

Drowning in Darkness

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Drowning in Darkness

by [allthesedaydreams](#)

Summary

After all that has happened, all the things that we've done, any good, any happiness, always seems to be drowned out by something else, something worse.

Post 2x18, my imaginings for S3 despite the trailer being released

Nancy can pretend everything is okay, that she's handling her traumas all on her own, that is until Ace returns from his roadtrip.

OR, these two idiots pine for each other as chaos and supernatural mystery surrounds them.

Notes

Full disclosure, I haven't really written anything more than emails or texts in years. But this universe is something I think will be fun to write in. I'm trying not to take things seriously with proofreading or whatnot, and like I said first time writing in a while - so go easy on me.

I tried writing it like the TV episodes, so there's a bit of head-hopping between characters but I did keep it mostly between Nancy and Ace...because obviously. And anything *italic* is Nancy's voiceover.

This will be series which I hope to have out before S3 drops but we'll see!

ANYWAYS I hope you enjoy me trying to reclaim old hobbies in new fandoms.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

The Secret in the Dark

Do we deserve a happy ending? Do I even believe in happy endings anymore? After all that has happened, all the things that we've done, any good, any happiness, always seems to be drowned out by something else, something worse.

The rain pelted down on the Bonny Scot memorial statue in the harbour, tears of rain ran down the stone faces as they stared back at Nancy from the parking lot of The Claw.

Dismantling Everett's company did bring some good back to the world, didn't it? But Celia's murderers were still out there. How do you fight a secret organization?

Nancy glanced over to the swaying Claw sign with a sigh and mumbled, "Still here."

Even the small inheritance Celia managed to leave me without Everett finding out barely made a dent in my mom's medical bills and Carson's business debt. Will I even be able to go to college? Do I even want to go to college anymore?

The rain made the worn-down restaurant somehow look worse. Nancy wasn't surprised her therapist told her she should consider leaving her employment at the beachside diner considering all the traumas held between its walls. By any mental health standards, it was a reasonable ask. But she couldn't do it. One day she thought she almost did, she even printed off her resignation letter - it was still folded and buried in the depths of her bag. Afterall, she still needed the money. And while she'd rarely admit it, this seaside shack had given her a purpose, a family, and some sort of twisted sense of love.

A loud knock on her window interrupted Nancy's thoughts, followed by a yelling George drawing her attention away from the swinging sign.

"Drew! You're late - again!" Nancy focused on the rain bouncing off George's bright yellow raincoat instead of meeting her gaze. "C'mon, move it!"

George turned and ran back into The Claw not bothering to check if Nancy was following behind her. Everyone has been extra cautious with her since the wraith. It had been a while now and it was getting on her nerves. At times she wanted them all to just stop acting as if she was going to collapse at any second. She'd rather they be angry with her for being reckless, for anything; she was capable of dealing with their anger.

Thankfully, George cared in her own way; she mostly didn't treat Nancy any differently than before. There was still a lot of George's yelling. But sometimes, like today, there was George running into the rain, completely out of character, to make sure Nancy was okay before a shift. Nancy pulled her keys from the ignition and shoved them into her bag before pulling her hood up and walking out into the storm. Their apprehensiveness reminded her of when her mother passed away and no one knew how to explain grief that powerful to a teenage girl. And now, the one other person she so desperately wanted to talk about everything she was dealing with had left her.

The Claw felt different without Ace around every day. Nancy couldn't find the words for it, but it was just less itself. Less whatever Ace is. But Ace being gone on his trip with Amanda for so long was starting to seep into all of their lives. Maybe like the storm clouds outside, everything just felt darker when Ace wasn't around.

Ace and Amanda took their time driving Florence down to New Mexico, stopping along the way to hike, visit tourist attractions, but it was when they got to New Mexico they settled for a couple of weeks. They tried to track down Amanda and Gil's mom but kept hitting dead ends. After too many failed attempts to track her down, they decided to head back up to Horseshoe Bay and return to their lives. That and they were running out of money.

They didn't rush home, Amanda wasn't enthusiastic about leaving New Mexico for Maine. It felt like she was giving up on finding her mom. But Ace couldn't contain his excitement, it vibrated through his being showing in his tapping fingers, his slight speeding over the limit. He took this trip because everything in the last few months had reminded him how short life is and to make the most of the moments he had. As much as he loved his crew and solving mysteries, he needed to be reminded how beautiful life was; there was too much darkness recently. He never intended for his trip to be this long, but he was dedicated to making it worth it for Amanda.

He tried to stay in touch as best as he could, everyone kept him updated on the events back home. Bess even video called him to show him that The Claw was just as he left it. He asked the others how Nancy was handling post-wraith life, but they all said Nancy was strong and working on things herself. He knew she needed to figure it out on her own and she was always strong enough to handle it. He did wish though that sometimes that she would need them more, need him more. He worried that the wraith did more damage to her than she was letting on but as always with Nancy, he couldn't push her to open up. So he left, giving her the time and space he knew she'd need.

Texting became the only way they remained in contact. Back and forth updating each other without really saying anything at all. Her sarcasm never quite landed right. His lighthearted jokes never felt genuine. He wanted her help with Amanda's mom, but everything that happened with Gil and didn't seem fair of him to ask. This strained obligation to be friends felt wrong. It wasn't them. It wasn't their friendship.

He knew Amanda was getting annoyed at him constantly worrying about Nancy, so he had to make a decision early on in their trip: Amanda or Nancy. And now, Amanda is happy. Nancy and him are okay, in their own way. Or he thinks they are. But he still felt that something was missing. That forgotten feeling never quite left him throughout the entire trip.

And it wasn't until they drove past the Horseshoe Bay welcome sign did he feel a pressure release from his chest. He was home.

Nancy was taking out the garbage when she saw Florence pull into the parking lot of The Claw. No one really knew when Ace and Amanda would be coming back. The storm can

wash up anything on these shores though, even the most uncomfortable situations.

She stayed outside longer than necessary, allowing the rain to seep into her sneakers as she tried to find herself enough to see Ace again. She didn't want him to think she was hurt that he left without saying goodbye so soon after the wraith, since then she'd done her best to seem normal over their texting conversations. Her only consolation was that Ace didn't tell anyone, not even Bess, his platanchor, that he was leaving that morning.

Since the wraith, she had grown to keep everyone at an emotional distance, not trusting herself enough to give someone more in case they left her like her Mom, like Owen, like Ace. She stayed busy working at The Claw, helping her dad with cases, and her nightly research at the Historical Society on the Women in White. She learned to stay busy enough so that no one could get close enough to see the cracks in her facade.

But she was never able to hide the truth from Ace. He was always able to see her truths even before she could.

Ace would be inside the diner now. She should go inside. Why couldn't she move her feet? "Just go talk to him, he's your friend," she whispered under her breath, letting the storm carry it away. Nancy looked up at the sky, cold rain hitting her face, her hood falling back a bit, and took a deep breath before she turned and walked back into the diner.

Bess dropped her tray of cutlery off at a random empty table and ran up to Ace as he walked in. "You're finally back!" she squealed as she threw her arms around his neck. Ace let go of Amanda's hand to hug his plantachor properly.

"Hey guys! Welcome back!" Nick said as he walked out from the office after hearing Bess' squeal, George followed close behind Nick.

"Finally someone who actually knows how to clean the fryer," George said smiling, "We had Nancy do it once, and it took her all day."

"It did not," Nancy chimed in with a small grin as she entered the diner from the back room, brushing invisible wrinkles from her apron, "Only about half my shift." She could do this. She could be normal. Smile. Make a joke.

Ace chuckled, "Glad I'm still needed around here then." He moved in to pull Nancy in for a hug, "Hey Nancy."

"Hey," she said softly as he pulled her in for a hug. She barely let her arms brush his back before she pulled away. His scent overwhelmed her and forced her to take a few steps back towards Bess.

Ace let his arms drop back to his sides already confused at Nancy's behaviour. His eyes roamed her face and body looking for any physical cause to her awkward hug. He didn't expect George to give him a welcome hug, that obviously wasn't their style. But Nancy?

“So, what brought you back?” Bess asked the couple, drawing Ace’s attention away from Nancy as she settled slightly behind Bess.

“This incredible weather, obviously” Amanda answered laughing, “I can’t believe we gave up the desert sunshine for this.”

“But babe, you know the rain of Maine calls to me though,” Ace replied, pulling Amanda into his side.

Nancy’s chest constricted as she watched his hand settle on Amanda’s waist, his thumb absently stroking her side. She thought she had enough time to get over these confusing dreamscape-feelings for Ace and yet here they were festering like a splinter in her side. The conversation continued around them, Bess and Amanda started discussing the jewellery Amanda found from a roadside vendor in New Mexico. Nick asked him how Florence handled the long driving hours.

Amidst all the conversations, Ace glanced at Nancy, her focus was on Bess as she exclaimed how much she loved turquoise stones. Ace noted the dark circles under her eyes, the harsher jut of her collarbone, the way her arms cradled around herself. She wasn’t okay, why hadn’t anyone said anything to him? He glanced at Nick, who gave a small shake of his head and mouthed, “Talk later.” Nick nudged George and gave her a pointed look.

Everyone was acting like Nancy was fine. Was this the new normal? The knowledge became visible as it furrowed into Ace’s every feature.

“Right people, back to work!” George clapped, “Visiting hours are over. Amanda, Ace, good to have you back, but unless you’re paying customers - please go home. You’re distracting my staff. And Ace, I expect you to be in for the dinner shift tomorrow, yeah?”

“Sounds good boss,” he nodded, the excitement of coming back to work filtering through his nerves didn’t surprise Ace. He knew he belonged here with his friends, with his crew.

After a chorus of goodbyes, Amanda and Ace left the restaurant. As the door shut behind them, Nancy suddenly found it easier to breathe.

“Right, those napkins and cutlery won’t roll themselves,” Nancy uttered as she walked to the kitchen leaving her three coworkers staring between where Ace exited and the swinging kitchen door. None of them could remember the last time Nancy volunteered to roll cutlery.

“They missed you,” Amanda softly said as Ace drove her home. Ace turned the steering wheel with one hand as she held his other hand in between their seats.

“I missed them too. Missing people is good,” he hummed, “It makes you appreciate what they bring to your life.”

“Nancy seemed alright, seems like she’s healing after...everything.” Ace could feel her gaze on his face as the words left her lips. He knew she was trying to gauge his reaction. This

argument Amanda was setting up for wasn't a new one between them.

He kept his face as neutral as he could as he replied, "Yeah, I think so." He gave her hand a squeeze, once again choosing Amanda over Nancy.

The rest of Nancy's shift, she smiled, greeted customers, and did whatever meaningless task George assigned her without complaint. She just wanted her shift to be over so she could leave The Claw. Leave the place where most of her memories with Ace lingered.

She needed to keep her hands moving, keep her mind on anything else other than Ace and Amanda. Ace's hand on Amanda's waist. The smell of her back as he walked out of The Claw. The small smile he gave Amanda as he looked down at her. And yet, she couldn't deny the warmth Ace brought back to The Claw; he was their missing piece.

Nancy was too anxious to go home and deal with her two dads, so she went to the only place where she could escape her own mind - the Horseshoe Bay Historical Society.

"Evening Hannah," Nancy greeted as she walked past the historian who was labelling a box to be mailed to the Bowen Museum.

The Bowen Museum, located in the next town over, always did try to change their exhibits despite being in a town of only a few thousand people. I went once when I was a kid, the exhibit was on historical picnics on the coastline.

"Hi Nancy," she replied, "Your usual table is open, I've put the Women in White documents on the corner for you. Let me know if you need anything else - I'll be here."

"Thanks! What exhibit is the Bowen Museum hosting now?" Nancy asked, curiosity always getting the better of her, as she hung her coat on the rack.

"Oh!" Hannah's face brightened at Nancy's question, "Celtic mythology, it's going to be fascinating! Not many people realise the influence the Celts had on this area after mass migrating in the 1700s."

Nancy smiled, it was nice to see Hannah excited and not worried about the imminent safety of the town against supernatural forces. "I'll have to try and make it over there then," she said over her shoulder as she walked toward her table in the back corner by the window.

After Ace left, she was bored of waiting to feel normal again so she started researching and burying herself in local lore. She has been trying to create a list of potential sites, creatures, and rituals that could be a threat or may be useful for the future. Mostly her research just meant reading the diaries of long-dead women. The repetitive isolation of their lives was exhausting, no wonder they turned to rituals and spells.

The one she was currently stuck on was something about caves, but where in Horseshoe Bay these ancient caves were, she couldn't tell. Maybe in the forest? Or water caves? Nancy dropped the journal and rubbed her eyes in frustration. She'd come across the mention of

these caves weeks ago and she still hadn't found anything conclusive yet on their location or really what they were used for other than certain ceremonies.

Nancy rested her elbows on the wooden table and stretched her neck. She looked at the stack of documents and books Hannah left for her and grabbed the first item on top, a thin bound black leather book - the stitches barely holding it together. A relatable feeling. Nancy carefully fanned through the weathered pages only pausing when a map caught her eye. Setting the book down on the desk she inspected the antique map of her hometown.

Her fingers traced the roads where she grew up, finding where her home would approximately be located, where the high school was, and down to where The Claw would eventually stand by the water. She noted it was odd that the beach was drawn so long, almost spanning double of what she knew it to be. She pulled up a map of Horseshoe Bay on her laptop, it is as if that section didn't even exist on the current map. Nancy started to wonder how can a whole section of the beach just disappear from the modern documentation?

She took a picture of the map and made a note in her journal about the beach with additional questions: Cave diving? Low tide access? Significance to Women in White? Nancy debated trying to roughly sketch the cave location into her journal when a slamming of the front door pulled her attention away from the sketch. It was then something in the streetlights out the window caught her eye.

What was Gil Bobbsey doing leaving the Historical Society in the middle of the night? Gil Bobbsey, conman, amateur criminal, twin to Amanda, my ex. And a sudden interest in local history?

Back in The Claw, Ace couldn't hide his frustration on his face; it was written in the furrow of his brow. Normally, Ace was a calm guy. Some would even say chill in his opinion. He'd listen, process, and then react. But seeing Nancy's state earlier had his emotions all over the place. He knew Nancy was strong enough, she's always been strong enough, but that doesn't mean she didn't need support. It was his guilt that was manifesting itself in this anger towards his friends - the people that have been here for her.

"Ace, you have to understand that she is working through it," Bess reasoned, "We support her, and try our best, but you know no one can make Nancy do anything. She's okay, considering everything..." letting her voice trail off.

"I'm just telling you, I know her and she's not okay, it doesn't look like she's eating or sleeping," Ace retorted.

"She's - I - I don't know..." Bess scrambled for words, looking to George and Nick to help her. "George?"

"She's in therapy. Both her dads are living in the same house. She was leeches off of for months by the wraith. Her best friend left without saying anything. She dismantled an entire multigeneration corporation. Her grandmother's secret organization murderers are still out there. She probably hasn't fully dealt with Owen's death yet. Everyone around her is acting

like she's going to fall apart any second," George listed items off on her fingers, "Hell, I'd say she is doing alright considering."

Ace felt the tension in his shoulders lessen slightly at their explanations. He looked at each of their faces before he let out a sigh and ran his hands through his hair. He knew they were right. And who did he think he was trying to make sure Nancy was okay when he left her and Horseshoe Bay for months. Did he even know her like he used to anymore?

"She's even been helping with wedding planning, researching the Women in White, and working the odd case for her dad or the police," Nick added. "We tried for weeks hovering around her, but she just kept on, more annoyed with us than anything. Thankfully supernatural disturbances have been fairly tame since you've been away."

"Yes, just that small haunting at the old cinema," Bess nodded with a small smile, "It was really nice actually, the ghost just wanted to watch Cinema Paradiso. Sadly, it was the film they died in so they never saw the end of it. Heartbreaking."

"I just - I wish I knew about Nancy," he started "Also, why didn't y'all tell me about the cinema ghost - Cinema Paradiso's brilliance would transcend death."

Bess patted his forearm, "We didn't want to worry you with supernatural stuff while you were on your big holiday. And what was there to say about Nancy... 'she's keeping busy?' That wouldn't have done anything."

Across the booth, George and Nick nodded while looking at Ace sadly. "You know Nancy, she's strong, she's just working through it all," Nick said with a small shrug.

He was right of course, but he knew that despite her strength she also needed people as much as she tried not to.

"Congrats on the engagement by the way," Ace said softly, "I should have said something earlier."

"Thanks, man." He watched Nick grab George's left hand as they both smiled at each other, his thumb absently stroking her engagement ring. Would Ace ever have that with someone? Could he see himself and Amanda that happy in the future?

Nancy watched Gil disappear into the darkness of the street before she turned to a new page in her journal and jotted down his name, the Historical Society and what time it was. The late hour finally hitting her, she packed up her belongings and dropped the Women in White documents on Hannah's desk as she walked out.

Nancy's house was quiet as she pulled into the drive. Both her dad's had long stopped waiting for her. After the wraith, it was suffocating to have them both hover about like she was going to collapse at any second. And there were a few times it felt like she could have just curled around the trauma and never wake up. But she couldn't, there were always too

many questions swirling in her head every night. No matter how long she stared at her bedroom ceiling covered in constellations she rarely found the answers she needed.

What would Gil need from the historical society? He wasn't oblivious to the supernatural undertow of the town, learned that after the shroud and wraith. Alternatively, he could just be looking into his family, maybe for his mom? Do I tell people I saw him? Or would that just worry them more?

The Mystery of the Midnight Rider

Chapter Summary

Awkward conversations. Stake-outs. And ghost trains.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone who left kudos and comments on the last chapter! It means so much to me! ♥

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Previously on Nancy Drew:

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As Nancy entered the back room at The Claw to start her shift, late, as usual, she collided right into Ace.

His hands gently grabbed her waist to steady her as their momentum spun the pair slightly off balance. Her hands hovered over his shoulders before she stepped out of his arms. His hands quickly slipped away from her body. That one touch was a familiar intimacy between the pair, one that now seemed forbidden.

“Oh - sorry, I didn't - Ace! Hey!”

“I'm sorry - it's -”

Both of them tried to speak at the same time while adjusting their clothing; Nancy straightened her apron, Ace tugged his sleeves around his hands. The look shared between them was enough to know the apologies went beyond just bumping into each other.

“How are you?” Ace asked her softly, retying his already tied apron simply to keep his hands busy.

“I’m -” Nancy paused thinking Ace was the one person she couldn’t lie to, but the physical distance of his trip and her experience in the dreamscape had created an odd space between them. Not knowing how to be completely honest and reveal how her heart broke without him being here, she offered a familiar branch of friendship. “If I find the words, I’ll share them with you.”

The corner of his lips perked in the barest grin as he recognized her statement from all those months ago. He dipped his head and nodded slightly. Ace knew not to push her despite how exhausted she looked. If he demanded more, she would add another layer of bricks to her internal walls. He didn’t know where they stood anymore, it was like staring at a picture hanging on a wall that is slightly crooked. The picture is still there, still beautiful, but it’s not quite right. So for now the best they could do is to continue this slightly off-beat dance around each other pretending everything was normal.

“Okay,” he said with a breath he hadn’t realized he had been holding.

“George has already yelled at me for being late, so I better...” she tilted her head towards the lockers as her voice trailed off and walked away putting some much-needed distance between them.

“And I am due for a reunion with the dishes,” he replied as he watched her put her bag in her locker and walked out to the kitchen.

“They’ve missed you, Ace!” Nancy called over her shoulder from her locker only to see the door swinging behind him. “I missed you,” she said under her breath as she slammed her locker shut.

Nancy thought her first shift with Ace should have been more awkward. She wished it was more awkward just so she could confront him about it, just so she could have an excuse to argue with him about it. She wanted to throw all the strained text messages from his trip in his face. She was itching for a fight. But like always with Ace, everything just felt complete.

After their run-in at the start of the shift, things just fell into place like a favourite worn-out sweater. He was the same as he always was: joking with Bess, stealing the crackers behind George’s back, and eating as many fries as he could. It had been ages since a shift had gone by so quickly for everyone, especially Nancy.

Nancy stared at the ocean as she lazily piled her last table’s dishes into the bus pan. The blue ocean blended into the darkening sky as they both stretched into the horizon. Something about the blue of the sky had her mind drifting back to the dreamscape with Ace. It all felt so real. The brush of his nose against hers. The shared breath between them. An almost moment. An impossible moment.

Ace stood in the kitchen listening to Bess fill him in on the town gossip and her latest Tinder date, but he was watching Nancy across the restaurant. She was just staring out the window, the water glass held just above the bus bin, fingers absently tracing the bottom edge of the glass, completely zoned out.

“And then she turned into a ferret,” Bess laughed obnoxiously.

“Oh really?” Ace replied without thinking, “Wait -” He turned to Bess brow furrowed, “We’ve seen some pretty weird shit but transfiguration would be like my sixth guess...”

“Ace! I’m kidding!” Her gaze shifted to Nancy, her voice lowering, “Have you two talked yet?”

“There’s nothing really to say,” he says looking back at Nancy, who hasn’t moved. Fingers still brushing the bottom edge of the glass. “She seems okay...”

“You know, she hasn’t talked about it - the wraith...with us at least. Highly doubt she brings up the supernatural stuff with her therapist or her dads either. But something happened in there, something she’s dealing with but doesn’t want to talk about. I’ve tried but...I think I’m just pushing her further away the more I do.”

Her voice is soft as her gaze drops to her hands and she twists a ring around her thumb. An anxious tick that pulls Ace’s attention away from Nancy.

“Hey, you being here, you supporting her is enough,” Ace dipped his head to look into her eyes and reassured her, “Just being here for her is enough. You’re a good friend.”

“Oh, Ace, she’s not your responsibility either,” Bess whispered as she saw the guilt reflected in his eyes.

“I know, I know,” Ace lifted his baseball cap and ran his hands through his hair before putting the hat back on. “I just - I should see if she needs help with those dishes.”

Ace walked out of the kitchen desperate to escape Bess’ stare before he said something he’d regret. He knew Nancy wasn’t anyone’s responsibility, she’s her own person - a strong, stubborn, and intelligent person. But that didn’t mean he didn’t want to support her. That he failed to support her since the wraith.

Ace anxiously wiped his hands on his apron before reaching out to touch Nancy’s arm, his fingers brushing her upper arm and down her to elbow slightly turning her.

“Hey - let me get those,” he whispered, trying to not scare Nancy but also so Bess wouldn’t be able to listen in.

Nancy felt her body turn slightly at someone’s touch as she blinked back into reality and out her memories of the dreamscape. She looked down to see Ace’s hand on her arm, her mind

slowly catching up that he was the one who turned her to face him. Her eyes followed his arm up to his face as his other hand reached for the glass in her hands. He was standing so close, too close. Nancy could see the different shades of blue in his eyes that the dreamscape didn't get quite right. She could count his eyelashes if she wanted to.

Ace's fingers brushed against hers as she felt the glass leave her hands, her stomach dropped under the weight of butterflies that such a small touch could have on her. She stepped away from Ace, sliding the bus pan off the table and lifted it between them.

"They're all yours!" she said too forcefully, the words even tasted sour as they left her lips. Ace gently placed the glass inside.

"Thanks, Betsy is the best bus pan so gotta take care of her," Ace replied with a smile as he grabbed the handles. Again, his fingers brushed along hers as she passed him the weight of the dishes. Nancy's breath caught in her chest at the contact, she stepped back creating the physical distance she so desperately required to be able to breathe again.

"Nancy," Ace started, "Are you sure you're - "

"I'm fine Ace," Nancy cut him off. She couldn't handle another person asking her that question, especially Ace. She couldn't explain to him that despite everything she's been doing to survive it all seems to be sabotaged by something else, some darker thing.

