saying goodbye, they turned and walked in opposite directions into the night.

Neither of them was completely alone anymore.

Chapter 10

Two Shores

Not a memory, exactly. More like a residue, the specific, lingering warmth of Clara's hand, the harsh yellow ring of the streetlamp on the asphalt, the brief, soft press of a kiss that had lasted less than a second and somehow hadn't fully ended yet. She lay completely still for a moment, her fingers finding her own lips in the dark, pressing against them lightly.

The ghost of the touch was gone. The feeling wasn't.

She got up slowly, dressed without thinking, and went downstairs into the ordinary Saturday morning, the sharp smell of cheap coffee, the low hum of the fridge, Andy's sticky cereal bowl already sitting in the porcelain sink. The light through the kitchen window had that flat, slate-gray quality that meant the day had decided to be completely unremarkable.

Nancy sat at the table, clutching her phone, trying very hard not to be the kind of person who stared at a dark screen.

She stared at the screen anyway.

No messages. Nothing from Clara. Which was fine. Clara wasn't the type to send a text at eight in the morning; she let things breathe. She didn't crowd.

Nancy's thumb traced the edge of the glass case. She was so absorbed in trying to look unbothered that she didn't even hear the screen door click.

"You're going to wear a hole straight through that screen."

Nancy's thumb stuttered. She snapped her head up.

Ruth was already inside the kitchen. She had crossed from the back door to the counter in the span of a single heartbeat, reaching for the handle of the coffee pot with the casual ease of someone who had been navigating this room for years instead of days. She was wearing a pale, oversized sweater with the sleeves pushed up past her elbows. Her dark hair was loose, a little messy from the wind outside, as if she'd let the morning have a say in how she looked.

The scent arrived a second after she did. Clean lavender, and beneath it, warming up in the heat of the kitchen, that heavy trace of caramelized sugar. It was quiet this morning. Undemanding.

Nancy watched her hands as she poured, the way her fingers moved around the handle, certain and unhurried, the kind of hands that knew exactly what they were doing without having to think about it.

Nancy looked back down at her phone. "I wasn't staring at it," she said.

"Mm." Ruth turned around, leaning her hips back against the counter, holding the mug in both hands. She studied Nancy the way she studied everything, directly, without any performance. "You've got that look."

“What look?”

“Like you’re waiting for something and trying to convince yourself you aren’t.” A pause. Ruth’s green eyes stayed steady. Patient. “It’s a very specific look, Nancy.”

Nancy’s fingers tightened around the edges of her phone. She wanted to deflect. She had a sarcastic line ready to drop, but Ruth was looking at her with that particular, laser-focused attention, the kind that located your exact weak spot without even appearing to search for it, and the defense dissolved before she could use it.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Nancy muttered.

Ruth’s mouth curved. It was a warm expression, but it held something else, something that knew a lot more than it was letting on.

“Okay,” Ruth said.

Just that one word. Entirely unconvinced.

Nancy pushed her chair back and stood up. “I’m going upstairs.”

“Okay,” Ruth said again. Same tone. Same quiet certainty.

Nancy turned her back and left.

Her bedroom felt both too small and too large. She sat on the edge of her unmade bed with the phone in her lap, looking at Clara’s contact photo, a grainy, candid snapshot from last month where she was mid-laugh, her round glasses completely askew and her eyes bright.

Before her brain could fully authorize the decision, Nancy was hitting the call button.

It rang twice.

“Hey.”

Clara’s voice was soft, slightly rough around the edges from sleep. Nancy’s ribcage tightened significantly.

“Hey,” Nancy said. “I didn’t wake you, did I?”

“No. I was just reading.”

“At eight on a Saturday morning?”

“Some of us don’t just sleep through our feelings,” Clara said, and Nancy could practically hear the small smirk in her voice.

“I don’t—” Nancy stopped. She exhaled hard through her nose, staring at her sneakers. “I missed your voice.”

A heavy beat of silence stretched over the line.

“Yeah?” Clara asked quietly.

“Yeah.”

Another pause. Longer this time. The kind of silence that meant something fragile was being held carefully on both ends.

“I missed yours too,” Clara said.

Nancy pressed her free hand flat against her sternum, trying to steady the sudden thudding there.

They fell into it easily after that, the conversation finding its own natural current. Clara was reading through an old, battered poetry collection she’d found at a garage sale, the pages soft and yellowed with age. Without any warning or preamble, she just started reading one aloud, her voice steady in the morning quiet:

“I am a forest, and a night of dark trees—but he who is not afraid of my darkness, will find banks full of roses under my cypresses.”

The words hung in the air between them.

“It’s beautiful,” Nancy said.

“Yeah.” A pause. “It really is.”

The phrase landed differently the second time. Nancy felt it arrive in her chest and stay there, warm and slightly dangerous, the way things stay when they mean two entirely different things at once. She was suddenly acutely aware of her own heartbeat, of the distance between their houses, of wanting to reach straight through the phone line.

Something true was rising in her throat, something that had been sitting heavy in her chest since they stood under that streetlamp, since Clara’s voice broke on ‘I love you,’ since Nancy had pressed her lips to Clara’s mouth and felt her exhale like she was finally letting go of a breath she’d held for years.

She felt the words coming. She tried to hold them back. One breath. Two.

She couldn’t.

“I love you,” Nancy said.

The words fell into the silence like a boulder dropped into a still pond. Irrevocable. Not performed, not planned. Just out there, completely true, and impossible to drag back inside.

Clara’s breath caught. It was a sharp, sudden sound. “Nancy—”

“I didn’t mean to just blurt it out—” Nancy jammed her hand over her mouth. “I—”

“No,” Clara’s voice came back, fiercely steady now. “Don’t you dare take it back.”

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” Nancy whispered.

A pause followed, long enough that Nancy could hear the faint static of the line. But inside the

silence, something had shifted out of suspension. It wasn't a full resolution, but it was real.

"We'll figure it out," Clara said finally, her voice incredibly soft. "Okay? We'll figure it out."

Not 'it's okay.' Not 'I know.' Just 'we'll figure it out.'

Nancy let her hand drop from her face. "Okay."

"Just don't run away," Clara said.

"I'm sitting right on my bed."

"Good. Stay there."

Nancy pressed her forehead down against her knees. She could hear Clara breathing on the other end, regular and slow, and it was the most grounding sound she had ever heard.

"I'm here," Nancy whispered.

"I know," Clara said. "Me too."

When she finally hung up, her room was flooded with bright morning light. She sat in the middle of it.

The call had given her something real, something warm and solid. She could feel it sitting in her chest like an answered question.

And yet.

She sat with her phone cold in her lap, looking at Clara's contact photo, and the thought arrived quietly, without any drama, which only made it worse: This should be enough. So why isn't it?

She pressed her palms to her eyes until she saw stars, then got up, washed her face with freezing water, and went back downstairs.

The living room had completely rearranged its atmosphere around Ruth and Andy while Nancy had been upstairs. Andy was flat on the rug, explaining something about a comic book with massive physical commitment, his arms flailing. Ruth was sitting on the couch, her own book closed in her lap, her attention entirely locked onto him. She wasn't performing patience; she was just giving it to him, completely unhurried.

She looked up the second Nancy appeared in the doorway.

"Better," Ruth said.

Nancy blinked. "What?"

"You look better than you did an hour ago."

She said it plainly, an observation, not a question. Then she shifted her weight slightly on the cushions. She didn't explicitly invite Nancy to sit, but space appeared beside her on the couch anyway, the way a door opens without anyone touching the handle.

Nancy sat down.

Not because she made a conscious choice to, but because her body was apparently making its own decisions today, and this was one of them.

The cushion beneath her was warm. The scent was right there, lavender and burnt sugar, but it was different now. Domestic. Devoid of the sharp tension from the kitchen earlier. It felt almost comfortable.

Almost.

Andy immediately redirected his entire lecture toward Nancy without breaking stride, pulling her into an explanation of Arctic bird migrations. Ruth caught Nancy's eye over the top of his messy hair, a small, shared moment, the specific warmth of two people witnessing the exact same thing together, and Nancy felt something major shift behind her ribs.

It wasn't the terrifying, electric jolt she got with Ruth on the porch. It was something quieter. More complicated. The specific, dangerous feeling of wanting to know a person inside out.

"Can I ask you something?" Nancy said during a brief pause while Andy sucked in a breath to continue.

Ruth looked at her, her head tilting. "You can ask me anything."

There was no hesitation, no boundaries up. Just 'you can ask me anything.' Like Nancy's curiosity was already welcome before it had even declared itself.

"Why here?" Nancy asked, her voice low. "This town. This job. You could obviously work anywhere you want."

Ruth considered the question genuinely. Her green eyes moved to the window, watching the gray clouds, then came back to Nancy's face.

"I needed somewhere new," Ruth said.

"From what?"

"From the old." A small, tight smile hit her lips. "From staying somewhere past the point where staying made any sense."

Nancy held her gaze, refusing to let her slide out of it. "That's not really an answer."

"No," Ruth agreed completely. "It's not." She evaluated Nancy's face. "You're incredibly direct for someone who spends so much time being quiet."

"And you're incredibly evasive for someone who seems so certain about everything."

Ruth looked at her, and for a fraction of a second, the composed adult armor slipped. The warmth remained, but beneath it was the edge, the seeing-too-much quality that Nancy had felt on the porch and in the doorway. The quality that made Nancy feel like Ruth was reading lines she hadn't even

written yet.

“I was somewhere I didn’t belong,” Ruth said finally, her voice dropping into a lower register. “And I stayed way too long because leaving felt like admitting I’d lost.” She paused, her eyes locking onto Nancy’s. “Eventually, I understood that staying was the exact same thing. Just slower.”

Silence fell over the couch. Andy found the page he was looking for and loudly announced a fact about wingspans. The room breathed again.

Nancy sat with what Ruth had just said. She thought about her mother. Her father. Twelve years of two people staying in a broken house past the point where staying made any sense at all.

Then she thought, unexpectedly, of herself.

Clara says stay, she thought. Ruth says leave. What does Nancy say?

She didn’t have an answer.

Ruth set her empty coffee mug down on the side table. Her hands, Nancy noticed them again, moved with total efficiency, entirely comfortable in their own skin.

“First love is a bizarre thing, isn’t it?” Ruth said.

Her voice was quiet, almost like she was talking to herself. But her green eyes snapped to Nancy’s immediately after, and they stayed there, just a beat too long, warm and carrying something that felt entirely unclinical. Something that came from the absolute inside of an experience.

Nancy’s pulse shifted hard. “What?” she managed.

“You came downstairs looking like someone who just landed after a long, terrifying fall,” Ruth said softly, holding her gaze. “I recognize it.”

I recognize it.

Not ‘I’ve seen it before.’ Not ‘I remember how kids get.’

I recognize it.

Nancy felt the words land heavily in her gut.

“The first time I finally figured out what I actually wanted,” Ruth said, her voice barely a murmur into the room, “I didn’t have a word for it either.” A pause. Then, almost gently: “It gets easier. For what it’s worth.”

She stood up in one fluid motion, calling Andy’s name toward the hallway, and left the room.

Nancy sat completely alone in the living room with the flat morning light, the smell of cold coffee, and something massive moving through her. It wasn’t panic, or the electric current, or the porch graze. It was something much quieter and more permanent. The absolute beginning of a question she hadn’t even known she was asking.

What does Ruth know?

What has she lived through?

What is she not telling me?

Nancy knew she should go back upstairs. She should retreat to her room and close the door.

She didn't. She stood up, walked into the hallway, and went into the kitchen to help them make lunch.

Chapter 11

Between Mornings

Nancy started coming downstairs early.

She didn't think about it too hard, at least not the first morning. She just didn't leave. She made tea she didn't particularly want, sat at the kitchen table with her backpack already zipped, and checked the time on her screen without actually processing what the numbers said.

She was waiting.

She told herself it was nothing. The bus schedule had changed, or maybe she just wanted to beat the morning traffic. That was all.

She stood up, sat back down, and watched the steam rise from her mug in thin, twisting lines.

The front door clicked.

Ruth stepped into the kitchen, brushing a loose strand of dark hair back from her face as she crossed straight to the sink. The scent arrived a split second later, lavender and that deep, underlying trace of caramelized sugar, familiar now in a way Nancy refused to closely examine.

"Good morning, Nancy."

"Morning."

Nancy was already reaching for her bag. Too quickly.

She forced herself to slow the movement down. Ruth watched her handle the straps, that laser-focused attention landing on her without making a big production out of it.

"You're still here," Ruth observed.

"I have time."

"Mm."

Ruth turned on the faucet, washed her hands, and dried them methodically on a kitchen towel. She reached into the cabinet for the chipped mug, always the chipped one, and poured her coffee with the unhurried certainty of someone who didn't need to perform ease because ease was just her default state.

Nancy stood by the table, completely still.

"You're going to be late," Nora said, rushing through the kitchen with her own travel mug and her mother's eyes that never missed a single detail.

"I won't," Nancy muttered.

She didn't move.

The next morning, she came down even earlier. She sat longer. She stopped pretending, even to herself, that she wasn't waiting for the sound of those keys at the door.

By the third morning, Ruth finally called her on it.

She had just walked in, her bag barely touching the counter, when she looked over at Nancy sitting there with her lukewarm tea, her packed bag, and her shoes already laced up tight. She said it without any preamble, without any cruelty, just with that terrifying, quiet accuracy that defined how she moved through the world.

"You're waiting for me now?"

Nancy kept her eyes glued to her mug. "I'm waiting for the bus."

"Of course you are."

Ruth's voice was soft, almost indulgent. The words accepted Nancy's excuse completely while believing absolutely none of it.

Nancy grabbed her bag and left, but the weight of that tone followed her down the porch steps. It clung to her skin like the morning dampness and stayed right there with her while she stood at the bus stop in the thin, early light, trying to remember how to breathe at a normal pace.

School compressed itself into meaningless fragments that week. Heavy locker doors slamming, fluorescent lights humming, half-heard history lessons, it all just blurred past without leaving a mark.

The only thing that felt sharp was Clara.

During first break, Clara was already there, leaning against the lockers outside the art room. She was just waiting, unbothered by the chaos around her. Nancy felt a massive wave of relief hit her chest the second her eyes found her.

They stood too close in the hallway. Neither of them took a step back to fix it.

"I love you," Clara said.

It wasn't a grand confession or a dramatic declaration. It was quieter than that, a pulse check, like pressing a finger against a fresh bruise just to see if it still ached.

Nancy felt it land deep. "I love you too."

Clara nodded once, satisfied, and turned back to her locker. The dial spun with a sharp metallic tick, tick, tick.

Yes. It was still there. Still real.

Lunch was harder. Or better, Nancy still hadn't figured out which.

They sat side by side at their usual corner table by the window, their knees touching under the laminate, the pale sunlight pooling in uneven patches over their lunch trays. Clara's hand found Nancy's wrist once, then twice, brief, warm touches that sent a sudden shiver straight up her arm.

Their shoulders stayed angled toward each other the entire hour without either of them acknowledging it.

Clara leaned in a little closer, her eyes dropping to Nancy's collar. "You smell different."

Nancy's hand froze halfway to her mouth. "Do I?"

"Yeah." Clara leaned in a fraction more. She wasn't touching, just close enough to catch the air. "Softer."

Nancy knew exactly what it was. Her mom had thrown a load of Ruth's laundry in with theirs. It was Ruth's detergent. From the borrowed sweater she'd grabbed out of the dryer without thinking.

She should say something. She should explain it.

Instead, Nancy just took a massive bite of her sandwich, too fast, not even tasting it, and kept her eyes locked on the tray. She could feel Clara watching her.

Clara waited.

Nancy took another bite, chewing deliberately.

"Never mind," Clara said.

She said it too easily. That was the part that made Nancy's stomach twist.

"Okay," Nancy murmured, nodding too quickly.

The rest of the hour passed the way it always did, conversations about assignments, small physical contacts, the comfortable shorthand they had built over the last few weeks. But underneath the noise, the thing they weren't naming sat right between their trays like a third person at the table.

Nancy felt it there the entire time.

Thursday came like something inevitable.

"You're coming over, right?" Clara asked, slinging her bag over her shoulder as they walked toward the heavy front doors of the school. The afternoon light was slanting gold across the concrete.

Nancy hesitated. It was just a fraction of a second, barely a hiccup in her stride, but it was there.

"Yeah. Of course."

Clara's smile was immediate and bright. Like it mattered. Because it did.

Clara's apartment building felt different to Nancy now. Less like a foreign territory she was exploring, and more like a place that existed without demanding anything from her in return. Mr. Johnson was sitting out on his folding chair by the kiosk, his hands grease-streaked from some project, already grinning when he saw them approach.

"The famous Nancy," he called out.

"I'm not—"

“You are here, so you are famous,” he corrected simply.

Clara laughed and pulled Nancy through the main door before she could argue the point.

Inside the apartment, Nancy didn’t ask any questions. She just assessed them with one sharp, direct look from the stove and made her decision.

“You look thinner,” she muttered to Nancy. “Sit down. Eat.”

Nancy sat. A plate appeared in front of her before she’d even finished pulling her chair under the table. They were pastelitos, hot, sweet, the pastry shattering into flakes under her fingers. She ate way more than she intended to. Clara watched her from across the table with quiet satisfaction, sliding another one onto her plate without making a big deal out of it.

“You see?” Clara said softly.

Nancy nodded. She did.

The kitchen was incredibly warm. The radio played low in the background, some old, slow bolero that Nancy hummed along to, slightly off-key and completely unbothered by it. The wooden table was heavily scarred from years of use. On the wall, a slightly crooked frame held a photo of Clara as a kid, gap-toothed, her father’s arm wrapped around her small shoulders.

Nancy looked at the photo for a long moment. This was a real life. Worn down, warm, and rooted in something solid. It was absolutely nothing like her own house.

She looked away.

Clara’s room received them with its familiar, amber-lit quiet. The blue walls felt dark and protective, the corkboard dense with sketches and evidence of a life being deliberately constructed piece by piece. The door clicked shut, and the silence that followed wasn’t awkward at all. It was the kind of quiet that held things rather than emptying them out.

Nancy sat on the edge of the mattress. Clara dropped down right beside her, close enough that their thighs pressed together. Neither of them adjusted the distance.

“You’ve been different this week,” Clara said, her voice dropping.

Nancy looked down at her own knuckles. “Different how?”

“Like you’re not always entirely here.” Clara’s voice was gentle, but her dark eyes were completely steady behind her glasses. “Like part of you is somewhere else, and you’re being very careful not to say where.”

Nancy felt the words hit her hard. Way harder than she expected. She thought about the laundry detergent. She thought about sitting in the armchair in the dark. She thought about Ruth saying ‘you’re standing differently’ on Monday morning, a detail she had explicitly kept to herself. She hadn’t mentioned any of the mornings to Clara.

“I’m here,” Nancy whispered.

Clara's fingers brushed against hers, then laced through them. "Not always all of you."

Nancy swallowed hard. She could lie. It would be incredibly easy, a lie by omission, a quick deflection, the same way she'd managed the sandwich at lunch.

She looked at Clara's face and realized she couldn't do it.

"I know," Nancy admitted.

Saying it was worse. Because it was true, and because Clara just heard the admission and didn't push her for an explanation. She just held Nancy's hand tighter and waited, and that massive amount of patience felt like its own kind of heartbreak.

"Did I scare you?" Clara asked quietly. "The things I said last week. Under the light."

"No."

"You didn't run away."

"I told you I wouldn't."

Clara studied her face, taking her time, completely unhurried. Then, barely above a breath, she said, "Say it again."

Nancy didn't hesitate for a single second. "I love you."

Clara closed her eyes. Just for a moment, her shoulders dropped, and she let out a long exhale, like she'd been holding that breath since they stood on the street corner. When she opened her eyes again, she was closer.

The kiss was slow. It wasn't uncertain or tentative; it was just careful. Like something that mattered too much to rush past. Clara's hands found Nancy's waist, and Nancy's fingers curled tight into the fabric of Clara's sweater, anchoring herself to the mattress.

Nancy didn't think about the kitchen. She didn't compare the scents. She didn't ask herself any questions. She just stayed entirely inside the touch.

When they finally pulled back, they didn't separate. They stayed forehead to forehead, breathing the exact same air, the small string of lights throwing a warm amber glow over the bed while the city went quiet outside the glass.

"We're really doing this," Clara whispered against her mouth.

Nancy didn't answer. She didn't need to.

Outside, the evening air felt cleaner. Cooler. Clara walked her halfway home, their shoulders bumping companionably, their hands brushing whenever they passed a dark stretch between the streetlamps. The lights were clicking on down the blocks as the sun dropped behind the rooflines.

"Tomorrow?" Clara asked when they reached the corner where their paths split.

Nancy paused. There it was again, that tiny, sharp fraction of a second where her brain stuttered.

“Yeah,” Nancy said. “Tomorrow.”

Clara nodded. It looked like she noticed the pause, but she didn’t call her out on it.

Nancy watched her walk away, the loose bun at the nape of her neck, the easy, unhurried certainty of her stride, until she turned the corner and vanished. Then Nancy turned toward her own street, her fingers still tingling from where Clara had been holding them.

And underneath the warmth, quiet and entirely unwelcome, the thought surfaced again: This should be everything.

She pressed her lips together and kept walking.

Friday morning was heavier. Fuller.

Nancy came downstairs early, exactly like she had every other day that week. She made her tea and sat at the table, her hands wrapped tight around the ceramic mug.

She waited. She didn’t even try to pretend she was doing anything else.

Nora passed through the room on her way to the hall, giving Nancy a look that wasn’t quite a question and wasn’t quite a comment, but was entirely a mother’s look. Nancy ignored it with the absolute precision of someone who had years of practice.

Then—the back door.

The sound of the hinge was tiny, barely a whisper. Ruth stepped into the kitchen, her hair slightly damp from a shower. She was wearing a different scent today, something clean and sharp, replacing the usual heavy lavender. She moved straight to the sink, turned the faucet, and rinsed her hands with methodical precision.

Then her fingers reached for the chipped mug.

She paused when she saw Nancy sitting there. Her head tilted just a fraction of an inch.

“You’ve had a good week,” Ruth said. It wasn’t a question.

Nancy’s chest tightened instantly. “What makes you say that?”

“You’re standing differently.”

The words landed the exact way Ruth’s words always landed, unhurried, precise, and completely certain of their own accuracy. Nancy almost smiled.

Almost.

Andy shattered the quiet before it could build into anything else. He barreled into the kitchen, his sneakers squeaking loudly against the tile, holding a lopsided clay project in both hands with the gravity of someone presenting a fragile diamond. Ruth shifted her weight seamlessly, her entire

attention moving to him. She was warm, present, and totally focused on whatever he was telling her.

Nancy sat back and watched them. Again.

A few minutes later, Nora called Andy out to the hall to grab his backpack, leaving the kitchen completely quiet. Just the two of them.

Ruth leaned her hips against the counter, holding her coffee mug, and looked across the table at Nancy with that massive, unhurried patience.

“Go on,” Ruth said easily.

Nancy frowned. “What?”

“You’ve been composing a sentence since the second I walked through that door.”

Nancy kept her eyes on her cold tea.

“You always do that,” Ruth continued, her voice low. “You arrange exactly what you want to say before you say it out loud. Which is usually smart. But sometimes, Nancy, the thing you actually wanted to say never gets arrived at.”

Silence flooded the space between the table and the counter. She was right. Nancy knew she was right.

Nancy looked up, meeting her green eyes fully. “You don’t know me well enough to say that.”

“Maybe.” Ruth wasn’t bothered by the defense at all. “Am I wrong?”

A long pause stretched out.

“No,” Nancy admitted quietly. “You’re not.”

Ruth took a slow sip of her coffee, her gaze never wavering. “You’re standing in two different places right now.”

Nancy felt the words hit something very specific and very accurate behind her ribs. “Which one is real?”

Nancy didn’t answer. She couldn’t.

“You have to choose,” Ruth said simply.

“What if it’s the wrong choice?”

“Then you learn what wrong feels like,” Ruth said, her voice entirely devoid of judgment. “And then you choose again.”

It was too simple. Too true.

Nancy looked at her properly, at the tiny smudge of flour on her wrist from God knows what, at the chipped ceramic mug held firmly in both hands, at the absolute ease of how she occupied the room without trying to be anything other than exactly who she was.

“I should go,” Nancy said, though she didn’t move.

“You should.”

Neither of them stirred.

“Nancy,” Ruth said as Nancy finally gripped her backpack strap.

Nancy stopped.

“First love looks good on you,” Ruth said, her voice dropping into something softer, almost gentle.

“Don’t let anyone take that away from you.”

A beat of silence followed.

“Not even yourself,” Ruth added.

