Summary

Clarke is in denial.

Octavia is grumpy.

Lincoln is in love.

Raven is awesome.

Lexa is conflicted.

And everyone is potentially too invested in good beer.

Notes

I swore to myself I would resist dipping a toe into the writing pool for this fandom, and yet.

I'd like to thank/blame HurricaneJane who has become a delightful enabler.
Clarke hates everything about Wednesdays.

She hates the way it lingers stubbornly between weekends when the bar is at its peak, coming to life with locals and travelers and good music. She hates that it's her scheduled open-to-close shift, which means she’s unlocking the back door at 7am and trudging back through it some 16 hours later, bone tired and sometimes smelling like beer. She hates that it was a Wednesday when her father died, and she really hates that three years later there are some Wednesdays that she wakes up forgetting he’s gone. There is nothing redeeming about Wednesdays.

Nothing, that is, except Lincoln.

Lincoln's dark green delivery truck is as punctual as the tides and at 10:00 every Wednesday morning pulls into a gravel lot behind the seaside bar that Clarke oversees. Lincoln is offensively fit without an ounce of ego. He has broad, tattooed arms and legs that belie his beautiful, kind eyes and soft voice. He is the singular bright spot in Clarke’s otherwise wretched midweek slump.

Clarke is rounding the bar counter as Lincoln props open the front door with a broad forearm and leans easily into a shaft of morning sunlight. "Hey, Clarke."

He smiles softly, echoing the gentle cadence of his voice, and Clarke instantly hates the day a little less. Lincoln could hardly be more lovely, and Clarke's mouth falls open to mirror his greeting when an acerbic voice she knows too well cuts through the quiet of the bar.

"It's fucking hot already. Please tell me the AC is on." Octavia barrels past Lincoln into the dark bar, pushing an arm against his stomach to inch past and not moving him even a little because Lincoln is more or less cut from stone.

Clarke nearly laughs at the way Lincoln's eyes trail after Octavia, unmasked in his fondness as if watching a kitten fetching a ball of yarn instead of the prowling, agitated tigress that is her dear friend.

"I'll open up the back for you, Linc," Clarke says with a sigh, curbing her laughter.

She rolls her eyes at Octavia, who has pulled open the double door beer fridge behind the bar to bask in front of it dramatically.

"Sheer coincidence you two showing up this morning at the same time then?" Clarke asks, eyebrows wagging suggestively as she twirls her bar keys around an index finger.

If he weren't backlit by the sun, Clarke thinks Lincoln might be blushing. He instead raises his palms in mock surrender. "All above board here. She was walking down my route on her way here, and I offered a ride."

Clarke does laugh then, because it's early and she's childish and sexual innuendo is often still
pretty funny outside of middle school, even as Lincoln rushes to amend with a hand to his forehead.

"To work. In my truck. I offered her a ride to work in my truck."

"Save yourself, Hot Stuff," Octavia says, coming to his rescue. “Clarke's sense of humor stopped maturing in the sixth grade." Octavia throws a damp bar towel at Clarke’s head, which she just manages to catch, and saunters towards where Clarke is stood near the rear of the building. To Lincoln, she says, "I'll get the delivery hatch open. Smuttynose is scheduled for 10:30 so I hope you’re ready to unload in double-time."

Clarke’s jaw drops to respond with something crass even as her hand slaps down onto a bar table because there is no way Octavia can expect her to ignore such low-hanging comedic fruit. But she apparently doesn’t care that it’s Clarke’s least favorite day of the week, or that she hasn’t had her third cup of coffee yet, because before Clarke has a chance to share her genius sexual hilarity, Octavia’s hand claps over Clarke’s mouth and she’s shaking her head.

“Honestly. A little self-control—would it kill you? You’re better than this, Clarke,” Octavia admonishes.

“But what if I’m not?” Clarke taunts, pushing Octavia towards the swinging storage door in a friendly shove. “What if this is just who I am?”

“At least now I understand why you’re single,” she sing-songs, disappearing through the storage door just in time to avoid the bar towel Clarke throws at her back.

Octavia is easily the best bartender in town, and not just because she volunteers to work doubles once a week, suffering the long shift alongside Clarke. Every Wednesday from open to close, she and Clarke: ride-or-die. Octavia probably does that solid for Clarke because they have known each other since junior high and she is, by all recognizable standards, Clarke’s best friend. It’s not something they necessarily discuss openly, but Clarke thinks it’s probably true nonetheless. Outside of a few journeys down the neck of a tequila bottle, Octavia is hardly brash with her emotions.

Clarke is pretty certain Octavia loves her, even if she doesn’t say so out loud. She knows for sure Octavia would drop a body into Boston Harbor for her, no questions asked. And once a month she sits through perfunctory brunches with Clarke’s mother, which is basically like taking a bullet for her.

None of which makes Octavia a great bartender. What makes her an impeccable barkeep is that she runs her bar staff like a drill sergeant who still knows how to have fun. She makes the locals feel like celebrities instead of bar fly nuisances. She employs an ideology of equality and fairness so that seventeen-year-old bar backs still in high school feel no less important than hotshot bartenders and veteran waitstaff. She's never late, stays past her shifts, and basically acts as her own bouncer when rare, unsavoury situations arise. The bar is almost entirely her ship to captain, Clarke only pretends to oversee it as general manager.

Which is why it's so entertaining to see Lincoln—sweet, caring, soft-spoken Lincoln—pawing after this little abrasive, firecracker who gives zero fucks and is impressed by almost no one. Octavia may keep her emotions close to her chest, but Clarke knows she would return Lincoln's affections in a heartbeat. If they’re not sleeping together yet, Clarke wagers it won’t be long.

"Lincoln's done," Octavia announces as she strides back towards the bar counter.

Clarke checks her watch, seeing it’s been just over 12 minutes, and she can't help herself. "Wow,
that was quick. Kind of a shame for you, though, that he's such a quick finish."

She almost ducks out of instincutal fear of bar towels being hurled at her head, but instead Octavia breezes past with a generous slap to Clarke’s ass, shaking her head.

"Jesus, Clarke. You're seriously the fucking worst."

"Come on, I'm funny!" Clarke argues to Octavia's retreating black shirt and shorts. "People find me to be very entertaining."

"Yup. You're a laugh riot," she deadpans. After retrieving two bottles of water from behind the bar, Octavia heads back the way she came. "I'm going to wait on Smuttynose. The walk-in cooler is my only relief from this fucking heat."

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Lincoln has betrayed Clarke in the worst possible way, and if she didn’t love him so much she would really, really despise him.

“I’m sorry, Clarke, please don’t kill me.”

He’s brought by samples of the brewery’s new pilsner that Indra plans to distribute starting in early June, and the betrayal almost intensifies since he’s clearly exploiting Clarke’s weak spot for German brews to soften the blow.

“How can you be leaving me?” she practically whines. Her lower lip, at the very least, is jutting out over the rim of her pint glass. “I thought what we had was … special.”

Lincoln chuckles, and it’s honestly melodic. If she could, Clarke would loathe the sound of it. He’s too perfect, she thinks, that was always the problem. There had to be a flaw.

“I’m not leaving, just no longer distributing,” he soothes. “I’m still staying within the company. You'll see me all the time.”

Lincoln makes his deliveries on Wednesdays, but because Indra established the brewery from the ground up—literally testing her first brews in her own kitchen—Lincoln serves as part of a handful of distributors who equally moonlight as beer reps for Trikru Brewing. Indra’s entire concept for Trikru is based on small-batch production, and her unique model has made her limited edition pours incredibly popular with Clarke’s clientele. She distributes a handful of locally crafted brews to select vendors, changing over at the first of every month or as her stock expires. Monday meetings with Lincoln are spent discussing upcoming sales and tasting whatever pours Indra has been preparing for her next month’s sale.

Clarke scowls as she drinks. Even the pilsner, which she absolutely loves, tastes sour with the news of Lincoln’s departure. He has just explained, a bit clumsily for his nerves, about leaving his current position to move up within Indra’s rank of command. It’s a massive promotion and an incredible vote of trust from Indra. Lincoln could not be more deserving, and Clarke plans to be infinitely happy for him too, just as soon as the sting of abandonment wears off.

“It’s a step away from the daily grind, but I’ll be around. I promise.” His eyes almost drift of their own volition towards the windows at Clarke’s back, behind which she knows Octavia is prepping for the mild 5:00 rush of office traffic.

Clarke’s quiet, coastal New England town hardly qualifies as having a ‘business district’—mostly quaint shops with sole proprietors, restaurants, and privately-owned coffee shops. But the 9-5
business that does exist produces its meager swarms of women and men in skirts, blouses, ties, and oxfords that Clarke’s bar attracts at quitting time. It’s located casually along the waterfront, nestled between boat slips and the old, Memorial bridge, which at the moment, casts its shadow across the deserted patio where Clarke and Lincoln are sat drinking beer under a late afternoon sun.

“Not every Wednesday, though,” she huffs. Petulant. A real sore loser. “This sucks. I mean, I’m happy for you, but this totally sucks.”

Lincoln laughs fully now, and Clarke can’t even help the small smile that works its way onto her otherwise disgruntled face. There is charming, and then there’s Lincoln.

“We will totally hang out, Clarke. You never did show me your secret fishing spot on the island.” He sips his beer as his dark eyes sparkle in realization. “Besides, you’re really going to like my replacement.”

“I really doubt it. He’s probably a meathead. Or a juicehead.” Clarke groans, imagining all the treacherous possibilities. “Ugh, he runs a fantasy football league, doesn’t he.” She closes her eyes, dramatically covering them with one hand as her elbow comes to rest on the table. “I swear to god, Lincoln, if he’s a goddamn vegan …”

“She, actually—” Lincoln clears his throat, and Clarke pulls apart her fingers just enough to create a gap through which to peek one critical, blue eye “—just moved from Brooklyn a few weeks ago, but I’ve known her for ages. A carnivore who does not play fantasy football, so far as I know. And she’s, I don’t know. You’ll like her.”

Clarke lowers her hand completely and continues to narrow her eyes at Lincoln even as they both take long, contemplative sips of their beers. He looks amused or pleased, confident. And Clarke is not appeased by this information in any way, but she is definitely … intrigued.

“You know her? From New York?”

Lincoln, quiet as he is and especially reserved about his formative years, has told Clarke he grew up in Bed-Stuy but very little else.

He hesitates briefly. “Yeah, we … ran in some of the same circles.”

He continues to be rather cryptic, but Clarke doesn't know how much she can push him to expound, so she just says, “Pour me another taste,” without much demand. And then finally admits, “This is really fucking good.”

Lincoln laughs and mock salutes, grabbing a Trikru growler by its neck. “Aye aye, Captain.”

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Clarke gets three more weeks with Lincoln before he deserts her entirely—despite the fact she already has plans to go fishing with him on Plum Island once the weather warms for good—and until that time, he tells Clarke that his replacement will shadow his full schedule to ensure a smooth transition. Clarke had grumbled at the time, scribbling down notes about the Imperial Stout she was tasting, made from espresso beans Indra had locally sourced. Something else, or rather some one else, to infringe on the precious time Clarke had left with her beloved Lincoln. The stout was delicious, though a bit dense for Clarke’s tastes at 4 in the afternoon. The news, in chorus with the beer, sat heavily in her stomach.

Today, another dreaded Wednesday, Clarke’s stomach practically dances with nervous anticipation as the 10:00 hour approaches.
“Stop fucking pacing.”

Octavia pops up from behind the bar counter where she’s just dumped her second bucket of ice into the bin.

“What? I’m not,” Clarke answers innocently, even as she consciously has to stop her feet from moving another step.

“I don’t know why you’re being so weird. According to Lincoln, Indra is the most terrifying person he’s ever had the pleasure of being around.” She hoists two empty ice buckets atop her shoulders then grins wickedly. “Besides me.”

Clarke laughs and relaxes by a fraction. “Okay, Fright Night, what’s your point?”

“My point is that someone like Indra is never going to employ some asshat who smells like salami and roots for the fucking Jets.”

Clarke muses silently for a moment before saying, “You’re talking about the rep from Riverwalk, right?”

“Yes!” Octavia shoots a hand out from behind the bar in recognition of Clarke’s astuteness, nearly dropping one of her empty buckets. “What is up with that smell, dude?”

Clarke laughs again. Octavia is, of course, absolutely correct in her assessment—both of Indra’s new hire and poor Larry from Riverwalk Brewery—and Clarke feels herself relax even further, confidence in Indra and Lincoln soaring. She feels infinitely better right up until the sound of crunching gravel hits her ears, and she whirls around to see Lincoln’s delivery truck roll around the side of the building.

Octavia must sense Clarke’s anxiety spike because a second later she’s slipping an ice cube down the back of her v-neck tee and patting Clarke’s shoulder in some warped confluence of comfort and distraction.

“Jesus Christ!” Clarke practically squeals, slithering around to shake the cube out of her shirt while Octavia sighs, unperturbed.

“Just … no sex jokes, stay professional but friendly, and take deep breaths so you don’t do that rambling thing that happens when you’re nervous. You’ll be fine,” she concludes with one final clap to Clarke’s shoulder before disappearing into the back to retrieve more ice.

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Oh, but Clarke does ramble. She rambles like a blessed idiot.

When it’s all said and done, mortal embarrassment is an understatement.

“Clarke, hey,” Lincoln says when she pulls open the delivery door that retracts with a loud, metal clatter. There’s a drop from the hatch, a few feet high, onto the gravel lot that leaves Clarke momentarily towering over him.

He helps her jump down from the hatch and then pulls her into a side hug that Clarke happily falls into just as the passenger door of his truck creaks open. If Clarke weren’t being embraced by Lincoln—an actual beacon of reassuring calm—she would be tense as hell in anticipation.

Lincoln has an impressive wardrobe of Trikru logo tee shirts, all of which stretch taut and leave
very little about his chest and abs to the imagination. Not that Clarke has spent a great deal of time ogling her friend while he hoists pony kegs and multiple cases of beer. She is merely observant and appreciative of the human form.

What Clarke did not know until this very moment, however, is that Trikru also markets tank tops, which is what Lincoln’s replacement is wearing when she appears at the back of the truck. She rounds the corner wearing a loose, black tank top, emblazoned with a large, faded-grey Trikru logo across the stomach and chest, and well-worn black denim. Ripped where they should be, faded across the pockets where the fabric crinkles from sitting. Her black sunglasses and black inked tattoos effectively complete the look. Clarke has never before seen anyone appear so effortlessly cool.

“Clarke, this is Lexa. I’ve entrusted her with my entire list of clients, but don’t worry,” Lincoln stage whispers, “I already told her you’re the most important one.”

Lexa smiles something small, polite. A smile likely reserved for first encounters or fellow passengers on public transportation. Cashiers, waitstaff, that sort of thing. Friendly, but not eager for friendship. She extends her hand with a step forward.

“Hey.”

Clarke had planned out this interaction in multiple scenarios. Lincoln’s introduction of the person with whom she’d be stuck dealing with for the foreseeable future was never going to go entirely smoothly.

She’d imagined saying something casually confident like: ‘Damn straight I’m his favorite—don’t you forget it.’

Or maybe she would keep it more professional like: ‘It’s my pleasure to maintain the working relationship Lincoln and I have fostered over the years. Welcome aboard.’

In any event, she has not prepared for this.

At first, all Clarke can manage is silent gaping, her eyes trailing up and down Lexa’s bared arms, which are inked significantly less than Lincoln’s but nevertheless have her full attention. Lexa’s hair is pulled loosely into a mess of easy curls atop her head, while her green eyes glint brightly from beneath a pleasant, morning sun when she removes her sunglasses. The girl, about Clarke’s age she would guess, is dressed for a day of moderately heavy lifting in late Spring temperatures and not to be ogled; and yet, Clarke’s throat is dry when she tries to swallow.

Honestly, Lincoln could have given her a head’s up.

And so she says, “Hi—hey, Lexa was it? I’m Clarke. Griffin. I manage—or, rather, I’m the general manager here at Dockside, and Lincoln and I are—well,” she looks to him fondly, “I’m going to miss him. A lot.” At some point Clarke must have taken Lexa’s proffered hand because she vaguely registers her arm moving up and down where they must be engaged in a handshake. “Not that I’m not—or, rather, that we at Dockside aren’t excited for you to be here. Lincoln speaks very highly of you. It’s so nice to meet you. Officially.”

Lexa’s eyebrows have risen only minutely, but it changes her entire countenance, and her smile, while not much bigger, is definitely more genuine. “Nice to—”

But Clarke is off and running again, not even allowing Lexa to fully return the sentiment. She is not breathing deeply, and she’s definitely doing that crazy rambling thing, and Octavia will be so
disappointed in her. Though she’s thankfully remembered to drop Lexa’s hand, who casually returns it to her back pocket.

“Did Lincoln say you moved from New York? I haven’t been in ages, but I love it. Oh! And the bus schedules from here to there are wicked convenient without being, you know, exorbitant. And quick, too. Four hours maybe. To Manhattan anyway. Don’t you think, Linc?” And then Clarke laughs at her own idiocy. “Jesus, rhyming at 10am. I should definitely stop talking. Anyway, I just mean it will be easy for you to get back there. From here. If you ever need to.”

Lexa nods once, amused. Maybe even smirking. “Wicked,” she says, clearly mocking now.

Definitely smirking. Shit.

Clarke needs to create a diversion and escape back into the delivery hatch where she can maybe hide out for the next three lifetimes or at least until she has rediscovered her waning professionalism.

“Oh okay, I’m going to let you guys get back to work, and I’m uh—shit!” Lincoln catches Clarke by the elbow before she fully trips and falls, having started to gracelessly back away from Lexa.

“Thanks,” Clarke smiles up at Lincoln who is now unapologetically laughing at her performance.

“It was nice meeting you, Clarke.” Lexa pulls open the latch at the back of the truck and slips her black shades back over her eyes. “Officially.”

Embarrassment creeps up the back of Clarke’s neck, and she really needs to get the hell out of there as quickly as possible, but she manages a broad smile in return and a stilted wave. “Yes. Same to you. Bye.”

*Jesus Christ, Griffin. Pull it together.*

Octavia is polishing stemless wine glasses behind the bar when Clarke reemerges through the front door, having walked around the building’s perimeter in hopes that the seabreeze might cleanse her temporary insanity.

“How’d it go?” Octavia asks.

Without making eye contact and heading straight for the office Clarke tells her, “I have to resign immediately.”

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Under penalty of death, Clarke has sworn Octavia to secrecy over the acute humiliation she experienced during her first encounter with the new Trikru representative.

So, Octavia of course tells Raven immediately.

“Why do you love Octavia more than me, Clarke? Why? If we’re being honest, she’s not even that nice to you.” Raven bangs into Clarke’s tiny office at 7:00 the following Thursday evening, and Clarke responds without looking up from her stack of paperwork.

“Context, please.”

“Octavia got to meet your hot, new girlfriend before me, and I’m incredibly offended,” Raven states, as if this should clear up any confusion.
Clarke does look up then, wondering if she’d mentioned in passing any of her truly unmemorable dates to Octavia over the past 6 days. “Huh?”

Raven huffs impatiently, crossing her arms where she’s leaned into the door frame of the office. “Trikru Brewery Goddess. New Lady Lincoln. Sex on legs.” She snaps her fingers, listing off her ridiculous epithets. “Keep up, Griffin.”

Clarke’s grip on the pen she’s been holding increases minutely, and she can only hope Raven doesn’t notice even as she glares pointedly, awaiting her response. Clarke has very purposely—and almost entirely unsuccessfully—shoved all thoughts of Lexa into the furthermost recesses of her mind over the past few days. Wednesday had been a shame pit of embarrassment, but by Monday when Lexa and Lincoln arrived at the bar for their weekly tasting Clarke had almost entirely recovered her poised and professional demeanor. Or, at the very least, the measured amount of professionalism she usually offers to a friendly colleague like Lincoln.

She had been casually charming, inclusive towards Lexa as she learns the ropes, even while mostly interacting with Lincoln as they discussed upcoming orders and the success of the Trikru pours currently on tap at Dockside. Clarke was completely focused and in control of all her mental faculties. No sign of the bumbling, blushing idiot who had greeted Lexa days prior. Lexa diligently took notes, stayed attentive to Clarke and Lincoln’s conversation, and spoke very little. It had been a veritable success compared to Wednesday, and Clarke had congratulated herself on keeping her shit together as the meeting ended and she shook Lexa’s hand without even a second’s hesitation.

Still, a residual guilt tickles at the back of her neck and Clarke works to school her face while feigning confusion, “Are you talking about Indra’s new rep? Lexa? She’s not even my type.”

Raven flashes from annoyance to anger so quickly it nearly takes Clarke’s breath away. “Do not insult my above-average intelligence, Clarke. You know I’ve already google stalked her, and between her limited social media presence plus O’s slapdash physical description, she could not be more in your sexual wheelhouse.”

“Fine, Raven,” Clarke sighs, “but you also know I’m shit at dating, and you know I can’t risk tarnishing a business relationship for the sake of a pretty face, which means you know this person is not now nor ever going to be my ‘girlfriend .'”

A deviant smile shadows Raven’s features. “So, you admit she’s got a pretty face.”

Clarke’s head collapses onto the stack of orders she’d been reviewing. “Please go away.”

“Ugh. Killjoy. I’m going to set up anyway, but listen,” Raven raps her knuckles against the desk until Clarke looks up. “You’re definitely not a shitty date.”

Raven winks and puckers her lips, blowing Clarke a kiss that begrudgingly makes her smile.

“I’ll be out a bit,” Clarke tells her, lightly tapping her pen against her stack of paperwork to indicate the orders she needs to finish entering.

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By eleven that night, the bar is to capacity, spilling out through the open doors onto the modest patio that lines the waterfront. Dockside is situated mostly among marinas, a standalone bar in a pocket of the city not populated by other vendors of its sort. Clarke’s father used to say that Dockside came first, and the rest of the city merely sprang up around it. First came the trade ships, then the pubs, then the insufferable, Northeastern elite who now populate its massive Colonials.
and overpriced, waterfront Capes. Clarke can do without the wealth and veiled snobbery of her coastal town, but she keeps her sanity by surrounding herself with good people and good beer.

She emerges from her office, which is hardly more than a glorified broom closet, to the sounds of Warren G, and a smile breaks over her face when she spots Raven.

She’s a certified genius, easily the smartest and one of the busiest people Clarke knows: working as a moderate-level marine engineer at the Navy Yard; teaching adjunct occasionally for BU’s undergrad program; and, still somehow finding time to host a novelty DJing night every Thursday at Dockside.

“God may have given me the brain of a scientist, Clarke, but she also gave me the rhythm of a 90s hip hop artist,” Raven once said.

Clarke doesn’t know how a person who oversees the construction of massive ships and understands the complexities of nautical machinery would have energy left for Kid N Play, but everyone decompresses in their own way. For the sake of business, it’s increased bar sales and ushers in heavier weekend traffic one day earlier. What started as a joke between friends has actually begun to return a marginal profit. Clarke cares less about the money (not that her boss will ever hear that admission) and more about her friend’s happiness, apparent on Raven’s face where she beams in large red headphones and neon, costume shop sunglasses behind an improvised DJ booth.

“Good night?” Clarke asks Octavia as she unloads a rack of steaming pint glasses. Octavia’s got two bar backs working plus her able-bodied bartenders, but Clarke honestly doesn’t know if she’s ever seen Octavia stop working.

“Busy, but nothing crazy.” She lines the glassware along a cooling rack, steam rising from each rim. “We need to ask Allagash about restocking their Bourbon Barrel Black. I’ve had three different people ask about it tonight.”

“I’ll email Carol in the morning,” Clarke nods. “Remind me.”

“You bet your sweet ass,” Octavia winks.

Clarke starts to chuckle before remembering, “Oh, also: fuck you.”

Octavia pauses in her task long enough to look up in genuine confusion.

“Raven came to harass me earlier about Lincoln’s replacement, so thanks a lot for keeping your mouth shut.”

Octavia shrugs. “I calls em like I sees em, Griffin.”

“You didn’t see anything because there isn’t anything to see!”

Octavia resumes emptying the rack of its pint glasses, laughing in the process. “I saw you approximately four seconds after you made a complete ass of yourself in front of a gorgeous woman, and your face said it all, dude.”

“Ooh! Are we talking about Sexy Lexy?”

“Jesus!” Clarke startles, clutching her chest as Raven fucking apparates just behind her shoulder. “Aren’t you supposed to be working? Also, can you never refer to Lexa as ’Sexy Lexy’ ever again.”
“Please,” Raven scoffs. “I don’t get paid for this shit. I am bringing rhythmic joy to the mostly undiversified people of this bar out of the goodness of my cold heart.”

It’s true. Dockside doesn’t pay Raven a dime. She does, however, drink for free every Thursday—and often some nights in between—in exchange for her truly heroic service.

“Anyway,” she continues, “you’re very cute when defending your girlfriend’s honor.” Raven slings an arm around Clarke’s suddenly tense shoulders and pinches her cheek.

“She’s not—we are business associates. Nothing more. And, can I just say, this is such an inappropriate conversation to be having.”

Moral high ground. A sound tactic. This is what will save Clarke from further mortification.

“Hmm, funny you didn’t have any issues shamelessly objectifying Lincoln for the past three years,” Octavia chimes in. Having finished with the dish rack, she leans both elbows against the bar counter and tilts her head contemplatively.

Damn Clarke’s faulty moral high ground to hell.

She scowls, mumbling, “I hate you both,” only to the amusement of Raven and Octavia, who eventually relent only because Octavia disappears into the kitchen with a her empty dish rack and a satisfied smirk.

“You know, she’s incredibly attractive, Clarke. Like, super hot from what little I’ve seen. In all seriousness, it’s okay if you like her a little.” Raven’s tone softens, and it makes Clarke so much more uncomfortable when she’s outwardly nice.

“I don’t like her, okay? I barely know her!” Clarke argues, even as she is remembering a handshake, a smile, a pleasant shade of green.

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The problem is: Lexa is extremely likable.

“If you remember the Hippo from last Fall, from what I understand, this should be somewhat reminiscent in body,” Lexa is explaining, pouring three small, equal portions from a growler into rocks glasses. “Indra has replicated several of the flavors, with the omission of the chocolate rye.”

Her voice is as gentle as it is confident, full of warm strength and dulcet tones that keep Clarke’s attention rapt regardless of topic. She could listen to Lexa speak for hours, drawn to her soft cadence. It’s been just over two weeks since their first meeting, and if Clarke has learned anything about the woman filling Lincoln’s shoes it’s that she wastes no words. Lexa is reserved but accessible, friendly if not a bit introspective. She’s a lot like Lincoln, actually, and Clarke wonders if he hadn’t been directly responsible for her hire at the brewery. Clarke blinks, realizing Lexa has stopped speaking and knee-jerks her way into making a joke.

“Removed the chocolate?” Clarke gasps, watching Lexa replace the dark glass bottle into the giant, black case at her feet. “Sacrilege.”

Lexa is returning Clarke’s smile when she passes tasting glasses to Lincoln and Clarke, recognizing by now in her second week that Clarke is rarely serious for long intervals. Lexa has taken the helm of this tasting, Lincoln a quiet, reassuring presence between the two women as Lexa describes each pour and the processes involved in each batch. The threesome sit at a high-top table inside the mostly deserted bar, a gloomy afternoon sky spilling grey light through the
windows that face the water.

“No chocolate,” Lexa continues, “but see if you can detect what other notes are present behind all the crisp hops.”

It’s a gentle challenge, barely more than a suggestion to test Clarke’s palette, but the hairs on Clarke’s arms stand on end when Lexa looks at her over the rim of her glass. Clarke clears her throat and looks down to the liquid in her glass, assessing its coloring and fragrance.

At Clarke’s first sip, it’s not an immediate favorite, but the flavors are incredibly balanced for how intense they are on her tongue. “Mmm,” she hums, swallowing her first sip and looking to Lincoln. He knows every granule involved in every one of Indra’s brews but his beautiful face of innocence gives nothing away. “It’s tart but … refreshing. It tastes summery.”

Lexa sets down her tasting glass and raises her eyebrows in question. She too, smirking and silent, gives nothing away. Clarke takes another sip as if to simply have another taste and not to soothe the sudden heat crawling up her cheeks.

“I don’t prefer a fruity beer, but this is complex enough to balance out the sweetness, in my opinion,” Lexa offers.

“It is,” Clarke agrees. “If anything, there’s an underlying sourness to it—cranberries?”

Lexa’s mouth twists pleasantly. “Close. Those tart undertones are accomplished by harvesting early. Indra sourced the fruit from Parlee Farms, who allowed us to—”

Clarke’s palm slaps abruptly against the table, disrupting the quiet bar and Lexa in the process. “Cherries!”

Lexa smiles fully now, distracting Clarke to the point she’s forgotten that she rudely interrupted her. Again. Clarke has never before seen Lexa’s smile at this magnitude, and it is instantly gratifying.

“Yes,” she says, pleased. “Local Regina cherries. Very good.”

Clarke basks in Lexa’s praise before rushing to apologize. “I’m sorry, I swear I am usually more well-mannered and will stop cutting you off mid-sentence”.

