

Cordially, Ardently, Yours

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Cordially, Ardently, Yours

by [nicmacallan](#)

Summary

Basically I binge-watched all of Nancy Drew and then the first season of Downton Abbey and somehow this happened. Enjoy, nerds! Will probably get a wee bit spicy later on.

Update: the further we get into this, the more I realize that it's way too feminist and socialist for Downton so we're going full Miss Fisher now and all the sexy times that implies.

Notes

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

Chapter 1

New York City, November - 1919

Lady Nancy Drew Hudson was certain that if she had to attend another ball this season, there would be a murder. Either because one of the other debutantes finally came to blows over some slight of etiquette, or in competition for some lesser lord's favor, or because Nancy finally lost her patience too close to a pressing iron.

Her six week stay so far at the home of her childhood friend, Lady Bess Tourani Marvin, had been soaked in feminine intrigue like a wick dipped in kerosene. All it would take was one tiny spark from any direction, and this townhouse full of young women on the verge would explode into a sweeping and destructive conflagration.

Twice so far this morning, Nancy had overheard their new friend Georgiana Li-Yun Fan muttering in Mandarin about how badly she'd like to wring Laura Tandy's pretentious neck. Violence was in the air.

Normally, this would be just how Nancy liked it. There was nothing quite so diverting as an intrigue that carried with it the looming threat of a life or death consequence. However, in this case, she'd promised her father—ostensibly at the deathbed request of her late beloved mother—to behave as a lady when in the midst of polite society. At least, until she'd secured a promising match and was therefore free to bend the rules again, once the rest of society stopped stating.

Come to think of it, solving a murder could be just the thing to liven up the season. Winter in New York City was nothing like Maine, and she was already missing the long days reading horrid novels in front of the fire and peaceful nights spent tracking the stars through her mother's old telescope.

Things were never as simple as she'd like them to be anymore, not for the illegitimate daughter of a debauched heir and an aspiring actress, born in secret and raised abroad by a kindly barrister and his schoolteacher wife. Now that she'd been forced out of hiding by her grandmother and prodigal birth father, Nancy had no choice but to come out into society and claim the birthright she'd never asked for but was apparently entitled to—or else. Or else... what?

Nobody ever seemed to explicitly say what happened to a girl of 20 with no firm offers of marriage in high society, but the tone they used was ominous enough to chill bone. Terrible things, by the sound of it.

Nancy sighed into her teacup as she contemplated her exhaustion at the prospect of another two months of endless balls, picnics, promenades, and other grueling social engagements that honestly felt more akin to being a piece of art on exhibit or an animal in a zoo.

Bess overheard it, of course—she was much more savvy than anyone gave her credit, this one—and rolled her eyes with an answering (much more dramatic) groan.

“Honestly, Nancy, it’s just a dance.” Bess bent her neck around the ornately carved screen to comment. “There’s no need to play the sacrificial lamb.”

“You’re one to talk,” Nancy replied, in the driest possible tone. “Considering that this is the sixth dress you’ve tried on since the tea was brought up.”

George smirked around a tea cake and nudged Nancy with her foot under the table, not waiting to fully chew and swallow before adding, “It’s the seventh.”

“Oh, bite your tongue,” Bess chided, swishing across the room with her bodice unbuttoned to grab another frock. “Or better yet, have another cake, George. It’s not as if anyone else is finishing them.”

Nancy tried and failed to hold back a laugh, and her half-muted snort caught the attention of Laura Tandy and her older sister Tiffany, who was in her fifth season, still unmarried, and quite bitter about it. The Tandy sisters were perched in front of Bess’s vanity, trying out her vast collection of cosmetics while attempting to do something daring with Tiffany’s hair.

“Rumor has it that George is eating her feelings,” Laura sniped, “because Ned Nickerson—the millionaire from Florida—snubbed her after they walked alone together in the park last week.”

“I don’t know if I’d set much stock in rumors if I were you,” Nancy commented, loud enough for the whole room to hear. “Particularly considering what they say about Tiffany gunning for the position of being Ryan Hudson’s mistress last season.”

George choked on her tea cake at that revelation, but by the time Nancy looked back at her, she’d schooled her expression into a smirk at Tiffany’s expense.

“Too bad she’s not a better shot with that gun,” George muttered, taking another sip of tea.

A gasp from Laura and a scowl from Tiffany told Nancy she’d gone too far. Again. Honesty was tantamount to brutality in polite society. She kept forgetting that ridiculous fact.

“Apologies,” she said, as she set down her cup. “That was unkind of me to say, even if—even if it was true. “Even if I was just repeating...what is obviously a cruel falsehood. I’ve obviously had too much...tea.” She pushed back her chair and stood, trying to seem prim and apologetic. “Please excuse me while I take a walk to clear my head.”

“Do you want some company?” Bess chirped, still half-dressed in the latest fluffy pink concoction designed to snare the eyes of everyone in the ballroom—men, women, anyone who might stand witness to her magnificence; she wasn’t picky. “I could be ready to go in ten...twenty minutes, if George helps with my laces?”

“No need,” Nancy waved her back. “I promise not to wander far enough to need a chaperone. I’ll probably just go to the library and take a book into the garden. Be back in time to change for the ball. I promise.”

As Nancy gathered her coat and strode out of the room, four pairs of eyes followed her—the Tandy girls’ speculative, George envious of her escape, and Bess wistful at how Nancy’s hair seemed to shine like a brand new copper kettle without the aid of any pomade or expensive french oils. For the first time in her life, Nancy began to understand why most people seemed to find her own watchful and speculative ways so unsettling. She was used to being the one who solved the mysteries, not being the mystery herself. But now that she was a lady, and a Hudson to boot, this was her lot.

Perhaps that was why she delighted in escaping as often as possible, in stealing away and placing herself as far from polite society as she could, as often as she could.

As she hurried through the ornately-decorated halls of The Marvin’s Greenwich Village mansion, dodging the startled greetings of servants along the way, she wondered if there was any way to fake an illness that was not so serious that a doctor would be called but bad enough to excuse her from this latest ball. She’d already hit her quota of sudden headaches for the season, per Bess. What other ailments might do the trick? Scarlet Fever? No, that was too contagious. Smallpox? Too difficult to fake. Hmm.

She’d been a guest here long enough that the layout of the house had become almost second nature to navigate—including the secret entrances to the servants corridors behind the walls. As soon as Nancy found herself finally alone, she ducked behind a tapestry and into a hidden door that led to a narrow stone staircase. Here, it was cool, and dark, and she could finally breathe a little more freely.

But there was no place to rest here, not without the threat of being stumbled upon. So after a few seconds of glorious solitude, Nancy continued down the stairs and into another long corridor, listening carefully for any sounds of movement as she followed the now familiar path to the secret entrance behind the bookcase library.

Judging from the cobwebs and dust, and the fact that the wall sconces were empty of candles, it seemed that this part of the passage was rarely used by servants. Hence, it was one of Nancy’s favorite areas to hide and spy as she passed the time.

Unfortunately, when she reached the hole in the wall that sat behind one of the paintings, she was chagrined to discover that the library was currently empty. No men were meeting to discuss their daughters dowries or the shifting stock market while tossing back brandy—at least, not today. Disappointing. But at least that meant she could sneak out of the passage and borrow a book the way she’d planned.

According to Bess, the library was her uncle’s domain, and girls weren’t really allowed in there without supervision. Having met Owen Marvin, Nancy assumed this had more to do with his rakish persona than any concerns about ladies getting ideas from the books contained in this room. She’d already made a mental note never to be caught alone with Sir Owen, given that her reputation was already hanging by a thread and any hint of scandal would sever it entirely. That, plus the fact that (as Nancy had observed from behind the wall, for weeks now) Sir Owen’s approach to negotiating was closer to that of a pirate than businessman.

Nancy, being American born and raised by Americans in spirit if not geography, had never been all that impressed with titles. In fact, she usually had a hard time keeping track of which was more impressive—a Duke, a Count, an Earl? Especially since it seemed that the most important factor (at least here in New York, and in society as a whole) was how rich a person actually was. Hence, the society buzz surrounding Ned Nickerson, the self-made millionaire. Or the fact that, in spite of his youthful follies and illegitimate heir, Ryan Hudson had been so readily and fully forgiven by his peers as soon as he'd returned to the fold and the family industry. His daughter and now heiress in tow, in spite of her odd hobbies and lack of social graces.

Toting her borrowed book—Crime and Punishment by Fyodor Dostoevsky, in the original Russian—Nancy made her way back through the servants corridors, thumbing through the tome as she headed for a solitary place to devour it. But she must've gotten distracted, because when she emerged from the passage, she wasn't outdoors as planned, in the quaint little gated garden that ran alongside the house.

Instead, she found herself in a cavern of brick walls and polished stone floors, surrounded by the most impressive selection of motor cars and carriages she'd ever seen in one place.

Drawn to the dazzling chrome and glistening paint of mechanical progress, Nancy crept closer to the nearest automobile, lips pressed together and book held tightly to her chest. She reached out to run a fingertip across a silver ornament perched on the nose of the car, lips curling in delight at the artistry of it, the practical machine beautified by legend. A gryphon perched at the crest of a man made machine, as if to give an air of irony to man's hubris.

Nancy had only ridden in one a few times, and then mostly in the city. She'd taken the train from Horseshoe Bay to New York. But she'd read that the latest models could get up to almost 80 miles per hour. How she'd love to learn how to work one and try those limits out for herself.

Nancy didn't realize she'd sighed her ennui aloud until someone chuckled.

"Sounds like a tragedy in the making."

Startled, she quickly stepped back, almost dropping her book as she moved away from the low and smooth rasp coming from the vicinity of her ankles. The youngish male voice was unfamiliar, and yet...something about it inspired a tingling sensation in her mind. Like a dream half-remembered that turns murky the longer you try to look at it.

Bending at the knees and craning her neck to peer down, underneath, to where the voice had originated, Nancy skirted the car until she came upon a lean set of long—very long—legs clad in loose black slacks and a pair of shiny, knee-high boots that looked a bit like riding boots but with a more rounded toe. 'Probably more comfortable to boot,' as her adopted father Carson would've joked.

"Excuse me," she said, after realizing she hadn't responded, and that was rude. "I didn't mean to startle anyone. I...got lost on my way to the garden, and was just pausing to admire this work of machinery."

Another low chuckle, then a scraping sound, and the legs bent to pull their owner out from under the car on some kind of rolling plank. Nancy was initially fascinated by the mechanism—what a simple yet ingenious device for getting oneself into hard to reach places—until she caught sight of the rest of the body. His body. The boy—the man—that had been lying beneath the car.