Nancy turned her head, her jaw tightening. “Why do you even care?”

Ruth didn’t hesitate. “Because nobody said it to me when I was your age.”

It was finished. Plain.

Nancy turned and walked out of the kitchen, heading up the stairs. She wasn’t running away this time, and she wasn’t retreating. She just needed to sit in a quiet room for five minutes before she could move forward into the rest of the day.

She sat on the edge of her unmade bed and looked up at the jagged crack in the ceiling. It was still there, obviously. Still growing in that slow, completely invisible way that cracks always do.

She let the entire morning just sit inside her without trying to arrange it into neat little sentences.

Clara’s voice, soft and certain over the phone: ‘We’ll figure it out.’

Ruth’s voice, quiet and steady against the counter: ‘You have to choose.’

Both of them were true. Both of them were sitting right there in her chest. Neither of them was finished.

Nancy lay back against the mattress, staring up at the plaster, and just let herself exist right in the dead center of the choices. It was the hardest thing she had learned to do all year.

Chapter 12

Holding

Nancy couldn't settle.

The yellow lamplight pooled across her unmade bed in uneven patches, catching the frayed, spiral edges of her sketchbook where it lay open and forgotten on the mattress. She stared straight up at the ceiling, at the jagged crack above her head, still branching, still growing in that slow, invisible way that cracks always do—and let Ruth's words move through her without trying to block them.

It belongs to you, whatever it is.

You'll get it wrong.

I'm here, aren't I.

She exhaled sharply through her nose, her fingers curling into the fabric of her pajama pants. There was something genuinely infuriating about the way Ruth looked at her. It wasn't just that she saw the surface; she saw the messy, contradictory, terrified things underneath. The way she'd noticed Nancy standing differently, as if Nancy's body had already started leaning toward a choice before her brain could even catalog the movement.

Nancy rolled onto her side, pressing her face deep into the pillow.

The scent was there. Faint. Almost entirely gone.

It was Ruth's laundry detergent. Still. From the borrowed shirt she'd worn days ago, from a moment of not thinking.

She breathed it in once before she could stop herself. Then she lay completely still, her stomach tightening into a hard knot as Clara's face materialized behind her eyelids, soft, warm, the exact way she'd looked in her amber room with the evening sun turning her round glasses into two golden circles.

You're here, but you're not.

And Nancy hadn't been able to deny it.

Her phone buzzed against her palm, the vibration rattling against the mattress.

Clara's name was bright on the glass.

Nancy stared at the glowing letters for three seconds before sliding her thumb across the screen.

I miss you.

A heavy, aching warmth spread through her chest instantly. She tapped her screen, typing back without a single second of hesitation:

miss you too my dear Clara my dear Clara 'dþ

The heart emoji felt entirely true, but it also felt completely insufficient. Like a tiny band-aid pressed over a wound that was still actively bleeding. She rubbed her thumb against the glass screen.

The three dots appeared almost immediately.

what are you doing

Nancy's fingers stilled over the keyboard. The cursor blinked rhythmically against the white background.

thinking

A pause. Then:

of me

She could hear the exact cadence of Clara's voice in the text, quiet, firm, the way it always got when she was digging for something real, refusing to let Nancy hide behind a polite phrase.

honestly?

Nancy's breath hitched in her throat. She could lie. She probably should lie. But Clara had a bizarre way of hearing the cracks in words, the exact same way a musician could isolate an off-key note in a loud room.

no

The single word sat between their screens. Heavy. Absolute. Nancy pressed her free hand flat against her sternum, trying to keep her chest from dropping.

and what are you doing

thinking

Clara's reply came back fast, almost amused:

Fair

Nancy's mouth twitched into a small, reluctant smile. She could perfectly picture Clara's half-smirk right now, the way her glasses would be catching the yellow light of her room.

Then, after a long beat:

love you

The words landed on the screen like a balm, soothing and stinging at the exact same time. Nancy's vision blurred slightly. She typed:

how did your friday go

She stared at the sentence, then hit delete until the box was empty. She typed something else, then

erased that too.

Finally, she sent:

We talked. she is friendly.

The dots pulsed. Stopped. Pulsed again. Clara was choosing her vocabulary carefully now, the way you move when you're trying not to startle something wild in the woods.

Nice

Nancy's stomach twisted with a sharp hit of guilt. She could easily end the conversation here. She could let Clara fill in the blanks with whatever narrative made her feel safe. But the dishonesty was a live thing, squirming under her skin.

but she is not you

The screen stayed completely still. No dots appeared. No reply came back.

Nancy's pulse roared in her ears, loud enough to fill the quiet bedroom.

Then:

do you want her to be

The question was a clean, precise knife.

Nancy's fingers flew across the glass:

no never

you are the light of my life no one can be you

She hit send, and the exact second the bubble turned blue, she felt both the absolute truth and the complete inadequacy of the statement simultaneously. Clara's reply was instant.

smart answer

Nancy let out a long breath, a shaky laugh escaping her throat.

I know

The dots appeared one last time. Disappeared.

see you

see you

She fell asleep with the phone clutched tightly in her palm, her lips curved just enough to hold the memory of the text.

The next morning, the winter sun slanted through the kitchen window, turning the chipped edge of the laminate countertop into a solid line of gold. Nancy poured herself a glass of orange juice, the thick

pulp catching slightly in her throat. Nora was standing at the stove, flipping pancakes with a metal spatula that had seen better decades. The rich, heavy scent of butter and warming syrup wrapped around the kitchen, thick and incredibly sweet.

“You’ve changed a lot this week, sweetheart,” Nora said, not looking up from the pan. “You’re glowing.”

Nancy’s fingers tightened around the glass. “I’m good.”

Nora turned around, her dark eyes catching the direct sunlight. “Just good?”

Nancy traced the rim of her glass with her thumb, watching the juice swirl. “Maybe I’m just starting to see things better.”

Before Nancy could pull back, her mother’s hand reached out, her fingers catching Nancy’s cheek. Her palm was calloused from work, but her touch was remarkably warm against Nancy’s skin.

“You’ve always been smart, sweetheart,” Nora said softly.

Nancy didn’t pull away. She leaned into the touch, just for a second, letting the quiet familiarity of it ground her.

The syrup on the stove hissed loudly as a drop ran down the side of the pot. Outside in the yard, Andy’s laughter rang out, bright, loud, and entirely unburdened by anything. For the first time in months, the house didn’t feel like a place that was actively holding its breath.

The rest of the weekend unfolded like a gift Nancy hadn’t known she was allowed to open.

They played Scrabble at the kitchen table on Saturday afternoon, Andy cheating shamelessly by sneaking glances at the dictionary whenever he thought Nancy and Nora were distracted. Nora made popcorn in the old, noisy air popper, the kernels rattling like hail against the plastic lid, and they watched a movie in the living room with the volume turned up way too loud, the exact way Andy liked it. Nancy found herself laughing at things that weren’t even funny, her ribs aching from the sheer physical relief of it.

At one point, Nora reached across the couch cushion and laced her fingers through Nancy’s, her rough palm holding on firmly.

“This is nice,” her mom murmured into the dark room.

Nancy squeezed back, her eyes fixed on the television screen. “Yeah. It really is.”

It was more than nice. It felt like a solid bandage pressed over a wound that had been open for years.

Monday arrived with the heavy, inevitable weight of routine.

Nancy was standing at the kitchen window earlier than usual, her backpack already slung over one shoulder, her breath fogging the cold glass pane.

Earlier than she needed to be. Earlier than made any logical sense.

She told herself it was just a habit now. That it didn't mean anything specific. That she was simply a person who liked to be downstairs before the sun fully cleared the trees.

She was still telling herself this when Ruth rounded the corner of the sidewalk, her dark coat moving slightly in the sharp morning breeze. She was early today. Much earlier than usual.

Nancy's pulse jumped into her throat. She didn't look away from the glass.

The front door clicked open. Closed. Heavy, deliberate footsteps sounded in the hallway.

Nancy turned around just as Ruth leaned her shoulder against the kitchen doorway, one dark eyebrow arched.

"Missed me?" Ruth asked.

"Not really."

Ruth's mouth curved into that slow, familiar smirk. "Still lying, I see."

She moved past Nancy toward the counter to grab the coffee pot, close enough that Nancy caught the scent of her instantly. It was warm, clean, but slightly different from the heavy lavender of last week, as if even Ruth's mornings had their own subtle variations. She reached for the chipped mug, poured the dark liquid, and turned around to face the table.

Their eyes met across the small kitchen.

"Good weekend?" Ruth asked.

"Yeah," Nancy said, keeping her voice level. "It was actually really good."

Ruth held her gaze for three long seconds. Something shifted in her expression, not the knowing smirk, not the evasive edge, just a small, entirely genuine piece of recognition.

"Good," Ruth said simply.

She took her mug and moved toward the living room, heading toward Andy's room to start the morning.

Nancy stood alone at the counter, listening to the quiet retreat of her footsteps down the hall. Then she let out a long, heavy breath she hadn't known she was holding.

The next few days found their own sharp shape.

Mornings belonged to Ruth, her quick, quiet smiles, her direct glances, the way she'd drop a sentence that was entirely too accurate and then move on to Andy before Nancy could assemble a defense. The kitchen filled every day with the smell of coffee, clean laundry, and whatever the weather decided to be outside the glass.

On Tuesday morning, Ruth arrived to find Nancy attempting to scramble eggs and burning the butter in the pan.

“Move,” Ruth said, stepping straight into her space.

“I know how to make eggs.”

“You’re burning them.”

“I’m caramelizing them,” Nancy countered, refusing to drop the spatula.

Ruth looked down at her hand on the handle, then up at her face, her green eyes inches away. She stayed there for a long beat, completely still. Then she took the spatula out of Nancy’s fingers without another word and fixed the pan with the total efficiency of someone who had never ruined a meal in her life.

Nancy watched her from the opposite side of the island. “You’re incredibly annoying.”

“Because I’m competent?”

“Because you’re always right.”

Ruth slid the eggs onto a clean plate and handed it across the counter. “You’ll get over it.”

Nancy ate the eggs. They were significantly better than anything she had ever made herself. She didn’t say a word about it, but Ruth’s mouth curved anyway, like she’d heard the admission clear as a bell.

Evenings belonged to Clara.

Her voice was a soft, steady hum through the phone line, her sudden, real laughter warm in Nancy’s ear. The way she’d say ‘love you’ at the end of a call like it was the simplest, most natural phrase in the world, because for Clara, it was. Clara had made her choice, she had said the words out loud under the streetlamp, and now she simply lived inside that truth without ever second-guessing herself.

Nancy was trying to learn how to do that. Slowly.

On Wednesday night, Clara read her another poem from the yellowed book—something about two parallel rivers that ran through the same valley for miles before finally finding a single point to merge. Nancy lay flat on her mattress in the dark, listening to the cadence of Clara’s voice, feeling the warmth of it settle deep into her bones. When Clara finished reading, a long silence followed, but it wasn’t uncomfortable. It was the kind of quiet that only exists when two people don’t feel the need to fight the space.

“Still there?” Clara asked softly into the phone.

“Still here,” Nancy whispered.

“Good.” A brief pause. “You sound different tonight, Nancy.”

“Different how?”

Clara considered it. “More settled. Like you finally put something heavy down.”

Nancy thought about that. She thought about the Scrabble game. About her mother's hand on her cheek. About Ruth fixing her breakfast on a Tuesday morning and choosing not to tease her about it.

"Maybe I have," Nancy said.

"Good," Clara whispered. "You've been carrying way too much for a long time."

Nancy existed right in the narrow space between them.

Between Clara's protective warmth and Ruth's sharp precision. Between the girl who saw her clearly and the woman who looked right through her defenses. Between the feeling she completely understood and the feeling she still didn't have a single safe word for.

She was stretched thin, but she wasn't breaking. Not yet.

In the evenings, Clara would ask about her day, and Nancy would tell her the small, true details, the way the afternoon light hit the tall windows of the art wing, the specific joke the history teacher made before the bell, and she would carefully leave out every single moment that belonged to the kitchen. Those moments she kept pressed tightly between her ribs, a secret she was still trying to hide from herself.

It was a fragile, dangerous balance. For now, the threads held.

But as she lay there in the dark, listening to the steady rhythm of Clara's breathing through the speaker, Nancy was starting to understand a terrifying truth: holding onto two shores isn't the same thing as choosing where to stand.

Chapter 13

The Lunch

Nancy woke up already dreading it.

Not the day itself, but the sheer math of it. She lay flat on her back, staring at the ceiling crack, letting the anxiety settle into a very specific shape: Ruth would be downstairs in a matter of minutes, doing her job, being completely inescapable, and Clara was arriving at noon.

What the hell were you thinking?

She forced herself out of bed before her brain could answer.

The kitchen smelled like buttered toast and that sharp, underlying citrus scent of Ruth's coffee. Andy was already at the island, his elbows planted directly in a small puddle of spilled orange juice, a heavy picture book splayed open between him and Ruth. His small finger was tracing a snow leopard rendered in pale watercolors while Ruth leaned in, her dark hair spilling over her shoulder, explaining how the artist had captured the texture of the fur.

Nancy's boots faltered right on the threshold.

"Good morning," she said. Her throat felt completely dry.

Ruth turned around, the low winter light catching her high cheekbones. "Slept late. That's a good sign."

Nancy's fingers found the edge of the counter, gripping it. A good sign. As if sleep could fix anything that was about to happen today. "I guess," she managed.

And then her eyes dropped, and she saw what Ruth was wearing.

A skirt. Short, not the loose trousers or the long, heavy linen dresses she usually wore around the house. The hem hit mid-thigh, the dark fabric clinging just enough to show the exact shape of her hips. Her legs were long, bare, and entirely real, and Nancy's brain completely jammed, producing one single, panicked thought: Why today? Of all the mornings that have ever existed, why did she have to wear that today?

"Drinking coffee today?" Ruth observed, her green eyes evaluating Nancy's face. She didn't mention the way Nancy's hands were shaking as she reached for a mug. "That's a new development."

Nancy let out a short, hollow laugh. "Think I need it today."

"I wouldn't mind joining you for another cup." Ruth stood up, not immediately, but a second later than she usually did, and crossed over to the coffee pot.

Nancy watched her move and felt her pulse climb into her throat. She gripped the edge of the laminate island until her knuckles turned white.

Clara is coming at noon.

Clara was going to walk through that front door, look at this woman, and understand the entire timeline of why Nancy had been so detached all week. It would be written right across Nancy's face, because it was apparently already there, visible to anyone who knew how to look. And Clara, Clara who noticed the people nobody else saw, would read it in a single second.

This entire lunch was a massive mistake.

"Nancy." Ruth's voice was quiet, stripped of the morning lightness. She had turned around from the pot, holding her mug, looking right through Nancy's defenses. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing." Too fast. Too thin. "Really."

Ruth studied her face for two long beats. She didn't push. She just let out a small exhale through her nose—a quiet concession—and turned back to her coffee.

The kitchen felt suffocatingly small. The air was too thick, and Nancy's heavy gray sweater suddenly felt like it was choking her.

"I need some air," she blurted out, her voice cracking. "Going outside."

Andy's voice floated up from his picture book, sweet and entirely oblivious: "It's literally freezing outside, Nance."

And Ruth—damn her—let out a real laugh. A low, warm, unguarded sound that wrapped right around Nancy's ribs like a hand closing tight.

Nancy grabbed her denim jacket off the wall hook and practically threw herself out onto the front porch, the freezing winter air hitting her face like a physical reprimand. She stood there, chest heaving, forcing the cold air into her lungs.

It's fine, she told herself, staring at the empty driveway. Clara is brave. Clara said yes. It's just lunch.

The cold didn't make the lie any more believable, but it helped her breathe.

The doorbell rang exactly at noon.

Nancy jolted upright from the living room couch, her charcoal pencil rolling off her sketchbook and disappearing onto the rug. Her heart was immediately pounding in her ears. From across the room, Ruth's green eyes tracked her, that quiet, laser-focused attention, but Nancy refused to look back.

She reached the front door in three long strides, pulling it open.

Clara was standing on the welcome mat. Her dark hair was slightly unraveling from its loose bun, her cheeks flushed pink from the wind, her round glasses fogged at the edges. She looked small against the backdrop of the gray street. She looked entirely like herself, smelling of old paper, dried herbs, and the distinct warmth of someone who had decided to be brave and was actively doing it.

"Clara," Nancy said, her voice a little too loud. "You're here."

Clara offered a careful, quiet smile. “You said noon.”

“Yeah. Yeah, come in.”

Clara stepped inside, wiping her sneakers on the mat. The familiar, grounding scent of her drifted into the entryway, and Nancy held onto it like a lifeline.

Then Ruth walked out of the living room.

She moved with that effortless, unhurried grace, the hem of her skirt swaying slightly with her stride, and Nancy watched Clara see her for the absolute first time, watched the exact second Ruth’s full, heavy presence landed in Clara’s expression. It wasn’t just that Ruth was beautiful; it was the total ease of her. The way she occupied the space without even trying.

Ruth smiled, warm, genuine, completely unperformed, and reached out. “Hi, Clara. It’s really nice to finally meet you.”

Clara’s fingers twitched against her sides. She took Ruth’s hand. “You too.”

A heavy beat of silence settled into the hallway.

Then Clara spoke, her voice quiet and completely devoid of packaging: “You’re... more than what I expected.”

Ruth tilted her head, her auburn hair shifting. “Oh?”

Clara’s grip tightened around the strap of her bag. “Nancy talked about you. A lot.” She paused, her dark eyes evaluating Ruth behind her lenses. “You look like someone who has never once in her life doubted herself.”

The words landed raw and unedited in the middle of the hallway. Ruth blinked, genuinely surprised for a fraction of a second, before her expression settled into something softer and entirely careful.

“That’s very kind of you to say,” Ruth said.

“And you’re beautiful,” Clara added flatly.

Nancy felt her stomach completely drop. The honesty was too loud, too unshielded.

Clara’s face flushed a bright, immediate crimson. “I—I didn’t mean to just blurt that—”

But Ruth was already moving, smoothing over the spike in the room with the total ease of someone who knew how to handle charged atmospheres. “I’ll go make us some tea,” she said, her skirt shifting as she turned toward the kitchen. “Chamomile or Earl Grey?”

Clara blinked, clearing her throat. “Chamomile. Thank you.”

Nancy let out a long, ragged exhale.

By the time Ruth returned carrying three steaming mugs, the tension had loosened just enough to breathe. The sweet, floral scent of chamomile moved through the living room, layering directly over

the faint trail of lavender and caramelized sugar that simply lived in the house whenever Ruth was there. Clara cupped both hands around the hot ceramic, her shoulders dropping half an inch.

Ruth sat back in the armchair. Andy wandered in a second later, carrying his snow leopard book, and within four minutes, he and Clara were deep in a hyper-focused conversation about apex predators that required absolutely nobody else's participation.

Nancy sat back, watching them from the couch. Then her eyes drifted across the coffee table.

Ruth wasn't watching Clara's face; she was watching Clara's hands. The careful, steady way her small fingers held the mug, like she was protecting something that mattered. It wasn't the way Nancy watched Clara, it wasn't that tight, aching warmth. It was more assessing. The look of an adult taking the exact measure of a person who mattered to someone they cared about.

Then Ruth's green eyes flicked up, catching Nancy's gaze.

The look she gave her wasn't the knowing smirk. It wasn't the evasive edge. It was something completely quiet that said: I see her. She's good. I understand why you needed me to see her.

Nancy looked away first, her chest tightening.

"I need to go spend some quality time with your brother," Ruth announced, leaning over to ruffle Andy's messy hair. "So excuse me, young ladies."

Nancy seized the opening instantly. She reached out and grabbed Clara's hand, pulling her up from the cushion. "We're going up to my room."

Ruth's smirk returned, slow and incredibly wicked.

"Behave," Ruth said lightly. Her green eyes stayed locked onto Nancy's face for half a second longer than the joke actually required.

Nancy's face burned hot. "Excuse me—"

"Just don't make a mess," Ruth grinned, her eyes catching Nancy's with that warm, dangerous challenge before she turned back to Andy.

Clara let out a surprised, bright laugh, and Nancy practically dragged her toward the hallway with her heart hammering against her ribs, her mind a chaotic blur of Ruth's legs, Clara's hand, and the terrifying realization that they were all surviving the room.

The bedroom door clicked shut behind them.

Clara turned around immediately. Before Nancy could even set her bag down, Clara whispered, "She is absolutely gorgeous."

The total admiration in her voice was unmistakable, bright, unguarded, and completely real. Like someone who had seen something spectacular and couldn't immediately manage their own defense mechanisms.

Nancy kept her back to her for one second, staring at her desk, before turning around. "I didn't really notice."

Clara's eyebrows shot up near her hairline. "You didn't notice?" She took two steps closer, tilting her head the way she did when she was analyzing a sketch. "Nancy. She looks like a person who has never once been uncertain about a single thing in her life. How do you even live in the same house as that?"

"She's just Ruth," Nancy muttered, her voice entirely devoid of conviction. She sat down heavily on the edge of the mattress.

Clara didn't follow her right away. She took in the bedroom first, the half-empty bookshelves, the moody stormy sea print on the wall, the desk overflowing with sketchbooks. "You have a nice room," she said softly.

Nancy let out a dry laugh. "It's freezing. It's not cozy like yours."

Clara paused, then walked over and sat down right next to her on the mattress. She sat close, their knees pressing together, the solid warmth of her body seeping straight through Nancy's jeans.

"It's not cold," Clara said quietly.

She reached out and took Nancy's hand in both of hers, her small fingers holding on firmly. She lifted Nancy's knuckles to her mouth, pressing her lips against the skin, holding them there for a long, heavy beat.

"I'm sorry," Clara whispered against her fingers. "For yesterday. At the park."

Nancy went rigid. "You didn't do anything wrong, Clara."

"Yes, I did." Clara's thumb moved slowly over the back of Nancy's hand. "I've watched you for a really long time, Nancy. And in my head, I always told myself I didn't have a chance. But watching you made me see exactly what kind of person you are. You're sweet. You're honest. You're kind." Her voice hitched slightly. "That's the only reason I found the guts to hand you that handkerchief. And since then, I promised myself I'd do anything just to be near you. I swore I'd never hold you back or be an obstacle." She swallowed hard, her eyes bright behind her glasses. "Yesterday, I was selfish. I'm sorry."

Nancy listened, her throat completely locked. She didn't interrupt. The raw, unedited honesty coming from Clara was like holding her hands too close to an open flame, it burned, but she couldn't look away from it.

When Clara stopped talking, the quiet in the bedroom felt completely full.

Nancy stood up, crossing over to her bookshelf. Her fingers searched behind a row of paperbacks until they found a small, square glass object she'd hidden there months ago. She walked back to the bed and held it out.

"Hold this," Nancy said.

Clara took it carefully, her fingers tracing the black base. "What is it?"

"What do you see?"

Clara turned it over in the light. "Nothing. It's just clear glass."

"Turn it upside down."

Clara flipped it. The exact second the heavy black base was on top, the internal liquid shifted, a massive ripple of deep blues, vibrant reds, and fine swirls of gold drifted slowly downward through the glass, filling the frame with abstract, living color. The shades bled into each other like a sunset caught inside a jar.

"Amazing," Clara breathed, her eyes reflecting the colors. "It's beautiful."

Nancy sat back down right beside her, their shoulders locked together. "That's exactly what you did to me," she said, her voice small. She gestured toward the glass. "I was just that. Empty. Clear. And then you turned me completely upside down."

Clara set the glass object carefully onto the nightstand. Then she reached up, her hands cupping Nancy's face, her thumbs moving softly over her cheekbones.

She leaned in and kissed her.

It lasted longer than the ones before. Softer. It wasn't an interrogation or a demand; it was just entirely present. Nancy's hands found Clara's waist, her fingers bunching the fabric of her sweater, pulling her closer until the distance was entirely gone. The kiss deepened, slow and completely unhurried, like the first real drink of water after a long, dry march.

Clara pulled back just an inch, her forehead resting against Nancy's.

"What?" Nancy murmured, her eyes still closed, her breathing ragged. "Am I a terrible kisser?"

Clara let out a low, warm laugh. "How am I supposed to know what a good kisser is?" She leaned back enough to force Nancy to look at her. "You're literally the first and only person I've ever kissed."

Nancy's eyes snapped open. She stared at her. "What?"

Clara just nodded, her cheeks turning pink again.

Nancy burst into a bright, startled laugh, the pure shock of it breaking the heavy tension cleanly. Clara joined her, their shoulders shaking together on the edge of the bed, their laughter filling the small room until Ruth's voice floated cleanly up the stairs:

"Pizza's here, kids!"