"- Okay." He looked down at the dishes. "Okay." The look on his face was like she had broken Florence's windshield.

"But thanks for checking...that means a lot. I'm just - just having a hard time adjusting. But I'm trying," she offered with a small smile, knowing it wouldn't be enough, she would never be enough for him. She turned to walk back to the kitchen and lifted her hand to touch his shoulder as she passed but realised he was not hers and shoved her hands into her apron pockets instead.

She made it halfway to the kitchen when Nick walked out of the office phone in hand.

"Nancy, hey, hold up," Nick exclaimed, "Have you guys seen these articles about that town by Eagle Lake? People are hearing a phantom train and lights passing through but there's no train."

Bess came out of the kitchen, "Oh I saw that, it was right after an article about someone ending up in a coma after a car crash - so sad..."

"There's been stories about ghost trains around Eagle Lake for ages. The original route was purely for tourism - dinner cars, lakeside views, and whatnot. But the tracks were removed decades ago for road access," Nancy recited, remembering the camping trip with her parents to Eagle Lake when she was younger.

"Witnesses claim to hear children screaming when the train passes," Nick continues to read from his phone.

“That’s new,” Nancy replied. “I don’t remember hearing any stories mentioning children.”

“I propose a stake-out!” Ace stated from behind Nancy, he hadn’t moved since taking Betsy the bus pan from her hands, “I’ll bring my Back to Black cassette for atmosphere.”

“And I have a new black jumpsuit that would be perfect!” Bess clapped her hands. “Nancy, you’re coming too right?”

The idea of being in a car with Bess and Ace for hours had her hands shaking in her pockets, but she needed to prove that she was okay.

“I already told Hannah I would look into something for her tonight about the Women in White,” she replied. It was a small lie wrapped in the truth: she was going to hunt down the caves tonight, which is Women in White related, just Hannah didn’t know about it. And she still needed to figure out what Gil was up to last night.

“Alright...Nick, you and George coming?” Bess asked.

“We’re actually cake tasting tonight,” he answered, “But call if you need anything we can always take cakes to go.”

“Stake-out snacks?” Ace asked as he raised his eyebrows.

“Like George doesn’t already know which flavour she wants,” Bess rolled her eyes, “I guess it’s just a platanchor stake-out then!” She smiled at Ace as he walked over to join the group.

Ace nudged his shoulder against Bess. “I need to hear more about the ferret date.”

Nancy glanced at Nick with confusion and he just shook his head, “No idea. But let us know if you need anything tonight Nancy.”

“Thanks, I will!” She wouldn’t, all she was doing was going for a long walk on the beach and maybe try to find out what Gil Bobbsey was up to. She was perfectly capable of handling those on her own.

It turned out looking for Gil Bobbsey would be easier than she thought. He was currently leaning against her car in the parking lot of The Claw, arms crossed with the collar of his leather jacket upturned against the wind coming off the water.

“Drew,” he smirked, as she approached him.

“What brings you to The Claw Gil?” she asked. After her shift, her weird talks with Ace, she wasn’t in the mood to confront Gil.

“Obviously the banana cream pie,” he answered, he pushed himself off her car and stalked towards her.

“We’re closed,” Ace answered behind her, the tone of his voice low and angry. Nancy whipped her head round to look at Ace, the furrow in his brow. She knew he never liked Gil, but she always thought for Amanda’s sake he’d at least be polite.

“Oh Ace, you know that’s never stopped me before,” Gil teased.

Ace took a couple of steps forward, but Nancy stopped him with her arm. She didn’t need anyone throwing punches today.

“What do you want, Gil?” she asked again.

“I was in the area...the beach is lovely this time of year,” he shrugged, giving Nancy a knowing look, “And after seeing you last night, I thought it would be polite to say hi. Call me sentimental.”

Out of her peripheral, she saw Ace’s head turn as he glanced down at her.

Gil fucking Bobbsey. What the hell was he up to? And why did he mention the beach?

“Funny, I don’t remember seeing you last night,” she lied, ignoring his comment about the beach. How could he possibly know that’s what she was researching last night?

Unless he went back to the Historical Society after she left and sifted through the books. But Gil isn’t patient? He barges through and deals with consequences later; he wouldn’t have taken the time to go through her stuff. However, he could have watched her researching last night, a good camera could have captured pictures of her notebook. She needed to be more careful.

“You were quite buried in all your books. Hannah was super helpful though,” Gil walked up to her, and whispered into her ear “Don’t worry, I’m not insulted you didn’t say hi. It gave me a reason to pop by today.”

“Shame I couldn’t get a slice of pie though,” he said loudly as he stepped around her with a glance at Ace who was still glaring at him, “I’m sure I’ll see you around Drew. Ace, thanks for bringing my sister back in one piece.”

Nancy watched Gil head up the street towards the town square. The sudden pain of her nails creasing the palms of her hands had Nancy drawing her attention away from Gil’s distant figure.

Flexing her hands, she turned around and walked over to her car. She needed to explore the beach tonight and find out if the cave the Women in White mentioned still exists or not. And she needed to make sure Gil hadn’t already done something stupid.

She could hear Ace’s footsteps following her instead of heading over to Florence. Nancy abruptly turned around catching Ace off-guard as he faltered to a stop in front of her.

“Ask your questions, Ace,” she demanded, resting her hands on her hips. She could see Nick and Bess standing on the steps of The Claw watching their entire exchange. She wondered if they heard Gil or not.

“Why didn’t you say anything about seeing Gil last night? And why was he at the Historical Society? You need to tell us these things, Nancy!” Ace burst out, slightly out of character for him. His first brush with Gil since being back didn’t help with his need to make sure Nancy was okay. Gil was bad news.

She took a deep breath before she replied, “I barely saw him. I saw him walking down the street from the Historical Society. My car was parked out front, so maybe that’s all he saw. Maybe he said the rest just to get a rise out of you - I don’t know. I didn’t know he talked to Hannah. I’ll ask her about it when I see her next.”

“And for the record,” she continued, her anger seeping through her words, “Seeing Gil Bobbsey on a street in the town he lives in didn’t seem all that important,” she finished before she turned back to her car to unlock it.

As she opened the door, she looked back at Ace and said, “Good luck on the stake-out tonight, text me if you need anything.”

She didn’t allow him to reply as she got in her car and left the parking lot. She watched Ace in her rearview mirror as she drove away. She could see the frustration hunching his shoulders, even under the puffer jacket he wore as he walked over to Florence.

“Gil Bobbsey was at the Historical Society? Talking to Hannah?” Bess asked as she grabbed a handful of popcorn. Ace rested his head against his seat as he glanced over at the lights of the quaint town of Eagle Lake.

He had parked Florence on a ridge in the approximate area of where the ghost train incidents were reported to have taken place. The ridge overlooked the lake and the small town nestled alongside it.

“That’s what he implied,” Ace muttered. The confrontation with Gil and Nancy in the parking lot still annoyed him. Something about it wasn’t right, he was missing a piece of the puzzle. His fingers tapped on the bottom of the steering wheel wanting his laptop to start hacking his way through the mystery. He already had a folder on Gil - but no one knew about that. When he was back in Horseshoe Bay, he’d start there and see if he missed anything. He could use his phone, but the battery was low and the signal out here was not the greatest so he’d have to wait.

“What could he possibly want from there though? He doesn’t need the shroud anymore...” Bess wondered aloud. “Would Amanda know anything?”

“We try not to talk about Gil...” he trailed off, thinking about the arguments he and Amanda had in this car about her brother. They came to an unspoken agreement that Gil and Nancy were topics they just shouldn’t discuss anymore. Priorities.

Ace fiddled with the camcorder set on the dash, he wanted to make sure everything was ready for if the ghost train did appear. He liked having a backup in case his phone battery died. But Marta did really give video footage a certain aesthetic that he really loved.

“That’s fair,” Bess answered, “He really is quite terrible, isn’t he?” Ace hummed his agreement, unable to quite articulate how much he despised Gil Bobbsey.

A flickering light out Florence’s front window caught his attention. It was too big, too bright to be any sort of vehicle headlights.

“Bess...” he warned gently. Ace quickly pressed record on the camcorder.

“I know Gil is an uncomfortable topic for you Ace, but sometimes we need to talk about -” she continued without noticing the light coming towards them.

“Bess!” Ace said her name louder but was cut off by a blaring train horn. The car felt like it was shaking as the light flew past the car carrying the horn with it. Behind all the noise there was a distant scream. Like that of a child.

“What the hell was that?” Bess gasped into the silence.

He opened the door, “Let’s look around.” Thankfully, the supernatural world decided to interrupt Bess, saving him from talking about Gil.

“We’re not getting a pistachio frosted cake, Nick!” George half-yelled and half-whispered at her fiancé. “Ted is allergic to nuts, okay?”

“You really should at least try this cake though - it’s incredible,” he replied in between bites.

“Of course I’ll try the damn cake, we’re obviously trying all the cakes, but we have to find our cake first,” she glared before smiling back at the bakery attendant. “What are the options without nuts?”

Nancy glanced at the rocks in front of her, headlamp illuminating the jagged rock face, and looked down at the tide schedule on her phone. She should make it through the rocks and back before the tide comes back in. If anything, she’d just have to wait it out on whatever was on the other side. She had already reached the end of the beach according to current Horseshoe Bay maps before finding a small trail. The entrance was so overgrown that she had to wedge her way underneath the brush and branches of the trees but it eventually led her to where she currently stood staring at the rocks and the water.

The water was out enough she wouldn’t have to climb over the rocks, but they loomed above her as she weaved around them. Her sneakers sank slightly into the damp sand with each step. Soon her only options were to climb the rocks or wade into the freezing ocean.

She carefully climbed herself over the rocks and dropped down into the sand on the other side. She stood and brushed the sea grime off her hands on her leggings. She continued walking as she scanned the rocks along the beach looking for any kind of cave entrance. According to the map in the journal, the caves should be somewhere along this stretch of beach.

Her phone buzzed in her hand, a text from Bess to the group chat.

Bess: Ghost train experience - check. Debrief tomorrow morning at work. We have video evidence.

Bess included a selfie in her black denim jumpsuit with Ace in the background looking at a camcorder.

George: Please tell me you have a video from this decade?

Ace: I'll have you know, Marta's video quality is impeccable. But don't worry, I'll digitize the footage and analyse it when I get home.

Nancy pocketed her phone and pushed her sleeves up. She needed to hurry if she was to make it back before the tide came in. Nancy had made it to the end of the beach and found nothing. No cave entrances. She stared at where the edge of the rocks met the sand and water. A small river of water seemed to travel behind one of the rocks. Nancy waded into the water, the cold water soaking into her runners, and peered around the massive boulder to find a cave opening.

The ocean water disappeared into the jagged entrance of the cave before seeping into white sand. As Nancy approached the entrance, she noticed that the diagonal opening of the cave could only be seen from certain angles; it was perfectly camouflaged by the surrounding rock face. Nancy carefully angled herself into the cave as she tried not to trip on the larger rocks embedded in the sand.

She pulled out her flashlight needing more light than just her headlight to properly investigate the cave system. She looked up to see hundreds, if not thousands, of stalactites hanging above her. Her lights cast looming shadows on the walls.

“Not creepy at all...” she whispered to herself as she continued walking deeper into the cave. Rivets of seawater squished under her shoes as proceeded further, Nancy followed the water towards a large black pool surrounded by jagged rocks. It didn't look like anyone had been here recently, but the water would have washed away any footprints.

She looked around, faded delicate paintings scattered the walls all around the pool of water. She pulled out her phone and started taking pictures. She needed to get closer to make out the paintings.

The brighter ones all depicted six all-white figures in a semi-circle in various rituals. The infamous Women in White. But the older faded images showed smaller figures making what looked like offerings on one side of the pool of water to a large single figure looming on the other side. The large figure was repeated the most on the walls - as if this cave, this pool was a shrine to it.

A splash of water behind Nancy caused her to turn too quickly and she lost her footing on the rocks and tripped towards the opaque pool. Her flashlight dropped as her hands reached out to grasp the stone wall, searching for anything to hold on to. Sharp pain sliced through her on the outside of her right forearm almost to her pinky finger. Her nails scratched the wall, she

felt them crack as she finally found a hold to stop herself from slipping into the pool. The soles of her sneakers skimmed the water's surface as pebbles and sand fell into its inky depths.

Nancy scrambled back away from the water's edge, she felt her blood dripping down her fingers now. She glanced at the cave entrance, the water was flowing in faster now. She needed to leave before she was stranded here.

She took one last look around when she noticed something caught in the stones at the pool's edge. It looked like a piece of paper, the remnants of what could be a name on it, but the ink was already starting to fade away. Nancy took a picture - she might be able to enhance it on her computer.

She cradled her arm to her chest as she grabbed her fallen flashlight and exited the cave and started the trek back to the way she came. It took her twice as long to get back to her car with only one hand to climb the rocks and the rising tide. By the time she made it back to her parked car at The Claw, the sun was starting to rise. She leaned against it exhausted and not entirely sure what she discovered in that cave tonight.

Nancy showered, dressed, and wrapped the cut on her arm as best she could before she headed back to The Claw. She could feel her exhaustion itching behind her eyelids as she pulled into the parking lot.

She adjusted her sleeves, the bandage wrapped down and around the palm of her hand, the knot sitting just below her pinky knuckle. She knew she'd have to give an explanation. But maybe they'd be too focused on the video to notice her injury.

Four heads turned to look at her from the bar when the bell chimed above the door. They were all huddled around Ace's laptop.

"We haven't started the viewing yet," Bess smiled at Nancy, "And we have a coffee ready for you."

"Thanks," Nancy said as she shrugged off her coat and grabbed the coffee from Bess' hands with her left hand. She took a sip, grateful for the warmth and caffeine. As she looked up she met Ace's gaze, a notch right in the middle of his brow told Nancy that he noticed and he knew something was wrong.

"So what did Marta capture for us?" Nancy asked, eager to get the focus off her. "Do we really have a train haunting a town?"

Nancy walked around the bar needing more cream for her coffee as Bess started retelling the events of the evening. She could feel Ace's gaze on her as she manoeuvred the small task of adding and stirring the cream with her non-dominant hand.

"Ace -" Bess nudged him from her stool beside him. "Ace, play the video,"

Nancy leaned on her side of the bar to see the screen as the five of them huddled to watch. It was a shaky video but the bright lights and train horn were intense and vivid. The pitch of the horn caused Nancy's exhaustion itch to transform into a full migraine. But it was the haunting scream of a child that caused the chill to race down her spine.

"It was odd because when we looked around after the train passed, there were two thin tracks in the dirt," Ace said as he pulled up a picture of the tracks.

Nancy looked at the tracks, "Those aren't train tracks though, they've got ridges and grooves. They almost look like -"

"Bicycle tracks!" Bess exclaimed, "That's what Ace said last night!"

Nancy repressed the blush she felt rising back down as she glanced at Ace and all he did was give her a small shrug.

"So two bikes caused your car to shake and a loud horn to go off last night?" George asked clearly unimpressed.

"Maybe it wasn't two bikes..." Nick trailed off, "Maybe something using bike tires... Hold on I remember reading something about Eagle Lake yesterday." He jogged to the office and came back frantically scrolling through his phone.

"Ace, can you play the video again? But without sound?" Nancy asked as Nick was searching for something.

Ace dipped his head and tapped a few keys before the video started playing again. Something odd caught her eye.

"Wait, pause it -" Nancy looked at the screen confused, "- is that a four-wheel bike?"

"Yes!" Nick pointed at the screen and then to his phone, "Two Eagle Lake teens win local engineering competition by building a quadricycle."

Bess looked at the laptop and Nick's phone, "So it's just some kids racing through with their...quadricycle? That doesn't explain the car shaking or the child screaming..."

"Added electrical elements could have maybe caused the shaking," Nick thought aloud, "Or even an added engine..."

"The scream could be younger siblings?" George shrugged. "I say we just pass this off to the local authorities. Sounds like kids playing a prank."

"I think The Captain knows someone up in Eagle Lake, I could see if he could pass the evidence along," Ace answered.

"It is all a bit underwhelming though," Bess complained.

"Not everything is ghosts Bess," George rolled her eyes and headed into the kitchen.

“You have to admit our track record leans heavily to the supernatural though!” Bess called as she followed her into the kitchen. “Don’t walk away from me George, I still need to hear about the cake tasting!”

“Do you need this article for The Captain?” Nick asked Ace.

Ace shook his head, “Already got it, but thanks.” Nick slapped Ace on his shoulder as he headed back to the office. “Quadricycle! Who would have guessed!”

“It was definitely not on my bingo card,” Ace replied as typed away on his keyboard.

“Another case solved,” Nancy said as she poured herself more coffee. She heard Ace’s typing stop, and with a final click, she knew he closed his laptop.

“Nancy, what happened to your hand?” Ace inquired, his voice lacked its usual warmth.

“Oh nothing drastic, just slipped and cut it on a rock,” she casually answered over her shoulder as she tried to brush him off.

Unfortunately with Ace, she knew her answer wouldn’t make a difference since he stalked around to her side of the bar. He grabbed her coffee and set it down before he wrapped his fingers around her wrist and pushed her sleeve up exposing the bandage. The chills returned to her spine, but this time it was from Ace’s proximity and his gentle touch as he examined her arm.

“Hey -” she exclaimed.

“You’re bleeding through the bandages,” he grumbled, as he inspected her arm. “And in a restaurant that is particularly unsanitary.”

“When has The Claw ever been sanitary,” she quipped. She watched Ace untie the bandages exposing the ragged gash along her arm.

“...Nancy,” she could feel his anger beneath her name. “What happened?” he asked again as he looked down into her eyes. His fingers were so gentle even though his words were hard and sharp.

“I cut it on a rock,” she repeated. She wasn’t lying. Ace’s eyes bounced between hers as he gauged her response. He sighed and broke eye contact as he let go of Nancy’s wrist and reached under the bar to pull out the first aid kit. He pulled out alcohol wipes, gauze, and fresh bandages before he turned his attention back on her.

“Where was this rock?” he asked, his focus now solely on cleaning Nancy’s arm. Nancy hissed as he dabbed the alcohol-soaked pad along the exposed wound. He glared at her in response. She glared right back. Setting down the alcohol pad, he started to spread the antibacterial ointment along the cut, and then finally he dressed her arm, taking his time looping and tying the knots, knowing she’d eventually lose patience and answer him. His touch combined with his silence was driving her insane.

“Fine!” she gave in. She noticed a small smirk grace his face as she answered.

“In a water cave,” she replied reluctantly. “By the beach.”

“Why were - wait - you went cave diving?” He dropped her arm. “Alone?”

“I wouldn’t call it cave diving per se, more like cave wading...” she replied slowly knowing her answer wasn’t going to change his mood. He looked at her, his gaze traced over her face, down her arms, to her feet, checking for more injuries. The blush she repressed earlier threatened to resurface as his eyes lingered on her.

“You should have told me. I have cave diving gear,” he replied, his blue eyes settled back on hers.

“Noted for next time,” she whispered, turning her wrist slowly testing the clean bandages. The bell of the front door as it swung open caused her to step away from Ace.

“Drew! Get changed!” George yelled at her as she came back into the dining room. Nancy nodded and side-stepped around Ace before speed-walking into the backroom. She was desperate to escape Ace’s interrogation and the lingering tension between them.

Chapter End Notes

Suffocate me with Nace tension please.

The Secret of the Forgotten Cave

Chapter Summary

Therapy. The Truman Show. And cave rituals.

Chapter Notes

enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Previously on Nancy Drew:

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“You got injured cave-diving?!” Ryan exclaimed way too loudly at Nancy as she strolled in the door after finishing her shift at The Claw. “You’re grounded!”

Carson cringed and muttered, “Too strong...” Nancy rolled her eyes and hung her coat up.

“It wasn’t cave diving - wait -” she answered, “How did you even know?”

“Ace called to say we would need to make sure you changed your bandages,” Carson answered. “When I interrogated him about why my daughter would need bandages changed he might have bumbled something about cave-diving while trying to hang up the phone.”

Ryan glared at her with his arms crossed, “Cave diving, alone? Nancy, c’mon! And you haven’t been answering your phone.”

“It wasn’t cave diving! There was no diving - I don’t even know how to cave dive? I just slipped on a rock at the beach. I’m fine!” Nancy exclaimed as she walked up the stairs.

Carson stared at her for a moment before he calmly said, “You also missed your appointment with Dr. Nielsen.”

Nancy’s steps faltered, her eyes closed, “Shit,” she whispered under her breath. She was so caught up in Gil, Ace, and the cave, that she completely forgot about her therapy appointment.

“She rescheduled your appointment for today. You have 15 minutes to get there,” Carson explained, “Which you would have known if you had checked your phone.”

She nodded and turned around heading back down the stairs to grab her coat. “I’m sorry,” she muttered as she went to pass them.

Carson grabbed her arm as she passed him, “Hey, I know there’s stuff going on, but we’re here for you.”

She looked between him and Ryan, her heart cracking at how blindly they’d fight for her. She dipped her head, “I know. Love you.” And raced out the door to talk about some repressed issues with Dr. Nielsen.

Ace stared at his laptop screen and contemplated the ethics of what he was about to do. Hacking his girlfriend’s twin brother’s phone didn’t seem that bad in comparison with a secure government database. The code was ready, all he had to do was hit enter and he’d have complete access.

Was this too far? What would Amanda think? He just couldn’t get Nancy’s interaction with Gil in the parking lot out of his head. His existing folder on Gil was a bit outdated, providing him with nothing new to investigate.

He mentally ran through the things Gil mentioned: banana cream pie, the beach, sentimental, seeing Nancy, books, the Historical Society, talking to Hannah, he whispered something to Nancy that Ace didn’t quite catch, and then he left.

The banana cream pie was a dig but that was just Gil being a dick. The beach? Nancy cut her arm at the beach... Gil might know something about why she was at the beach and Nancy clearly thought getting injured was worth it. Nancy already said she would talk to Hannah, but would she share anything with Ace or charge on without anyone?

Ace ran his hands through his hair in frustration and leaned his elbows against his desk. There was a time when he would have just asked Nancy about all this. They would have talked the puzzle through, linking each other's words and thoughts before anyone else could catch up. And now, it felt like he was scrambling after barely-there conversations.

Without looking up, Ace hit the enter key. If Nancy wasn’t going to work with the crew, he was going to make sure she was safe in his own way. He got to work sifting through Gil’s phone dragging and organizing what he found onto his private server.

Next, he accessed the Historical Society security footage, thankfully Hannah had him set it all up so he wasn't digitally trespassing. He scanned the footage from two nights ago at double speed until he watched Nancy enter. He paused the video. She was smiling at something Hannah said. That smile was the best thing Ace had seen in a while, for it was real, he could see it in the way her shoulders relaxed. It was beautiful.

His finger shook as he hit play again watching Nancy head to a table in the back. He sped up the footage again until he saw Gil enter. He resumed normal speed, Gil scanned the building before smiling at Hannah. Ace admitted the asshole could be charming, but he still hated him.

Hannah nodded at something Gil asked before explaining what looked to be some sort of request form. Ace cursed under his breath, he should have pressured Hannah more into letting him have audio surveillance installed and not just video. Ace watched Gil take the form from Hannah and then he walked out.

That was it? Ace flipped through the different cameras to find Nancy at her table notebook and laptop in front of her as she stared out the window. This must be the moment she saw Gil on the street. He released a tension-filled breath when he saw she wasn't lying to him about seeing Gil. Ace could always see through Nancy's lies, but being gone for so long it felt reassuring to know he could still rely on that in their friendship.

"Tell me more about..." Dr. Nielsen paused as she checked her notes, "Ace's return to The Claw."