Strong thighs, narrow hips. A muscular torso, clad only in a white dress shirt and vest—an unbuttoned vest, to be exact—with the sleeves rolled up on the shirt, and his bare forearms were—oh, goodness gracious, she was staring. Her mouth was hanging open like a fountainhead, and she was staring. Blue eyes, like hers but much deeper, somehow. More like the ocean than the sky. Dear god—and secretly, Nancy didn't know if she actually believed in god, but DEAR GOD—that face. Roman statuary would weep with jealousy if they could. And that hair, golden brown and unfashionably long in the most attractive possible way, and yes, yes her mouth was still open, and she was stammering. STAMMERING, like a magpie with a failing memory.

“I...I, uhm, I was just. I um.”

He smiled, and the metaphorical magpie keeled over, dead. “Can I help you, miss?”

“Can you...help...?” Pull yourself together girl, you aren't really a mindless debutante, after all!

Nancy cleared her throat, which was unladylike, but necessary in this case. After taking a beat to reset herself, she smoothly continued, “Actually, yes. If—if you don't mind.” Somewhat smoothly. “I wonder if you might be able to tell me, how fast does this car travel, at a maximum?”

Her question seemed to light his face up from the inside, and she dug her fingers into the spine of the book, pulling it closer like a paper chest plate. As if literary armor might protect her from being penetrated by this beautiful boy's—man's—gaze, or melted by the warmth of his smile.

“I'm so glad you asked,” he said, pulling himself to his feet, where he then towered over her, grinning. “There's nothing better to do on a nice day than cure a pretty girl's troubles by taking her for a fast drive. Let me just grab a schmatta to clean the oil off my hands, and I'll start her up.”

Nancy Drew Hudson had never swooned in her life, but she was considering it.

“Oh, well that sounds...” Ideal. Wonderful. Like the perfect escape plan from this terribly boring new life. “Interesting. But I probably shouldn't...uh, I mean, something tells me it wouldn't be appropriate for me to go on a fast drive—or a drive of any kind, really—at least not with a strange man I've just met. We...we haven't been properly introduced, and I'm sure there are rules about...this kind of thing.”

“Well, that is what we call a fixable problem, milady,” he said, grabbing a clean white towel and running it over and through his fingers. “Us having not met.”

Nancy found herself momentarily transfixed by his movements, so much so that she wobbled a little when he stepped back toward her with his hand extended.

“The name’s Joseph Eli Hardee, but everyone I know just calls me Ace.” He held his hand out to her, like he was expecting her to do something with it.

Oh, right. A handshake, Nancy recalled. People shook hands. That was a thing that regular people often did. She peeled her right hand away from the book at her chest, forcing herself to relax her shoulders enough to reach out. His fingers embraced hers, squeezing once gently, dwarfing her hand in a way that made her forget where she was until he let go.

“I’m—“ the name Nancy Drew was poised to tumble off her tongue, but before it did, she remembered that it wasn’t so simple anymore. Ever since she’d been outed in the society papers, her beloved anonymity had gone up in smoke. Which made it difficult to sleuth around unnoticed as often as she’d done back home.

When her pause stretched on, he filled it smoothly, without even a hint of awkwardness. “I’m the Marvin’s chauffeur, in case that much wasn’t clear.”

“Oh, of course!” And also, somehow, a relief. What were the odds a chauffeur read the society gossip papers, and would therefore recognize her face on sight? “Yes, I deduced as much. I’m...Katherine. Katherine...Carson. But my friends call me Kate.”

“So then, Kate Carson.” Eyes sparkling with mirth, he leaned in toward her by just a few inches. Not too close as to be improper, but close enough that Nancy forgot to take the next breath. “Fancy a drive?”

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Ace takes Nancy for a ride. (OMG, behave yourselves, I meant literally!)

A/N: Please do not judge me for my Wikipedia History or my Google Translate French. I am trying to get to the smutty parts ASAP and we are not known for being a patient people. Thank you.

Nancy couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so free. Free to breathe, to ask questions without worrying about how she'd be perceived, to be herself. Which was...a bit ironic.

Driving through New York with the wind in her hair, grinning ear to ear and laughing with her whole lungs. Even adventuring under an assumed name with a man she hadn't known an hour ago, it somehow felt like she was back home. Much closer to home than the Marvin Estate, anyway. But then, she realized, that wasn't saying much.

"What's that?" Distracted by a point of interest, Nancy found herself leaning into the driver, reaching over him in her haste to gesture to a building in the distance. When the car hit a bump in the road, she almost careened into him, and had to steady herself with a hand on his arm.

He smiled, apparently not noticing that she was flirting with the boundaries of propriety—or not caring, either way.

"That'd be the Woolworth Building," he shouted, over the engine. "Tallest in the world, at almost 800 feet!"

"Well, let's hope nobody falls off it," Nancy replied. "Or they'd make quite a splash."

Instead of being shocked at her observation, as most people usually would be, he laughed.

"You'd sure have a long time to regret your mistake on the way down."

"Long enough to plan your own funeral, perhaps?" She joked, tilting one corner of her mouth.

"Or pray for a last-minute miracle." He was clever, confident, and yet (seemingly) totally unaware of his allure, which only made her like him more. "Possibly to several gods in a row."

"I'd probably try to send some kind of message," she said. "Something to warn others away from following in my footsteps, so to speak."

“Oh?” He smiled conspiratorially, leaning into the wheel as he made a hard turn. “What would your last words be? ‘Watch your step?’”

Nancy chuckled warmly, resisting the urge to pinch him. “As they’d say in London, ‘mind the gap.’ Or, in my case, ‘examine the guardrails,’ since I’d only have fallen to my death from a building that tall if there was some kind of sabotage afoot.”

“Who would ever want to harm you, Kate?” When she stole another glance, his manner had shifted from jovial to troubled.

“Oh, nobody,” she waved a hand dismissively, reminding herself that he didn’t know who she really was, or anything about her past—and it should stay that way, for his own good, and her reputation’s sake. (Not that she really gave a damn about the second part.) “I was just...making a joke. Sorry, I...I’m always saying the strangest things. Or, noticing things I shouldn’t. My father...he says I should filter my thoughts a bit more carefully.”

“Never apologize for sharing your thoughts,” he said, and Nancy couldn’t seem to find any cracks in his solid sincerity. “It’s a rare gift, being able to see the world in all its complexity, and speak up about things other people prefer to ignore.”

“You know what, Ace Hardee? I couldn’t agree with you more.”

As they headed back toward the city, Nancy imagined that she had an inkling of what it might feel like, falling from such a great height, so suddenly. They’d gone as far as they dared, over a bridge and into New Jersey to take advantage of less-crowded roads, so Ace could open up the engine and show her what Florence could do. Nancy had held her breath and gripped the seat with every bit of strength in her fingers to keep from crying out in exaltation, the vibration of the engine and the heady scent of exhaust filling her with a gut-deep yearning she couldn’t quite place. Every time she dared a glance in his direction, she felt it again. It was strange and unexpected, but not unwelcome, this feeling. She found herself staring at the way his fingers flexed around the steering wheel in those soft leather gloves, a few too many times, before finally forcing her eyes back on the road and the surrounding bustle of a city always in progress.

“How old are you, anyway?” Nancy asked, perhaps a little too bluntly, as she side-eyed him from her perch on the edge of her seat. The anxiety of resubmerging into society was already seeping back into her veins, growing stronger with every mile they traveled.

“I’ll be twenty-one in October,” he said. “And since I’m guessing it’s your next question, no, I didn’t enlist. The Army just missed me. My older brother Grant is set to ship out with the AEF next month, but our father is dead set against it.”

“Because he disapproves of the war?” Nancy wouldn’t blame him, if that was the case. The looming threat of armed conflict was one of the reasons—on top of Nancy’s birthright being exposed by a newspaper reporter—her father had decided to move them back to the United States after her adopted mother’s death when she was sixteen. After which she’d spent almost three years burying herself in mysteries to avoid grieving her mother and trying to make sense of the world in whatever ways she could. Little had she known then, the world had

been on the brink of explosion, and no matter how hard she tried, she wouldn't be able to make the shattered pieces of it fit back together in the same way, not ever again.

Ace shook his head, unaware of Nancy's internal struggle against her own embattled history.

"Because my father disapproves of all wars. Violence in general, actually. Ever since he lost his hearing in a riot, when he was studying in Paris."

"A riot?" Nancy searched her memory, and added up what she'd observed so far. "You mean in France? That's where the name Hardee comes from, isn't it?"

"Oui, c'est exact," Ace said, his accent flawless—much better than Nancy's French, if she was being honest. "My father was studying in Paris, when someone threw an explosive through the window of his dormitory. Antisemites, using the whole Dreyfus Affair as an excuse to turn their hateful rhetoric into reckless action."

At that, Ace seemed to brace himself for something, but Nancy wasn't sure what. Nothing about what he'd said was shocking, or remotely something that reflected badly on him. The blame clearly belonged with the mob that had injured his father with their violence, which explained his anti-war sentiments, and perhaps why Ace himself was so slow to anger from what she'd seen.

"I remember my father talking about that case," Nancy said. "According to Carson, it was a grave miscarriage of justice, and Alfred Dreyfus was clearly innocent from the onset. He never should have been tried in the first place."

Ace seemed taken aback, but then he seemed to relax. "Yes, it was a..fraught time."

"Well, your father sounds like a good man," Nancy said. "Someone my father would likely get along well with."

As soon as the words left her mouth, Nancy realized (too late) how forward they must sound. But Ace only smiled a little more broadly, ducking his head to look left and judge oncoming traffic.

"I would very much like to meet him one day," he muttered, sneaking a glance in her direction.

Nancy bit her lip to keep from giggling like a schoolgirl, because (honestly) that wasn't her style. She refrained from commenting again for several minutes, focusing on the neighborhoods and trying to mark the route and calculate how many more minutes of freedom she had left. With him. Those minutes passed far too soon, and before she knew it, they were almost there.

"Well," she finally said, when she couldn't stand the silence (silence full to bursting, packed with all the things she wanted to, but couldn't—or shouldn't—say) any longer. "This has been a nice escape—I mean, diversion—while it lasted. But I should be getting back, before I'm missed."

“As you wish, milady,” he said. “Thank you for letting me borrow you, if only for a short while.”

Nancy looked away, blushing, but she couldn't keep her eyes from wandering back after a few seconds. With his dark blue uniform and his deep blue eyes, Ace seemed to blend in easily to the hustle and bustle of New York City, but Nancy had a feeling she could learn to pick him out just as easily in any crowd. If not by his eyes, than by the set of his shoulders, or the sharpness of his jawline angled above his pristine collar. The uniform hat he wore only did half its job in covering up his glorious golden-brown mane of hair, which he sheepishly admitted to Nancy that he avoided cutting based on a promise to his mother, after removing his hat and nervously running his fingers through it with a fond glint in his eye. Nancy had to clasp her fingers together at that point to avoid reaching for him. She didn't want him to get the wrong idea, particularly after she'd all but run away with him that afternoon. Shockingly, they managed to weave back through the growing city traffic and return to the Marvins' garage without being seen, just as the sun was beginning to set. The truest gentleman, he practically leapt from his seat as soon as the engine coughed itself to sleep, circling Florence to open her door and help her step out.