Clara's dark eyes lit up with sudden, absolute mischief. She stood up quickly, tugging on Nancy's hands to drag her out of the room. "Oh, I have a fantastic idea. Let's go downstairs and ask Ruth to judge. Who's the better kisser."

Nancy's face exploded in heat. "Shut up. Do not say that."

"She's an adult, she must have some experience—"

"Clara, I swear to God, don't you dare," Nancy hissed, but Clara was already laughing, pulling her through the doorway and down the hall.

Ruth was leaning against the kitchen counter, holding a triangle of pizza, her green eyes immediately filling with total amusement when she saw them come down the stairs. Andy was already at the table, his mouth completely full, crumbs dusting his chin.

"Here come the lovebirds," Ruth said smoothly.

Nancy's face burned, but Clara just squeezed her fingers tight and pulled her straight to the table.

"This is significantly better than her cooking," Clara noted, gesturing toward the pizza box.

Ruth's eyebrows shot up. "What cooking?" She let out a fake gasp. "She can't even fry an egg without starting an international incident."

Nancy shot Clara a warning look, but Clara just smiled back, innocent as anything.

Ruth's gaze drifted between the two of them, warm, assessing, taking in the joined hands, and the corner of her mouth lifted. "Hidden messages," she murmured, more to herself than to them. She didn't press. She just slid into the chair next to Andy and pointed at the box. "Eat before it gets cold."

They sat down and ate. The conversation moved easily after that, talking about school, about Mr. Johnson's weird habit of giving Clara extra churros for free, about the art project Nancy had been actively avoiding for two weeks. Ruth listened to all of it, chiming in with advice on how to keep a houseplant alive without killing it, moving through the conversation with the total ease of an adult who knew exactly how to make space for people rather than taking it over. She was completely effortless.

Nancy watched Ruth's fingers handle her crust, and after a moment, without looking up, Ruth shifted her grip slightly, acknowledging the watch without calling attention to it.

Nancy looked away, focusing on her food.

After lunch, Ruth herded Andy upstairs for his mandatory afternoon nap. The exact second the sound of their footsteps faded down the upper hall, Clara turned to Nancy with absolute intent.

Nancy didn't hesitate. She closed the distance instantly, her hands locking onto Clara's waist as their mouths met.

This kiss was entirely different from the ones before. It was hungrier. Fast. Clara's fingers tangled tight into the hair at the back of Nancy's neck, and Nancy's hands slid up the smooth fabric of Clara's shirt, pulling her body flush against her own. The living room couch creaked heavily under their shifting weight, the entire world narrowing down to the sharp flavor of tomato sauce, Clara's mouth, and the tiny, ragged sounds she was making—

A floorboard creaked loudly near the stairs.

Nancy jerked backward so fast she nearly tripped over her own boots, landing hard in the armchair across the room. Clara blinked, her eyes dazed, quickly smoothing down her skirt and sitting with entirely unconvincing primness on the edge of the cushions.

Ruth stepped into the living room doorway.

Her smile was completely knowing. There wasn't a single detail she hadn't computed.

She didn't take the empty chair across from them. Instead, she walked over and sat down right next to Clara on the couch, close, her hip pressing directly against Clara's, close enough that the dark fabric of their skirts overlapped on the cushions. Nancy's fingers dug into the wooden armrests of her chair until her nails clicked.

Ruth leaned slightly toward Clara, her voice low, but completely audible in the quiet room.

"You two have a really beautiful thing going on here," Ruth said softly. She paused, her green eyes steady. "Don't let anything—or anyone—ruin it for you."

Clara snapped her head around, her movement instinctive. Their faces were suddenly inches apart, their noses nearly brushing in the space above the couch, Clara's dark eyes wide behind her glasses.

Ruth held the proximity for one full, heavy second longer than necessary.

And Nancy watched, from across the living room, her hands locked white against the armrests, as Ruth's green gaze dropped, just once, brief and absolute, to Clara's mouth.

Then Ruth pulled back. She stood up smoothly, smoothing her skirt down.

"I should probably get going," Ruth said, her voice returning to its normal, unhurried cadence, as if she had decided the room had reached its absolute limit.

She collected her bag from the hallway hook, said a quiet goodbye to Nora who was coming through the back door, and left. The front door clicked shut.

Nancy sat in the armchair and didn't move an inch. She didn't know exactly what she had just witnessed, but she knew, with terrifying certainty, that she had seen something permanent.

Nora arrived fully as the afternoon sun started dipping below the roofline, her keys jingling loudly as she let herself in. She froze for a second when she saw Clara sitting on the couch, then her tired face opened up into a genuine smile, and she crossed the living room, pulling Clara into a tight hug before Nancy could even announce her name.

"You must be Clara," Nora said, stepping back but keeping her hands warm on Clara's shoulders. She studied her face with that frank, direct mother's attention. "I feel like I already know you. She talks about you entirely differently than she talks about anyone else. I noticed. I'm her mother; I notice things."

Nancy's face went completely crimson.

Clara just beamed back at her.

“You’re going to have to come back here,” Nora said, already turning toward the kitchen to start dinner. “It’s been entirely too quiet around this house lately. A home shouldn’t be this quiet.”

When it was finally time for Clara to head home after dinner, Nora tossed her car keys across the kitchen to Nancy. “Take mine. The right headlights work better in the dark.”

The drive back to Clara’s neighborhood was quiet at first. The dashboard lights threw a faint green glow over the wheel. As soon as Nancy shifted into third gear, Clara’s hand found her thigh, her fingers warm and solid through the denim.

“She’s a really great person,” Clara said softly, looking out at the passing streetlamps. “Your mom. She’s mature. Kind. Beautiful.” She paused, her thumb rubbing against the jeans. “Honestly, she’s really attractive.”

Nancy’s grip tightened around the steering wheel until the plastic groaned. “Oh. So you like her.”

Clara’s hand squeezed her thigh firmly. “Yeah, Nancy. I really like her.”

Then she leaned across the console, pressing a warm, lingering kiss directly to Nancy’s shoulder.

“But I love you.”

Chapter 14

The First Days of Summer

The first morning without school didn't feel like freedom.

It just felt like something had been abruptly removed. Nancy stood in the kitchen for a long time, her hands resting flat against the edge of the island, the cool wood grounding her while the rest of the house sat in a strange, unfamiliar quiet. No alarm had gone off. No doors had slammed. No rushed footsteps had pushed her into the day. The hours stretched out in front of her, wide and completely unstructured, and for a moment, she didn't know where to put herself inside them.

The coffee maker gurgled softly, filling the silence with something ordinary and dependable. Steam curled upward from the pot in thin, wavering lines.

Ruth was already there.

She was leaning against the counter as if she had always belonged in that exact square foot of space, one hip resting lightly against the wood, her fingers wrapped loosely around a mug. She wore a light summer dress, pale fabric that looked almost translucent where the morning sun hit her shoulder. It moved when she moved, clinging just enough to suggest the shape of her body without ever fully giving it away.

Nancy noticed before she could tell her brain to stop looking. The sharp line of her collarbone. The way the fabric shifted when she breathed. The slow, absent way her thumb traced the rim of the ceramic mug.

Nancy turned around too quickly, reaching for the toaster. The bread slid into the slots. She hit the lever down with way more force than the machine needed.

Behind her, Ruth let out a quiet breath that might have been a laugh.

"Careful," she said, her voice low and unhurried. "The toaster hasn't done anything to you."

Nancy huffed under her breath, staring at the heating coils. "It started it."

"Of course it did."

The toast popped up way too soon, pale and disappointing. Nancy swore softly and pushed the lever right back down, her fingers lingering on the plastic knob as if she needed the mechanical resistance, something simple and small she could actually control.

Ruth didn't move. She didn't offer a follow-up comment. She just stayed exactly where she was. Present. Like the low hum of the refrigerator. Like the steady warmth of the room. Nancy could feel her existence without even looking.

When the toast finally came up properly, golden and crisp, Nancy buttered it slowly, focusing entirely on the small grounding motions, the drag of the knife, the melting yellow squares, the salt on her

tongue.

Ruth reached past her to grab the sugar bowl.

Her bare arm brushed right against Nancy's. Just for a split second.

It shouldn't have meant anything. Nancy's breath caught in her throat anyway.

There was the faintest pause—almost imperceptible—before Ruth continued, moving as if absolutely nothing had happened, stirring a spoonful of sugar into her coffee once, then twice.

"You're quieter today," Ruth said.

"It's early."

Ruth hummed, entirely unconvinced, but let the subject drop.

By the third morning of the break, the quiet had settled into something else. Not emptiness. Just space.

Nancy started noticing things she'd been too rushed to catch before. The sound of Ruth's bare feet moving across the kitchen tiles. The way she leaned when she stood, never fully still, always shifting her weight. The way she didn't look at Nancy directly whenever she knew Nancy was watching her.

Or maybe she did, and simply chose not to acknowledge it. That specific possibility stayed with Nancy way longer than it should have.

On Thursday evening, the light was going a deep gold through the kitchen window. Nancy reached up for a clean glass on the high shelf at the exact same moment Ruth reached past her for a bowl behind it. They both stopped. Their arms were nearly touching, the distance between them precise and entirely charged, neither of them moving for one long beat.

Then Ruth took what she needed and stepped back.

Nothing was said. Nothing needed to be. But Nancy stood at the counter for a minute after, her hand still raised in the air, and understood that the week had been accumulating something she didn't have a single safe word for. Small moments. Constant proximity. The specific awareness of another person's body in a shared house.

She went up to her room and pulled out her phone to text Clara.

miss you

The reply came back fast.

miss you more. tomorrow?

Nancy's fingers flew over the keyboard.

tomorrow. and saturday. come for the whole weekend.

A pause followed.

are you serious

yes

Another pause, longer this time.

ok

Just that one word, but Nancy could feel the weight of it through the screen.

The park felt like something familiar she could step back into without having to think about it.

Clara was already sitting on their usual bench under the oak tree, her sketchbook open on her lap, her pencil moving in soft, deliberate lines. The sunlight filtered through the leaves above her, catching in her dark hair and reflecting off the edge of her glasses.

Nancy felt the tight pressure in her chest loosen the second her eyes found her.

Clara looked up and smiled, and everything shifted right back into its proper place.

“You’re late,” Clara said, though there wasn’t a bit of accusation in her voice.

“You’re early.”

“I’ve been here ten minutes.”

“Like I said. Early.”

Clara laughed, snapping her sketchbook shut. “You will pay.”

Nancy didn’t stop moving when she reached the bench. She leaned straight in and kissed her, soft, familiar, and immediate. Clara’s hand came up to catch Nancy’s wrist, holding her there for a second longer, grounding the touch. Grounding them.

When they pulled apart, Clara was still smiling. “Hi.”

Nancy let out a long breath. “Hi.”

They sat close together, their shoulders locked, their legs angled toward each other automatically. Clara unpacked two sandwiches from a brown bag, their fingers brushing as she handed one over. This time, Nancy didn’t pull her hand back. Clara didn’t either.

The days slipped into one another, warm, long, and uneven.

Clara was working more shifts at the bookstore now, so her messages usually came later, scattered between her hours.

miss you

still at work

the customers are completely insane today

Nancy would read them, smile faintly at her screen, and type back.

miss you too

come over later?

Sometimes Clara could make it work. Sometimes she couldn't. But whenever she did, the sharp edges of the house softened again. They would fall onto the living room couch or into Nancy's bed, dissolving into quiet laughter and slow conversations that stretched late into the night. Clara's head would rest against Nancy's shoulder, Nancy's fingers tracing absent, thoughtless patterns along her bare arm.

"Stay," Nancy said once into the dark, the word escaping before she could stop it.

Clara lifted her head, something quiet and thoughtful flickering behind her glasses. "I can't. Not tonight, Nancy."

Nancy just nodded, but the word stayed behind in the room long after Clara left.

At home, the atmosphere had shifted again. Not visibly, not in a way her mother or Andy could point to, but it was there. In the way Nancy lingered in rooms. In the way her attention split into two shores, even when she didn't mean it to.

And in the way Ruth sometimes paused whenever she caught Nancy watching her, not stopping what she was doing, not calling her out, just a slight slowing of her movements, a quiet awareness. As if she knew exactly what Nancy was doing and had chosen to file it away for later.

One afternoon, Ruth made a pot of tea without being asked. She set a steaming mug right beside Nancy's sketchbook on the kitchen island without a word, then sat down across from her and opened her own book. They stayed like that for an hour, completely silent. It should have been nothing. It felt like a massive gift Nancy had been handed without knowing she needed it.

When Ruth finally stood up to head downstairs to Andy's room, she paused on the threshold.

"You know," she said, her back to the room, "college isn't the end of anything."

Nancy looked up from her sketch. "What?"

Ruth glanced back over her shoulder. Her green eyes moved briefly to the NYU acceptance letter that was still taped to the wall near the hallway, where it had been since January. "It just changes the shape of things," Ruth said, her voice steady. "That's not the same thing as losing them."

She walked down the hall before Nancy could assemble an answer.

Nancy sat in the quiet kitchen, staring at the white envelope.

September. Six weeks.

She had spent months explicitly not looking at that timeline, the exact same way she'd learned not to look at a lot of painful things. But Ruth had just looked directly at it and named it, the way she named

everything, quietly, without any cruelty, and without asking for permission first.

Six weeks.

Nancy reached out and touched the edge of the paper. Whatever was happening in this house—with Ruth, with Clara, with herself, had exactly six weeks left before the shape of everything changed forever. She had been living as if they had all the time in the world. They didn't.

Saturday arrived too fast.

The afternoon unfolded slow, the way good summer afternoons always do, plates of food passed between hands, real laughter rising and falling, the sunlight moving across the backyard in long, warm stripes. Clara was there, completely folded into the space right beside Nancy on the porch, easy and certain.

Andy thundered out to show Clara his latest project, an elaborate, hand-drawn map of an imaginary country with mountains named after his favorite junk foods. Clara studied the marker lines with total seriousness, pointing to a blank spot and suggesting that a river called the Chocolate Run would significantly improve the eastern region. Andy completely agreed, his face lighting up, and ran inside to grab his brown marker.

Ruth watched them from the kitchen doorway, a damp dish towel held in her hands. For a fraction of a second, her expression went completely unguarded, warm, soft, the look of someone witnessing something genuinely good.

Then her green eyes moved to Nancy. Nancy looked away first.

The rest of the afternoon carried them easily, and for a little while, nothing felt complicated. Clara was right there. The light was perfect. Andy's real laughter filled the rooms. It felt almost simple.

Until the evening.

Until Nora, wiping her wet hands on a towel after dinner, said it casually, like it was the most ordinary thought in the world: "Clara, honey, it's getting late. You should just stay the night."

Nancy's breath stopped completely in her lungs. Clara went totally still on the couch.

"I don't want to impose, Mrs. Harrison," Clara said automatically.

"Nonsense," Nora smiled. "Nancy can just share her room. There's plenty of space."

Nancy's pulse was suddenly everywhere, too loud, too fast, thudding in her ears.

"Right, Nance?" Nora asked, looking over.

Nancy forced her voice to come out steady. "Right."

Clara looked right at her. Not quickly, not shyly. Directly. Something powerful passed between their eyes, sharp, electric, and completely undeniable.

"You don't have to if you don't want to," Nancy said, her voice dropping into a quieter register.

Clara's gaze dropped briefly to Nancy's mouth, then snapped back up to her eyes. "I know."

A heavy pause hung in the living room.

"Stay," Nancy said.

This time it wasn't casual. It wasn't light. The word meant everything.

Clara inhaled softly through her nose, her shoulders dropping. Then she nodded. "Okay. I'll stay."

The house went quiet around them an hour later. Doors clicked shut, lights dimmed, and the entire world narrowed down until it held only Nancy's bedroom, the mattress, and this one specific moment that neither of them could step away from now.

Clara sat on the edge of the bed, her hands folded loosely in her lap, though her fingers kept shifting against her skirt, betraying her nerves. Her round glasses rested on the nightstand, and without them, her dark eyes looked larger, deeper, searching the dark room in a way that made Nancy's chest tighten significantly. There was no shield now. No distance left. Just Clara.

Nancy stayed by the bedroom door for a second longer than necessary, her back pressed flat against the wood. It felt like crossing the room meant crossing a line she'd never be able to undo.

Then she moved. Slow.

Clara looked up as Nancy approached the mattress. "Hi," she said, her voice softer than before, like the word itself was fragile.

Nancy stopped right in front of her knees. "Hi."

The silence stretched, but it wasn't empty. It was completely full of every single thing that had been building between them for weeks, every almost-touch, every paused breath in the hallways, every time they had stopped themselves just before a line became something more.

"I don't really know how to do this," Clara whispered, her eyes wide.

Nancy let out a small breath, a tiny, quiet sound that didn't quite turn into a laugh. She lowered herself onto her knees directly in front of Clara, her palms settling gently on Clara's lap, grounding both of them.

"Neither do I."

Clara's hand lifted from her side. It hovered for a fraction of a second near Nancy's jaw, uncertain, and then her fingers touched the skin. Light. Just her fingertips tracing the bone, as if she were testing whether Nancy was real, whether she would lean into the touch or pull her face back.

Nancy leaned right into her palm.

Clara's breath caught sharply. "Is this okay?" she whispered, though she didn't move her hand.

Nancy didn't answer with a word. She turned her head just an inch and pressed her lips directly against the inside of Clara's wrist, right where her pulse was fluttering, quick and completely

unsteady. She felt the skin jump under her mouth.

Clara made a tiny, involuntary sound against the quiet—soft, ragged—and her other hand came up, her fingers finding Nancy's hair. She wasn't pulling; she was just holding on, anchoring Nancy right there.

Nancy rose up from her knees, slowly, giving Clara all the time in the world to stop her if she wanted to. Clara didn't move an inch.

Their mouths met again, but this time, it wasn't the quick, careful softness from before under the streetlamp. It lingered. It deepened without any force or urgency, just a quiet, absolute certainty that neither of them took a step back from.

Clara's hands moved first. Deft. Careful.

She touched Nancy like she was learning a new language, her shoulders, the line of her collarbone, the way her back curved whenever she breathed out. It wasn't rushed, and it wasn't unsure. It was entirely attentive, as if every tiny reaction from Nancy's body was a detail that mattered.

Nancy felt that attention move through her like a wave. The way Clara adjusted her grip, subtly, the exact second Nancy's breath changed. The way she paused, not out of fear, but out of absolute awareness.

Nancy's own hands found Clara's waist, feeling the deep warmth of her skin through the thin fabric of her shirt, her thumbs brushing slowly, almost absentmindedly, as if she needed to confirm this was happening. Clara's breath hitched hard at the pressure, and Nancy felt the shift, holding her tighter, staying right there.

Learning her.

Clara pulled back just an inch to look at her face. Her dark eyes were deeper now, completely steady in a totally new way.

"I love you," Clara said. No buildup. No hesitation.

Nancy felt the last wall in her chest completely give way. "I love you."

And this time, when their mouths came back together, the hesitation didn't vanish, but it changed. It wasn't fear anymore; it was pure care. It was the total awareness that this moment mattered too much to rush past and lose.

Clara's fingers slid deep into her hair again, firmer now, and Nancy's hands moved with total certainty too, no longer hovering or questioning every inch of skin. They followed pure instinct, guided entirely by the quiet responses between them—the shift of breath, the soft, ragged sounds neither of them tried to hide in the dark anymore.

Time completely loosened its grip on the bedroom.

There was no clear line between one moment and the next, just closeness building into something

warmer, something that felt less like a discovery and more like recognition. Like they had been moving toward this exact bedroom for months. Like they had finally arrived on the same shore.

At one point, Clara's fingers found Nancy's hand again, lacing tight between her fingers, holding on with a firm grip when everything else felt too new and too overwhelming.

Nancy squeezed back hard. Not to steady Clara, but to steady herself. And Clara understood anyway.

Afterward, they didn't move much.

Clara lay tucked securely against her side, her head resting right below Nancy's shoulder, her fingers still loosely holding Nancy's hand, as if the concept of letting go hadn't occurred to her yet. Their breathing slowly found the same even rhythm, but the warmth between them didn't fade. It settled into the mattress.

Nancy stared up into the dark, her fingers moving absentmindedly through Clara's loose hair, slow, careful, memorizing the exact weight of the moment. For the first time all year, she felt entirely inside her own body—warm, held, and certain in a way she hadn't known she was missing.

Clara shifted slightly against the sheets, pressing closer without waking up, her warm breath hitting Nancy's neck.

Nancy closed her eyes, pulling the blanket over them.

This. Exactly this.

Chapter 15

The Last Days of Summer

The first light of dawn crept through the gap in the curtains, painting a thin, pale gold stripe straight across the pillow beside Nancy.

She lay completely still. Her breath was shallow, her fingers curled lightly against the edge of the cotton sheet. The warmth of Clara's body radiated against her side, steady, solid, and real. This was the first time she had ever woken up right next to someone, really next to them, close enough to count the dark lashes fanning Clara's cheeks, close enough to see the way her lips parted slightly with each quiet exhale. A lock of Clara's hair had come completely loose from its usual bun, spiraling over the pillowcase like ink unspooling in water.

Nancy didn't move an inch.

She didn't want to disturb the quiet, didn't want to break the spell of this moment where the world outside the glass didn't exist. The house was dead still, the specific kind of stillness that comes before anyone else stirs, before the floorboards groan underfoot or the kettle begins to whistle in the kitchen. She studied Clara's face, the soft dip of her temple, the way her brows twitched now and then as if she were dreaming something just out of reach.

Her chest ached. Not with the sharp, acidic sting of guilt this time, but with something heavier. Something that settled into her ribs like a held breath.

She reached out, her hand moving slow, her fingertips hovering just above Clara's shoulder before she finally let herself make contact, the barest graze, like testing warm water. Clara shifted against the mattress, a low murmur escaping her throat, and Nancy pulled her hand back instantly. But Clara only turned her face deeper into the pillow, her breathing unchanged.

Nancy let out a quiet breath.

She wanted to memorize this. The exact weight of the morning air. The scent of Clara's skin. The way the early light caught the fine, soft hairs along her bare arms.

This room had absolutely no lavender in it. No particular, heavy presence at the edges of things. Just Clara, entirely, completely Clara, and the quiet morning, and Nancy's own heart, which felt, for once, like it was located somewhere she could actually reach.

A bird called outside, sharp and insistent from the yard. Clara's dark lashes fluttered. Her small fingers twitched against the sheet, then stilled. Nancy watched as her eyes opened, unfocused for a fraction of a second, then locking straight onto Nancy's face. A slow smile curved Clara's mouth, sleep-soft, lazy, and entirely unguarded.

"Hi," Clara whispered, her voice rough and dry from sleep.

Nancy couldn't trust her own mouth to speak. She only nodded, her throat tightening.

Clara stretched, her shoulders rolling back against the mattress. “What time is it?”

“Early.” Nancy’s voice came out huskier than she intended. She cleared her throat. “Nobody’s awake yet.”

Clara hummed, her dark gaze drifting over Nancy’s face like she was tracing a sketch. Then she reached out, her fingers brushing Nancy’s collarbone, light as a moth’s wing. “You’ve been watching me.”

It wasn’t a question.

Nancy didn’t deny it. Instead, she leaned in, moving slow, giving Clara all the time in the world to pull away if she wanted to. Clara didn’t move an inch.

Their lips met, but differently than last night. Softer. Much slower. Like they had all the time in the world left. Clara’s hand found Nancy’s waist, her thumb pressing into the curve of her hip, and Nancy shivered under the blanket.

They broke apart quickly when a floorboard in the hallway creaked, Nora, probably, starting her morning routine. Clara’s cheeks flushed pink, but she didn’t look away from Nancy’s eyes. “We should probably get up,” she murmured.

Nancy didn’t move. “We have time.”

Clara’s laugh was quiet, breathless. “Your mother is definitely making breakfast. She’ll notice if we’re late to the kitchen.”

“She’ll just think we were talking.”

“About what?”

Nancy didn’t have a single answer for that. She just kissed Clara again instead, deeper this time, until Clara’s fingers tightened firmly in the fabric of Nancy’s sleep shirt.

When they finally pulled apart, Clara’s round glasses were askew on the nightstand. She pushed them back up her nose with the heel of her hand, her smile crooked. “You’re bad,” she muttered.

Nancy grinned, giddy and incredibly light, and rolled out of bed to grab Clara’s clothes from the desk chair. She tossed them onto the mattress, then turned her back to give Clara privacy, though she could still hear the soft rustle of fabric, the quiet hitch of Clara’s breath as she pulled her shirt on. Nancy pulled on her own clothes, yesterday’s jeans, a shirt with the hem completely wrinkled, and when she turned back around, Clara was watching her, her fingers paused on the middle button of her blouse.