“Aw, Clarke,” Lincoln coos while patting Clarke’s forearm. “No you won’t.”

Oh, right, Clarke blinks. Lincoln is still here.

Clarke’s eyes narrow in his direction as she mutters, “Traitor.”

“It’s all right,” Lexa says, reaching down for a second growler.

“No, I’m really sorry,” Clarke reiterates. “You were saying something about an early harvest of the fruit.” Clarke takes another sip, willing herself to focus.

After a slight hesitation and a grateful nod, Lexa resumes, “Picking season for cherries in this region is very short, usually less than three weeks between mid June and early July. Indra worked with these farmers to determine when they could harvest an early crop that would accomplish a tartness to mitigate without entirely erasing the cherries’ more familiar, sweet flavors.”

Lexa licks her lips as if in search of any of these residual flavors she’s been describing and reaches
across the table for Clarke’s glass. Clarke sits transfixed, dumbly neglecting to respond to the remainder of Lexa’s narrative as she easily pulls the glass from Clarke’s loose hold. When Lincoln lightly clears his throat, Clarke very nearly jumps.

“Parlee has been great to us,” he says, dumping the remnants of his own glass into the pitcher where Lexa had emptied hers and Clarke’s. “You should take a day trip out there sometime, Lexa. Mark and Ellen would be happy to give you the full tour.”

“I will,” Lexa says.

Having finally found her voice, Clarke enthusiastically chimes in. “I’d love to go! We should totally do that—I mean, if you want. We could drive out there some weekend morning and, you know, observe the process together.”

Clarke knows Lincoln is laughing at her inelegant proposal because he’s doing a shit job hiding it behind a bar napkin, but she doesn’t much care because Lexa’s cheeks have turned a lovely shade of pink.

“I’m going to grab us some ice waters,” Lincoln announces, excusing himself to the bar where Octavia is restocking and cleaning. The pair of them will undoubtedly share a laugh at Clarke’s expense, but she can’t bring herself to be upset by it.

Not when she’s sat across from Lexa who appears slightly unnerved but not at all offended by Clarke’s proposition to hang out, apart from their scheduled meetings at Dockside.

“That is a very kind offer, Clarke.” Lexa pours them three more tastes of a second, amber-colored beer before making eye contact. “I don’t exactly know my way around yet. It would be nice having someone who is familiar with the area, but you’re so busy here. I would hate to think I’m encroaching on your free time away from work.”

The prolonged eye contact almost causes Clarke to stutter, though she manages an affect of nonchalance when she says, “No way, it would be great! Honestly, I can never get any of my loser friends to go fruit picking with me. Plus, I can’t allow a city girl to get lost in Tyngsboro farm country. Yikes.”

At this, Lexa laughs softly and ducks her head. When she looks back up she says, still smiling, “An offer I can’t refuse then. Okay.”

Clarke beams as she echoes, “Okay.”

The problem is: Lexa is extremely likable, and Clarke is so, incredibly screwed.
Lincoln’s last official delivery arrives with scorching temperatures. The heat is more than uncomfortable and wildly unseasonable for early June in Massachusetts, but not even Clarke’s precious, grumbling malcontent behind the bar can dampen her spirits. Octavia curses relentlessly about the stifling heat and the bar’s lackluster AC unit as Clarke breezes behind the counter for icy bottles of water.

“Why is there no fucking coffee brewing?” Octavia snipes, glaring at Clarke’s sunny disposition. “And why are you so fucking happy? It’s Lincoln’s last day—shouldn’t you be all mopey and depressed?”

Clarke grabs a third bottle and tosses it to Octavia, who grabs it out of the air with one hand. “Raven is bringing by Americanos on her way to the Yard—you’re welcome by the way—and if you want an answer to your second question I suggest following me to the hatch.”

Octavia asks skeptically, “Why would I do that?” nevertheless following Clarke into the rear storage area of the building.

In lieu of an explanation, Clarke holds open the swinging door for her friend, ushering Octavia towards a rectangular block of sunlight created by the open hatch. They stand in the doorway, shadowed by large boxes of dry stock and unrefrigerated cases of beer. Just beyond, Lexa is crouched on her haunches at the mouth of the delivery hatch, receiving cases of beer and pony kegs that Lincoln hoists up from the back of their truck. She’s in short black track shorts and her black Trikru tank top, by now a signature accessory, which is shaded darker in random patches of sweat. Lincoln wears a maroon tee shirt and loose khaki shorts, though it looks as if he wishes he were wearing much less, the tee shirt nearly soaked through along his back and under his arms. One glance at Octavia and Clarke thinks she may be wishing the same thing.

“This is wrong, Clarke. This is grossly, grossly sexist and inexcusable objectification,” Octavia states, her eyes never wandering from the two at work before them.

A sheen of sweat glosses them both: Lexa across her neck and shoulders; and Lincoln atop his shaved head, while trails of moisture disappear into the vee neck of his shirt.

“Yup. Totally and completely immoral. Our feminist memberships are so getting revoked for this.”

“For sure.” Octavia takes a large gulp of water, afterwards wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. “I have to go stock.”

Clarke smirks, eyes askance at her friend who has yet to move. “Sure thing, O.”

“I’m leaving. Right now.” Octavia actually shakes her head and closes her eyes. “Fuck, he’s so pretty, isn’t he?”

Clarke sighs, patting Octavia’s head sympathetically. “Yeah. So pretty.” Clarke means Lincoln, whose beauty is inarguable, though her eyes betray her intentions and slide up the length of Lexa’s bared legs for the fourth time.

_Fuck, is right._
“Okay, seriously. Stop being such a perv and just offer them water already, Clarke,” Octavia says before pushing back through the swinging door that leads into the bar.

“I am! I will,” Clarke promises distractedly. “Hey, O, wait!”

Octavia props open the door with one hand, looking to Clarke expectantly.

“Be honest, you're in a better mood now, aren't you?”

Octavia glowers and flips her the bird, leaving Clarke to her self-satisfied laughter.

:::

The Friday after Lincoln’s last delivery shift, Clarke is throwing him a party. She has mostly forgiven him for his abandonment of their longstanding business friendship, though admitting that befriending Lexa has had anything to do with her change of heart is something Clarke will take to the grave. She wants to give him a proper send-off as he embarks on his new career path. She wants to do something nice for Lincoln to express her love and to congratulate him on being such a wonderful human.

She stands in line for coffee, having spent all morning updating Dockside’s social media outlets to announce a private event that will leave the bar closed to the public and fielding calls from invitees who wish to help. Her urgency for caffeine at the moment is an understatement. She’s kept the gathering small—just her Dockside family, the Trikru staff, and some local bartenders and fellow distributors who she knows to be Lincoln’s friends. Clarke is double-checking details with Octavia via text when she hears a familiar voice over her right shoulder.

“Cold brew, black. Light ice, please.”

Clarke has already placed her order and is waiting in the slow shuffle towards the cash register when she swivels her head to find Lexa standing behind her in casual wear and a straw woven fedora.

“Hey,” Clarke smiles.

Lexa’s recognition of Clarke immediately produces its own, smaller smile. “Clarke. Hi.”

“This is so strange—I’ve never seen you outside of work before. In, like, real clothes.”

*Inside thoughts, Clarke. Inside thoughts.*

“I think that means that at least one of us works too much,” Lexa banters easily, slipping a hand into the front pocket of her shorts while the other holds her sunglasses and wallet.

Lexa isn’t profoundly stringent as a work colleague, but she does maintain a certain rigidity while interacting with Clarke and other employees at Dockside. This Lexa, off-the-clock and dressed for a casual summer morning, is relaxed and charming. Clarke is momentarily distracted by these two distinct halves of the same woman. Equally appealing. Equally dangerous as Clarke struggles to maintain professionalism. She shakes her head, trying to clear it of wandering thoughts, just as one of the baristas calls her name. Once she’s paid and stuffed some loose dollar bills into the tip jar, her phone is buzzing with Dockside’s main line.

“Shit. I have to take this,” she tells Lexa who has moved aside from the register to wait on her drink.
Lexa waves a hand as if to say: don’t worry about it.

Clarke tries to stay focused on what Octavia is saying, obviously asking really important questions about Lincoln’s party and updating Clarke on the inventory and confirming the guest list; but it’s difficult to think clearly when she has Lexa in her direct line of sight. She’s wearing loose, cotton shorts, frayed above the knees like she co-opted them from old, grey trousers and a slouchy tee shirt that looks too soft and too threadbare for Clarke’s brain to function properly. Lexa, who has been fiddling with her sunglasses, eventually clips them onto the low-slung neckline of her tee shirt to accept her drink. Clarke can no longer pretend she’s heard an iota of Octavia’s one-sided conversation.

“Okay, I’ll be there in like four minutes,” Clarke rushes to tell Octavia as Lexa retrieves her iced coffee. “I have to go. Yeah. Yes. Okay, I will. Bye.”

She ends her call while Octavia is still shouting profanities just as Lexa pops a bright pink straw into her drink and takes a sip. She looks to Clarke with a self-satisfied smile and tilts her head to indicate Clarke’s cellphone. “See? Working too much.”

“I know,” Clarke exhales with a good-natured eyeroll. She needs to chill out, but Lexa in this proximity—with her hat, and her sunglasses, and her generally just being an attractive human being—is overwhelming. Clarke heads for the shop’s entrance to create some distance, regaining her composure. “Oh! Speaking of work, you’re coming tonight, right?”

Lexa follows, a step behind. “Lincoln’s party?”

Clarke nods, draining a fourth of her iced Americano in one pull—which is doing her no favors for the jittery energy already coursing through her—and backs her way out of the coffee shop. She keeps the door propped against her shoulder blades as Lexa walks through, inadvertently catching something of Lexa’s scent in the process. It’s a nice smell. Not intoxicating. Not ethereal. Just pleasant. A clean, fresh smell, as if Lexa just did a load of wash or rolled around in a field of flowers or something.

“I’ll be there, yes.” Lexa replaces her sunglasses over her eyes as they make their way towards the wooden planks of the riverwalk.

The middling seaport Clarke calls home sits between a freshwater river and the ocean, spread along a narrow, brackish waterway. A promenade stretches along the water for nearly two miles, and Dockside bookends the north side. Clarke and Lexa fall into stride, for a few quiet moments enjoying their iced coffees and the mid-morning breeze from across the water.

“So, I’m headed this way,” Clarke eventually says, indicating with her hand that still clutches her phone.

Lexa’s eyes drift in the direction of Dockside.

“I figured,” she says, again smiling that relaxed, confident smile that has Clarke totally distracted until Lexa speaks again. “I was planning to sit down by the water, but I’ll walk with you for a bit.”

Clarke falters a step. “Oh.”

Clarke Griffin does not get flustered. She is more often than not a pinnacle of self-assurance, bordering on bravado. That being said, Lexa is, among other things, unfairly attractive, and Clarke finds herself sorting through a sudden rush of nerves when Lexa’s face begins to fall.

“Unless you—”
“No!” she places an innocent hand against Lexa’s forearm. “That would be … nice.”

Lexa pinches her lips together, returning to a more familiar smile. The kind she allows for Clarke’s attempts at humor during their weekly meetings. Lexa reaches up to tug at the loose neckline of her shirt where a black bra strap peeks out. Clarke’s fingers, which had rested briefly along Lexa’s arm, fall back to her side.

“Maybe I can even get you to talk about something other than work,” Lexa says, taking another sip of her coffee.

Clarke laughs at Lexa’s teasing and wonders, not for the first time, if Lexa is naturally this charming with everyone or if she’s making a concerted effort. She doesn’t often struggle with her perceptions of people, has no trouble finding dates, and has only once before been caught completely off-guard by someone who more-or-less blindsided her with attraction. Lexa, however, is a nut she has yet to crack.

“I have plenty of things to talk about apart from the bar. You’ve just never seen me outside of it to know any better.”

“Because you work too much,” Lexa counters.

“Yes. We’ve established that,” Clarke smiles, feeling tingling sensations run up and down her arms and legs. From the breeze, surely.

“Let’s hear it then,” Lexa prompts. “Besides curating an impressively diverse selection of rotating craft beers, what is it that fills your time?”

Clarke exhales a laugh, tipping her head back towards the sun and wishing she’d grabbed her sunglasses off the bar counter before leaving Dockside. “Right, except for that.” She runs a quick hand through her hair and says, “Fishing.”

A nearly imperceptible tick to Lexa’s eyebrow. “You like fishing? Really?”

“I do. Surprised?”

Lexa slows a bit, eventually coming to rest the small of her back against the low, wooden railing of the boardwalk. She considers Clarke while sipping her beverage.

“I am surprised. Not because you don’t look like a perfectly capable angler.”

Clarke is so pleased by the compliment, she doesn’t mind the blush on her cheeks. It’s Lexa’s tone that Clarke can’t read. She hasn’t figured it out, but she certainly doesn’t hate the way it sounds either. Whether Lexa is actively flirting or merely being pleasant, it’s nice being on the receiving end of it. Clarke stops beside her, propping an elbow onto the railing to face Lexa’s profile.

“I’ve been fishing my whole life, actually. I love it.”

“You grew up here then?” Lexa asks.

“Massachusetts, yes. We lived in Boston until I was seven or eight, but my mom was determined not to raise a ‘city kid’ and moved us here where I could grow up with, I don’t know, grass and trees and a heightened sense of socioeconomic privilege.”

Lexa looks over, smirking. “What does your mom have against ‘city kids’ exactly?”
“Well, other than them being notoriously rebellious and ill-mannered, probably nothing.”

Lexa acknowledges the slight by shaking her head and looking away. “Ouch.”

Bantering with Lexa is too easy and far too enjoyable. Clarke can’t believe she’s been wasting precious time of her prime years on dating apps when this lovely, intelligent woman now stood before her is offering to keep her company—the product of an organic, in-person encounter.

Clarke debates her next words for half a second, but she’s always been impetuous to a fault when it comes to beautiful women. “You should come with me sometime.”

Lexa again adjusts the neckline of her shirt where it’s threatening to slip off her shoulder. “To Boston?”

“No, fishing,” Clarke clarifies. “You should let me take you fishing sometime this summer.”

Clarke knows this invitation is not on par with her clumsy suggestion to visit a cherry farm together as work associates. What was arguably, a semi-professional offer (even if poorly delivered). She and Lexa are not pitching around ideas during a meeting at work. They’ve actually, thanks to Lexa, avoided the subject of work entirely. This is clearly something altogether different, and Clarke feels the air condense around them in an instant.

Lexa hesitates for what feels like long seconds but eventually says, “I don’t eat a lot of seafood, actually.” There’s a weighted pause that rings in Clarke’s ears, and then, “My girlfriend is allergic to shellfish so we tend to stay away from it.”

It’s an immediate punch to the gut, and Clarke feels unbalanced even as she is supported by a sturdy, wooden railing. Had she really misread this entire situation? Had there not been a palpable chemistry between them? Her mind reels, trying to find its footing. When a brief lightheaded spell dissipates, she barely manages to clear the shock from her voice.

“You have a girlfriend.”

“I do,” Lexa answers. Her voice lessens, a soft and careful lilt almost carried away on the breeze. “Surprised?”

Clarke’s playful mood has all but vanished, but she picks up the thread easily anyway, ignoring the unpleasant twists in her stomach. She takes a sip of coffee, wishing it were something stronger.

“I am surprised,” she tries to keep with the script, but there is some honesty in it as well. “Not because you don’t look like a perfectly capable girlfriend.”

Lexa looks exactly like a person capable of having a girlfriend. Of being the perfect girlfriend. Clarke senses a deflation, a marked sinking from her chest that travels downward.

Lexa chances a brief look to her left where Clarke is stood. She is smiling again, tentative, hopeful, as Clarke tries desperately to return her easy grin. She manages it, but just. Lexa turns where she’s stood to prop her elbows on the wooden railing and exhales as she faces the water. Clarke wonders if it doesn’t sound too much like relief. In any case, she’s not granted much time to consider Lexa’s nuances before her phone is buzzing again. Octavia may actually murder her if she doesn’t get back soon, and suddenly her time alone with Lexa feels too complex for 9am anyway.

Lexa easily translates Clarke’s buzzing phone and looks at Clarke over her shoulder. “Octavia?”

“Yeah.” Still distracted and feeling somewhat unmoored by Lexa’s reveal, Clarke clears her throat
and stands upright to again run a hand through her wind-tossed hair. “Yeah, I left her with like 4,000 loose ends to tie up before tonight and there’s a good chance she’s already sent a hitman to finish me off since I said I’d be back—” Clarke glances down to her watch, “—shit! Like 20 minutes ago.”

Lexa stands upright now too, placing a hand on the sundrenched wood of the riverwalk railing and turning to face Clarke. “I’ll see you tonight then.”

Clarke begins backing her way down a mostly deserted boardwalk, suddenly eager to get back to work if it means she can concentrate on something other than Lexa. And her girlfriend. “Yes, definitely. See you later.”

Clarke waves quickly and Lexa returns it. She’s not turned around for more than a breath, though, when Lexa calls out again.

“Clarke.” Clarke spins towards her and Lexa says, “Thanks. For keeping me company for a bit.”

She smiles genuinely at Lexa’s quiet gratitude. Whatever feelings still swarm at the base of Clarke’s stomach—guilt, anxiety, confusion—Lexa all but vanquishes in an instant. Clarke looks at her and just … feels better.

“You too.”

Lexa’s head bobs in a quick nod. That too, translates like relief.

“And, the offer still stands, you know,” Clarke continues, coming to a decision. “Fishing is like a paragon of all great friendship rituals after all.”

“Great friendship,’ huh?” Lexa smirks, leaning a hip against the railing.

“Yes— hello! Lexa, we are totally best friends.” Clarke tilts her head to the side, mocking offense. “Wait, did you not know that?”

Lexa’s laugh is so enchanting and genuine Clarke almost forgets that she had, moments before, felt a harrowing sense of unease. Clarke grins in return, enjoying the sounds of Lexa’s fading laughter.

“You know,” Lexa says, “I read every line item of the contract Indra drafted to secure my employment, but I must have missed the, um …”

“Fine print,” Clarke supplies, their shared amusement now reflected in each other’s smiles.

She takes a deep breath, hoping to quell the remainder of her nerves and steps forward, extending a hand. “So, do you accept the terms?”

Lexa nods resolutely, taking her own step forward to stand directly in front of Clarke. “Yes. These terms are acceptable.”

Lexa’s grip is firm but her skin is soft as they move their hands up and down in tandem. Once, twice. Clarke wonders who releases the hold first, lost as she is in her own thoughts. Lexa is taken. And why wouldn’t she be? Having known her for less than a month and already feeling prematurely enamoured, the information should not have come as a surprise. She knows that girls like Lexa do not typically linger in the dating pool for long. And even if there had been something, a feeling, a mutual sensation—no. It was a simple miscommunication.

But they can be friends. It would be great to count Lexa as a friend, Clarke decides, hesitating only
briefly to place some distance between them by taking a step backwards.

“As your newly ordained best friend, Clarke, I have to insist you return to Dockside as quickly as possible.”

Still momentarily consumed with the way Lexa’s handshake has left her hand throbbing pleasantly, Clarke blinks. “Huh?”

“I now feel a certain responsibility for your safety, and I would be remiss to allow Octavia to have you murdered.” Lexa looks gravely serious, but Clarke laughs loudly until she sees Lexa’s face break into a wide grin.

“Okay, I’ll see you tonight, best friend.”

“Bye, Clarke.”

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The party is in full swing when Clarke spies Lexa slipping in through the front door. It’s not as if she had been waiting for her, per se. She would certainly never admit to perpetually checking the front entrance and back patio for her face in the crowd. But she is relieved to see her, in part because Raven will not shut the fuck up about finally getting a proper introduction. Lexa doesn’t immediately see anyone she recognizes, though Clarke doesn’t think she seems bothered by it, and casually makes her way towards the bar.

Clarke, who has been doing wide sweeps of the building—socializing, fetching drinks, occasionally sitting in Lincoln’s lap—is moving in Lexa’s direction without a second thought. She’s excited to see her—at the very least, she can admit this to herself.

They reach the busy counter moments apart. Clarke is enough in Lexa’s periphery that she sees her approach, turning to greet her with the easy smile Clarke now associates with Lexa feeling relaxed and content. She remembers their morning together and her cheeks warm; she wonders suddenly why Lexa showed up alone.

“Hi again,” Clarke says instead, beaming at Lexa despite an attempt to tamp down her bright smile.

Between Clarke’s heels and Lexa’s black sneakers, they’re finally of a height, and Clarke takes a moment to enjoy having Lexa’s eyes on her level. Lexa looks away to glance around the bar, her gaze landing briefly on the additional lighting, the people mingling about, and the sparse decor she and Octavia had thrown together that afternoon.

When Lexa’s eyes again find Clarke’s, they’re filled with unrestrained mirth, and Clarke feels a little bit better about her own dopey smile. Lexa clears her throat. “My best friend knows how to throw a great party.”

Clarke laughs, taking her own look around at their surroundings. “Uh, first of all, you’ve been here for 45 seconds. Also: wow, you’re really running with this whole best friend thing. I’m impressed.”

Lexa’s gaze turns to steel. “We shook on it, Clarke. Do you have any idea the binding properties of a contractual handshake?”

Clarke’s eyes narrow skeptically. “I don’t. How serious is it exactly?”

All seriousness falls from Lexa’s face as she shrugs. “Not much, actually. For all its symbolism, a
handshake agreement means very little. From a legal perspective.”

“Okay,” Clarke laughs, “good to know.” But then, Clarke is suddenly curious. “How is it that you know all this Law and Order jargon?”

Lexa reaches up to adjust the collar of her shirt, a pressed white oxford she has somewhat tucked into her black jeans. Clarke has begun to attribute the action to Lexa’s momentary discomorts. Her mild unease.

A brief pause and then, “Graduate school. I studied public interest and human rights law at Columbia.”

Clarke’s eyes go wide. “You’re a lawyer?!”

At Clarke’s wild expression, Lexa almost laughs, seeming to relax again as she leans against the bar counter. “Not exactly.”

“Well, aren’t you full of surprises today,” Clark sighs, finally catching the attention of Mindy behind the bar.

She has about a thousand-and-one questions about Lexa’s increasingly mysterious life swarming her brain. But she suspects that, much like Lincoln, a barrage of queries thrown at Lexa is not an effective form of bonding and more likely to scare her away. If her friendship with Lexa is to be successful, which Clarke is stubbornly determined to achieve despite a niggling, inconclusive attraction, then she has to go slow. Mindy approaches, popping the caps off of two bottles of Summer Blonde ales.

“Hey, Clarke—you need another drink?”

The party kicked off around seven, and Clarke had nursed a solitary beer for the first hour-and-a-half. She desperately needs something stronger but defers to Lexa instead.

“What do you want to drink?”

Lexa scans the long line of tap handles and then the shelved bottles of liquor. “If I order something other than beer, do you promise not to tell Indra?”

Clarke laughs as Mindy sets down the bottles of beer in front of two guys to Clarke’s right. “Don’t worry, I already saw her drinking something brown and neat from a snifter.”

Mindy wrinkles her nose. “Ugh. Grand Marnier. I mean, to each her own, but straight Grand Marnier? No thanks.”

“How about a bourbon then?” Lexa smiles at Mindy. “On the rocks?”

“You got it—what’s your preference in poison?”

“Oh! Get her the Stillhouse,” Clarke intervenes excitedly before Lexa can respond.

Mindy nods. “And for you? Another Bissell Brothers? Or do you want something else?”

“Do we still have the watermelon juice that O pressed yesterday?”

“Um …” Mindy ducks behind the counter to pull open a squatty cooler used for mixers. She emerges with a bottle half-full of pulpy, dark pink liquid. “Yup! You want the Mezcal drink, don’t you?”
“Yes, please!” Clarke beams, clapping her hands. When Mindy leaves to make their drinks, Clarke turns to find an amused Lexa watching her. “You have to try this drink. I will basically drink anything that involves Mezcal, but this one is especially ridiculous.”

Lexa shifts, stuffing her hands into the front pockets of her jeans and leaning back against the bar counter. “And the bourbon?”

“Oh, right.” Clarke cringes apologetically. “Yeah, sorry for commandeering your order, but I wanted you to try this whiskey we just got in: Van Brunt. Do you know it?” Lexa shakes her head and Clarke continues, “They’re a small distillery in Brooklyn—Red Hook, I think—that source entirely from upstate New York. Anyway, I thought you might … like it.”

“Oh,” Lexa smiles, acknowledging Clarke’s thoughtful suggestion, and Clarke feels warm with sudden, unwarranted embarrassment. “Thank you.”

Clarke smiles in kind, tapping her fingers against the bar counter in time with the music. “You’re welcome.”

Mindy returns with their drinks, and Lexa turns again to face the bar with her wallet open. Clarke waves her off just as Mindy starts to decline Lexa’s money.

“Save it for the tip jar,” Clarke tells her. “Open bar tonight.”

“Oh. Wow. I didn’t realize. Thank you.” Lexa fishes out a twenty and a few smaller bills from her wallet and slides them towards Mindy.

Mindy accepts the tip with a wide smile. “Hey, thanks!”

“By the way, Mindy, this is Lexa, our new rep from Trikru,” Clarke mentions, grabbing her and Lexa’s drinks off the bar. She hands Lexa the whiskey then bobs her head towards the woman behind the bar. “Lexa, this is Mindy.”

“Nice to meet you, Mindy.” Lexa’s voice takes on a gentle formality, and Clarke smiles at the now familiar sound.

Realization then dawns and Mindy says, “Oh, you’re Lexa! You’re the new Lincoln! Raven said —”

Clarke cuts her off with an ominous hand in the air and a pointed look of reproach. “Don’t listen to anything Raven says. Ever.”

“Okay, okay. Nice to meet you, Lexa,” Mindy laughs, retreating to the other waiting guests but giving Lexa one last, lingering look that has Clarke grinding her teeth.

No sooner has Clarke taken her first sip when Lexa asks, “Who is Raven?”

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After their first drink at the bar Clarke had walked Lexa through the indoor party, stopping for introductions where she thought Lexa might be interested in making connections. They take their second drink onto the patio where lights are strung, and music is playing, and the smell of a sizzling grill fills the sea air.

“Are you hungry?” Clarke asks over her shoulder where Lexa follows. As they approach the grill area—a built-in, charcoal monstrosity that Clarke had installed the summer prior—she claps the
“Murphy makes an incredible blackened shrimp kebab but is otherwise completely useless.”

“Fuck you, Clarke,” Murphy smiles, even as he extends his neck so that Clarke can smack a loud kiss on his cheek. “I’m low on shrimp, and we’re out of scallops, but I have some of the bison kebabs and a shitload of chicken. You guys want some?”

“I’m fine for now, thank you,” Lexa responds.

Clarke declines as well, squirming out of Murphy’s grasp with a laugh when he pinches her side. She makes her way closer to the water where most of the boats have docked for the night, only one or two drifting slowly past with their twinkling beacons of red and blue light. Lexa sidles up to her right side as they both rest their elbows along the rusted steel beams that Dockside’s original owners had fashioned into railings. Clarke thinks they may be repurposed railroad ties from the old tracks that used to run through town.

“I’ve never met Murphy,” Lexa says.

“Oh shit, I would have introduced you properly.”

“It’s fine,” Lexa smiles.

She continues to look curiously over her shoulder though so Clarke explains, “He’s kitchen staff, technically, but he keeps very sporadic hours so it’s not surprising you’ve not seen him here before. I’m pretty sure his only purpose for working is to keep his insurance and make beer money.”

“Oh.” Lexa nods, sipping again at her drink where the ice cubes have all but melted. “Is he—are you two—”

“No, no, no,” Clarke laughs hysterically. “Um, no. Not since Junior prom anyway.” Lexa’s eyebrows shoot up, causing Clarke’s laughter to start again. “Even then it wasn’t like that. I’ve known him since I was a kid, but we’ve never—no.”

“I’m sorry,” Lexa starts. “I shouldn’t have—”

“Lexa.” The drinks have made Clarke too relaxed and being in Lexa’s company has made her too serene, and Clarke has a hand on Lexa’s arm again before she’s even registered that she maybe shouldn’t.

It’s an innocent gesture that doesn’t feel entirely innocent when Lexa’s eyes drop to where Clarke’s fingers are touching one of her banded tattoos, visible from how Lexa has rolled up the sleeves of her shirt.

“It’s fine,” Clarke continues, removing her hand as quickly as she placed it. “I’m not offended by you asking, or even by the assumption. Honestly, Murphy is fucking great. I probably should be dating him.”

“Okay,” Lexa exhales, resuming her gaze on the water and sipping her drink.

Clarke hesitates, not wanting to pry where Lexa does not appear overly forthright. But the door has been opened, and Clarke walks through. “Speaking of significant others, though, I was sort of anticipating meeting yours tonight.”

“Oh. She had other obligations,” Lexa says, a lazy swirl to her drink as she looks into her nearly empty glass.
“Oh, well, I’d like to meet …”

“Costia.” Lexa supplies. Her following smile looks innate. Like she can’t utter this girl’s name without the resulting upturn of her lips.