Nancy knew what Dr. Nielsen wanted her to say, something along the lines of addressing her feelings and being open with those around her. She picked at the cushion in her lap and pulled at a stray thread as she tried to find the words that could describe the hollow feeling inside her.

"I - well," Nancy started, "It was harder than I thought it would be. I think or - I hoped that the distance of the trip would lessen these...feelings...I have for him. But instead, they feel more intense than ever."

Nancy reminisced about the moment behind the bar that morning, she wanted to lean into his touch. She wanted to rest against him, share the weight of everything with him, she wanted to just be with him.

"...I don't want to ruin our friendship. It's too important to me," she said softly, "And my history with romantic relationships isn't great. Not that it matters, he and Amanda seem happier than ever. And I want to be happy for him, he deserves happiness more than anyone."

"Let's unpack that - how does one decide who deserves happiness?" Dr. Nielsen asked.

Ace zoomed in on the two maps on his screen, Gil and Nancy had both visited a random point in the ocean yesterday. Gil's history actually showed up visiting the same spot

numerous times over the last week. The cell dropped out of service and rejoined at the exact same spot every time.

He wasn't proud he tracked Nancy's location, but he had permission from the crew to track their phone locations in case of an emergency. Ace definitely classified this as an emergency.

But there was nothing there? It was just the ocean according to the map. Nancy said she was on the beach, not diving. What the hell was going on?

A knock on his bedroom door interrupted his thoughts.

"Ace?" Amanda called from the other side of the door. He stood in a panic then quickly locked his computer and opened the door.

"Hey!" he smiled awkwardly. "What are you doing here?" He pulled her in by her waist and pecked her on the lips.

She held up a VHS between them, "Movie night remember? You said I needed to watch The Truman Show or we'd break up."

"...Yes," he said slowly remembering the conversation, "A required film for everyone."

She looked at the slowly rotating desk chair behind him and then back up at him. "Did you get consumed with work again?" she teased as she wrapped her arms around his neck and played with the soft curls hair skimming his shirt collar.

He sighed into her embrace and buried his face into her neck, "Security for Hannah at the Historical Society," he muttered, he hated lying to her. He hated the way the almost-truth tasted leaving his hips.

"Well then," she swayed him slightly, "Perfect time for a break." She stepped out of his arms and pushed the VHS into his chest with a grin.

He smiled back, this was easy. Comfortable. Normal. So why did he feel so disappointed?

"Should I be worried if this girl I'm in the talking stage with just mentioned they have a pet snake?" Bess asked George as returned a bottle behind the bar.

George gave her a look.

"You're right, that's a red flag," Bess nodded, "I hate snakes."

George just shook her head in response.

"She is so beautiful though," Bess sighed, "The girl. Not the snake."

Nancy's entire being was running on caffeine. After her mentally exhausting therapist appointment, Nancy needed a distraction from continuing to overanalyze everything Dr. Nielsen had said. And the perfect way to avoid her own emotional health was to go ask Hannah about Gil and the paintings she'd seen in the cave.

Nancy turned the radio up in her car to listen to the tragic news of Alex Bertman, age 20, who was found unconscious on a hiking trail. Alex was now in a coma at Horseshoe Bay hospital. Nancy waited to see if there were any more details provided. This was the second coma patient in under 24 hours, which was too high for Horseshoe Bay and over the last year she started to question any and all accidents.

"Nancy, I was wondering if you would stop by tonight," Hannah greeted Nancy from her usual perch at the front desk, "I missed seeing you yesterday night."

"I was actually looking into something I found in one of the journals from the other night," Nancy explained. "I was wondering if you recognize any of these painted symbols?"

Nancy scrolled through her phone before she swiped to the largest cave painting and passed her phone to Hannah.

Hannah swiped and zoomed in before nodding, "That is the goddess Sulis," she replied, passing the phone back to Nancy.

"Sulis...?" The look of confusion was clear on Nancy's face.

"Sulis is a Celtic deity," Hannah grabbed a pamphlet on her desk and handed it to Nancy as she continued to explain. "Originally she was worshipped near thermal springs, the most popular in Bath, England. Worshippers would offer her cursed tablets appealing to the goddess to punish those that wronged them. Their names were carved into the stone tablets and thrown into her waters. I would offer you more texts but I loaned most of them to the Bowen Museum exhibit."

Nancy looked at the pamphlet, the Bowen Museum logo in bright gold on the front advertising the new exhibit on Celtic settlers and mythology in the local area.

"And these paintings I saw?" Nancy asked, nervous for Hannah's answer.

"One could assume Celtic worshippers that migrated here found a natural pond or pool to worship Sulis, she was known for her healing and nourishing qualities as well. You must have found a settlers' temple dedicated to the goddess...but -" Hannah paused, "you said you found the location in one of the Women in White journals?"

Nancy nodded, putting the pieces together, "They were six white figures painted on the walls of the cave, around a pool of water."

"Any spiritual ground would have strengthened the rituals they wanted to perform..." Hannah added. "It would make sense they chose it as a sacred spot for rituals."

“What happened to the people Sulis was asked to punish on the tablets?” Nancy asked, nervous to know the answer.

“The punishment could be set by the offeror, but usually the punishments were to impair the physical and mental well-being of the perpetrator, by the denial of sleep, by causing normal bodily functions to cease or even by death.”

“Like a coma...” she exhaled. Nancy thought about her time in the cave, even if someone did offer a carved stone tablet to Sulis she wouldn’t have been able to see it in the darkness of the water. Then Nancy remembered the paper caught on the rocks.

“Would these curse requests have to be made in stone? Say if someone today wanted to offer Sulis a curse?” Nancy asked, trying to fill the gaps in her working theory.

“I mean stone was the preferred medium of the time. I’d assume worshippers thought it was more permanent than parchment. I think one or two were found written on pewter sheets. But a common stone was always available and easy to scratch names into...” Hannah answered her, her brow furrowed as she watched Nancy start to walk out.

“Nancy?” she called after her.

“Thank you, Hannah!” Nancy yelled over her shoulder as she ran to her car and shoved the pamphlet into her bag.

Nancy’s mind was racing too fast for her to keep track of everything. Sitting in the driver’s seat of her parked car, she pulled out her notebook and frantically scribbled down “Sulis - goddess, curse”. She thought of how Gil mentioned the beach yesterday and zoomed in on the photo of the paper caught in the rocks. She played with the photo settings in the basic camera app.

A groan of frustration slipped out as she thought how quickly Ace would have discovered the name on the paper - ALEX BERTMAN.

How were Alex and Gil connected? How did Gil discover the cave or Sulis?

The Bowen Museum exhibit had only opened recently and Alex was found yesterday morning. The other coma patient was in a car accident the day before that. If what Hannah said about Sulis’ curses was true, someone could have fallen unconscious and then crashed their car because of the curse. She scrolled through the news articles trying to find the name of the other patient, but none was mentioned, only requests for respect and privacy of the loved ones at this time.

Nancy slammed her hand against the steering wheel, she pulled up Ace’s contact and hovered over the call icon. He would have had both Alex and the other patient’s medical files for her in minutes if she wanted. All she had to do was ask for help, a simple thing between friends; it was what their friendship was built upon really.

She tapped the icon, held the phone up to her ear, and listened to each ring as she waited. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Nancy squeezed her eyes shut and willed away tears. Six. The

ring tone was cut off by the sound of Ace's voice. Her heart stopped, she inhaled ready to explain everything.

"Ace's phone. This is Ace's voicemail," his lazy voice echoed into her ear.

"Fuck." A tear escaped from between her lashes and ran down her cheek.

An automated voice continued, "This number is unavailable right now. When you hear the beep, record your message or press pound for more options." A loud beep rang out as Nancy roughly wiped the tear away with the back of her bandaged hand.

"Ace, it's Nancy. Please call me when you get this," she said quickly and hung up. She tried. She reached out. At least Dr. Nielsen would be proud of that. Nancy's fingers frantically searched Alex Bertman's name in a browser with Gil Bobbsey: they went to the same school, in the same year, a few mutual friends on social media including Amanda.

Then she found the photo. Amanda Bobbsey stared lovingly at Alex's face, her lips pressed to their cheek, their intertwined hands resting on Amanda's shoulder, fingers linked tightly together, as they smiled at the camera. Alex is Amanda's ex.

Amanda wouldn't be involved in all this would she? Or was Gil just being an overprotective brother?

Nancy decided to do the only thing she could think of that might give Alex a chance. She started her vehicle and drove to the beach. She had to go back to the cave and see if pulling Alex's curse from the water would wake them up.

The buzzing in Ace's pocket pulled his attention from the scrolling credits on his television. He glanced down at Amanda asleep beside him, her body curled around his, their legs woven together. She shifted, her breath hitched slightly before it returned to normal even breaths. He could tell from the custom vibration pattern that it was Nancy calling.

Nancy never called him anymore. The phone continued to vibrate in his pocket as Ace thought through the repercussions of answering it.

He was with Amanda. He just finished watching one of his favorite films with his girlfriend falling asleep in his bed.

He was with Amanda. The comfort of Amanda curled next to him reminded him of simpler times. Of motel rooms and perfect desert sunsets. With Amanda.

He was with Amanda.

Ace reassured himself that Nancy would call again if it was urgent. Or she'd leave a message, maybe she'd call someone else. He wasn't the only person capable of helping her.

But what if Nancy was in trouble? What if she needed him? His exact skills?

He kept repeating Amanda's name to remind himself that it was Amanda in his arms, in his bed right now. She should have been his only thought this evening. His first priority.

The phone went silent in his pocket.

Knowing where she was going helped Nancy arrive at the cave quicker than the night before. The cut on her arm had started to bleed through her bandages again, but the pain was insignificant to her as she waded around the final rock to reveal the cave's entrance. The faint glow that shone from the inside had Nancy's stomach in knots. Her own flashlight illuminated a fading set of footprints in the sand leading into the cave.

As Nancy proceeded into the cave, she came upon Gil crouched beside the pool of water with a lantern beside him, staring at his reflection. A folded piece of paper in his hand.

"Drew," he said without looking up at her, "I was wondering when you'd stop by."

"Gil..." she acknowledged slowly.

"I bet you've got it all figured out..." he stated as he looked up slowly meeting her gaze.

"Not quite," she admitted, "Not sure how you learned about all this in the first place." She gestured to the cave walls. "Or who the first coma victim is. I know -"

"They're not important," Gil interrupted her, "Let's call them...a test." Gil stood up and started walking around the pool towards her. The paper tapping against his leg.

Nancy swallowed, "What kind of test?" she asked.

"It doesn't matter, they shouldn't be around much longer," He taunted back at her. Silence fell between them. The only noise was the lapping water of the ocean.

Nancy stumbled back as Gil stepped closer. "Ah, careful..." he whispered as he lifted up the paper in his hands. "One of your friends could be next."

Nancy froze in place. "What do you want, Gil?" she pushed the words through her teeth. His mouth lifted into a grin as he glanced around the cave.

"Did you know the curse offering to Sulis doesn't have to be on a bulky stone tablet?" he asked, his eyes met hers again. "Of course you do, the lovely and intelligent Hannah informed you."

Nancy gave him no acknowledgement so he continued.

"I did contemplate carving names into stone for the goddess, for her I would have, there's something about the permanence of it that appealed to me." He sighed, "But you know me, I don't have the patience for that."

Nancy fumbled for her phone in her pocket, the movement caught Gil's attention. He let out a dismissive noise.

"Don't even bother, you know there is no service in here," he scolded, "I thought the great Nancy Drew would be smarter than that."

Gil glared at her for a moment, his eyes were almost as dark as the black pond beside them. His gaze shifted to the paper in his hand, "I could have easily put your name on here, watched you collapse lifeless into a coma. Lips turning blue as you slowly drowned in Sulis' darkness. But-" he paused. Nancy's heart was beating so loud, she was sure Gil could hear it echo off the cave walls.

"But..." she prompted, not sure if she wanted him to continue.

"You would sacrifice anything for your friends, or your dads. Even your own life," he continued, "And to have you suffer and be unable to save them. That would be true torture," Gil leaned down and picked up a medium-sized rock as he continued to speak.

"You see, once the paper completely dissolves, Sulis' debt is paid. The curse is no longer required. Neither is the person." He shrugged. "Could be weeks or months, depending on the paper." Nancy watched as he wrapped the folded paper around the rock.

"Why - what are you doing?" she sputtered quietly.

"Can't make this too easy for you." He pulled an elastic band out of his pocket as he wrapped it around the parcel and held it above the black water.

"So Nancy Drew, who will be the first of your annoying friends to go? Maybe one of your dads?" he laughed and dropped the parcel into the water. Nancy fell to her knees as she reached into the water trying to grab the rock, but all she felt were the bubbles that floated after the sinking rock.

"Gil," she begged as she pulled her soaking hand out of the water, "What have you done?" Her eyes never leaving the rippling water as she spoke.

He ignored her, "I'd give them less than an hour before they start to feel the effects of Sulis' revenge." Her head whipped around to meet his gaze, her blue eyes wide but fierce with worry and determination.

He crouched beside her. "I told you, you'd regret this" he whispered, his lips brushing against her ear. She shoved him back in disgust, knocking him into the walls of the cave before she started to run.

"You won't save them in time!" he yelled after her, his laugh echoing behind her as she exited the cave.

The first car she saw as she ran into The Claw parking lot was Florence. She needed to tell Ace - they needed to make sure everyone was okay. She was out of breath, sweaty, and

covered in sand and whatever other sea grime. Blood trickled down her fingers from her freshly opened cut on her arm.

“Nancy!!” Ace barreled toward her, Bess, Nick and George following close behind. Her panicked eyes flicked between all her friends looking for any signs as to who was Gil’s target. Nancy fell into Ace as she paused to catch her breath. His arms held her away from him, steadying her.

“You can’t just leave me a voicemail and then go offline!” He almost growled at her. “No one had any idea where you were. And I’ve been digging into Gil, he must know something about that cave you were looking into and I’m worried he might try to hurt -”

Nancy stammered interrupting him, “Gil, yes - I need you -” Nancy gasped like she was running out of air, it was like she was - Nancy’s eyes went wide at the realization.

“Nancy?” she could barely hear Bess call in the background, “Are you okay?” Her voice sounded muffled as Nancy continued to try and inhale more air.

Barely able to stand, Nancy leaned heavily on Ace’s arms. She felt her nails dig into the down of his jacket as she tried to stay upright. She focused on his eyes, those perfect blue eyes, as they stared at her with so much worry.

“Nancy?” breathed her name so quietly, as one hand grabbed her waist to hold her up. “Just breathe, we’ll figure it out, we always do. Please - please Nancy - just breathe for me.” His other hand moved to cup her cheek, keeping his eyes locked on hers.

“I can’t - breathe - drown -” It was like she was choking, the loss of air started to blur her vision, darkness fading in around the edges. With a final look at Ace hoping to convey everything she could, Nancy collapsed into him succumbing to the darkness. It wasn’t a curse for her friends that Gil offered the goddess, but her own.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading, your comments and kudos mean everything to me

feel free to come chat on [tumblr](#)!

The Race Against Time

Chapter Summary

Hospital waiting rooms, tears, and heartbreak.

(TW: hospitals, coma, death, LGBTQ+ abuse, bullying, conversion camp mentioned)

Chapter Notes

This is one of the most struggling things I've written in a long time. I think I went back and changed it so many times. But thanks to everyone who's been reading and leaving comments and kudos. It means a lot ♥

Check the trigger warnings above if you haven't already. This wasn't beta read or anything so there's most definitely some mistakes and continuity errors, but I have to remember I'm writing this for a creative outlet so yeah. I'd say enjoy but this is a painful chapter pals.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Previously on Nancy Drew:

"I can't - breathe - drown -" It was like she was choking, the loss of air started to blur her vision, darkness fading in around her edges. With a final look at Ace hoping to convey everything she could, Nancy collapsed into him succumbing to the darkness. It wasn't a curse for her friends that Gil offered the goddess, but her own.

Ace felt Nancy sway backwards for a second before she collapsed into his body completely.

"Nancy!" he heard Bess scream out behind him as he lowered Nancy to the ground.

"No, no, no," he whispered under his breath, "Fuck, not again Nancy." The memories of seeing Nancy unconscious in the whisper box flashed in his mind as he frantically pushed her damp hair away from her face. He felt Bess, George and Nick kneel around them. Bess let out a small cry and grasped Nancy's lifeless hand.

"She's too cold," Ace muttered, his hand cupping her cheek. His Eagle Scouts training suddenly became automatic as he started to pull at the knot of Nancy's scarf to look for a

pulse.

“Her pulse...” he breathed, his fingers were shaking too much to untie the knot.

“Ace,” he felt George move his hand away as she untied the knot and pocketed Nancy’s scarf.

His fingers trembled against her skin while he searched for a reassuring beat. His eyes traced over her face while he waited, all the colour was gone, all the fierce life that shone through every emotion was gone, and her lips were faintly turning blue. Ace didn’t breathe until he felt it - barely there and way too slow.

“She still has a pulse -” he sighed, “shit - the hospital, we need to get to the hospital now.” Not wanting to take his hand off the only thing telling him Nancy was alive but knowing he had to, he reached into his pocket and tossed Florence’s keys at Nick. Ace’s fingers immediately find that beating spot on Nancy’s neck again.

“Bess - grab her bag. George - the doors,” Ace said quickly, with much more force than he intended. They’d never seen him so authoritative before, they all just froze at his tone and stared at him.

He looked up from Nancy’s face, “Let’s go!” he cried before he shifted Nancy’s weight to pick her up and carry her to Florence’s backseat.

“Nick, you have to be gentle, Florence can tell when a driver is anxious,” he said over his shoulder.

Maneuvering Nancy into the backseat seemed easier in his head. He ended up shouting at Bess to help him and together they managed to get her in. Her head was in Bess’ lap as Nick raced to the hospital, her legs were draped over Ace’s.

Bess was trying to keep her crying silent as she stroked Nancy’s hair. Ace reached into the back and grabbed his emergency wool blanket and draped it over Nancy. The feeling that he was useless to help her started to seep into him, his hands shook as they hovered above her blanket covered knees. Nancy had been unconscious before and they saved her, they always saved her, just as she would always save them.

She had survived other times, but for Ace that didn’t make this time any easier, the anxiety and worry was coursing through him like an electric current. If anything the previous times made this incident worse because what if this time she wouldn’t pull through? What if this time they couldn’t solve this? What if he couldn’t save her?

“George,” he said without looking away from Bess’ hands on Nancy, “Text Mr. D tell him - tell him - Nancy’s...”

“Okay, Ace” she interrupted him softly, “I’ve got it.”

Nick dangerously ran Florence through a stop sign, but Ace didn’t even blink. He just watched Nancy. The look Nancy gave him before she collapsed haunted the inside of his

eyelids. Her eyes were so desperate, her eyelashes wet with tears she didn't realize were starting to gather, and her lips paling as she struggled to breathe. He could still feel her nails digging into his forearms through his jacket. He wasn't sure if he'd ever forget her face at that moment, he still had nightmares about skin scared by the wraith and he was certain Nancy as she collapsed lifeless into his arms would be the new images haunting his nightmares.

"We're almost there," Nick called from the front, pulling Ace from his thoughts. He looked up at Bess, the teary mascara tracks staining her cheeks.

"She'll be okay," Bess whispered more to herself than Ace, her voice cracking, "She has to be."

After arriving at the hospital, everything passed in fleeting handfuls as if he was passing through a strobe light. Nick stopped the car at the emergency entrance. Bodies scrambled to get Nancy out of the backseat. Ace carried Nancy into the hospital. George yelled for help. A gurney appeared. Nancy taken from his arms. Nancy disappeared behind closed doors. Carson and Ryan arrived frantic and worried. Bess guided him to a hard seat in a waiting room. He watched George fiddle with Nancy's scarf as they waited. And waiting, constant hours of waiting.

Ace hated hospitals. He hated the way they smelt. He hated the subtle buzz of the fluorescent lights. He hated the almost silence. It was a silence of machines beeping in backgrounds, anxious waiting rooms, and tears, so many tears. Memories of his mom sobbing in a hallway, her hand in his hair as he leaned into her legs as a small child. Laura's soft cries of apology when he visited her room after their accident. Bess beside him, crying so silently he could almost hear the teardrops hit her jeans. Ace hated hospitals.

Ace let out a shaky breath, what felt like the first since he saw Nancy running towards him in the parking lot. As the hours passed, the ache of his muscles started to settle in. The exhausted hangover of adrenaline began to weigh on his body. Only for his attention to be on high alert when Carson and Ryan walked through the doors. All four of them jumped from their seats, Bess and George immediately asking questions. But Ace just watched Mr. D's expressions as he relayed information from the doctor, barely registering the information. Mr. D wasn't crying, he looked relieved, which meant Nancy was stable. She was okay.

"She's in a coma, medically they can't explain why her body shut down that way," he explained, he glanced at Ryan, "They asked if she had been swimming recently? Her ultrasound showed significant damage to her lungs, but the x-rays just showed darkness throughout her chest area."

Ryan peered over his shoulder at the administration desk before continuing, "While waiting we heard a doctor saying she is the third patient to come in like this..."

"Which means there's others..." George glanced at their group, "We'll figure it out."

"Mr. D, Mr. H," Ace asked, his nerves audible in every word, "Can we see her?"

“Not yet, there’s some more tests they need to run and they don’t know with the other patients what circumstances or security they should put on the room,” Ryan answered frowning, “I’m sorry.”

“But she’s stable,” Mr. D clasped his shoulder, “That’s something. You got her here in time.”

But Bess started crying as George hugged her and Ace just needed to get away from it all. From the feeling of hopelessness. Ace hated hospitals.

He found a secluded area on the maternity ward. People here were actually smiling and there were still tears, but they were full of happiness and joy. The silence felt softer here. He sat down and finally checked his phone for the first time since leaving his house the night before. As he leaned on his elbows on his knees, he scrolled through the numerous notifications from Amanda and a couple from his parents.

He left Amanda in his bed yesterday. He just left her to find Nancy. He hung his head in his hands, his life was being pulled in two different directions. At times he wanted the adrenaline and mystery with Nancy and the crew, but he also wished for the peaceful life he had on the road with Amanda. He scrunched his eyes, pushing away the lack of sleep and tried to remember the order of yesterday’s events.

Ace remembered letting Nancy’s call go to voicemail after they’d finished watching The Truman Show. Amanda was asleep next to him still in her work clothes. He tried to just be with her, he pulled her impossibly closer to him, the jasmine scent of her hair brought a sense of calm to him. But his mind couldn’t stop racing about Nancy’s call. He waited, waited for his phone to vibrate again with anyone else’s call or text. Waiting to see if Nancy called anyone after him. Waiting to see if they needed him. And yet, all he could hear was Amanda’s sleeping breaths.

He couldn’t handle the not knowing, so he slowly untangled himself from Amanda and stepped into the hallway and listened to Nancy’s voicemail. All he could hear was the panic in her voice. He replayed it again to listen to what she was saying.

“Ace, it’s Nancy...” as if he didn’t have her as a favourite contact. As if he didn’t know her number off the top of his head. She gave no explanation to why she was calling, only asking him to call her back. No text, nothing. He called her back. Straight to voicemail. He called her again. Same thing. Her battery could have died. Or she must be out of service.

“Shit,” he whispered under his breath, knowing Nancy probably went to that cave again.

He called Bess to see if Nancy was at home and texted their group chat. No one had seen Nancy since the end of her shift. He grabbed his jacket and keys, his anger almost causing him to drop them to the floor. He thought after all they’d been through Nancy had gotten over this self-sacrificial crusade she seemed to be on.