“Faites attention où vous mettez les pieds,” he bent his head to tell her, with a glint in his eye that almost made her trip, and not because of what he'd said—but how (and how close to her ear) he'd said it. Ace was hearkening back to his earlier joke of ‘watch where you step,’ but—unless Nancy was mistaken, and she may have been, because her French was atrocious—the more literal translation was ‘be careful where you tread.’ She forgot to let go of his hand for a long moment, distracted by the jolt that went through her when their eyes met. Surely, he couldn't know how apt his warning was, for her situation. Or how many times she'd stepped into a mystery that turned into a horror story midway. Surely, he was just being coy.

“Now you're just showing off,” she blurted, face heating as she smiled up at him.

As well as he looked in those black leather gloves, Nancy couldn't help silently cursing them, if only for denying her the feeling of his bare fingers touching hers in a somewhat socially appropriate way. Not the way she secretly wanted, but that was between her and the god she didn't really believe in, after all.

Ace's smile felt like a challenge, as he raised her hand to his lips, lightly brushing her knuckles in what could only be described as a chaste kiss if you were standing very far away. Nancy did her best not to shudder visibly. She should probably leave now. She was. She was leaving. Any minute now. Any second...

“Si jamais tu tombes, je t'attraperai,” he added, blue eyes burning into hers, his voice low and far too intimate for how long they'd known each other—and yet, it felt as natural as a heartbeat.

If you ever fall, I will catch you.

Jesus Christ, Sherlock Holmes, and Woodrow Wilson, help her. Nancy wasn't falling. She... had already landed. Fatally.

Unfortunately, Ace took her stunned silence as an invitation to step closer, which seriously impacted Nancy's ability to formulate a plan. Move. Speak. Etc.

"Kate Carson, I hope this isn't too forward of me, but when can I see you again?"

That did it. Hearing her mother's name—her alias, so foolishly chosen, in retrospect—from his lips in that tone in this situation was like a bucket of cold water to the face. Just in time, too.

Glancing nervously at the brooch-mounted watch she'd inherited from her late mother, Nancy grimaced, a bit too theatrically.

"I...oh, I don't know. I should be getting back. I've been—my friends are probably wondering where I've gotten off to, and I shouldn't worry anyone."

Somehow, even though they'd just met, Ace knew her well enough not to push. With one last tender squeeze of her hand, he let her go, stepping back to a more appropriate distance.

"The next time you need to escape—or be diverted—you know where to find me."

"Yes, of course" she nodded dumbly, pushing back the yearning and covering it with a smile. "Goodbye, Ace. And thank you...for the drive."

Still, she couldn't resist lingering a few seconds longer, trying to commit every line and detail to memory, from the scent of his soap to the way his hair curled above the line of his collar. The likelihood of her stealing away to see him was minimal—not without being caught by one of the Marvin's other servants—and she couldn't risk it. Not if she planned on keeping her promise to Kate and Carson Drew, and honoring the sacrifice they'd made to ensure she could claim the life she'd been meant to live. Even if...it might not be what she wanted. Turning away, she pretended to leave the garage, before circling back and sneaking past the parked cars and into the hidden entrance to the secret tunnels that would lead her back to Bess's room and the rest of her so-called friends.

Bracing herself for another long evening of champagne, badly-danced foxtrot steps, and mind-numbingly boring pretension, Nancy stepped back into the skin of Nancy Drew Hudson and climbed the hidden staircase with a heavy heart.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Nancy stumbles into the shady plans of men.

“Forgive me for saying so, but you look... like you’d rather be anywhere else.”

Nancy’s ramrod-straight posture became even more tense (if that was possible) as the speaker approached. She might not have spent much time around Bess’s eldest cousin, but his reputation preceded him. Everyone this side of New York seemed to give him a wide berth, and Nancy’s innate detective sense told her it wasn’t only because he had a reputation for being a little too forward with the ladies.

“Mr. Marvin,” Nancy kept her expression neutral, as she turned her head slightly toward him, keeping her gaze soft and focusing over his shoulder instead of directly at him—a trick she’d learned from her former French tutor, Mademoiselle Lamar. “How is business?”

Owen Marvin laughed, his slicked back dark hair vying with the satin lapels on his tuxedo for shiniest accoutrement. “I thought uptown girls were taught to only chat about the weather.”

“I suppose they are.” Nancy refused to let him see her cringe, even if he’d meant it as a slight against her upbringing—which she wasn’t certain he had. “But given how many ‘uptown girls’ are at this party, I’m guessing you’ve already covered every possible angle of weather talk to date.”

His smile was wolfish—she noted, in her peripheral vision—as he took a sip from his glass. “You noticed me making the rounds, huh?” At least he didn’t try to deny it, which Nancy had to concede was somewhat refreshing. “But that doesn’t mean I haven’t had my eye on you.”

She supposed he meant that as a compliment. “I’d probably be flattered, if I didn’t think you were so practiced at multitasking.”

Another laugh, but this one sounded a bit more genuine. “Touché, Miss Hudson.”

Nancy almost opened her mouth to correct him, but then she caught herself. The name Drew carried no weight here, not outside of Horseshoe Bay. Definitely not in the circles Owen Marvin traveled.

“Would you care for a dance?” He held out a hand, level with hers but a respectful number of inches away from touching her without consent. Another point in his favor, which brought him to about...two points so far, total, since they’d met. “I promise not to step on your gorgeous shoes.”

The shoes really were the best part of the outfit, Nancy silently conceded, all gold and sparkly—and borrowed from Bess. Across the room, through a thin haze of cigarette smoke and fog of delicate socialite perfumes, Bess caught her eye and winked. Nancy fought the urge to roll her eyes. Of course she was behind this.

“Actually,” Nancy said, finally turning to face him directly—after all, Carson had always taught her to meet all of life’s challenges head on—“I’m feeling a slight headache coming on. Must have had a bit too much sun today. I hope you’ll forgive me if I say goodnight a little early.”

It was clear from the momentary flash of annoyance in Owen’s brown eyes that he wasn’t accustomed to being turned down. But he had gained a reputation for being a shark in business for a reason. Before she could even leave the room, he was turning her rejection into an opportunity for negotiation. He followed her into the next room, his long strides easily matching her pace.

“And here I thought you girls had spent the entire day primping up in my sweet little cousin’s suite.”

Damn. Nancy silently kicked herself for making such an unforced error. Not that she’d done anything illegal—or even really wrong—by sneaking away to take a drive with Ace. But she’d still rather nobody knew about that for...her own reasons.

“I...have a genetic tendency toward heatstroke,” she said. “Red hair, you know. It comes with the territory. I can burn just sitting too close to any given window.”

Another unintentional mistake, she realized a bit too late—calling more attention to her appearance; basically giving him the perfect excuse to sweep his shark eyes hungrily across her skin. He took his time looking. Nancy felt exposed in the most uncomfortable way.

“I don’t know if I’d call that red. It’s more like...burnished copper.” He reached a hand toward Nancy’s hair, and she took a step back, broadening her shoulders as her training kicked in. “Whoa, now. I was just testing a theory. No need to square up, Peaches.”

“Don’t call me that,” she snapped, a little too frostily, before correcting. “Mr. Marvin. I mean, I would prefer if you didn’t. Please.”

It wasn’t necessary to be this defensive, she told herself. He wasn’t any threat to her, physically. Just her reputation, probably.

“What would you like me to call you, then?” He took another step into her space, and Nancy suddenly realized that they were alone in the hall, with nobody around to see...whatever he did next. “Blue eyes? Dollface? Or how about, the future Mrs. Owen Ma—”

“Marvin! There you are, you smarmy son of a gun! Been looking all over for you!”

From down the hall, a male voice, slightly slurred. Nancy stepped around Owen, using his body to block her from view as she retreated behind his back. Ryan Hudson was the next last person she wanted to see just now.

“Don’t tell me you’ve been avoiding me,” he drawled, loud enough to be heard in the ballroom, probably. “I mean, just cause you owe my father a fortune, there’s no reason we can’t be friendly!”

Luckily, Ryan seemed much more interested in harassing Owen than noticing his own daughter—so for now, he was her accidental savior. Nancy used her biological father’s rather crass entrance to her advantage, ducking behind a tall plant and taking a sharp turn down a random hallway. This way seemed to lead toward the kitchens, because a white-coated waiter was coming toward her down the hall, carrying a huge covered tray that thankfully seemed to block him from noticing Nancy. The waiter seem to be unfamiliar with the mansion’s layout, however, because (before he could pass Nancy’s new hiding place where she crouched behind a statue) he took a turn down another hall—away from the party in full swing. This made Nancy’s detective senses tingle, and in spite of being possibly pursued herself, she found herself carefully following the misdirected waiter.

She couldn’t get too close, otherwise he might turn and see her, but she noticed that his jacket was too long in the arms but tight around the shoulders, and that his shoes were not the shiny patent black of a professional waiter—but instead soft leather, with laces. Strange. From what she’d seen of how Diana Marvin ran her house, Nancy didn’t think her hostess would stand for a single worker in her home wearing such a haphazard uniform. Even Ace, who had been lying underneath a car when she’d first seen him, had clearly taken steps to keep his shirt crisp and white underneath his suit jacket, and his boots unscuffed, or risk Aunt Diana’s legendary arched brows. But...this wasn’t the time to be thinking about Ace, she reminded herself. Not now, or ever again.

After making another sudden turn (this place really was a maze of narrow corridors, honestly) the waiter stopped suddenly in the middle of the hall, forcing Nancy to flatten herself against a wall behind a column. There was a dull knocking sound, followed by a scraping, then a deep thud. Then nothing. When she dared to look again, the waiter was gone.

Curiosity piqued, she followed his footsteps, but where he had stopped didn’t make any sense. There were no doors here. No hallways. Only a rather forgettable stone statue in front of an otherwise blank wall. And yet...Nancy had stayed in this place long enough to know it had many secrets, only a few of which she’d uncovered so far. She thought about the knocking sound she’d heard, and stepped around the statue to press her ear against the wall just behind it. A tentative knock against the wood returned a hollow noise. Another hidden entry to the network of secret passages, then? After sleuthing around for a few more seconds, she discovered a cord hidden along the back of the statue and pulled it. The wall slid away with a scrape, and she smiled.

This tunnel was dark, cramped, and musty with disuse...also there was a sickly sweet smell that she couldn’t quite place. Rough-hewn and steep, it spiraled down without branching, narrowing further until she found herself having to trail her fingers along the sides to keep from bumping her elbows in the dark as she went. After a while, brick walls turned to stone, and the stone became cold and damp. She shivered, wishing she was wearing something more sensible than a cocktail dress and heels, or that she at least had some kind of lamp for light.