“What?” Nancy asked, suddenly self-conscious.

Clara shook her head, her dark eyes completely soft behind her lenses. “Nothing. Just... you.”

Nancy’s face went warm. She looked away first, busying herself with pulling the sheets straight. “We should go down.”

Clara finished buttoning her blouse. “Yeah.”

They moved toward the bedroom door together, but Nancy hesitated, her hand hovering over the brass knob. Clara bumped her shoulder lightly. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Nancy turned the handle. “It’s just...”

Clara waited, watching her face.

Nancy let out a breath. “I really don’t want to go downstairs.”

Clara’s smile was slow, knowing. She leaned in closer, her mouth right near Nancy’s ear. “Later,” she promised.

The word sent a clean shiver straight down Nancy’s spine.

The kitchen was already alive with noise. Nora was at the stove flipping pancakes, Andy was at the island with a comic book propped against the syrup bottle, his feet swinging rhythmically against the stool legs. The rich scent of coffee and melting butter filled the air.

Nora glanced over her shoulder when the screen door clicked. “Morning, girls. Clara, you’re staying for breakfast?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Clara smiled.

Nancy sat down across from her, their knees automatically brushing under the table. Andy didn’t notice a thing, entirely absorbed in his comic panel. But Nora’s gaze flickered between the two of them, sharp, evaluating, and deliberate. Nancy kept her face carefully neutral, though her pulse jumped when Clara’s foot found hers beneath the table, their toes curling together on the tile.

Breakfast passed in a haze of stolen contact. Clara’s hand brushing Nancy’s when they reached for the butter. Their shoulders pressing together when Andy launched into a loud story about his friend’s new bicycle. Nancy’s thumb tracing the soft inside of Clara’s wrist whenever Nora turned her back to the counter.

Nora served seconds without offering a comment, though her mouth tightened once when Clara laughed out loud at something Andy said, her head tipped back, her throat exposed in the bright sun. Nancy had to look away.

Afterward, they helped with the dishes, Nancy scrubbing the plates, Clara drying, their hips bumping naturally in the narrow space between the sink and the counter. Nora wiped down the stovetop, her movements efficient, but Nancy caught her reflection in the microwave glass watching them more than once.

“Andy,” Nora said suddenly, setting her rag down. “Why don’t you go check on the garden? See if any of the tomatoes are ready for picking.”

Andy groaned loudly but swung his legs off the stool and shuffled out the back door.

Nora turned around to face them, crossing her arms over her chest. “You two are unusually quiet

today.”

Clara’s fingers twitched around the edge of the dish towel. “Just a little tired.”

Nora’s gaze moved slowly to Nancy, then back to Clara. “Mm. Well. It’s the last week of summer break.” A long pause followed, her mother’s voice softening around the edges. “Don’t waste it.”

Nancy’s stomach twisted with a sharp hit of reality. Four days. That was all that was left before the timeline ran out.

Beneath the counter, out of sight, Clara’s pinky hooked firmly around Nancy’s. “We won’t,” Clara said.

Outside, the sun was already high in the sky, the air thick with the buzzing sound of cicadas in the trees. They walked down the sidewalk without picking a direction, their shoulders brushing with every step, their hands swinging close but not quite lacing together. The neighborhood road was quiet, the neighbors’ blinds shuttered tight against the midday heat.

“What are you thinking about?” Clara asked, tilting her head.

Nancy kicked a loose pebble, watching it skitter across the asphalt ahead of them. “That I really don’t want to go home tonight.”

Clara stopped walking.

Nancy turned to face her. Clara’s expression was completely open, her hands loose at her sides, just waiting.

“Then don’t,” Clara said softly.

Nancy swallowed hard, her chest tightening. “Your grandmother—”

“Nany won’t mind at all.” Clara took a step closer, her fingers finding Nancy’s, threading through them securely. “Stay with me.”

The words settled deep into Nancy’s chest, heavy, sweet, and absolute. She nodded. “Okay.”

Clara’s smile was radiant. She tugged on Nancy’s hand, pulling her forward, and they walked faster now, their steps syncing perfectly, the distance between them and Clara’s building shrinking with every single breath.

Nancy was in the kitchen when they let themselves in, her hands heavily dusted with white flour, the old radio playing a low, scratchy tune. She looked up from the counter, her wrinkled face creasing into an immediate smile. “Mijita, you’re back.” Her gaze moved to Nancy, assessing her face but completely kind. “And you brought company.”

Clara squeezed Nancy’s hand tightly. “Nancy’s staying for dinner tonight, Nany.”

Nany’s dark eyebrows rose just a fraction of an inch, but she only nodded, wiping her hands on her apron. “Well, good. There’s plenty of food.” She gestured toward the hall. “You girls go on. I’ll call

you when it's ready."

Clara's room received them, the heavy wooden door closing behind them with a soft, final click.

For a moment, neither of them moved.

The bedroom held the last warmth of the afternoon, the air thick and settled, carrying the faint scent of sun-warmed linen and that distinct, earthy trace of paper that simply belonged to Clara. The light had shifted into a deep evening gold, slipping through the thin curtains in long, quiet lines that brushed across the mattress, the blue walls, and their faces.

Clara was the first one to breathe out. It wasn't steady. Nancy felt the movement more than she heard it—the small, ragged rise and fall of her chest.

"Nancy," Clara said, her voice dropping into a lower register, almost uncertain now that they were entirely alone with nothing else between them.

Nancy took a step closer. She didn't rush, but she didn't hesitate either. There was an absolute, quiet certainty in the way she reached out, her hands finding Clara's waist like they had always known the exact shape of it, like they had been waiting for permission to hold on.

Clara's breath caught sharply in her throat. That tiny sound undid something in Nancy completely.

"Hi," Nancy said softly.

Clara let out a breath that almost turned into a laugh, but didn't. "Hi."

And then they were kissing.

It wasn't like the times before. It wasn't a stolen moment in a hallway, or a playful distraction, or careful in the same guarded way. This time it deepened almost immediately, not because they were rushing, but because they were certain. Clara's hands came up to frame Nancy's face, holding her right there, her fingers trembling just a fraction of an inch before they completely settled against her skin. Nancy answered the pressure without a single thought, her body moving closer, pressing flush against Clara's, closing whatever tiny bit of space still existed between them.

There was no space left.

Clara let out a small, ragged sound against her mouth, surprised, or completely overwhelmed, and Nancy felt it everywhere. It traveled straight through her, sharp and incredibly warm, landing right behind her ribs.

They slowed down without pulling their lips apart. Foreheads brushing, their breath completely tangled.

Nancy let her hands move, not exploring blindly, but feeling. The curve of Clara's spine beneath her palms, the heavy warmth of her through the thin fabric of her shirt, the way her body responded with subtle shifts, small inhales, and quiet releases of tension.

Clara's hands were learning her too. More hesitant at first, then shifting into something much braver.

Fingertips tracing her shoulders, pausing at her collarbone, returning to her neck. Like she was memorizing a map.

Then Clara did something unexpected. She pulled back. Not away, just enough to look directly at Nancy's face without the softening of proximity. Her dark eyes were completely steady behind her glasses. Her breath was not.

"I see you," Clara whispered.

Nancy didn't have a single sentence for that. She didn't need one. Clara came back to her mouth.

"You're—" Clara started, then stopped, her voice catching on a phrase she couldn't quite shape.

Nancy leaned in, her lips brushing softly against the corner of Clara's mouth. "I know."

She didn't entirely, but she understood the feeling perfectly.

Clara let out a soft breath, her forehead dropping onto Nancy's shoulder for three seconds, grounding herself against her chest. Nancy held her right there, one hand sliding gently up the center of her back, slow, steady, and reassuring.

"I don't want to rush this," Clara whispered into her neck.

"We're not," Nancy said.

And they weren't. Everything that followed unfolded with a quiet, heavy gravity, unhurried, intentional, and deeply aware of each other. They moved together in a rhythm they hadn't known they knew, guided less by certainty and more by pure attention. By listening, to the catches in breath, to the pressure of touch, to the smallest reactions of skin.

Every single moment mattered. Every small shift. The way Clara's fingers tightened slightly against her shoulder when something felt right. The way Nancy's breathing changed without her meaning it to. The way they kept pausing—not to stop, but to look at each other. To make absolutely sure. To stay completely with each other inside it.

Clara's forehead pressed back against Nancy's, their air completely mixed.

"Nancy," she whispered.

"I'm right here," Nancy answered.

And this time, she was. Completely. No flicker of another room. No distraction. No second voice echoing in the back of her head. Just Clara. Clara's hands, Clara's deep warmth, Clara choosing her over and over in every single movement.

Something in Nancy opened up entirely. Not suddenly, and not with a big dramatic burst, but completely. And Clara met it without a single second of hesitation. With the exact same quiet certainty.

Time completely lost its shape after that. It stretched out, softening at the edges, until neither of them

was counting the minutes anymore, only holding onto the simple, overwhelming reality of being known and not turning away from it.

An hour later, the small living room was bathed in the lazy, golden haze of late evening. The television screen was playing a sitcom low, casting flickering blue shadows across the walls while Nany laughed out loud at a joke. Clara was sitting cross-legged on the floral couch, her fingers tracing idle patterns on her own knee, while Nancy leaned her back against the wooden armrest. Their shoulders brushed whenever either of them shifted on the cushions.

Clara's pinky slid against Nancy's thigh—just for a quick second—before retreating beneath the throw blanket.

Nancy exhaled softly through her nose, her fingers curling tight into the fabric of the couch cushion. She didn't look over at Clara's face, but she could feel the absolute heat of her, the way Clara's breath hitched the second Nancy's knee pressed back in answer.

Nany turned the page of her magazine, completely oblivious to the couch.

Clara's hand found Nancy's beneath the heavy blanket, their fingers lacing together firmly. Nancy's thumb stroked the inside of Clara's wrist, slow, deliberate, and Clara's lips parted slightly, her round glasses fogging just a fraction of an inch in the humid evening air.

The commercial break ended on the screen. Nany hummed along to the loud jingle, entirely absorbed in her program.

Clara tilted her head toward Nancy, her dark eyes glinting behind her lenses in the blue light. "You're cruel," she mouthed.

"You started it," Nancy breathed back, her mouth barely moving.

Clara's fingers flexed under the blanket, her nails grazing Nancy's hip through the denim of her jeans. "I can stop right now," she whispered. But her grip tightened instead of loosening.

Nancy turned her head just enough to meet her dark gaze fully. The challenge hung between them, thick, sweet, and heavy. She didn't answer with words. She just shifted her weight, letting her thigh press fully against Clara's.

Clara's breath caught sharply. "We're terrible," she whispered.

"We're honest," Nancy corrected, her voice barely a murmur into the room.

Nany let out a loud sigh, stretching her thin arms above her head. "I'm beat, girls." She yawned heavily. "You turn off the TV when you're done, yeah?" She patted Clara's shoulder as she passed the couch, her slippers shuffling rhythmically against the old hardwood floor.

The screen door to her bedroom groaned open. Closed. Then dead silence.

The television played on, some canned laugh track filling up the empty room. Neither of them was listening to a single word of it.

Clara's hand moved to Nancy's waist. Nancy turned fully toward her on the cushions.

Clara stood up first, her fingers tangled tightly with Nancy's as she pulled her up from the couch. Their steps were hurried but completely quiet as they moved down the narrow hallway, the old floorboards creaking softly under their weight. The door to Clara's room clicked shut behind them, the brass lock turning with a quiet, final snick.

Clara pressed Nancy's back right against the wood of the door, her hands framing her face, her thumbs brushing softly over her cheekbones. The moonlight coming through the curtains painted them both in silver and deep shadow.

"Hi," Clara whispered.

The exact same word as that morning, but entirely different now. Rougher. Way more certain.

"Hi," Nancy echoed.

She didn't rush. Her fingers traced the curve of Clara's waist, the deep dip of her spine, memorizing the exact way Clara's breathing changed whenever she touched a new piece of skin.

"We have all night," Nancy murmured against her lips. "Let's take it."

Clara's hands stilled for a fraction of a second against her cheeks. "I don't want this to be something we ever forget, Nancy."

It wasn't poetic or packaged. It was just true. Just Clara.

"We won't," Nancy promised, her voice steady.

Clara looked right into her eyes. "Promise me."

Nancy held her face in both of her hands, her thumbs steady against her skin. "I promise."

Clara's fingers trembled just a fraction of an inch as they moved after that, her touch incredibly careful, like she was handling something infinitely precious. And Nancy, who had spent so many months refusing to let herself be held by anyone, let herself be held now. Completely.

Monday morning arrived too soon.

The house was quiet when Nancy let herself back in through the front door, the rich scent of coffee already thick in the hallway air. Ruth was standing at the counter, her back to the entryway, stirring a spoonful of sugar into her chipped mug. Andy was sitting on a stool right beside her, chattering away about a video game, not even looking up when the door clicked shut.

Ruth turned around slowly.

Her green eyes moved over Nancy, taking in the flushed cheeks, the slightly messy hair, the absolute way she carried her body differently now, as if something that had been tightly braced for months had finally let go completely. Something deeply knowing settled into Ruth's gaze.

"You chose to live it," Ruth said, her voice incredibly soft. "Good choice."

Nancy's face burned hot instantly. She busied herself with dropping her backpack onto a hallway chair. "No," she muttered, moving past her toward the coffee pot. "I just did what you told me to do."

Ruth's laugh was low, warm, and completely unhurried. "Yes, you did." She took a slow sip of her coffee, watching Nancy over the ceramic rim. "It suits you. You're glowing."

Nancy's fingers fumbled slightly with the handle of the cabinet. When she finally turned around, mug in hand, Ruth was watching her with an expression that was simply, entirely kind.

"You want to talk about it?" Ruth asked, her voice dropping into a lower register. "I'm right here."

Nancy nodded before her brain could even second-guess the movement.

Andy wandered off a few minutes later, his video game calling him from the living room, leaving the kitchen completely quiet. Just the two of them.

Nancy sat down at the table, wrapping both of her hands around her mug. "It's amazing," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper into the room. "Everything about her is amazing. But it ends, Ruth. Everything ends. She leaves for her bookstore shifts. I leave for college in a month. It all just—" She stopped, her throat locking up.

Ruth was quiet for a long moment, turning her mug in her hands. When she spoke, her voice was completely steady. "Nothing will ever be over unless you choose to let it be over." A pause. "The shape changes, Nancy. That is not the same thing as an ending."

Nancy's voice cracked slightly around the edges. "How? Look at you—you lost someone in your past and—"

"I don't regret a single thing I had," Ruth said flatly, her green eyes locking straight onto Nancy's face. "Not any of it. And I'll have more chances. Things are moving for me now, too. In a really good direction."

Nancy evaluated her face. "Someone new?"

Ruth stayed quiet for two seconds. "I'm just not standing still in the wreckage anymore," she said simply.

It was final. Entirely Ruth.

Nancy looked at her for a long moment, and felt something shift behind her ribs, not painfully, and not with a terrifying current, but more like a heavy door closing gently in an empty room. It was the quiet, necessary adjustment of finally understanding that someone you have been watching is beginning to look elsewhere. Toward their own life. Their own story.

She didn't name the feeling. She just held her mug and let it settle into the wood.

They talked for a long time after that. The morning stretched out around the kitchen table, the coffee slowly growing cold in their cups, Ruth's voice acting as a steady, reliable anchor while Nancy poured out every single fear she had. About leaving the house, about Clara, about not knowing how to

hold onto the summer once it became nothing but a memory.

Ruth listened the exact way she always listened. Completely. Without rushing toward an easy answer.

When Nancy finally stood up to head up the stairs to her room, Ruth said one last thing from the counter.

“You spent this entire summer learning how to look at things you were terrified to look at,” she said, her eyes fixed on her mug. “Don’t you dare stop doing that when you get to college.”

Nancy didn’t answer. But she carried the sentence with her up the steps, into her bedroom, and straight through the last four days of the break.

The rest of the summer passed the exact way the best things always pass, way too quickly, and with the specific, bittersweet weight of something you know you will never be able to return to exactly as it was.

Summer didn’t last.

Nancy’s college dorm room was cold in a way that had absolutely nothing to do with the temperature outside. The thin, unyielding mattress. The single-pane glass window that looked out over a gray concrete parking lot. The total blankness of a small room that didn’t know her name yet—no familiar jagged crack in the plaster ceiling, no jasmine vine tapping against the glass, no ordinary family sounds moving through the walls at night.

She lay flat on her side, her phone dark and cold beside her palm.

She tried desperately to hold the summer inside her mind, the exact warmth of Clara’s skin beneath her hands, the amber light filling that small blue room, the specific, beautiful sound of Clara’s laugh whenever something caught her off guard.

The memory slipped right through her fingers like smoke.

What stayed behind instead, burning behind her eyelids, was the goodbye. The car pulling away from the curb. Her father’s hands gripped tight on the steering wheel. Her mother’s wave growing smaller and smaller through the rear glass.

And Clara.

Clara standing right beside Andy and Nora on the front porch steps, her face streaked with real tears, her small hand lifted in a final, trembling goodbye. The image cut deep into Nancy’s chest. Her ribs tightened until she could barely draw a breath.

Now there were only phone calls. The cold press of lips against a glass screen. The hollow, distant ache of ‘I miss you’ whispered into an empty room in the dark.

It wasn’t real. It wasn’t nearly enough.

She rolled onto her back, staring straight up at the blank white ceiling. Somewhere in this massive building, strangers were sleeping. People she hadn’t met yet. A life she hadn’t started yet. The exact

future she had taped to her wall in January and stopped believing in, and then believed in again, and was now, physically, sitting inside of.

It didn't feel like freedom. It just felt like something major had been removed.

She closed her eyes in the dark.

She saw Clara's face, sad, wet, and shining with tears under the porch light.

She saw Ruth's smile—slow, private, turned completely toward something new.

She saw the jagged crack in the ceiling of her childhood bedroom, growing in that slow, completely invisible way that cracks always do.

She didn't know what any of it meant yet. She only knew she was right here, in this freezing room, at the absolute beginning of something she couldn't yet see the shape of.

And that she was, despite everything, still looking.

Chapter 16

The Distance Between

The dorm room was freezing, the kind of damp winter cold that seeped right through the thin mattress and settled into Nancy's bones. She lay on her side, knees drawn up toward her chest, staring at the dark screen of her phone. The silence in the small room pressed in around her, broken only by the occasional sharp rustle of plastic grocery bags from her roommate, another late-night snack run, another clumsy attempt at conversation that Nancy had let dissolve into nothing. She barely even knew the girl's name beyond the first day's awkward, polite introduction. Her roommate seemed nice enough, but in a flat way that required zero effort and offered absolutely nothing back.

Nancy rolled onto her back, letting out a sharp breath. The white ceiling above her was completely blank, unmarked except for a single, straight crack near the corner, nothing like the jagged, branching one at home, which she knew entirely by heart.

She reached for her phone, her thumb hovering over Clara's name. The call connected before her brain could authorize a second guess, and a second later, Clara's face appeared on the glass. She looked small on the screen, her round glasses fogging slightly from the warmth of her breath, the familiar deep blue of her bedroom walls framing her shoulders.

"Hey," Clara said. Her voice was incredibly soft but immediate, like she'd been sitting there waiting for the screen to light up.

Nancy swallowed hard, her throat dry. "Hey."

They fell into the rhythm they'd spent weeks building over the distance, Clara talking about her shifts at the bookstore, the way Nancy had started knitting a massively oversized blanket, the regular customer who kept asking for book recommendations and never actually bought anything. Nancy listened, nodding at the right moments, but her own answers were slower tonight. Shorter.

When Clara paused, tilting her head to evaluate the camera lens, Nancy knew the question was coming before it even left Clara's mouth.

"You're quiet," Clara observed. It wasn't an accusation. Just a plain fact.

Nancy rubbed her thumb over the hard edge of the phone case. "Just tired. Classes are a lot."

Clara's lips pressed together into a thin line, just for a second. "You've been tired a lot lately, Nancy."

The words hung in the air between them, unchallenged. Nancy looked toward the dark window where frost had begun to creep along the aluminum frame. "It's just freezing here."

"Nancy."

Nancy turned her eyes back to the screen. Clara's dark gaze was completely steady behind her lenses, the exact way it always got when she was about to say something that would unsettle the careful balance they were both trying to maintain.

“Talk to me. Really talk to me.”

Nancy’s chest tightened significantly, her ribs arching against her sweater. She wanted to. She desperately wanted to say ‘I miss the way your hands feel’ and ‘this room smells like absolutely nothing’ and ‘I keep hearing her voice in the kitchen.’ But the phrases stuck, completely tangled in her throat.

“I’m fine,” Nancy lied.

Clara didn’t push. But Nancy saw the way her small fingers tightened around the handle of her ceramic mug, the way her eyes flickered—just once—away from the camera, like she was searching the blue room for the right words and coming up completely empty.

They said goodnight a few minutes later, gently, carefully, the exact way you handle something you’re both terrified of breaking.

The calls continued, night after night, a regular metronome of distance.

Clara’s voice was a lifeline, but it wasn’t nearly enough to fill the void. Nancy found herself staring at the dark screen long after the line went dead, but the image that kept slipping into her head wasn’t the blue room. It was Ruth standing in the kitchen back home, leaning her hips back against the counter, her arms crossed over her pale sweater, her green eyes sharp and unreadable. The memory of lavender and caramelized sugar was so vivid in the small dorm room it made her stomach actively ache.

One evening, after Clara had signed off with a quiet ‘sleep well,’ Nancy sat straight up on the mattress, her heart pounding for no logical reason. She opened her contacts, scrolling past Clara’s name, past her mother’s, and stopped right at Ruth’s.

Her thumb hovered over the screen. She didn’t press it.

The sharp cold snapped at her bare ankles as she walked down the hall to the shared bathroom, the linoleum floor unyielding beneath her socks. When she returned to her room, her phone was buzzing against the desk wood, her mother’s face was on the screen, her brows knit in that specific configuration that meant she already knew something was wrong before Nancy even picked up.

“Sweetheart,” Nora said the second the video connected. The kitchen was visible over her shoulder, familiar, warm, the exact spot near the stove where Ruth always stood. Nancy’s breath caught instantly.

“There she is,” Nora smiled broadly, leaning closer to the camera. “Look at you. You look thinner, Nancy. Are you even eating down there?”

Nancy let out a short huff. “Hi to you too, Mom.”

“I’m serious,” Nora said, her tone teasing but her eyes evaluating. “College steals your weight and your sleep. It’s a documented medical phenomenon.”

Nancy rolled her eyes, but she was smiling despite herself, the crushing isolation of the dorm lifting just a fraction. “I’m completely fine.”

“What’s wrong?” Nora asked, the light tone vanishing instantly.

“Nothing.” The lie came out too fast. Too thin.

Nora’s expression softened into something incredibly gentle. “Are you and Clara fighting?”

“No,” Nancy’s voice cracked slightly around the edges. “No, Clara is... she’s amazing, Mom. Honestly, I don’t even deserve her.”

A long pause stretched between them. Through the speaker, Nancy heard the familiar clink of a metal spoon against a ceramic mug back home.

“Why would you say something like that?” Nora asked quietly.

Nancy picked at a loose, frayed thread on the edge of her institutional blanket. “I don’t know. Maybe because I can’t be like her. She’s so sure of everything.”

“Oh, baby.” Nora let out a warm, heavy sigh that vibrated through the phone. “It’s your first semester. Everything is hard right now. But it gets easier. I promise you it does.”

Nancy wanted to believe her. “I hope so.”

She stared at her mother’s face, at the familiar kitchen cabinets behind her, and decided to just say the thing. “And... thank you,” Nancy added, her voice dropping into something lighter, almost playful. “For understanding.”

Nora blinked at the screen. “Understanding what?”

“You know. That your daughter likes women.”

There was a distinct beat of silence on the line. Then Nora let out a low, knowing laugh. “Well, I happen to also like it.”

Nancy’s face exploded in immediate heat. “Mom—”

“What?” Nora’s grin was entirely unrepentant.

“Mom!”

“What? It’s a little late in life for me to change my entire lifestyle, but maybe—”

“Oh my god, stop,” Nancy pressed her palm hard against her mouth, but she was laughing now, the tight weight in her chest easing just enough to let her actually draw a deep breath.

“Go to sleep,” Nora said finally, her eyes warm. “You look like you desperately need it.”

“Bye, Mom.”

“Bye, sweetheart. I love you.”

The screen went dark.

Nancy stared at the black glass for a moment longer than necessary, her own flushed face faintly

visible in the reflection. Then her gaze shifted toward the empty corner of the desk, back to the kitchen that wasn't there anymore, to the empty space over Nora's shoulder where she knew someone else was probably standing right now.