Clarke takes a prolonged pull off her bottle of beer, having switched off the Mezcal. Just one drink had made her mind wander into dangerous territory in Lexa’s presence. She swallows down a fizzy mouthful of hops and considers the merits of responsible drinking around beautiful, unavailable women.

“I’d like to meet her sometime,” she reiterates.


“You moved here together, I assume? Have you and Costia been dating for long?”

Lexa makes a contemplative expression, tapping a finger against her glass. “Four, maybe five weeks.” Her poker face is impressive, giving nothing away, but Clarke is slowly learning Lexa’s tells and almost immediately rams her shoulder into Lexa’s, throwing her off-kilter.

“Jackass,” Clarke mumbles.

Lexa rights herself, overdramatically smoothing down the front panels of her shirt but laughing good-naturedly. “It’ll be three years next month.”

Three years. Three years.

Clarke grips the neck of her beer and struggles to find something to say beyond, “Wow.” She drinks more beer, hoping it will inspire her. “That’s—wow, congratulations.”

*Brilliant, Griffin.*

Lexa smiles her thanks and finishes off the rest of her second whiskey. She reaches for her collar, as if checking it’s still buttoned. “So, do you have someone?”

Clarke laughs humorlessly. “I have plenty of insignificant *someones* in the dating pool here, just not …”

Lexa looks over as Clarke trails off and nods in understanding, as if not forcing Clarke to finish the sentiment. It feels like being exposed.

Clarke brushes off the sudden tension with well-practiced deflection. “I’m fucking terrible at long-term relationships anyway.”

Lexa smiles too kindly. “I’m sure you’re not terrible.”

“It’s well documented, trust me.”

“I once dated a girl who brought me to a bar after we’d had dinner together only to meet up with another guy she was also dating, so,” Lexa shrugs.

“Jesus,” Clarke laughs.

“Yeah. Anyway, I’m guessing you’re faring better than that.”

"Point taken,” Clarke concedes.
Lexa points to Clarke’s bottle of beer. “Can I get you another drink?”

Clarke declines with a shake of her head. “I’m fine but feel free to get yourself another.”

Lexa rests her empty glass along the steel beam and turns to Clarke. “I’m going to head out, actually. After I find the guest of honor, that is.”

“Oh, okay.” Clarke stands up fully too, working up a smile. She stops herself from saying: *It feels like you just got here.*

“Costia is heading back from an event in Boston, and I’d like to be home when she gets there.”

Clarke smiles more genuinely. “That’s really nice.”

Lexa looks away and bites her lower lip, and Clarke thinks she looks very pretty when trying to shrug off the embarrassment of her own sentimentality.

*Not because you don’t look like a perfectly capable girlfriend.* Clarke’s own words continue to haunt her.

She looks away from Lexa then, whose attention is elsewhere, and casts her eyes to the far end of the patio. Lincoln is there and instead of being corralled by his adoring friends and colleagues, he is sharing a moment with Octavia in a quiet corner of an otherwise raucous celebration. Octavia looks as calm and content as Clarke has ever seen her, and she wonders if she could start referring to Lincoln as the Octavia Whisperer and still keep her life.

“Lincoln is down there,” Clarke says with a nod.

Lexa turns her head in the direction Clarke had indicated, and she too smiles at the pair. “Do you think I’ll be intruding if I say goodbye?”

“Probably,” Clarke shrugs. And then shouts, waving a hand above her head, “Hey, Linc! Having fun?”

Lexa’s scrutinizing eyes fall back on Clarke. “I’m beginning to understand the underlying strain on your relationship with Octavia, Clarke.”

Clarke shakes her head with a laugh. “You have no idea.”

Lincoln nevertheless looks up with a smile, quickly says something to Octavia, and begins making his way across the crowded patio.

:::

Clarke leaves Lexa to speak with Lincoln alone and excuses herself to the restroom. On her way out of the bathroom, Raven intercepts her with a cold drink and an abrasively friendly arm slung around Clarke’s shoulders.

“Hey, sugar tits.”

Clarke’s arm finds its way around Raven’s waist as she sighs, “Hey, babe.”

They find two empty stools along a portion of the bar that is lined with windows and a long stretch of wood-glossed counter top. The windows face the patio and beyond that the water. Lexa and Lincoln remain in conversation outside, visible where Clarke and Raven have found seats. She tells herself she needs to stop looking, to stop wondering, to stop over-thinking altogether where Lexa is
concerned. She takes a long swig of Raven’s proffered drink without checking the label, and her face puckers immediately.

Choking down a mouthful and instantly gagging seconds later, Clarke shoves the bottle back at Raven. “What the fuck?”

Raven’s expression remains blank, unperturbed, her eyes also trained on the two outside. “What? You looked thirsty.” She turns a knowing look to Clarke on the word thirsty, and Clarke’s scowl intensifies.

“Moxie? You offer me Moxie? That toxic jet fuel should be outlawed.”

Raven shrugs, taking a long sip. “I like it.”

Clarke shudders. Just watching the dark brown, syrupy liquid being consumed is making her feel ill. “You’re really sick.”

“And you’re stalling.”

“Why is it that I always have to ask you what the hell you’re talking about?”

“Probably because our IQs are on vastly different planes.” Raven shakes her head, as if the explanation alone is too taxing.

“Hey!”

“The point is, you’re going to have to introduce me to your girlfriend sooner or later, Clarke.”

Clarke closes her eyes, feeling a headache settling behind her temples. “Jesus—okay, listen. She is not—”

“Yeah, yeah, she’s not your girlfriend. Yet. But only because you haven’t had the cajones to ask her out.” Raven proudly hoists her bottle of frightening brown soda. “Hence, the liquid courage.”

“I haven’t not asked Lexa out for a lack of moxie,” Clarke says dryly.

“Then what’s your excuse, Griffin, because let me tell you—I’ve been watching that shit unfold all night, and—”

“She has a girlfriend, Raven. Okay? And the reason I know that is because I did ask her to hang out, thereby embarrassing myself in front of her for like, the fourteenth time in so many days.” Clarke slumps onto the counter top, burying her face in her hands.

“Wait.” Raven urgently grips Clarke’s thigh, forcing Clarke to look at her. “That girl—the one you’ve been indirectly flirting with while she trails after you making moon eyes at your shit all night—that girl has a girlfriend?”

Clarke exhales, cutting her eyes briefly to where Lexa and Lincoln stand off to her right. “Yup. Three years. Three fucking years. I mean, that’s like common law marriage for lesbians, right?”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah.” Clarke spins in her stool so that her knees knock up against Raven’s thigh. “I wasn’t really flirting, though, right? Because I’ve been trying really, really hard not to flirt with her.”

Raven cups Clarke’s earnest face, giving her cheek a few light taps. “Oh, sweetie. I’ve seen you
flirt with light fixtures. We figured out a long time ago that it’s sort of beyond your control.”

“Crap,” Clarke whimpers, letting her head fall forward so that it can rest on Raven’s shoulder. She is suddenly so ready to be at home in bed, away from everyone, buried under her blankets.

Raven rubs a soothing hand up and down her spine a few times before stopping abruptly. “Uh-oh. Incoming.”

Clarke sits up, spinning in her stool just as Lexa pushes through the patio door into the bar. She wants to say goodbye, but a surge of panic hits her chest as she remembers who sits at her left. Clarke spins back to Raven with barely contained terror in her eyes.

“Behave,” she whispers harshly. “Please.”

Raven cocks a daring eyebrow, nevertheless crisscrossing a finger over her heart.

“Lexa,” Clarke calls out, and Lexa finds Clarke’s eyes at the sound of her name. “Still heading out?” she asks as Lexa approaches.

“Yes. Costia texted from the train a few minutes ago.”

“Okay,” Clarke responds, taking a deep breath as she motions to Raven. “Hey, before you go … this is Raven.”

The two women seem to size up one another for several long seconds. Clarke holds her breath. Of course Lexa, exemplar of decorum, is the first to extend her hand.

“It’s nice to finally put a face to the name.”

Raven smirks. “Likewise.”

Clarke watches them, her eyes darting back and forth like it’s a goddamn tennis match. She’s starting to sweat due to the intensity of this bizarre standoff and intervenes by grabbing playfully at Raven’s chin.

“Yes, and what a good face it is.”

“Aw, thanks, babe,” Raven coos, always so endeared to unsolicited compliments.

“So, I’ll see you Monday, right?” Clarke asks, turning to Lexa whose eyes have taken on a distant quality, though they remain on Clarke.

Probably anxious to get home, Clarke thinks.

“Yes. I’ll see you then. Thanks again for the invitation tonight.” Lexa smiles then, this tiny knowing lift to her mouth that Clarke thinks might be her new favorite thing. “You do throw a great party, as it turns out.”

Clarke ducks her head, her laughter drowned out by the music. “Thanks. Get home safely.”

“I will,” Lexa promises. And then, looking away from Clarke she says in a less familiar tone, “It was nice meeting you, Raven.”

Clarke glances over to Raven who seems to have snapped abruptly out of a trance at the sound of her name. Clarke scrutinizes her odd behavior even as Raven shakes her head.
“No, yeah. For sure. You too.”

Lexa nods once more, a final farewell to them both, before making her way through the scattered bar tables and disappearing out the door moments later.

Raven unexpectedly wallops Clarke across her bicep. “That girl has a girlfriend?”

“Oww! Yes—what, why?” Clarke asks while massaging her arm.

“I don’t know, dude. Something doesn’t seem right about that.” Raven’s gaze is still locked on the front door, her eyes doing that clouded over thing like when she’s calculating complex mechanical equations in her head.

“Get used to it, Reyes. Lexa has a girlfriend, which means she’s never going to be my girlfriend. I will continue to date mediocre if not sexually fulfilling men and women, and Lexa and I—” Clarke swallows, suddenly her throat feels very dry. “Lexa and I will be … friends.”

“Friends,” Raven responds drolly.


Raven barks out a laugh just as Octavia is walking towards them.

“ Clarke and Lexa are going to be friends, O. Just friends and nothing more,” Raven mocks, pulling Octavia towards her with a hand to her waist.

Octavia props her elbow onto Raven’s shoulder and studies Clarke while somehow producing three shot glasses full of something that smells suspiciously like tequila from her other hand. She really is the best bartender.

“How did you—” Clarke gawks.

“Hundred bucks says they sleep together before Halloween,” Octavia says and shoves two of the three glasses towards Raven and Clarke. “Bottoms up, bitches.”

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“The drive to the farm is about an hour so there’s no way I’m making it without coffee,” Clarke is saying as she opens the coffee shop door for Lexa.

They’d made plans during Monday’s tasting—Lexa’s first solo venture as she officially took the reins of Lincoln’s client list—and though Clarke enjoyed having Lexa’s full attention, she had felt Lincoln’s absence acutely. Still, it had given her an opportunity to solidify plans with Lexa for the cherry farm.

Lexa brushes past into the coffee shop, her green eyes critical as she searches Clarke’s face. “And how many cups of coffee have you already had?”

Clarke scoffs, aware of Lexa’s momentary proximity even as she tries not to be. “The coffee I drink at my house doesn’t count. It’s like pre coffee. Practice coffee. Merely a necessary primer for the real deal.”

Lexa crosses her arms, arching an eyebrow. Irritatingly knowing and insistent. “How many?”

“Two-and-a-half,” Clarke answers under her breath, not giving Lexa the satisfaction of reading her like a book before she’s greeting the baristas with a friendly wave and bright smile.
It’s been just over a month since their first meeting, but the friendship has solidified nicely. Even if Clarke’s entire body feels warm or her palms often sweat if Lexa looks at her a certain way. The point is, she is hardly the classless idiot Lexa met four weeks ago, and they are well on their way to becoming good friends outside of their working relationship. Lexa is a quick study where Clarke is concerned, making it seem as if they’ve known each other for much longer.

“Hey, Clarke,” Avery smiles back. “Samoan roast on drip? Or you want your usual Italian?”

“Need the espresso today, babe. Can you leave me a little room for milk?” Avery nods and Clarke gestures to Lexa. “I’m getting hers too.”

“What? No, you don’t have to,” Lexa protests, already reaching for her wallet in the back pocket of what must be her favorite pair of black denim for how often she wears them.

“Relax, it’s on me. If it makes you feel better, I’ll let you pay for gas.”

Lexa practically rolls her eyes as she replaces her wallet. “Those two transactions do not equate, Clarke.”

“Will you just order, please?” Clarke urges with a smile. “God, you’re so grumpy without caffeine.”

Lexa, because she is apparently a petulant seven-year-old, spitefully orders a decaf iced green tea as if to prove that she does not require caffeine to be charming. They stop for gas on their way out of town, which Lexa does pay for despite Clarke arguing that she was only kidding, but it seems to improve Lexa’s mood nonetheless. Clarke gives up on the radio after fiddling with it for the first ten minutes, and opts for the white noise of their open windows. The Saab she’s been driving since her senior year of high school has an unreliable cooling system, but the weather is comfortably warm, and the breeze is nice.

It’s several minutes of comfortable silence before Lexa says, “Thank you for joining me, by the way. And for offering to drive.”

“I wasn't even sure you had a license, growing up in New York.” Clarke teases, producing a slow, confused scowl from Lexa.

“Clarke, I literally drive for work. To your place of business. Twice a week.”

“Fair point,” Clarke laughs, always eager to push Lexa’s buttons. “Anyway, I think we can both acknowledge that I basically steamrolled my way into this trip. I’m sure you would have rather come alone, but you're just too nice to say no.”

Lexa looks over at her so earnestly, Clarke has to fight to keep her eyes on the road. “That’s not true. I enjoy hanging out with you.”

Clarke’s hands grip the wheel, sliding its ridges along her sweaty palms once or twice. The sensation isn’t calming but she needs a distraction from Lexa’s gentle honesty.

“And, I’m not really that nice,” Lexa continues, sipping from her iced tea.

Clarke glances in her direction. “You're nice to me.”

Lexa considers her for a moment before Clarke’s eyes are back on the road. “I know. Why is that?”

“Uh, because I’m fucking awesome? And, in case you forgot, I’m your best friend in the entire
Lexa laughs lightly, fiddling the straw in her drink. “You might be my only friend in the Commonwealth.”

“Not true. You have Lincoln.” Lexa acquiesces with a short nod. “And,” Clarke says with a quick glance, “you have Costia.”

Lexa nods again while taking a drink. When she swallows, she smiles towards Clarke and then the windshield. “Yeah.”

Clarke rarely knows what to do with Lexa’s reticence, but particularly where Costia is concerned, and decides to change the subject.

Lexa beats her to the punch. “I’ve never been to a fruit farm.”

“Didn’t you grow up in The Big Apple?”

Lexa groans, “Clarke, that was a terrible joke.”

Clarke laughs, often the only person amused by her poor humor and never bothered by it. “If you think that was bad, it’s gonna be a long day for you.”

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The farm is absolutely beautiful and the owners could not be more gracious hosts to Clarke and Lexa, taking time to answer questions and share the ins and outs of fruit farming. Lexa is diligently attentive, asks all the right questions, and offers all the right accolades which result in Mark and Ellen shining with pride and adoration by the end of their tour. Clarke had expected no less. They are invited repeatedly to come back and visit. She has always preferred the coast, but it had been a gorgeous afternoon to spend in the countryside. Admittedly, having Lexa as her traveling partner didn’t hurt either.

Clarke checks her watch as they find their way back to the car. “Do you have to get back?”

Lexa shrugs, opening the passenger door and addressing Clarke over the roof of the car. “Not really. What did you have in mind?”

“Lunch?”

“Sure, I could eat.”

Clarke rolls her eyes and slides into the front seat. “Your enthusiasm astounds.”

Lexa doesn’t comment but is smiling as she gets into the passenger seat and reaches for the seat belt. “Do you know a good place to eat around here?”

Clarke checks her mirrors, finds her sunglasses in the console between them, and throws the car into reverse. “I don’t know this area at all, actually. But, if you’re up for it, I thought we could drive out to Essex. They have a great little place to eat along the water.”

“Yeah, cool. Sounds good.” Lexa looks over as she clicks into her seat belt, just before Clarke has put the car into drive, and says, “Was that enthusiastic enough for you?”

Clarke narrows her eyes and throws the car into first gear, hoping her disdain for Lexa’s sarcasm translates even through her dark sunglasses. It’s another few minutes of Clarke getting her
bearings, finding the way back to the highway, and starting their return to the coast.

“So,” Clarke says, “what did you think of the farm?”

“It was beautiful. I’d definitely like to go back. Costia would love it.”

Clarke tsks. “Why didn’t you bring her?”

Lexa smiles. “Costia is sort of short on free time as of now. She’s just entered a PhD program at BU, and there’s all these preliminary responsibilities and obligations she has to fulfill before the term officially begins this Fall. She spends most days in Boston, actually.”

About 12 different things click into place for Clarke, and she almost doesn’t recover from all the light bulbs exploding over her head.

“So, that’s why you moved. From Brooklyn?”

“Yeah,” Lexa nods. “Costia was accepted to this sort of exclusive program at the university, an amazing opportunity for her, and she couldn’t turn it down.”

“That’s great! What is she studying?” Clarke asks, honestly interested in hearing about Lexa’s amazing, intelligent, and probably gorgeous girlfriend. She can’t wait to tell Raven how fucking wrong she had been. Clarke is going to be a stellar best friend.

“Finishing up her degree in Environmental Health. This program focuses on research and investigation into communities with exposure-related health outcomes,” Lexa recites.

“Damn. That’s an impressive mouthful.”

Lexa’s whole face warms. “Costia is impressively driven,” she says with the pride of a loved one.

Clarke is ready to ask another follow-up, finally feeling as if she’s gained some tread on Lexa’s life, when she abruptly changes the subject. They spend the remainder of the drive discussing weather patterns of the Northeast and how they differ between Boston and New York. Clarke tries not to feel purposely excluded.

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When Clarke is two-thirds of the way through a lunchtime lager, enjoying the sunny deck seating and marshy river views, she starts feeling much better.

“Which one is that again?” Lexa asks, indicating to Clarke’s pint glass with an empty shell. They have been working their way through an order of coconut curry mussels, and she’d insisted Lexa take the last two.

“South End Lager from Queen’s City.” She extends the pint towards the middle of their long, slender table. “Wanna try?”

Lexa hesitates, as if she didn’t know they had reached a point in their budding friendship where swapping drinks is acceptable, but Clarke is restless with the pace of things. She makes friends hard and fast, and she can sense that Lexa, despite her reservations, is almost desperate for friendship. Clarke raises her eyebrows and wiggles the glass encouragingly, watching the beer slosh up the sides before Lexa finally accepts. She may be closed off and protective, but if there’s one way to get Lexa to step up, it’s a direct challenge. She reciprocates the gesture as she takes a small sip, carefully sliding her own glass towards Clarke along the wooden slats of their table.
“Not bad for a lager,” Lexa assesses. “I don’t usually favor them.” She watches Clarke take her glass and bring it to her lips. Lexa swallows before adding, “That’s the Notch Pils, by the way.”

Clarke has a smug smile as she swallows. “Oh, I know. Me and this little beauty go way back.”

She pretends to hug Lexa’s beer against her cheek before returning it. Lexa laughs into her napkin, wiping away remnants of Clarke’s lager from her mouth. Clarke returns to her own beer, finishing all but the last sip, as their server approaches to clear the bowls of residual curry and empty mussels shells.

“What did you guys think of the mussels?” the woman asks.

“They were great.”

“Yes, so good. Thank you,” Clarke adds.

“Another round of drinks?”

“No, thank you,” Lexa answers.

“Have another,” Clarke insists. “I’m driving—you should totally exploit that.”

The woman laughs and scoops up Clarke’s empty pint glass from the table before looking back to Lexa.

Although she deliberates, Lexa seems more confident in her decision when she looks to Clarke and says, “Another Notch would be great. Thank you.” The waitress bobs her head before walking away at which point Lexa adds, “We can split it.”

Clarke’s answering smile practically eclipses the sun.

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“So, Costia won’t lock you out of the house after consuming all this seafood, right?”

Clarke had ordered the haddock sandwich but insisted Lexa try the lobster roll, which now sits nearly obliterated on Lexa’s plate.

She shakes her head, finishing a bite before saying, “She actually feels bad I don’t get to eat it more often, but it’s just not worth the risk. We tend to stay away from places that focus on seafood as a precaution.”

Clarke’s eyes widen as she breathes out. “She chose a helluva place to go to school. How bad is her allergy?”

Lexa picks up her beer glass, studying its contents. “Pretty fatal, actually.”

Clarke’s eyes bulge. “Jesus, really?”

“No, not really,” Lexa laughs.

“Ugh,” Clarke frowns. She kicks Lexa’s shoe under the table which only encourages her laughter at getting a rise out of Clarke.

“I don’t know,” she eventually shrugs. “She has an epi pen that we’ve never had to use.”
“And, you’ve been together three years so … pretty good odds then,” Clarke calculates, tipping her pint glass until Lexa clinks hers against it with a small tilt of her head.

“So,” Lexa draws the word out, drumming her fingers along the table. It’s a movement and a lead-in that has Clarke’s heart rate speeding up for no good reason. “You’ve known Octavia since childhood. You met Lincoln through Indra. And you let Murphy take you to prom.”

“Are we just annotating my friendships now?” Clarke says.

Lexa takes a drink of beer then asks, “What about Raven?”

Clarke exhales, her mouth drawing an amused arch as she leans back into her chair. “Oh. Raven is my ex.”

Lexa’s eyes go comically wide, her eyebrows nearly reaching her hairline, and Clarke can’t believe she didn’t have her camera ready to capture this reaction for posterity. She’s chuckling softly, enjoying the last dregs of her pilsner even as Lexa tries to pretend she didn’t just let her jaw drop to the wooden tabletop. The server returns with the bill in the midst of it, and Clarke manages to slip her credit card into the woman’s hand without Lexa’s dispute because she’s still trying to recover.

“Didn’t see that one coming, did you?” Clarke taunts.

Lexa doesn’t even try to hide it. “No, I definitely did not. Raven is your—”

“Ex, yes,” Clarke laughs. “As in, ex-girlfriend. As in, our vaginas used to spend quality time together.”

Two silver-haired women at a table behind them turn around abruptly, making eye contact with Lexa who immediately covers her face with one hand and slumps in her seat.

“Jesus, Clarke.”

Lexa’s embarrassment only serves to further Clarke’s enjoyment of the moment, but she eventually grabs her keys and stands, having had her fun. “I’m gonna pee before we go. I’ll meet you outside.”

“Okay,” Lexa nods, still holding her unfinished beer and looking around their table distractedly. “Where is the bill?”

“Paid,” Clarke rushes to say before quickly making her way off the patio.

“Clarke.”

Moments later Clarke finds Lexa outside, leaned up against the building with one black sneaker propped against the grey clapboards. She’s looking off across the road, not even facing the water. Not even on her phone. Clarke comes to stand next to her and Lexa looks up at her, blinking, before standing fully, hands in her front pockets while Clarke studies her face.

Clarke gasps in realization. “Oh my god, Lexa.”

“What?”

“You were picturing it, weren’t you?”

Lexa can’t even answer with a straight face, her rosy cheeks beneath the rims of her sunglasses a dead giveaway. “No.”
"You were. You were totally standing out here thinking about Raven and me."

"Clarke. I was not thinking about anything." Lexa insists, grasping for her reliable tone of formality and failing miserably.

“Liar,” Clarke smirks, too pleased with herself to feign offense and effectively stalk back towards the car. Knowing that Lexa is in her wake, Clarke sways her hips instead.

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Chapter End Notes

Do not be fooled by these dummies trying to figure out their collective shit. This story will contain virtually zero angst.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Clarke is openly opposed to most, if not all forms of physical fitness.

And yet, she finds herself agreeing to a morning run with Lexa on a Sunday in July when the temperatures are surprisingly mild. Lexa’s commitment to her rigorous fitness routine is an obvious detriment to their friendship, though Clarke has a hard time remembering why as she discreetly ogles Lexa’s workout attire. She’s mandated a series of warm-up stretches prior to their run, correcting Clarke’s half-assed efforts at limbering up her hamstrings like a goddamn drill sergeant.

“Clarke, your mockery of these exercises only serves to increase your risk of injury.”

Clarke had intended this to be a casual, low-impact run, and Lexa’s unforgiving intensity would be super annoying if Clarke weren’t one hundred percent distracted by the amount of skin on display in front of her. Lexa’s black workout shirt is somehow both loose and fitted, large geometric patterns cut into its back and sides to expose her shoulder blades and heather grey sports bra. Her shorts are hardly less distracting—what appear to be relics from a high school track team, maroon mesh with white piping that still bears remnants of a fading mascot—and then just legs for fucking days.

Lexa links her hands above her head one final time, pulling to stretch out her sides in both directions. “Okay, ready?”

They’ve met near the water, where the harbor dips under Memorial Bridge and begins its expanse towards the ocean. Clarke is jumping in place, shaking the tension from her arms, and trying to maintain the appearance of someone who has been running their whole life. Lexa, of course, sees through the act and smirks at Clarke’s boisterous: “Let’s do this!”

“We’ll run alongside the river until we reach the park then loop around to pick up the rail trail. Sound good?”

“Yeah, yeah. Cool,” she responds with limited enthusiasm, quickly doing a mental calculation of the route Lexa has suggested.

A quarter of a mile in, Clarke makes the mistake of asking, “How far are we going?”

“I figured we would just run until you collapse,” Lexa says, a taunting smile on her lips when she looks over.

“I’ll have you know I have remarkable stamina.”

For once in her life, Clarke hadn’t intended the double-entendre but can’t backtrack fast enough before Lexa is looking over at her suggestively.

“I’ll be sure to confirm that with Raven.”

“Dude!” Clarke shoves Lexa’s bicep, forcing her into the grass for a few steps before she regains her footing on the asphalt. “Honestly, though, I feel faint already,” Clarke pants, despite the rather moderate pace they’re keeping.
“It’s been less than fifteen minutes, Clarke.”

“Let’s go get brunch! My treat?” Clarke is entirely too hopeful, looking over to Lexa who refuses her eye contact.

It’s the perfect opportunity for Clarke’s eyes to travel down Lexa’s sharp jawline and then her neck, dipping finally to Lexa’s collarbone that’s being framed by the cut of her shirt. Clarke’s “best friend” mentality has not yet brought her traitorous eyes to heel, but she’s working on it. She gets her eyes back to the pavement in front of them when the small jingling of a bicycle bell sounds over her shoulder.

“We’ll take a break at the High Street bridge, okay?” Lexa says some moments later.

They’ve chosen an overly manicured trail that carves through the city, following the path of the old train tracks that were long ago dug up and rerouted. The paved trail is maintained by the city’s Arts and Gardens association who keep it overflowing with giant variegated hostas, pale yellow day lilies, crowded beds of wild flowers, and random pieces of sculpted, metallic art. It winds its way under foot bridges, sunken behind rows of historic houses, and ends at the old train station. Clarke has utilized the trail previously but only as a convenient cut-through from one area of town to another.

“Yeah, sure. I’m fine,” Clarke lies.

Clarke is not fine; she has, in fact, never ran for fifteen consecutive minutes in her entire adult life. But Lexa is panting quietly beside her, these small puffs of controlled air leaving her lips that are making Clarke feel like she could champion the Boston Marathon.

“Good. Let’s pick up the pace a bit.”

Clarke lets her head drop in defeat even as Lexa sprints off ahead of her by a few feet. “Fuck.” When she looks up again, she’s got a full, uninterrupted view of Lexa from behind, and that is apparently motivation enough. *Fuck*.

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“Clarke, get up.” Lexa kicks the toe of her sneaker for the fourth time, Clarke’s foot bobbing at the ankle her only response. “Clarke. There is literally a bench ten feet from you.”

“Can’t,” Clarke mutters. “Dead.”

There is an exceptionally steep set of stairs at High Street, giving access to the trail from street level, and Clarke has found a resting place at its base. Sprawled across the asphalt as if she is attempting a snow angel. When Lexa had said they would ‘take a break’ what she meant was ‘take a break from running to commit suicide on repetitive stair climbs like we’re training for Ironman.’ Clarke’s eyes are closed but she knows Lexa is standing over her from the shadow she casts across Clarke’s face.

“We can get brunch,” Lexa tries, and if Clarke’s muscles were still able to function, she would crack a smile at Lexa’s desperate bribe. “Clarke, *come on.*” Lexa then nudges Clarke’s calf, but even the brief contact of Lexa’s skin against hers isn’t enough to rouse her.
“Tell Octavia I loved her the most. Tell Lincoln—”

“You’re so fucking dramatic,” Lexa huffs, squatting down to her haunches.

That is definitely enough to have Clarke squinting open her eyes to the sun, catching Lexa giving encouraging smiles to an older couple walking past who wear matching expressions of concern. Lexa is practically demure when it comes to using profanity, so this is an exceptional break from the norm. Clarke is delighted.

“Okay. I’ll get up,” Clarke struggles to say. “But you’re going to have to carry me back.”