Luckily, there was a faint light coming from up ahead, along with the sound of rain. No, not rain. Running water. The sweet smell had given way to something more sulphuric and dank. Men's voices echoed lowly in what sounded like a cavernous space, more than two but less than five. She couldn't make out what they were saying, mostly due to the echoing and her distance, but it sounded like arguing. Creeping forward, she could just peek through a low stone doorway and into what looked like an access tunnel that led into the sewers.

Four men stood around a small stack of crates that had a kerosene lamp perched on top, throwing their shadows into sharp relief against moist stone walls. Two of the men argued, while a third had his back to the door and a fourth stood watching the other three with his arms folded.

"Grant, I can barely move my arms in this thing," said the man dressed as a waiter, who had carelessly abandoned his tray on the ground. He was dark-haired and sullen-faced, with a strong jaw shadowed by stubble and the posture of a boxer. "Of course I burned the soup! You're the only one of us with culinary training, so you should be the one wearing this getup."

"Sorry Abe, my captain called us in for a last-minute training exercise," replied the handsome young man in a military uniform—who Nancy guessed was at least 20 years old, and had asian ancestry, like George. "I couldn't get away until now. I'd love to switch, but how suspicious would it look if one waiter left and another one just came back up in his place?"

"Knowing these people?" The non-waiter (Abe?) scoffed. "They'd only notice you if your ass was on fire, or you dropped soup in their laps. They're too busy wheeling and dealing, trading their daughters for shady alliances while they're at it."

The third man (who was older than the other two she could see, ruddy-faced and dressed like a dock worker) shook his head, unfolding his arms to gesture adamantly to the other three. He didn't speak, but they all turned to look at him, remaining silent as he gestured. After a few seconds, Nancy realized that he was speaking—but in sign language, which she unfortunately couldn't understand. Judging from the look on the fake waiter's face, he was also having a hard time following.

"Yes, but what deals are they making?" The next voice she heard was softer, less agitated, and much more familiar—and that last part was what made Nancy flinch. "Which daughters are they trading, and what are they getting in return? There has to be proof...some kind of paper trail."

Ace was the man with his back to her. She hadn't looked at him for very long, and he wasn't wearing his chauffeur uniform, but a rough woolen coat and a knitted cap—similar to the older man who was signing.

"Until we find that proof," he continued, translating what the other man signed, "we have to keep our heads down. Keep digging. Quietly."

"What we need is someone on the inside," said the man called Abe. When Ace looked toward him, he held up his hands. "I mean further inside, with more access. Someone who won't get a second look if they're seen lurking around in the house."

“Maybe, but you were the one who said we might have to get our hands dirty here,” Grant signed as he spoke. “Because these people don’t play by the rules. So they probably have no issue killing someone who gets in their way.”

“That’s why we need to be ruthless here, Little Frankie.”

“Don’t call me that, Abraham. Unless you want me to start calling you Baby Abie?”

Nancy didn’t understand what was going on, but she knew she’d stumbled into something potentially dangerous. Something she wasn’t supposed to overhear. It was obvious these men were spying on the Marvins, but why? Why were they so interested in the family’s business deals and alliances? And how did they know about the secret tunnels?

Most importantly—at least to her—was the question: why was Ace involved with these men, who were obviously in disguise and probably also criminals?

As much as she had an urge to keep digging for answers, she needed to get back to the house and into Bess’s rooms before someone came looking for her.

Tearing her eyes away from Ace’s shadow, she backed away from the entrance and started to find her way back, but her fancy shoe slipped on the moist stone floor, and she stumbled. She didn’t cry out, but her bare shoulder hit the wall with a low thump. She froze, listening for any sounds of alarm. But there was nothing. She held her breath until the men started speaking again—Abe saying something about not enough men fit for a job, and Grant responding that war was to blame for that. Nancy started moving again, as quickly as she dared.

But a few meters down the tunnel, she heard a sound right behind her. She whirled, bringing her arms up to defend herself, but whoever it was seemed to move with her in the dark. Like a shadow of her own, whirling and enveloping her. Before she could even think to cry out, strong arms had wrapped around her, pinning her arms to her sides and lifting her easily off her feet.

That was when she finally did scream, writhing against the hold, letting her voice echo through the tunnels and hopefully back up to the house—or up in the street, where someone might hear and come to her rescue. This earned her a strong hand clamped across the lower half of her face. She bit the hand muffling her voice, as hard as she could. The man holding her grunted, but didn’t let go, dragging her back toward the door and the lantern and the other men.

This was a bad situation, but Nancy had been in worse. She stopped struggling, already calculating a plan to free herself, or failing that, explain. Maybe Ace would recognize her and tell the other men she wasn’t a threat and they’d let her go. Maybe this was all some odd misunderstanding. Maybe Santa Claus was real, and there really were alligators living in the sewers.

As soon as the light hit her, she realized that Ace was the one holding her, and she froze. So did he. She couldn’t turn her head to look up at him, but she could feel him tilting his head down toward her, and there was no missing his sharp intake of breath against her hair or the

tightening of his fingers around her waist. For a few long seconds, nobody said anything, but then the man called Grant shook his head and laughed.

“This guy finds a gorgeous girl lurking around every corner, doesn’t even have to try, and I’m still single...how?”

Abe crossed his arms, narrowing his eyes at her. “You wanna tell us why you followed me? You working for Marvin, or just looking for a thrill, sweetheart?”

Nancy tilted her head back to look up at Ace, and that seemed to break some kind of spell. He took his hand away from her mouth, loosening his hold until she could stand on her own feet. His blue eyes were stormier than she’d ever seen them, his jaw tense with shock and dismay. Straightening her spine, she took a small step away from him and immediacy regretted it as a shiver passed through her body at the absence of his heat—or maybe it was more the draft of cold, moist air coming from the nearby tunnel.

“Kate,” Ace’s voice was low, his eyes intense, as he quickly stripped off his woolen coat and wrapped it around her. As he did, he seemed to notice what she was wearing for the first time, eyes dipping to take in her now disheveled silk dress, before swallowing thickly. “What’re you...How...did you get here?”

The coat smelled like soap and spices and fresh rain. She wrapped it more tightly around her, shivering and casting her eyes to the floor as she searched for a worthy excuse. But all she could do is stare at his broad chest, at his arms still reaching for her, at the woven pattern in his thick knitted sweater that rose and fell with his breathing.

“I...I didn’t mean to...I was trying to avoid someone up—upstairs, and I...got lost.”

Ace seemed to buy her act of confusion, or maybe he just wanted to believe she was honest. Unlike him, it seemed.

He turned toward the other men, signing as he spoke. “It’s okay. Her name is Kate Carson. She’s not with the Marvins. Or the Hudsons. She’s just...just a girl I know, who ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time. Trust me.”

The older man raised his eyebrows, gaze flicking from Ace to Nancy, before staying on Nancy. He didn’t seem like the trusting kind.

“Of course you’ve met before,” Grant muttered, throwing up his hands. “Can’t catch a break, can I?”

Abe stepped forward, fists on his hips. Nancy didn’t like the way he was looking at her, with a mix of disgust and interest. She unconsciously moved a little closer to Ace, who put a hand on the small of her back to steady her. She hated how safe his touch instantly made her feel.

“Looks like the gag’s on you, Hardee,” Abe taunted. “Don’t you read the society papers? This right here is Nancy Hudson, the long lost heiress.”

As soon as he heard her real name, Ace dropped his hand.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

The mystery in the making is now a murder mystery. Nancy can't work it alone, this time. Shockingly, she doesn't want to.

The next morning, Tiffany Hudson's body was found in the garden.

Moments before she heard the news, Nancy had worried that she be discovered sneaking back into Bess's suite around dawn. She'd worried about how to answer her friends' questions over where she'd been. Or who she'd been with. Or why she still had a man's jacket wrapped around her shoulders—not a tuxedo jacket, even, which at least could be logically explained by the company she was meant to keep.

None of those questions came up, however, when Nancy was suddenly jarred out of an all-too-recent sleep in her guest room bed, by a frantic Bess and a deadly serious George.

"Nancy, you'll never believe it! The most horrible thing ever has happened!"

"Allegedly," George added, pulling Bess away from Nancy's bed. "Let her wake up before you throw another tragedy on her."

Nancy sat up so quickly that she had a little dizzy spell—likely thanks to not sleeping, or really eating anything the night before.

"Tragedy?" A sudden pang went through her as she realized what George meant—that Nancy's adopted mother's death was still fresh in her recent history—followed by another, when she heard Laura's unbridled sobbing from down the hall. She'd recognize that sound anywhere, the sound of a human heart breaking open. Her brain went from half-asleep to high alert in between heartbeats. "What happened? Someone...someone's died, haven't they?"

"It was Tiffany," George said, as Bess nodded frantically, pressing her fingers to her lips. "The gardener found her, about half an hour ago. They think she might have been poisoned. Sometime last night, maybe."

"Oh god, who would—" Bess whispered, her voice cracking hysterically, "I mean, who would do something so despicable?"

A day ago, Nancy would've shaken her head and said she had no idea. But now that she knew a bit more about the source of the Marvin Family fortune—and Owen's history in particular—she realized it could be any number of people in this house. Including at least two members of her own biological family. So really, the question wasn't so much 'who would do

something so despicable’ as it was ‘why would they do something so despicable to Tiffany in particular?’ That part made the least sense.

Nancy threw back the covers and pulled her legs out of bed, already planning how she would track down the first clue. She needed to see the place where Tiffany had been found—the crime scene. Then, she needed to talk to Laura. But first...she needed to find Ace and tell him what had happened, so he could—

Bess’s wide brown eyes, sparking with images tears, grew wider with confusion.

“Nancy...why are you still wearing your cocktail dress?”

Double damn. “Uh...well?”

“Also, why is there mud smeared around your ankle?” George leveled her with a look.

“Nancy...were you in the garden last night? Did you poison Tiffany?”

It wasn’t the wildest question, given the evidence, but Nancy could tell that George didn’t believe it, or she wouldn’t have asked. But Bess was a little more gullible.

“Oh Nancy, you didn’t! I mean, I know she was never all that friendly to you, but that’s not a good enough reason to—“ her voice dropped into a theatrical whisper, “—go and POISON someone, honestly!”

“Bess, come on.” Nancy stood up and took her friend by the shoulders. “I know this is scary, and horrible, but we need to keep our heads if we’re going to help find who did this. Tiffany wasn’t my favorite, but she was a friend, and I’d never have wished her any harm.”

“Maybe a little bit of harm,” George muttered, “but not death, anyway.”

Nancy ignored George’s sullen admission, because again, she didn’t really mean it. “We need to figure out who did wish her mortal harm, though. Because whoever it was, they’re still at large. And until we know their motive, we don’t know if they’re coming for anyone else. If this is about money, Laura could be next on their list—as the new heiress to the Tandy’s fortune. Or, if it’s about something else...one of us could be in the killer’s sights.”