The ache returned to her ribs. Sharper this time.

For the next two days, Ruth threaded herself through absolutely everything Nancy did.

Not dramatically, and not in ways that demanded her attention. Just in small, persistent echoes. In the curl of white steam rising from her paper coffee cup in the morning. In the way a girl sitting across from her in the library tilted her head when she listened to a lecture, just a fraction of an inch, the exact way Ruth did whenever she was amused. In the total, heavy quiet of the late afternoon, when the sun turned low and the world seemed to pause just long enough for thoughts to force their way to the surface.

Nancy reached into her pocket for her phone more times than she could count. She never hit the button.

Clara noticed. Of course she noticed.

They were exactly three minutes into a Friday night call, Clara mid-sentence about a regular customer's bizarre request for a book on taxidermy, when she abruptly stopped talking. Her expression shifted behind her lenses, her brows drawing together, the way she looked when she was piecing a complicated sketch together in real time.

"Do you remember," Clara said slowly, her voice very quiet, "when I told you under the streetlamp that I wasn't asking you to love me back? That I just wanted to be in your life."

Nancy's pulse spiked instantly, a loud thudding in her ears. "Yes."

"And you are," Clara said. Her voice was steady, but Nancy could see her small fingers tapping a restless, uneven rhythm against her knee. "You're in my life."

"And I love you," Nancy said, the words coming out too fast, slamming into the microphone.

Clara offered a small smile. It didn't reach her eyes at all.

"But you love her more," Clara said flatly.

The words landed without any force. They didn't need it. They settled deep into the floorboards of the dorm room.

Nancy opened her mouth, but absolutely nothing came out.

She felt it then, not the sharp sting of getting caught in a lie, but something much quieter and entirely final. The specific, heavy sensation of a truth arriving that had been true for months, a truth her body had recognized long before her brain had the guts to look at it. It didn't feel like a shocking revelation; it just felt like recognition. The particular weight of something you can no longer pretend you haven't seen.

Her hands were completely still in her lap.

Clara's dark gaze softened, not unkind, and not angry. Just entirely certain. "We don't get to choose who we love, Nancy," she whispered into the screen. "Or how much."

Nancy's vision blurred completely, the blue walls on the screen dissolving into a smudge of color. "You live inside me, Clara," she whispered against the glass. "I can't hide from you. I don't ever want to hide from you."

Clara let out a long, slow exhale.

Then, barely above a breath, she said, "Call her."

The phone rang twice in the quiet dorm room before the line clicked open.

"I'm surprised," Ruth said. Her voice was warm, instantly carrying that familiar, quiet amusement that Nancy knew by heart. "How are you, dear? Long time no see."

Nancy's grip tightened around the plastic case until her knuckles ached. "How are you doing, Ruth?"

"Oh, you know. Onward." A brief pause. "How about you?"

"Not bad."

A heavy silence followed.

"No, you're not," Ruth said flatly.

Nancy's breath caught sharply in her throat.

"You sound exactly like yourself," Ruth continued, her voice dropping into a lower register, stripped of the light surface tone. "Which usually means something is wrong."

Nancy pressed her free hand flat against the thin mattress. She could feel the precise, laser-focused quality of Ruth's attention even through miles of phone line, the stillness, the absolute accuracy. The terrifying sense of being located precisely without being reached for.

"I've been thinking," Nancy said, her voice careful.

"I know," Ruth said.

The silence that followed was not empty. It was completely full of every single thing neither of them was saying, everything that existed in the narrow space between what they were and what they had chosen not to become.

"Ruth—"

"Not yet," Ruth said softly, but with absolute clarity. "Not like this, Nancy."

Nancy understood. She didn't push.

They spoke for a few more minutes after that, about the weather, about the neighborhood streets,

about the local market that had started selling those little white peaches Ruth liked. Small, meaningless details that meant absolutely everything. Ruth's voice was exactly the same as it had been in the kitchen—low, steady, and grounding in a way Nancy hadn't realized she was starving for until it was there.

And it made every single thing ten times worse.

By the time the call ended, Nancy's hands were shaking so hard she could barely set the phone on the desk.

Christmas break was exactly three days away, but Nancy couldn't wait.

The decision didn't feel like a choice she was making; it felt like something that had already been decided weeks ago, and she was only now catching up to the motion of it.

She packed her duffel bag before dawn, moving quietly in the dark so she wouldn't wake her sleeping roommate. The room felt even colder in the early morning air, the gray light sharp as she zipped the canvas and pulled her heavy coat over her shoulders. She took one last look at the blank ceiling, at the single, straight crack near the corner that looked like nothing at all, and left without looking back.

The bus station was packed, a chaotic wall of movement and noise, students dragging heavy suitcases, voices overlapping, the low, mechanical hum of departures and arrivals. Nancy kept her head down, her paper ticket clenched tightly in her gloved hand.

The ride back blurred into something completely shapeless. Gray skies, bare trees, long stretches of highway she didn't recognize until suddenly, miraculously, she did. She pressed her forehead flat against the freezing glass window, watching as the landscape shifted from foreign to known. The streets narrowed. The buildings changed. The tiny, specific details, the corner bodega, the cracked sidewalk near the park entrance, came back into focus like something remembered rather than seen.

By the time the bus finally air-braked to a halt, her chest felt entirely too tight for her ribs.

The taxi ride through her hometown was quiet.

"Early for the holidays, ain't it, kid?" the driver asked, catching her eye in the rearview mirror.

Nancy didn't answer him. She just watched the passing streetlamps.

The house stood exactly where she had left it.

It sat in the same quiet way, the front windows dim in the fading winter light, the porch steps worn down in the exact places they had always been worn down. Nothing had changed. Everything had.

She let herself in through the front door quietly, the lock turning with a soft click that sounded incredibly loud in the hallway. The house was dead still. Evening had fully settled over the block, the light outside dimming toward night.

Nancy dropped her heavy duffel bag by the door.

She moved slowly at first, then more carefully, her boots light on the stairs despite the familiar, loud

creak of the wood beneath her weight. No voices called out to greet her. No movement answered her presence.

A small, almost childish thought flickered through her brain: Surprise them.

A tiny smile hit her mouth. She reached the top landing, her feet silent on the carpet.

Then she heard it.

A sound. It wasn't loud, and it wasn't clear, but it was completely unmistakable the second it registered in her ears.

Breathing. Heavy, rhythmic, and uneven.

Coming directly from her mother's bedroom.

Nancy stopped dead in the hallway. Something in her body went completely rigid, as if every single muscle had pulled tight at once. The bedroom door was slightly open, a thin strip of yellow light cutting across the dark carpet.

She didn't think about it. She didn't authorize the movement. She pushed the door.

The heavy wood swung inward just a few inches.

And Nancy's entire world cleanly tilted.

Her mother's body was arched against the white sheets, her skin flushed dark, her breath coming in ragged, uneven pulls Nancy had never heard exit her throat before. And above her—

Ruth.

Completely naked. Her mouth was pressed hard against Nora's collarbone, her hands holding her mother's waist with a fierce, heavy familiarity that was not new, not tentative, and not anything but entirely known.

For a fraction of a second, neither of them saw her.

Nancy couldn't draw air into her lungs. She couldn't move her boots. The world didn't tilt or shatter; it simply stopped existing.

Then Ruth turned her head.

Their eyes met through the gap in the door. Green locking onto brown.

And something in that look, something completely direct, unhidden, and entirely aware, locked every single piece of the summer into place with brutal, terrifying clarity.

Nora gasped loudly, the sharp sound breaking whatever suspended animation had held the room. She grabbed frantically for the edge of the sheet, pulling it up to her chin, her voice raw and panicked. "Nancy—"

Nancy didn't hear the rest of the sentence.

Her fingers had gone completely numb against the wooden doorframe, the hard edge of the molding digging into her palm just enough to remind her that she was still physically standing on her feet.

Ruth didn't move a single inch. She didn't look away from Nancy's face.

Nancy felt it then, not just shock, and not just confusion, but something much deeper. Something that twisted through every single thing she thought she understood about her life and rearranged it into a shape she could no longer pretend was new.

She took a violent step backward into the dark hallway. Then she turned. And she ran.

The stairs went past in a blur, her shoulder catching hard against the wooden railing, the physical impact registering somewhere distant and entirely irrelevant to her brain. The front door gave way under her hands, and then she was throwing herself out into the night, the freezing winter air hitting her face like a slap.

She ran down the sidewalk until her legs physically decided they couldn't do it anymore.

Then she stopped.

She stood directly under a streetlight, her breath coming in ragged, uneven gasps, her hands braced hard against her knees. The cold air burned like fire in her lungs.

She straightened up slowly.

The street was completely empty. Quiet. The exact kind of ordinary neighborhood that had absolutely no idea what had just happened inside that house.

She stood right in the center of the yellow pool of light and let her breathing slow down.

It wasn't the image of the bed that stayed behind in her head. Not fully.

It was Ruth's eyes.

The exact way they had found her face through the gap in the door immediately, without having to search the hallway. The way they had stayed locked onto her. They weren't guilty. They weren't startled. They weren't performing a single thing.

Just Ruth—seeing her, the way she always saw her—completely, accurately, and refusing to look away.

Nancy pressed her cold fingers hard against her mouth.

She stood there under the lamp for a really long time, the freezing air settling around her shoulders, the streetlight steady overhead.

Something had ended tonight. Permanent.

And something else, something she had been circling around for months without ever having the guts to name, had just become entirely impossible to ignore.

She didn't know what she was supposed to do with it yet. She only knew she was standing right in the middle of it.

And that this time, she wasn't going to run away again.

The dark street stretched ahead of her, quiet and completely indifferent. Nancy stood still, let her hands drop to her sides, and for the first time in her life—

she didn't look away.

Chapter 17

Home

The cold bit straight through Nancy's sweater as she walked, each gust slipping through the gaps between fabric and skin like fingers testing for weakness. She kept her head down, watching her boots strike the cracked sidewalk in a rhythm that felt steadier than anything inside her. The physical discomfort registered somewhere distant. What pressed harder was the weight behind her sternum, a dense, unmoving pressure that had settled there the moment she stepped out of the house and had not shifted since.

She turned a corner and the wind changed direction, carrying chimney smoke and the damp scent of earth. Her jaw ached. Only then did she realize how tightly she'd been clenching her teeth, her jaw grinding with a force that would linger into tomorrow.

Nora did nothing wrong. Ruth did nothing wrong.

The thoughts circled, persistent, rational, and entirely useless. They explained everything and resolved absolutely nothing. She wanted something else, something sharper, cleaner. A reason she could hold onto. Anger that made sense.

But it wouldn't come.

A playground appeared without warning, tucked between two houses she'd passed a thousand times as a child. Two kids chased each other across the metal structure, their laughter cutting clean through the freezing air. Nancy slowed down, gravel crunching under her boots.

An old man stood at the chain-link fence, his gloved hands wrapped loosely around the wire. He wore no coat, just a worn cardigan, his breath rising in thin white clouds. But his face, Nancy found herself watching it longer than she meant to. He wasn't smiling exactly, but something in his posture was completely settled. As if he had stepped outside himself and found something sufficient in simply standing there, watching. As if the kids' laughter was enough.

Nothing extraordinary. Just two children playing and an old man watching.

Nancy's fingers found a loose, frayed thread at her sleeve and pulled at it absently. She thought of her dorm room, the silence she had turned into a habit, almost a discipline. She thought of Clara's voice, steady and patient, offering her a space she never fully stepped into. She thought of Ruth, of the way her presence had always demanded something sharper, more honest, and how Nancy had never managed to meet it without retreating.

The thread snapped. She let it fall.

Then she started walking again, faster now, as if stillness itself might force her to feel something she wasn't ready to name. The houses grew familiar in pieces, the overgrown hedge, the mailbox shaped like a fish that Andy had once insisted was alive, the uneven sidewalk she used to jump over as a game.

Her mother's house waited at the end of the block, its front windows lit, steady and unchanged.

The door opened before her boots even hit the bottom step.

Nora stood in the frame, her robe pulled tight around her waist, her face bare in the porch light. The signs were immediate, swollen eyes, flushed skin, the fragile stillness of someone who had been crying and hadn't quite finished.

Nancy stopped on the first step.

"Sweetheart."

Nora crossed the distance quickly, her arms wrapping around Nancy before she could even respond. The warmth of her hit all at once, smelling of laundry detergent, sleep, and something deeply familiar that Nancy hadn't realized she had been starving for until it was right there.

"I'm so sorry," Nora whispered into her hair, her grip tightening. "I'm so sorry, Nancy."

Nancy's hands hovered in the cold air for a fraction of a second, then slowly found the fabric of her mother's robe, gripping it lightly.

"I know I should have told you," Nora continued, pulling back just enough to look at her face. Her hands came up, gentle and searching against Nancy's cheeks. "I know."

"It's okay, Mom," Nancy said automatically. The words came out too easily, too practiced. "You didn't do anything wrong."

Nora studied her face for a moment longer than felt comfortable, as if she could see the exact space between what Nancy said and what she actually meant. But she didn't push. She stepped back instead, clearing the doorway.

"Come inside. Let's sit down."

"Where's Ruth?" Nancy asked, not moving an inch.

A small shift passed over Nora's face. Not quite hesitation, just something quieter.

"She's here," Nora said softly. "She's living with us now."

The words landed with a dull, heavy weight right in Nancy's gut. She didn't react, not outwardly. But something behind her ribs tightened further, like a breath she couldn't fully complete.

"I suggested it before anything ever happened between us," Nora added quickly, her voice careful. "It just made sense. For Andy. For her. It just... worked out."

Simple.

The explanation landed like a stone. Why was everything so simple for everyone else? Clara's love was simple, offered without any demands. Ruth's boundaries were simple, clear as a locked door. Her mother's new life was simple, a practical arrangement between adults who asked nothing of each other. Only Nancy stood right at the center of a knot she had tied herself, every single thread leading

somewhere she couldn't follow.

"I'm tired," Nancy said, stepping past her into the warmth of the hallway.

She didn't wait around for an answer.

Her bedroom hadn't changed at all.

The same desk. The same window seat. The same jagged crack in the plaster ceiling, branching like a map she had memorized years ago. Gerald. She had named the crack Gerald when she was ten, a private joke that had never needed an audience.

She lay down on the mattress fully clothed and pulled the heavy blanket over her shoulders, staring straight up at the ceiling.

She waited for the anger to come. It didn't. What remained was just something heavier. Not sharp enough to act on, not clear enough to fully understand. Just there.

The bedroom door burst open without warning.

Andy launched himself onto the bed, a sudden blur of movement, noise, and immediate warmth. "You're back!"

Nancy blinked, the heavy silence breaking cleanly. She opened her arms without a second thought, and he folded into her instantly, solid and real in a way nothing else had been all night.

"I missed you," she said into his messy hair, squeezing him.

"I missed you more," he said immediately, pulling back to look at her face with the total directness of someone who had not yet learned to soften things. "Are you staying? You have to stay, Nance. Mom's way happier when you're here. Ruth too."

Nancy didn't respond to that. She just smoothed his hair down instead.

The next morning, the kitchen felt exactly the same.

The smell of coffee. Toast. The faint, underlying thread of lavender woven into everything.

Nancy sat at the island, her hands wrapped around a ceramic mug she wasn't actually drinking from. Andy was flipping through a comic book beside her, unusually quiet, as if his brain sensed an atmosphere he didn't have the vocabulary to understand.

Footsteps sounded in the hallway.

Ruth appeared in the kitchen doorway.

She paused there for just a single second, long enough to register Nancy's presence, to adjust something subtle in her posture, before stepping into the room.

"Hey you," she said, her voice lower than usual, softer around the edges.

"Hi."

Nancy looked right at her. Directly.

Ruth didn't hold the gaze at first. Her green eyes moved, to the table, the window, Andy's comic page, before returning to Nancy's face, more deliberately this time.

"You okay?" Ruth asked.

"Yes."

They both knew it was a lie.

Silence settled heavily between the counter and the table, dense and unmoving. Ruth set her cup down on the laminate, straightening her shoulders, the composed adult armor sliding right back into place.

"You're judging," Ruth said flatly.

Nancy didn't deny it. "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing," Ruth met her eyes fully now. "But you're going to be disappointed."

"Why?"

"Because there's absolutely nobody here to blame, Nancy."

Nancy's throat tightened significantly. "I'm still hurt."

Ruth's expression didn't flicker, but her green gaze sharpened. "I don't really see why."

"Neither do I."

The words escaped Nancy's mouth before her brain could stop them.

She looked down at her mug, her fingers perfectly still around the ceramic. The coffee inside had gone lukewarm. She was acutely aware of the specific quality of what she had just said, it wasn't a clever deflection or a polite phrase. It was the absolute truth, delivered entirely by accident.

The kitchen went dead quiet. Andy turned a glossy page. The kettle ticked faintly on the cold stovetop. Somewhere upstairs, a floorboard creaked.

"Why my mom?" Nancy asked finally, her voice barely a whisper.

Ruth didn't answer right away. She looked across the island at Nancy the exact way she always had, carefully, directly, as if she were looking right through the sentences into the thing that wasn't being said.

"Why not?" Ruth said at last, her voice steady. "She's kind. She's beautiful. She's my age."

A long pause hung in the kitchen air.

"And she doesn't ask a single thing from me," Ruth added.

Nancy felt the weight of the phrase more than she fully understood it. "Neither do I," she said quietly.

Ruth's green eyes held hers, absolute and unyielding.

"Yes, Nancy," she said softly. "You do."

The words landed without any force, but they didn't need it. Nancy looked down at her cup. The coffee had gone completely cold.

She drank it anyway.

Chapter 18

What She Carries

The cold had settled into Nancy's bones long before noon, but she stayed on the doorstep, her back pressed against the wooden frame, her knees drawn tightly to her chest. The winter air held that dry, cutting edge, each breath sharp enough to feel, visible only for a moment before dissolving into nothing. She had been sitting there long enough for the numbness to creep from her fingers into her wrists, long enough for the sky to shift from a pale morning gray into a heavier, dimmer blue that suggested the day had already begun to close in on itself.

She could hear the house behind her. It wasn't as quiet as she expected, but it wasn't full either. The low clatter of dishes came and went, uneven, like someone moving through the kitchen without any urgency. Andy's laughter rose once, sharp and bright, then dissolved back into silence. There was no second voice answering him. No rhythm of conversation. Just empty space.

Nora wasn't home.

Nancy felt that absence immediately, the way you notice a missing step only when your foot expects it. The house held her mother's shape without her in it, the faint scent of lavender still clinging to the hallway, the order she left behind, but the center of it was gone.

And still—Ruth was inside.

Not passing through. Not visiting. Inside. Moving through rooms that had never belonged to her and now, somehow, did.

Nancy didn't move. If she went in, she would have to see it, not just Ruth, but the way Ruth existed in that space without asking permission, the way the house had already begun to rearrange itself around her. She would have to stand inside something that had already changed shape without her.

The cold, at least, was simple. It didn't ask a single thing of her.

The door creaked open behind her.

Warmth brushed the back of her neck before she even turned her head. Ruth stepped out onto the threshold, the hem of Nora's robe grazing her ankles, the fabric too thin for the weather but worn as if the cold were entirely irrelevant. She didn't shiver. She never seemed to respond to things the way other people did.

"It's freezing out here," Ruth said, her voice low, roughened slightly by the winter air. "Come inside, Nancy."

The way she said her name—carefully, fully—sent a sharp, unwelcome current through her. Nancy didn't answer. Her fingers tightened in the sleeves of her sweater, anchoring her in place on the concrete.

Ruth watched her for a second longer, then turned without waiting for a response and went back

inside, leaving the door open just enough for a strip of yellow light to spill across the welcome mat. Nancy stared at it, at the thin line between inside and out, as if it were something more significant than it actually was.

A moment later, Ruth returned.

She carried two mugs, steam curling from their surfaces, and a folded blanket draped over her arm. Without a word, she set one mug beside Nancy's boots, then unfolded the blanket and laid it across Nancy's shoulders. The wool was rough but heavy, trapping what little heat her body still held. Ruth sat down directly beside her on the step, close enough that their arms brushed, close enough that Nancy could feel the steady, rhythmic rise and fall of her breath.

They didn't speak.

Nancy wrapped her hands around the mug, letting the heat sink slowly into her fingers, the temperature almost painful against her numb skin. The tea was boiling, but she drank it anyway, letting it burn her tongue, her throat, something inside her that felt like it needed burning.

The silence between them wasn't easy, but it wasn't empty either. It held something, something waiting, something that had been waiting for longer than either of them had been willing to admit out loud.

"Do you love her?" Nancy asked.

The words came out rough, pulled from somewhere low in her chest before her brain could authorize a second guess.

Ruth's fingers stilled against her own cup. She didn't answer immediately. Instead, her hand lifted and settled lightly against Nancy's back, moving once—slowly—over the heavy blanket. It wasn't quite a gesture of comfort, and it wasn't quite anything that could be easily named.

"Do you love Clara?" Ruth asked back.

It wasn't a deflection. Nancy knew that. Ruth didn't avoid questions; she shifted them, turned them until they pointed somewhere truer and harder to look at. The counter-question landed heavy and immediate.

Nancy turned her head to look at her. Ruth's face was turned slightly away, her green gaze fixed somewhere out on the quiet street, but there was a distinct tension there, small, controlled, but present. Something not entirely at rest.

"I need to say it," Nancy said, her voice thinner now, dangerously close to breaking. "I—"

Ruth's fingers came up and touched her lips.

Not sharply. Not enough to force a silence. Just there.

For a moment, neither of them moved an inch.

Ruth's hand stayed longer than it needed to. Long enough that it stopped feeling like an interruption

and started feeling like something else, something neither of them acknowledged, but both understood completely. Her green eyes didn't leave Nancy's face. There was no distance in them now, no practiced, adult steadiness. Just absolute attention. Direct and unshielded.

Nancy didn't pull back. That was the part that changed the room.

There was no resistance left in her, no retreat, only a dense stillness, and something in that stillness that felt entirely like permission. It shifted the air between them, made it thinner, more fragile.

Ruth felt it. It showed in the smallest way, the tightening of her jaw, the sudden flicker in her gaze, the brief, almost imperceptible hesitation that did not belong to the composed, controlled version of her Nancy had come to rely on. It wasn't a decision. It was the terrifying moment right before one.

Then Ruth withdrew her hand.

Her fingers dropped back into her lap. Her gaze broke away first, turning back toward the empty street as if that had been her intention all along, as if absolutely nothing had changed between them.

"Call Clara," Ruth said flatly.

Nancy swallowed hard, her throat burning. "Ruth—"

"She'll be happy to know you're back in town." Her voice was low and gentle, but final in a way that didn't need any emphasis. "Go, Nancy."

Ruth stood up, the heavy blanket slipping slightly from Nancy's shoulders before settling again, and went back inside. She closed the door behind her with a quiet click that sounded incredibly loud against the winter dark.

Nancy stayed where she was on the step.

The tea slowly cooled in her hands. The streetlights flickered on one by one down the block, casting long, thin shadows across the cold pavement. She stared at her phone screen for a long time before unlocking it, Clara's name bright against the black.

She pressed call. Clara answered on the second ring.

"I'm back in town," Nancy said, her voice steadier than she actually felt. "Can we go out?"

There was a brief, real pause on the other end. Then, softly, "Yes. I'd love that."

They agreed on Rama Coffee, the same place they had gone to the first time, back when everything had still felt new and uncertain in a completely different way.

Nancy arrived fifteen minutes early. She sat by the window, her fingers tapping a restless rhythm against the side of her cup, her tea untouched. The café was warm, the air thick with the smell of espresso and something sweet she couldn't quite place, but the heat stayed at the very edges of her skin. It didn't reach her center.

When Clara walked through the glass door, the bell chimed, and Nancy stood up before she even

realized she was doing it.

Clara saw her immediately. Her expression shifted, relief first, then something much softer, and she crossed the space between the tables quickly, pulling Nancy into an embrace that was firm, grounding, and real. Nancy held onto her tightly, her face pressed into the warm curve of Clara's neck, breathing in the familiar, safe scent of old paper and dried herbs.

Something behind her ribs loosened. Not completely, but enough to feel the difference.

They sat down and ordered food they barely touched. Their hands found each other across the table automatically, Clara's thumb moving in small, absent patterns over Nancy's skin. For a little while, it almost felt like they could return to the summer.

Then Clara's fingers stilled.

"What's wrong?" she asked, looking through her lenses.

Nancy let out a breath that felt like it had been waiting for miles. "I can't lie to you, Clara. I can't say it's nothing." She paused, her voice dropping into a whisper. "Ruth is living at my house now."

Clara's fingers tightened around hers instantly. "Oh."