“Not a chance,” Lexa smiles, reaching down to grab both of Clarke’s hands and pull her up.

Clarke’s legs have turned to jelly, only part of which is the result of Lexa’s strong grasp and the way she wordlessly steadies her as Clarke stumbles towards a nearby wooden bench. They are quiet for a few moments, the sun stretching high over a sparse canopy of grey birch trees.

“Why did you agree to a run if you hate cardio?” Lexa asks after a moment. Amused, but also genuinely curious as Clarke’s head lolls along the back of the bench to look at her.

Clarke rifles through all the honest responses she is absolutely barred from saying aloud and settles on a minor white lie.

“I don’t hate it,” Clarke starts, pressing on despite Lexa’s scoff of scepticism. “I just didn’t anticipate a regime worthy of fucking basic training.”

Lexa checks the tracker on her wrist. “We didn’t even make it three miles.”


Lexa sighs, shaking her head, and they again fall silent to the sounds of birds and rustling leaves above.

“What do they have Costia doing today?” Clarke eventually asks.

“Assembling research teams, I think. She finally gets a few days off this week,” Lexa shares with what sounds like some relief.

“Oh, good.” Clarke finally sits up, testing the strength in her limbs as she readjusts on the bench. “Did you decide on a place for the big night?”

Lexa and Costia’s three year anniversary. Dinner. Wine. Romance. Ostentatious gifts that Clarke hopes to fucking god don’t include rings of any sort.

“Not yet.”

“What about Salt and Smoke?”

Lexa’s face scrunches in confusion. “The burger place?”

“Yeah, but it’s like classy burgers. Great list of cocktails, great whiskey menu, craft beers, obviously,” Clarke smirks. “It’s fun and fancy with minimal pretension, and the owner and his husband are good friends of mine.”

“That could be good,” Lexa contemplates. “I’ll check out their menu. Thanks.” Her feet are still bouncing against the asphalt with untapped energy she must keep on reserve because for all that
Clarke is swearing off fitness for life, Lexa looks anxious to run another 40 miles. “Would it be alright if I—”

Lexa’s hands are alternately gripping and tapping her own kneecaps, and Clarke bumps their elbows together, dislodging the fidgeting one on Lexa’s right knee. “Go on and finish your run without me.”

Lexa looks over, biting the inside of her lower lip. “You sure?”

“Yeah,” Clarke exhales, slumped inelegantly as she is along their shared bench. “I’ll get Raven to take me to brunch.”

“Okay. Thanks,” Lexa smiles, a curve to her mouth that Clarke has started to feel personally responsible for.

Clarke coughs out a laugh. “For what? Slowing you down and being dramatic?”

“An excellent summation of our friendship.”

Clarke effectively shoves a smirking Lexa off the bench.

She is laughing lightly as she stands and says, “See you tomorrow?”

“If I’m still alive at that point, yes,” Clarke answers. “What is Indra sending me in August? Did she ever work out the blend on her smokehouse ale?”

“Guess you’ll have to survive until tomorrow to find out,” Lexa taunts, walking backwards and magically producing earbuds from an undisclosed location.

Clarke growls, attempting to stand. “Lexa! No! This is not how this arrangement works! I need the inside scoop!”

“Bye, Clarke,” Lexa waves, turning a moment later to jog away into the shadowy underpass of High Street’s footbridge.

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“So let me get this straight: you’ve never met her, she doesn’t exist on any of Lexa’s scant social media profiles, and she’s never even answered a phone call from her in your presence? Sent off a text message with, like, hearts and fireworks emojis and shit?” Raven is meticulously dissecting an omelet as she hypothesizes, “Maybe she doesn’t exist.”

Clarke finishes her second mimosa and sets the empty glass back onto their outdoor brunch table. “First of all, please stop internet stalking random people.”

“Lexa is not random people, Clarke. She’s your ‘friend,’” Raven says with an air of disbelief, hooking her fingers around the word friend like she’s been trained to refer to Lexa this way. Which, to be fair, she has.

Clarke carries on, ignoring Raven’s commentary. “Second of all, Costia definitely exists. You should see the way Lexa’s face lights up when she talks about her.” Clarke forces down all her sullen negativity, exhaling in determination. “It’s actually really sweet.”

Raven gives her a brief, pitying look before flagging down their server and ordering more booze.
Clarke manages a smile. She really, fucking loves her.

“I told her about us, by they way,” she says casually.

Raven finishes another bite of eggs, looking pleased. “What did she have to say about that?”

Clarke laughs, remembering Lexa’s initial, stunned reaction. “I think her head nearly exploded.”

Raven tilts her head in consideration, nodding a few times. “We always did tend to have that effect on people.” She seems to weigh her next words carefully, her tone more precise when she asks, “And Jake?”

Clarke looks down to her plate and clears her throat. “No.” She looks back to Raven after a pause. “No, we didn’t get into any of that.”

Raven nods again, and Clarke can already hear what she’s about to say. “I miss him.”

Clarke breathes out, answering like a refrain. “I miss him too.”

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Of course it happens on a Wednesday.

The bar is ghosted, even regulars are dropping off and heading home early. Octavia sent eighty percent of the staff home two hours ago in favor of tending bar solo and forcing Clarke to play bar back. They’ve been hunched over the morning paper’s crossword puzzle for thirty minutes when a crowd of rambunctious women burst through the front door. This is clearly not their first watering hole of the evening, and at least four of them are apparently excited for shots. It’s 8:30 and Clarke wants to die.

“Jesus Christ,” Octavia grumbles, leaving Clarke to work out 39 across. She throws some cocktail napkins onto the bar counter and greets their new guests. “Ladies, what can I get for everyone?”

Clarke catches snippets of ‘promotion,’ and ‘impromptu,’ and ‘Jaeger,’ which she ignores in favor of checking her phone. A text from her mother that she will ignore until the morning. A missed call from an old friend in California, who she’ll call once they close for the night. And an image from Raven—a screen grab off an alumni webpage from Columbia that is captioned: she exists after all.

Clarke’s stomach dips as her thumb hovers over the thumbnail image, a group shot of maybe 30 people, when the front door opens again and in walks Lexa.

Clarke’s face lights up at the unexpected sight of her, but her eyes quickly follow the line of Lexa’s left arm where it trails behind her, a hand linked to Lexa’s own.

Costia is tall, inching over Lexa by a generous margin which is easily her least intimidating feature because Costia is criminally attractive. She mirrors Lexa’s penchant for pulling off a casually stunning aesthetic, looking as if she blindly grabbed an outfit from the back of her closet but also walked off a runway during New York Fashion Week. In the midst of Clarke processing Costia’s looks, she then remembers that Lexa’s girlfriend is also brilliant, educated, and driven to saving lives and probably the entire planet from imminent destruction.

Clarke desperately hopes she hasn’t been openly staring, but Lexa’s voice is too full of amusement when she says, “Hey,” for Clarke to think she hasn’t noticed.

The first thing that flies out of Clarke’s mouth when she rounds the counter to greet them is, “What are you doing here?” Which is obviously the wrong way to express her surprise because a shadow
briefly clouds Lexa’s happy face until Clarke remembers basic human etiquette and extends her hand towards Costia. “Hi! You must be Costia.”

Costia gently drops Lexa’s fingers from her own in order to clasp Clarke’s hand.

“Hey, Clarke,” she says warmly, familiar and genuine as if she and Clarke have been friends for ages. “It is so nice to finally meet you. This place,” she says admirably, casting her eyes around the bar, “is amazing.”

She is still gently holding Clarke’s hand in a slow-moving handshake, and Clarke finds herself gaping uselessly until Costia releases her grasp.

“Oh, thank you. It’s—” Clarke exhales. “Dockside has been a part of the city landscape for a long time, and I suppose I’m just taking my turn at the helm.”

“Well, you’re killing it—the interior is beautiful, and the location is amazing. Plus, a woman running the ship?” Costia is jubilant where Clarke is still stunned. “No wonder it’s doing so well.”

“Oh, Octavia totally runs this place—I can assure you my managerial role is a total sham.” Clarke demures in good humor, practically flushing from such an onslaught of open praise. “I can’t take credit for the location either, but yeah. Thank you—we’ve transformed the design and the overall concept quite a bit over the past few years.”

When Clarke had taken over at Dockside, it had been a carbon copy of several other seaside bars: serving cheap fried seafood platters and domestic light beers almost exclusively. With over a hundred small batch breweries in the area, it seemed criminal not to showcase them all in one, unique location. She phased out the deep fried clam rolls for small plates of locally sourced ingredients, and the bar has been garnering low-level acclaim ever since.

Costia’s dark eyes keep roving around the space while Clarke tries not to feel incredibly vulnerable and Lexa remains quietly observant between them.

“You’ve definitely maintained a sense of the building’s history despite its modern appeal,” Costia is saying. “Lexa says it’s the best stop on her route, and now I can totally see why.”

Clarke’s heart rate spikes, her gaze landing on Lexa in an instant, who looks officially called out and awkward for maybe the first time since Clarke has met her. Clarke grins, feeling buoyed by Lexa’s apparent favoritism, and decides to throw her a lifeline.

“Yeah, well, she has to say that, contractually.”

Lexa’s answering smile looks appreciative, and the curve to her mouth—even in Costia’s presence—still feels like it belongs to Clarke.

“Right,” Lexa says. “Lincoln was pretty explicit about that from day one.”

Clarke smiles at the memory, and Lexa’s eyes dance with what looks like fond recollections of Clarke acting like a completely inept human being during their initial introduction. Lexa looks away after a moment, a different strand of fondness taking over as she looks up to Costia, and Clarke quickly remembers her place.

“What are you two drinking? Something bubbly? Celebratory?” Clarke offers with forced enthusiasm.

Costia grins at Lexa, reclaiming her fingers. “Babe?”
“Do you have the Stillhouse?” Lexa asks, looking back to Clarke.

Clarke swallows harshly, tasting the iron will of her emotions as they scrape against the back of her throat. She will keep her shit in check, play gracious host to her guests, and reconsider her stupid plan to befriend Lexa at a later date.

“Yeah,” Clarke smiles. “Two?”

“Yes,” Lexa answers. “Thank you, Clarke.”

Clarke bobs her head towards the mostly empty bar. “Find yourselves a table. I’ll bring them over.”

She doesn’t wait around to see the way Lexa leads them further into the bar. The way her hand comes to rest at the small of Costia’s back. The way Costia leans down to whisper something privately into the shell of Lexa’s ear. By the time Clarke is back behind the bar counter, Octavia has served the pack of women now entertaining themselves and is awaiting Clarke with a questioning look and arms crossed high over her chest.

“The girlfriend?”

Clarke doesn’t stop on her mission to locate the small-batch whiskey bottle, clinking two small mason jars together as she grabs them with one hand. “Yup.”

Octavia moves aside, avoiding Clarke’s brisk movements. “You good?”

Clarke chews at the side of her lip as she internally counts off the first pour. “Yup.”

“Clarke.”

Once she has the second one poured, both with a large globe of ice resting in the honey-colored whiskey, Clarke makes for the end of the bar with both glasses in one hand. Octavia stops her with a firm hand against her shoulder, and Clarke practically shakes her off.

“Clarke. Let me take them.” Octavia isn’t asking, but it still sounds like an offer.

“I’ve got it.” Clarke’s eyes burn where they are locked with Octavia’s, but she refuses to admit this is something beyond which she can handle.

“Take a walk outside. I know you’ve got it.” Octavia pries the drinks from Clarke’s grip. “Just take a breather.”

Clarke exhales, and she hates that the air stutters as it leaves her chest. Her eyes cut quickly to the booth where Lexa and Costia have settled, Lexa entranced and grinning as Costia tells a story with wild gesticulations and a broad smile. Clarke closes her eyes. Her friend is happy and settled and celebrating the love and commitment she shares with an incredible woman. Costia and Lexa are content and enamoured, clearly. And, Clarke needs to walk away.

She clears her throat, giving Octavia her nonverbal consent to deliver the drinks as she slips through the narrow hallway behind the bar, past her office, and out the back door. She’s never been a smoker, but if there were ever a time to take up the habit this might be it. She briefly considers checking underneath the discarded lobster cages where she knows Murphy hides his Parliaments.

Clarke takes several steadying breaths once she’s outside, the salty sea air instantly calming. She won’t waste time chastising herself for wishing things were different for her and Lexa. She’s only
human, and Lexa is … Lexa. Still, meeting Costia is an important step in firming up reality for Clarke when it comes to the complications of this newfound friendship. She won’t apologize for her feelings that may extend beyond the realms of that friendship, but she won’t stay mired in guilt and resentment because of them either.

Clarke can admit there’s an undeniable chemistry she shares with Lexa, but if that is never explored then she is going to be okay with it. She has certainly endured far worse.

She can do this. She can keep her attraction to Lexa at bay in lieu of a great friendship, which is bound to outlast some passing fancy. Clarke takes less than ten minutes to pull her shit together and marches back into the bar with new determination.

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An unexpected late crowd has filled up three or four of the high-top tables, the group of business women now mingling with some of the fishermen who have been loyal to Dockside since before Clarke was born, and Octavia is a streak of fast-paced efficiency.

Clarke jumps in to help where she can, but Octavia is in her most impressive state as she services the bar single-handedly. “Need a keg on Two Roads—can you get it?” Octavia asks as she tops off two pints of chai porter.

“Double IPA or pilsner?”

“IPA.”

“Got it. Anything else?” Clarke is already making her way towards the swinging door of the storage area when Octavia rattles off a few of the canned beers they offer.

She’s two steps away from pushing into stock and storage at the rear of the building when a finger grazes her elbow and she whirls on the spot.

“Hi,” Lexa says. And then quickly reconsiders, taking a step back. “Sorry, you're busy,”

“No, it’s fine,” Clarke smiles, somewhat out of breath and still unscrambling her brain from Costia’s unannounced entrance into her bar, but nevertheless happy Lexa has sought her out. She makes a regretful expression. “Octavia needs a pony keg, though.”

Lexa straightens, snapping into work mode and holding open the swinging door for Clarke to walk through. “Let me help.”

“No!” Clarke opposes, her eyes wide. “You’re on a date, Lexa. You're celebrating with your girlfriend! You can’t—”

Lexa ignores Clarke’s protests, breezing into the rear storage of Dockside with the practiced ease of someone who has navigated its depths regularly. Clarke eventually follows, somehow both perturbed and touched by Lexa’s insistence.

She tries again with a different tactic: legalese. Lexa won’t be able to argue with sound logic. “You’ve been drinking. You shouldn’t even be back here, and you definitely shouldn’t be handling any product.”

Lexa rolls her eyes, heading straight for the kegs. “I’m extremely well-balanced in general and
have hardly had anything to drink, Clarke.”

That doesn’t sit well with Clarke, nor does she necessarily trust that Lexa is being absolutely truthful. Lexa should be drunk. She should be giddy with champagne and in the throes of celebration over her remarkable, brilliant, beautiful girlfriend. She shouldn’t be standing with Clarke in a darkened stockroom that smells of stale beer.

A wrinkle forms along her brow as Clarke stops arguing long enough to question, “What are you even doing here? Shouldn't you be, I don’t know, on a romantic stroll along the water or sharing a bottle of pink bubbles at the wine bar instead of at work?”

Lexa’s movements seems to slow, and Clarke fears she’s said too much, her honest critique somehow embarrassing Lexa. Lexa’s hand sweeps over the rows of kegs then, and Clarke realizes she’s only waiting for Clarke to tell her which one to grab.

So, fucking stubborn.

“Oh. Two Roads IPA.” Clarke clears her throat. “Thanks.”

Lexa grabs an orange miniature dolly truck and easily hoists the keg on top. “Costia has so little time to explore the city or even to just hang out at our apartment because of school.” Lexa rests her forearms onto the rubber handles of the dolly. “She told me over dinner that she feels like she’s missing out on my life here. That it’s almost as if we’re living separately now.”

Lexa exhales and Clarke swallows for lack of anything productive to say. It’s the most intimate thing Lexa has ever shared, let alone about Costia. On their anniversary no less. She wonders if the whiskey and whatever drinks Lexa had over dinner aren’t responsible for her sudden honesty, or if this is some marked development in their friendship. Lexa trusts her, and for once Clarke stumbles to find an appropriate response.

She fails miserably. “So you brought her to meet me?”

Lexa’s face warms, her faraway look vanishing as her eyes center on Clarke. She smiles as if she finds Clarke’s confusion endearing. “In a way. I brought her to Dockside, specifically. And to a few other Trikru vendors that I work with directly.”

“Oh, right. Right.” Clarke closes her eyes in humiliation. “Your work.”

“She wanted to see my life.” Lexa lifts one shoulder, looking about. “This is my life now.”

Clarke nods, dumbly forgetting to respond because Lexa has confounded her again with her simple honesty.

“She was excited to meet you too, of course.”

Clarke scoffs, turning to yank open the door of a large, stainless steel walk-in cooler, packed to the gills with cases of beer. “Sure she was.”

“She was,” Lexa insists, her grin lopsided and lingering as Clarke reemerges from the cooler with three six-packs of canned beer. “I’ve mentioned you at least once or twice conversationally.”

Clarke arches an eyebrow. “Once or twice, huh?”

Lexa shrugs, helping Clarke arrange the multi-colored cans into a cardboard box atop the keg so they can be rolled out all at once. “No more than three times.”
They face each other with matching smiles while Clarke’s hands settle on a case of beer and Lexa’s arms rest again along the dolly’s rubber grips. In this moment, Clarke thinks maybe she can be okay with whatever this is. Whatever she and Lexa mean to each other, with Lexa’s eyes locked with hers in shared amusement, she can handle anything. She can even be okay with Costia.

Clarke will forfeit a relationship with Lexa in every other capacity if she can keep just this one thing: this shared smile between them. Clarke can be a goddamn saint about the loss of everything else if she’s allowed to be selfish with Lexa like this.

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Octavia is only mildly annoyed with her when she returns with restocked beer after fifteen minutes when it should have taken no more than five. Octavia clocks Lexa emerging from the stock room in Clarke’s shadow, but offers only a cursory tick of her eyebrow to indicate she’s noticed. Clarke reloads the canned beer fridge in record speed, wipes the counters, and busses two racks of glasses into the kitchen to assuage her guilt.

She avoids Lexa’s table, avoids so much as looking in its general direction, and focuses solely on work. By 9:45, the bar has again reached a lull, and Clarke has returned to her crossword. A shadow falls over the puzzle, and she looks up to see Lexa leaning an elbow onto the countertop.

“We’re taking off. Costia is just using the restroom.”

Clarke stands up, tucking strands of hair behind her ears. “Okay. Well, thanks for coming by. It was really nice meeting her, Lexa.” Clarke breathes out, and smiles with some practiced determination. “She’s really great.”

“I think the feeling is mutual,” Lexa nods. “She hasn’t stopped talking about the wings at the restaurant you recommended and how much she loves this place.”

Clarke returns Lexa’s nod. “Good.”

Costia strides towards them from the bathrooms, a smile on her face that could light up the entire city. She slips an arm around Lexa’s waist but keeps her eyes on Clarke.

“Thank you so much for the dinner rec, Clarke. I want to have those wings as my last meal. They are—”

“Awesome. I know, right?” Clarke says. “I won’t tell you how often I get them delivered here. I’m glad you guys had a nice time.”

“It was perfect,” Lexa tells her.

Clarke thinks again about Murphy’s cigarette stash and debates the pitfalls of late onset nicotine addiction. She looks away from Lexa instead.

“This has been an overdue introduction, Costia, but it was great finally meeting you.”

“Yes! Same to you—Lex habitually compartmentalizes, and I’m so fucking busy in Boston that we sometimes forget to, like, stop and connect all the moving pieces, you know?”

“Yes, totally,” Clarke nods, pretending she’s processed anything Costia has said beyond the sight of her hand and the slow circles it’s been rubbing against Lexa’s hip which Clarke has been trying to ignore.
“Can I call you a car?” Clarke blurts out, apropos of nothing other than to get out of her own head.

“We’re walking distance,” Lexa offers.

This is new information, and Clarke’s eyes widen by a fraction. “Oh. Cool.” She always knew Lexa was in her vicinity, she just wasn’t sure of the exact proximity.

“Yeah, we’re just above that British candy shop,” Costia offers, quick to tack on, “Oh! And we’re hosting a game night! You should totally come.”

Clarke cannot reconcile her perception of Lexa with a person who participates in game nights, let alone offers to host one. In the time it takes Clarke to wrap her head around Costia’s invitation and an image of Lexa preparing bowls of nuts and setting up a Monopoly board, Costia is speaking again.

“Please come,” she pleads sincerely. “They’ve granted me a grand total of four days off in August before the semester officially starts, and I’m determined to have fun. We have no friends, but Lincoln will be there and maybe some people from my research team.”

Clarke hesitates to accept, wondering how in the hell she would possibly hope to survive spending even more time around Costia, lovely as she is, until Lexa says to her, “You should come.”

At which point Clarke is basically powerless to refuse.

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“You have to come with me.” Clarke is as serious as a funeral procession. “You have to come with me.”

Octavia rolls her eyes. “Why did you even say yes?”

“She totally put me on the spot! How was I going to turn down that invitation without coming off like a complete dick?” Clarke argues, refilling her beer glass with what’s left of her Pilsner Urquell tall boy. “Also did you see her? I have the distinct impression Costia does not often hear the words: no thanks.”

Octavia looks at her as if Clarke is a simple-minded child. “Why didn’t you just say you’d have to check your schedule, giving yourself enough time to come up with a viable excuse to politely decline?”

“Where were you two hours ago when I could have actually used this advice?”

Octavia shrugs, finishing off her three finger pour of bourbon. “Whatever, dude. I’m sure you still would have said yes.”

Clarke sighs in defeat. “Yeah. Because I’m too nice.”

Octavia chuckles, shaking her head. “Nope.”

“Why then?”

Octavia pins her with a pointed look then slides off her barstool. “Because Lexa asked you to be there.”

She’s back behind the bar before Clarke can lodge any protests and pats a sympathetic hand between Clarke’s shoulder blades as she passes.
“I could have said no!” Clarke shouts to Octavia’s retreating back as she disappears into the kitchen. “Wait—does this mean you're coming with me?”

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“You don’t have to feel obligated to come.”

Lexa is sitting at the delivery hatch, her long legs dangling off its steel edge as she sips from a bottle of water. Clarke sits beside her. It’s an overcast Wednesday in late July, and Lexa has just finished her delivery, slightly winded as she drains a good portion of water from the bottle. It’s become a sort of habit for Clarke to join her when she’s finished unloading, bringing Lexa water to drink, and making idle chatter until Lexa has to be on her way to the next vendor.

Costia’s proposed game night is scheduled for the upcoming weekend.

“I don’t feel obligated,” Clarke says, her voice softening in uncertainty as she asks, “Do you want me to be there?”

Lexa looks over at her, her top lip glistening with the water she’s been drinking. “Of course I do.” Lexa licks at her lips and Clarke feels a jolt shoot through her abdomen. “I just know how Costia can be sometimes.”

“And how is that?”

Lexa taps the heels of her sneakers against the concrete wall. “Aggressively friendly?”

Clarke laughs, tilting back until her weight rests on the palms of her hands against the cool, metal grate of the hatch. “No, no, she was nice. Anyway, not like I’m one to talk.”

“Is that something you do, Clarke?” Lexa looks over her shoulder so that Clarke can see the way her mouth is turned up at one end. “Forcibly befriend people? I did not know this about you.”

Clarke kicks her foot out to one side until it knocks against Lexa’s, their feet swaying together for a moment afterwards.

“Whatever. You were basically gagging to be friends with me.”

Lexa hums, still pleased. “I remember it somewhat differently.”

Clarke watches Lexa finish the last of her water, content to sit quietly among the sounds of cars passing by on the bridge, seagulls crying out over the water, and the horns of ferry boats in the near distance as they come into port. After too short a moment, Lexa hops to her feet turning to stand directly above Clarke. She offers Clarke a hand, which Clarke accepts, letting Lexa pull her up until they’re both stood in the hatch opening dusting bits of dirt and gravel from their shorts and hands.

Lexa hands her the empty water bottle. “Thanks.”

“Sure.”

Clarke stands close enough that she can see the distinct color of Lexa’s eyes, the way morning grey clouds have made their green hues shadowed and stormy. Lexa blinks, and Clarke takes a step back to clear her throat. To catch her breath. When she looks back up, Lexa has grabbed onto the handle mounted beside the delivery hatch and is swinging down onto the gravel lot. She reaches up to pull the latch on what was once Lincoln’s truck, and Clarke watches every stretch and pull as if she
hasn’t seen Lexa’s routine multiple times before. The latch clangs loudly as Lexa locks up the truck.

Lexa finds her sunglasses clipped to the front of her tank top and offers Clarke a slight tilt of her head. “See you later, Clarke.”


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Clarke really needs to remember to stop telling Octavia anything ever.

“You're going to her house? And the girlfriend will be there?!”

Clarke is laid across Raven’s sofa, mindlessly watching the six o'clock news while Raven makes them chicken pozole after a long day of work because she is a superhuman.

“Her girlfriend lives there and organized the damn thing so yeah,” Clarke mumbles into the pillow beneath her head, “I’m assuming she’ll be there.”

Raven rounds the couch wielding a slotted spoon and a glass of sparkling rosé. “I have to ask you a serious question.”

Clarke sits up, warily accepting the wine glass that Raven hands her. “What?”

“Can I convince you not to go?”

“Raven—”

Raven brandishes the spoon like a weapon, effectively silencing Clarke. “Okay, follow-up question: can I convince you to wear boiling points glasses?”

The reference is lost on Clarke who scowls in confusion until Raven sighs and plops down onto the coffee table in front of her. “Boiling Points, dude. MTV classic of the early 2000s? Hidden cameras, that sort of shit. Forget it.”

“Do you and Octavia have anything in common besides an obsession with my friendship with Lexa?”

“Barely. The point is: you are essentially dating someone without sleeping with them, allegedly, who also happens to have a girlfriend, who they may or may not be sleeping with—jury’s out on that—but is nevertheless totally into you, and it’s fucking fascinating.”

Clarke struggles to unpack Raven’s nonsense and takes a long sip of wine. “I can’t even begin to pinpoint how wildly inaccurate all of those statements are.”

Raven twists her mouth and narrows her eyes. “I have my sources.”

“Octavia is not a source!” Clarke shouts.

“Not strictly, but she makes for an impressive messenger.”

Clarke hates that she’s intrigued, but Raven has plied her with wine and the promise of Mexican home cooking and she is fucking weak for Raven’s baiting.

“Lexa is not into me, Raven, because she is very much in love with her girlfriend. And, why in the
hell would you think she’s not sleeping with Costia?”

Raven looks like the cat who got the cream. “A buff, bald little bird told O that someone is feeling pretty abandoned in the bedroom as of late.”

The hair on Clarke’s arms stand on end even as she rolls her eyes and takes another sip of wine. “Bullshit. Lincoln would never betray Lexa’s confidence like that. He’s too loyal to go running his mouth about something like that even if it were true. Which it’s not.”

“It was implied,” Raven insists. “I may have embellished on the not having sex part. Anyway, I think our little Octavia is teaching Lincoln a new brand of loyalty.” Raven wiggles her eyebrows, sticking her tongue through her teeth. When Clarke refuses to acknowledge the insinuation, Raven says bluntly, “With her vagina, Clarke. She’s making this dude loyal to her vagina. Sexually.”

Clarke shoves her off, laughing, “I get it, jesus! But you’re wrong again, Reyes. Trust me, there is no way Lexa is not having sex with her girlfriend.”

Raven seems to settle, considering Clarke closely when she asks, “So you met her?”

Clarke exhales with a slow nod. “Yup.”

“And?”

“She’s great. She seemed perfectly lovely.”

“Hot?”

Clarke shakes her head. “Beyond.”

Raven hums. “Okay, so she’s great and super hot, but we can still hate her behind her back, right?”

Clarke laughs, shaking her head. “No.”

“What if we can hate her openly but through insults thinly veiled as compliments?” Clarke again shakes her head. “Come on, Griffin, you know that’s where I excel!”

“Sorry, babe.”

Raven pouts, eventually stealing back Clarke’s wine glass to have a long sip. “This whole Lexa thing—”

“There is no ‘Lexa thing,’” Clarke interjects.

Raven sighs, unconvinced. “I don’t like the idea of you torturing yourself.”

“I’m not!” Clarke laughs. “Lexa and I are fine. As friends. And Costia is nice. Everything is good. I promise.” It’s a poorly attempted lie that doesn’t have Raven fooled for even a second, but Clarke is grateful when Raven doesn’t press for the truth. “Can we eat now? It smells amazing in here and I’m starving.”

Raven stands to kiss the top of Clarke’s forehead. “Comamos, hermosa.”

:::

Later that night on the verge of sleep where she had collapsed into Raven’s sofa after three bowls of pozole and a shared bottle of wine, Clarke’s thoughts meander where they shouldn’t. Her brain is
exhausted but her heart races at the idea of Lexa somehow being unhappy with Costia. She tells herself it’s not possible and feels fairly confident that Lexa is, in fact, quite happy in her relationship. Clarke has seen it with her own eyes.