“Nancy, how can you be so calm?” Bess was shaking her head, hugging her own arms in an attempt to comfort herself. “I just told you that someone died at my party last night, and you’re acting like this is some kind of mystery novel.”

George laid a hand on Bess’s shoulder. “That’s just who Nancy is,” she said. “Trust me, we grew up together. The moment Nancy Drew starts panicking, that’s when we really know the world’s about to end.”

“Okay, but how do you explain all this?” Bess gestured again to Nancy’s disheveled appearance. “If you weren’t out at all hours, lurking in the muddy garden?”

Nancy sighed. She was going to have to come clean with her friends—or partly clean, anyway—if they were going to trust her enough to help investigate.

“Bess, how much do you know about the secret tunnels hidden all over this house?”

Bess’s brown eyes bulged. “The...WHAT?”

“Hmm,” Nancy folded her arms. “So, I’m guessing you’re also unaware of the fact that a large portion of your family’s fortune comes from importing banned liquor and illegal gambling?”

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A few hours later, Nancy found Ace in the garage, thankfully alone, washing a car in his chauffeur uniform without the jacket. When he turned to look at her, she had a sudden urge to run and fling herself into his arms, which was very out of character for her and which she very strenuously resisted. She’d washed up and changed, coiling her hair up into a loose bun at the back of her neck, but as her hair dried little curling tendrils kept escaping its hold. She didn’t have time to worry about that, though, now that her head was spinning with so many secrets.

“Nancy...I mean, Miss Hudson.” The way he said her name still stung in the cold light of day. “How can I help you?”

His newly serious tone continued to bother her now, when she had much bigger problems to focus on than whether Ace would ever forgive her for lying about who she was. His excuse for not telling her the whole truth about who he was, on the other hand...was a bit more compelling.

Before they’d left the secret sewer access tunnel, Ace had introduced her to his father, Thomas Hardee, who apparently owned a private investigation firm that sometimes did jobs for the New York Police Department. Grant was his half-brother, who also worked for Hardee & Sons, now part time since he’d joined the military as an intelligence officer. Police Detective Abe Tumura was Ace’s cousin, on his mother’s side, but that didn’t explain why any of them were gunning so hard for the Marvins. Or the Hudsons.

Not until Ace admitted, as they were making their way back through the tunnels (with him keeping his distance from her) that Abe’s wealthy fiancée (Bethany) had left him for one of the other Marvins, only to disappear while crossing the ocean for a European honeymoon. (A double tragedy for Abe, which might explain why he was always scowling.) To make matters worse, the Marvins had taken over Bethany’s family fortune after her death, and the man she’d married was now one of the richest in New York. That man was Owen Marvin, and from what Nancy had seen, he didn’t seem like he’d lost the love of his life less than a year ago. Far from it.

This backstory would’ve been more than enough to sway her into offering her help, even if it hadn’t been for the betrayal in Ace’s eyes that she desperately needed to banish. She’d hurt him by lying, but he didn’t know the whole story, or her reasons. Nobody did, and she couldn’t afford to let them. So until she was free to share the whole picture, the best she could do was help them make it right.

But the Hardee men and Tumura weren't convinced that she could be trusted, and things were about to get even more complicated now that Grant's prediction had seemingly been proven right. The Marvin house was dangerous—even deadly, to some, it seemed.

"It seems Tiffany Tandy was murdered last night," she told him, fairly bluntly—but there was no reason to sugarcoat it. "I heard that Owen is resisting bringing in the police, but according to the Marvin's physician, she may have been poisoned."

The look in Ace's face went from trepidation to something much harder, and Nancy held her breath to see what he'd do next.

"Damn it," he swore softly, looking down at his reflection in the car. "We should have seen something like this coming."

"Why?" Nancy lowered her voice, taking a step closer until she was separated from him by only a few more steps. "What did she know? Why would Owen—or anyone—want her out of the picture?"

Ace shook his head. "I don't know, but...she used to be friends with Abe's...with Bethany. They were at school together. It could be that she had some kind of evidence to suggest...but then, from what I overheard some of the maids talking about, once...she could also have gotten on the wrong side of...someone else."

"You can say Ryan Hudson," she said, taking another step toward him. "Because I've already considered it. She's been trying to get close to him for a while now, but he didn't seem all that interested. Celia—my grandmother—thinks that Ryan might be having an affair with someone else, otherwise he would've taken Tiffany more seriously as a potential wife."

His eyebrows pulled together as she spoke, and Nancy had the uncomfortable sensation that he was rethinking how he felt about her. Questioning whether she could be trusted. Again.

When he dropped his tools and stepped toward her, Nancy had to hold herself together to keep from swaying into him. Especially when he dropped his voice further and whispered, close enough that she could feel his breath ruffling her hair.

"Do you have...any reason to suspect that they were involved? Romantically, I mean, Ryan and Tiffany? Maybe...in secret?"

She knew he was only whispering so nobody might overhear, that he didn't mean for his words to seem so...intimate. And yet...

"I've never seen them together," she said, carefully, "but there were rumors, and a few times I overheard her and her sister talking about my fa—about Ryan. It sounded like they were scheming about something." She thought back to the day before, when George had made a comment about Tiffany being a little too desperate. "But it doesn't make sense, that Tiffany would try to...entrap Ryan, by luring him into a secret romance. He was already a...well, it seems like people talk about him like he's some kind of...prodigal son, fallen from favor."

“If he’s the prodigal son, then what does that make you?” His whisper was suddenly rougher, like it was being grated over stone. “Some kind of...fallen angel?”

When she looked up into his eyes (a huge mistake) her breath caught at the raw interest she found there. Unlike Owen’s gaze, this inspection made her feel exposed in a different way. An exciting way. He reached up, slowly moving to touch a damp and rosy curl that had fallen into her face. She didn’t pull away, because she didn’t want to. She held her breath and didn’t dare to move until he’d tucked the errant tress behind her ear, until he’d taken back his hand.

Who are you, really? His eyes seemed to ask. Nancy couldn’t bring herself to answer, not in words.

Nancy shook her head. “The Tandys have plenty of social standing on their own, and based on their shared jewelry collection...more than enough money to go along with their society clout.”

Or, so it would seem. Then again, how often in Nancy’s young life had things ever turned out to be exactly what they seemed? Ace’s proximity was distracting, but that didn’t stop her from having an epiphany.

“Then again...” She thought back to a few weeks ago, when the Tandy girls had arrived. How they’d only had a few pieces of luggage between them, unlike Bess who had 12 trunks of dresses all by herself. She thought of how they very carefully only took a few bites at every meal, how they always seemed to judge George for taking seconds, even though they both always looked like they were starving. How they shared their jewelry, how they wouldn’t let any of the Marvin’s household staff touch their things or help them get ready. How they always kept their guest rooms locked whenever they left Bess’s suite of rooms.

“What?” His eyes roamed her face, trying to translate what he was seeing. “What are you thinking? You’re putting something together.”

The fact that he could read her this well already was unsettling, yet thrilling.

“I’m not certain, but...I think the Tandy girls might not be exactly who we think they are. I have a...a hunch, so to speak. I think maybe we should take a closer look at their rooms. Specifically, at their jewelry box.”

“Well then, partner,” he stepped back, thrusting his hands into his pockets and squaring his shoulders. “Let’s go liberate some jewels.”

#

As Ace led her up the hidden staircase and through the maze of tunnels between the walls, she couldn’t help feeling mesmerized by his confident gait and the long shadow he cast in the light of his battery operated lamp. She’d never seen anything like it before, and found herself covering the convenient device, which likely would’ve helped her in many of her previous mystery adventures. Like the secret of Mossy Swamp, for example, when she’d almost drowned in a bog after her kerosene lantern had gotten too wet to relight. She refrained from

asking him if she could hold it, mostly because she still wasn't sure if he'd forgiven her for lying.

After a few more twists of the tunnel though, she couldn't stand the silence. "Ace...about the other day. I didn't mean to—"

"Shh," he stopped in his tracks, flicking off his light as he suddenly spun to press her against a wall. She gasped, and he stepped closer, placing a single finger against her lips in the dark. Her heart pounded as he leaned his head down to whisper into her ear. "Sorry if I scared you, but Owen Marvin's study is on the other side of this wall, and he might be inside."

Nancy nodded, gripping his shoulders for balance. It was too dark to make out any details, but her other senses were running wild with stimulus. The feeling of his finger pressing across her lips, the smell of his soap and a spice she couldn't place—like licorice and pepper together—combined with the warmth and solidity of his body against hers, and she once again felt dizzy. Her next inhale was a little too shaky, and when he stepped away, she stumbled. He caught her easily, but his next whisper was laced with concern.

"When was the last time you ate?"

"I'm...not sure," she whispered back honestly. She could practically feel him frowning down at her in the dark. "Yesterday...lunch?"

"Unacceptable," he muttered, pulling her back in the other direction. "Come on, we're taking a detour."

"But...what about the jewelry box?" Her whisper was a little too loud, again.

"Thieving can wait." He pulled her into his side, whispering into her hair so softly that her skin tingled from scalp to toes. "Besides, we can't have your stomach growling, and giving us away."

"My stomach doesn't gro—" she started to protest, but was rudely interrupted by her own stomach, growling angrily. "Fine, you win."

She could feel him smiling somehow too. "I always do," he said. "Let's get you out of here. There's no way I'm letting you eat anything that was made in this kitchen."

About thirty minutes later, Nancy found herself curled up in the backseat of one of the Marvin's town cars a dozen blocks away from the mansion as Ace fed her greasy chips out of a bag and shared another bite of the best hot dog she'd ever tasted. It was spiced sausage with some kind of brown mustard, sauerkraut, and sweet pickles. Better than any gourmet meal she'd ever eaten, and that was saying nothing of the company.

With his jacket off and his shirtsleeves rolled up, it was difficult for Nancy to share any space with Ace without openly staring—but especially one as cramped and private as this. Obviously, Diana Marvin liked to remain mysterious, because the back windows were all tinted so they could see the city outside but it couldn't see them. If she wasn't eating, she'd

probably be drooling. But at least now when she felt faint, she'd know it was thanks to his proximity and not her hunger.

"So, you were saying," Ace finally spoke, after carefully wiping his face and hands with a napkin. "About last night?"

"I was?" She answered with her mouth half-full, then cringed. "Sorry." Swallowed, as daintily as she could. "What was I saying?"

He grinned, shaking his head and reaching for her mouth again—for the third time that day, heaven help her. He wiped a dab of mustard away from the corner of her mouth, and her heart stopped for a few seconds. "You said something earlier, in the tunnels. That you didn't mean to?"

Didn't mean to...stare hungrily at his finger, as he casually licked it clean? Definitely. But that probably wasn't it.

"Oh, I uh...I meant to say that I'm...sorry."

"Oh? Sorry for what?"