The word was tiny, but it carried a massive physical weight. Nancy watched as something moved behind Clara's dark eyes, surprise, yes, but also something sharper and entirely final, something that didn't settle easily.

"She's with my mom," Nancy said flatly.

Clara's free hand came up to press against her own mouth. She didn't speak a word. Her grip on Nancy's fingers tightened further, not enough to cause pain, but enough to anchor herself to the table.

The silence stretched across the laminate. Nancy couldn't hold it.

"Let's walk," Nancy said.

They left the café and moved through the freezing blocks without speaking, their shoulders brushing occasionally, their boots falling into an uneven rhythm on the concrete. The streets were quieter now, the evening settling fully around them.

Halfway to Clara's building, Clara abruptly stopped.

Nancy turned around. "What?"

Clara stepped closer, her hand coming up to rest lightly against Nancy's chest, directly over her thudding heartbeat. "You have to go home, Nancy."

Nancy frowned. "Why?"

"Because you know why," Clara's voice was incredibly soft, but there was zero hesitation in it. "You can't stay in between two shores forever."

“I want to be with you,” Nancy said, the words slipping out unedited before she could shape them into something safer.

Clara’s expression softened into something that looked like heartbreak, but her dark eyes stayed steady. She stepped fully into Nancy’s space, her hands coming up to frame Nancy’s face, her thumbs brushing lightly along her cheeks. “I want to be with you too, Nancy.” She leaned in and kissed her, soft, brief, and entirely careful.

Nancy leaned into her mouth instinctively, her fingers reaching for her jacket, but Clara pulled back before the touch could deepen.

“Go,” Clara murmured.

It wasn’t unkind, and it wasn’t uncertain. It was just absolute.

They stood there for a moment longer, their hands still loosely connected in the cold, until Clara took a step backward and let go. Nancy watched her turn and walk away down the block, her figure disappearing into the shadow of the buildings without looking back a single time.

The winter cold returned to Nancy’s skin immediately. She stood still for a long time, staring at the empty sidewalk, then turned toward her own block.

The freezing air bit into her face as she walked, her breath curling in front of her like thick smoke. She pulled her coat tighter, the wool stiff with frost, and turned away from Clara’s neighborhood before her brain could try to second-guess the motion. The total quiet of the streets unsettled her. It wasn’t the peaceful kind; it felt empty, stretched so thin across the dark that it might tear if she moved too quickly.

She knew she should have taken the bus, but walking felt necessary, like she could physically wear down the knot behind her ribs if she just kept her boots moving long enough.

The longer route pulled her through the older blocks where the lamps flickered and the shadows didn’t quite settle against the pavement. A loose metal sign creaked somewhere above her head. A cat slipped across the asphalt and vanished into the darkness. Nancy flinched anyway, her body entirely too alert, too acutely aware of its own existence.

By the time she reached her street, the cold had worked its way deep into her bones. Her mother’s house stood quiet at the end of the block, the faint blue glow of the television leaking through the living room curtains.

Not asleep. Of course they weren’t.

She stood at the bottom of the porch steps for three seconds, her hand hovering over the railing before she finally pushed the front door open.

Warmth met her first. Then the low murmur of the television screen. Then them.

Nora and Ruth were sitting close together on the couch, a single heavy blanket pulled over both of their legs, their shoulders touching in an easy, practiced way that made something behind Nancy’s

ribs tighten before she could stop it. Her mother's head rested lightly against Ruth's shoulder, her fingers moving absentmindedly along Ruth's bare arm as if they had been doing that for years.

They didn't notice her right away. Nancy stepped into the hallway, closing the door softly behind her, her body still half-frozen from the block.

"Hi, sweetheart."

Nora's voice pulled her forward. Her mother sat up quickly, the throw blanket slipping slightly, and crossed the living room before Nancy could even decide whether she wanted her to. The hug came fast, warm, thick, and immediate. Nancy let herself be pulled into the embrace, though her arms were slow to respond to the pressure.

"You're absolutely freezing," Nora murmured, her hand moving up to press against Nancy's cheek.

Nancy just nodded against her shoulder. But over her mother's arm, her eyes had already located Ruth.

Ruth hadn't moved an inch on the couch. She hadn't smiled, and she hadn't looked down. She simply watched, her green gaze steady, direct, taking Nancy in as if nothing about this midnight arrival surprised her and every single detail of it mattered.

Nancy held that look for a beat too long before Nora guided her toward the cushions.

"Sit down," her mom said softly, pulling the blanket open. "Come here, get warm."

Nancy sank into the cushion directly beside her, the heat of the living room hitting her skin in waves. Nora tucked the wool tightly around her shoulders, her hand lingering on her arm, grounding her. Nancy let her body lean sideways, her head finding her mother's lap without a single thought, her frame folding into something that still knew how to be small in this house.

Her feet stretched out under the fabric. They brushed right against Ruth's leg beneath the blanket.

Neither of them pulled away to fix the distance.

The television filled the room with meaningless background noise. Nora's fingers moved slowly through Nancy's damp hair, the rhythm steady and comforting.

"Are you okay, sweetheart?"

Nancy didn't answer right away. Her eyes were wide open, angled just enough to watch Ruth without fully turning her head on her mother's lap.

"I'm okay," she said finally.

"You don't look okay."

Ruth's voice was quieter than Nora's. It wasn't sharp, and it wasn't accusing. It was just there, filling up the space.

Nancy swallowed hard. "It's just the cold."

Ruth studied her face for a moment longer, then stood up from the couch. The heavy blanket slipped as she rose, and the space she left behind cooled down immediately. She picked up the edge of the wool, shaking it out once before draping it more carefully around Nancy's shoulders.

Her hand brushed right against Nancy's waist in the process. Then it lingered, just slightly too long to be called accidental, and not long enough to be called anything else.

Nancy felt the pressure. Everywhere.

Ruth pulled her hand back first. She sat down again on the opposite end of the couch, leaving distance between them.

The conversation resumed, though Nancy barely followed the sentences. Nora said something about her office schedule. Ruth answered her. Their voices moved around her, over her, but none of the words settled. Nancy stayed completely still, listening instead to smaller things, the shift of fabric, the quiet exhale of breath, the way Ruth's fingers tapped once against her own knee and then stopped, as if she had caught herself in a habit.

"I'm going to bed," Ruth said after a while.

She stood up, stretching her shoulders slightly, her robe falling back into place around her ankles. Her green gaze moved down to Nancy again, and this time it didn't slide away quickly. It held on. Not soft, and not distant. Just entirely aware.

Then she turned and walked down the hallway.

Nora followed her not long after, pressing a warm kiss into Nancy's hair before heading up the stairs, the house settling into a deeper silence behind her.

Nancy stayed flat on the couch for a long time. Until the warmth of the room stopped feeling like comfort and started feeling like a weight she didn't deserve.

Her bedroom didn't help. It felt too still, too untouched, like it had been waiting for a version of her that hadn't come back from college. She stood in the center of the rug for only a moment before turning back to the hallway.

The bathroom light was shining through the crack in the door.

She reached out for the brass handle—

The door opened. Ruth stepped out into the hall.

A towel was wrapped loosely around her body, another draped over her damp, dark hair. Water traced slow, thin lines down her collarbone, disappearing beneath the edge of the white cotton. She stopped dead when her eyes found Nancy.

For a second, neither of them moved an inch.

Nancy's breath caught sharply in her throat. Her eyes dropped before she could tell her brain to stop, taking in the wet skin, then lifted right back up to Ruth's face, like she didn't trust herself but couldn't

look away either.

Ruth noticed. Of course she noticed.

Something shifted in her expression, not surprise, and not discomfort. Something much more controlled than that. Something that had already been decided long before this midnight collision happened.

She took a step forward. Close. Close enough that the heat of her body cut straight through the cold still clinging to Nancy's skin.

Then she stepped past her. Without saying a single word.

The scent of steam, clean soap, and lavender followed her down the narrow hall.

Nancy stood there in the dark hallway, unmoving, her pulse roaring in her ears. Then she pushed the bathroom door open and stepped inside.

The water was entirely too hot. She let it run anyway.

It hit her shoulders hard, steady, and grounding in a way nothing else had been all night. She leaned forward, her palms braced flat against the wet wall tiles, her breath completely uneven in the steam.

Her body hadn't calmed down. That was the problem.

It wasn't the shock of the house, and it wasn't the situation, and it wasn't even Nora. It was this. The exact way her chest tightened whenever Ruth looked at her. The way her breathing changed whenever she was close. The way her body answered something she had tried, for months, to keep completely unnamed.

Nancy squeezed her eyes shut against the heat.

"I—"

The word broke before it could form a sentence. She swallowed hard, took a ragged breath, and tried again. Quieter this time, like saying it softer might make it less true.

"I love her."

The words didn't feel like a confession. The water kept running against the tile, loud and steady. Nothing changed. That was the worst part.

Chapter 19

What Remains

Morning came slowly, the light thin and colorless as it slipped through the curtains and settled across Nancy's floor. She woke before she fully understood where she was, her body stiff, her throat dry, her mind already crowded.

For a few seconds, there was nothing. Then it all returned.

The couch. The blanket. Ruth's hand lingering at her waist. The bathroom door swinging open. The water hitting the tiles. The words she had whispered to herself in the steam, alone, where nobody could hear.

I love her.

Nancy opened her eyes. Her room stared back at her exactly as she had left it months ago, unchanged in a way that felt almost deliberate. The crack in the ceiling stretched above her—Gerald, patient and branching, growing in that slow, invisible way that cracks always do. Her desk sat untouched, the chair tucked neatly beneath it. Even the air felt the same, faintly stale, faintly lavender, like a room preserved under glass.

She pushed herself up and sat on the edge of the bed, her fingers pressing into the mattress as if testing its reality.

The house was quiet, but not empty. She could hear the low murmur of voices from the kitchen, the clink of a spoon against a ceramic mug, the soft shuffle of footsteps on the tile. Nancy exhaled, her breath unsteady, and stood up.

The kitchen was narrow, the morning light spilling through the half-drawn curtains in pale strips across the floor. Nora stood by the counter, her back to the door, her voice warm as she spoke to Ruth. Ruth sat at the table in her usual spot, her posture relaxed but her fingers tapping a restless rhythm against her mug. The air smelled of coffee and toast—something completely ordinary, something that didn't match the tight pressure behind Nancy's ribs.

Nancy stopped right on the threshold.

Nora turned first, her face lighting up. "Good morning, sweetheart," she said, stepping forward. As she passed the table, her hand brushed casually against Ruth's arm. It was an effortless, natural gesture, the kind of touch that belonged in a kitchen on an ordinary morning.

Ruth's gaze lifted to Nancy's, her expression completely unreadable. "Morning," she said, her voice neutral.

"Morning."

Nancy moved to the counter and poured herself a cup of coffee. She didn't sit in the chair beside Ruth. She took the far end of the island, her boots heavy on the floor, her own mug cold against her palms.

Nora returned to the counter, her movements easy, her laughter soft as she resumed whatever conversation she and Ruth had been having before the door clicked. Something about Christmas schedules, about decorations, about plans Nancy didn't care to track. She watched her mother instead, the way she leaned against the counter, the way her fingers curled around her own cup, the way her other hand found Ruth's arm again, just for a second, before pulling away.

Nancy's grip tightened around the handle of her mug. She didn't look up.

"I need to get to work," Nora said eventually, her voice bright. She moved closer to the table, her hand lifting to cup Ruth's cheek before she leaned down. The kiss was quick, natural, the kind of thing Nancy had seen a hundred times before in other lives.

But this time, as Ruth's lips parted slightly, her eyes flickered, just for a second, straight toward the doorway. Toward Nancy.

And Nancy was watching.

Nora pulled back, her smile lingering, before she turned to Nancy. She crossed the space between them, her fingers gently brushing Nancy's hair back from her eyes before she pressed a warm kiss to her cheek. "Ask Clara to come over tomorrow," she said, her voice warm. "We can all spend the weekend together."

Nancy nodded, her throat locking tight. "Sure."

Nora hesitated, her hand lingering on Nancy's shoulder a moment longer than necessary, as if sensing something unsaid in the air. Then she stepped back, her keys jingling loudly as she reached for them on the counter. "I'll be back by six," she called out, and then she was gone, the front door clicking shut behind her.

The house completely changed its atmosphere.

Not physically. The kitchen was exactly the same, same table, same chairs, same faint scent of lavender lingering from Ruth's shower the night before. But the air felt dense. Charged. Like the fraction of a second after a lightning strike when the world is still holding its breath for the thunder.

Ruth stood up, her chair scraping loudly against the tile, and moved to the coffee pot. She refilled her cup, her movements slow, deliberate, and completely unhurried. Nancy could feel the weight of her own gaze, the way her eyes irresistibly followed Ruth's every movement, the lift of her hand, the tilt of her head, the way her fingers curled around the ceramic handle.

Ruth turned around, leaning her hips back against the counter, and looked directly at Nancy.

They didn't speak.

Andy's noise announced his arrival before his boots even hit the threshold, a loud clatter of footsteps from the hallway, the sound of his bedroom door being pulled open with way more force than he intended, the exact way he always did in the morning when the transition from sleep felt too abrupt.

He appeared in the kitchen doorway in his dinosaur pajamas, his hair pressed completely flat on one

side and standing up on the other. His eyes scanned the room in that quick, assessing way he had when he was recalibrating, checking who was there, what the configuration looked like, whether the morning matched what he expected.

It didn't.

Nancy could see it in the small pause before he stepped onto the tile. The way his gaze moved between her and Ruth, not reading the hidden text—he wouldn't—but registering the atmosphere. The quality of the heavy silence. The rigid tension in Nancy's shoulders. Things his brain felt completely without having the language to name them.

His fingers began tapping a quiet rhythm against his pajama pants.

Ruth saw it immediately.

"Hey, bug." Her voice shifted instantly, warm, steady, and unhurried in the specific cadence she knew worked for him. "Come on. Let's get your breakfast sorted out before your session."

Andy moved toward the island without a single second of hesitation, the tight lines in his body easing as Ruth's presence organized the space around him. She buttered his toast, asked him about the game he'd been playing yesterday afternoon, and listened to his answer with the full, unvoiced attention he needed and had learned to trust in her.

Nancy watched Ruth's hands, how they moved around her brother, certain and gentle. The plate, the glass of juice placed exactly where he liked it, the wooden spoon.

"I want to show you something after," Andy told her, his voice brightening as he climbed onto his stool.

"Show me at lunch," Ruth said. "We'll have plenty of time." She smoothed his messy hair down once, a brief gesture he tolerated from her in a way he didn't from anyone else in the house. "Go get dressed first, okay? Your clothes are sitting on your chair."

Andy looked down at his toast. Then up at Ruth. Then at Nancy, one quick, searching look that Nancy didn't quite know what to do with.

"Okay," he said finally.

He took his toast with him, chewing deliberately, his footsteps retreating back down the carpeted hallway. Ruth waited until she heard his bedroom door click shut. Then she turned her eyes back to the table.

The room was smaller now. Closer. More honest.

Ruth walked back to her chair and sat down. She wrapped her fingers firmly around her mug and looked straight at Nancy's face.

"Are you going to say what's troubling you?" she asked, her voice low. It wasn't unkind. It was just real.

Nancy's fingers stilled against her cold cup. "Do you really want to hear it?"

A long pause stretched across the table. Ruth let out a slow exhale, her shoulders rising and falling heavily with the breath. "No," she admitted. "Not really. But I know it will keep hurting you if you don't say the words."

Nancy let out a short, bitter sound that wasn't a laugh. "How would you know?"

Ruth's green gaze didn't waver a fraction of an inch. "Because a long time ago, Nancy, I was in your exact situation."

Nancy blinked, her jaw tightening. For a moment, she couldn't speak. She sat with the weight of that sentence, the precise weight of it, what it actually meant that Ruth had lived through something like this from the inside. That she wasn't speaking from the safe, sterile distance of adult experience, but from a scar.

"What did you do?" Nancy asked, her voice barely a whisper into the kitchen.

Ruth's fingers tightened around the ceramic until her nails turned white. "I said exactly what I was supposed to say. I followed the rules."

The pain in her voice was entirely raw, unguarded, and unperformed. Nancy could see it clearly in the way her throat worked, in the deep way her eyes darkened in the sunlight.

"Did it help?" Nancy asked.

Ruth looked at her—really looked at her—and nodded once. "Yes. No matter how much it hurt, or what was done with the words after... it always helps to say the thing."

The words settled heavily into the wood grain of the table.

Nancy looked down at her coffee. Her hands were perfectly still around the ceramic. She understood exactly what Ruth was offering her right now, not permission, and not an invitation, but something adjacent to it. The specific, heavy gift of someone who has been exactly where you are standing and knows the only way out is straight through.

She drew a deep breath into her lungs.

"I love you," Nancy said.

The words didn't echo against the cabinets. They didn't explode. They just existed between them in the kitchen air, in the narrow space where Ruth's breath hitched sharply and her green eyes closed tight for just a single second.

Just a second. But it was enough.

Ruth opened her eyes, her gaze locking back onto Nancy's face with brutal stability. "Now it's out," she said, her voice steady despite the visible tremor in her fingers. "It's a fact. But let it end right here."

Nancy's chest completely ached, her ribs tight. "Why?"

"Because you need to accept reality."

"And you don't care at all?"

Ruth's breath came harder, her chest rising. "I do care," she said, her voice rough and cracked around the edges. "I care enough to ask you to stop it right here, Nancy."

Nancy let out a short, cynical laugh. "Easy for you to say."

"No," Ruth said, her voice breaking slightly on the syllable. "I wish to God it was."

The silence that followed was suffocating, pressing down on the counter until Nancy could barely draw air. "What now?" she asked, her voice tiny.

Ruth's green gaze didn't falter. "You need to answer your own questions."

She stood up in one fluid motion, her chair scraping against the floorboards, and walked toward the kitchen doorway. Nancy's hand shot out across the laminate, not to physically stop her from leaving, just to anchor herself to something solid.

"I won't ask you for a single thing, Ruth," Nancy said, her voice barely audible over the hum of the fridge. "But I don't think I'll ever stop loving you."

Ruth stopped dead on the threshold.

For a long moment, she didn't move an inch. Her back was completely to Nancy, her shoulders held in a rigid tension that was no longer hidden, no longer managed into something smooth and adult. Nancy could see it now—clearly—how much physical effort it took for Ruth to stand there and not turn her face around.

Then she turned. Not fully. Just enough that Nancy could see her profile in the light, the line of her jaw set entirely too tight, her green eyes darker than they had been a moment before.

For a fraction of a second—just one stolen beat—it looked like she might take a step backward. Like she might close the narrow distance between them and completely undo every single sentence she had just delivered.

Nancy felt it. That shift. That dangerous possibility. It was entirely real.

And then, Ruth made her choice.

The moment passed. She straightened her shoulders, whatever had slipped returning instantly to its proper place, not erased but contained again, held with visible effort. She didn't say another word. She turned her back and walked down the hallway.

This time, she didn't stop.

Nancy didn't move from the island. Not when Ruth disappeared from sight, not when the heavy quiet returned, not when the house resumed its ordinary, clockwork rhythm around her. She stayed at the

table, her hands wrapped tight around the ceramic, though the coffee inside had long since gone completely cold.

From down the hallway, Ruth's voice carried clearly into the kitchen, low, steady, and completely patient. "Not like that, bug. Look—like this."

Andy answered her immediately, his voice bright, loud, and excited about a game panel. The sound of it filled up the empty space easily, naturally, as if nothing in the world had shifted behind the ribs of the house.

Nancy listened to them. That was the life Ruth had chosen to stand inside of. Not complicated. Not unresolved. Not suspended in questions that had absolutely no safe place to land. Real. Lived. Ongoing.

Nancy lowered her eyes back to the wood grain. Her chest ached, but the feeling was different now. It wasn't sharp, and it wasn't panicked. It was just heavy. Certain.

She had said the words out loud. They existed now outside of her own body, no longer just in the quiet corners of her mind, no longer just in steam and solitude. And Ruth had heard them.

And still, she had turned her back and walked away. Not because the words meant absolutely nothing to her, but because they meant enough.

Nancy let out a long, slow breath through her nose. Her fingers tightened slightly around the cold ceramic, grounding herself in the solid weight of the mug, the small, undeniable reality of something she could physically hold onto.

Upstairs, her bedroom waited for her. Gerald in the plaster. The old version of her that used to fit inside the walls. Down the hall, Ruth's voice continued, steady and sure, shaping the morning for someone else.

Nancy sat right between those two shores. And this time—she didn't leave.

Chapter 20

Glowing

The taxi's engine hummed as it pulled away from the curb, leaving Nancy standing on the wet asphalt. The evening air was sharp, carrying that specific winter cold that seeped right through your layers, and the first hesitant raindrops tapped against her shoulders like uncertain fingers. She pulled her coat tighter, the rough wool catching against her palms, and turned toward the apartment building. The yellow streetlights cast long, wavering shadows across the pavement, stretching and bending whenever the breeze caught them.

Then—a voice.

Her name, called out from across the street.

Nancy turned, squinting through the steady drizzle. Mr. Johnson was standing outside his shop, one arm raised high, his flannel sleeve rolled up to the elbow despite the chill. The neon sign above his glass door flickered rhythmically, casting his face in alternating strokes of blue and white. She lifted a hand in response, her fingers already stiff from the wind.

“Hi,” she called back, her voice cutting thin through the damp air.

He beckoned her over, the gesture firm but warm. She hesitated for only a second before stepping off the curb, her boots splashing through a shallow puddle. The freezing water seeped through the thin soles instantly, a cold, sharp shock against her socks.

“Hi, Mr. Johnson,” she said as she reached the awning, stopping just outside the pool of light spilling from his display window. “How are you doing?”

“Hi, dear.” His voice was gruff but kind, the way it always was, like a well-worn tool, reliable and completely familiar. “I’m good. How about you? Long time no see around these blocks. Everything okay at school?”

She nodded, tucking her hands deep into her coat pockets. “Yeah. I’ve just been busy at college. That’s why I haven’t been around.”

“Oh.” He exhaled, a thick cloud of white steam forming between them in the dark. “Good. Wish you luck, Nancy. You’re a smart young woman.”

“Thank you.” She shifted her weight toward the stairs, ready to turn back toward Clara’s building, but his hand closed gently around her forearm. It wasn’t tight enough to hold her back. Just enough to ask her to stop.

“Dear,” he said, his voice dropping into a lower register, the way it always did when he talked about things that actually mattered. “Can I tell you something?”

She faced him fully now, the mist gathering on the collar of her coat. “Yeah. Sure, Mr. Johnson.”

He rubbed the back of his neck, his calloused fingers leaving faint red streaks against his weathered skin. "I've known Clara since her dad first brought her to this neighborhood," he began, his voice softening. "She was a cute little thing. Sweet. Everyone on this block loved her."

Nancy smiled, but it felt thin, stretched too tight across her teeth. "Yeah. She's the kind of person you can't help but love."

"A few months ago," he continued, his eyes fixing on the sidewalk, "right before she started those bookstore shifts... she was happy, Nancy. Glowing, even. You could see it from a mile away. Made all of us old folks happy just to be around her."

Nancy's throat tightened significantly, her ribs locking. She knew exactly where this line was going.

"But lately," he said, and his voice cracked just a fraction of an inch, "she looks sad. Lonely. Like she's hurting inside." The lines around his eyes deepened, his brow furrowing as if he could smooth out the wrinkles in the neighborhood through sheer force of will. "I'm worried about her. We all are. Maybe it's the work, maybe it's..." He trailed off, shaking his head. "Can you talk to her? Find out what it is? We're all willing to help her if she needs it."

The weight of the block settled right onto Nancy's shoulders, a massive physical pressure, like heavy stones stacked one by one on her chest. She swallowed hard, forcing her throat open. "I will. I promise."

"Thank you, dear." His smile was incredibly grateful, but his eyes stayed shadowed, carrying the kind of look that lingered long after the words were spoken.

She turned away, the hem of her heavy coat brushing against the wet concrete. Each step back toward Clara's apartment building felt heavier than the last. The rain picked up, a steady, rhythmic patter against the back of her neck, but she barely registered the moisture.

She'd done this. She was the exact person who had dulled that glow.

The brick building loomed ahead, its front windows glowing warm and gold against the gray evening. Nancy climbed the concrete steps, her fingers trembling slightly as she pressed the buzzer for the apartment. A beat of silence followed. Then the metal lock clicked loudly, the heavy door swinging open before she could even pull her hand back from the frame.

Clara was standing there.

They looked at each other through the doorway.