She turns over to face the back of the couch, disgusted with herself for considering the potential of Lexa’s discontent, even briefly, and how she might benefit from it. Another thought surfaces in its wake, and Clarke is even more disturbed by her own conscience. Raven had leveled a handful of accusations regarding Lexa, and the only one Clarke failed to refute was that she and Lexa are somehow dating.

She scowls at the oversight, rolling over to grab her phone where it sits on the coffee table. It’s after midnight and Raven has work early the next morning, but Clarke is too annoyed to care. She fires off a stern text.

*Lexa and I are not dating.*

Raven was probably sleeping but an ellipsis pops up on Clarke’s screen a second later because Raven is also too headstrong not to have the last word.

*Best Lay of Yo Life: r u texting me from my living room*

Clarke really needs to change her passcode so that Raven will stop giving herself stupid monikers to humiliate Clarke.

*Yes.*

*Best Lay of Yo Life: how many dates have you been on with other people since May?*

Rude. She dates plenty, and calling her out for a random, two-month slump is such a low blow. Clarke frowns at her phone, but she’s not quick enough to respond before Raven is texting again.

*Best Lay of Yo Life: go to sleep. try to stop thinking about Lexa for more than 4 seconds and then we can discuss your relationship status*

Clarke sends Raven 10 middle finger emojis and throws her phone back onto the coffee table. She really needs new friends.

:::

In the morning Clarke wakes to the aroma of freshly pressed coffee. Raven is gone to work at the Navy Yard but has left Clarke an empty mug beside her steaming French press. She inhales the delicious smell wafting throughout Raven’s open kitchen and reaches for the mug. She gets through half a cup of black coffee before she sees the blue post-it note stuck to the face of her phone.

Clarke leans forward on the couch, plucking the note off her phone and sipping coffee as she reads Raven’s precise scrawl.

*You’re better than someone’s part-time girl, Clarke. Don’t settle for less.*

She sighs, slumping back into Raven’s ridiculously comfy sofa and sulking into her cup of coffee. Before locking up and leaving Raven’s place, she begrudgingly scratches out her own note in her far messier script—*I love you too*—and leaves it stuck to Raven’s bathroom mirror.

:::
In the end, being in Lexa and Costia’s apartment isn’t the squeamish torture fest Clarke had drawn up in her mind. Octavia arrives as her stalwart wingwoman, but Clarke finds she doesn’t need her as much as she had anticipated. Not when Costia is busy entertaining and bonding with her newly acquired friends from university, leaving Lexa untethered and more often than not drawn into Clarke’s orbit.

They play a horribly imbalanced game of Trivial Pursuit, during which Costia and the other students from BU wipe the floor with Clarke, Octavia, and Lincoln. Lexa holds her own, and Clarke is reminded yet again that there is plenty about Lexa that she doesn’t know, including her background in Law from Columbia. Clarke’s bruised competitive streak is soothed only by watching Lexa making faces at her from across the room when one of Costia’s genius friends makes obscure scientific references while answering questions and sending the entire game on tangents well over Clarke’s head.

By the end of the night, Clarke is pleasantly buzzed on two IPAs, hugging Costia goodbye, and threatening Lexa with her Pop Culture edition of Trivial Pursuit that she promises to bring the next time. Lexa leans into the doorway of her apartment, hands stuffed into her front pockets, while Clarke locates her purse and shoes.

“Are you okay to drive?” Lexa asks when Clarke is in the narrow stairwell just outside the apartment.

“Lincoln is giving me a ride,” she answers, jutting her thumb towards the stairs where Lincoln and Octavia are waiting for her at street level.

“You mean you don’t just sleep at Dockside?”

“Ha ha.” Clarke rolls her eyes “My place is near the nature conservatory, smartass.”

Lexa looks impressed. “Near the water?”

“Yeah, the harbor is kind of my backyard,” Clarke nods.

“Wow.”

“I’ll show it to you sometime.”

Lexa stands fully, taking her hands out of her pockets only to adjust the neckline of her shirt. “I’d love to see it.”

“Anyway, I should …”

“Yeah, right. Your ride is waiting,” Lexa says, glancing down the stairwell. “I’ll see you Monday, Clarke. Goodnight.”

“Night, Lexa.”

Without ever discussing the reasons behind their mutual decision, they do not hug goodbye.

:::

Octavia and Lincoln step apart when Clarke exits the building onto the sidewalk, subtly placing distance between each other where Clarke thinks there was previously none. Octavia feigns annoyance at Clarke’s loitering upstairs as they start the walk to Lincoln’s SUV.
“Ugh, finally. I thought you two would never stop flirting long enough to say goodbye.”

Clarke quickly backhands Octavia’s stomach, causing her to wince as Clarke cuts her eyes to Lincoln. She hopes he hadn’t been listening, but his face is always so placid he never gives anything away. At the very least Octavia looks remorseful, mouthing a quick ‘sorry’ to Clarke as they walk. Clarke can handle the constant taunting from her two best friends, but she does not need Lincoln being privy to idea that there’s anything unsavoury going on between her and Lexa.

Lincoln takes Octavia home first, which Clarke finds odd until Lincoln infers he’ll be seeing Octavia later once he drops off Clarke and swings by his apartment to check on his cat. They pull alongside the road in front of Clarke’s house—a small, oddly shaped structure that hovers partially over the water—and Lincoln cuts the engine. Clarke’s stomach drops. He definitely overheard Octavia’s inane commentary as they left the party, and now Clarke is going to have to explain to Lincoln that she is in no way a homewrecking trollop out to sabotage Lexa’s relationship.

Or, maybe she’s just paranoid.

“That was fun,” Clarke says, still hopeful she can get away with a quick goodnight and escape into the safety of her house.

Lincoln’s smile is easy. “Yeah. I’ve never felt so uneducated.”

Clarke’s laughter fills up the car. “Oh my god, totally!”

When her laughter dies out, Lincoln says, “So, you and Lexa are getting on pretty well then?”

Clarke’s pulse quickens as she fidgets for the clasp on her seatbelt. “Uh, yeah. Yeah—we um, we get along really well actually.” It’s not a lie. It just feels like such an insignificant sliver of the truth.

“Lexa is a great friend to have.” Lincoln’s voice is as calm and steady as ever. “She’s incredibly loyal. To a fault, at times.”

Clarke swallows, sensing they are having more than one conversation simultaneously. She wishes Lincoln would just lecture her to keep it in her pants already and move on so that they can stop slow waltzing around the giant Lexa-shaped elephant in the car.

“Right. Yeah, I sensed that about her right away.” She sighs, running a hand through her hair. She’s about to make her excuses and exit the car when Lincoln nudges their elbows together across the center console.

He’s grinning like a fool when he tells her, “I told you that you’d like her.”

Clarke stutters out a laugh. “Uh, yeah. What’s not to like?”

*Hair, eyes, wit, smile.*

Lincoln laughs in chorus, holding up his enormous hand for Clarke to hi-five. “Cool. I’m glad it all worked out. Let’s go fishing soon, though. I miss hanging out with you.”

And just like that Clarke’s misplaced anxieties fly out the open window. Perhaps Lincoln had never suspected after all.

“Yeah, well, someone’s been a little preoccupied.”
Lincoln grabs onto Clarke’s hand and drops his head onto his chest. “I have a confession, Clarke: I’m sort of in love with your friend.”

“No shit, babe,” Clarke laughs.

“She’s great.”

“Octavia is one of the raddest fucking people I know,” Clarke concurs emphatically.

Lincoln regards her sincerely, patting her leg once he’s released the grip on her hand. “So are you.”

“Jesus Christ what a lovefest.” Clarke groans, finally reaches for the door latch but pausing to land a kiss onto Lincoln’s temple. “Get out of here and go make-out with my friend already.”

“If you insist,” Lincoln smiles. “Text me your schedule and we’ll hang out.”

“I will. Bye!”

Lincoln waits until Clarke is safely inside the entryway of her house because he’s unapologetically chivalrous even when the crime rate in Clarke’s wealthy, seaside town is basically nonexistent. She kicks off her shoes by the front door, grabs a beer from the fridge, and heads up the spiral staircase at the center of the lofty main room. It empties into her bedroom, which she pads through in search of pajamas before opening the french doors onto her second-story deck. The house’s total square feet is modest, a bit like a loft with extra rooms, but it is waterfront and the house was built to capitalize on the view. Clarke settles into her favorite deck chair, swaddled in a soft cotton blanket, and stares out across the moonlit water.

The downfall of her employment is recurring insomnia, and getting home before 11 means Clarke is wired. The beer is halfway gone when Clarke’s phone buzzes along the armrest of her deck chair, a startling sound amid all the quiet. A text from Lexa after 10:00 at night is highly out of character, but it’s nevertheless her name on Clarke’s screen when she checks the message.

Lexa: We found a thin black cardigan. Is it yours?

Clarke almost laughs at the absurdity. She starts typing ‘it’s August why would I wear a sweater’ before backspacing the reply and keeping her response concise.

nope. not mine.

Lexa: Okay. Sorry for texting so late.

Clarke bites at the tip of her thumbnail and takes another pull off her beer as she types out a reply. It’s the axis on which she can either end the brief conversation or ...

don’t be. I’m wide awake.

There’s a brief pause and then an ellipsis bubble that has Clarke’s pulse quickening.

Lexa: Me too. The moon is full and it’s very bright in the apartment.

i know. i’m staring at it right now.

She sends one off and then another.

um, window treatments?
Lexa: Have not purchased curtains yet and blinds are grossly inadequate at best.

Clarke laughs. She can hear Lexa’s fixed cadence even in her texts, and it’s almost as if they’re still hanging out. She thinks about having Lexa there, in her house, enjoying her deck, sharing some beers and mindless conversation. It’s a nice thought that vanishes as soon as Clarke reminds herself who Lexa shares that moonlit, too-bright bedroom with.

hope you're able to get your beauty rest despite lunar interference.


Clarke sends a full moon emoji and then a random assortment of knives and swords, hoping Lexa will understand the sentiment. She finishes her beer, clicks off her phone, and heads inside pretending she’s not fighting an urge to keep this conversation going until sunrise.

Chapter End Notes

I don't have a solid plan for updates and tend to write inside the confines of parenting a toddler and finishing grad school, but if yelling about these idiots between updates is your jam, you can find me on tumblr at mopetytropey.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Hello, I am back with 10k words of these dummies spending literally all of their time together and addressing approximately 0% of their mutual attractions.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

September heralds crisp, autumnal breezes but maintains its sunbathed mornings and blissfully warm afternoons along the waterfront. New England is the unequivocally superior region of the country as summer gives way to autumn, and Clarke is not biased in the least she just so happens to be more intelligent than every other person who disagrees with her assessment. Her quaint pocket of Massachusetts's North Shore is absolutely idyllic, and the first leaves haven’t even begun to turn. Clarke is excited for some of the upcoming seasonal brews that will feature on Dockside’s menu, but she and Octavia have sworn off showcasing beers of any pumpkin variety until at least mid-month. Starbucks and Dunkins can chill the fuck out.

On Monday when Lexa had stayed beyond their scheduled meeting at Dockside to eat a light meal at the bar, Clarke had thought: this is new. On Wednesday, when Lexa had again walked into her bar and asked Octavia for a menu and a session ale, Clarke tried to ignore the recurrent flutter of irregularity. By Thursday, as Clarke is exiting storage with an inventory clipboard and spies Lexa on the patio, she’s had enough.

“Okay, what gives?”

Lexa looks up from a mostly full pilsner glass as Clarke helps herself to the only other chair at Lexa’s tall patio table.

“Hello to you too, Clarke.”

Delicacy has never been Clarke’s strong suit. “Since when do you eat dinner here every night?”

“I like the food here,” Lexa says simply, arranging her very lovely features to express some mild disdain. “Management is sort of awful.”

“Fuck you,” Clarke laughs. “Where’s Costia been? You’re not—” Clarke’s heart leaps to her throat, choking off her words because she hadn’t meant to ask.

“We’re good,” Lexa replies easily, and even still Clarke can’t help but look for the lie. “She’s gone quite a bit—even more now than before with classes and things in full swing.”

Clarke struggles to calm her racing heartbeat, wishing she had control over the words that fly unfettered out of her mouth all the fucking time. Maybe hanging around Lexa will teach her some stoicism, some restraint in her speech.

“Right, of course. I didn’t mean to insinuate—I’m sorry, you’re just …” Clarke takes a deep breath. “It sucks she’s not around more. I mean. For you.”

So there’s that theory out the fucking window. Words continue to run amok. Splendid.
Lexa seems to contemplate the thin froth on her beer for a moment, running the tip of her index finger around the rim of her glass. She eventually looks up with a smile that Clarke, for once, does not recognize. “I’m fine. I don’t mind being alone.”

Clarke barely controls a scoff. Lexa is so full of shit. “You don’t mind being alone so you come sit in a bar that is not only run by your friends but also full of people?”

Lexa blushes even as her brow furrows and she says with an air of annoyance, “It was perfectly quiet and solitary out here until about five minutes ago.”

Clarke is feeling a bit playful, happier than she probably should be that Lexa has chosen to show up three times in one week just so she doesn’t have to dine alone at home. The fact her visits have also coincided with Clarke’s schedule likely a fluke of chance. Clarke slides off her stool, leveling a particularly defiant look at Lexa as if to say: enjoy your precious solitude then. Clarke stalks off the patio, the heels of her loafers clicking against the wooden deck planks as she goes.

When Clarke swings back behind the bar, Mindy is exiting the kitchen with a small plate of seared scallops over pea puree and an arugula salad.

“Oh, is that mine? I’m starving.” Clarke eyes the salad plate in Mindy’s left hand.

“Nope, sorry. This is Lexa’s. Yours should be up in a few.”

Clarke scrutinizes the salad more closely, reaching for the plates with a sigh. “She won’t want the goat cheese on this. I’ll ask the guys to make another, and I’ll take this one.”

“Oh,” Mindy easily hands over the plates, her eyebrows scrunching. “She didn’t order it without.”

“Yeah, she wouldn’t have specified.” Clarke rolls her eyes. “Don’t worry, I’ll take care of it.”

Mindy shrugs, returning to the other guests at the bar counter as Clarke backs into the kitchen through a swinging door. Lexa had ordered the same salad on both Monday and Wednesday, unsurprisingly a creature of culinary habits, and both times Clarke had bussed an entirely clean plate save for the discreetly gathered pile of goat cheese beneath Lexa’s fork. Lexa wouldn’t inconvenience a mosquito if it were actively biting her arm, let alone trouble a server to alter food to her liking. Clarke thinks Lexa spends a lot of time not asking for the things she wants.

“Ricky, can I get an arugula without the chevre?”

Ricky responds in rapid Spanish, and Clarke manages to cobble together a translation enough to tell him that she is going to eat the other salad, and it certainly was no mistake of his own. Clarke is hardly fluent but spent enough Sunday dinners with Raven’s sprawling family of aunts and cousins to keep afloat in conversations with her staff who she encourages to use their first languages. By the time Lexa’s salad is plated, Clarke’s own bowl of pasta is up in the window.

She’s particularly skilled at being difficult, Clarke’s mother has always said so, which is how Clarke ends up sitting alone at the corner of the bar and sending a thoroughly confused Mindy back outside with Lexa’s food. She is two bites into her salad when her phone rumbles beside her plate on the countertop with an incoming message.

Lexa (6:33pm): Are you planning to continue sulking? Or would you like to eat on the patio?

Clarke rotates her head enough to see Lexa looking in her direction through the wall of windows that face the patio. As their eyes connect, Lexa makes a gallant gesture to the other side of her table and the empty chair. Clarke returns to her phone, contemplating an appropriately salty response.
(6:34pm): am I allowed to speak if I join u or will it disturb your peace and quiet?

Lexa (6:34pm): I wasn’t aware it was physically possible for you to stop talking.

Clarke doesn’t respond and she doesn’t turn back around. She does throw a middle finger over her shoulder and hopes Lexa is the only patron in sight of her crude retaliation. Minutes pass and Clarke ignores her urges to continue bantering with Lexa in favor of devouring her roasted mushroom fettucine. Without warning, two plates lightly clatter onto the countertop beside her, and Clarke looks up to see Lexa settling into a barstool to her left.

To Clarke’s raised eyebrows, Lexa merely shrugs and stabs a pear with her fork. “The temperature has dropped significantly, and I didn’t bring a jacket.”

There’s no way it’s any less than sixty-five degrees outside, and Lexa’s waffled grey henley is more than sufficient clothing. Clarke watches her for a moment—meticulous in the way she carves out slivers of her scallops, dragging each piece through the pureé in delicate swipes—but is eventually forced to return to her own portions when she can’t stop a smile from stretching her lips.

:::

“So, we’re on for Saturday?” Clarke confirms.

Lexa’s hands find their way into her front pockets as Clarke pushes through Dockside’s front door, holding it open so that Lexa can walk through. Outside, they are engulfed in dim yellow light from overhead gas lamps, original to the building and hissing quietly. The sun is long gone, but the sky is still murky, darker in spots like smudged charcoal.

“Yes. What time?”

Clarke contemplates with a twist of her mouth, folding her arms along her stomach. “Want to meet at the coffee shop at nine?”

“Sure.”

“Okay, cool.” Clarke smiles, delighted anticipation bubbling in her chest.

Lexa slowly rises onto the balls of her feet and back down, the gravel crunching beneath her well-worn sneakers. “So, what should I wear?”

Clarke suppresses a string of inappropriate responses, clearing her throat to distract Lexa from any indication that Clarke had been imagining her in various stages of undress.

“I’ll double-check the weather, but it’s supposed to be warm. Cooler on the water by a few degrees, but you’ll be fine as long as you dress in layers.”

“Layers,” Lexa nods. “I can do that.”

There’s an awkward pause that Clarke would typically fill with big, bodily hugs. Squeezes to fingers. Kisses to temples and cheekbones. These affections—instinctual to Clarke and accepted widely among her friends—remain untapped when it comes to Lexa. Clarke understands why. There is no mystery to the prescribed distance that she and Lexa keep.

The line between them is so thin, Clarke feels the distinct, perpetual danger of crossing over it with every step.
“Okay, I’ll see you Saturday,” Clarke finally says, leaning her weight against the door at her back to avoid swaying into Lexa’s gravity.

Lexa nods curtly. Determined. Like when it comes to Clarke, she’s always making a conscious decision to walk away. “See you then.”

:::

Saturday morning has Clarke awake well before her alarm. She spends plenty of time with Lexa, but today already feels different, and it’s barely 7am. There’s a sea change looming, and Clarke can sense it in her bones as she rolls out of bed. The sun is bright and warm. The breeze off the water is light and the harbor tranquil as Clarke unlatches the French doors off her bedroom and swings them open. A perfect day to spend on the water. Clarke breathes in the distinctly pungent air rolling off the salt marshes, and briefly thinks of her father. He would have had her up at dawn on a day like today, cattle-prodding her out of bed and into the boat to soak up an entire day at sea.

In an hour she’s finished the last sips of her coffee on the deck and lazily wanders back in through the open deck doors to find something to wear. There is hardly a bite to the air, but Clarke knows the weather out on the water can vacillate without notice. She doesn’t typically bend towards New England seaside fashion, but today feels like an excuse to go broke in terms of showing Lexa a proper day at sea. Clarke layers a plain pocket tee with a thin yellow flannel and throws a worn, blue sweatshirt that she bought on Cape Cod one summer into a canvas tote bag. The faded stitching across the front of the sweatshirt reads “Hyannis Port,” and paired with her khaki shorts and scuffed leather topsiders she could not look more like a fucking J Crew ad. Clarke’s dad’s tattered old BU hat, which she’s only just reclaimed from Raven’s thieving hands, goes on last to keep her hair from working its way into an untameable rat’s nest.

Shit. That’s what she forgot to remind Lexa to bring.

Clarke snatches her phone off the foot of her unmade bed and opens an ongoing message with Lexa.

(8:11am): bring a hat. or hair ties. or both.

Lexa’s quick response is a selfie in which she’s already wearing some kind of vinyl skate cap from the 80s. The kind of accessory that you might find at Urban Outfitters for a ridiculous amount of money but that Lexa has probably thrfted from Brooklyn or has maintained from childhood. It’s checkered black-and-white along the sides with a short black brim and is pulled low over her black wayfarers. The photo is angled so that Clarke can see only a tease of Lexa’s mouth, her right cheekbone, and the slope of her neck, but fucking christ the last thing Clarke needs is actual photographic evidence of Lexa’s face on her device.

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Clarke is alone in her own house and thus lets a fair amount of profanity fly towards the arched ceiling of her bedroom before taking six or seven deep breaths and responding like a rational adult.

(8:12am): overachiever.

Clarke takes a moment to forcefully pinch her lips between her teeth before her willpower collapses shamefully and she reopens Lexa’s photo.

How can so few square inches of a person’s face be so beautiful?

Lexa’s reply buzzes through as Clarke is scrutinizing the details of the photo, as if she’s not about to see Lexa in person and spend an entire morning with her.
Lexa (8:14am): Peruvian on drip today. Should I order you a giant carafe?

Of course Lexa is already at the shop almost forty-five minutes ahead of schedule. The girl can do nothing by halves. Clarke is all but ready to head out as a thrill ricochets against her ribs that Lexa’s own excitement propelled her to an even earlier arrival.

(8:15am): be there in 10. lg iced will suffice. thx

Clarke descends the stairs, breezes into the kitchen where she’s already begun preparing an open cooler with ice packs, and opens the fridge. She’s portioned out sliced veggies, hummus, feta, and olives into small containers. Clarke tosses in a packet of fresh pita from Joseph’s and a six-pack of Notch’s session pilsner. She throws her tote and the cooler in the backseat of the Saab and is headed downtown in under three minutes.

:::

The coffee shop, much like Dockside, is situated directly among the marinas, sandwiched by boat slips on either side. Clarke and Lexa take their iced coffees and bagels to-go, Lexa offering to shoulder the cooler on their short trek down the riverwalk. Lexa had been sitting in the sun on the coffee shop’s outdoor patio when Clarke arrived, and her sleeves and pant legs have been arbitrarily rolled to expose tanned forearms and petite ankles. Lexa has complied with Clarke’s wardrobe suggestions, layering a black tee shirt beneath her chambray button-down and carrying a black hoodie.

“Should I have brought something for lunch?” Lexa asks, indicating the cooler over her shoulder.

“If you’re nice, I’ll share mine,” Clarke teases, turning off the public walk to swing through a gated dock that slopes towards the water. Arched over its entry is a metal sign painted white with blue and yellow lettering that reads: Windward Yacht Yard. “Hey, Jerry!”

A man of about sixty, rotund and sun-beaten, squats near a row of dinghies as Clarke and Lexa approach. A brown and white dog lays near his feet, its tail beginning to wag as the man stands to greet Clarke.

“There’s my sunshine gal,” Jerry beams, standing to wrap up Clarke in a massive embrace. “Did I know you were coming down today?”

“I talked to Jim,” Clarke tells him, rearranging her shirt once Jerry has relinquished his boisterous hold. “Jerry, this is my friend Lexa.”

Lexa steps forward at the introduction, clearly anticipating a friendly handshake when Jerry doesn’t hesitate to collide into Lexa’s personal space for a hug of her very own. Clarke smothers a laugh against the back of her hand at Lexa’s surprise, and pats Jerry’s shoulder to put Lexa out of her misery.

“How many times have you been out this season?” Jerry asks as he leads the way down the docks. The dog follows at his heels.

Clarke sighs regretfully. “Not as often as I’d like.”

“You’re working too much then,” Jerry tells her over his shoulder.

“I’ve been trying to tell her the same, Jerry,” Lexa pipes up from where she’s brought up the rear of their meager procession.
Jerry stops in front of a sleek 50’ boat with an enclosed helm. “Keep this one around, sunshine,” Jerry chuckles.

Clarke is too busy blushing to notice the way Lexa’s mouth has fallen slightly ajar at the massive white yacht to Jerry’s left.

“You girls all set?” Jerry asks.

“Yeah, we’re good. Should be back by the afternoon, but I’ll radio in,” Clarke tells him. She ruffles the dog’s fur behind its ears before saying, “Feel free to use the slip while we’re out.”

“Will do, kiddo.” Jerry whistles sharp and quick. “Let’s go, Georgia.” The dog leaves Clarke’s side and dutifully follows in Jerry’s wake.

“This is …” Lexa trails off after hardly making words, still ogling the massive white boat, and Clarke laughs.

“Not mine.” She nudges Lexa’s elbow until she looks in the other direction, a slip on the opposite side of the docks. “This one is.”

The much smaller sea skiff is no less impressive, and Lexa gapes equally stunned. She hesitates to move any closer to the boat, while Clarke approaches its stern like an old friend.

“Oh good, Jim already loaded up the rods and tackle for us,” Clarke notes, swinging her tote into the back of the boat where it lands on a red vinyl deck chair with a soft thud. She finally looks back to Lexa who lingers near the bow of the boat with uncertainty. Clarke stands with her hands on her hips, squinting in the morning sun. “You do know you have to board the boat to actually do any fishing, right?”

“Yes, I’m just—this is incredibly beautiful, Clarke.”

Clarke takes a moment to let her gaze slide up and down the boat’s twenty-two feet of vintage lapstrake sides, wooden overlapping planks that are painted in white and navy color-block. The console and gunnel framing all original walnut and stained to a glossy shine. Clarke nods as her eyes settle back on Lexa. The boat is definitely one of the most beautiful things on the marina.

Lexa hoists the cooler before Clarke can respond. “Where should I … ?”

“Yeah, on the floor there is fine,” Clarke directs. “Why don’t you hop in and I’ll work on the cleats.”

Lexa climbs aboard with some agility, the rubber soles of her Vans squeaking against the glossy wood-stained coverboards that frame the boat.

She seems to remember herself then, smirking a bit as she sets the cooler down on the black rubber flooring. “I had no idea Dockside paid so well.”

Clarke bites at her lip, rarely avoidant of Lexa’s gaze. It’s now or never. She exhales, lowering to untie the rope lines on the first of three cleats that anchor the boat to the dock. “This was my dad’s boat.”

When Clarke looks back up, Lexa is watching her, unmoving. She examines the craft a second time, presumably with new eyes. Her voice a reverent sigh as she re-emphasizes, “It’s beautiful, Clarke.”
Clarke smiles in relief. “Thank you.”

She makes quick work of the remaining steps to cast off, and in no time at all they’re underway. Lexa finds a seat out of the way, watching Clarke move around in practiced ease and looking wholly impressed with Clarke at the helm.

“You’ve done this before,” Lexa comments lightly.

They’ve cleared the Memorial Bridge underpass and are slowly making their way among a clustered maze of sailboats, speedboats, and ostentatious luxury yachts. Clarke stands at the console, lightly gripping the wheel and deftly maneuvering through the sea of boats. She smiles over at Lexa.

“I could probably do this with my eyes closed.”

Lexa stutters a laugh, looking around at the hundreds of boats jammed along the waterway. “Let’s not test that theory today, okay?”

Clarke navigates them beyond the riverwalk, along the northern coast of Plum Island where the waterway narrows to a slender passage. In under an hour they’ve dropped anchor, leaving land and harbor in their wake and nothing ahead but the vast Atlantic. Clarke forgoes setting up the rods to plop down into a deck chair beside Lexa. They bob and tilt in the current as Lexa fetches their bagels, handing an asiago over to Clarke and keeping the cinnamon raisin for herself. Clarke runs over some of the basics of the the fishing poles at their feet: the bait, the hooks, spool, clutch, and drag. Lexa nods along attentively, stopping Clarke to ask for clarification no more than three times all while chewing thoughtfully on her breakfast.

Once they’re officially ready to cast, Lexa off the starboard side and Clarke off the port, Lexa rubs a thumb over the wooden handle of her fishing rod, looking down. She turns to Clarke, who stands over her left shoulder ready to give pointers when needed. “There’s a ‘J’ on mine.”

Clarke looks down to the worn handle between Lexa’s hands, nodding a few times. “Yeah. My dad’s name was Jake.”

Lexa places Jake’s rod into the holder Clarke has bracketed to the side of the boat and turns to face Clarke fully. “She knew him?”

Clarke hums, nodding her head. “He’s the reason we met.” Lexa looks more than intrigued, the fish momentarily forgotten, and Clarke obliges her curiosity. “I was in my second year at RISD—”

“Wait—art school? You’re an artist?”

Clarke laughs at Lexa’s eager tone, knowing it’s almost unheard of for Lexa to interrupt someone. Their exchange is also reminiscent of that first night during Lincoln’s party when she had revealed a similarly surprising background in law, and the great mystery of Lexa began to fracture. Clarke feels suddenly overjoyed to be sharing a major part of herself with Lexa, who seems eager to receive it.
“That was the plan,” Clarke muses. “But then sophomore year I got the call. The call you never want to get— ‘Dad’s sick, prognosis grim, come home when you’re able.’”

“What did you do?”

“I left that same day. As soon as I hung up the phone. I didn’t drop my classes, I didn’t even pack. I just got in my car and fucking left.”