He didn’t even think about Amanda. By now his parents were used to his weird schedule, but he normally kept Amanda updated; she was used to the supernatural stuff. Was it because

he'd just gotten back and was desperate to feel useful again? Was it this feeling of purpose and being needed what he had been missing? Or was it just because it was Nancy? And it'd always be Nancy.

Hours after soaking up as much joy he could from the maternity ward he wandered back down the waiting room and sat down next to Nick. He couldn't handle dealing with his parents or Amanda just yet. He wanted to put it off as long as he could.

"Bess and George went home to shower and nap," Nick said looking over at Ace, "They got a lift, so don't worry about Florence. She's still parked outside." Nick passed him his keys over the chipped wooden armrest.

"Thanks," Ace replied and took the keys without looking at Nick. He started counting ceiling tiles to avoid making eye contact with anyone.

"You okay?" Nick asked Ace as he bumped his fist to Ace's shoulder. "It's been a helluva time. I've never seen you like that. I mean you let me drive Florence." Ace cringed, the guilt about leaving Amanda pulled at him more. He wanted to sink away and disappear into the terrible hospital wallpaper.

"I don't even know...everything is just a blur right now," he rubbed his eyes as he failed to explain his feelings. "I just want to see her, you know? To know she's okay?"

Nick nodded, "I get that, but I don't think we can help much from here. George is going to pick me up, I need some sleep and something to eat. You should head home too."

"I can't leave her -" he started to answer Nick, but Ace's phone started buzzing. "One sec," he said to Nick before walking away to get some privacy.

"Hey," he answered.

"Hey?" Amanda answered in the background, "Just hey? Ace, what the hell is going on?! I woke up and you were gone. And your parents had no idea where you were. We've been calling you all day. I went to The Claw and it was closed even though Nancy's car was there. And you haven't -"

"Nancy is in a coma," he interrupted her. "We brought her to the hospital last night. I know I didn't call but we didn't know - we weren't sure if -" his voice hitched at his next thought, "- if she'd make it. We still haven't been able to see her. I'm sorry I didn't call or answer but it's just - she's not -"

"Ace, stop, take a breath," Amanda said softly, "It's okay, we were just worried about you. It's not like you to just disappear like that." Ace looked over his shoulder at Nick in the waiting area.

"No, I'm okay, I'm just going to stay here for a while," he let his words fall into the silence. He didn't regret running off to find Nancy, but he had this haunting obligation as if he should

regret it. Amanda waited for him to continue, to say anything really. He knew he wasn't being fair to Amanda, she had done nothing wrong.

"I should probably..." he started, "I need to check in with my parents." He couldn't put it off any longer.

"Right, of course," she muttered, "Let me know if you need anything from me, okay?"

"Okay," he replied. "I'll talk to you later."

He heard her distant "Okay," from her before he hung up.

Calling his mom was a lot easier than talking with Amanda, by the end of the call she already started making a list of meals she was going to bring to the Drew's house. She also said she would update The Captain since he almost filed a missing person's report, so he'd eventually want to hear from Ace himself.

Then he sat down in the waiting room and waited. Nick left. Bess came back. But Ace waited. He counted floor tiles after determining that there were approximately 284 ceiling tiles. He was about to move on to electrical outlets when his mom ended up coming to the hospital. She convinced him to come home since visiting hours were over so he might as well eat, shower, sleep and then he can come back when Nancy might be able to have visitors.

When Ace returned with Bess the next morning, he brought coffees for Mr. D and Mr. H, who he was pretty sure hadn't gone home since Nancy was admitted.

"I remembered the right milk this time," he tried to joke as he passed the coffee to Mr. H.

"Thanks Ace," he smiled sadly.

"So Carson, do you think we'll be able to visit Nancy today?" Bess asked sweetly, too sweet for this early in the morning.

"I think so, only one at a time though," he nodded, "With the unknown variables of the cases they're keeping visitors to a minimum."

Ace looked at Bess to see if she wanted to go first but she was already going to sit down in the waiting area. Bess gave him a look that pushed his feet into motion following Mr. D and Mr. H down the hallway.

Nancy was sharing a room with the other drowned coma patients. Each bed sectioned off with curtains; as the newest patient Nancy was the closest to the entrance. Ace's stomach dropped with guilt when he saw her in the hospital bed.

Her body was tucked in with blankets, the cords and tubes all over her were connected to so many different machines. He had never seen Nancy look so small. Even when battling the wraith, she never looked this lifeless. It was all wrong. There was a lack of flush in her cheeks, she was so desolate without being able to see that annoying sparkle in her eyes or the faint grin of her lips, even her vibrant hair seemed dull against the white pillow. When he sat

next to the bed, his hand found hers without thinking. His fingers recoiled for just a second at how cold she was before he grasped it tighter with both hands.

“I’m so sorry Nancy,” his voice cracked. “I’m - I wish -” His words caught in his throat, he didn’t know what he wanted to say to her, or maybe he had too much to say to her and it was all rushing at the same time.

“We’re going to save you,” he managed to get out, “I’m gonna fix this.”

It felt like if Ace left, if he took his eyes off her again, she’d cease to exist. As if him being near her was the anchor keeping her here with him. Ace glanced at the machines connected to Nancy; science was keeping her alive, keeping her here. But science wouldn’t bring her back.

And still he stayed, he didn’t say anything, but he stayed. He was selfish and he wanted more time. Even if it was science keeping her heart beating and lungs breathing, with every breath he was reassured that she was still here.

He wasn’t sure how long he was there, but Mr. H came in to grab him so Bess could visit too.

Ace squeezed Nancy’s hand one last time before he walked out. He nodded at Mr. D and Mr. H before he headed back to the waiting area. Bess almost ran past him to see Nancy.

Ace sent a text to George and Nick saying that they’d be able to visit Nancy if they wanted. They showed up within a half hour, George threatening to kill Bess if she didn’t come out soon.

Their day was spent rotating through visiting Nancy. Each time Ace had his turn, both hands would clasp Nancy’s cold one and he’d just match his breathing to hers, finding calm in the synchronicity.

The next day everything changed. The first coma patient that arrived, an older woman with symptoms like Nancy, died.

Ace’s code had just finished accessing the hospital files for the two other coma patients when Bess walked in holding Nancy’s bag. He let the files load to his ftp while he walked over to join everyone else.

“Found this on the floor in Florence’s back seat,” she exclaimed, lifting up the satchel. She tipped Nancy’s bag and let the contents scatter noisily over the table. Nancy’s entire life was now a mess on top of Table 5 in The Claw. No one moved right away, they all just stared at the items that made up Nancy’s entire life.

“Carson said we can stop by whenever to go through her laptop and room,” Nick said, glancing at Ace. Ace nodded, his eyes still darting between the different items on the table noticing the cell phone.

“I think this has something to do with Gil or maybe some kind of cave,” Ace’s voice echoed into the silence of the diner, “He was here the other day, and she mentioned a cave for

Hannah, but before Nancy - before she collapsed - she managed to say his name.”

“Right, so look for anything to do with Gil or a cave...” Bess agreed as she lowered the empty satchel to the floor.

No one moved toward the items. All of them were too scared to touch Nancy’s private possessions.

“Screw this,” George muttered and grabbed the closest thing to her - a very crumbled up folded piece of paper.

With George’s movement the rest of them reached for an item. Bess grabbed Nancy’s notebook, Nick picked up her wallet, and Ace pushed her lockpick kit aside and lifted her cell phone.

“This feels wrong,” Bess whispered looking at Nancy’s closed notebook in her hands, “Like we’re invading her privacy.”

“She broke into your locker and found your secret passport for her own curiosity,” George said as she unfolded the paper, “At least we’re trying to save her life.”

“Very true,” Bessy shrugged and flipped open the notebook.

“What the hell?” George exclaimed, “Nancy was going to quit?” She flipped the paper over to see if there was anything. ““Dear George and Nick, please accept my resignation...Sincerely, Nancy.’ She couldn’t even write more than one line.”

“When’s it dated?” Nick asked, looking over her shoulder.

“It’s not,” George showed him.

“I guess she could have written that ages ago?” Bess speculated with a tightness in her voice like she couldn’t believe Nancy would ever leave The Claw, leave them really.

“Or last week,” Ace mumbled thinking his return might have prompted Nancy to quit. Like she couldn’t handle being in the same room as him. He thought things were at least okay, definitely not worth quitting over. He could feel the weight of Bess’ gaze on him as he worked to unlock Nancy’s phone.

“Right, well,” Nick started, “I guess maybe she’s been dealing with more than we thought if she really wanted to quit.”

“Still could have written more than one measly line,” George set the paper aside and grabbed a pamphlet.

“Nancy’s got a bunch of stuff about the Women in White in here,” Bess said as she flipped through, “Oh, a cave! She’s noted something here about a cave on a beach?”

“She was running from the beach the night before she collapsed,” Nick pointed at Bess. No one knew how to properly classify Nancy’s condition, she didn’t die, although her lungs look

like she drowned.. ‘Collapsed’ seemed to be the easiest way to explain it.

“And she cut her arm going to a cave on the beach the night before that too,” Ace uttered, his focus purely on Nancy’s phone as he opened her call history. His name at the top, the last person she called, her voicemail repeated in his mind. Her small voice almost pleading with him to call her back.

Everyone paused what they were doing and looked at him in confusion.

“I bandaged it up after the quadricycle thing,” Ace lifted a shoulder, “She never mentioned Gil, just something she was looking into for Hannah.”

“There’s a note about Gil along with a time and the Historical Society,” Bess jumped onto the end of Ace’s statement, almost bouncing with the connection of clues.

“She mentioned he stopped by there,” Ace said, while he continued to scroll through Nancy’s recent messages, mostly to her dads, a few from a Dr. Nielsen Ace had never heard of. “But when I looked at the security footage after she mentioned it all it showed was Hannah handing him some kind of paper and then he left.”

George looked between Bess and Nick, “You looked at the security footage...days ago?”

Ace stopped his scrolling and looked at each of his friends, “I didn’t like how he was talking to Nancy yesterday in the parking lot.”

“So you hacked into the Historical Society security feeds?” Nick asked, his concern pinching together his eyebrows.

“Well, kind of,” Ace clarified, “I have a login because I set it up for Hannah.” He paused, and then continued, “I did hack Gil’s phone though after that.”

At that statement three sets of eyes looked at him even more intensely, George’s head tilted into an awkward angle, her eyes squinting slightly.

“You hacked Gil Bobbsey’s phone?” Bess questioned, Nancy’s notebook now completely ignored.

And in that moment, with the chime of a bell the universe turned against him.

“Your girlfriend’s brother’s phone?” George continued Bess’ shock.

“You hacked Gil’s phone?” a voice echoed from the front door behind Ace. A voice that was laced with betrayal and hurt. Amanda. Amanda who has barely seen since Nancy has been in the hospital. Ace’s eyes closed as he inhaled and turned to face her standing by the front door holding a bakery bag.

“I know he’s a dick but,” she started as Ace walked toward her. He pocketed Nancy’s phone and started to apologize.

But Amanda cut him off, “You promised you would never.” From his peripherals he watched Bess, George and Nick slowly disappear into the back room.

“I know, I know I promised, but Nancy -”

“Gil and Nancy ended months ago.” Amanda snapped. “Gil might be rude, but he wouldn’t hurt Nancy.”

“Amanda,” Ace insisted, “He was willing to let George die for the shroud.”

“And we’re back to that. Again.” she rolled her eyes. “Here.” She shoved the bagels at his chest, pushing the air out of him as he awkwardly grabbed hold of the items.

“I wanted to see you and I thought you might be hungry,” she sighed, clearly disappointed she even tried to do something nice for Ace and his friends.

“Thank you,” he hesitated, “You have to understand Nancy mentioned -”

“I don’t really care what she said Ace,” she interrupted him, “You promised.”

Her eyes pleaded with him, “You promised you would never and I trusted you.” Each time the word “promised” passed her lips Ace’s soul cracked a bit more. The hurt in Amanda’s eyes wasn’t helping either.

“And -” she paused trying to catch her thoughts, “It’s for Nancy. Right? That’s why you hacked his phone?”

Ace swallowed and nodded, “He confronted her in the parking lot the other day.”

“So you hack everyone that confronts Nancy?” she asked, her voice laced with sarcasm.

“The ones that have threatened her in the past, yes!” Ace’s temper got the best of him as he carelessly tossed the laptop and bagels on a nearby table. He was annoyed with this fight on their road trip and he was annoyed with it now especially since Nancy was in a hospital bed. He was over having to prove that Gil was a bad person.

“My god, Ace!” she cried, “You’re not her lackey, Nancy can take care of herself. She did the entire time we were away, she doesn’t need you to do everything for her.”

“Right now she does!” he blurted, frustrated he ran his hands through his hair breaking eye contact with her. His lack of sleep was not helping this situation. Anger, regret, loyalty, and exhaustion were all fighting to control him.

“And I need you to be my boyfriend. Priorities, remember?” Amanda threw his words back at him. Silence echoed through the restaurant.

“Do you even know what I’m going through right now?” He glanced at her confused with her question.

She shook her head, "Of course, you wouldn't know. We haven't seen each other in days. And I understand, I haven't had time to tell you. Plus Nancy is in a coma and she's one of your best friends." She turned back to the door and opened it. "But I just - I needed - I can't be here right now." And with a sigh, she walked out.

"What happened? Is your dad okay?" Ace asked following her. He knows she worried about her dad being in prison. He'd been so caught up in Nancy he didn't realize that the world, their lives, continued on beyond that. His mind started running through everything, what could have happened to Amanda?

"Is Gil okay?" the question physically scratched his throat as he asked it, but he was her only brother. Gil was the only person she had left.

"So now you care about Gil?" she laughed, "That's cute," she said over her shoulder as she walked down the stairs.

"I care about you," Ace said and touched her arm gently, turning her towards him. She stared at his hand before looking up at him.

"I found out this morning, I found out that a person -" she paused, her gaze darted back and forth between his eyes, "I found out that someone I used to care about might be dying, and I just wanted - I needed you. I wanted to talk with you because I can't see them for complicated reasons."

"I'm sorry -" Ace started.

She shook her head causing Ace's voice to falter, "We weren't that close anymore, it was in high school and it was messy. But you weren't there when I needed you Ace. And that hurt. Now this whole thing with Gil. I think it'd be best if we..."

"Amanda, please," he stepped closer to her and reached up to cup her cheek. "Please, don't do this."

She sighed and leaned into him and closed her eyes, "I just don't think I can look at you right now. I need some space. Or time, both, I don't know. I just need to think without your eyes pleading with me," She turned, stepped out of his grasp, and walked to her car.

Too exhausted to fight anymore and too distracted by his worry for Nancy, Ace let her go.

Bess immediately hugged him when they walked back into the diner. "Oh, Ace," she whispered with her arms tightly wrapped around him. Nick and George were standing by Nancy's things packing them back into her bag.

"George and I are going to head to the Historical Society to see Hannah," Nick said, "Ask her about Gil and a Sulis goddess?"

"I found a scribbled note mentioning it," Bess explained to Ace, "Figured Hannah would be the one to ask."

“And there’s this pamphlet,” George added holding up the brochure, “It mentions items on loan from Horseshoe Bay Historical Society. See if Hannah knows anything about it and why Nancy had it in her bag.”

“Let’s head over to the Drew’s,” Bess said with a sad smile to Ace as she took Nancy’s bag from Nick, “You can distract yourself with Nancy’s laptop.”

Ace nodded, not really wanting to talk at the moment. He grabbed his laptop and the stupid bagels, it would be a shame to let them go bad.

Ryan stood at the foot of Nancy’s hospital bed, his arms braced against it. He glanced between Carson in the chair beside her and Nancy.

“So we’re just going to trust a handful of barely old enough adults to save her?” he asked.

“It seems to have worked in the past,” Carson shrugged, “I’m not sure what else we can do.”

“How do you handle this?” Ryan started pacing, “I feel like I’m going out of my mind.”

“Welcome to parenthood,” Carson smiled sadly at him, “It’s a special kind of torture.”

Bess walked in first having been in Nancy’s room before. Ace hovered in the hallway and just looked in. Nancy who kept her walls so high, careful to not let anyone close. Entering her room, going through her things, and disrupting her space felt wrong. He wanted Nancy to trust him, trust them all, enough that she’d want them to be in here. He kept telling himself that if he was in a mysterious coma, Nancy wouldn’t have a problem rifling through his stuff.

“I bet Nancy pretty much had this all figured out on her own already. We just have to piece it together,” Bess said as she glanced at Nancy’s bulletin board, almost all of it covered with Women in White papers.

“Especially if this is what she’s been doing in her free time?” she continued, as she lifted up random pinned notes on the board to reveal more paper underneath.

“I told you something was off with her,” Ace said softly as entered the room, eyes darting quickly around gathering details of Nancy’s life. Stars on the ceiling, the soft pink walls, and the window seat. He wanted to spend time looking at her crammed bookcase, he wanted to know what songs she could play on the guitar, he didn’t even know she could play guitar. He thought he knew her, but there was always more, she was like a never ending messy string of code that always kept him guessing.

He felt Bess’ stare on him through the awkward silence. “I know you did,” she said before she walked over to the window seat and pulled out Nancy’s notebook.

Ace sat down in Nancy’s desk chair and got to work on her laptop. There was no significant activity since the night she saw Gil at the Historical Society, most of it was just notes on the

Women in White. He found the rough location of the cave she'd mentioned. But he already had that information from Gil and Nancy's phone. Nancy's phone...he fumbled before he pulled it from his pocket and plugged it into the computer.

Transferring Nancy's phone data to his ftp was going to take a minute so he spun aimlessly around in her chair.

"Anything else in her notebook?" he stopped the spinning chair to face Bess.

"Not really. Sulis curse, the cave, and Gil," She flipped between the pages. "But we don't even know if those are connected at this point," she sighed. "And there's so much on Temperance and the Women in White in here too."

"Knowing Nancy and our luck," he shrugged, "They probably are connected."

"Why was she doing all this alone?" Bess asked, shutting Nancy's notebook in frustration, "I don't understand - she should have known - we could have helped her."

"Nancy's strong," Ace assured, as he spun back to the computer, "But she's also strong headed. I think maybe after the wraith she's trying to prove that she's capable. But I'm not sure who she's trying to prove that to, maybe herself, because we all know she's always been strong enough to handle anything."

Bess hummed as she tucked her legs under her, "Maybe this is more than Gil? Maybe it has nothing to do with him at all? Nancy's got all this stuff on the Women in White, it could be connected to them."

As Bess continued to brainstorm behind him, Ace dove into Nancy's phone data.

"I think you're right," Ace interrupted Bess' rambling, as he scrolled through the files from Nancy's phone. "It must have something to do with the Women in White. She's got pictures of the cave with paintings of six little white figures."

"I knew it!" she exclaimed, "Okay, so not connected to Gil then? But it must be you said she mentioned him last night..."

Again, he let Bess carry on as he stared at the photo of the water pool in the cave. The water was too black to be natural, the darkness creating a perfect mirror of the dripping cave ceiling. And yet, he couldn't look away. Even through the photos he could feel the water almost staring back at him, calling to him in some way. He frowned thinking Nancy had gone here alone. He quickly swapped windows back to get away from staring at that water.

At first, her last searches were confusing, but slowly the puzzle started to piece itself together. She must have connected the coma patients somehow, but she could only identify one.

With access to the hospital records, he looked up the patients that were in Nancy's room, the one who died. The first one who passed away was Margaret Marson, an older woman who

was found after a car accident earlier this week. And there was Alex Bertman, who was found unconscious in woods by fellow hikers.

Based on Nancy's browser history, she was able to link Alex to Gil through social media. And then he saw it, Amanda and Alex together. This was who Amanda was so upset about, it looks like they dated years ago, but no one ever really forgets their first love.

Alex had a connection to Gil, but why would Gil want to hurt Alex and Amanda broke up years ago?

"Bess?" he asked, looking for his platanchor's advice. She only hummed in response as she continued to decipher Nancy's notes about the Women in White.

"How bad would it be if I hacked into Amanda's ex's online accounts?" he queried, looking over his shoulder at her. Bess lowered the notebook and stared at him.

"Amanda? The one who you had a yelling match with in The Claw earlier today?" she clarified with a tone that made Ace cringe.

"Yes?" he mumbled reluctantly.

"Is it connected to Nancy?" Bess asked, raising her eyebrows. He wanted access to Alex's online accounts to see if he could figure out why Gil would want to hurt them. And if he was the one that hurt Nancy.

"Possibly," he said slowly, "I've been digging through her recent searches and this Alex Bertman popped up, they were found unconscious in the woods the other day and now are in a coma. In the same room as Nancy. And Amanda dated Alex in high school."

"I think if you don't start hacking, I will have to learn how to," Bess reassured him. "Why'd you even ask?"

"The whole thing with Amanda," he turned back to the computer and started entering in the code, "I don't want to mess it up more than I already have. I don't even know if we're still together."

"Ace," Bess hesitated, "Are you sure this relationship with Amanda is what you want?"

"I like being with Amanda, I think we're both just dealing with a lot right now," he brushed off Bess' question as he typed frantically. It felt wrong reading the emails and messages sent between Alex and Amanda.

"Alex and Amanda," Ace started to explain to Bess, "They were in love, but it sounds like Alex wasn't ready to come out to her parents." He typed a few more keys, opening up more windows.

Bess walked over to read beside him, "Oh no," she whispered. "Alex's parents threatened to send her to a conversion camp if she didn't break up with Amanda. That's horrific."

“It gets worse,” Ace muttered, “Alex’s parents humiliated Amanda, openly threatening her for turning their daughter against them.”

“And Amanda never mentioned any of this to you?” Bess wondered out loud. Ace shook his head in response.

“This would be enough reason for Gil to want revenge, it looks Amanda isolated herself in school, losing all her friends, grades slipped. There’s even messages from Gil pleading to Alex. It’s heartbreaking,” Bess’s voice broke as she whispered, saying it all too loud made it all too real. “This makes Alex a target for Gil’s revenge as well as Nancy. He definitely has something to do with it.”

“That doesn’t explain any connection to Margaret though,” Ace said, needing a change in topic when Bess’ phone started ringing.

“Hannah said Sulis is a Celtic goddess that puts people in a coma!” George yelled through the phone the moment Bess had it on speaker.

“It’s more complicated than that,” Nick’s voice chimed from in the background.

“People offer her curse tablets and she punishes people using the request on the tablets,” George continued, “Usually the punishment requests are for death. Not that complicated Nick. We just got Nancy free from the wraith, we can’t let another supernatural being get her.”

“So someone would have had to offer Nancy’s name to Sulis?” Bess asked, looking at Ace. “Someone who wanted her to regret what she’s done?”

“It’s Gil, we all know it’s Gil,” George ranted through the phone, Ace could feel the eye roll.

“But Gil doesn’t have a connection to the other two coma patients,” Nick said, a faint ticking of a signal light in the background.

“Actually,” Ace said, “He does. Or Amanda does? It’s complicated. I’m still trying to figure out how he would even know about the cave and being able to curse people. The first patient however, I don’t see how Gil is connected at all. She was an older woman, Margaret Marson. She lived here all her life, never married, she ran a bed and breakfast down by the beach.”

“Maybe she was just convenient being by the beach?” George answered.

“They’ve listed the cause of death as drowning on her file,” Ace read off his computer, he opened the different scans to see her lungs. It was just darkness obscuring the entire chest area. “And that is definitely not how lungs are supposed to look, even ones damaged from drowning.”

Bess grimaced as she looked over Ace’s shoulder, “So based on the timeline Alex will die next and then Nancy?”