"For...not telling you the truth, at first. About who I was. Who I am, I mean. Or..." she looked away from his gaze, which was too intense as usual. "Who I'm supposed to be, I guess. It's confusing. I don't always feel like I'm...that I'm really..."

"Who they want you to be?"

"Yes, exactly." She sighed and put down the food. "It's still new to me. Being a Hudson, I mean. They're not...none of this is like the way I was raised. They keep telling me I'll get used to it, but..."

"This isn't really who you are."

"No." She looked up at him, folded into the backseat of a car neither of them owned, as they ate street meat and investigated a murder together. "Well actually, this—" she gestured between them. "This is exactly who I am, usually. Apart from the complicated new family dynamics, and the multiple undercover accomplices."

"So, you only see me as an accomplice." His voice sounded serious, but his face held a smirk. "What am I helping you accomplish here, exactly?"

"Well, for one thing, you're feeding me. My father—I mean, Carson Drew, the man who raised me—is always saying I forget to eat when I'm on a case. So, that's helpful. I also think we can...um, help each other. Since my case and yours are possibly linked."

"Your case?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, Tiffany's murder," she said, a little defensively. "After all, she was my friend—sort of. I found out about her death before you did."

“Nancy, are you...” his eyes sparkled with mirth and something else implacable. “Are you actually calling dibs on a dead body?”

She braced herself for his judgement, already bristling. “And what if I am?”

“You are just...” he looked down at his hands, which were twisting a napkin. “So much more perfect than I thought, is all.”

Her face was on fire, thanks to the heat rising in her blood. “I’m...not perfect. Trust me, I’m...if you really knew me, you wouldn’t—“

“Something tells me I’m getting there,” he said, reaching for her hand. “And I’m just saying, I really like what I’m learning.”

“That...is not a reaction I was expecting,” she confessed on a whisper, looking down at their joined hands. “I’m used to normal, nice people thinking I’m...unhinged. Or, I don’t know. Confused, somehow, about my proper place in the world. At best, my persistence is an inconvenience. At worst, I feel like I’m constantly having to mask my true self in order to belong.”

She’d never said this aloud to anyone before, not even herself.

“Then clearly, you haven’t been traveling in the right circles.” As he spoke, his thumb ran across her palm, sending tingles up her spine. “It’s very lucky you sleuthed your way into mine—ours, I mean. I’ve been saying for years that our crew could use some more feminine wiles on our side.”

“Feminine wiles?” She bristled at that, looking up at his face to find a teasing smirk. “Is that all you think I bring to the table?”

“From what I’ve seen so far, you’re the most dangerous of us all,” he said seriously, pulling her closer. “You’re smarter than me, you dress better than Grant, and you’re prettier than Tumura.”

“Maybe not, if he’d learn to smile more often,” she retorted. “I mean, his jawline is to die for.”

“Funnier than my dad, too.” He chuckled. “He has a dry sense of humor, but you’ll see that when you get to know him better.”

“So, uh,” she cleared her throat. “Are we accomplices, then? Officially?”

“And how do you plan to reciprocate?” He leaned in, and she gulped. “If I help you steal the jewelry box—or, let’s say borrow it, temporarily—what happens next?”

“Well,” she licked her lips, trying to ignore how his eyes followed the movement. “If my hunch is correct, we’ll need someone to do a deep dive into the Tandy’s family finances. Find out if they’re imposters, or if they’re just a wealthy family that has recently fallen on hard times. And if so, what changed? And what are they doing here? What is—what was—Tiffany hoping to gain, by pursuing Ryan?”

“Other than an engagement ring?” He shrugged. “My guess is she was willing to trade his tarnished reputation for whatever her own family is hiding. I’ll get my dad working on that angle. Your mission—if you choose to accept it—will be to get closer to the sister, and figure out what she might know. Ideally, without putting yourself in any danger.”

“That...may be something I can’t promise,” she admitted. “Based on past experience.”

“Well then, I guess it’s a good thing I plan to stay close enough to run to your rescue whenever you need me.” He reached out and tucked her hair back into place—even though she was fairly sure her hair hadn’t needed to be tucked. “We’ll have to stay close, for safety’s sake, and the sake of the investigation. Is that okay with you?”

Nancy couldn’t think of anything she’d ever been more okay with in her life.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

This chapter goes out to all my himbo goths, my Mary Shelley stans, and my horny little creepers. Stay weird, babes.

As spooky as the city morgue was during the day, its creepiness tripled at night, when it was closed and mostly deserted.

Ace had spent more time around dead bodies than he would've liked, but it was one of the side effects of being in the mystery business. He'd never minded that part of the job, but he'd also never looked forward to it. At least, not until now.

Tonight, he found himself shifting his weight nervously from one foot to another as he waited outside the closed (and currently locked) morgue, standing watch while the most interesting girl he'd ever met knelt behind him, picking the locks. Cold and dank as it was, there was no place in the world he'd rather be.

Nancy—a name which suited her better than the alias she'd originally given him—was currently disguised as a boy, wearing some of Grant's old clothes that were still a few sizes too big. The overalls and lumpy sweater she wore were cinched around her waist with a length of rope, and her glorious spun copper hair was tucked up under a knitted cap. All of the men's boots had been much too big for her feet, so instead Nancy wore the only pair of plain black shoes she owned that didn't have any heel. They looked like ballet slippers, but she claimed they were tightrope shoes that she'd kept from solving a mystery in a traveling circus when she was fourteen years old.

"Ah, a triple tumbler," she muttered to herself, "like the Luxembourg case."

"Problem?" Ace couldn't stop himself from sneaking another glance. Even in shadows, her eyes flashed with intelligence as she surveyed the mechanism, daring it to challenge her further. "I can try, if you'd like?"

"No need. The pins are just rusty, thanks to the moisture." Her voice was soft, yet determined. "This is nothing compared to the cellars of Cathédrale Notre-Dame."

With every story she let slip about her past, Ace fell further. Harder. More deeply. He was beginning to suspect that there was no such thing as too far, too much, or too deep. Not when it came to investigating the mysteries of Nancy Drew.

"Almost...got it." She chuckled. "And here, I thought all those fancy needlework classes had gone to waste. These fingers have never been nimbler, thanks to Bess."

Ace grimaced, turning away to cast another glance down the hall both ways. Nancy Drew-Hudson. Hudson. He had to keep reminding himself about that last part. She was an heiress now, which meant she was above him in every conceivable way. As if she walked through the world on a metaphorical tightrope, and he was merely shuffling through the sawdust below.

“That’s funny,” he said, turning to help her back to her feet. “Miss Marvin doesn’t strike me as the crafty type.”

Nancy’s answering laugh was like a chorus of silver bells thinly muted with satin fabric. Oh, god. He was waxing poetic now. Grant was right. He was in serious trouble here.

“I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised when you really get to know her.”

She paused with one shoulder pressed to the heavy metal door, fingers wrapped around the handle, as she stared up at him. The expression on her face was expectant, like she was waiting for him to—oh, right. Of course. Ace lent his own shoulder, pushing along with her to open the door a few inches, until they could both narrowly edge through the gap. Then he pulled it shut behind them, wincing as his haste caused the hinges to squeal.

They both froze just inside the morgue, eyes wide and tension building across the barest whisper of space that stood between them. Ace should move away. He was going to move away. Just as soon as they were sure no alarm had been raised. After a few more agonizing seconds, she turned away first—to his relief, and dismay.

“Alright, let’s get to it, then.”

“Yes, let’s.”

He followed her along the tidy row of fresh corpses covered in stained white sheets, valiantly resisting the urge to put a skip in his step and whistle a casual tune. A snide little voice in the back of his head (which sounded suspiciously like Abe Tumura) commented that he’d follow her anywhere, happily and without question, and he should be wary of that instinct.

“Body first?”

She shook her head, glancing back at him without slowing her steps. “No, your father said we only need a blood sample for his colleague at the university to test for poison. That’s easy enough to collect once we locate the body, and by the looks of things,” she gestured to the laid out corpses, which were clearly the...uh...freshest. “They’ll be laid out in order of time of death. So we’ll start at that end. Before we do that, we should find the key.”

Ace nodded, already reordering his priorities. “So if it comes down to proving how she was killed, or proving why?”

“Unlike Sherlock Holmes, I mostly care about the how to point me to the who did the thing and why,” she said, tossing her head in a way that would’ve made her hair dance—if she hadn’t been wearing a hat. “Without a motive, proving the means helps no one. It’s just showing off.”

Ace fell another few meters into the endless abyss that was his growing admiration. Mayday. Ejection impossible.

“You’re that certain she was killed because of something she knew, and that she kept some evidence of it in the box?”

“No, but I have a very strong hunch.”

“By all means,” he said, as he used two of his leather-gloved fingers to slightly lift a nearby sheet and glance at the nearest body—the wrong one. “Please expound.”

She stopped short between two pallets, staring over at him like she was surprised at the question. Didn’t people usually ask her to describe how her fantastic mind worked in more detail? Apparently not.

“Well, I noticed that Laura keeps a diary, but Tiffany doesn’t—didn’t, I mean. She did, however, spend a great deal of time writing letters to someone. Letters she never seemed to post. So I assume that the person she was writing to was either forbidden, unreachable, or both.”

Ace considered her logic, and it was sound, but, “What if the person she was writing to was close enough to hand-deliver the letters, though?”

The look on her face sharpened, and there was something else behind it then—a lightning quick flash of admiration. Unless he’d only imagined it. Wishful thinking? But then—

“Elementary, my dearest Watson.”

He went from slightly breathless to full respiratory arrest at her words. Or maybe it was the way she was smiling over at him, brilliant and incomprehensible as the sunrise. More spontaneous poetry. Damn.

“Regardless of which of our hunches is correct, I would be willing to make a bet with you that she never had time to send off the latest letter. Which hopefully has some details of her latest schemes.”

“Agreed,” he rounded another table to stand behind her, leaning over her shoulder as she surveyed a clipboard full of notes that someone had carelessly left on one of the gurneys. “Where does your brilliant theory lead us next, Holmes?”

“If we’re going to open the secret compartment in the Tandy’s jewel box,” she said, (while blushing, at his praise or proximity?) “we’re going to need Tiffany’s secret key. Laura doesn’t have it. So it must have been in Tiffany’s possession, and therefore—“

“Among her personal effects,” Ace finished a bit breathlessly, as their gazes collided. “Which, uh, which should be...kept in the medical examiner’s office. At least, until a family member comes to claim them.”

When Nancy raised her eyebrows at him, he pointed, his arm brushing against her shoulder. “Over there, that wooden door set into the wall with all the drawers.”

But she didn't look away. "You know, I had a hunch you'd prove to be surprisingly useful."

In spite of the mismatched getup, she was still the most beautiful girl Ace had ever seen. It was difficult to focus, or form coherent responses around her. Especially when she looked at him like that. When she said things that made him imagine...wonder...flounder...flail, like this.