Lexa’s mouth twists, the questions in her eyes familiar and weighted. “Your dad had—”

“Cancer, yeah.” Clarke exhales. “Aggressive too. He fought it for a few years, but …”

Her words fizzle out, and a quiet stretches between them as Clarke struggles to finish her thought. She knew the topic was coming, and she was braced for it. She can always sense it on the brink—poised, ready to be unveiled. Inviting Lexa to come fishing on her father’s boat with her father’s old fishing rod had been a virtual guarantee the subject would be discussed. It’s been better as of late. She’s been better. Still, Clarke sucks at this part.

She’s tried it in several variations over the years:

*My dad passed away.*

*My dad died.*

*I lost my father.*

Every day she’s improving at living her life without him, but she never gets better at saying these things. They are each uniquely, fucking terrible ways to say there is a piece missing from her life that cannot be found.

Clarke doesn’t wait for Lexa’s condolences, nor does she wish to linger on the darker memories of her father, opting instead to finish her original train of thought. “So anyway, when I came home from RISD it was decidedly permanent—producing a major shitstorm between me and my mom and dad, who had worked so hard to get me there.” It is just past 10am and Clarke wonders how hard Lexa would judge her if she opened a beer. “Raven was in this BUMP program at BU at the time, studying marine engineering and interning for my dad’s firm.”

Lexa smiles genuinely, an arch to her brow when she says, “And sparks flew.”

Clarke laughs, and fuck it—she’s opening a beer. She reaches into the cooler, shifting around their lunch containers until she can shuck off two cans of pilsner. She holds one up to Lexa, who hesitates only briefly before accepting the can and releasing the tab with a loud hiss and pop. Clarke settles into a red vinyl chair and crosses her legs.

“I mean, I guess I had always known I was sort of into girls and guys—non-gender specific attraction and all that—but suddenly I was nineteen, my world utterly shook by the news of my dad, and Raven came walking into his office one day, and it was just …” Clarke shakes her head at the recollection, snapping open her own beer.

“Fireworks, huh?”

“More like getting hit in the chest with a Mack truck.”

“Sounds romantic,” Lexa smirks.
Clarke barely resists the urge to kick her foot against the toe of Lexa’s sneaker. “It was. This, you know, whirlwind romance with all that spitfire and intensity that comes with first loves or really major relationships.” Clarke sighs with an easy shrug. “Everything else was so fucked up, but … Raven made sense.”

Lexa sips her beer. “And how long did this whirlwind last?”

“We broke up before my dad—” Clarke clears her throat, flicking the tab on her beer can. “We were together for just over a year-and-a-half.”

“But, you’re still very close,” Lexa says.

Clarke laughs lightly. “An understatement. She was by my side throughout, you know, everything. Even after we’d stopped sleeping together.”

There is a brief lull, just the sound of gulls overhead and the ocean’s current lapping against the boat.

“I thought you still were, you know,” Lexa admits to a wide-eyed Clarke.

“What? You thought we were—when?”

“That night that I met her for the first time—Lincoln’s party.”

Clarke feels horribly flustered for no reason, grateful for the beer in her hand and the light breeze against her face. “What in the hell, Lexa? I told you that night that I wasn’t with anyone.”

It’s now Lexa who looks awkward, running her fingers down the lacquered finish of the boat’s coverboards against which she is leant. Clarke swallows another mouthful of pilsner, thinking they maybe should have stuck to the fishing.

“I know. But, you looked—you were very affectionate.”

The heat on Clarke’s pink cheeks has crawled down her neck, poured onto her chest, and set it aflame. The truth is escapes through a laugh: “I’m affectionate with everyone.”

She doesn’t say: except you.

Lexa looks away after a contemplative moment, watching her feet where they are crossed at her ankles. Clarke takes a lengthy gulp of beer, tempted to place the cold green can against her neck and face. Talking about her father had been a hurdle in itself. Talking about who she is or is not sleeping with—how Lexa has been thinking about who she’s sleeping with, is a veritable mountain Clarke is not ready to scale.

“Okay we’re never going to catch any fish at this rate,” Clarke suddenly decides, hopping to her feet and moving back beside Lexa.

After a moment’s delay, Lexa places her beer at their feet and takes hold of the rod, awaiting Clarke’s instruction.

:::

They catch nothing. Lexa drinks four of the six beers and convinces Clarke to let her navigate the boat in a wide looping pattern while they are in the open ocean and a safe distance from other seafarers. They don’t dock until almost five that evening, when the sun is low, and the air is
chilled, and Lexa jams her hands into the pockets of her hoodie as they make their way back down the docks at the marina. Clarke finds their elbows knocking together as they walk side by side, a jaunty bounce in Lexa’s gait.

It is the best, fucking day.

They part ways where Clarke had left her car, a lot perpendicular to the coffee shop and not far from Lexa’s apartment. Clarke has a vicious internal debate over asking Lexa to grab dinner, but a fresh wave of guilt for having squired Lexa away from Costia for more than half the day has her biting her tongue.

“Thanks for teaching me how not to catch fish,” Lexa says, dodging away when Clarke’s hand swings for her upper arm. Lexa’s smile is wild and free when she amends, “I had a great time, Clarke. Honestly.”

Lexa’s eyes are brimming with that windswept delight, her cheeks rosy from a day spent at sea in the sun and surf. They’ve both since removed their hats, and Lexa’s braids are loose and her curls a bit unkempt. Clarke wants to die

“Me too.” She swallows down her regrets and smiles. “Tell Costia I said hi, and next time she’s totally coming with us.”

Some indeterminate shift crosses Lexa’s face, but she is nevertheless smiling when she agrees, “Definitely. I’ll tell her.”

There is a moment’s pause when Clarke panics, thinking Lexa might actually hug her—the way her body sways and her eyes focus intensely on Clarke’s own. Lexa instead reaches forward one hand and lightly squeezes Clarke’s wrist just over the frayed cuff of her sweatshirt. It is so much worse than a hug.

“I’ll see you, Clarke.”

Clarke has all but fossilized under Lexa’s unexpected touch but swallows past the arid scrape of her throat and rasps a farewell. “Yeah. See you, Lexa.”

:::

Clarke orders Thai and eats in front of the TV, digging her chopsticks straight into the take-out containers because she can’t be bothered with doing any dishes when she’s finished with her basil fried rice and steamed dumplings. There is absolute crap on television, and Clarke ends up staring at her autoloading Netflix dashboard for longer than she’d like to admit. A day on the water has her in bed before 10:00, but a day spent with Lexa has Clarke’s pulse racing and eyes wide, tracing the bulbous shape of her ceiling as she searches for sleep.

She is browsing her phone—resolutely avoiding Lexa’s texts in which her face is now hidden away, completely accessible to Clarke in the form of Lexa’s selfie from that morning. But laying in bed and staring at a third of Lexa’s profile sounds more depressing than reading the news. She nearly drops the phone as a message buzzes through, catching Lexa’s name as a banner drops from the top of her screen. Clarke opens the message immediately with zero chill, but her breathing shallows as she begins to read Lexa’s rather lengthy text.

_Lexa (9.48pm): Approximately five percent of children under the age of 15 will experience the loss of one or both of their parents. Given current population statistics, that amounts to around three million kids in the US alone. Internationally, those statistics would be exponentially higher, when_
considering poverty-stricken and/or war torn countries.

A secondary ellipsis bubble appears before Clarke can even begin to formulate a response.

*Lexa (9:48pm):* I’ve done a lot of research on parentless children.

Clarke takes three or four evenly spaced breaths, sitting up in bed to criss-cross her legs beneath the duvet and hunch over the glow of her phone.

*(9:49pm)* Ok. In law school?

*Lexa (9:50pm):* High school, mostly.

Clarke’s palms sweat where she’s clutching her phone in one hand and the duvet in the other. Again her reply is delayed by a successive text from Lexa.

*Lexa (9:51pm):* Thank you for telling me about your father, Clarke. I only meant to say, you’re not alone.

There isn’t a viable response to encapsulate everything Clarke is suddenly feeling and thinking and wanting to express to this person who in the span of three minutes has completely upended her emotional headspace. A collection of tears unexpectedly sting the corners of her eyes, and Clarke doesn’t know if she’s crying for herself or for Lexa or for every other kid who is living with a shared kind of loss. The only thing Clarke knows is that she does, in that moment, feel less alone.

*(9:53pm):* thank you, Lexa

Clarke doesn’t know what prompted Lexa to reach out—in her own bizarre, data-driven sentimentality—but Clarke has to believe that in some capacity, she’d been on Lexa’s mind. She takes a breath, wipes her eyes, and lets that notion settle over her. Clarke no longer cares—she opens the details tab and clicks on Lexa’s photo. She closes it again after a minute and resumes typing.

*(9:57pm):* please know how much this means to me. seriously. thank u.

*(9:57pm):* I’ll see you mon :)

*Lexa (9:58pm):* See you then.

*Lexa (9:59pm):* Indra is doing bourbon barrel IPA in October.

Clarke tips back against her pillows, a loud laugh bubbling from deep and echoing through her bedroom. Just six months in, and she has finally broken Lexa’s rule-governed determination to keep Clarke in suspense on Indra’s classified brews until their official Monday tastings. She has never felt more victorious.

*(9:59pm):* FINALLY!!!!

She accompanies the message with a prolific string of celebratory emojis to signify her success over wearing Lexa down.

*Lexa (10:00pm):* Goodnight, Clarke.

:::

By Monday afternoon, Clarke has never felt so consumed with an urgency to hug someone in all
her life, her fingers tapping down to the hour of Lexa’s arrival at Dockside. She’d spent a great deal of Sunday processing and reprocessing their exchanges from the night prior, and now, two days later, she just really needs to wrap her arms around Lexa’s wiry frame and reiterate how wonderful a human she finds her to be.

Clarke doesn’t know Lexa’s history. She doesn’t need to know Lexa’s history. She just needs to let her know she’s there for her as much as Lexa has been there for Clarke.

Lexa arrives as punctual as ever, pushing through the front door of the bar with her large black canvas cooler slung over a shoulder, but approaches Clarke with a cold air of professionalism. Clarke’s radiant smile evaporates with each measured step of Lexa’s crisp movements and careful composure.

Clarke’s pulse accelerates even as she greets Lexa with an easy, “Hey.”

“Hi,” Lexa answers, barely a look for Clarke before her eyes are elsewhere. “Where should we sit?”

“Um, patio?”

Lexa jerks her head, a subtle grind to her jaw. “It’s just started to rain.”

Clarke swivels towards the wall of windows facing the water, and sure enough the panes are dotted with fresh rivulets of falling raindrops.

“Right. Let’s just grab a booth then.”

Clarke waves a hand towards a section of elevated booths, and Lexa consents with another formal nod that has Clarke’s stomach roiling. She calls to the bartender, Jeff, asking him to bring them some glassware and ice water and cautiously follows Lexa to the table.

“Are you okay?” Clarke tries, desperate to see any fracture of that carefree spirit Lexa’s eyes had held the last she saw them.

“I’m fine.” Lexa’s stony gaze has Clarke dropping any further lines of questioning.

Clarke surrenders with a quiet sigh. “Okay.”

Lexa wastes no time getting down to business, never straying from her scripted Trikru presentation of facts and processes and hardly giving Clarke more than a breath of eye contact as she speaks. Clarke is both intimidated and incredibly frustrated by Lexa’s cool detachment. She’s barely able to hear anything Lexa has to say about the new Trikru brews, and she can’t very well make a scene with her vendor in a bar full of paying guests. Regardless of the fact that Lexa has been more of a close friend and confidant than a mere colleague since almost the very beginning. Lexa has always been a friend above anything else.

The thought is a necessary reminder for Clarke and more than enough motivation to have her interrupting Lexa and standing from the booth. That, at the very least, has Lexa looking confused.

“Where are you—”

Clarke’s low-growl demand leaves no room for debate. “Come here.”

She stalks away from the table headed for the black stockroom door, and doesn’t have to check her shoulder to know that Lexa has obediently followed her. Clarke rounds on her as soon as they’ve
cleared the dry stock area into the sea of kegs and commercial beer coolers which hum around them in chorus.

Clarke comes out swinging, suddenly furious at Lexa’s disaffected behavior. “What the hell is going on with you?!”

Lexa again tenses, shuttering into another blank expression, but she can’t hide the flex of her jaw or the tic of her brow from Clarke who has memorized her face.

“Nothing is going on, Clarke. We should get back to—”

“I can’t.”

Lexa seems genuinely confused if not also mildly annoyed. “You can’t?”

“No,” Clarke sighs. “I can’t concentrate on the unique temperature of each cask and its methodical soaking technique to acquire maximum flavor profiles when you’re acting like this.”

“How am I acting?” Lexa scowls, a challenging lilt to her otherwise measured cadence.

“Like someone who doesn’t know me. Like someone who didn’t spend an entire Saturday with me and then proceed to say incredibly purposed, thoughtful things about the loss of my father.”

Lexa’s response is quick, as if the words had been at the ready. As if she’d been waiting to say them from the moment she walked into the bar. “I shouldn’t have said those things. It was presumptuous of me to think it would mean anything to your situation.”

Clarke takes a half step forward, every ounce of fight and frustration drained from the way she says, “Lexa.”

Lexa’s face gradually begins to splinter apart into something Clarke can finally recognize. Lexa visibly softens, her frigid tone melting away to reveal her quiet, uncertain rebuke.

“I’m sorry. You shared something very personal with me, Clarke, but to assume my own experiences were somehow relevant, or that you care to hear them—”

“I do care,” Clarke insists. “And, I want to hear about them. Whenever you’re ready. Or, even if you never want to share them with me—that’s okay too. But, Lexa, you can trust me.”

The way Lexa’s eyes snap to hers has Clarke sighing in relief—a tension that had been stretched so taut, she can feel its release course through her from head to toe.

Lexa very nearly whispers. “I do trust you.”

Clarke’s answering smile reflects in Lexa’s tired, hopeful eyes. “Don’t freak out, okay? But … I’m gonna hug you now.”

“Okay,” Lexa smiles, just the barest lift to a corner of her mouth.

It’s Clarke’s last point of focus before she leans in. She folds her arms around Lexa’s shoulders so that her hands lay flat against Lexa’s shoulder blades. Lexa’s reciprocation is halted only briefly before her arms find their way around Clarke’s lower back, a light and tentative hold. Clarke has to raise up onto her toes to fit her arms around Lexa’s shoulders, but she does fit. An insignificant difference in height has never felt so right.

Clarke squeezes just once, releasing her hold before her hands can traitorously take on a mind of
their own and rub circles across Lexa’s scapula or trail fingers down her spine. Lexa steps back too, looking more like herself—all of the disquieted shadows across her face replaced by light eyes and a soft mouth. Two prominent features that Clarke works to ignore by clearing her throat and tucking loose strands of blonde curls behind her ears.

“So, you wanna tell me about this bourbon barrel IPA again?”

Lexa smirks, even as she turns towards the swinging door of storage. “Sounded to me like you have a pretty comprehensive understanding of it.”

Clarke follows a step behind. “No, no, no, I need to hear it again when I’m not filtering everything through my seething anger with you.”

“Were you really mad at me?” Lexa has paused at the door, holding it open for Clarke to walk through into the bar, and though she is still amused Clarke can hear the underlying concern in Lexa’s ask.

When she meets Lexa’s gaze, caught somewhere between the door frame when Lexa is too near as she passes, Clarke wants to say: I am mad at you for so many selfish reasons.

Instead she feigns disgust with a noisy sigh, leaving Lexa to follow as she returns to their booth. “Of course I was mad at you. You’re an infuriating pain in the ass.”

:::

By early October, Clarke has succumbed to the maddening demand for pumpkin beer, and has allowed various drafts to fill almost a third of her 27 taps. Smuttynose, Wolaver’s organic, Cambridge Brewing, and more. They’re even pouring Pumpkinhead from Shipyard because Clarke is sentimental for having shared them with her dad when she was still underage. Despite her reluctance to promote them, Clarke actually enjoys a variety of pumpkin beers. Particularly when served with a cinnamon sugared rim or, Octavia’s secret specialty, a shot of vanilla vodka. But the craze for them during the month of October does diminish their sales of other pours, and Clarke hates that the commercialization of pumpkin flavoring is ultimately affecting her bottom line.

Octavia uncharacteristically keeps her cool, almost chipper when she greets Clarke on a Friday afternoon, and Clarke has to laugh. Apparently keeping Lincoln as her bedmate has the power to transform decades of surly behavior.

“You’re coming Tuesday, right?” Clarke asks, brushing past Octavia behind the bar to grab a water.

“Can’t.” Octavia shrugs when Clarke looks affronted. “Sorry, Lincoln got us Bruins tickets.”

“Hockey? Seriously?” Clarke shakes her head in disappointment. “O, we’ve bathed together. And you’re ditching me for fucking hockey?”

“Dude. We were seven. That shit was so not consensual.” Octavia opens the glass door of their canned beer fridge to take inventory before the Friday rush. “Anyway, I’m not ditching you for hockey. Technically, I’m ditching you for the man taking me home after hockey.”

Clarke feigns dejection. “Fine. He’s a valid excuse, I guess. Being the perfect human specimen that he is.”

Octavia’s eyes seem to gloss, taking on a far-off look as she says, “Yeah. Speaking of baths—”

“Nope.” Clarke shakes her head emphatically, shoving Octavia out of the path to her office.
“We’re done, thanks. Do not need that visual.”

:::

Tuesday arrives to Clarke having a mentally unstable cleaning spree of her entire house, top to bottom and three times over. She’s invited some friends for a casual hang—namely Octavia and Lincoln, who are annoyingly loved-up and absent, and Raven, who has been M.I.A. all day to Clarke’s incessant texts, in which she’s been berating her for going missing. The only other two guests on the list are Lexa and Costia, hence the bleach-fueled spiral Clarke has fallen into by 4pm. It’s the first time either of them will have been to her house, and she’s coping by scrubbing already clean toilets and vacuuming the furniture.

Clarke has attended a total of two fairly successful game nights at Lexa’s apartment, and she only figured it was time to return the favor and extend an invitation to Lexa and Costia for a gathering of her own. Except now her three closest friends have abandoned her and Clarke is beginning to question all of her life choices.

She’s asked everyone to arrive by six, having planned and prepped an easy meal to prepare after cocktails that is no less impressive and delicious. Just after 5:30 her phone vibrates through the back pocket of her denim, and Clarke pauses in applying her eyeliner. It’s an actual phone call from Raven, and Clarke has to consciously reduce a swelling panic in her chest because they are not phone people and in Clarke’s mind a call usually means a dire, fucking emergency.

“Hello?”

“Don’t be mad.”

“Where the hell have you been?” Even still the panic gets the better of her. “Are you okay? Where are you?”

“Work. Things exploded—I mean, not literal things, but it’s an utter fucking shitshow.” Raven exhales in disgust. “I’ve been locked in for over 11 hours, I haven’t eaten, I need a fucking shower, and I’m going to start physically eliminating any person who isn’t actively improving this chaotic situation.”

Clarke puts her phone on speaker, setting it onto the vanity so she can resume her eyeliner. “Please do not commit any manslaughter on an empty stomach, babe. I cannot bail you out tonight.”

“I know,” Raven sighs. “Your thing—fuck. I’m not getting out of here anytime soon. I’m so sorry.” Clarke swallows down a different sort of panic, scrambling to assess her options for a get-together that was meant to include three of her closest friends and now comprises only Lexa and her unbearably attractive and brilliant live-in girlfriend. Clarke wonders if it’s too much of a dick move to throw a pity invite to Murphy at the eleventh hour.

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it,” Clarke lies. “You need to eat something though, for real.”

“Ugh. Save me a plate, okay and—” Raven begins a tirade, half of which is in Spanish, to whoever just barged into her office, and Clarke honestly hopes they live to see another day. “Clarke, I gotta go. I love you. I’ll text you tomorrow.”

“Yeah, okay. I’ll talk—” Raven has already disconnected, the line gone dead before Clarke can say goodbye.

She looks at the time on her phone. 5:43. *Fuck.*
In a hail mary attempt to resuscitate her dinner party gone rogue, Clarke sends three or four desperate texts to Octavia which may or may not include bribes of extreme monetary significance. Octavia’s response is just a photo of her boots backdropped by a Zamboni circling the ice at TD Garden, proof positive that she really is in Boston. Clarke audibly pouts.

Her doorbell rings not one, fucking minute past six, and Clarke cannot believe that Lexa’s face is not in every living dictionary next to the word: punctual. She takes a steadying breath, adjusting the low neckline of her black top to be sure the cleavage is just on the right side of intriguing without crossing over to obscene. The glass of wine she’d poured at a quarter to six has been rapidly diminished, but she carries it with her like a lifeline to answer the door.

Clarke swings open the door with a bright smile, hoping it will mask her anxiety. “Hey!”

“Hi.”

Lexa is standing on her front walk, holding a bottle wrapped in brown paper and twine, properly dressed for autumn in jeans, short leather boots, and a cozy sweater. The vision of her standing there encompasses Clarke’s anxieties, swallowing them whole. She hardly notices anything beyond Lexa’s large brown curls and rosy cheeks until Lexa shuffles from one foot to the other.

“Am I early? I didn’t see any other cars besides yours.”

Clarke is ripped from her daze, reality slapping her across the face like a harsh sea breeze. “Wait. Where’s Costia?”

“Oh. She had to bail. School is kind of excessive at the moment. But she got you this peace offering to accommodate.” Lexa holds up a bottle of what looks to be really expensive port, but Clarke is too busy gawking to accept the gift.

“Are you joking?”

Lexa lifts her arms, looking down to her pockets as if to say: where would I be hiding her?

“No, she’s at home, buried under books and lesson plans. Why?”

Clarke reigns in her reaction, shaking her head as she invites Lexa in with a broad, ceremonious swing of her arm. “Nothing. It’s fine, just … seems to be the running theme tonight.”

Lexa crosses over the threshold cautiously, her eyes darting quickly around Clarke’s space. She must register the silence rather quickly because she asks, “Is no one else here?”

Clarke brushes past her into the open kitchen. “Nope. No one else is here. No one else is coming. Massive, embarrassing party failure.” She pauses by the island and hoists an open bottle of Pinot Noir. “Wine?”

“You don’t have to stay, you know,” Clarke says, offering Lexa an out just three sips into their first glass of wine. “The party is obviously a total flop.”

“Where am I going to go?”

Lexa says it so easily, a nonchalance to the shrug of her shoulders, it takes Clarke several seconds
to stop obsessing over every syllable.

Eventually Clarke remembers that her mediocre humor is always there to save her. “Did you have any friends in Brooklyn, because Massachusetts Lexa is kind of a total loser.”

Lexa laughs, nevertheless flipping her off, and Clarke thinks this is maybe a party worth salvaging.

Clarke sips her wine, treading into familiarly unpleasant territory. “I thought you and Costia were supposed to have more time together this month.”

Lexa watches the wine swirl in her glass as she slowly rotates her wrist. Clockwise. Counterclockwise. “Costia can’t help but be totally immersed in her work, and this program is shaping up to be even more demanding that she originally had planned for.” Lexa takes a slow sip of her wine, running her tongue across her lips afterwards. “She’s hyper-focused and so incredibly driven. Tonight she’s on overload, trying to prepare her lessons for tomorrow’s undergrad classes.”

It’s a roundabout, somewhat avoidant answer to Clarke’s inquiry, and Clarke can’t help but offer Lexa some hope without forcing the subject.

“Maybe next semester won’t be so intense.”

Lexa smiles through a forbearing sigh. “She’s just applied for an international Fulbright research grant next term.”

“International? As in abroad?”

Lexa nods. “As in Nepal.”

Clarke’s eyes bulge as she finishes the last of her wine in one, large gulp. She pats Lexa’s shoulder cap as she heads back into the kitchen for more wine. “I’ll grab the bottle.”

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When Clarke returns from the kitchen, Lexa’s hands are in her pockets and she is doing a slow circle around the perimeter of Clarke’s living room. “So, this is your house.”

“Yup.” Clarke nods, her eyes scanning the open room for stray particles of dust, the windows for smudges and fingerprints.

“I’ve driven by it. I never would have guessed.”

“Yeah, it’s funky, right? I’ve always thought of it as a shipwreck someone then refurbished into an actual living space.”

Lexa smiles. “I can see that.” Her eyes continue to roam, and Clarke can only watch, still fairly anxious at the reality of Lexa being in her house. “It’s nice. It … suits you.”

Clarke feels a pulse in her neck, a heat flaring in her cheeks that is completely uncalled for because Lexa has hardly said anything that should warrant her biology’s ridiculous overreaction. Clarke moves into the room, intent on acting cool and calm despite herself, and hands Lexa a full glass of wine.

“The layout is really unique,” Lexa continues. “It’s so open with all these high ceilings and windows.”

“Yeah,” Clarke agrees without thought, her eyes still trained on Lexa’s appraisal of her home.
“You should see the bedroom.”

Clarke’s immediate mortification is exacerbated only by Lexa’s obvious surprise that quickly turns to unguarded amusement.

“The ceiling,” Clarke rushes to say. “I mean, the ceiling at the top of the house is, uh, there’s an arch with, um, windows so that the second floor is more like an atrium. Sort of.”

Lexa just keeps nodding, quietly sipping her wine, and enjoying the hell out of Clarke’s humiliation.

“So,” Lexa eventually smirks. “What else did you have planned for this enormous failure of a party?”

Clarke’s eyes glint with pure mischief. “Actually …”

:::

They huddle around the kitchen island, between them a round shortbread tin, remnants from the previous Christmas when Clarke’s mother is inundated with gifts from her patients and their families.

“We don’t have to,” Clarke is saying. “It was supposed to be something fun with everyone here to like, get stoned and attempt a game of charades or something.”

Lexa doesn’t look up from the tin. “You made them?”

“Raven and I made a few batches over the weekend.”

“Have you tried one?”

Clarke scoffs, “I would be remiss as a host to serve my guests something that hadn’t been thoroughly tested through quality control.”

Lexa looks up with a grin, and Clarke thinks that the wool blend of her cableknit sweater makes Lexa’s eyes an even deeper shade green. Lexa plucks a small cube of soft caramel candy from the tin, examining it carefully between her fingers.

“Should we eat dinner first?” Clarke laughs.

After a beat of eye contact, Lexa makes the decision for them and pops the candy into her mouth with a delightfully challenging smirk.

:::

An hour’s time has them situated on Clarke’s sofa, Lexa sitting properly upright, if not more slouched than Clarke has ever seen her, while Clarke lies flat on her back, upside down and on the floor, her legs elevated and bent at the knee on the cushion next to Lexa. Music pours softly from Clarke’s bluetooth speaker, a nondescript playlist she and Octavia once compiled as they drank one too many shift beers at Dockside.

“So then your dad is still in Brooklyn. What about siblings?”

“Older sister. Anya.”

“Aww, Anya and Lexa. Cute,” Clarke coos, resulting in Lexa’s gentle shove against her calf.
“We arrived already named, Clarke. Foster children are often without parents but not generally nameless.” Lexa is quiet for a moment, and then breathes a short laugh. “Gus would have given us terrible names.”

“So, not biological sisters then?”

“No.” Lexa laughs again. “Though I’ve known many people who would argue to see the definitive scientific proof of that. Our father included.”

“Oh,” Lexa hums. “He was, before us. Anya never knew her though, and she was with Gus for two years before I arrived.”

Lexa, as it turns out, is exceptionally chatty and forthcoming when stoned. It’s been just under two hours since Clarke’s fabulously vacant soiree kicked off, and she has since been gifted a wealth of information on Lexa’s guarded past. Lexa shares in these brief glimpses, small details and minutiae of her life in New York—very little before Gustus, her adoptive father, but so many lovely memories of Lexa’s life after she came to live with him.

“Your dad, he isn’t married?”

“A kid in the NY foster system as far back as she can remember.

A range of group homes and foster families ranging from supreme shit to relatively bearable.

Finding Anya at eleven. Losing her again at thirteen. Their eventually permanent reunion when Lexa came to live with Gustus just after her fourteenth birthday.

Clarke waits and listens, she is wordless and still where Lexa has found her stride in opening up. It’s all so easy and natural, the conversation never strained and their laughter frequent. They don’t return to talk of Costia and her impending study abroad, should the grant be accepted, and Clarke is relieved. Frankly, Clarke is far more interested in Lexa as a person and not who she is as defined by her relationship with someone else. Clarke tries very hard not to feel overwhelmed by her constant instincts to touch, to reassure, to comfort in brushes of fingertips against Lexa’s skin as she speaks of her family and her past.

“Clarke, did you hear me?” Lexa leans forward to rest her elbows on her knees. “Are you sleeping?”

Clarke giggles. She forgot she had closed her eyes. “No! No, I’m awake. I’m listening.”

“What did I just say?”

Lexa’s voice is so lovely, soft and even like warm, lavender water pouring over your neck and shoulders. It’s slower now under the weight of one too many edibles, that clipped tone almost gone entirely.

“Clarke.”

Shit.

“Uh, you said your dad would have given you horrible names.”