No words. Just the narrow space between them, entirely charged and fragile, like the fraction of a second before a held breath is released. Then Clara's mouth curved, slow, sure, and completely real, and Nancy's chest completely ached with the familiarity of it. She took a violent step forward, and Clara met her halfway, their bodies colliding in a hug that was equal parts relief and absolute sorrow. Nancy buried her face deep into the warm crook of Clara's neck, inhaling the safe, grounding scent of her, vanilla, dried herbs, and old paper. Clara's hands pressed hard against her back, her fingers curling tightly into the rough wool of her coat.

They didn't speak a word. They didn't need to.

Inside, the small apartment was incredibly warm, the air thick with the rich scent of simmering tomatoes and garlic. Nany was standing at the stove, her back to the room, humming something low and entirely wordless. She turned around, wiping her hands on her apron, and her face split into a wide smile. "Nancy! Mija, it's been entirely too long."

Clara didn't let go of her hand as they moved into the narrow kitchen, their fingers laced together securely.

Dinner was quiet but comfortable, the kind of silence that comes from knowing each other's physical rhythms by heart, the exact way Clara tilted her head when she was thinking, the way Nany's laugh crinkled the corners of her dark eyes. Nancy helped clear the porcelain plates afterward, her movements completely automatic, her mind still snagged hard on Mr. Johnson's words.

She was glowing. You could see it.

Then they were in Clara's room.

The small lamp on the desk cast a soft, yellow glow over the mattress, turning the blue walls a deeper shade, like the sky right before twilight hits. Nancy ran her fingers along the smooth wooden back of the desk chair before sitting down. Clara perched on the very edge of the bed, her legs tucked securely beneath her skirt, her round glasses catching the light.

They sat like that for a long moment, the quiet between them not empty, but completely full—full of all the things they hadn't said over the phone lines, all the spaces they'd let grow between their trays at lunch.

"I'm sorry, Clara," Nancy said finally, her voice rough. She watched Clara's gaze lift, her dark eyes reflecting the yellow lamplight like still water.

Clara shook her head, her shoulders dropping. "Don't be, Nancy. Please."

"I know exactly what pain I'm causing you. I look at you and I know. And I'm so sorry."

Clara's small fingers twisted in the hem of her sweater. "You've given me so much," she said, her voice completely steady. "You've given me happiness. Joy. Love. Way more than I ever thought to ask for."

Nancy's breath hitched sharply in her throat. "You only deserve happiness and love, Clara. Entirely."

She paused. The next words were right there, waiting at the back of her teeth—I promise I'll try—and she felt both the desperate shape of them and the total inadequacy of them. She couldn't make that promise to Clara. Not cleanly. Not honestly. Not with Ruth's voice still echoing in the front of her chest, and the morning in the kitchen still existing the way it existed, undeniable, permanent, and fixed.

What she could offer her was simpler than that. And ten times harder.

“I’m here,” Nancy whispered across the space. “Right now, Clara, I’m completely here.”

Clara studied her face for a long, unhurried moment. Something behind her lenses shifted, not quite relief, and not quite acceptance, but something that held both truths without demanding a single line more.

“What happened back there?” Clara asked quietly.

Nancy let out a shaky breath that wasn’t quite a laugh. “Nothing new.”

Clara held her gaze, her eyes absolute. “Liar.”

The word landed with the specific, clean accuracy Clara always brought to the room, direct, entirely without cruelty, and without any need to elaborate. Nancy felt the syllable settle deep into her ribs. She felt the heavy truth of being seen so completely that pretense became entirely pointless. She sat inside that stillness for three seconds, that particular comfort of being known. It was the thing about Clara that had always completely undone her defenses. Not the confrontation of it. Just the precision.

“Yeah,” Nancy said softly, her shoulders dropping. “Yeah, okay.”

Clara nodded once. She didn’t require an explanation; she just received the admission.

They stayed in the quiet for a moment longer, and then something in the room shifted, the way the air moves when the heaviest thing has been acknowledged and the room can finally breathe again.

“Thank you,” Nancy said.

Clara tilted her head, her mouth twitching. “Well...”

“What?”

“Fuck you, Nancy.”

Nancy let out a loud bark-laugh, the sharp sound surprising even her, bright, sudden, coming up from somewhere that hadn’t been reached since she left for college. Clara’s face broke open into a wide, genuine grin, and just like that, the bedroom felt ten times warmer, the air between them charged with the thing that had always been steady beneath the complications.

Nancy looked right at her. At the yellow light on her face. At her glasses slightly askew on her nose. At the way she was still smiling, that particular, private smile that was for Nancy and absolutely nobody else.

She stood up from the chair.

Not before she could second-guess herself, but after. After she had already decided, consciously and deliberately, that this was the right thing and the true thing, and that Clara deserved to be chosen by an act of will, not just by momentum.

She crossed the rug, her hands cupping Clara’s face, her thumbs brushing over the softness of her cheeks. Clara’s breath hitched sharply, her dark lashes fluttering as she looked up, asking the question

without words.

Permission given.

Clara's hands found Nancy's waist, her small fingers splaying wide against the small of her back, pulling her body flush against her knees. She pressed her lips to Nancy's stomach, right through the fabric of her gray sweater, the deep warmth of her breath seeping through the wool. Nancy tangled her fingers tight into Clara's loose hair, tilting her head up, and then she was kissing her, slow at first, then deeper, like she was trying to pour every single unsaid sentence into the press of their mouths.

She pulled back just an inch to meet Clara's eyes. The dark flush on her cheeks. Her lips already swollen from the pressure. The absolute steadiness in her gaze that never once faltered.

Then she pushed gently, and Clara fell back onto the mattress with a soft oof, Nancy following her down onto the sheets, their limbs aligning the exact way they always did, without effort, without question, and without friction.

What followed was warm, real, and fully chosen by both of them. Nancy stayed entirely present in the touch. Completely. Clara's hands were learning her body again, her voice soft and ragged in the dark, the specific way she delivered Nancy's name when everything else in the world had fallen away.

And at the very edges of the amber room, not intruding, not demanding, but simply existing the way permanent things exist, the morning in the kitchen waited. Ruth's voice. The cold mug on the laminate. The words that had been said and could never be unsaid.

Nancy didn't try to push the memory away. She let it sit there at the edges of the dark, while she held Clara closer against her chest.

Both shores were true. Both shores were hers.

The first thing Nancy felt when she opened her eyes was warmth, soft, deliberate touches tracing her cheekbones, the bridge of her nose, the curve of her jaw line. Her skin hummed beneath the contact, half-dreaming, half-awake. For a single breath, her mind stayed with Clara, the solid weight of her in the dark, the way her fingers had tangled in Nancy's hair, the slow press of her mouth against her stomach. Then memory shifted, subtle but certain, and she remembered she had taken a taxi back to her own street alone late last night, the ride completely quiet, the house dark except for the yellow glow of the porch light.

Her eyelids fluttered open.

Andy's face was hovering inches above hers, his grin lopsided, his dark hair sticking up in every single direction. He was close enough that she could see the tiny flecks of gold in his irises, the way his lashes cast shadows on his cheeks when he blinked in the sun.

"Hey—she's up! She's up!"

His voice cracked cleanly on the last word, dissolving into a loud laugh as he bounced on the mattress beside her hip.

Nancy exhaled, something behind her ribs loosening without her permission. She rolled over toward him, pulling his small body into her arms. His ribs felt thin beneath her palms, his pajama shirt warm from sleep.

“Good morning, my love,” she murmured into his messy hair, pressing a succession of warm kisses to his temple, his forehead, and the tip of his nose.

“Eeooo—” He wriggled out of her grip, wiping at his face with his sleeve. “You’re all slobbery, Nance!”

She laughed, the sound still rough with sleep, and sat up, the heavy blankets pooling around her waist. The bedroom smelled like clean laundry detergent and the faint, sweet tang of Andy’s strawberry shampoo. Sunlight slipped through the blinds in soft, distinct stripes, cutting straight across the rumpled bedspread.

“Wait for me downstairs,” she said, already moving her feet to the floor.

She pulled on her robe, the fabric still slightly damp from the hallway air, and tied the belt tight around her waist. Andy followed her down the hall, his bare feet slapping rhythmically against the floorboards.

The bathroom was warm, the mirror fogged from an earlier shower. The sharp scent of lavender hung heavy in the air, her mother’s soap. Nancy splashed freezing water on her face, the cold clearing the sleep from her head.

When she turned around, Andy was watching her from the doorway, serious now, like he had an important piece of news to deliver.

“Breakfast?” she asked, brushing his hair back from his forehead.

He nodded quickly. “Ruth made pancakes.”

The kitchen was already alive with noise. Steam curled from the stovetop, plates clattered softly against the counter, and Nora’s voice threaded through the low hum of the radio program. Ruth was standing at the stove, her sleeves rolled to her elbows, flipping a pancake with easy, methodical precision, a mug of coffee balanced firmly in her other hand.

She looked up the second Nancy’s boots hit the tile.

“Sleeping Beauty rises,” Ruth said smoothly.

Nora turned around from the fridge, a carton of orange juice held in her hands. Her cheeks were flushed pink, her hair still damp from her shower. “Took you long enough, sweetheart.” But she was smiling broadly.

Nancy slid into her usual stool at the island, Andy climbing quickly onto the one beside her. The table was already full, pancakes stacked high, strawberries bright in a plastic bowl, the syrup warm.

She reached out for a fork, her fingers accidentally brushing Andy’s as he grabbed for the syrup

container first.

“What’s the plan for the break today?” Ruth asked, sliding a clean plate straight toward Nancy’s hands.

“I was thinking we could—” Nora began.

“Work,” Ruth cut in lightly, her shoulder nudging Nora’s with an intimate, unthinking familiarity. “You were going to tell us about the Miller account, remember?”

Nancy froze, her fork hovering an inch above her plate.

Nora never talked about her office accounts at home. Not once.

The silence that followed the sentence was immediate and thick. Just the hum of the fridge.

“I—I don’t really know what you mean, Ruth,” Nora said, her voice careful, her color rising.

“You were muttering about it last night in bed,” Ruth replied easily, taking a slow sip of her coffee. “Something about the client backing out at the last minute?”

The bright pink rose further in Nora’s cheeks. “Oh. That. It’s completely nothing.”

Nancy set her fork down hard against the laminate. “You’ve never talked about work in this house, Mom. Not one single time.”

“That’s not true, Nancy.”

“It is true,” Nancy said, her voice fiercely steady. “Not with me. Not with Dad. Not ever.”

The air in the kitchen shifted, turning dense.

Then Ruth spoke, calm, effortless, and completely unbothered by the tension. “I happen to be very easy to talk to.”

Nancy met her green eyes fully across the island. “Yes. Everyone in this house appears to agree to that.”

Nora let out a long exhale, the rigid lines in her shoulders slipping away as she smoothed over the moment. “Is Clara coming over today?”

The transition was so fast it almost made Nancy dizzy.

“She’ll be here for lunch,” Nancy said, keeping her voice level.

“Then what do you want me to make for lunch, sweetheart?” Nora asked, turning back to the fridge.

A brief pause hung over the counter.

“Parpique,” Ruth said simply.

“It’s freezing outside, Ruth,” Nora answered.

“It’s literally raining,” Nancy added, looking at the window.

Ruth lifted one dark brow, her mouth curving into that slow smirk. “So?”

Andy lit up instantly, bouncing on his stool. “Parpique! Parpique!”

Nora let out a loud laugh, completely giving in to the room. “Alright, alright. Parpique it is.”

Nancy watched Ruth as she moved around the stove, the quiet, absolute confidence in every single gesture, the total ease of her presence. This woman had walked right into their life and somehow made the entire house feel steadier, warmer, and more whole.

Andy’s loud laughter broke through her thoughts.

Ruth and Nora were laughing together over something by the sink, doubled over, a shared, easy joke between them. Nancy hadn’t even heard the words.

She was just watching Ruth smile.

Clara arrived exactly with the heavy rain.

Her dark hair was damp at the edges, her round glasses completely fogged as she stepped inside the entryway, shaking the water from her flannel sleeves. Andy ran to her the second the lock clicked, wrapping his arms tightly around her legs.

“Easy, tiger,” she laughed, her hands steadying his shoulders on the rug.

Then her eyes lifted, finding Nancy’s in the hallway.

Something completely quiet passed between them. Certain.

The rest of the afternoon settled into something warm, loud, and lived-in. Ruth and Nora were outside on the covered porch with the grill, arguing softly over the timing, letting out real laughter whenever the wind picked the rain up. Clara and Nancy were inside the kitchen, moving around the island in a practiced, automatic rhythm, their hips brushing naturally without a single thought. Andy darted between the two shores, carrying messages back and forth like they were orders that actually mattered.

They ate together at the table, sitting close, their shoulders locked, the laughter easy and unperformed. Beneath the table, out of sight, Clara’s hand found Nancy’s thigh. Nancy didn’t pull away to fix the distance.

Later, full and warm, Nancy stretched her arms above her head. “Me and Clara are going out to the bakery for dessert,” she announced. “You two stay here and clean up the kitchen.”

Nora let out a mock groan. “That is entirely not fair.”

“Life isn’t fair, darling,” Ruth said smoothly, setting her mug down.

Andy jumped up from his stool. “I’m coming with you! I get to pick the flavor!”

“Of course you are,” Clara smiled, reaching for her jacket.

The neighborhood bakery was incredibly warm, sweet-smelling, the glass display cases fogging up where Andy pressed his face directly against the frame.

“Cheesecake,” he decided, pointing a finger.

“Cheesecake it is,” Clara said.

They carried the cardboard box home carefully, handling it like something that mattered.

The exact second they stepped back through the front door, everything in the hallway stopped moving.

Ruth and Nora were standing right in the center of the kitchen, pressed tight together. Her mother’s fingers were tangled deep into Ruth’s dark hair, Ruth’s hands holding her waist firmly. The kiss was deep, completely unguarded, the specific kind of touch that entirely erased the rest of the world.

Nancy felt the sight like a physical hit behind her ribs. Beside her, Clara’s fingers tightened around her hand until it was nearly painful.

Then Ruth’s green eyes opened.

She saw them standing in the hall. Everything went dead still.

Then—

“We got the cheesecake!” Andy’s loud voice shattered the suspension cleanly.

Nora let out a breathless laugh, stepping back from the counter. Ruth moved with her, easy, completely composed again, but her green gaze flicked straight to Nancy’s face, holding on for a second longer than it should have.

They ate the dessert in the living room while a movie played low on the screen. Andy fell asleep halfway through the film, curled into a ball on the rug. Nora leaned down, tucking the heavy throw blanket carefully around his shoulders.

Ruth sat right beside her on the couch. Close. Natural.

Clara’s fingers moved slowly through Nancy’s hair, a steady, grounding rhythm against her scalp. Twice during the movie, Nancy caught Ruth looking across the coffee table at her. The second time, the look held on. Something was there. Green locking onto brown. Then it vanished just as quickly.

“I need a cigarette,” Clara said quietly as the credits started to roll.

Nora turned her head immediately. “You smoke, Clara?”

“Just two or three a day.”

“Can I have one of them?” Ruth asked, her mouth twitching.

“No.”

“Just one,” Ruth pushed.

Clara stood up from the cushions. "Come outside then."

Outside on the porch, the air was freezing, damp from the storm. Nancy watched them through the glass window at first, her forehead pressed against the pane. Then she pushed the door open, the sentences carrying clearly through the damp air.

"You look very happy with Nora," Clara was saying, her lighter flickering.

"I am," Ruth answered, her voice steady. "She's incredibly kind. Loving."

"And passionate?"

A long pause followed, the smoke curling up into the porch light.

"At our age, Clara... passion isn't the most important thing in a house," Ruth said quietly.

Another silence settled over the steps.

"I can see the love between you two is completely genuine," Clara said.

"Yes. It is."

"And you and Nancy," Ruth added softly, her green eyes finding Clara's face. "You're younger. More passionate."

Nancy didn't let herself hear the rest of the sentence. She pushed the screen door wide, her boots loud on the wood.

"You like the cold, I see," Nancy said flatly.

Ruth smiled—slow, easy. "It's nice air."

Nancy stepped straight into Clara's space, her arm slipping around her shoulders, holding her tight against the wind. They stood like that for a full minute on the porch steps. Three people. Entirely too aware of each other's existence.

Inside, the house had gone completely quiet. Andy was asleep on the rug. Nora moved softly around the living room, adjusting the pillows. Ruth brushed past her on her way to the hall, her hand briefly touching Nora's lower back, a small, automatic, deeply intimate gesture.

Nancy noticed it. She noticed every single detail.

Beside her on the sheets an hour later, Clara's hand slipped away from hers. It wasn't a sudden movement, and it wasn't angry. Just... gone.

"You should get some sleep," Nora had said before heading up.

"Yeah," Nancy answered.

They had moved down the hallway together. The house felt entirely different now. Or maybe she did.

Clara stepped into Nancy's bedroom like she belonged inside the walls. She took off her heavy flannel

sweater, setting it neatly on the desk chair. Nancy closed the wooden door, the lock turning with a quiet click.

For a moment, neither of them spoke a word.

“You’re cold,” Clara said, looking at her shoulders.

“A little.”

Clara took a step closer, her small hands rubbing warmth into Nancy’s bare arms, slow, absent, and gentle.

Nancy swallowed hard, her throat tight. It felt too normal. Too grounding.

Clara’s fingers stilled against her skin. Then she pulled her hands back.

“I’ll stay with you tonight,” Clara whispered.

“Okay.”

They moved quietly in the dim room, changing into their sleep clothes, settling onto the mattress. They lay facing each other, close, their chests nearly touching. But it wasn’t the same as the summer.

Clara reached out, her fingers brushing Nancy’s hair back gently from her forehead. “You okay, Nancy?”

Nancy hesitated for a fraction of a second. “Yeah.”

Clara didn’t challenge the lie this time. Her hand just stayed flat against Nancy’s cheek, warm and solid.

Nancy leaned into her palm. Just enough.

The house settled into a deep silence around them, quiet and completely full of every single thing that hadn’t been said out loud. Nancy closed her eyes, holding onto the physical warmth beside her on the bed, even as something major and unresolved remained just beneath the surface of the sheets, waiting.

Chapter 21

Growing Up Fast

The morning light had already stretched long across the floor by the time Nancy woke, her body heavy with the kind of sleep that comes after too little rest. She blinked against the brightness, her fingers instinctively reaching for the warmth beside her, only to find the sheets cool.

Clara's side of the bed was empty, the faint impression of her still pressed into the mattress like something recently lost. Nancy exhaled and rolled onto her back, staring up at the ceiling as the memory of the night before settled over her, not sharply, not painfully, but with a quiet persistence that refused to leave. The closeness, the ease of it, the way Clara had held her without asking for anything more than her presence.

Somewhere in the house, there were voices, low, indistinct, moving through the walls in a way that made it clear she was no longer alone. The day had already begun without her.

She pushed herself up and made her way to the shower, letting the hot water run longer than necessary, standing beneath it as the steam filled the room and softened everything around her. The scent of shampoo, Clara's, floral and faintly sweet, lingered in the air, and for a moment Nancy allowed herself to stay there, eyes closed, letting the heat sink into her shoulders and spine.

But the quiet didn't last. By the time she dried off and pulled on a loose sweater and jeans, the house had shifted into something more awake, more present, and when she stepped into the kitchen, the smell of coffee confirmed it.

Ruth was already there, leaning back against the counter with one hip, a mug cradled in her hands, the steam curling upward in thin, disappearing lines. She didn't turn immediately, but Nancy could see the subtle shift in her shoulders, the small adjustment that said she had been aware of her the moment she entered.

"Morning," Nancy said, her voice still rough with sleep.

"Good morning."

Ruth's gaze lifted slowly, deliberately, moving over Nancy without hesitation, from her bare feet to the way the sweater slipped slightly off one shoulder, to the damp strands of hair clinging to her neck. She didn't look away.

Nancy many moved toward the coffee pot, but Ruth didn't move. It wasn't obvious, not something that could be called out without sounding absurd, but she was standing exactly where Nancy needed to be, her body forming a quiet barrier that forced Nancy to hesitate for just a fraction of a second before continuing.

"Did you see Clara?" Nancy asked, reaching anyway.

"Yes," Ruth said, taking a slow sip of her coffee, her eyes never leaving Nancy's face. "She had coffee

and left early.”

Nancy nodded and stepped closer, her arm brushing lightly against Ruth’s as she reached for the pot. The contact was brief, almost incidental, but it sent a small, undeniable jolt through her, a warmth that had nothing to do with the coffee. Ruth didn’t shift. If anything, she seemed to settle more firmly against the counter, her presence steady, unyielding in a way that made the space feel smaller than it was.

“What?” Nancy asked quietly when the silence stretched too long.

Ruth tilted her head slightly. “What?”

“You’re staring.”

There was a pause, just long enough to matter.

“Does it bother you?”

Nancy set the pot down harder than she meant to, the sound sharper than the moment required. “It does when I don’t know why.”

Ruth’s mouth curved, not quite a smile, something more restrained. “You’re growing up fast.”

The words landed with more weight than they should have, settling somewhere in Nancy’s chest in a way that felt immediate and unwelcome.

“Excuse me?” she said, turning more fully toward her.

“You’re changing faster than you think,” Ruth replied, her voice low, almost conversational, though there was something beneath it that wasn’t.

“Define changing.”

Ruth exhaled softly, her fingers tightening around the mug as if grounding herself. “You’ll understand. Very soon.”

Nancy studied her then, really studied her, taking in the familiar lines of her face, the calm that usually defined her, and the subtle fracture beneath it that hadn’t been there before, or that Nancy hadn’t allowed herself to see. She took a step closer without quite realizing it.

“I remind you of someone,” she said. Not asking.

Ruth’s breath caught, almost imperceptibly, but enough.

“In fact,” she said after a moment, quieter now, “yes. You do.”

“Who?”

Ruth refilled her mug, both hands wrapping around it as if the warmth mattered more than usual. She took her time before answering, her gaze dropping briefly before returning to Nancy’s.

“A girl from my past.”

Nancy didn't look away. "You hate talking about your past."

"I hate the history in it."

"And you hate that girl."

Ruth's gaze snapped back to hers, sharper now. "I hate who she was."

"Which was what?"

The silence stretched between them, thick and deliberate, before Ruth finally spoke again, her voice rougher than before. "Weak. Confused. Stupid enough to think that one moment didn't matter." She swallowed, her throat working visibly. "It took one stupid kiss," she added, slower this time, the certainty slipping just slightly, "and everything shifted. People reacted. Differently."

She didn't say more. She didn't need to. Nancy felt it anyway, the weight of it settling into the space between them, making everything else feel smaller by comparison.

"But she didn't stay that way," Nancy said softly.

Ruth looked at her then, really looked, and for a brief second something in her expression gave way, something unguarded, something that cost her to let show.

"You will be strong," she said.

Nancy let out a quiet breath, something almost like a laugh. "But not as beautiful."

That broke it, just enough. Ruth's laugh came softer this time, more real, and the tension eased, not gone, but loosened enough to move within.

Nancy reached for the coffee again, and once more Ruth hadn't moved. She could have asked her to step aside, could have created space where there was none, but instead she leaned in again, closer this time, her body brushing against Ruth's as she reached past her. The contact lingered just long enough to no longer be accidental, long enough for Nancy to feel the steady rise and fall of Ruth's breathing, for Ruth's breath to catch, barely, but undeniably.

"Are you done?" Ruth asked, her voice lower now, controlled but not entirely steady.

Nancy didn't answer. She poured her coffee, her hands steady even as her pulse climbed, and when she set the pot back she let her fingers brush lightly against Ruth's waist, a fleeting contact that still carried intention.

Their eyes met and held, something unspoken passing between them, something neither of them named. Then Nancy stepped back.

They didn't speak after that. They didn't need to.

Later, Nora returned with groceries, her voice filling the house and breaking whatever had settled in the kitchen. Nancy helped unpack, her movements automatic, her thoughts lingering somewhere else entirely. When her phone buzzed in her pocket, she already knew who it was.

I love you.

Clara's name glowed on the screen, simple and certain. Nancy looked at it for a moment longer than necessary before typing back.

I love you.

Her thumb hovered for a second before she added:

What are you doing?

The reply came quickly.

Nothing important. Want to come shopping?

Nancy smiled faintly.

Mall? Half an hour.

See you.

The mall was loud and bright, filled with movement and noise that made it easy, for a while, to forget everything else. Clara was waiting near the entrance, her glasses slightly fogged, her smile immediate and open in a way that loosened something in Nancy's chest the moment she saw her.

They moved easily together after that, slipping into a rhythm that felt familiar, talking, laughing, trying on things they didn't need. Clara adjusted a sleeve here, brushed Nancy's waist there, small touches that felt natural and unforced.

Nancy let herself fall into it. Or tried to.

Once, Clara said something and Nancy didn't catch it.