“Hannah said, if we can pull out the curse from Sulis’ springs we might be able to save her, but,” George paused, “She also said Nancy mentioned something about paper instead of stone

tablets and if the paper is gone, then there's nothing we can do." Tension filled the air as a feeling of hopelessness weaved in between them.

It felt like nothing. It felt like she was falling through thick black tar. Unable to inhale, unable to open her eyes, unable to scream for help. She was just suspended in this never ending darkness. For the first time in months, Nancy felt completely calm.

And she kept sinking deeper and deeper below.

George had given her mom the pictures of Nancy's scans to see if there was any ritual that Victoria knew of that could help. But Victoria insisted she see Nancy in person.

"A piece of paper isn't going to tell me shit," she claimed, "I need to see her."

They all waited for Victoria in the hospital the next morning. Ace was sick of waiting rooms, the silence was becoming too loud to focus on all the thoughts running through his mind. Nancy. Amanda. Alex. Curses. He weaved between people until he found a long hallway that seemed neglected. And he began pacing up and down, trying to find a calming rhythm for his brain.

As he turned around to walk back for the umpteenth time he bumped into Amanda. Her eyes were red and puffy from crying, traces of mascara clinging to her eyelashes.

"Amanda," his voice cracked. He took a step toward her to comfort her, but she just shook her head.

"Amanda," Ace repeated, pleading as he pulled her towards him, "Talk to me, please." He hated seeing her like this. Amanda who was normally happy and carefree, her smile usually blooming with light. But this, this crying, shell of Amanda was wrong.

"What happened?" he whispered, not wanting to make any loud noises. Not wanting to admit he knew her history with Alex. How scared she must be unable to see Alex.

"Why don't you just hack into my phone and find out, Ace?" she snapped at him, pushing him to get away.

"No, talk to me, what happened?" he insisted, following her down the dark hallway. "I can't lose you too."

She whipped back around as she heard him. "Ace, you didn't lose me. You pushed me away. And I don't want to talk to you about loss right now - the person, Alex is - Alex was -" A sob broke through Amanda, catching in her throat. "I loved her Ace, and she's - she is gone."

Ace sighed and pulled her into him, wrapping his arms around her, this isn't something he'd wish on anyone, not even Gil or Everett Hudson.

“Amanda, I’m so sorry,” he breathed, “What can I do?”

She pushed the heels of her hands into her eyes, the defiance fading from her eyes, “You should have been asking me that days ago.” Her voice scratched with her sadness.

“ I know you’re worried about Nancy and she’s your friend,” Amanda looked at him as she continued, “But you talked all this big stuff about priorities, and I can’t help but feel like since we’ve gotten back to Horseshoe Bay, I’m no longer a priority to you.” Her last words were barely a whisper.

“You know that’s not true Amanda - you know that I -” Ace paused trying to find the words she needed to hear, but deep down he knew she was right.

“Even now, you can’t even say the right words Ace,” she laughed and looked away from him, tears starting to roll down her cheeks, “I just - I can’t do this anymore. I can’t be second to Nancy...” she let her voice trail off.

“You’re not -” he insisted, he could hear the pleading in his voice, but he cringed at the taste of the lie on his lips. The truth he’s been trying so desperately to repress in the depths of his heart was dangerously close to revealing itself. Scared to ruin what was going on with him and Amanda, but also ruin his friendship with Nancy.

“Ace, you are incredible, but you’re lying to yourself if you think that,” her fingers grazed his cheek, down to his chin, “My mom always said this thing about love manifesting itself as worry. And I never really understood it until I saw you with Nancy. You worry so fiercely for her. Not just now when she’s injured, but every second of the day. It’s in your breath, the furrow of your brow,” Ace’s eyes closed as her fingers traced his brow and down the bridge of his nose, “It’s in everything you do.”

“New Mexico was perfect,” she looked back at him with a sad smile, her eyes showing a small spark of happiness at the memories. “But it feels like I’m trying to get back to how our relationship was in New Mexico, but I think we left that behind there.” Ace’s gaze focused on Amanda’s lips, unable to meet her stare.

She reached up and pushed a stray lock of hair from his face. “After high school and Alex, I was so desperate for any kind of love even if I wasn’t someone’s first choice. But now I think maybe I need to be my own priority. I need to figure out what I want. What I deserve.”

“Amanda, please,” Ace whispered, leaning into her touch.

“You showed me I deserve that Ace, that it exists in the world, please let me go find it,” she pressed her forehead to his, before her lips brushed his in goodbye. He could taste the salt of her tears or maybe they were his tears. Her hands were on his chest, his gently weaving in her hair, brushing her neck. Her hand fisted his t-shirt as he leaned toward her not wanting this kiss to end, for it all to be over. But she pulled away and pushed him back.

“Goodbye Ace,” she whispered before turning and walking away.

Ace wandered the hospital hallways aimlessly working his way back to the waiting room. He was overthinking everything Amanda said to him. He wanted her to be wrong, he wanted to prove her wrong, but deep down he knew she was right. Every word she said was right.

“Sad boy with the hair,” Victoria called at him from across the room, “C’mon.” She tilted her head back to where the group was hovering.

“Nancy doesn’t have much time left,” Victoria started, her eyes darting between the four of them, “There’s a poor lost soul in that room that is lingering in that room without their body, but I think you can still save Nancy.”

“Nancy has this darkness surrounding her heart. On the scans it covers her lungs, but it’s more like it’s seeping from her heart. Like the person wanted Nancy to have her heart rot from the inside out and suffocate on that darkness. It’s bad chi.”

Bess was nodding frantically beside him. “Remind me when all this is over, we need to realign all of our chi,” she whispered to him.

“Is there a way to save her?” George asked, impatient for her mom to get to the point.

“This darkness that surrounds her heart is ancient magic,” Victoria answered, “Whereas the wraith was a newer, created-evil, the scars it left in her mind are healing, slowly, but healing. With an ancient darkness like this, her heart and soul are suffocating. Her heart is literally breaking under the pressure.”

“Mom!” George hissed, “Do you know of a way to save her?”

“Maybe, I will need to check with Hannah, you know we’ve got our supernatural book club now,” Victoria rambled, “And I vaguely recall something that might work, but I’m not sure it’ll be crossing cultures and I’m not sure how effective it’ll be.”

“Something is better than nothing at this point,” Nick voiced what they were all thinking.

Chapter End Notes

...how are we feeling?
i'm not feeling good.

feel free to yell about it with me on tumblr [@allthesedaydreams](https://www.tumblr.com/allthesedaydreams)!!

The Broken Anchor

Chapter Summary

Kidnapping, sage, and tears.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for being so patient with me ♥ Operation Save Nancy is underway - let's go!
Heavily relying on a lot of dialogue here and it's not beta-read so enjoy the chaos friends

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Previously on Nancy Drew:

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They started devising a plan of who needed to be where. George and Nick were going to drop off Victoria and Bess at the Historical Society and head back to The Claw to keep researching Sulis and Margaret to see if there was anything they missed. Which left Ace to stay with Nancy.

Whenever they were in a room Ace was always aware of Nancy, she had that energy that demanded his full attention, but he was hyper-aware of her hands. Wrapped around a coffee mug. Tucking her hair behind her ears. Their enthusiasm as she explained her theory. A gentle brush against his shoulder. The subtle tremble of nerves when she was scared.

Ace sat beside her hospital bed, a room that once held multiple noises indicating they were keeping multiple people alive, now the only beeping in the room was from the machines keeping Nancy here. Ace knew based on the two women before that Nancy didn't have much time left.

His eyes drifted over Nancy, nothing had changed, she was still impossibly pale, her lips wrapped around the incubation mouthpiece were a shade of blue Ace would happily never see again. But she was still Nancy. She was still here. Still alive.

He sighed as he lifted her hand into his, her palm perpendicular to his and interlocked their fingers. He was used to her cold temperature. Her grip was nonexistent but still, he held on, maybe even extra tighter to compensate. He rubbed his thumb in a circle on the back of her hand as if he could transfer his warmth to her.

"Nancy, it's Ace," he whispered so quietly before he cleared his throat, "Nancy, please, you need to come back. You need to fight whatever you're facing in there and come back to us. Please." His voice broke as he pleaded into the silence. Did she have anything to fight in there? Or was it just darkness and silence?

"This is all so wrong," he paused, "It felt wrong the moment I left Horseshoe Bay and I was just refusing to acknowledge why." He began tracing the lines of her knuckles with his other hand, gently finding tiny scars he'd never noticed before. Maybe she got them teaching herself to lockpick, the thought passed so quickly in his head but the picture of a young Nancy getting frustrated as the pick slipped from one hand and nicked her finger was easy to imagine.

"I - I thought we'd be okay though," he furrowed his brow, trying to find the right words, "We'd overcome so much already but then, then we weren't. I might have driven away, but - you -" he stuttered unsure of his words, "You shut me out. Even before with Gil and the wraith you had never shut me out like this and I don't even know what I did wrong. And I don't know how to fix it because we aren't us anymore." Ace could feel the tears pricking the back of his eyes, but he continued.

"Every day on my road trip, right before I fell asleep, I would think of all the things I wanted to share with you. I wanted to tell you about my day, the sites, all of these things. But we weren't talking the way we did before, it wasn't easy like it normally was. Maybe we weren't as close friends as I thought? And then I started questioning if I had done something wrong, maybe you only needed me for certain cases or hacking something. But even then those calls, those requests for help never came. It seemed like you didn't need me at all."

"And I don't think you know how much you mean to me," he let out a breath, "I don't think I knew how much you truly mean to me until - until this week really. Or maybe I did and I was too scared to admit it, or I didn't want to ruin our friendship. Or that I didn't think that you and I - that we would ever be a possibility in your mind. But now you're here and I don't know how to fix this. I don't know how to save you," A frustrated sob broke through his words at the end. Ace leaned his forehead against their clasped hands.

"I can't lose you, Nance, not like this." He shook his head, pressed his lips to her knuckles, "Please Nancy, we still need you. I need you." His voice was barely audible as the words

were lost within their intertwined fingers.

Ace didn't know how long he stayed like that, listening to the silence that only hospitals could provide, and never taking his eyes off Nancy. His hands constantly holding hers as he wished and prayed to any god that would listen to let them find a way to save her. Fingers tracing random patterns on her skin. Sometimes he'd spell her name, or he'd connect her freckles like his own personal constellations.

Ace didn't want her to feel alone, he didn't know if she could hear him, but he knew people talking to him during his coma helped. So he kept talking, about anything, just to fill the silence.

"Do you play the guitar? I saw one in your room and was wondering about it. If so, I'd like to make a request for you to play me an AC/DC song once you're awake."

"I remember seeing you at the library once when we were young. Of course, I was too nervous to talk to the girl with the bright red pigtails. But you were fierce as ever, even then, you walked up to the desk and demanded to see the Sherlock Holmes books from my mom. When I told my mom you started working at The Claw, she smiled and retold that story except she added when she showed you to the shelves, you lectured her about how girls could be detectives too, but you needed to research how first. Which sounds about right."

He kept talking. He told her how his dad showed him the newspaper article when she solved her first case. "He signed how impressed he was that a young girl did what no one else could do that night. Then he met you after my accident and you bombarded him about the poisoning case and he said 'Still impressive.' And of course, he's right."

He talked about wanting to go to MIT or Cal-Tech when he was younger, but now he wasn't sure if his criminal record would allow it and he was too scared to ask in case he could never go. He told her how he wanted a dog one day named Monty because dogs with old man names made him smile. But he also loved Monty Python. He talked about how he started rewatching Star Trek after Grant left just to feel closer to him somehow. He was explaining the pivotal episode where Captain Kirk has to negotiate for his freedom when Ace's phone started ringing.

"Ace!" George yelled through, "Hannah and my mom think they've figured out how to save Nancy."

"Wait - okay - shit, what do we need to do?" Ace asked in a panic, his hand in Nancy's squeezed tighter.

"Well first, you need to break Nancy out of the hospital," she explained slowly.

"The hospital with the machines keeping her alive?" Ace clarified, glancing warily at all the beeping machines.

"Yeah, remove everything. Mom said she'll be stable, kind of like hibernation, long enough for you to get her to the cave for the ritual."

“What if I hurt her?” Ace looked at the intubation tube with worry.

“It’s this or she dies in a matter of hours Ace!” George yelled at him, annoyed. “Nick is coming to get you and Nancy, Bess and I are rounding up everything we need. Meet you at The Claw.”

“Yeah, okay,” he replied, “I can do this,” he said more to himself than George.

“And Ace, bring her necklace - you’ll need it,” she stated before hanging up. Ace saw the necklace sitting on the side table in one of those zipped up plastic bags, he grabbed it and shoved it into his pocket.

After watching a few tutorials online, Ace slowly removed the intubation and all the IVs. Soon Nick rushed into the room with a gurney, a massive puffer jacket, and some wool socks.

“Time to move!” Nick greeted Ace with a grimace. Nick held up the jacket and socks, “All I could grab with the short notice. They clothed Nancy as best they could before Ace lifted Nancy’s body from the bed into the gurney.

“This is ridiculous, no one is going to let us out of here like this,” He panicked looking down at Nancy in her hospital gown on the gurney with the oversized puffer and wool socks.

“There’s a shift change in about a minute. All we have to do is make it to the side door. My truck is waiting,” Nick explained as he wrapped the coat around Nancy’s frail frame. “We got this. We’re going to save her Ace.”

Nick stood and looked Ace in the eye as he clasped his hands on his shoulders. “We are going to save her,” he repeated. “But we need to move, now.”

Ace shook out his terrible thoughts and nodded. “Okay, let’s go.”

Nick peaked his head out of the door and looked down the hallway. Ace had his hands on the back of the gurney ready to run with Nancy.

“Go!” Nick yelled and they ran out the room, swerving to the left as they bolted for the side exit. Nick ran ahead to push open the door. Thank god, the hospital had put Nancy in a room in such an excluded hallway, as two random young men running with an unconscious body on a gurney would have been hard to explain to anyone. But they didn’t run into anyone, and soon Nick was propping open the door as Ace ran through with Nancy towards Nick’s truck.

“Put her in the middle seat,” Nick instructed Ace.

“I hate talking about her like she’s some kind of object,” Ace muttered under his breath but did as Nick said. Nick discarded the gurney back into the hospital hallway and ran back around the truck before jumping in. Ace pulled the seatbelt around Nancy and buckled her in. Nick gave him a sideways glance.

“Safety first, Nick,” was all Ace said in response, “Safety first.” And he wrapped his arm around Nancy’s shoulders pulling her to his chest.

“No Bess! We don’t need the rosemary, we just need ice, lots of ice!” George yelled at Bess.

“But don’t you think the rosemary will make it a bit more pleasant for Nancy?” Bess asked.

“She’s unconscious, I don’t think she cares all that much,” George called over her shoulder as she pulled another bag of cubed ice from the freezer.

“Actually, adding some cleansing herbs like sweetgrass and sage could help aid with the purification! If anything they wouldn’t hurt,” Victoria called from the restaurant.

“Oh! I know where the sage is. George?” Bess called out. “Do we have any sweet grass?”

George rolled her eyes and sighed before replying, “It’d be with all the other herbs and spices if we did!”

Bess, George and Victoria were waiting for them in the parking lot, a couple of soft coolers and camping lanterns at their feet. Ace unbuckled Nancy when they arrived, but he only opened the door while Victoria started explaining the ritual. He rubbed his hand up and down Nancy’s arm absentmindedly to keep her warm against the night air.

“So you’ll be performing the Shinto tradition of misogi, which is a Japanese ritual to purify the body and soul. That’s why I had to check with Hannah because I wasn’t sure if a Japanese ritual would work on a Celtic/Roman deity’s curse.” Ace glanced between all of them, the same worried look was reflected on all his friends’ faces.

“But it should,” she reassured them, nodding, “And if not, at this point a cold bath won’t hurt her.”

“Only give her hypothermia?” George asked. “Maybe kill her?”

“I don’t even know if she has that long left,” Victoria said softly, her gaze landing on Nancy leaning against Ace in the truck. Ace tightened his hold on her in response, refusing to accept that fate for her.

“You’ll have to take her to the cave, add the ice to Sulis’ pool of water along with items connected to Nancy,” Victoria continued explaining, “Bess?”

“Oh right!” Bess started handing out items, “Nick, the gear shift compartment you made her. George, her Claw name tag. I’ve got a group picture of us,” she smiled slightly looking at the framed photo from Nancy’s birthday, “And Ace you grabbed her necklace right?” He nodded, he could feel the slight press of it in his front pocket.

“Once the ice is in -” Victoria went on to explain the ritual.

“And the sage!” Bess interrupted, remembering what else she had, “We didn’t have any sweet grass though.”

“Once you’ve added the ice and sage,” Victoria amended with an eye roll, “Someone will have to go into the water with her, submerge her underneath, and hold her there.”

“We have to drown her?” Nick asked, his fear tightened his voice and pinched his eyebrows.

“In a way, Sulis has almost accomplished that. This person, for them it won’t be easy, they’ll be a surrogate sacrifice in a way - someone to anchor her, show her the way out of the darkness. It has to be someone close to her.”

“Should we call Carson to come?” Nick asked, “Strongest connection, he did raise her?”

“He’s on the other side of town,” George explained, “He was heading to the hospital to do damage control after the, well, the kidnapping of his comatose daughter by two -”

“I’ll do it,” Ace cut her off, the words out of his mouth before he could even process what he was saying. “Nancy won’t make...” he refused to finish that sentence, “Carson won’t be able to get here in time if we wait.”

“Do you think -” Nick paused, “No offence, but will your connection be strong enough?”

“It has to be,” Ace looked down at Nancy, “I can’t lose her.” The thought of losing Nancy more than he already had hit Ace so deep he could feel it in his bones as if a cold humid wind ran through his body and held him down.

“Sad boy,” Victoria walked over to him, held his hand and warned him, “There are risks, your soul could always carry a piece of that darkness.”

“Will Nancy’s?” he whispered, not sure if he wanted to hear the answer.

“Like yours, it may and it may not,” she shrugged, “Depends how strong your tether is to her.” She looked at him and tilted her head, her stare started to become unsettling when she finally said, “We will see how strong your love for her is.”

“I don’t - not like -” Ace said, eyes frantically glancing around his friends. Ace had barely admitted his feelings about Nancy to himself let alone all their friends. But none of them looked surprised at Victoria’s statement.

“Mhmm,” was all Bess said as she picked up the items around her with a grin.

“Sure,” George added smiling, “Let’s go find a cave and save our girl.”

Ace hopped out of the truck and manoeuvred Nancy into his arms, his arms sliding under her knees and around her back and lifted her out of the truck.

Nick closed the door behind him, “We can switch off if you ever need a break.” Ace only nodded in response.

The trek along the beach was illuminated by Bess and George’s flashlights bouncing between the sand and the crashing waves. None of them spoke as they hurried along, the only sound was the wind and the waves meeting on the shoreline.

Ace and Nick traded off carrying Nancy, but she was back in Ace's arms after Nick commented on keeping the gurney from the hospital. The rocks were the trickiest bit but they'd managed to get Nancy and themselves over with only a few minor scrapes and cuts.

Bess turned around slowly trying to find the cave located on the map, "It should be right here." She swung her flashlight around dramatically.

Bess screamed suddenly, scrambling to grab onto George beside her. Her flashlight settled on Gil's unconscious body lying in the sand with an indifferent looking Temperance standing above him.

Temperance looked exactly as she did when she created the wraith, not at all like decades had passed since then. Her eyes sparked as she looked at the group of them.

"Are you here to save my niece?" she asked. Ace held Nancy tighter, Temperance's voice was sickly sweet causing chills to run down his back.

"Wouldn't she be your great-great-great-great-great-great niece?" asked Bess quietly, still clinging to George as she tried to count the generations between Nancy and Temperance.

Her only response was to shrug, "She won't be anything if you don't save her."

Ace looked down at Nancy, they didn't have time for this. Ace glanced at Gil, he didn't look like Nancy when she fell unconscious, his face still held some colour. "Temperance, what have you done to Gil?" he asked slowly, unsure of if he wanted the revenge of hurting Gil himself, he still cared about Amanda, and he was not sure what Temperance was capable of.

"He lost his purpose," she sighed, glancing down at him, "He screwed up and let his emotions get the best of him." She looked at Nancy in Ace's arms before she continued. "I never wanted this for Nancy, she still has a purpose. But he just couldn't control himself. I only needed access to the bed and breakfast, Margaret was refusing to give me some of her family's heirlooms. But then Gil decided to get his revenge and ruined everything."

She crouched down, brushed a stray curl from Gil's forehead, "It's a shame because he was quite useful in other ways. It didn't hurt that he is also so gorgeous. He made for quite the plaything."

"I might puke," George muttered under her breath, voicing what they all were thinking of Temperance and Gil together.

"He knew so much about the town and helped obtain certain objects," she said. "He'll be fine though," Temperance stood and brushed the sand from her hands, "He'll have some amnesia, but no harm done."

"He murdered three people," Nick exclaimed, gesturing to Gil's body, "I'd say that's some harm done."

"But can anyone prove that?" she asked dismissively as she walked up to Nancy and Ace. She looked between Ace and Nancy. Her hand reached up to caress Nancy's cheek. "You

better hurry, she doesn't have much time."

Temperance turned and started walking away between the rocks and down the beach.

"We can't just let her go?" Bess said, "She's clearly up to something!"

"Right now, we need to save Nancy, then we'll figure out what to do with Temperance," George responded.

"And Gil..." Ace added thinking of Amanda losing her only other family member, especially after losing Alex. He didn't want that heartbreak for her.

Ace followed George into the cave, Bess and Nick trailing behind him. He lowered Nancy to a flat rock near the dark pool of water that he recognized from the photos on Nancy's phone. It seemed to inhale all the light and sound from around them. He'd never been in a cave without any echoes, it was unsettling. He glanced around, the cave paintings, the stalagmite looming above them, and the black pool of water ranked high on one of the creepiest places he's been. The whisper box was up there too.

Bess, Nick, and George were setting up the lanterns and emptying the coolers of ice and herbs into the water. He could barely see the ice, the water was too dark, like an inkwell reflecting its surroundings.

Ace brushed Nancy's hair away from her face, his fingers gently tucking her hair behind her ear as they settled on her neck. He let out a small breath when he felt a small beat beneath his thumb. She was still with them.

"Stay with us Nancy," he whispered, pressing a small kiss to her forehead. "Please."

George started to take charge, "Nick, Bess, we need to sacrifice our items at the same time Ace lowers Nancy under the water." The two nodded in response as they pulled out their respective items. George stood on a rock holding a piece of paper and Nancy's name tag.

"Ace, you have the necklace?" she asked, he awkwardly pulled it from his pocket and held it up, before wrapping it around his fingers a few times.

"Right," she nodded, "I'm not sure if this will be painful for you or what's going to happen to either of you when you submerge Nancy under. And I don't know what my mom meant when she said you might share the darkness or whatever. But are you ready?"

"It's okay," he said softly, "It's Nancy." And he lifted her once again before cautiously wading into the pool of water and lowering her into the darkness. He could feel the ice cubes and sprigs of herbs brushing against his hands, but he couldn't see them as if there was a black reflective layer on top of the water that prevented seeing what hid beneath the surface. Like Sulis, herself absorbed it all. He barely registered the freezing water soaking into his clothes, or George starting to chant as he shifted his hold on Nancy to hold both her shoulders.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered, as he watched her red hair swirl in the water like a halo of flames amongst the black liquid.

“Now Ace!” George yelled as they tossed in their items.

He grasped Nancy’s shoulders and pushed her head under, her hair swirled around his wrists, her pale face fading under the water. He could feel the chain of her necklace pinching into his hand as he held her down. He could faintly hear Bess sobbing in the background, while George continued to read off the paper. None of it mattered, he just wanted his Nancy back.