"I...try."

"Let's hope this lock is simpler than the last."

Wordlessly, Ace followed her toward the office door, which was disappointingly also locked. But Nancy assured him it would only take a few minutes to pick. He was opening his mouth to attempt a glib remark when the unmistakable sound of approaching footfalls—heavy, methodical, booted—reached his ears. He immediately dropped into a crouch next to where Nancy was kneeling, so he could whisper more quietly and directly into her ear.

"Someone's coming, fast."

"How fast?"

Ace cocked his head. "They'll reach the door in...fifteen seconds, unless they pass by."

"Damn," Nancy whispered back. "I need at least thirty. Should we take the risk?"

Ace did another quick visual sweep of the morgue. If someone came in now, there was no place to hide. Except...

"Keep trying, for ten more seconds. I'll find us a backup plan."

"Rodger, mate."

She didn't sound like she was at all worried—but Ace genuinely couldn't tell if that was because she trusted him or she was just having too much fun and not worried about getting caught. Maybe she'd be able to talk herself out of trouble, but Ace would never hear the end of it from Abe, and that was a risk he couldn't afford.

It took Ace about five seconds to realize that there was only one hiding place they could use aside from the ME's office, two seconds to note it was a horrible idea, and another to come to terms with the fact that there was no better option. Not when the next second was filled with the sound of keys scraping in the outer door lock, and the disappointed look on Nancy's face when she did the same math he'd already done—but quicker.

Before she could even whisper her agreement with Ace's horrible plan, he was pulling her off the floor, opening the nearest hatch—which he'd guessed to be empty due to the lack of a note card in the slot next to the door, and thankfully was correct—yanking out the body-length rolling platform, then lying down on it before dragging her on top of him and wheeling them both into the dark and frigid hole in the wall. Nancy helped by cinching her legs around his body and reaching up above his head to pull the door almost completely shut behind them.

Everything happened so fast that Ace didn't have time to really process it. Not until they were alone in the dark, fitted snugly together from neck to knees and panting into each other's hair as quietly as possible. Not until she wriggled on top of him in her attempt to see through the small crack between the hinges and the door, bringing her lips so close he could almost taste them. Not until her thighs were bracketing his hips in such a way that if he even so much as acknowledged he inhabited a mortal, physical body in that moment, there would be no hiding the intensity of his reaction.

Ace tried to shut off every sense but his hearing, which he needed to listen for whoever had just entered the morgue. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, but then couldn't bear to stop looking. He wished he could ignore the sweetly floral scent of her hair, or the way a few escaped strands tickled his face every time she moved. He wanted to fall into a gentle, temporary coma and only awaken when it was safe to scream his frustration—or act upon it. But alas, Ace was a living, breathing, warm-blooded human man with excellent night vision, a sophisticated palette, a great sense of smell, a newly single-track mind, and...

And apparently, shockingly little willpower. Because his hands had somehow drifted when he wasn't paying attention. Or maybe they'd instinctively flown to rest on her hips and he'd simply neglected to recollect them. Either way, his fault. Inappropriate. Inexcusable.

He knew that, but also, he did not take them back. In fact, his hands seemed to tighten of their own accord, pulling her even closer. Until she gasped, a tiny sound of surprise. But not horror. Which would've been more expected, given the situation.

No, she didn't tense, or try to pull away from the places where their bodies were all but joined. Instead, she arched. Fingers fisting in the fabric of his coat, pressing her soft chest into his harder one, she pulled herself closer. Closer. Lips hovering, heart pounding—he could feel it now, echoing his own pulse but in a higher staccato—her eyes glittering mischievously in the dark, even as she pretended she was still watching the crack in the door. Or maybe she was. But...no.

Ace knew better. He could feel her responding to him, down to his bones. On an atomic level, even.

“Nancy.”

His voice was less of a whisper and more of a choked, helpless groan that was too low for human ears. He wanted—no, needed—her to look at him. He needed her to see the truth in his eyes before his body rudely broadcast it in oversimplified terms.

When their eyes met, it felt like being engulfed in flames, but in a pleasant way. Ace flexed his abdomen slightly, turning his body into a taut bow as he rose into her, as she became the string holding him together. One hand slid up her side, following the thick folds of his older yet littler brother's castaway jacket like a surveyor seeking more welcoming paths hidden in a rocky landscape.

Nancy's lips parted and her eyes fluttered closed, her hands sliding up to frame his jaw. He hovered in midair, suspended in darkness, waiting for her word. Her signal. Anything. He'd wait forever if that was what it took. He watched, enraptured, as her tongue softly painted her

bottom lip. She seemed to hold her breath for a moment. Then she kissed him. Gently, but it was everything. Time stood still, but then it tripped and fell faster. The kiss became more. Harder. Deeper. Everything else.

His other hand went to her hat, tugging it off so her hair tumbled free. He needed to touch it. He removed one of his gloves so he could delve his fingers through the silken strands, forgetting where he was or why such a detail should even matter.

Another mystery of Nancy Drew he couldn't wait to solve, how she could be so soft and beautiful and driven and insatiable, all at the same time. A dichotomy of pure poetry and—fuck whatever Grant said—Ace was a poet now. How could a man be anything else when faced with such glorious material? Her lips were sweet berry wine, her tongue was a sinful revelation, her eyes were windows to heaven itself, her hair was molten silk and welcoming fire, her body was...god, her body—

The sound of a heavy door slamming nearby jarred them swiftly back into reality. Nancy gasped while Ace jolted a little too violently, which made the platform they were lying on creak metallically in protest. They both winced, but there was no response. Only a deep, cavernous silence outside their (suddenly much warmer) hiding place.

“I think...I think the guard finally left.”

Her voice was soft and ragged like a well-worn shirt, and Ace couldn't help the way it made him feel, knowing he'd done that to her. Satisfaction down to his bones, and an aching need to do it all over again.

“Let's find out,” he agreed, in an equally ragged tone. Because he couldn't think of an honorable reason to make them stay hidden here longer, even if—shockingly—he wished they could remain on the slab.

Nancy took charge, already reaching for the door and inching it open slowly, until she could see the whole morgue. It was empty. She looked down at him, waiting for his move, and he momentarily forgot where he was again when the light hit her. Her hair was tousled, lips kiss bruised and eyes a bit glassy. He no longer had to simply fantasize what she might look like when...after...if he ever had the pleasure of...oh, damn. Not now. Steady on, man.

Her deepening blush told him she hadn't missed the evidence of his...very large feelings. How could she? It was obvious, and for the moment, inescapable. Ace cleared his throat and focused all his energy on getting them out of such a tight spot, as quickly as possible.

It was a very good thing the morgue was so cold, and they were both wearing so many layers.

Blushing deeply, but still smirking mischievously, she turned away to focus on the door to the ME's office. But it was already unlocked.

“That's curious.”

“Hmm?” Ace pretended he hadn't been furiously adjusting his clothes, when she looked back at him.

“The door is unlocked now.”

“Strange,” he agreed. But his mind was still in the wrong place, so he didn’t say why. Even if on some level, he knew that it didn’t make sense for a night watchman to search every locked door on his usual patrol route. Not at their pay grade. They tended to do the absolute least work.

“Why would someone—oh!”

Nancy had shouldered open the door, only to find that the medical examiner’s office had already been ransacked. Ace came up behind her, standing as close as he dared, to survey the wreckage over her shoulder.

“Damn,” he said. Then, “apologies. I mean, that’s unfortunate.”

She only laughed. “So, the person we heard was most likely not a guard, after all.”

“Agreed,” Ace concurred, lamely. Some accomplice he turned out to be. “Which likely means that the key to the jewel box has already been found. Unless...”

She turned to look up at him, and it hit him again, the wreckage of his soul painted across her face. A soul she now owned, completely. He wondered if she could tell.

“Unless Tiffany hid the key somewhere else?”

Ace looked back toward the office. Maybe whoever had done this had trashed the place in frustration, not in haste. It was surprising they hadn’t heard someone making such a ruckus in here.

He didn’t realize he’d said that last part aloud, until she chuckled darkly. Warmly. His skin tingled at the sound.

“To be fair, we were a bit...distracted.”

The look she gave him could’ve cremated all the bodies in the morgue. Easily. God.

“The bodies...” he choked, in a feeble attempt to stop his own body from combusting. “We should find...uh, Tiffany.”

“You’re right,” she said. “At least we can still prove the how, if not yet the why.”

Unfortunately, as they soon discovered, they hadn’t only kept themselves distracted through a robbery in progress.

They’d also missed a grave robbing.

Tiffany’s body was gone.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

After midnight, things get a little angsty

“We should probably talk about...before.”

Nancy’s head swiveled to face him in the dark, but Ace chose the coward’s path, keeping his eyes on the road as he drove.

“Before...when?”

“The...” Was she really going to make him say it? “In the morgue. Before.”

“Oh, right.” She crossed her legs, lacing her fingers together over her knee. Even in lumpy boys’ clothes, she really pulled off the whole prim and proper act—but only when she chose to. “There’s no need to apologize, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

This did not bode well. “Apologize?”

For kissing her? Wait, hadn’t she kissed him first? Or was she referring to the other liberties he’d taken, or the way he’d failed to keep himself in check, as a gentleman? He should definitely feel sorry for some of the impure thoughts he had about her, but she didn’t know about those. He wasn’t sorry, either. Maybe he’d just pretend...

“Neither of us could’ve anticipated that the killer—or perhaps the killer’s accomplice?—would be so bold as to break into the morgue and steal Tiffany’s personal effects. Let alone her body.”

“Oh.” She meant the... “Right, yes. That was...um, unexpected. Of them.”

“The worst part is, we can’t report the break in without exposing ourselves.”

Ace glanced over, surprised to see her smirking, before she clarified.

“For breaking in first, I mean.”

“I’ll tell Abe,” he said. “I’ll call him when we get back. He’ll be able to look into it.”

“You aren’t going to call him from the garage?”

Ace slowed to stop at a deserted intersection, turning to face her.

“Nancy, do you...do you think I live in the Marvin’s garage?”

She laughed. “I mean...well I hadn’t really thought about it until now, but when you say it like that, I suppose it sounds awfully silly.”

She paused for a moment, then added a little defensively, “Although, it’s not as if I was picturing you curled up in the backseat of Florence, using a pile of clean rags as a blanket. I just hadn’t really...”

“Pictured me sleeping?” Ace blurted out, before thinking.

Instead of answering, she ducked her head toward the window, away from him.

He couldn’t help grinning. “I forgive you.”

“But I do have a hunch that Owen Marvin has someone listening in on the telephone lines,” she added. “I can’t prove it yet, but the other day, when I tried to call home—to check on Carson, I mean—I could’ve sworn I heard someone breathing on the other line.”

“Other than the operator?”

“Yes, this was after the operator connected the call and signed off.”