“After that.”

Clarke opens her eyes to Lexa looking down on her. She wonders if Lexa knows how it takes
superhuman strength to form words when staring at her face. Tired of waiting, Lexa finally repeats herself. “I’m hungry.”

“Oh! Me too—what should we eat?”

Lexa smiles that smile. Clarke’s smile. She’s taking it. It’s hers. Finders keepers. “You said you were making dinner.”

“Ugh, not now. Too hungry,” Clarke whines, beginning a failed attempt to sit up. She lays back down, her left hand landing on Lexa’s boot as her eyes light up. “Let’s order tacos!”

When Lexa laughs, it shakes the foundation of Clarke’s house. She swears the rafters shudder and the tides change course. Clarke laughs along without intent, and she hopes this night never ends.

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It ends with an argument, though it’s hardly fueled as a receding high and stomach full of tacos and guacamole has rendered Clarke ultimately docile.

“I’m not letting you walk, Lexa. It’s like, two miles back into town!” Clarke is backed against her front door, obstinately blocking Lexa from leaving.

Lexa rolls her eyes. “You do know I grew up in Brooklyn, right? I usually walked two miles before 10am.”

“Just call an Uber.”

“I want to walk, Clarke,” Lexa reiterates. “I don’t need a car to take me less than eight minutes down the road.”

“Fine. If you’re set on getting your fucking cardio or proving a point, then I’m going with you,” Clarke decides, slipping into a pair of shoes she’s left in the entryway.

“That makes no sense,” Lexa argues. “How will you get back home?”

Clarke smirks and unlatches the front door, dragging out the word ‘I’ as she says, “I will call an Uber.”

Lexa follows behind her, mumbling a nevertheless distinct “so fucking dramatic” as they lock up and start down the darkened sidewalk. The night is cool without being officially cold, though as the sidewalk follows along the harbor a breeze off the water has Clarke hovering into her thin shirt for warmth that isn’t there. Lexa veers closer to her after several paces, her hands as always tucked into her front pockets, but the thick woven fabric of her sweater against Clarke’s skin has her forgetting the chill.

Once they’ve reached the outlying houses of downtown and its towering, red brick mill buildings, the wind is shuttered enough that Lexa gently steps away. Clarke is warm down to her toes though she clenches her jaw to keep her teeth from chattering. They pass the restaurants, mostly dark and vacant and locked up for the night. Then they approach the bars from which people still spill out into the streets. Gathering for smokes. Laughing their way into cabs. Linked hands and drunk kisses and heading home.

Lexa’s apartment is off the main street, but still in the mix of noise and chaos, and Clarke wonders for the first time if they chose the apartment because it reminds Lexa of home. Clarke steps into
the alcove of Lexa’s building while she finds her key.

“Come in while you wait for a car,” Lexa offers, jingling her keychain in an anxious manner that is utterly new to Clarke.

“No, it’s fine. Busy time of night.” Clarke bobs her head towards the ruckus of the adjoining streets. “There won’t be any wait time. Plus it’s late. Costia will be …” Clarke trails off, not knowing the first thing about what Costia will be up to while her girlfriend lingers on a doorstep with someone else.

Lexa looks up then to the brick above them and nods.

“You should go. I’ll be fine,” Clarke says.

Lexa looks at her with strained uncertainty—she could wage wars with that look. “Are you sure? I don’t mind waiting.”

“Go,” Clarke urges with a laugh, a light shove that has Lexa leaning back into the door of her building.

If Clarke were a lesser person, she might let her own forward momentum carrying her into Lexa’s space just to see Lexa’s reaction at being pinned against her own front door. Clarke instead employs the virtues of her waning moral code and steps back.

Lexa is smiling again as she admonishes, “You’re a very abusive best friend. Has anyone ever told you that?”

“Maybe you just bring it out in me;” Clarke challenges, crossing her arms along her stomach.

Lexa rights herself, once again standing at her full height and forcing Clarke to look up to find her eyes. “Maybe.”

Clarke absolutely has to flee the scene because at this point the swirl in her stomach whenever she’s around Lexa, which she has more or less grown accustomed to over the past six months, has begun a dangerous southward migration. Clarke surges forward with a brusque and clumsy hug, clamping onto Lexa so hastily, Lexa hardly has time to reciprocate.

“Okay, bye! I’ll text you when I get home,” Clarke is saying, quickly making her exit from Lexa’s immediate vicinity and wondering, very seriously, if she should ever be in it again.

Chapter End Notes

Big thanks to everyone who has been recommending and commenting and essentially drug-pushing this story onto their friends and family. I am still shouting into an echo chamber about all things Clarke x Lexa over on tumblr @mopeytropey
“Hi, Mom.” Clarke leans into a warm hug, bussing her mother’s cheek with a kiss.

“How are you? You look tired,” Abby assesses, ever the physician. Clarke doesn’t even bother responding before Abby glides around the table to ask, “How are my girls?”

Raven and Octavia answer in unison, each receiving a hug of their own. “Good.”

Brunch is a standing affair with a selective guest list. Once a month. Always in Boston. Always on Sunday. Always Clarke and her mother, buffered by Abby’s ‘adoptive’ children Octavia and Raven. Abby still lives in the same historic monstrosity that Clarke grew up in but keeps a studio apartment near the hospital for convenience when she’s there for long hours. Clarke has, on more than one occasion, joked about her mother keeping a side piece in the city away from the prying eyes of their relatively small coastal community; Abby does not find it funny in the least.

They sit at a favored café off Boylston because her mother prefers brunch in Back Bay to any culinary offerings elsewhere in the city. Clarke would be irritated by the swarms of privileged affluence and the lowkey snobbery hanging in the air, except the food here is really, fucking good. Anyway, she and her friends tend to balance the elitist atmosphere with some lowbrow humor and nonconforming topics of conversation as much as possible.

They’ve ordered entrees and a second round of drinks when Clarke’s phone buzzes inside her clutch, which sits at the corner of their table. Abby is busy fawning over Raven, encouraging her to speak to her superiors about a promotion she’s due, reiterating the hardships of women in STEM fields. Octavia is making notes of the beers they have on tap because she is, of course, always working. Clarke slips her phone from the zippered clutch to check the message.

“Well, that’s a smile I haven’t seen in awhile.” Abby’s observation floats easily across the table, and Clarke looks up like a deer in headlights.

“Oh,” Clarke clears her throat, tucking the phone away. “Sorry, I was just making sure that wasn’t work.” Clarke tries steering the conversation in a direction she can handle. “We’ve been training a new shift manager and today is her first solo brunch.”

Abby, unsurprisingly, is undeterred. “So, it was work?”

Clarke’s hand drifts towards the stem of her champagne flute. “Uh, no it wasn’t work.”

“The guy you’ve been seeing then—what’s his name again?”

They sit at a square table, Clarke flanked by O and Raven and in direct line of sight of her mother. It feels like an interrogation even though Abby is smiling and relaxed and being respectfully curious. Clarke has been on a total of three dates over the past month, two of which have been with a man called Mark. She’s not beside herself with him but enjoys his company and his kind eyes. Not that Clarke has been particularly eager to date anyone as of late, but she needed, more than anything, to get Raven off her ass about it.

As of late, Raven has resorted to sending her strings of texts, lewd and unsolicited advice on her dating life, and Clarke deletes them as quickly as she receives them.
Clarke shakes her head of Raven’s ridiculous input, returning her focus to her mother presently across the brunch table.

“Uh, no. It wasn’t him. His name is Mark, and I’m not seeing him, we’re just—you know, hanging out. We’ve been on, like, two dates.” Clarke eyes her mimosa with disdain, angry at its weak champagne to juice ratio and willing it to be something stronger. “Anyway, how’s work, Mom?”

Abby seems to process the information carefully, sipping her coffee before asking, “Okay, well if it wasn’t Mark. Who was it then?”

Clarke may actually murder her friends for their betrayal as they respond in an obnoxious, sing-song chorus: “Lexaaa.”

“Lexa?” Abby perks up, switching from her coffee to her mimosa. “Do I know about Lexa?”

Clarke points a commanding finger at Octavia and then Raven, who is smirking proudly into her drink. “For the record, you are both dead to me.”

“Can someone please fill me in?” Abby sighs.

“I’ve told you about Lexa, Mom.” Clarke tries to maintain a casual tone, still convinced she can emerge from this brunch with her dignity. “She works for one of our most popular breweries, and we’ve become pretty good friends over the summer.”

“I’ll say,” Raven quips under her breath.

“Okay, yes, I remember her now.” Abby nods, contemplating the information as if she’s well aware it’s incomplete and probably half-untrue. “And, Lexa has a girlfriend, correct?”

“Yes.” Clarke answers quickly, cutting her eyes dangerously to Raven.

But it’s Octavia who totally sells her out. A true dark horse. Her tone forbearing as she says, “For now.”

Abby shifts towards Octavia and cradles her drink closer to her chest. She could not be more rapt, and Clarke really needs something stronger to drink.

Even still, Abby looks sympathetic when she says, “Oh no, are they not doing well?”
“They’re doing fine,” Clarke interjects. “Can we please talk about literally anything else?”

“Yes, I’m sorry, Clarke.” Abby settles back into her chair. “We shouldn’t be rude to your friend. I’m just trying to understand the … dynamics of your relationships. Things were so much less complex when you were dating Raven.”

Clarke closes her eyes to Raven’s delighted laughter, tilting her head back with a groan. “I need a beer. Or a shot.”

“They’ve got that double-roasted coffee porter you love. That shit is like 10% ABV,” Octavia supplies.

“Oh, honey,” Abby admonishes. “If you’re going to drink a beer before eleven a.m. at least order it with some tomato juice.”

“Thanks, Mom. And you two: for the ten millionth time, Lexa is my friend, and Mark is just my current—”

Raven none-too-subtly coughs the word into her drink, “Beard.”

Clarke will kill Raven first. It is decided.

Abby, thankfully, seems to retreat from her line of inquiry and only sighs, “Well, I hope everything works out for Lexa and her girlfriend. She seems very sweet from what you’ve described, Clarke.”

Abby smiles across the table, a look Clarke struggles to return until her mother suggests, “Let’s have another round, girls.”

Raven and Octavia are uncharacteristically cooperative and silent. No more input from the peanut gallery, and Clarke doesn’t trust it for a second. When their server returns with a round of drinks, Clarke having opted for a bloody mary, Octavia raises her glass.

_Oh no._

“Hundred bucks says they break up by Christmas.”

She and Raven clink their glasses across the middle of the brunch table to Abby’s perplexed scowl while Clarke strategizes the logistics of double homicide.

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Lexa buzzes her up and then meets Clarke at the open doorway of her apartment at the top of the stairs, a toothbrush in one hand and her shoelaces untied.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” Clarke smiles, stepping into the apartment once Lexa has moved aside.

“I’ll be ready in a minute.”

Clarke waves her off. “Take your time. I’m early.” She looks into the kitchen where Costia is hunched over a laptop, hair up, dressed in soft-looking clothes, and wearing a concentrated frown. “Hey, Costia.”

“Hey, Clarke!” Costia’s face transforms instantly, her smile lighting up the already sunbathed apartment. “How is the temp outside?”
“Ugh, it’s gorgeous. Sure I can’t convince you to come with us?”

Costia winces, gesturing towards the kitchen table that is cluttered in books and papers. “I fucking wish. I literally have no time right now for anything fun.”

Clarke almost feels guilty for her own leisurely Saturday morning, if not also for whisking Lexa away with her. “Sorry. That sucks.”

“Okay, I’m ready,” Lexa announces as she emerges from a short hallway off the living room.

“Good luck,” Clarke says to Costia, offering a rueful smile and wave.

“We’re biking down to the island and back, so I’ll be home in a few hours,” Lexa says from near the door as she ties her shoes.

Costia smiles from her seat at the table. “See you then, babe.”

They leave the apartment without so much as a brushing touch between Lexa and her girlfriend, and Clarke tries to ignore the resounding echo of her friends’ contrived and unfounded conspiracy theories about the state of Lexa’s relationship.

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Just shy of Halloween, Clarke and Lexa have finally stumbled upon an activity that fulfills Lexa’s obsession with exercise while placating Clarke’s abhorrence of cardio. They rent bicycles from a shop in the old mill buildings and take them down the coastal, two-lane road where it dead ends on Plum Island. Lexa had pushed for speed bikes, but Clarke emphatically declined in favor of blue-and-white beach cruisers. It takes just under forty minutes before Clarke leans her bike against the wooden railing of a pavilion in the dunes, and Lexa follows suit as they trudge through the sand towards the water.

Clarke collapses unceremoniously into the sand moments later, not caring that she’ll have to wash her hair three times before getting it scrubbed out completely, and closes her eyes to the sun. Lexa sits beside her more gracefully, legs bent at the knees and arms draped over her kneecaps.

“How is this ride any less intense than a run, Clarke? It’s over eight miles round trip.”

Clarke knows without looking that Lexa is checking the black tracker on her wrist, and she almost opens her eyes just to check she’s right.

Such a fitness geek.

“Yes but there are wheels involved. And propulsion.”

“And burritos.”

Clarke sounds scandalized. “What?”

Lexa laughs beside her, “Don’t think I didn’t notice you sizing up Metzy’s taco truck as we rode by the airstrip.”

Busted.

“I have no control over the location of food trucks in this city, nor that they happen to be conveniently located along our route to get back into town,” Clarke responds primly.
“So, you don’t want to stop on our way back then?”

Clarke scoffs as she shifts against the cool sand. “Uh, yeah, of course I do.”

They are quiet for several long minutes, Clarke relaxing into the pliant sand as it molds around her shoulder blades. The breeze is cool, most days barely touching 60 degrees at this point, but Clarke loves days spent at the beach in pants and sweaters almost as much as she enjoys swim suits and the smell of coconut sunblock.

“So, did you end up going on a second date with that guy?”

Clarke tenses unintentionally. “Uh, yeah.”

“That good, huh?”

“Shut up,” Clarke laughs, shoving her arm against Lexa’s leg. “It was … you know, fine. It was fun.”

Lexa doesn’t immediately respond, and Clarke doesn’t have to look over at her to know she’s likely biting her bottom lip or repositioning the neckline of her faded pink sweatshirt. This is their practiced waltz of avoidance, and each time they dance Clarke wonders how closely they will veer into actual honesty.

“Will you see him again?”

Clarke doesn’t want to talk about who she’s dating, who she isn’t dating. She doesn’t want to hear Lexa’s blithe words of encouragement or feigned interest. She wants to lay in the sand and feel the seasons change as the wind comes off the water, running over her hands and face. She suddenly feels tetchy and irritable, though she tries to keep it from her tone. “I don’t know. Maybe. Probably.”

“You just seem a bit … underwhelmed,” Lexa continues, treading further into this territory than ever before.

Clarke can’t help but wonder why Lexa is suddenly so interested. Maybe because there is finally someone to be interested in. Maybe it’s not Mark specifically, but merely the idea of someone else at all. She tries and fails to silence Raven’s obnoxious *I-told-you-so* ringing in her ears.

“I’m not looking for anything explosive, but I mean—he’s nice. He’s nice to look at, too, which helps,” Clarke tacks on, her eyes askance at Lexa to gauge her reaction.

Lexa smiles, fiddling with the rolled cuff of her jeans. “Can I see what he looks like?”

Clarke can’t help but laugh at Lexa’s barely contained curiosity and rolls up onto her side to fetch the phone from her back pocket. Her face ends up closer to Lexa’s side than she’d intended, and Clarke’s hand fumbles for her phone as she inhales the scent of Lexa’s detergent.

Clarke unlocks her phone while laying on her back and navigates to her dating app. She pulls up Mark’s profile and hands the phone over to Lexa, who then slides up her sunglasses to examine the phone screen more closely in the sun’s glare.

“Well …” Clarke prompts, now incredibly anxious with her phone in Lexa’s clutches.
“Objectively, he’s not terrible looking.”

Clarke unsuccessfully attempts to punch Lexa’s arm that is closest to her. “Wow. Such a glowing review. Thanks.”

Lexus laughs beautifully, distracting Clarke’s annoyance and anxieties. She is still smiling, something on the verge of an actual laugh, even as she swallows before asking, “So are you … fielding any other offers?”

Clarke laughs loudly then, half true amusement half inescapable awkwardness. She cannot believe they are trying to have this conversation. Things were so much easier when Lexa at least feigned disinterest in her dating life.

“Jesus, I’ve gone on a couple dates, I’m not trying to sell a house. But, I mean, yeah, obviously I have other prospects.”

“Oh, obviously you have prospects,” Lexa mocks, leaning back to sink her weight into the sand against her elbows.

“Babe, I don’t know that you’ve noticed, but I’m a fucking catch.”

Lexus’s laugh is smaller, settling into a familiar smile that has Clarke’s pulse racing as Lexa’s eyes roam her face.

She turns on her side to face Clarke, wiggling Clarke’s phone in her right hand. “Mind if I glance through all these droves of prospective dates?”

Clarke sighs loudly, closing her eyes to Lexa’s proximity, to her contemplative eyes and the curve of her mouth. “You can look through my entire, ridiculous profile if you like.”

Lexus goes quiet, shifting again so that she’s lying on her stomach, propped up by her elbows. Their shoulders touch where Clarke’s arms are folded along her stomach, and Clarke keeps feeling these minor shifts at their singular point of contact as Lexa scrolls through her phone.

"Did you ever use an app to date?" she eventually asks.

"I met Costia at school, but before that, yeah. A bit." Lexa is quiet again for a moment and then, “Why is this your profile picture?”

“What’s wrong with it?”

Lexus huffs a sigh. “Nothing is particularly wrong with it, it just—you’re wearing sunglasses for starters.”

Clarke laughs, turning her head in the sand to look upwards at Lexa. “Nothing’s ‘wrong’ with my picture, but you have a litany of complaints about it?”

“People who choose profile pictures in which a portion of their face is obscured usually have something to hide, Clarke,” Lexa rationalizes. “But you have—” Lexa’s mouth seems to have run away with her thoughts because she abruptly snaps it shut.

Clarke swallows, a breath trapped somewhere beneath her sternum. “I have what?”

“I just mean, your eyes are—they should be the focal point. You shouldn’t hide them," Lexa says, but her sincerity falls away seconds later. “They’re basically your only redeemable feature.”
Clarke drops her jaw in disgust, rolling her weight into Lexa who topples easily into fresh sand. “You’re such a dick.”

They are both laughing, Lexa righting herself to sit cross-legged and brushing sand from her clothes. She considers Clarke’s phone and then decides, “You should let me take a new picture.”

Clarke falters, her laughter choked off by Lexa’s earnest suggestion. “What?”

Lexa swivels her head to the water and gestures with her free hand to the landscape around them. “This would make for an excellent photograph, Clarke.”

“You look like shit. This sweatshirt might literally be from from high school, and my hair is a mess.” Clarke sits up as well, rearranging her clothing self-consciously and combing the hair from her eyes as Lexa continues to observe her.

“It’s nice.” Lexa twists her mouth and taps Clarke’s phone against her kneecap. “It’s authentic. You look—” Clarke meets her eye, if only to see Lexa’s admission as it leaves her lips. “You look like you.”

Clarke’s heart pumps wildly, her blonde hair scattered again by the ocean breeze, and her cheeks warmed by Lexa’s honesty. She thinks Lexa sees her as no one else ever has. Clarke lets her take the damn picture.

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Clarke exhales, sinking her fingers into the coarse grains of northeastern sand. They’ve been sat on the beach for just over an hour, and Clarke’s empty stomach is signalling a departure is imminent. Still, she’s not yet ready to say goodbye to the last dregs of beach and sun.

“When is Costia in DC for her conference? This weekend?”

Lexa hums as her heels dig into the sand, shifting the landscape beside Clarke’s foot. “She leaves after classes on Thursday, I think.”

“Okay, well, we can hang out. If you want.”

Lexa’s voice carries over her more closely, and Clarke can tell Lexa has turned to look down on her. “Don’t we hang out all the time anyway?”

Clarke, who has again returned to lie prone beside her, opens her eyes if only to roll them at Lexa. “Yeah, but I know you get lonely. Despite your bullshit claims to loving solitude.”

“I am capable of enjoying alone time and the pleasure of your company, Clarke.”

“Okay, well, if you get bored of meditating in complete silence let me know. We can watch old movies or something.”

“Your house?”

“Sure, if you want.”

Lexa nods once or twice. “Okay. Sure.”

:::

Despite everything that Clarke knows about the line she is treading with Lexa—despite her recent
influx in dating, despite Costia for that matter—she keeps finding herself in Lexa’s pleasant company, continuously drawn into each other’s orbit in these small, innocuous ways.

“Clarke, these are not New York bagels.”

“Come on, don’t be a snob. They’re so good!”

The line for Abraham’s Bagels is perpetually long, often stretching down the street for an entire block. Clarke exits the bagel shop ahead of Lexa who has held open the door. She carries a thin, brown paper bag which holds food for the both of them. The air outside the shop is a gust of cool, autumn wind.

“I didn’t say they weren’t good. I’m just saying, they don’t compare.”

“Elitist.”

“No, Clarke. Realist. It’s just a statement of fact.”

Clarke rolls her eyes before slipping sunglasses back over her eyes. “Fine. Whatever, let’s go eat by the frog pond. Or is that too pedestrian for your big city tastes?”

“Since when does my preference in bagels give me a superiority complex when you’re the one with the fancy boat and a house on the waterfront?”

Clarke laughs as they fall into stride, heading in the direction of the pond.

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Bartlett Mall is a circular, hollowed out portion of the city with a pond at its base and a grove of trees wrapping its perimeter. At street level, a brick pathway runs beneath a canopy of squat flowering trees, which Clarke once read is meant to mirror Pall Mall in London. The old courthouse, which dates back to the early 1800s, sits on the East bank in stately red brick. It’s easily one of the most scenic autumnal landscapes in the area, and Clarke always makes it a point to spend time there as the trees burst into color and reflect off the glassy pond below.

“It’s pretty cold. Are you sure you want to sit outside?” Lexa asks. She holds their paper bag of bagels in one hand, the other stuffed into a pocket of her navy blue jacket.

Clarke has layered a thick wool sweater with knobby wooden buttons beneath her favorite down puffer vest and holds their coffees, one in each hand. She feels cozy and warm to her core except for the tip of her nose.

“It’ll be warmer down on the benches beside the water. The high banks tend to block all this wind.”

Lexa looks over at her with a smile that warms Clarke by several degrees. “Okay.”

Today it is bagels and coffee by the pond. Tomorrow it could be iced coffees along the waterfront despite the chilling seabreeze. Clarke searches herself for guilt that isn’t there. Her friendship with Lexa is by no means conventional, not least of which because she has almost entirely stopped denying her feelings (to herself, in any case). Lexa seeks her out—for comfort, for companionship—and Clarke doesn’t have the will to refuse her.

:::
On the night they've scheduled movies and pizza, Clarke suggests mulled wine, festive for the season, but Lexa arrives with a sack of ingredients for spiced whiskey cider, and Clarke has never looked a booze-filled gift horse in the mouth. Her anticipation at the prospect of spiced whiskey is muted only by Lexa’s attire, and Clarke finds herself uncharacteristically at a loss for words as she answers the door. Lexa looks dressed for optimal relaxation, her brown hair piled loosely atop her head: a typical look that Clarke has more-or-less adjusted to. What’s different tonight is that Lexa is also wearing round, tortoise shell frames that Clarke has never seen.

She’s instantly distracted by this unexpected accessory that is currently giving her dry mouth and chest pains. “Are those new?” Clarke attempts nonchalance and fails miserably.

“Oh,” Lexa adjusts her glasses along the bridge of her nose as if completely unaware that they intensify Clarke’s attraction to her by a thousand percent. “No, I’ve had them for ages. I tend to wear them more often in the winter.”

Clarke is less than pleased to know she’ll be silently suffering for the next several months, but fakes a grin as she invites Lexa into the warmth of her home.

“They look good,” she says, immediately regretting her choice of words.

*Reign it in, Clarke.* “Um, they’re a good frame for the shape of your face.”

*Better.*

Clarke defiantly ignores the pink tinge on Lexa’s cheeks as she crosses the threshold and responds with a quiet: “Thanks.”

:::

After an hour, the house smells amazing, aromas of apples, cloves, and cinnamon thickening the air. After three hours, Clarke is admittedly drunk if not still maintaining her wherewithal for the sake of conversation.

“We’ve been friends for how long,” Clarke drawls. “Six months?”

Lexa’s cheeks are rosy from too much whiskey, her glassy eyes twinkling under the low lights as she calculates the months. “Yes.”

“So, am I allowed to ask you about your mysterious background in law yet?”

Clarke has draped herself along the sofa, legs crossed at her ankles, while Lexa occupies an overstuffed reading chair that Clarke removed from her dad’s study when she purchased her house. It was the first piece of furniture moved into the space after she signed the deed.

Lexus smiles easily, a bit drunk herself. “It’s not that much of a mystery, but yes, you can ask.”

“You studied law at a prestigious university in New York.”

“Yes.”

“But you manage clients and distribute product for a small-batch brewery in Massachusetts.”

Lexus finishes a sip of warm cider. “Also true.”

“Okay,” Clarke laughs. “So, where’s the disconnect?”
Lexa seems open to the conversation, but she nevertheless tucks her knees up to her chest, dwarfing herself into the cushions of Clarke’s chair.

“I wish I knew. I’ve been so singularly focused for as long as I can recall—education was always the priority. Go to school, graduate with honors, apply for scholarships, whatever it took.” Lexa runs a finger along the patterned upholstery of Jake’s chair. “I wasn’t going to let my disadvantages in early childhood become a setback or a scapegoat on which I could pin all my problems.”

“That’s a really admirable outlook on a pretty bleak situation.”

“There’s always someone worse off than you,” Lexa explains plainly. “I became intent on changing laws of consent surrounding sexual assault, particularly for kids within the system who are so often underrepresented.”

Clarke’s stomach sinks, weighted with dread. “Lexa…”

“No, not me. But I definitely knew plenty of kids who had survived that kind of trauma without ever seeing justice carried out.”

Clarke feels only slightly less nauseous, still moved by Lexa’s determination. “So you went to fight for them. To make a difference by studying a broken system and trying to make it better.”

“I started to.”

Clarke’s brow creases sympathetically, “And then?”

“And then one day I woke up and I had just … lost the fucking plot. I just didn’t know what I was doing anymore. Or where I was headed.”

Lexa looks lost, dejected at her own proposed inadequacies, and Clarke can’t stand the sight of her looking so dispirited.

“You can’t be more than thirty, Lexa. You do know that you’re still allowed to be figuring shit out, right?”

“Twenty-eight.”

“Same age.” Clarke offers a smile that Lexa is too distracted to return. “Okay so look at it this way: look at everything you’ve already accomplished. You still have so much time to figure out exactly how you plan to make a difference, Lexa.”

Lexa swills the drink in her glass before mumbling, “Costia has her shit figured out.”

“Costia isn’t you.”

“We were so in sync when we first met. So equally passionate for our own causes and the marginalized demographics we're driven to help.”

Clarke sobers instantly. Things have taken an unexpected turn into forbidden territory—discussions of Costia to this degree are never on their agenda—and Clarke cannot be drunk for this conversation. Lexa and Costia were in sync.

They were. The tense Lexa has chosen to reference cannot be unintentional.

Clarke’s pulse thrums, daring herself to be brave and ask the question that’s been haunting her
conscious for months.

“You're not in sync now?”

Lexa abruptly slides off the chair, landing on her feet and padding into the kitchen in her striped socks to refill her glass from the pot on the stove.

She speaks with her back to Clarke. “We considered breaking up before leaving New York, actually.”

Clarke nearly falls off the couch, finding her balance at the last minute and somehow not spilling a drop of her cider.

“You did?” she croaks.

Lexa nods as she reenters the sitting area, settling instead on the end of the sofa near Clarke’s feet. “I was unhappy, completely directionless. I’d quit school. I didn’t know what I was doing anymore. After she’d been accepted to BU, Costia thought getting out of Brooklyn might clear my head. So, she asked me to come with her. We talked about what might make us both satisfied, and in the end I decided to move with her. It was a … lengthy discussion.”

Clarke is aghast, her addled brain struggling to process information as rapidly as Lexa shares it. “Wow. That sounds incredibly rational.”

“Costia and I are both exceptionally pragmatic.”

“Clearly.” Clarke says, returning again to her cider. “But, things are good now though, aren’t they? I mean, I’ve seen you together—you seem happy.”

“Things between Costia and I are as good as they were before we left New York.”

In typical Lexa fashion, it’s an answer that tells Clarke absolutely nothing. Even the possibility of Lexa and Costia on the outs has Clarke on the verge of hyperventilating. They desperately need to segue out of this subject matter before Clarke’s head explodes. She isn’t equipped for this conversation. Not between the dim lighting of her living room, the excessive whiskey, and Lexa curled up on her sofa looking soft and vulnerable.

She blurts out the first asinine thing that flies into her head. “Well, I for one am grateful for your lack of direction during this tragic, quarter-life crisis. I mean, I scored a supreme best friend from the fallout.”