As Ace started to lose the feeling in his hands, a pulse shuttered throughout the cave, and Nancy was pushing against him to break through the water. Her feet kicking and splashing the water against the rocks. Relief coursed through him at Nancy’s movement, he moved his hands from her shoulders to pull her out.

“Oh thank god,” Bess cried. “Get her out of there Ace!”

Ace immediately hauled her out of the water, settling on one of the rocks the soles of his sneakers still causing ripples in the water. He pulled her into his lap, his arms pulling her into his chest as she coughed up black water onto the rocks.

“I couldn’t lose you,” he said, “I couldn’t lose you,” he kept repeating as he rocked her back and forth slightly. He wasn’t sure if he was reassuring himself or her at this point. He felt, more than saw since he couldn’t pull his focus away from Nancy, Bess wrapped a blanket around Nancy’s shoulders.

He felt Nancy pull back against his hold, still coughing. He loosened his grasp, but he couldn’t remove his hands. He frantically ran them over her arms, before he grasped her face tilting her head up, needing to see her eyes, to check she was really there. Relief washed over him as his eyes met hers, her eyes wide and scared as she continued to cough, but slowly calming down the longer she stared at Ace.

He could feel warmth beneath her cheeks and released a breath he didn’t realise he was holding. Her hands shakingly held on to his wrists and his gaze flicked between her eyes. She watched him while trying to hold in her fading cough, her body shaking from the cold, his thumbs stroked against her cheekbones. Her eyes, he was finally able to see those beautiful blue eyes for the first time in days. He pushed a wet curl of hair off her forehead.

“I couldn’t lose you,” he whispered again, he watched the recognition register on her face. He realized where they were, who they were with, he reluctantly lowered his hands, grasping hers into his. Nancy opened her mouth to try and say something. Ace saw the pain flash through her eyes, “Shh, it’s okay,” he calmed her down, “Don’t try to speak. Your lungs and throat have suffered a lot of damage.”

He looked over her shoulder at his friends. Bess was kneeled beside Nancy, her hand on her back, tears silently streaming down her face. George and Nick had their arms wrapped around each other, the same grateful and exhausted look on them.

“Let’s get you home,” Bess managed to get out, taking the moment to hug Nancy from the side.

George and Nick gathered the supplies from the cave as Bess and Ace started leading her slowly out of the cave. She watched a worried look pass between her friends as they exited the cave. It was only a few months ago they were in the same position leading Nancy into Myrtle Hudson’s residence.

“Gil’s gone...” Bess said looking back at Nick and George worry etched into her brow.

“Let’s just get Nancy home,” was all George responded with. Nancy frantically looked between all of them before settling on Ace, he was the only one looking at her. She furrowed her brows.

Had they figured out the connection to Gil? How did he find the cave in the first place?

“He was here earlier. Unconscious, but still,” Ace explained gently, watching her expression shift, “With Temperance.” Nancy’s eyes went wide in shock. Ace’s hand stroked her back in reassurance, “We’ll explain everything later, but we need to get you warmed up. Can you walk?”

She glared at him for avoiding the topic, his mouth tipped up at her look. Nancy glanced at her feet and nodded in response to his question. His hand tightened around hers as he placed one hand on her elbow and continued to lead her toward The Claw. Bess on her other side to help her navigate the rocks.

Ace didn’t let go of Nancy the entire trek back to The Claw. He and Bess never left her side until they arrived at the parking lot where an ambulance was waiting with Carson and Ryan pacing in front of it. It was only as they rushed toward Nancy, a paramedic close behind, that Ace let her go. Her fingers slipped out of his, she felt her fingers curling in response trying to keep her hold on him, but he just let his arm drop back to his side.

Nancy felt herself wanting to protest, her fingers twitched wanting to reach out and grab his hand again. Nancy glanced at him for a brief moment, he gave her a slight shake of his head. And she remembered - Ace was still with Amanda.

She blinked back tears for a moment before her dad’s pulled her in for a hug. Carson’s hand wrapping around her waist, the other on the back of her head. Ryan beside her, his hand stroking her back. She was here with her family. She was alive thanks to her friends.

And for the first time in a long time, Nancy cried. She silently sobbed into her dad’s shoulder. She was exhausted and frustrated. She cried giving into her heartbreak for the first time in months, she cried about Gil, the wraith, and she finally acknowledged that her heart was breaking over Ace. A boy who when she first met him she never expected he could break her heart, but he grew on her and somehow smashed her to pieces over time. She wanted to yell and scream at everything, but she also wanted to just sleep despite waking up from a coma less than an hour ago.

“It’s okay Nancy,” Carson whispered, “You’re safe. They saved you.” Which only caused her to sob more.

“We need to let the paramedic check you over, kid, you’re shivering,” Ryan added. Carson released her and allowed the paramedic to lead Nancy over the ambulance. The paramedic exchanged the blanket Bess had wrapped around Nancy for an emergency thermal one and started to examine her for injuries.

She could feel her friends’ watching her, but she just leaned into Carson as she sat on the back of the ambulance. She felt a familiar pang of guilt seep in, she knew how much they had done to save her just by the look of relief on all their faces, but she didn’t know the details. Nancy wasn’t sure if she wanted to know everything just yet, sometimes ignorance was bliss. She was still trying to cope with the wraith and now this. Dr Nielsen was going to be employed for quite some time if Nancy kept this up.

Someone passed her a warm drink, but her hands were shivering too much she barely managed to take a sip. The warm sweet tea soothed her throat and eased her shivering and it was nice to have something to with her hands as the paramedic poked and prodded at her. She flinched as they shine the too bright flashlight in her eyes to check for a possible concussion. She could see Ace step towards her at her discomfort, but Bess pulled him back and whispered something to him. She saw him take a familiar wide stance, arms crossed over his chest, as he loomed off to the side. Nancy looked back down at the steam rising from her drink. Just breathe, focus on one thing she told herself. Focus on one worry, one moment to get through to the next.

The paramedic led Carson and Ryan to the side, explaining that she was clear to go home, but they recommended a change of clothes, a warm bath, and she’d be able to talk again, it just might take some time. Nancy tuned out of their conversation and glanced down at what she was wearing: hospital dressing gown, soggy, wet wool socks, and a puffer coat she recognized was Nick’s.

She suddenly felt arms gently wrap around her, “You’re okay,” Bess whispered, her voice soft with affection. Nancy smiled, wrapped her free hand around Bess’s forearm and tilted her head against Bess’ in response. “We were so worried about you.”

“We’ve got to get her home guys,” Carson informed the small group hovering around Nancy. “But you’re welcome to come to the house,” he glanced at Nancy, “Are you up for people over?”

She shrugged, knowing they’d show up even if she wasn’t. She just wanted to be away from Ace’s intense stare and out of these soaking wet clothes.

The jacket dropped against the tiles with a loud smack, disturbing the quiet of the steamy bathroom. She sat on the edge of the tub as she rolled the socks down her ankles pulling them off to join the jacket on the tiles. The water was continuing to pour into the tub as she walked over to the mirror and looked at herself for the first time.

She recognized features herself, her eyes were familiar, the freckle was still in the same spot, her lips curved just so but it was all a hauntingly skinny version of herself. Her cheekbones were too prominent, her collar bones jut out from the hospital gown. She crossed her arms and peeled the gown off her body. Her muscles protested at the stretch and exertion of such a simple movement.

Her inhale echoed through the bathroom as she glanced at herself. Her hair was greasy and matted but smelt oddly like sage. There were dark bruises on her shoulders, faint impressions of fingers marked her pale skin with a purple hue. She could count each of her ribs. Her fingers brushed the now hollow space of her diaphragm. Her hip bones unpleasantly echoed the point of her elbows. She closed her eyes tightly and turned away from the mirror walking back to the bath. She hissed as she eased herself into the warm water. Nancy reached in front of her and turned the water off. Curling herself around her knees and she silently wept, letting her tears fall into the water.

Nancy forced herself to stay in the warm water, hating the wet feeling against her skin. She had kept reminding herself to breathe. Panic rose in her throat when she decided to tip her head back into the water, immediately she sat back up. She wrapped her arms back around her knees content in this position waiting for her body to warm up. The memories of falling into black tar flashed before her. She missed the calmness of the darkness, ever since waking up she's only felt frantic chaos. Except for a single moment when she looked into Ace's eyes, his thumbs caressing her cheeks, she'd never felt so calm. It was like the storm within her settled the longer she looked into his eyes.

Ace glanced up at the ceiling again.

"You looking up at her room every 15 seconds isn't going to make her come down any faster Ace," Bess taunted him under her breath from beside him on the couch.

"I know," he sighed, "I know. But don't you think she's been up there for a while? Maybe too long?"

"It's barely been 30 minutes," George answered, giving him a deadpan look, stirring her spoon in her mug.

Bess had made tea for everyone while Mr. D and Mr. H got Nancy upstairs. Mr. D had let Ace shower and change into a spare set of clothes he had at The Cla. But Ace rushed so much Nancy hadn't even started running the water by the time he got out. After settling in the living room with Bess, Nick and George he could barely make out their murmured conversation in the kitchen, something about if a Dr. Nielsen does house calls. But Ace's focus kept being drawn upstairs where he knew Nancy was. Was she okay? Did she need anything? She couldn't speak so how could she ask for help if she needed to? What if he had permanently damaged her when he removed the intubation tube?

His fingers started to tap away on his mug with nervousness. He remembered the look of relief on Nancy's face after she calmed down in the cave, his favourite furrow in her brow as she wanted him to explain about Gil and Temperance, and the small smiles she gave him

every time he lifted her down from the rocks on the beach. He wasn't sure what happened between the beach and him letting her go to her dad's but something changed when she looked back at him.

He remembered her broken sobs as Carson hugged her. He'd never seen Nancy so broken. The wraith, the Aglaeca, Owen, even after her mom passed away, he never wanted to see her like this again. The layers and layers of walls she built up around herself shattered the moment Carson's arms wrapped around her. Ace would never forget the sound of her cries.

Ace wanted to go to her, to hold her again, to tell her everything, but it wasn't the time or place. Each moment that passed only made him more on edge. He couldn't take his eyes off her the entire time the paramedic checked her over, ready to step in at any sign of her discomfort.

But now, with her silence upstairs, Ace was even more worried. Ever since he heard the water stop running he wanted to run upstairs, but Bess had her head leaning on his shoulder and he couldn't bear to bother her too. They were all exhausted, it felt like they had been up for days - they probably had been up for days. Nick had already fallen asleep with his head in George's lap.

He heard a noise upstairs and he tensed as he listened to what sounded like water draining through the pipes. Then he heard more water running, maybe a shower, he angled his head trying to decipher the sounds.

Bess lifted her head and looked up at the ceiling too, "That's the shower," she explained, "That's a good sign."

Carson was heading up the stairs with a mug of tea in hand the moment he heard the shower cut off. Ace smiled, as much as Nancy and Mr. D have had their issues, Mr. D loves her with all his heart. It reminded him to text his parents quickly that Nancy woke up and was back at home. It was the middle of the night, but he knew they'd want to know.

Nancy watched her dad's fuss about her bedroom from where they tucked her into bed, pillows propped behind her, a mug of tea warming her hands. Finally, they calmed down enough to just sit. She smiled at them, grateful for their weird little family. She was unsure when they all clicked but now she wouldn't want it any other way.

"You know they won't leave until they're able to see you right?" Ryan teased her.

"Ace barely left the hospital as it was," Carson informed her cautiously, "Rebecca came and forced him to leave the first night."

Nancy opened her mouth to ask a question, "How - how -" The pain was too much to continue. She counted off on her fingers, hoping they'd understand, she wanted to know how many days she was out for.

"Just over a week," Carson answered quietly.

“I’m sorry,” Nancy mouthed. The guilt at how worried they must have been was something she was used to, but still made her uncomfortable. She knew she took too many risks, but she was always trying to help someone else, and that made it seem worth the risk.

Dr. Nielsen explained to her that her recklessness with her own life could be a product of her grief. She had seen too many times how fickle life can be, so risking her own for someone else’s didn’t seem like a sacrifice. But she needed to remember that her life wasn’t just her, it was everyone she loved too.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Carson whispered as he grabbed her hand. He leaned forward and kissed the top of her head. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“But really,” Ryan started, trying to lighten the mood, “I can kick them out, but they’ll just wait outside on the front porch.”

Nancy smiled and rolled her eyes before she nodded. Both her dads hugged her before leaving to send up her friends.

She reached over for a notebook and pen on her nightstand just as Bess walked in slightly knocking on the door.

“Hey Nancy,” Bess smiled as she sat next to Nancy on the bed, “How’re you feeling?”

Nancy shrugged as if to say, “It could be worse,” in response. George, Nick, and finally Ace filed into the room. She could feel the moment he passed into her room before she saw him, his presence ignited every nerve in her body aware of exactly where he was - hovering near her desk.

George walked to the other side of Nancy’s bed and sat by her feet facing her, “It’s good to see you looking semi-decent for us, Drew.”

Nancy smiled in response and wrote in her notebook, “You all look terrible too.”

“We saved your ass and this is the thanks we get?” George joked her laugh echoing throughout the quiet bedroom. Again, all Nancy could do was shrug in response causing gravity to pull the neck of her oversized shirt off her shoulder.

She heard Bess inhale beside her, “Oh Nancy...” but all she could focus on was Ace turning and walking out of her room, taking her breath with him. She looked between her friends to see if she should follow him, not sure exactly what she did wrong.

Nick just shook his head, “Give him a minute,” he looked at the direction Ace left in, “He - he had to hold you underwater Nancy and - the bruises...”

Nancy adjusted her top to hide purple stains on her shoulders. She looked again between her friends before writing, “Tell me what happened. Everything.” She underlined everything before showing it to Bess to read aloud.

“You scared us, Nancy,” George started, “From the moment you were running into the parking lot, we didn’t know what to think. But Ace - I’ve never seen him like that ever.”

Bess continued recounting the story, Nick and George adding in their bits from Ace getting her to the hospital, going through her bag for clues, and finally making the connection to Gil. Nancy could tell she was glossing over details when Ace was mentioned, but she wanted to hear everything first.

Bess explained how they found out about Amanda and Alex's past relationship. "Poor Amanda couldn't even visit Alex in the hospital - her parents wouldn't let her." Nancy felt guilt at all her anger towards Amanda, no one deserved the kind of heartbreak she had gone through. Maybe Ace felt like he should be comforting his girlfriend instead of here with her, that he has spent too much time-saving Nancy again.

"You pretty much had it all figured out," Nick said, "We just had to piece all of it together and find a way to save you."

"Hannah and my mom mostly did that," George cut in, "Did you know they started a supernatural book club? I've barely seen Victoria read anything in my life and now Hannah has her reading at least a book a month." Nancy smiled at that, it was cute they were bonding and she also wanted to know where her book club invitation was.

"So then we had to get the ice and the sage," Bess continued, "for the ritual, the sage was a key ingredient." George rolled her eyes at that comment. "While Ace and Nick broke you out of the hospital. Then we all met at The Claw. Victoria explained the whole ice bath, cleansing, surrogate sacrifice, personal items, etc. and then -"

Nancy tapped Bess, brow furrowing in confusion over the ritual.

"Well - um -" Bess stammered looking at Nick and George for support.

"The ice -" Bess gave George a look, "and the sage had to go in Sulis' pond or pool, we all had to sacrifice something important to you: name tag, picture, that sort of stuff. I guess to tip the scales?" George explained, "While that was happening someone with a strong connection to you had to hold you under the water to cleanse the curse from you." She picked idly at a thread on Nancy's bedspread, "And, well, Ace volunteered."

Nancy looked between Bess and George in surprise. Both of them gave her the same disappointing stare back.

"C'mon Drew, we know you're not *that* oblivious," George whispered, "You know how much you mean to all of us, but especially Ace. Other than Bess you're probably his best friend. Out of all of us, it had to be him."

"I've never seen him so scared as when you collapsed into him in the parking lot," Nick shook his head. Nancy shut her eyes trying to push back the tears she could feel threatening to fall. Deflect. Switch topics. She needed to do something.

"Temperance?" She wrote it down and passed it to Bess.

Bess glanced back at George before she continued explaining how they came across Temperance standing over Gil at the cave entrance.

“Whatever her plan was or is, it didn’t sound good,” he continued from Bess, “Like she had recruited him because of his connection to you, but he couldn’t follow her instructions. That’s why Alex and you were both cursed. Neither of you had anything to do with Temperance’s plan. She still needs you though.”

Nancy just wanted one night to rest, but she was already thinking about what her great-Aunt could have in store for her.

“Also, pretty sure she fucked him,” George grimaced as the words left her mouth. The thought of Gil and Temperance together made Nancy’s stomach churn. But it does explain how he knew about Sulis’ cave and the curse offerings.

“Oh, she definitely alluded to that,” Bess nodded with a look of disgust on her face. “And it was weird, it was like she hadn’t aged at all? The letter she gave you, she never mentioned anything about anti-ageing or immortality?” Nancy shook her head, she’d gone over that letter so many times and waited for Temperance to do something, but nothing ever happened.

“We’ll have to look into that - I’ll talk to Hannah,” Bess nodded, “After the ritual, Gil’s body was gone and you were our main priority.”

“I’m sorry for everything,” Nancy wrote before squeezing Bess’ hand.

“It’s okay, Nancy,” Bess held her hand tighter.

“Maybe next time, because there will be a next time,” George smirked, “Promise us you’ll keep us in the loop a bit more about all your extracurricular research. Might save us some time.”

“We’ll always be here for you,” Nick added, “Okay?” Nancy nodded in response, a tear managed to escape and was tracing its path down her cheek. She knew she owed them her life, multiple times over, so all she did was hold up her pinky to promise. Bess squealed and linked their fingers together. And at that moment, Nancy felt everything was almost back to normal again. Or at least her version of normal.

The bruises. Ace thought he was going to be sick at the sight of the bruises his hands had created on Nancy. Dark horrible marks. He couldn’t get out of her room fast enough, but he couldn’t go downstairs and face Mr. D and Mr. H. He managed to get halfway down the stairs when he just sat down.

He hung his head in his hands and tried to focus on his breathing just like the school counsellor had taught him when he was younger. His eyes darted around the wood floor until he picked a spec in the wood grain and just only stared at that as he counted his inhales and exhales.

“Ace? Son, are you alright?” He faintly heard Mr. D asked him, but it was like it was echoing through a tunnel. All Ace could do was keep breathing, keep counting, and keep staring.

“I’m going to sit next to you alright?” Mr. D’s voice echoed closer this time. Ace thought he nodded in response but couldn’t be sure anymore. He felt Mr. D sitting next to him on the step, the brush of his body next to Ace’s, and a hand resting on his back.

“It’s going to be okay, son,” Mr. D said softly, “She’s okay.”

At that sentence Ace turned his head and looked at Mr. D, “But - but - I hurt her, she has - has these horrible bruises, I can - can see the imprint of my hands.” The words came out in gasps as Ace vocalized his thoughts. He couldn’t stand to look at Mr. D for long so he turned back to focus on his speck in the wood grain.

“Ace,” Mr. D whispered, “Ace, look at me.” Ace slowly brought his gaze back to Mr. D, he could feel himself blinking too many times as he tried to keep his eye contact.

“You. Saved. Her.” Mr. D enunciated each word slowly to make sure Ace registered them, “You saved her, Ace.” He repeated. Ace gulped and squeezed his eyes shut.

“But-” he started.

“No,” Mr. D cut him off, his hand shifted to Ace’s neck and lifted his head to make eye contact again. “You saved her Ace, thank you.”

“Please don’t thank me Mr. D,” Ace managed to get out. The guilt pulled heavily at every bone and muscle of Ace, knowing Nancy might not have run into that cave if he hadn’t pushed her about Gil and everything else that day.

“I don’t know what happened these last few months between you and my daughter,” Mr. D removed his hands from Ace and leaned his elbows on his knees, clapping his hands together. “But I do know she wouldn’t be here today without you.”

“I don’t really know what happened either,” Ace admitted, “I thought we were friends, but...I don’t know.”

“Nancy can -” Mr. D sighed, “Nancy is her own person, you two just need to talk and figure it out.” Ace nodded, he knew that was the only way, but he wasn’t sure he’d be able to walk back into her room after he ran out.

“And I’d recommend doing it soon,” Carson brushed his hands on his jeans and stood up, “Because once she gets her voice back, you might not be able to get a word in to plead your case.” Ace gave Mr. D a small smile at his classic, but terrible, lawyer dad joke.

“You’re right,” he nodded, “Thanks Mr. D.”

“Anytime Ace,” Mr. D patted Ace on the shoulder before he walked down the stairs and turned into the living room. Ace stayed on the stairs until he felt like his legs wouldn’t collapse under him if he stood up. By the time he made it down the hallway to Nancy’s room, he could hear George and Bess talking about Temperance and Gil being by the cave.

Ace leaned against the wall next to Nancy's door not wanting to disrupt anything just yet. He listened to his friends laugh and he could hear the smile in their voices as they recounted some unlucky Claw customer that walked in on them while Victoria was demonstrating the ritual chants to George.

He better get this done soon, Nancy needed to rest. He turned and shuffled slightly into the doorway, leaning against the frame. Nick noticed him first and nudged George while Bess continued to animatedly talk to Nancy.

George dramatically yawned, stretching her arms out and bumping Bess in the process. Ace rolled his eyes at his friend's antics. But when he finally glanced at Nancy in the bed, she was already staring at him.

Chapter End Notes

i promise fluff and more in the next/final chapter - love you and thank you for all the kudos and comments

feel free to yell about nace with me on tumblr [@allthesedaydreams](https://www.tumblr.com/allthesedaydreams)!!

The Clue of the Broken Locket

Chapter Summary

Confessions, a sunrise, and sex.

Chapter Notes

WE FINALLY MADE IT BESTIES

this chapter is definitely not perfect, hell neither is this entire fic, but i had to remember why i was writing this. and selfishly, it was all for me

so...i hope you enjoy the last chapter! this somehow turned into three times they're interrupted and one time they're not, there is very little plot to be had, so have fun

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Previously on Nancy Drew:

He better get this done soon, Nancy needed to rest. He turned and shuffled slightly into the doorway, leaning against the frame. Nick noticed him first and nudged George while Bess continued to animatedly talk to Nancy.

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Nancy knew every creak that the hall floor made, she knew someone was lingering. And she knew it wasn't Ryan or Carson, they would have just walked right in, which only left Ace.

She didn't even hear the others say goodbye, all she could focus on was him. Nick patted Ace's shoulder as he walked past, finally leaving Nancy alone with him. His intense stare darting over her face, shoulders, to her hands fiddling in her lap, and back up to her face. Her lungs were burning, she was too scared to even breathe as he continued to not say anything. Unable to hold her breath any longer, her sharp inhale brought his attention to her open lips and back up to her face.

She watched his eyes trying to place the shifting emotions hiding in the blue. Remorse. Gratitude. Relief. Guilt. Nancy opened her mouth to speak, he shouldn't feel guilty, none of

this was his fault.

“Nancy -” he started, coming over to sit facing her on the bed. His leg tucked under the other, thigh pressing into hers. His gaze darted between her eyes as he paused trying to figure out what he wanted to say first.

“You called me Nance,” she managed to get out in a whisper. Her voice, out of practice, cracked around the words. The pain scratched uncomfortably, but it was all irrelevant, here with him.

His brow furrowed in confusion, “Nancy...”

She swallowed, “Before - everything - the parking lot.” She winced over the k in parking lot as it was particularly painful to get out. She was trying to use as few words as possible to get her point across. He’d never called her Nance, not once. Only a few people in her life had: her mom, Karen, and Ryan.