Ace considered why a person would do that—after all, it seemed like a lot of time to waste hoping to overhear something useful—but then, Owen Marvin was known for being particularly paranoid.

“Best to assume calls from the Marvin house aren’t secure, then,” he agreed.

Nancy seemed taken aback by his acquiescence for a moment, but then she flushed and smiled. She’d pulled off her knit cap again as soon as they’d gotten back in the car, and now she ran her fingers through her hair as she considered. It was distracting, particularly since her hair smelled like fresh blossoms and sweet lemonade. Ace took the next turn and did his best to focus on the road.

“Speaking of the Marvins,” he cleared his throat nervously, uncertain of how to broach the topic. “My father said that your friend Bess has something of a...uh, what’s the term...a checkered past?”

Nancy turned her head to look over at him, lips quirked but eyes sharp.

“I know all about it,” she said. “And if there was anything to worry about, I’d let you know. If anyone in the Marvin family had something to do with Tiffany’s death, it wasn’t Bess. You can trust me on that.”

“I do.” Ace hoped she believed him, because he did. More than he probably should, after only knowing her for a few days. But then, his heart was involved, and it hadn’t always been the best judge. “It’s just...”

He searched for the words, before slowing to a stop a few blocks away from the Marvin’s townhouse—just in front of one of the secret exits that would help Nancy sneak back into her room with nobody the wiser. If Ace was being honest, there was a small part of him that was

mentally calculating the odds of getting caught if he tried to sneak in with her. But that was ridiculous. For one thing, he was undercover as a servant, and she was an heiress. Most importantly, she hadn't asked.

"Just what?"

He startled at her words, turning to find her staring at him expectantly. In the shadow-dappled moonlight, she looked like some Fae creature sent to tempt him into a crossroads bargain. One where he'd lose his soul and sanity. There was that damn poetic license again.

"Sorry, what?"

Rosy lips quirked, she raised a single eyebrow. "You just said 'it's just,' about Bess?"

Oh, right. "I was...just wondering if you trusted her, uh, enough to...ask her about the case. Maybe even..."

His brain stumbled, trying and failing to catch up to his mouth, which was trying and failing to cover for the rest of him.

"Ask her to steal for us?"

The way she kept finishing his sentences, then taking them a step further... Ace was dangerously close to buying a ring.

"Actually, I was going to say spy for us. But given her...background, it's not a bad idea. Maybe she could even search Owen's office, see if he left behind any clues?"

"Or I could," she offered, with a smile. "I don't know if you'd noticed, but I'm no stranger to breaking and entering."

"I did notice." He turned off the engine, fidgeting nervously with the keys. "But I still...I don't want you to try anything alone. It's bad enough that Laura almost caught you sneaking out of their room when you searched the jewel box."

"Please, I'm not afraid of Laura."

Ace sighed, pulling off his gloves. "I just...I want you to be careful. You have more to lose here than I—than I and my team do. You should let us take the risks."

Somehow, he knew she'd hate that. Knew she'd try to argue. Maybe that was part of why he was already turning to open the door, avoiding meeting her gaze.

"Ace, I don't care about that." She scoffed.

He stepped out of the car and ducked to look back at her through the open door. "I know you don't, but I do."

It was late, and the street was too quiet. A nice, wealthy neighbor where people would notice if they made too much noise. He lowered his voice. "Come on, let's get you back before

you're missed."

Closing his door as gently as he could, he circled around to open the passenger side for Nancy. But she stayed seated, arms folded and eyes flashing as she glared up at him.

"Why do you care if they miss me?"

He shook his head, regretting his words.

"Let's not talk about it now. Someone might look out the window and recognize you. That hair of yours is hard to miss."

"Fine, but we aren't finished discussing this."

Ace knew she was perturbed at him taking charge, but he found it adorable instead of insulting. "As you wish, milady."

Grudgingly, she took his hand, letting him pull her out of the car before he led her to the ivy trellis that concealed an iron-grated entry to one of the many tunnels running under and inside the city mansion.

Ace had always been curious, and diligent. He always did his research. The house had been built in 1790 by William Henry Morgan, an eccentric inventor who had gotten rich by inventing a new lightweight alloy that could be used to make everything from weapons to machine components. He'd gotten rich by patenting and selling his own inventions, then his older brother Felix Ray Marvin had taken over the business and turned it into a massive swindling operation that promised to help patent ideas for aspiring inventors before stealing them and hoarding patents. Ashamed of his family, William had left Europe and moved to New York, where he'd fallen in love with a poor young Irish girl and built this house as a wedding present. According to records, just a few years after they were married, the young Mrs. Marvin died of yellow fever.

Once he'd carefully opened the grate—doing his best to avoid a loud and rusty screech like before—they inches their way through the opening and into what looked like a little walled-in garden at one corner of the grounds. Except it was more like a cemetery for one, with an elaborate mausoleum at the center and metal statues overgrown with vines. Eerily, the statues were all of the same woman.

Ace felt a tug on his arm when Nancy stopped in her tracks, and it was only then he realized he'd never let go of her hand. He turned, expecting her to still be glaring at him, but finding her wide eyed and open mouthed instead. The moon was waxing, just full enough to cast her pale skin in a glow and illuminate the landscape in bluish shades of elaborate shadows.

"What is this place?" Nancy asked on an exhale as she took it all in. "I've never seen it before."

They'd left through the garage, and this part of the garden was inaccessible from the grounds unless you had a key to the locked gate or knew where the secret passage was hidden, so Ace wasn't surprised she hadn't known about it. Especially since, from what he'd seen, they

forced her to spend far too much time cooped up in the house doing lady things, when she'd clearly prefer to run wild.

"The man who built this place lost his wife while it was still being constructed," Ace explained, as simply as he could. Maybe Nancy was one of the few people he'd met who would appreciate knowing the full story, but it was getting late. "He made this garden as a kind of shrine to her, I guess."

"That explains why...these statues...they're all modeled after the same person, but in different poses." Nancy stepped closer to the nearest one, but didn't release his hand, so he went with her willingly. "That one over there is her as a young woman. This one looks like she was a few months pregnant. Did she have the child before she died?"

"I don't think so. Or at least, if she did, I couldn't find any record of the birth."

"Hmm," she considered, as he stepped closer to hear her musings. "That statue in the corner looks like her as an older woman, though. So maybe some of these are based on...artistic license, or...wishful thinking?"

"That would be especially tragic."

Ace had meant it as a glib remark, to lighten the mood, but it came out soft and sincere.

"Tragedy is a part of life," she said. "Everything you love is something you think you couldn't bear to lose. Otherwise, it's not really love."

"That's...very wise, and beautifully put."

"It's something my mother—I mean, Kate Drew—used to say. I don't know that I ever really understood it...before."

At that, she turned into him, until his arm was partly encircling her, their two hands still clasped together. He instinctively wrapped around her more tightly, flexing his fingers in hers, until their palms met.

...And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.

She raised an eyebrow, lips tilting quizzically as she looked up at him. Wait, had he just said that aloud? Damn. He'd meant to only think it.

"Sorry, that was a strange thing to say, wasn't it?"

"Have not saints lips," she asked, "and holy palmers too?"

Ace suddenly felt like he'd been kicked in the chest by a horse.

They were alone now, surrounded by walls on four sides, with nobody to see or overhear. And yet, everything suddenly felt sacred, like there was an expectation of reverence in this place that shouldn't be disappointed. Surrounded by monuments to one man's lifelong obsession with a girl, it was far too easy to imagine slipping into madness, a life of singular

purpose. The worship of one glorious body, two gleaming eyes filled with intelligence, a courageous heart, a formidable mind, and copper hair that melted and poured through his hands like honeyed butter.

Ace was beginning to understand William Marvin's obsession a little too well.

"Are you asking me to kiss you, Nancy?"

Please, say yes. Please, let me kiss you again. Here in the moonlight, where I can see you the way god intended, glowing like the angel you clearly are.

"No," she shook her head, lips tilted and teasing, always a surprise. "A well-bred lady would never ask such a thing."

Ace held his breath, knowing that couldn't be the end of it. He knew there was more. She was never simple.

"...But I'm hoping you will, anyway."

Ace didn't dare hesitate. He raised his free hand to her face, knuckles brushing the softness before his fingers uncurled to tilt her head further, to bring her lips closer. This time, he took the lead, slowly brushing his lips across hers. So slowly, so softly that she parted her lips on a faint gasp, like she was impatient to breathe him in.

But he took his time now that he'd started, pulling her into him mere millimeters at a time, savoring their first kiss that wasn't in the heat of the moment, excusable as a thoughtless impulse, or surrounded by death on all sides. Well, everything but that last part, he supposed. Since they were sort of in a cemetery, still.

Ace didn't excel at everything he tried, and it usually took a lot of time and effort for him to master new skills, but he didn't mind. Anything worth doing was worth doing well. Kissing Nancy Drew was nothing like any other skill he'd had to learn. It was more like he'd been born to do it. Teasing her lips open until he could taste her willingness, then pulling away, pressing his lips into her neck, finding that spot behind her ear that made her eyelids flutter shut and her fingers fly into his hair, grasping, arching, pulling. Circling back to do it all over again, working her up into a frenzy of arousal and frustration until it felt like she was literally trying to climb him like a tree. Trying to get closer, to be kissed harder, wordlessly begging for more.

As much as Ace secretly wanted to hear her beg one day, it wouldn't be tonight. So he gave her everything, letting go, no more holding back. Not only unleashing his lips and tongue and occasionally his teeth, but allowing his body to tell her everything that was in his heart. His soul. Everything was hers. He was hers, irrevocably. Entirely. If anything ever happened to her, he would spend the rest of his existence trying to crack the secrets to unwinding time and undoing death. He would learn chemistry, smelting, sculpting, alchemy, necromancy, whatever it took to get her back. He'd sell his soul to join her, failing everything else.

"Nancy..."

He groaned her name into her neck, as she tugged at the fabric of his layered clothing, futilely trying to remove cloth obstacles between their bodies without detaching or detangling them first. If she touched him the way he'd dreamed about, here and now, there'd be no going back. He'd have her naked and writhing beneath him in the dirt, with only a few discarded articles of clothing for a bed, claiming her in the most carnal sense in a freezing cemetery that was probably also haunted. He might not regret it at the time, or even immediately after, but damn it, she deserved better.

“Nancy, we should—“

“Wait.”

She tensed, pulling away suddenly, and Ace's kiss-drunken mind clumsily tripped through a litany of questions, concerns, and potential apologies for whatever he'd done wrong. But she pulled him closer, dragging him behind the nearest overgrown statue before he could even finish catching up mentally.

She tugged him down into a crouch, pressing her lips against his ear, as she whispered, “We aren't alone, Ace. Someone is watching us.”

End Notes

Fun fact, my good bishes! Apparently, the surname Hardee comes from the Old French and Old English word hardi, which means brave. TheMoreYouKnow.gif.

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