"Hey," Clara said softly, nudging her. "Where'd you go?"

Nancy blinked, pulling herself back. "Nowhere."

Clara watched her for a moment, something thoughtful flickering in her expression, but she let it pass.

Dinner was quiet and warm, at a small table where the light stayed low and the outside world felt distant. Clara reached across the table, her thumb tracing slow circles over the back of Nancy's hand.

"You glow when you're happy," she said.

Nancy turned her hand, lacing their fingers together. "Maybe I glow when I'm with you."

Clara's smile softened. "Christmas is next week."

"I'm a stay-at-home person," Nancy said. "You know me."

"With me?" Clara asked.

Nancy held her gaze. "Yeah. With you."

Clara leaned back slightly, satisfied. “Good. Then New Year’s is mine.”

Nancy huffed a quiet laugh. “Deal.”

A small pause settled between them.

“And tonight?” Clara asked.

Nancy didn’t hesitate. “Your place.”

They didn’t talk much on the way there. They didn’t need to. Clara’s apartment welcomed them in quiet, the door closing behind them with a soft click that seemed to shut out everything else.

Clara turned to her in the dim hallway, and Nancy went to her without hesitation—not falling into it, not managing it, but choosing it, the way she had learned to choose things. Clara’s hands found her face, tilting it up, and the kiss that followed was unhurried and certain, the kind that didn’t need to prove anything.

What came after was the same. Familiar in the way that only comes from having learned each other, where to be careful, where not to be, the particular language of attention and response they had built between them over months. Clara said her name the way she always did in these moments, like it was something she was grateful to know. Nancy answered with her hands, her presence, the deliberate act of staying completely inside it.

She didn’t pull away. She didn’t drift.

She was there—fully, honestly there—and Clara felt it. Nancy could tell by the way she held on afterward, the small sound she made before her breathing evened out. As if she had been waiting for this particular version of Nancy to show up, and here she was.

Later, the room had gone still, the air warm and settled. Clara lay half-curved against her, her breathing slow and even, one arm draped loosely across Nancy’s chest. Nancy lay on her back, staring up at nothing, her fingers moving absently against Clara’s arm, tracing slow, thoughtless patterns as if trying to hold onto the steadiness of it.

For a while, she let herself stay there, let herself feel it fully—the warmth, the certainty, the way being with Clara asked nothing complicated of her.

Then, without warning, the morning returned.

The kitchen. The narrow space between them. Ruth standing in her way as if she had always been there.

You’re growing up fast.

Nancy’s breath caught.

Clara shifted slightly in her sleep, her arm tightening around her without waking, grounding her in the present even as something else pulled at her from just beneath it.

Nancy turned her head just enough to look at her, to take in the softness of her expression, the trust in the way she slept beside her.

She didn't move. She stayed exactly where she was.

But her eyes remained open. And sleep didn't come.

Chapter 22

Christmas

The morning sun had already climbed high by the time Nancy stirred, its pale winter light filtering through the half-drawn curtains of her bedroom. It stretched across the floor in long, quiet lines, settling against the walls as if the house had been awake for hours without her. She lay still for a moment, her body heavy in that particular way that comes from too little rest and too much thinking, her mind slow to catch up with where she was.

When it did, it came all at once. The night. The laughter. The way things had shifted without anyone naming it.

She rolled onto her back, the sheets twisted around her legs, and let out a slow breath. The space beside her was cool now, empty, though the faint impression of Clara's body still lingered in the mattress. Nancy's fingers drifted there without thinking, pressing lightly, as if something might still be held in the fabric.

It wasn't.

Somewhere down the hall, a voice—low, familiar—then another, softer, answering. The house wasn't empty. Just already moving.

Nancy pushed herself up, running a hand through her hair before reaching for her towel. The floor was cold under her feet as she stepped into the hallway, the quiet of the house wrapping around her as she moved toward the bathroom.

The shower was already damp, the mirror fogged faintly from someone else's use. She didn't think about it. Just turned the water on, hotter than she needed, and stepped under it, letting it fall over her shoulders, her neck, her back.

For a moment, everything else slipped away. Just the water. The heat. The steady sound of it filling the space.

Her eyes closed.

And then—the door creaked.

Nancy's eyes opened immediately.

Ruth stood there, just inside the doorway, her hand still on the knob as if she hadn't meant to open it that far. For a second, just a second, they both froze, the steam shifting between them, softening the edges but not enough to hide anything.

Ruth's gaze lifted to Nancy's face first. Then, too quickly, it dropped. Not lingering. Not exploring. Just, there. And gone again, like something that shouldn't have happened at all.

Her breath caught, sharp and quiet.

“Sorry,” she said, the word rough, almost clipped, and she turned immediately, pulling the door shut behind her with a soft, final click.

The sound echoed louder than it should have.

Nancy didn’t move. The water kept falling, hot against her skin, but she barely felt it now. Something in her chest had tightened—not panic, not embarrassment, something else. Something she couldn’t quite place.

She stayed there longer than she meant to, until the heat faded, until the air cooled slightly around her, until the moment lost its shape enough for her to move again.

When she stepped out, her hands weren’t steady.

Back in her room, she dressed without thinking too much about it. Jeans first, then discarded. Not uncomfortable, just not right. She paused, looking at the open drawer longer than necessary before pulling out something else. A skirt. Shorter than what she usually wore here. A sweater next, soft and loose, slipping slightly at the shoulder when she pulled it on.

She didn’t adjust it. Didn’t really think about why.

When she looked at herself in the mirror, she didn’t smile. Just studied the reflection for a second longer than usual, as if trying to understand what had changed, or if anything had at all.

Then she turned away.

The kitchen was empty when she went downstairs, the coffee maker still half-full. She poured a mug and carried it into the living room.

Andy was kneeling by the tree, working through the lights with the focused, methodical attention he brought to things that had a clear right answer, each bulb tested, each tangle approached as a problem to be solved rather than a frustration to be felt. Nora perched on the arm of the couch, directing him with the patience of someone who understood that this particular task, on this particular morning, needed to unfold at exactly his pace and no faster.

Ruth was sprawled on the couch itself, one arm draped over her eyes.

Nancy felt the shift in the air the moment she stepped into the room. Ruth’s fingers twitched against her forehead. Then, slowly, she lowered her arm.

Their eyes met.

Ruth’s smile was careful, almost hesitant, as if she were still recalibrating. Nancy pretended not to notice, sinking onto the floor across from the couch and crossing her legs. She leaned forward, ostensibly to rub at her calf. From the corner of her eye, she saw Ruth’s gaze flicker, then snap back up.

“You’re quiet,” Nora remarked, watching Nancy over the rim of her coffee cup.

Nancy hummed, stretching her arms overhead. “Just tired.”

Andy held up a tangled cluster of lights. “Mom, these are impossible.”

Nora laughed. Nancy tilted her head, as if considering the tree, and glanced at Ruth again. Ruth was watching her. Noticed she’d been caught. Looked away.

Then Ruth stood abruptly, muttering something about the bathroom, and disappeared down the hall.

Nora slid onto the couch beside Nancy a few minutes later, her knee brushing Nancy’s. “You’re in a mood,” she observed.

“Am I?” Nancy’s voice was neutral.

Nora studied her for a long moment, then sighed, her shoulder pressing against Nancy’s. “College treating you well?”

“It’s fine.” Nancy traced the rim of her mug.

“You need to spend some time with Leo before going back.” Nora’s voice was dry. “He really misses you.”

Nancy exhaled. “I will.”

Nora’s thumb rubbed slow circles against Nancy’s wrist. Then, quietly: “Are you happy? With Ruth, I mean.”

Nancy turned her head. Nora’s expression was unreadable.

Nora’s smile was soft, but her eyes were distant. “It’s okay. Different. Not something I ever thought I’d want, but she makes me happy.”

“What do you mean, different?”

Nora hesitated. “You know I’m not like you. Not like her. I’m straight, Nancy. Or I was. I don’t know.” She laughed, but it was a brittle sound. “Let’s call it an arrangement. And the sex is good.”

“Mom!” Nancy groaned, but Nora just grinned, nudging her shoulder.

“What? It’s true.” The smile faded slowly. “I just wish I could give her more.”

“More what?” Nancy’s fingers stilled.

Nora’s gaze dropped to her lap. “Love.”

The word hung between them. Nancy sat with it for a moment, the weight of what Nora had just said, what it meant. Ruth was in a relationship where she was cared for but not fully loved. She had chosen warmth and ease and something real but not complete. And she knew it. She must know it.

Nancy reached out, her hand covering Nora’s. “You do love her.”

“I do.” Nora’s voice was barely a whisper. “But not the way I loved your father. Not the way she deserves.”

“You’re not in love with her.”

Nora didn’t speak. She just leaned forward, pressing her forehead against Nancy’s shoulder, and Nancy let her, her own throat tight.

They stayed like that until Andy’s voice cut through the quiet. “Mom, the lights are still tangled!”

Nora laughed wetly, sitting up and wiping at her eyes. “Duty calls.” She stood, but paused, her hand warm on Nancy’s cheek. “Happy for you, kid. Whatever it is.”

Nancy watched her go, then glanced toward the hallway.

Ruth was leaning against the doorframe, her arms crossed, her expression unreadable.

Their eyes locked. Held. Nancy didn’t look away.

By evening, the house smelled of wine and garlic, the remnants of dinner still scattered across the coffee table. Andy had torn into his gifts with the particular intensity of someone for whom anticipation is almost physically unbearable, the waiting had been its own kind of endurance, and the release of it was enormous, complete. Now he lay sprawled on the floor amidst wrapping paper and a half-assembled model plane, narrating the construction process to himself in a low, satisfied murmur.

Nancy retrieved the whiskey from the cabinet, the bottle heavy in her hands.

“Game time,” she announced, unscrewing the cap. “Poker. Loser drinks.”

Nora groaned. “I’m terrible at poker.”

“Exactly why you’re playing,” Ruth said, her voice low, amused. She took the deck from Nancy, her fingers brushing Nancy’s palm, and began to shuffle.

They played in a loose circle on the floor, the cards slapping against the wood, the whiskey burning its way down Nancy’s throat. Nora was the first to falter, her laughter growing louder with each round. “I’m done,” she declared after her third loss, waving a hand as she pushed to her feet. “You’re all cheats.”

“No escapes,” Nancy sing-songed, but Nora only flipped her off before stumbling toward her room, her steps unsteady.

“She’s gone,” Ruth wheezed, watching Nora’s retreat. “Look at her. She can’t even walk straight.”

Nancy dissolved into laughter, the room spinning just enough to make everything funnier. “Your turn to lose, then.”

“In your dreams, amateur.” Ruth’s grin was sharp, her eyes bright with challenge.

They played another round. Then another. The whiskey dwindled, the cards flew, and the air between them grew thicker, charged with something that wasn’t just alcohol. Ruth’s knee brushed Nancy’s. Nancy didn’t move away.

“You’re cheating,” Ruth accused, slamming her cards down. “Again.”

“Prove it.” Nancy leaned in, close enough to smell the whiskey on Ruth’s breath, the faint citrus of her perfume.

Ruth’s hand shot out, grabbing Nancy’s wrist. “I’ll show you—”

Then they were on the floor, a tangle of limbs and laughter, Nancy pinning Ruth’s wrists above her head. The game forgotten. The whiskey forgotten. Ruth’s chest heaved beneath her, her dark eyes wide, her lips parted—

Nancy stopped laughing. The room stopped spinning.

Ruth’s breath caught. Nancy’s gaze dropped to her mouth, her pulse roaring in her ears. It would be so easy. Just an inch. Just a—

She leaned down.

Ruth turned her head at the last second, her cheek brushing Nancy’s lips instead. Nancy didn’t pull back. She buried her face against Ruth’s neck, inhaling the scent of her skin, the heat of her. Ruth’s hands found her waist, her fingers pressing in—not pushing away. Not pulling closer. Just there.

They stayed like that, frozen, until Nancy rolled onto her back beside her, both of them staring at the ceiling. The silence was its own thing—not empty, not comfortable, just present.

Ruth sat up first, her movements slow, deliberate. She looked down at Nancy for a moment without speaking.

“Help me up?” Nancy asked, her voice rough.

Ruth reached for her hand. Nancy’s fingers slipped in hers, but when Ruth pulled, Nancy’s legs gave out, her balance shot from the whiskey. She stumbled, laughing, and Ruth caught her, her arm wrapping around Nancy’s waist to steady her.

“Bed,” Ruth decided, already guiding her down the hall.

Nancy let herself be led, her cheek pressed against Ruth’s shoulder, her feet unsteady beneath her. The hallway was dim, the house quiet around them, everyone else already gone to their own corners of the night.

The last thing she remembered was the warmth of Ruth’s arm, the steadiness of her, and then, Ruth’s lips, brushing her temple. Accidental, maybe. Or not.

Then she was dreaming. In the dream, Ruth leaned down. In the dream, she didn’t turn away.

Chapter 23

The Road Back

The cold seeped into Nancy's bones before her eyes even opened. A sharp, early-morning breeze had slipped through the gap in the window, carrying the scent of damp earth and the faintest hint of woodsmoke from a neighbor's chimney. She shivered, burrowing deeper into the sheets, only to find them half-pulled away, tangled around Clara's legs.

Clara lay curled on her side, her back to Nancy, her breath slow and even. The rise and fall of her ribs was steady beneath the thin cotton of her nightshirt. The room was still dark, the blue-gray light of dawn barely touching the edges of the curtains, but Nancy could make out the shape of her, small, warm, utterly at peace.

For a moment, Nancy just watched.

The way Clara's fingers twitched slightly in her sleep, as if dreaming of brushing paint onto a canvas. The way her glasses, left on the nightstand, caught the faintest glint of light. The particular stillness of someone who had learned, over years, to rest completely.

Then the cold bit again, sharper this time, and Nancy reached for the blankets, dragging them back over herself. She pressed close, her front to Clara's back, one arm slipping around her waist. Clara murmured something indistinct, and Nancy buried her face in the warm crook of her neck. The scent of her—jasmine and the faint, sweet musk of sleep, filled Nancy's lungs, and the tension in her shoulders eased.

Just for this, she could stay.

She must have dozed again, because the next thing she knew, soft lips were pressing against her temple, then her cheekbone, then the corner of her mouth.

"Time to get up," Clara whispered, her voice rough with sleep.

Nancy groaned, rolling onto her back.

The ceiling above her was a mess of old plaster, the paint slightly yellowed with age. A single crack ran diagonally from the corner above the door, jagged and uneven, like a lightning bolt frozen mid-strike. She traced it with her eyes, following its path until it disappeared behind the edge of the light fixture.

She didn't know its name. It wasn't a fork, wasn't a branch. It was just a break, something that had happened over time, something that had found its shape without meaning to.

The realization settled into her quietly. Not everything needed a label. Not everything needed to be fixed.

"One more moment," she murmured.

Clara didn't argue. She shifted, propping herself up on one elbow, then lowered her head onto Nancy's chest. The weight of her was solid, grounding. Nancy exhaled slowly, her fingers finding Clara's hair, the loose strands slipping through like silk. Outside, a bird called—sharp, insistent—and the sound cut through the quiet of the room.

It's today.

The thought settled in her stomach like a stone. Today, she would leave. Today, the bus would take her back to college, back to the life she'd built there, the one that existed separate from this house, from Clara, from Ruth.

The pain in her chest flared. She pressed her palm against her sternum. Clara's breath was warm against her skin, steady. Nancy focused on that, the rise and fall, the way it made the fabric of her nightshirt shift slightly with each exhale. The crack in the ceiling blurred at the edges.

Not everything needed to be fixed. The pain eased.

"I love you," Nancy said suddenly, the words spilling out before she could stop them. "I love how you stayed."

Clara lifted her head just enough to meet Nancy's eyes. Her glasses were still on the nightstand, and without them, her face looked softer, younger. The corners of her mouth turned up, just slightly.

"I know how you feel," she said, her thumb brushing over Nancy's collarbone. "And I know I wasn't supposed to stay. But I love you. And you make me who I am." Her voice was quiet, but there was no hesitation in it. "I'll always be here."

Nancy cupped Clara's face in both hands, her thumbs resting on the warm curve of her cheeks. She studied her, the way her lips parted slightly when she breathed, the way her brows furrowed just a little when she was thinking.

This was her choice. Not the only one, maybe. But the one that mattered most. Clara was her constant. The one who had stayed when Nancy hadn't even known she needed her to.

She pulled Clara's face closer and kissed her, softly, slowly, like she was memorizing the shape of her. Clara made a small sound against her lips, something between a sigh and a laugh, and then she was shifting, her arms tightening around Nancy, her forehead pressing against Nancy's shoulder.

Neither of them said it, but they both knew. This was goodbye for now.

The room was too quiet when Clara finally pulled away. She dressed quickly, her movements efficient, but her hands lingered when she buttoned her blouse, when she tucked her hair back into its loose bun. Nancy watched from the bed, the sheets pooled around her waist, her fingers twisted in the fabric.

"I have to go to work," Clara said, her voice carefully light. "I hate goodbyes."

Nancy swallowed. "I'll miss you."

Clara crossed the room in two steps and kissed her, firm, sure, her lips warm and insistent. Then she was gone, the door clicking shut behind her, and Nancy was left with the echo of her footsteps down the hall.

She didn't let herself listen for the sound of the front door closing.

The kitchen smelled like coffee and toast. Nora stood at the stove, her robe belted loosely around her waist, her hair still tousled from sleep. Ruth was at the table, her fingers wrapped around a mug, steam curling up between them.

She looked up when Nancy entered. For a second, their eyes held.

Then Ruth smiled—slow, easy—and the tension in Nancy's shoulders eased just a fraction.

"Morning," Nora said, turning to pour another cup. "Cream and sugar?"

Nancy nodded, sliding into the chair across from Ruth. Their knees brushed under the table, just barely, and Ruth didn't pull away.

Andy wandered in a moment later, still half-asleep, his hair sticking up in all directions. He registered Nancy's presence with a nod and reached for a piece of toast, settling into his chair with the particular focus of someone organizing his morning one component at a time.

"You're leaving today, right?" he said, not looking up.

"Yeah."

He chewed. Considered. "You'll be back for spring break."

Not a question. A fact he had already filed away, already made peace with.

"Yeah," Nancy said. "I will."

Nora set a mug in front of her, then kissed the top of her head on her way past, her lips warm, her hand squeezing Nancy's shoulder. "Don't forget to call me when you're there," she said. "Not a text. Your voice."

"I know, Mom."

Nora paused. Her hand stayed on Nancy's shoulder one beat longer than necessary. Then she moved toward the hallway, and a moment later, the sound of her getting ready filled the distant parts of the house.

Andy finished his toast, pushed back his chair, and wandered off with the quiet self-sufficiency that was entirely his own.

The kitchen settled into silence. Just Nancy and Ruth.

Ruth took a slow sip of her coffee, her gaze steady over the rim of the mug. The morning light came through the window at a low winter angle, finding the green of her eyes, the faint lines at their corners, the particular stillness of her face.

Nancy looked at her. Fully. Without managing it. Without looking away.

Ruth held it.

“You’ll miss your bus,” Ruth said finally.

“I know.”

Neither of them moved.

Nancy stood before she could think better of it, her chair scraping back. She reached for her bag on the counter. The house was quiet around her, the ordinary sounds of Nora’s preparation distant down the hall.

She turned toward the door. Two steps. Three.

Ruth’s voice, quiet and certain: “Nancy.”

She stopped. Didn’t turn. Not yet.

Ruth’s footsteps crossed the kitchen. Her hand found Nancy’s wrist—not grabbing, not urgent, just there. A presence. A fact.

Nancy turned.

Ruth was close. Closer than the kitchen usually allowed, or maybe the kitchen had simply become smaller over these months, the space between them always aware of itself.

Ruth looked at her for a long moment. Then she reached up. Her thumb moved across Nancy’s cheek, once, slow and deliberate, and Nancy understood, only then, that her eyes had filled without her knowing. Ruth’s touch was firm and gentle and entirely without pretense, the way she did everything. Not performing care. Just giving it.

She didn’t speak. She didn’t need to.

Her hand cupped Nancy’s face, holding it the way you hold something you are about to release, something you want to feel the full weight of before you let it go. Her eyes were dark, and they did not look away, and in them, Nancy saw everything Ruth had never said and would not say now, not because it wasn’t real, but because saying it would cost Nancy something Ruth was not willing to take from her.

Nancy felt the tear before she could stop it. Ruth wiped it away with her thumb.

That was all. Then she lowered her hand. Stepped back.

And the space between them was ordinary again, or as ordinary as it had ever been.

“Go,” Ruth said. Her voice was low and completely steady. “Build something good.”

Nancy nodded. Her throat was too full for words. She turned toward the door, opened it, and walked out. The morning air came in, cold and clean and indifferent to everything that had just happened in

this kitchen.

The bus station was loud with people going home or returning to somewhere else, the air sharp with diesel and cold. Nora found a spot near the departure gates, her car idling as she turned in her seat.

“You have everything?” she asked, her voice already thick.

“Yeah.”

Her mother’s hands were clenched in her lap. “Call me when you get there. Not a text.”

“I know.”

The words hung between them, inadequate. Nora pulled her into a hug that smelled like her perfume, like the kitchen, like years of being held inside it. Nancy pressed her face into her shoulder.

“I love you,” her mother whispered.

“Love you too.”

Her mother pulled back, her fingers brushing Nancy’s hair from her face, the same gesture she had made since Nancy was small. “Go on, then.”

Nancy grabbed her bag and stepped out into the cold. She turned back once. Her mother lifted her hand, pressed it to her mouth. Nancy waved, then climbed the bus steps. The driver nodded, and the vinyl seat felt cold beneath her as she settled in. The engine rumbled to life, and the station shrank away.

She pressed her forehead to the glass.

The highway unfolded in gray and brown, the fields and trees flashing past in a rhythm that asked nothing of her. The seat beside her was empty, and she was glad for it.

She thought of Clara first.

The way her fingers had twitched in sleep, dreaming of paint and canvas. The way her glasses had caught the faintest glint of light on the nightstand, patient and waiting. And then, the moment Clara had lifted her head from Nancy’s chest and looked at her without them, her face softer, younger, entirely unguarded, and said ‘I wasn’t supposed to stay’ as if that were the most ordinary confession in the world. As if loving someone past the point of sense were simply something that happened, something you named, and then kept going.

Nancy had cupped her face in both hands. She remembered the specific warmth of it, the weight of Clara’s cheekbones against her palms, the way Clara had closed her eyes for just a second, leaning into the touch, as if being held like that, carefully, deliberately, like something worth holding, was something she was still learning to receive.

That was Clara. Not the grand gestures. Not the declarations. The small, specific courage of staying when staying was complicated, of receiving love without flinching from it, of saying ‘you make me who I am’ in a voice that had no performance in it whatsoever. The way she had said ‘I’ll always be

here' without needing it to be anything more than a fact, the simplest true thing.

Clara was her constant. Her sure thing. The one who saw her clearly and stayed anyway, not despite the complications, but with full knowledge of them.

Then she thought of Ruth.

The thumb across her cheek. The tear wiped away. The eyes that had held everything without letting any of it spill over into something that would cost Nancy more than she could carry. Build something good. Three words that contained everything Ruth was, precise, generous, always looking forward rather than back.

Nancy had been in love with Ruth. She could see it clearly now, sitting on this bus, watching the world move past without asking anything of her. She had known it in a shower, said it to a kitchen, felt it in the quiet spaces between ordinary moments until it had become something constant, something woven into her.

But she could hold it now without being held by it. It was hers. Part of the shape of who she had become. Not a wound. Not a mistake. Just something real, something she had been brave enough to feel completely.

Her heart, she understood now, was bigger than she had thought. Big enough for Clara's quiet steadiness, the jasmine and old paper, the glasses slightly askew, the handkerchief offered to a stranger crying against a wall. And big enough for Ruth's fire, kept at the distance Ruth had chosen, which was its own kind of love, the kind that says 'I see you completely, and I will not take what that seeing costs you.'

She didn't know what came next. She was nineteen years old, on a bus going back to a life she was still building, the future wide and uncertain, and for the first time, she wasn't afraid of it. Not anymore.

She rested her head against the seat, the engine humming beneath her, the road unspooling ahead like a question she was finally ready to live inside.

The crack in the ceiling of her childhood room waited back there, patient and branching, growing in the slow, invisible way that cracks do.

She closed her eyes. Clara's jasmine. Ruth's lavender and caramel. Her mother's perfume. Andy's strawberry shampoo. The particular smell of a life she had lived completely, without looking away.

She let out a long, slow breath. And somewhere on the road between one life and whatever came next, she was already missing things she hadn't lost yet.

That, she thought, was what it meant to be alive.