And now Ace.

Nancy watched his face shift in recognition, then back to apologetic, “It just slipped out. With everything - with you - I won’t say it again,” she tilted her head, it almost sounded like he was bargaining with her. Like if he promised never to call her Nance again, she’d let him stay in her room a bit longer. Stay in her life a bit longer.

She grabbed the discarded notebook beside her and flipped to a new page. Not wanting to use her voice for what she wrote next, knowing he’d hear every emotion in her words.

“It’s okay, Ace. I like when you say it.” She stared at the page a second longer before passing it to Ace. His fingers brushed along hers as he took the book from her.

Nancy watched a faint blush tint his cheeks and ears as he read what she wrote. His fingers skimmed over her words as he read them again before looking up at her. He lifted his eyebrows in response. She lifted her shoulder in a half shrug. The two of them seamlessly fall back into a familiar habit of wordless conversations.

“I have something of yours,” he said, reaching into his jeans pocket. Nancy felt her brows furrow until she saw her necklace between his fingers.

“I couldn’t let Sulis take another thing from you,” he whispered as he passed it to her. She fiddled with the locket and charm as she pictured how much Ace had given up this past week for her, how natural it felt being this close to him. She missed this easiness with him, where they could communicate with no words. It always used to be this easy, but then there was Amanda. Nancy set the necklace aside and reached for the notebook, Ace let it slip from his hands. She felt the confusion in his stare as she wrote out her question.

“How is Amanda holding up?” She passed the notebook back to him and watched his reaction. His shoulders tensed slightly before he sighed.

"I don't know," he answered honestly, without looking at her. He kept his eyes on the page as he said, "She broke up with me. After Alex..." The weight of his statement thudded between them, with each beat of her heart Nancy could feel his words echo in her chest. And when he glanced at her from under his lashes, his stare pierced her with so many unsaid emotions between them. Even if she could say something she didn't think she'd be able to piece the right words together.

Nancy leaned forward, shifting the blankets aside as she moved closer to him. She reached for his hand, she put all her remorse into her tight grasp willing him to understand how sorry she was.

"Are you okay?" she mouthed, knowing out of everyone Ace could read her lips the easiest. She felt the muscles of his fingers twitch before he squeezed her hand in response. Her gaze flicked down to their hands and watched the muscles in his forearm ripple as he continued to hold her hand.

"I think so," he answered as he stared at their joined hands. His fingers on his other hand twitched before he cautiously held her hand in both of his. He didn't look at her as his hold shifted and he traced her fingers. Her heart beat faster with every stroke along her knuckles. His thumb drifted to her wrist, gently finding her pulse point. She knew he could tell her heart was racing at the faint lift in his lips.

"The entire time you were in the hospital," he whispered more to himself than to her, "I kept holding your hand, hoping it would bring some comfort to you wherever you were. I talked to you about everything and anything. Did you hear any of it?"

Nancy shook her head, wishing that she could have heard every word he confessed, that she could have felt every brush of his fingers in hers. But all she had was darkness.

"It never felt this easy with Amanda," he admitted quietly as if he knew Nancy would have follow-up questions, "At the start for the briefest of moments, maybe. But after a while, it felt like we were both trying to be someone the other person wanted, but could never quite live up to."

He paused and looked up at her, gauging her reaction. But Nancy was still staring at their clasped hands, her brain short-circuiting over everything he just said. She inhaled slowly, taking in his scent, clean and but faintly salty like a breeze off the ocean.

"And then you," He faltered. She looked up at him waiting for him to continue, he stammered, getting caught in her gaze and lost in his memories. "You - collapsed - choking Nance. And there was so much waiting in the hospital, and I hate hospital silences. I - I thought I lost you. And I couldn't lose you again, not with you hating me as you did." Nancy watched Ace search her face like he was scared she would disappear if he blinked.

She put her other hand on his thigh, "I could never hate you, Ace," she mouthed, "Amanda made you happy. And -" She paused, trying to find the simplest way to explain how she'd been feeling about him for all these months.

“And -” he prompted her, the caress of his fingers had stopped completely as he watched her. Nancy looked around the room desperate for something to prompt the words to her lips. She glanced back at him, his focus entirely on her movements.

“And that was enough,” she explained without a sound, his gaze watching her lips shape around the words intently.

“Enough?” he murmured confused, “Enough what?”

She half-shrugged, becoming more exasperated at not being able to find the right way to explain it. She pulled her hands out of his and pushed back her hair frustrated that she couldn’t just say the feelings beating in her chest.

“Would writing it down be easier?” Ace passed her the notebook and pen. She started writing, never once looking up at him, the words easily finding the page without the distraction of his eyes. At some point his hand settled on her blanket-covered thigh, his thumb lazily stroking up and down. The contact made her pen hiccup in surprise, she knew he noticed, but she knew if she looked up at him, she wouldn’t be able to finish writing.

She paused looking at the paragraph she’d written and bit her lip wondering if it was too much, too soon. He had only just broken up with Amanda. Before she could second guess herself, Ace had already grabbed the notebook and flipped it so he could read it.

“I think for a while I stopped believing each of us could be happy with all the darkness surrounding us each day. But Nick and George found each other. And I thought maybe, Amanda was that for you, your change, your person, that she could give you that happy ending full of light on dark days. So I kept my broken darkness and the mess that I always seem to bring into everyone’s lives away from you. And maybe at the start, it was the wraith, but the feelings still lingered even after we got rid of it. During the wraith dreamscape, you were there, and I felt things for you. Things changed. I knew I should have told you, and I tried, but you left. I convinced myself that I would only ruin the happiness blooming in your relationship with Amanda if I brought it up, so I pushed it...pushed you away. I pushed everyone away. I thought it was helping.”

Nancy watched Ace shake his head in disbelief at what he was reading. His grasp on her thigh tightened in annoyance.

“You self-sacrificial -” he muttered under his breath and set the notebook down between them. Ace’s gaze on her felt like he could see everything she wanted to hide. Could he see how fast her heart was pounding in her chest?

“Nancy Drew,” he addressed her intently, “I can’t believe someone as smart as you - you can’t seriously think that you pushing us away would be better? Make us happier?” he asked her. “That you haven’t given us, given me, a purpose? A sense of belonging? A family? You deserve every ounce of happiness and goodness in the world, Nance.” He placed his fingers under her chin and forced her to look up at him.

“You aren’t broken,” he assured her, “You deserve happiness.”

His fingers drifted from her chin, brushing along her jawline until they finally settled on tracing along her neck. His thumb perfectly aligned with her unsteady and wildly beating pulse. Each brush of his calloused fingers sent a small shock to her nervous system overwhelming every other sense in her mind.

“I don’t deserve you,” she whispered into the space between them, ignoring the pain it caused her to say.

She let her forehead tip against his, his nose brushing against hers. Looking into each other’s eyes, Nancy swallowed and exhaled. His eyes are always revealing more than his words, every emotion swirling in the blue darkness. Her heart fluttered as he inhaled at their proximity. Nancy watched as his eyes studied her face.

“But you have me,” Ace breathed as his lips almost brushed hers in a lingering moment, his warm breath ghosted across her face before he inhaled.

Nancy shut her eyes in anticipation and found herself leaning forward to press her body towards Ace. His other hand drifted from her thigh to her hip settling there as he pulled her impossibly closer. His soft lips captured hers silencing her small gasp, her body feeling flush with sudden warmth. A warmth that overpowered any remaining dark chill from her body.

At first, it was a delicate butterfly of a kiss, and then his arms encircled Nancy, cradling the nape of her neck and gripping her hip as Ace pulled her into him, adding more pressure to her lips and deepening the kiss putting every ounce of emotion behind it.

His lips felt so gentle, so warm; her hands slid up Ace’s chest and one hand scrunched into the hair at the base of his neck, those soft locks had tempted her for too long. Her toes curled under the bunched up blanket as his lips enthusiastically reciprocated to the slight tug of her fingers in his hair. It turned into the deep kind of kiss that left no room for other thoughts - only feeling and needing more.

Ace pulled away slowly, his lips brushing against hers, once, and then twice, even slower as if trying to slow Nancy’s racing pulse to match his pace.

“We should slow down,” Ace muttered, his lips caressing hers between each word. Nancy shook her head in response and led him back to her lips by the nape of his neck. Her insistent mouth parted his lips, sending wild tremors along her nerves, inflicting sensations Nancy’s imagination could never even quite get right.

“Nance,” he whispered as his mouth grazed her chin, Nancy barely breathed when the feel of his lips brushed her neck, he pushed her hair back from her shoulder and continued to work his way down her neck to her collarbone. Nancy couldn’t help but close her eyes and imprint the sound of his voice to her memory. Each inhale kept her moans at bay and each exhale released a tremor of nerves into her shaking hands. And then suddenly his hands pushed her back slightly. Nancy opened her eyes to find Ace’s staring at her exposed and bruised shoulder.

His fingers traced the purple marks. Nancy watched the sadness seep into his eyes. The guilt. She shifted to hold his face in her hands, forcing his gaze up to her.

“I’m so sorry,” his voice cracked, his pain sounded too loud in her room.

She shook her head furiously in response and kissed his lips again. Trying to convey with her actions that he didn’t need to apologize.

Another kiss. That she was grateful he saved her.

Another kiss. That the bruises would heal and disappear.

And another slow kiss. She could taste tears, and she wasn’t sure if they were his tears or hers, but it made her press her lips to his even harder.

As she pulled away, ready to keep convincing him she was okay in any way she could. Ace whispered, “Nance, we should talk.”

And those three words had Nancy completely removing herself from him, her embarrassment flush against her cheeks. Had she forced too much between them? Was she moving too fast? She pushed herself away, back into the cushions as far as she could, as far away from what she anticipated would be him rejecting her. He let his hands slip away from her body as he gave her the distance she needed.

“Not like - fuck,” Ace stuttered as he ran a hand through his hair. She looked up at him, her eyes drawn to his arm flexing with the motion.

“You know I didn’t mean it like that.” He lifted his hand as if he wanted to hold her fidgeting fingers in her lap, but lowered it back down cautiously.

“But you just got out of a coma,” he pleaded with her, his hand flexed and wiped his gathering nerves into his jeans, “It’s just - I don’t think I’ve slept in a week, and as much as I want this, and believe me when I say,” his eyes met hers fiercely, “I really want this.”

“But it shouldn’t happen tonight.” His words drifted into the silence of her room as she watched him shift closer to her. Nancy didn’t want him to stop talking. His voice became as soft as the caress of his fingertips gently tucking hair behind her ear.

“I want this too,” she mouthed and reached for his hand, weaving her fingers between his. She felt his sigh in her soul as the tension left his body. He lifted their joined hands and brushed his lips along her knuckles. Nancy’s eyes closed at the gentleness of his affection. And then he pulled her toward him, hand easing along her jaw, settling along her hairline. His thumb stroked her cheek as his lips brushed her forehead.

“I’ll see you tomorrow?” he mumbled into her. Nancy pulled back, her brow furrowed in confusion. Nancy opened her mouth to protest - she needed him here, to hold her, she waited too long for this - but Ace interrupted her thoughts.

“I can’t stay,” he explained, understanding her every micro-expression. “Mr. D likes me, and I think I’m growing on Mr. H, but they don’t like me *that* much and especially not after what you’ve been through. You need to rest.”

Nancy rolled her eyes in response and sighed. She knew Ace was right, but she didn't want him to leave. What if tomorrow came and Ace changed his mind?

"I promise to be here when you wake up," his hand squeezed hers, "With my mom's hot chocolate." She couldn't help the small smile growing on her face. His hand lifted and gentle fingers brushed a curl of hair behind her ear, his touch caused a blush to bloom on her cheeks.

"Okay?" he asked, as he lowered his hand from her face. Just watching and waiting for her reaction. She nodded reluctantly.

"Okay," he kissed her cheek, just once as a promise, before standing from her bed. Nancy kept her hold on his hand, causing him to spin back to her. She stared up at him from her spot on the bed expectantly.

"Nance," a small chuckle escaped his lips. She tried not to smile at how she brought that reaction out of him. Nancy noticed his eyebrows raise a centimetre or two, lined with something between happiness and surprise and his eyes, his eyes twinkled in amusement as if he knew something she didn't. Nancy liked this look, this joy in his eyes, and she loved that she had something to do with it.

He leaned down, pulled his hand from hers to grasp her face between his hands as he pressed a tender kiss on her lips. Nancy's eyes closed and all she could only focus on was how soft he felt against her mouth, how addictively he invaded all her senses.

His lips pulled away much too soon for Nancy's liking. He chuckled again and Nancy was smiling as she opened her eyes to see him staring back at her.

"I'll see you soon, okay?" he confirmed again as he dropped his hands from her face. She dipped her chin in acknowledgement.

"Okay, text me if you need anything," he backed away, not wanting to look away from her just yet. Nancy nodded again, in two minds of wanting to pull him back to her bed and shoving him out of her room already.

Ace arrived back at Nancy's late the next morning carrying a stack of large tupperware containers of food and a large thermos of hot chocolate. Mr. D swung open the door before Ace could even attempt to ring the doorbell.

"You have to tell your mother that we don't need any more food, Ace," Mr. D greeted as he grabbed a couple of containers. "We've barely made a dent in what she dropped off last week."

"She's a woman who loves through food," Ace shrugged, "And I can't really tell my mom to do anything Mr. D. If I didn't deliver them, she'd just show up herself."

Bess popped her head out from the kitchen, "Did Rebecca send more of those blueberry muffins?"

“Morning Bess,” Ace greeted her as he set the containers on the island.

“Sorry, morning Ace,” she grinned at him from behind her coffee mug, “Did Rebecca send-” Ace slid a container towards her, cutting her off. “I love your mum!”

“I take it back, she can send these muffins over whenever,” Mr. D smiled as he grabbed one from in front of Bess. “We have to hide them from Ryan though, you know he’d hoard them all.”

Ace glanced upstairs, “Is Nancy -”

Bess shook her head as she pulled out a muffin, “Not yet.”

“Do you think it’d be okay if -?” Ace motioned upwards.

“Just go,” Bess shooed him towards the stairs, “We all know you’re in love with her.”

Ace looked toward Mr. D in a panic, “Mr. D, I should - “ Ace wanted to explain that he didn’t want to take advantage of Nancy, especially when she was still recovering and that he truly did care for her. And he respected Mr. D, the last thing he’d want to do is betray that.

“Ace, we’ve all known for a while,” he interrupted Ace as he ripped a piece off the muffin, “Go on up.”

As Ace was walking up the stairs he heard Bess say, “Do you think we should have dragged it out longer? Rebecca would have totally kept sending him over with more food to help get them together.”

Nancy dreamt only of the darkness - suspended and completely calm. But this darkness was different. The water wasn’t dense, it was shimmering with light coming from above her. In her dreams, she was content to just float and watch the light create patterns in the water.

As she woke, her shimmering dream shifted into light dancing through the dust of her bedroom. The feeling of her dream still lingered behind her eyelids. Maybe if she kept them closed she’d fall back into the calm darkness. The sound of muffled footsteps in her room though had her brain immediately on high alert.

Nancy sits up and looks frantically around her room, only to come across Ace crouched by her bookshelf. His head tilted sideways to read the spines, hair flopped over perfectly to catch a beam of light streaming in from her windows. Nancy wanted to run her fingers through it.

“Ace?” she whispered, her voice still a little sore, but better than yesterday. Ace quickly straightened and turned toward her.

“Hi,” he replied as he awkwardly stepped toward her, “How - how are you?” He hovered near her, but kept looking around her, anywhere but at her eyes.

“My throat feels a bit better,” she answered, “Talking isn’t as painful.” Why was he being so awkward? Nancy had seen how he was with Laura, even with Amanda, and he wasn’t so...avoiding with either of them.

“Oh!” Ace turned and grabbed a thermos from the window seat, “I promised hot chocolate.”

“You remembered,” she sighed, trying to push the thought away that Ace was acting strange. A lot had happened last night, their relationship shifted last night. Maybe he was having second thoughts about it all - maybe he regretted last night.

“Of course,” he said as he handed it to her, “And my mom would have killed me if I forgot.”

“And that is something we definitely don’t want,” Nancy whispered as she opened the thermos inhaling the chocolate scent. Ace was still hovering beside her as she took a tentative sip.

“I think your mom is my favourite person in your house,” she said with her eyes still closed, savouring the taste and letting the heat soothe her throat.

“I won’t tell the Captain,” Ace said as his gaze continued to bounce around the room.

“Ace,” Nancy dragged out as she watched him continue to fidget, unable to meet her eyes, “What’s wrong?” She couldn’t stand seeing him like this like he was looking for every possible exit out of her bedroom. She set the thermos on her bedside table giving her attention to him.

“Hmm?” he hummed as he focused way too intensely on a picture on her bedside table.

“You’re acting strange, not making eye contact,” Nancy explained, she coughed and winced slightly at the increased use of her voice, “Something on your mind?”

Ace sat down next to her, similar to how he was the night before. Nancy felt her cheeks blush at the memory of his lips, his hands on her hips pulling her closer. Except for this time, Ace ensured there was a sliver of space between them so they wouldn’t touch. Nancy's gaze found his and she watched him exhale his nerves, steadying his body.

“I guess - it’s just with everything life has thrown - everything you’ve survived recently,” Nancy let him work his way through his thoughts, “Do you really think there’s a possibility of you and me? Or am I hoping for too much?” He looked at her as the words left his mouth with such focus that it knocked the breath from her lungs.

She didn’t answer him right away as she thought about what he was seriously asking of her. Did he really think that she didn’t want this? That every fibre of her being craved him? That the only place she felt truly safe was next to him?

“Because you need to tell me now,” Ace whispered, “We can be friends, but I just - I need to know so I can -”

“Ace, shut up,” Nancy muttered before leaning forwards and kissing him. Her hand grasped his chin and pulled him towards her. She lingered, kissing him slowly and with intention

before leaning away to look in his eyes. Her thumb stroked his cheek slightly as she thought how lucky she was. His hands settled on her hips, her current favourite spot for them to be at all times.

“It’s always been you,” she whispered in between breaths. She kissed him again and it was new and exciting, yet familiar like coming home. This was different than last night, every move between them was sure and determined.

Ace pulled her onto his lap, straddling him. With the new angle, Nancy tipped his head back to kiss him deeper with both of her hands weaving their way into his hair. Every brush of their lips she could feel their friendship, their love, but also lust and longing that she repressed for far too long. His hands stroking up and down her thighs had her lifting and rolling her body towards him with a need that has been burning slow and steady between them for ages.

It only took one knock for reality to shatter around them. The knock on the door had Nancy scrambling out of Ace’s lap and back against the headboard. Ace smoothed down his hair and adjusted his position to look more casual.

“Nancy? Ace?” Carson called from the other side, “I’ve brought up some food.”

Nancy glared at him as if to say, “He knew you’re up here?”

“Of course he did,” Ace shrugged in response. “C’mon in Mr. D!” Ace answered Carson.

Carson walked into the room with a tray balanced in one hand, “Hey kiddo, how are we feeling?” He set the tray down on her desk as he walked over to feel her forehead. “Definitely warmed up since yesterday! That’s good!”

His statement caused Nancy’s blush to deepen, almost matching the colour of her hair. Ace awkwardly shifted in his place on her bed trying to put more distance between their bodies.

“And the voice?” Carson asked, enjoying interrupting the two clearly flustered youths.

“A bit -,” Nancy whispered as she tried to keep her eyes on her dad, but Ace kept distracting her as he fidgeted near her. The flex of his arm as he scratched his head, the pull of his t-shirt to expose that perfect glimpse of toned skin above his jeans.

“Nancy?” Carson asked with a level of concern only a father could have.

“Better,” she finished her thought, looking away from Ace and smiling at her dad. She could feel the heat of a blush burn beneath her skin again at being caught gawking at Ace.

“Right, well I’ve got scrambled eggs, oatmeal, a blueberry muffin...” Nancy let Carson’s voice drift off as he described the breakfast tray he brought up. Her thoughts drifted to Ace, how much she wanted to shove her dad out the door, but also the sudden shift in their relationship, his recent break up from Amanda, there was so much baggage between them.

George permitted Nancy to return to work if she only ran food and bussed the tables. No interacting or talking to customers of any kind. For Nancy, this was a blessing and a curse - she didn't have to politely discuss Maine weather patterns with tourists anymore while waiting to take their order, but it meant she was constantly brushing against Ace as she dropped off dishes.

The faintest touch of his arm against hers would set off nerves throughout her entire body. A brush of his fingers as she passed him a plate caused a pull in her stomach that had her steps faltering.

The tentative beginning of their romance was all hidden touches, quick kisses behind doors, and always interrupted by someone else. Nancy's house had a constant flow of people, especially when she was still recovering. But even when she and Ace were alone, he was being too careful with her, cautious not to hold her too tight, not to push her too far. And each time, his eyes filled with guilt when he saw the fading bruises on her shoulders. He was giving her the time and space to heal, but also the space she needed to piece together the mystery of them.

How would they work? Would this change their group dynamic? She knew he could see the running line of questioning in her mind, but unlike anyone she'd been with before he let her work through it, helping her when she needed it. Nick demanded she share her every emotion. Owen enabled her instinct to run away from her problems with jets and New York. And Gil, well Gil just fueled every ounce of doubt and shame she had.

But Ace gave her the support to work through it, without cornering her or enabling her. He answered her every question with calm reassurance. He knew just what she needed. However, that space has created a build-up of tension that a few stolen moments in her bedroom, in Florence, just couldn't satisfy anymore.

At a particularly slow moment in the lunch shift, Nancy pulled Ace into the backroom desperate and craving him.

"Nance - what're -" he said before Nancy's lips were on his, her hands fisted into his apron pulling him towards her. And then he wasn't protesting anymore.

Nancy manoeuvred him backwards and pressed him up against the lockers, her lips finding his as her hands explored every taut muscle of his chest as one of his hands slipped under the bottom of her blue dress. His fingers skimmed the muscles of her thigh, his other gripping her waist, before flipping their positions. The cool of the lockers pinched into Nancy's back as she pulled Ace's hat from his head, her fingers desperate to twist into his hair. His hand hitched her leg up around his waist in response, Nancy moaned as his fingers dipped into the edge of her underwear.

"Ace? Can you grab - oh my god! I'm so sorry?!" Bess screamed, the swinging doors barely closing as she turned around to walk about out again. "But be safe!" she popped back in quickly.

Ace groaned, letting Nancy's leg drop, sliding down his body, back to the ground. Her head leaned back against the lockers as his forehead pressed into her collarbone.

“At least it wasn’t George?” he mumbled into her neck, brushing his lips against her racing pulse, before pulling away from her.

“Yeah, but with Bess’ screaming, George will be here soon,” Nancy sighed straightening her dress and apron, “3, 2, 1 -”

“Drew! Ace!” George yelled, stomping into the backroom, “This isn’t a motel, we don’t pay you by the hour to make out by the lockers!”

It was 5 a.m. when Ace pulled up outside Nancy’s house and texted her to come for a drive.

Nancy: It's too early. Go away

Ace: Come chase a sunrise with me sleepy-head

Ace tapped his fingers nervously on the steering wheel as he waited for a response from Nancy. His breath caught when he saw her walking out the front door wearing a pair of leggings and his blue pullover. Her hair was still messy from waking up and she’d never looked more beautiful, more herself than she did walking towards him.

She smiled at him before she opened the passenger door. Soft good mornings were whispered between even softer kisses as Nancy settled into the passenger seat. Ace watched her tug her knees to her chest before he backed away from the drive.

Ace drove out to the bluffs, music played softly between them. His fingers strummed along her knee in time to the song. Her hands were tucked into the sleeves of his pullover fiddling with the cuffed fabric. Ace glanced between the road and her as their hometown passed by in flashes out the windows, knowing there was no place he’d rather be than here with her.

Ace slowed down and signalled to turn onto the road leading to the bluffs. He felt Nancy shift her gaze to look at him for a moment, he let his palm settle on her leg in recognition. He knew what this place meant to her, the dark hold it had on her memories from her birth to the algebra. But he remembered what she told him one night, a barely-there whisper hidden behind interlocked hands, about her dreamscape and everything the version of him said there. The safe place he created for her then, he wanted to give to her now.

“I know -” he started, clearing his throat, “I know the bluffs aren’t the happiest place for you, but I just - I want to show you that they can be beautiful too.” He glanced at her quickly before his eyes travelled back to the dirt road in front of him.

“Maybe create happy memories that can help balance out the pain.” He could feel the intensity as she watched him speak, he lifted the weight of her gaze every time he moved a muscle to adjust the steering wheel. When she didn’t say anything he glanced over at her, curled in the passenger seat.

“Thank you,” she yawned with a smile, the small lift of her mouth barely reaching her still drowsy eyes. Ace watched an array of emotions flicker across her face: her nerves hidden

carefully behind her hope, her admiration.

And it was here in the light of not-quite dawn that his emotions caught in his throat and inhibited him from saying anything, especially those three words. She linked her fingers with his, skimming along every callous and knuckle. Their conversation continued in between knowing glances and subtle touches.

After stopping at the viewpoint, Ace untangled his hand from Nancy's and shifted Florence into park. He looked at the fading blue sky, the colours slowly shifting reminded Ace of all the shades hidden in Nancy's eyes.

"We're a bit early," he smiled, sneaking a glance at her. He let the tips of his fingers trace the bottom of the steering wheel nervously. He let his words fall into the silence of the car. He fiddled with the stereo, he ejected the mixtape and flipped it over for side B. His body was entirely aware of how she was watching his every move. The need to fill the space between them with words hung in the air.

"I honestly thought it would take more pleading to get you out of bed," he grinned slightly as he settled back into his seat. Nancy glared playfully at him, his smile deepened at her reaction.

"My bed, as tempting as it is," she replied, leaning over into his seat to graze her lips down his ear, "Isn't nearly as tempting as you are," she murmured, pressing a kiss to his cheek. Ace inhaled as her breath spread shivers down his spine, followed by a heat that only her affection seemed to ignite.

Ace turned his head, his nose brushing against her cheek, "We don't - that's not why -" he whispered, his lips dangerously close to hers. Ace's hands hovered over the worn-down steering wheel, he was letting Nancy control the pace of this moment, letting her reclaim this spot however she needed.

"I know," her eyes shone like the waves crashing below them, "But I want this. I want this here with you." Her touch traced down his cheek, slipping past his jaw, and down his neck.

Ace swallowed at her statement, he felt the pads of her fingers lift with the motion. Her statement was simple in nature but heavy with words unsaid between them. Ace watched her eyes flick between his as she waited, the caress of her thumb causing his eyes to drift shut as he nodded.

She pressed a soft, lingering kiss to the side of his mouth, his hands tracing up her body settling on her waist as his lips found hers. He felt her whole body sigh into his as he returned her kiss. Her hands slowly slid into his hair, like she was savouring the way it felt between her fingers.

His breath hitched as she shifted her grip to kiss him more intensely. Florence's seats creaked as Nancy shifted trying to get closer to him, he could hear the release of her seatbelt prompting him to unbuckle his. Her lips never left his as he wove his arm out from the seatbelt restraint to grasp her face in his hands, tilting her face towards his. Her hands were

all over him, her tongue coaxed his lips apart, the taste of peppermint and chamomile tea consumed him.

Their bodies awkwardly angled as their hands softly explored each other. Ace couldn't hold her like he wanted to. He groaned, briefly pulling his lips from hers as he lifted her onto his lap. Her sigh above him ruffled his hair as she straddled his thighs. His hands drifted from her waist to her hips, dipping down to her ass and back to her hips again. Her mouth was on his again, a rough kiss, her hands holding him in place as her lips parted his, her hips rolling into him.

With every breath she stole from his lips, he gave back to her, grazing a kiss to her jaw, to her throat, to that one spot - Nancy's sharp inhale echoed above him - that one spot he knew she'd breathe into. He grinned against her skin, his hands tightened around her waist as her body arched, pressing into him. Ace hissed as he felt her touch dip under the hem of his shirt, trembling as she traced upwards.

"All this seriously can't just be from washing dishes..." she moaned, her hands tightening around his ribcage. He grinned, pulling her face down to his, catching her lips in a kiss.

"Cave diving," he whispered with a smile. His eyes drifted open, waiting for her reaction. And everything in his mind disappeared as the sunrise beamed around her. The colours surrounded Nancy, her hair sparked with the pinks and oranges streaming across the sky, her skin flushed and her head tilted back as she laughed at his comment.

He wondered if this is how Nancy felt when she drowned, because in this moment he couldn't fathom taking another breath, scared that any movement would take this moment away from him.

"Ace?" Nancy tilted her head, exhaling the last of her laughter. Her fingers ran through his hair, pushing a stray lock away from his forehead. Her nails grazed just above his eyebrow as her gaze locked with his.

"Beautiful," he breathed with a shaky sigh, the word barely a whisper between them. He lifted his hand and traced his fingers down the illuminated strands of hair against her cheek. Ace knew his emotions were written all over his face as he watched the sunrise around her. His world felt infinite and full of hope.

Her touch changed as she pressed her forehead to his, their chests alternating rhythmically in between them. Her hands shifted to hold his jaw, he felt her touch graze his earring and heat blazed through him over the simplest touch.

"Thank you," she kissed him slowly.

"Thank you for this morning," her hands slid down his neck.

"Thank you for saving me," she fisted his shirt and pulled him towards her.

The next kiss made the sky break open. This wasn't like the other times, no stolen grasping moments, there was no rush here to have each other for mere seconds. This moment was

passing as slowly as the sun rose around them. Each touch ignited a new colour in the sky, shifting the clouds to let more light breakthrough.

The end of a flashlight knocked against the fogged up driver's window causing Nancy to pull her lips away from Ace's with a groan.

"Ace, you know you can't park here," Tamura's voice echoed from outside, "Please don't make me call the Captain to tell him you're out here hotboxing your car."

"As if I would ever hotbox Florence," Ace grumbled, letting his head fall back to the headrest, his hands dropping from Nancy's waist to her legs. Her leggings leave little for his imagination. Nancy shifted back into her own seat, Ace tightened his grip as it drifted along her legs to keep them draped over his lap before he rolled down the window.

"No hotboxing here Detective," Ace answered, as Tamura glanced between Ace and Nancy, "Shocked they'd send you out on a basic call like this?"

"I - I recognized the car identified over the radio," he stammered before straightening, "Just - get out of here, you know you're not supposed to park here."

"Thanks, Detective!" Nancy waved, unable to contain the grin on her face as Ace started Florence and backed her back out, turning back onto the road.

"Bess?" George asked, "What are you doing here? You're not scheduled to close tonight?"

"I swapped with Nancy," Bess explained, "Thom and Rebecca are out of town."

"Her and Ace still haven't -"

"Nope!" Bess cut her off with a smile, "And Nancy is going absolutely feral. I think she would have murdered me if I didn't switch shifts with her."

Nancy knocked on Ace's front door, her usual rhythmical knock lost in her desperation. Her feet shifted as she anxiously waited for Ace to answer. Nancy's brain couldn't formulate a thought, at least not one based on any coherent language. She couldn't understand why her hands were trembling with nerves, she wanted this, she wanted Ace. It'd been too long, every breath, every look, every kiss, Nancy needed more.

"Hey Nance, I was just about to text -" Ace greeted her as he swung open the door. "What's wrong?" Nancy exhaled and pushed him inside, closing the door behind her.

"Whoa! Talk to me," Ace exclaimed, his hands grasping her elbows as he stumbled backwards into the house. "Did Temperance do something? Should I call George or Bess?" His eyes searched her body for any visible injuries and she couldn't control butterflies in her stomach from his genuine reaction.

“Ace,” Nancy interrupted him, the steadiness of her voice shocked even her because inside she was still trembling. “I don’t want to talk about my 200-year old great aunt right now. Or George. Or Bess.”

“Okay, so what’s the urgency for movie night?” Ace asked slowly, confusion furrowed in his brow. “You’re not cancelling - I thought Bess had your shift covered?”

Nancy slumped her back against the door, watching Ace in front of her. He was so concerned, his hands hovering just over her as if he wasn’t sure if he should touch her. But that’s all she wanted him to do. All she needed him to do.

She ran her hands through her hair, this frustration was getting the better of her. “I just - as lovely as movie night sounds, I need -” she tried to force the words out to explain this desperation in her chest. The pinch of her teeth into her lips kept the words in but barely.

“Talk to me,” he whispered, stepping closer, his feet settled around hers. “How can I help?”

His hands drifted from barely touching her elbows to grazing her hips. His fingers settled into the belt loops of her jeans. The warmth of Ace’s touch burned through her clothes, easing her trembling nerves. His thumbs caressed her softly as he spoke, each stroke of his calloused fingerprint reminded her to inhale and exhale.

Nancy could smell his distinctive cologne, leaving her lightheaded. She could see every breath expand his chest, she could practically feel the warmth hidden in the dark blue of his eyes. Using the door to support most of her weight, she released her lip from the pinch of her teeth as she slowly exhaled all the air from her lungs.

“Ace,” his name escaped her lips with her breath, “I need you.” Hearing his name from her lips immediately stilled his every move, Nancy was pretty sure he was holding his breath.

All the stress and worry left his face, his eyes swept down her and back up, leaving a trail of shivers over her entire body. Nancy pulled him closer, their stomachs meeting, she could feel the need for him vibrating over her entire body transferring from her body to his.

“I don’t want to rush you,” he replied, “If you’re not -”

“I need you now,” Nancy repeated with more determination. Everything in her needed to feel him, his body against hers, she wanted to be overwhelmed by him.

His breath soothed her trembling lips, and he adjusted, angling his head to catch her lips in a fraction of a kiss. Her breath hitched as he held her hips and tilted them to meet his using his grasp on her jeans. And then another kiss, a bit fuller. Nancy traced up his body and draped her arms around his shoulders, her fingers playing with the soft tendrils of hair that curled at the base of his neck. Their short breaths between kisses became as intoxicating as his lips, her body fighting for air and her need for him.

Nancy hummed as Ace’s lips trailed down her jaw, her hands fully in his hair now. She pulled him back up to her and kissed him fully. Her hands clenched into his hair as his tongue slipped into her mouth. He tasted like salty popcorn and mint and Nancy couldn’t get enough.

“Why do you taste like popcorn?” she asked, taking a moment to breathe and letting her senses return to her.

“Movie night isn’t complete without popcorn,” he answered so earnestly, in a way only Ace could, as he looked down at her with flushed cheeks and his hair mused from her touch.

“Of course, you made popcorn,” she smiled before pecking him on the lips.

“A snack for later,” he murmured, guiding her lips back to his. His body pressed her further into the door. Nancy’s head tipped back as she sighed, losing herself in this moment. His insistent mouth was sending wild tremors along her nerves, inflicting sensations she hadn’t been able to get out of her mind since their first kiss.

Ace’s lips skimmed down her neck with desire. His fingers burrowed into the skin above her jeans, spreading heat through her body. They drifted up her back and toyed with the edges of her bra, his touch was too light which only made her want him more. Ace shifted and Nancy hissed in pain as the doorknob wedged into her back.

“Ace - bedroom?” she asked, moving away from the door, stepping into him. His arms instinctively circled around her even more.

“Upstairs,” he answered, leaning away from her, his eyes full of curiosity and passion. She tipped her head, giving him a look. Before she knew it, Nancy was being pulled throughout his house. Unable to contain herself, Nancy let out a laugh as Ace rounded a corner too quickly causing him to stumble. He turned back to her and smiled as he tugged her in for another kiss.

In the dark of the upstairs hallway, Ace spun her so she was in front of him, his arms wrapped around her waist. Nancy barely caught her breath when she felt his lips kiss down her neck, Ace brushed her hair back from her shoulder and continued to work his way down her neck to her shoulder. Nancy ran her hands over his forearms, appreciating the corded muscles under her fingertips, and leaned back into him. His lips trailed back to her neck, and she moaned, unable to contain herself, she spun around in Ace’s arms and pulled his lips to hers.

Without breaking their kiss, Ace walked Nancy backwards toward a door, his body pressing against hers as they leaned against it. The floor creaked as their weight shifted further into the door, his mouth on hers was gentle but there was purpose in his every moment. This kiss was fierce, hot and devastatingly slow, he linked their hands and guided them up the wall as he held them above her head.

His touch dragged down her arms, caressing the sides of her breast to her waist, and pulled her hips into his. She could feel him hard with need against her. His mouth kissed down her throat slowly and determined. Nancy arched into his touch with a gasp.

“Did I hurt you?” he breathed. Nancy shook her head in response, unable to form words at the moment. She wanted to reassure him that there was nothing he could do that could hurt her, but in truth, Ace was the only one who could truly break her. He was her everything.

Needing to be closer, to move past her emotions, to feel his skin on hers, she grasped the hem of his shirt and lifted it over him. Her breath catching in her throat at the sight of his body, she was finally able to appreciate the hard lines of muscle in front of her.

“Dishwashing is a seriously underrated form of exercise,” she muttered admiring his toned body, illuminated only from the lights downstairs. The shadows emphasized each muscle and movement as he laughed, tipping his head to fall against her shoulder.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell people,” he replied, his lips brushing against her neck, “Zen and the art of dishwashing.” Nancy laughed with him as she let his shirt slip from her fingers to the floor. Her hands, unable to stay still, caressed the expanse of his warm skin, feeling his muscles tense under her cool fingers. Her touch was gentle but as determined as her feelings for him.

“I love hearing you laugh,” he whispered in between kisses. Ace’s hands brushed up her sides until they reached the first button of her shirt.

“I love seeing you happy,” he continued, raspy and deep, his voice filling the dark hallway. The tension between them returned as another button came undone beneath his fingers. She felt a blush rise to her skin under his fingerprints.

“And I love feeling that blush,” he breathed, as he pushed the sleeves off her shoulders, letting the shirt fall to the ground behind her. In the dim light, she could feel his gaze scrape over her body. She wanted to answer him, she wanted to say everything she loved about him, but she couldn’t focus - he overwhelmed her every sense.

His hands skimmed back up her arms, tracing her collarbone, lingering on her pulse point, and around her back as he unhooked her bra. He shifted a bra strap off her shoulder, his eyes following its path. Every nerve in Nancy’s body was ignited with a need for him.

Nancy roughly pulled him back to her to kiss him again, he reached down and grasped her by the thighs lifting her. She automatically wrapped her legs around his waist in response, the press of his chest on hers sent a new round of shivers down her spine. His fingers buried into her thighs as she arched against the wall rolling her hips against his.

A small moan escaped her, Ace twisted the doorknob and walked her into his room. Her thighs tightened around him, letting him carry her, her focus was on never letting his lips leave hers. She caught his bottom lips between her teeth playfully, he kissed her hungrily in response. She heard the door click shut behind them.

His hands wandered her bareback down to her ass. Their gasping breaths in between kisses filled the silence of his bedroom. Ace lowered her to the bed, feeling every line and curve of her body as he hovered over her.

Nancy, desperate for him, dragged his lips to hers again, her legs wrapping back around his waist. But Ace only kissed her tenderly in response. Nancy groaned at his pace, she had waited too long for this.

Ace grinned up at her as he lazily kissed down the column of her throat, finding the spot that made her gasp and grasp the sheets beside her. His fingers trailed from her waist to her breasts, catching her nipples, massaging them until Nancy was whimpering with need. His lips followed tasting the places he touched.

She felt his breath on her stomach, the rush of his exhale causing her to inhale at the sensation as he fumbled with the button of her jeans. She lifted her hips to help him as he eased her jeans and underwear down her legs.

“God, Nance,” he murmured before his mouth trailed up her legs, kissing ankles and knees as he passed, his hands squeezed her thighs as he lowered himself and tasted her.

Her breaths came faster, throttling her voice into barely there gasps. Her hands dug into his hair as he continued his slow pace. He shifts to hold her rolling hips down on the bed, his gaze catching hers with a spark. Her toes curl on his back as he increases his pace, her world tilts as he sucks her in, his name slipped from her lips in a plea as he continues through her waves of pleasure.

“Beautiful,” Ace said as Nancy opened her eyes to find him lazily pressing a kiss to her inner thigh.

“I want you,” Nancy whispered, her voice raspy with need. Her chest rising and lowering as she tries to catch her breath.

Ace kissed a random path up her body, every kiss was rough and warm. As he pressed a kiss to her collarbone, he replied breathing hard, “You have me.”

“Then why are you still wearing pants?” Nancy groaned, letting her head fall back into the pillows, her hands flailing to tug at his clothing.

“That is very fair,” Ace chuckled, as he stood up from the bed, undid his pants, and stepped out of them. He crawled up the bed over her, his lips unable to stay away from her skin.

“Hey,” he hummed as he settled back into her embrace.

“Hi,” she smiled as his nose brushed against hers.

“Condom?” she sighed, her nails tracing over his shoulders.

He fumbled for a condom from the drawer beside his bed, knocking a book off his bedside table. “Shit,” he mumbled under his breath.

“I’m sure your mom will waive the damage fees to the library book Ace,” she muttered with an eye roll.

“I really wish you hadn’t mentioned my mom,” he replied, tearing open the wrapper. His grin reached his eyes as he watched her laugh. His hands returned to her waist after working the condom on. She exhaled from laughter, his touch bringing her back to the moment that has been building between them.

She tucked a stray curl behind his ear, lingering on the earring she adored. Lifting her head she brushed her lips against his. His body shifted, one hand spanning against her ribs, the other lifting her thigh over his hip. Nancy trembled with anticipation as their bodies aligned.

Nancy groaned his name into his skin, “Ace, please.”

His first thrust had Nancy holding her breath with need as he sank deeper into her. Her voice caught at his size and the pleasure coursing through her. He moaned her name into her ear, sending shivers down her neck. Nancy curled into him, eager, needing him to go faster. He was being too gentle, she didn’t want his gentleness, not after waiting all this time.

“Ace,” she whimpered, wanting him to go faster. “Stop making me wait.” His hands slowed her rolling hips, keeping the mind-numbingly slow pace he set at the beginning.

“Be patient - I’ve wanted this - wanted you for so long,” he replied, as he sighed over her breast, causing her chest to tighten. Nancy knew that they had both been fighting their feelings for so long, that finally being with him felt natural. His thumb gently caressed Nancy’s hip as she watched his eyes flick between hers. Nancy’s breathing grew quicker and his heated look melted into a tentative smile.

Nancy brushed a kiss across his jaw, her teeth grazing, hands pulling his hair, she was losing herself with each thrust. Lost in the rhythm of each other, it felt so perfect. It has never felt like this for Nancy, it shouldn’t be this good, not at first.

“How are you so good at this -” her words fading in a breathy moan. His every movement threatened to unravel her from the inside out.

“Because I know you Nance,” he whispered, a brush of his hand released another moan from her. “I know you,” he repeated. And he was right. Ace was the first person she truly felt that knew all of her, could read her every expression, every dip in her voice, her choice of words.

“I never want this to end,” she panted, desperately clinging to him, her thighs wrapped around his waist tighter, his hands digging into her as he pulled her closer.

“I’m sure we could practice and build up our stamina,” Ace said as he moved faster, causing Nancy to swear and scrape her nails into his back.

“You’re - Nance - you’re so beautiful,” Ace lifts one hand to gently hold the nape of her neck, he tilts her head and kisses her neck. Nancy doesn’t know how to handle the tenderness of the moment, sex for her was always a distraction, a quick release. But with Ace it was different, slower, more powerful, it was as if he held her every emotion in his hands, something she had never trusted anyone else with before.

And it’s just her and Ace. His hands on her skin. Her fingers in his hair. His eyes watching her. Just Ace. Nancy wanted to say more to him, but her stomach somersaulted, and everything became blurry with pleasure.

“Fuck,” Ace breathed, his lips skimming her jawline in an open-mouthed kiss as he tried to catch his breath. He thrust harder, deeper, and Nancy came undone clutched around him.

He braced himself over her, his climax followed soon after as he moaned into her neck, she could feel his muscles under her fingertips shiver in the aftermath. Nancy felt exhausted and limp with release, she could feel her heartbeat frantic thrumming through her. His head head on her chest, his fingers tracing invisible patterns into her skin, down her hips to knees and back up to her ribs. He traced her body with quiet awe that she could only associate with Ace.

After a few minutes, Ace propped himself up on his elbow, he pushed his hair aside with his freehand, "Popcorn?" he asked with a lazy grin.

Nancy gently held his jaw between her hands and kissed him deeply, slowly, savouring him. "You get the snacks and water. I'm going to the bathroom. And then round two." She pecked his lips with a smirk.

She laughed at his expression as she eased out of his embrace, pulled on a discarded sweatshirt, and walked out his bedroom. She glanced over her shoulder once to see him flopped back on the bed with the biggest smile on his face, sheets tangled around his legs.

Nancy watched the rays of barely-there sunshine cast shapes and shadows on his back. She followed its path with her fingers and replaced her touch with kisses to wake him. Nancy blushed at the marks she left on his back the night before. And again this morning. Nancy watched Ace's eyes flutter open before he lazily released a smile and hummed a good morning.

"Can I tell you something?" she whispered as she pressed another kiss to his back. Her words imprinted into his skin as she watched the goosebumps appear beneath her breath. A hum was his only response as his eyes closed again savouring the sensation of her lips.

"I'm not sure when it happened, but one day, pre-wraith, I looked at you and it occurred to me how much I loved seeing your smile," she started slowly, not wanting to disturb the morning too much. "And since then I don't think I could survive without you, when I tried, I ended up in a coma." She watched his lips twitch trying to contain his small grin.

"And I think you were always meant to know me better than anyone else. I didn't see it coming, but now I can't think of anything else except for how much I love you. I'm scared I've made your life out of control, and -"

His eyes blinked wide awake at her words, he pushed up from the bed and shook his head furiously, "Nance -"

"Let me say this please," she pleaded with him, brushing a quick kiss to his lips.

"I'm scared because I am still infuriatingly and inexplicably drawn to you and I don't think I'll ever be able to give any of this up," she murmured, unable to control her pace any longer, the words needing to escape. "Because I - I love you too much. And I know you and I know it hasn't been that long since you and Amanda broke up, so you don't have to say it back or anything at all but -"

“You of all people should know - after all this time - after everything, and not just last night,” Ace said as he interrupted her thoughts with a kiss, knowing sometimes that was the only way to keep her quiet.

“That I loved you even before I realized it - that I am in love with you,” Ace repeated as he leaned in to kiss her full on the lips, his arms wrapping around her as he rolled pulling her on top of him.

Her hair fell around them, a protective curtain against what the day might bring. “Even with murderers, ghosts, and a 200-year old witch aunt on the loose?” she asked, her eyes never leaving his.

“Whatever life throws at us, Temperance, Gil, or even just missing cats. It’s always been you.” Ace whispered, lips brushing hers in a promise.

Chapter End Notes

with season 3 well underway, I really couldn't be bothered to deal with Temperance or Gil. so they're a future problem in this universe

anyways, thanks for joining me on this wild journey. this was my first fic in a really long time, so it was fun to just indulge and write for me again. i hope you enjoyed it <3

as always feel free to come yell about it on tumblr [@allthesedaydreams](https://www.tumblr.com/allthesedaydreams)

End Notes

I hope you liked it?

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!