Lexa’s scowl descends into an adorable pout, and Clarke is laughing by the time Lexa kicks her own socked feet against Clarke’s.

“I’m so drunk,” Clarke groans.

Lexa smiles guiltily. “I think I have a heavy pour.”

“Let’s put on a movie and order pizza.”

Lexa’s face lights up comically. She extends her upheld hand along the back of the sofa, prompting Clarke for a hi-five, a gesture which has in six months never infiltrated their friendship, and Clarke’s laugh is more of a cackle as she gamely slaps her right palm against Lexa’s left.

:::
Just as the opening credits start, an open box of pizza on the coffee table before them, Clarke nudges Lexa’s foot with her own.

“Hey, I really am glad you ended up here. Even if it’s just a stop on your way to figuring things out for yourself somewhere else.”

Lexa watches her for long seconds as the TV’s illumination flickers across her face. “Me too.”

“You’re okay, right?”

There is not enough whiskey in all of the east coast to dampen the effects of Lexa’s prolonged gaze. Clarke counts the seconds between her shallow breaths as she awaits Lexa’s response.

“I’m okay,” Lexa finally says, her voice as unsure as Clarke’s unsteady pulse.

:::

Clarke wakes knowing she isn’t in her bed. Her limbs are sore and stiff and weighed down by other limbs. She raises her head off the arm of the sofa to see Lexa’s long legs a tangled mess with her own. She drops her head back against the arm rest, stifling a groan. Her head pounds. Her mouth is stuffed with cotton. She is going to endure a monstrous hangover when the sun comes up, all of which will be magnified by the emulsified guilt of knowing she fell asleep with Lexa. They had fooled themselves into thinking they were striking a successful balance. But this is it. This is their tipping point. They have careened off the precipice after months of recklessly treading its edges.

There is nothing inherently sexual or intimate about their positioning, Clarke having passed out at one end while Lexa’s head is crooked against the opposite arm rest, their legs jumbled in the middle. If it were Raven or Lincoln it would be nothing. But this is Lexa.

Nothing is ever nothing with Lexa.

Clarke is careful to extract her legs without waking Lexa, to a degree that it takes her almost ten minutes to finally be clear of the couch. She finds a throw and gently drapes it over Lexa’s legs, pausing when she’s through to watch Lexa sleep. Clarke jumps when Lexa shifts, though she doesn’t wake. Clarke has already made her decision, but before she goes she kneels beside the couch to remove Lexa’s glasses, knowing Lexa would be grumpy to discover she’d slept in them and grumpier still if they were bent or broken in the morning. Clarke places the frames on the coffee table, exhales her resignation, and walks away.

When Lexa wakes in the morning, Clarke is gone to work, a note pinned to her front door that says: sorry there is no coffee. please lock up on your way out. thx, clarke

:::

November is dark and depressing and not just because of the weather, though it does properly accentuate Clarke’s dismal mood. The water is gloomy and grey. The trees have lost their leaves, looking like skeletons of their former selves. It’s been two weeks since Clarke has spent any time with Lexa outside of work, and even their interactions at Dockside have been severely limited. As the Thanksgiving holiday approaches, Clarke questions for the hundredth time her decision to buffer a distance between them.

Octavia takes tastings with most of the brewery reps now, Trikru included, while Clarke holes up in her office claiming paperwork and scheduling conflicts. She’s fooling no one, not even herself, but it’s better than seeing Lexa’s sad, green eyes and avoiding all the questions locked within them that Lexa won’t ask.
Clarke avoids the Wednesday deliveries. She avoids Lexa’s texts until they stop appearing. She avoids Lexa’s stupid photo in her stupid phone. Clarke even avoids the coffee shop for fear of a chance encounter. The days pass, and she doesn’t feel better. She feels progressively worse. She feels horrible.

Thanksgiving is a muted affair. Clarke traditionally hosts her band of friends at the house and savours her time spent in the kitchen with Lincoln, her dutiful sous chef, and Raven who sneaks bites of everything while Clarke chases her away from the kitchen island with a wooden spoon. This year there’s an obvious lack of cheer, and Clarke knows it’s the gaping, Lexa-sized chasm in their midst.

“Costia has family in Arlington,” Lincoln tells her while mincing an onion. “They’re spending the holiday there.”

Clarke hadn’t asked, but Lincoln is as intuitive as he is kind and beautiful. Clarke nods her head in acknowledgement, feeling nevertheless ridden with guilt and unease for having not invited Lexa in the first place.

The prescribed distance was overdue. It was necessary, Clarke tells herself. But it does little to relieve the ache of loss in her chest.

:::

The text comes three days before Christmas. Clarke checks her phone from where it had vibrated atop the bar counter and stops to hold her breath before swiping a finger across the screen.

Lexa (9:33pm): I understand you are taking the space you need right now, and I respect the distance you have set; but I leave for NY tomorrow. It didn’t feel right to not let you know. Merry Christmas, Clarke.

Clarke can feel her chest heaving, the labor she must employ just to draw breaths that’s making her head spin.

“O, I’ll be in the office if you need me.” Clarke starts for the back hallway as Octavia lifts her chin to signal she’s heard.

Her hands sweat as she sits behind the small desk, jumping to her feet a second later to pace along barely five feet of open floor. She could just respond to the text. A simple Merry Christmas. Happy holidays. Safe travels. Done and dusted. She could ignore it altogether.

Or.

“Clarke.” Lexa picks up on the first ring, and Clarke’s entire muscular system releases weeks of tension at the sound of her name in Lexa’s gentle timbre.

“Hi.”

The line is silent. Not even Lexa’s breathing penetrates. Like Clarke, perhaps she is holding it for fear of disrupting this cautious détente.

“You called—”

“I miss you.” The words escape Clarke’s mouth of their own volition at the sound of Lexa’s voice, and a sigh quickly follows that Clarke cannot accurately say belongs to herself or to Lexa.
“I miss you too.”

Clarke sinks back to rest her weight against her desk, gripping one hand to its edge and briefly closing her eyes. “You leave tomorrow?”

“Yes. I’ll be gone until the second of January.”

“Indra is allowing for that much leave? I thought vacations went against company policy,” Clarke jokes, already relaxing into the familiar swing of their easy banter.

There’s a quiet laugh over the line that has Clarke biting her lower lip to keep her face from splitting open.

“You know Indra. She’s filled with Christmas cheer.”

It is Clarke who laughs next. “Right.” Lexa doesn’t respond before Clarke is asking, “How are you getting home?”

“Planes, trains, and automobiles,” Lexa quips. “Well, trains and busses at least.”

“Taking the train to Boston?”

“Yes.” Lexa pauses, taking a breath before continuing. “I’ll meet Costia at South Station, and we’ll take the bus back into Manhattan.”

“Let me take you to the train station then,” Clarke says.

“Clarke, thank you, but I really don’t need a lift.”

“I want to.”

“I don’t want to inconvenience you.”

“You’re not. I offered.”

“I can just—”

“You are not walking to the train, Lexa. It’s over a mile from downtown, and it’s December.”

Lexa exhales a long suffering sigh. And just like that, they’re back at it.

:::

Lexa slips wordlessly into the passenger seat of Clarke’s car, placing a small canvas bag at her feet and rubbing her gloved hands together after she’s buckled in. Clarke smirks in her direction until Lexa looks up.

“See? You would have been freezing if you’d tried to walk.”

Lexa rolls her eyes. “I would have been fine.”

Clarke’s smirk relaxes into an actual smile, which is gradually mirrored in Lexa’s own upturned mouth.

“Hi.”

Lexa sandwiches her hands between her knees. “Hey.”
Clarke thinks. It somehow relaxes her even further.

"How have you been?"

Lexa shrugs. "Okay. Had loads of time by myself for meditating."

Clarke laughs and throws her car into gear, waiting for traffic to clear.

"Is that all you’ve packed to bring home? For an entire week?"

Lexa glances to her feet, shrugging a moment later. "I learned to travel lightly."

Clarke clears her throat. "Right."

Lexa looks back up to Clarke as if fighting to keep a broader smile from overtaking her face, "Thanks for the lift."

Clarke returns her smile. "Of course."

The short drive is mostly silent, Clarke’s radio softly tinkling the sounds of generic, overplayed Christmas favorites. The parking lot at the train station is all but vacant, and Clarke pulls her car parallel to the platform, leaving the engine running.

Her nerves are shot. The anticipation of seeing Lexa again after more than an entire month of obstinate avoidance has not prepared her in the slightest for actually being with Lexa in a confined space.

"What time is your train?"

Lexa checks the black tracker on her wrist which doubles as a digital watch. "Fifteen minutes. I can wait on the platform if you want to go."

Clarke shakes her head with a laugh. "You are so fucking difficult."

Lexa’s eyes practically bulge. "I’m difficult?!"

"Yes!" Clarke turns in her seat, as much as she can without knocking into the gear shift. "Can’t you just let me do something nice for you?"

Lexa relaxes again into her own bucket seat, shifting to mirror Clarke’s position and unhooking her seatbelt.

"Thank you, Clarke."

Clarke pinches her lips between her teeth as she watches Lexa. Her breathing is mostly managed, but her heart rate is wild. She wonders if fifteen minutes is enough time to be completely honest. She swallows back her fear, intent on making every minute count.

"I'm not seeing Mark anymore." A strong start.

"Oh." There is surprise in Lexa’s eyes, mixed with some other element that Clarke doesn’t have time to question. "Did something happen?"

"No," Clarke exhales. "He was great, and we always had a fun time. It just wasn’t—it was never as good as—" Clarke pauses to watch Lexa, biting her lip and gauging her for a reaction.
Lexa nods once, never dropping eye contact, and Clarke almost cries in relief.

“It didn’t feel right.”

“Right,” Lexa nods again.

Clarke rapidly flips a switch to blasé indifference instead, tapping a hand against the steering wheel. “Anyway his name was Mark, and when you think about it: Mark and Clarke.” Clarke makes a gagging face and shudders.

Lexa laughs prettily. “You broke up with him because his name rhymes with yours?”

“No,” Clarke says, settling her own laughter as she makes pointed eye contact again. “That isn’t why.”

Lexa looks away, picks at the broken rubber along the sole of her shoe. Clarke thinks the car may combust against all the words they are unwilling to say.

“I just assumed you had started seeing him more seriously.”

“Because we stopped hanging out.”

“Yes.”

Clarke traces her finger along the diameter of the steering wheel. “Mark had nothing to do with that.” Lexa is quiet and still, and Clarke is finally courageous enough to say, “You essentially told me you and Costia were having problems, and then we,” she swallows roughly. “We slept together.”

Lexa’s head shoots up at that.

“I mean, not—we literally slept together, Lexa.” Clarke smooths her palms against the fabric of her jeans. “whatever happens between you and your girlfriend—I just never wanted to complicate things for you.”

Lexa’s face softens. The look she gives Clarke sounds exactly like: too late.

“Look, you know I’m not here to malign Costia’s character or anything close to it. She’s clearly an amazing person, and you’ve stayed together for your own reasons. But Lexa … you deserve to be happy. Like, really happy. Like, so ecstatic about the person you’re with you can’t even function properly. You deserve to be with someone who makes you that happy. You both do.”

Lexa sighs, tugging at her beanie where it covers half of her ear. “And you think there’s someone out there who can make me that happy?”

“Yeah.”

Unsuccessfully, Lexa attempts to curb her smile. “Yeah?”

Clarke can’t look away for anything. “Definitely.”

:::

Lexa’s train arrives, and Clarke watches the daily commuters exit in staggered lines.

“Okay, so, I’m going to, um, board,” Lexa says, flustered and uncertain and so fucking adorable
Clarke can’t believe she has the restraint not to kiss her.

Lexa opens the passenger door to Clarke’s panicked, “Wait!” Lexa eyes her over her shoulder. “I mean, um, let me get out with you.”

Lexa’s confused ‘what, why?’ is muffled by Clarke’s own door opening as she makes her way around the front of her car.

There hasn’t yet been any snow and the ground is as bare as the trees, but Clarke immediately shivers. “Jesus Christ it’s fucking cold.”

A man of about fifty gives her a glancing look of disapproval.

“Happy holidays!” Clarke beams in response as he passes, and Lexa is laughing when she turns back to face her.

“Why did you get out of the car if you’re so cold?”

Clarke doesn’t slow until she’s pressed up against Lexa, her arms wrapped tightly around Lexa’s neck and shoulders. “For this.”

A second later Lexa has dropped her bag to the platform beneath their feet, but Clarke hardly registers the dull thud before Lexa’s arms are circling her waist. It’s an embrace that Clarke lets linger, in no rush to lose Lexa to geography when she’s only just gotten her back within reach. But time is cruel, and Clarke eventually disengages at a snail’s pace. Lexa seems no more willing to move, and Clarke’s heart begins hammering a rhythm against her ribs when Lexa’s hands slide along her back and come to rest briefly at her hips. It is, in no uncertain terms, not a friendly gesture, and Clarke’s stomach swoops dangerously low at the contact.

Lexa steps back by a fraction and reaches for her bag. “I’ll see you when I get back.”

“Okay.”

“Get back inside the car, Clarke,” Lexa grins. “Your teeth are chattering.”

“Text me when you get to your dad’s.”

“Okay.” Lexa takes one step backwards and then another. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas.”

Chapter End Notes

I was resolute about keeping the angst to a minimum, but this chapter was being defiant. Feel free to come harass me about it on tumblr @mopeytropey.
but I'll be seeing you

Chapter Summary

An interlude in Brooklyn.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“So, what are you running home to hide from this time?”

Anya is braced in the door frame of their father’s apartment, arms folded over her chest, when Lexa arrives.

“I’m here on the day before Christmas, Anya. Why do you think I’m here?”

“Likely story. Any time you come back here, you’re avoiding something.”

“Anya,” Lexa sighs.

“You look … vexed.”

“I am not vexed.”

“Your face is.”

“Well, it’s nice to see you too.”

Their breaths hang in puffs of frozen air between them. They remain in silent standoff, Lexa shouldering her bag but neither willing to concede weakness to the blistering cold of a New York December morning.

“Are you planning to let me in?”

After a prolonged delay, as if to show dominance, Anya steps aside, allowing Lexa entrance into their childhood home. Lexa steps through familiar hallways, trailing down the narrow apartment until she reaches a small bedroom. The first place she ever called home. The first space that ever felt like hers. It is a small boxed room that holds little more than a petite, wooden desk and full size bed, the same as it did while Lexa occupied it all those years ago. Anya has followed her through the apartment with quiet footsteps and makes herself flush with the wall next to Lexa’s old bedroom door.

“Where is Gustus?”

“Grocery,” Anya answers. “He has grand plans to cook for us tomorrow.”

“Oh, god.” Lexa sighs, tossing her bag onto the bed and sitting down beside it. “He still won’t agree to having his groceries delivered?”

“You mean Gus? Not do something on his own? Stubbornly refuse help?”

Anyshrugs. “He’s a grown man. There’s no reasoning with him. Arthritis be damned.”

Lexastretches her back until it pops and rolls her shoulders. Her night spent on myriad forms of public transportation followed by sharing a too-small and unfamiliar bed at Costia’s parent’s place has resulted in a stiff neck and throbbing lower back.

“How’s Boston?”

Lexaswallows down a stomach flutter, clenches her fist very briefly against the duvet, and brushes off thoughts of Clarke’s embrace at the train station that have been running on repeat for the past twelve hours.

Her voice never waivers. “Fine.”

Anyaaalready 99% skeptical at any given moment, further narrows her assessment of Lexa and tightens her mouth.

“What aren’t you telling me?”

Lexaalmost laughs. So much.

Laughter would be such an obvious tell for Anya, and Lexa intends to keep her cards close to her chest when it comes to Clarke. Anyway, Anya remains ardently suspicious of joy expressed in any form. Lexa instead kicks off her shoes, letting each one plunk noisily to the floor.

“It’s not technically Boston. We’re north of the city by about forty minutes.”

“Spare me the geography lesson, kid.” Anya crosses her legs at the ankle to mirror her arms crossed along her stomach, her gaze calculating. “You’re acting weird. And, I’m not an idiot.”

“Jury’s out on that one,” Lexasmirks, and Anya flips her off.

Her face suddenly flattens. “Oh shit. Did you finally break things off with Costia?”

Lexascowls in offense. “What do you mean finally?”

Anyaa, as much as she has ever looked anything other than bored, is nonplussed. “You two have been talking about breaking up for over a fucking year.”

“That is not … technically true,” Lexa tries to argue, but she’s underslept and out of practice when it comes to holding her weight against Anya.

“Okay fine. So how is your girlfriend with whom you are still with if only by a mere technicality?”

Lexacloses her eyes and tips her head back against the wall.

“Jesus fucking christ, I’m gonna need a beer for this shit,” Anyasighs. “Do you want a beer?”

Lexa opens her eyes. “It’s nine in the morning.”

“Yeah. And it’s Christmas Eve.” Anyapushes off the wall and starts back down the short hallway towards the kitchen. “Let’s get festive.”

Lexasighs, too exhausted to move for long seconds where she can hear Anya opening and closing
the fridge, popping caps off of bottles of beer. Before she moves to meet Anya in the kitchen, Lexa slides her phone from her back pocket and finds her ongoing message with Clarke. It’s been radio silence since they last saw one another at the train, the last text between them being Lexa announcing her trip home.

Her fingers twitch over the keyboard on the screen and she chews at her bottom lip. In the silence of her old bedroom, her nerves again take flight.

(9:13am): *I am back home to my dad’s. I would have texted last night, but we arrived late and I crashed at Costia’s parents’.*

Clarke’s reply comes instantly, and Lexa is smiling into her phone without restraint.

*Clarke Griffin (9:13am): OMG YOURE ALIVE*

*Clarke Griffin (9:14am): does it feel nice to be home? better than the bus in any case …*

Her eyes roam the walls, empty except for Lexa’s high school diploma framed on one wall.

(9:14am): *I am in my old room. It’s very small. But, yes. Nice to be back.*

“I’m not above drinking both of these beers if you don’t come claim one,” Anya shouts down the hallway.

Lexa jumps to her feet, skittish as if Anya had just walked in on her masturbating, and she feels her face warm under a crawling blush.

“Relax, Anya. I’m on my way down.”

*Clarke Griffin (9:15am): is it cold? it’s fucking freeeeeezing here. still no snow.*

*Clarke Griffin (9:15am): i came over to my mom’s though and her dog is keeping my lap warm*

A picture arrives before Lexa can respond: a small, brown dog curled along two legs in grey sweatpants. Clarke’s legs. Lexa again bites her lip as her stomach continues to flip flop. If seeing a small fraction of Clarke’s sweatpants clad legs has her head swimming, she is very much in over her head.

(9:16am): *Anya is demanding an audience with me so I have to go drink beer with her in our dad’s kitchen.*

*Clarke Griffin (9:16am): lol omg i can’t believe u r going to start drinking before ME! i am so proud. have fun. glad u made it safely :)*

Lexa wants to say: *I’d rather stay and talk with you.*

She wants to ask Clarke questions about her mom, about their family traditions. She wants to see her, hear Clarke’s voice and raspy laughter. She wants to ask Clarke to send her that photo they took on the beach just so she can have something of Clarke nearby. The photo that Clarke insisted they take—‘prerequisite best friend selfie’ she had said—and then criticized for hours on end because her hair was a mess and half of Lexa’s face had been cropped out of frame. The photo Clarke had promised to share with her before their time apart.

Lexa takes a deep breath instead.

(9:16am): *I’ll text you later.*
She replaces her phone into her pocket and walks briskly into the kitchen where Anya has pulled herself onto the linoleum counter beside the sink to drink her beer. She nods her head towards the fridge.

“I put yours back in. Didn’t know how long you’d be back there composing sonnets.”

Lexa rolls her eyes but feels her phone vibrate through her back pocket as she approaches the fridge, forcing herself to employ ironclad restraint not to check the message in Anya’s presence. She checks the label on her beer and frowns. "Remind me to get Dad some higher quality beer." Anya ignores her, eyes boring into the side of Lexa's head and face stony. “So.”

Lexa finds a seat at the small, round kitchen table, looks squarely at Anya, and sips her beer. “So?”

“Who is she?”

Lexa remains stoic in spite of Anya’s interrogation, but there is a small part of her that wonders if her sister has had her phone tapped.

“Who is whom?”

Anya directs a warning finger in her direction. “Don’t do that. Do not answer my questions with more questions.”

“You haven’t asked me any questions to which I’m able to provide answers without context,” Lexa challenges.

“Okay, definitely do not do that either.”

Lexa smirks into another sip of beer. “What am I doing?”

“That pretentious lawyer speak that you think intimidates people.”

“It does intimidate people. Generally.”

“Well, I’m not most people. I was on the other side of a shitty bathroom stall when you inserted a tampon for the first time. You are literally incapable of scaring me, kid.”

Lexa grimaces from her seat at the table. “You cherish the most bizarre memories of our childhood.”

Anya snaps her fingers two or three times. “Focus. Gus will be back soon, and I need the fucking scoop before he derails the conversation into a diatribe about the Mets’ new relief pitcher.”

Lexa perks up at that. “He’s actually looking very promising in the off season. I heard an interview with Collins—”

“Lexa.” Anya’s waning patience has officially expired, and Lexa exhales in defeat. There is no way she’s getting out of this one.

“I assume you’re asking about Clarke.”

Anya looks far too pleased with Lexa’s acquiescence. “Why would you assume I’m asking about Clarke?”
“Now who’s responding by asking more questions?”

“Okay so, Clarke.” Lexa hates the way Anya says her name with such intention. She hates even more what Anya says next. “Is this the one with the fancy bar and great tits?”

Lexa’s grip on her beer slips and it nearly ends up a pile of broken glass and frothy fermentation on the linoleum flooring if not for her quick reflexes.

“I never said—” Anya is already grinning like a cat who’s cornered a mouse as Lexa quietly confirms, “Yes, she manages one of the bars on my client list.”

“And you like her.”

Lexa feels the reality of a conversation she’s been avoiding for months settle around her. “I … don’t know.”

“No. That wasn’t a question. You like her.”

Lexa looks up to Anya whose face is blunt but not unkind. Her confidence unwavering and dark eyes penetrating.

Lexa looks away and exhales what she hopes is not as shaky a breath as it feels. “Yes. I like her.”

There. She’s said it. Lexa wishes it felt more like relief.

“And what about Costia?”

Lexa swallows down a familiar dread. “Costia is the same as ever. Driven, focused, brilliant.”

“Jesus, Lex,” Anya laughs. “You’re not hiring her for a tech startup, you’re dating her.”

“Costia is great. She’s always been great.”

Anya is unrelenting, and Lexa has to remember it’s why they have for so long been inseparable. “Do you still love her?”

Lexa knows, without hesitation: “Yes.” It’s not a canned answer. It’s the truth.

“Do you still want to be with her?”

Lexa crosses one leg over the other, propping an ankle atop her knee. Her brow crinkles in honest confusion. “Aren’t those the same two questions phrased differently?”

Anya’s face softens into a kind of sympathy reserved for older siblings. “Not even a little.”

Lexa can already feel her heart rate picking up speed, though she’s determined to remain calm. “I’m not going to end things with her just because she’s inadvertently created this distance with her work and schooling. I fell in love with her because of those things—because she was so determined and passionate and wanted to fight for things she believes in.”

“Don’t be that person, Lexa,” Anya sighs.

“What person?”

“Don’t be a shitty person by pretending you’re trying to do the right thing.”
“I am trying to do the right thing,” Lexa argues.

“Don’t you think there’s a little more going on than just scheduling conflicts? Come on, Lexa. You were having this discussion well before Boston.”

“Things are different between us,” Lexa partially concedes, “but they’re not necessarily bad. I can’t just break up with Costia for no reason.”

“I can think of a great reason.” Anya waggles her eyebrows lecherously, hopping down from her perch to grab another beer.

“Don’t be crass,” Lexa scowls. “I’ve definitely never talked to you about any of Clarke’s physical traits, Anya. Including her—”

“Great tits?”

Lexa extends her arm enough to punch Anya’s bicep and has never before been more grateful for their shoe box kitchen than when her fist makes contact.

Anya laughs off Lexa’s reaction and snaps off her bottle cap before leaning back against the fridge. “You like her, Lexa. And if you care about Costia, then don’t be a dick by staying with her out of obligation. I mean, don’t you think you're being pretty unfair to her as it is?”

Lexa frowns, knowing Anya’s right but is yet unable to acknowledge it.

"Sometimes relationships end before everything goes to shit, Lex. It doesn’t have to get messy and fucked up before you decide to end it."

Lexa contemplates silently while finishing her beer. When Anya slides a new one in front of her, she accepts it with a small smile of gratitude. Anya eventually sits across from her, and they drink in mutual silence for several minutes. Lexa has always enjoyed the kind of quiet that can be shared, and is suddenly homesick for her sister even while sitting across from her. They have always been compatible with a mutual need for quiet solitude. The thought quickly leads her to Clarke, who by all available evidence never shuts up but is no less compatible, and Lexa smiles so much she almost laughs.

“She calls everyone babe.”

Anya looks up as she takes a drink. “Who? Clarke?”

Lexa nods, taking a drink of her own.

“You hate when people do that.”

“I know.”

Anya cringes at Lexa’s soft smile. “You two are going to be so fucking gross, aren’t you?”

Lexa ignores her sister’s disgust and sips her beer. “And, she refuses to watch baseball.”

Anya shrugs. “Could be worse. She could be an insufferable Red Sox fan.”

Lexa continues to muse, slowly spinning her bottle in a widening circle of condensation. It feels freeing to allow her thoughts to wander to Clarke—to allow someone else to know just how often her thoughts are with Clarke. “She also loves karaoke. But not even actual karaoke. She just does this performance lip-syncing routine to horrible pop music in her own living room. It’s actually
pretty funny. She can be pretty funny.”

Anya audibly gags. “Ugh. Is there nothing redeeming about her? Do not say her eyes.”

Lexa does laugh then. “Um. She has a boat?”

Anya’s dark eyes almost sparkle with interest. “Keep talking.”

“It’s really incredible. It belonged to her dad. I think it’s from the 50s or 60s, but it’s been restored beautifully.”

“I thought you had a crippling fear of boats,” Anya suddenly recalls.

“Yeah, I do.”

Anya shakes her head. “Didn’t tell Blondie about that, did you?”

“Okay, seriously, how do you know that Clarke is a blonde?”

“So there’s this search engine called Goog—”

Lexa looks appalled. “You did an internet search on her?”

“I looked up one of my sister’s clients, located the name of its general manager—one Ms. Clarke Griffin—and then casually perused her Instagram.”

“Jesus, An.” Lexa rubs her fingers across her forehead and closes her eyes.

“This is all public information for consumption. It’s not my fault your girl doesn’t privatize her social media accounts. What exactly did they teach you at that fancy law school?”

“Regardless. It still feels like an unnecessary invasion of privacy.”

“What do you expect, kid? You moved away. You hardly give me scraps of information about your new life, and I’m forced to piece the rest together,” Anya shrugs.

Lexa deflates and her shoulders relax where her spine had gone rigid in defense of Clarke. “Do I really tell you nothing?”

“You don’t. But that’s nothing new,” Anya says, entirely unbothered. “You’ve never been particularly chatty.”

They quiet again, Lexa contemplative and brooding despite Anya’s nonchalance. Anya accepts whatever version of Lexa she is willing to give and always has. Reticent and withholding or explosive and vengeful. She has known Lexa from all sides and either supports or corrects her behaviors accordingly. There is no shared blood between them, and yet Lexa has never felt a more primitive bond to another person.

She takes a sip of beer, averting her eyes to the tabletop and curbing a smile when she says, “Clarke does have nice eyes.”

Anya kicks her leg beneath the table but is nevertheless almost smiling herself as she responds, “Sentimental twat.”

When Gustus returns with enough food for seven armies, he seems curious as to the sink full of empty beer bottles but distracts himself immediately by wrapping up Lexa in a bone-crushing
Clarke’s text, which Lexa reads the very instant she is away from Anya’s prying eyes, says: *enjoy your time with your family and don’t worry about texting with me. but please hurry back.*

*Please hurry back.* Lexa reads the message at least seventeen times.

:::

Around lunchtime on Christmas day, she brings a box of shortbread and a bottle of Kahlua to Costia’s parents because she knows Costia’s mom likes to drink it in her coffee on Saturdays, particularly around the holidays. She spends a little over an hour chatting with Costia’s parents before returning to her father’s, wishing Costia a Merry Christmas and leaving a brief kiss on her cheek at the front door. She and Anya spend the rest of the day with Gustus, their lovely and doting father, who is all but incompetent in the kitchen, but they humor his good intentions and heartily eat a flavorless casserole and dry turkey breast. They make up for the poorly prepared cuisine with plenty of red wine and Gustus’ bellows of laughter.

At Anya’s urging, Lexa asks Costia to meet for coffee two days after Christmas. This was never going to be easy, but Anya is right: it’s time.

“Moira said I could stay with her in Somerville,” Costia tells her without much preamble. Her hands cup a vanilla latte to keep warm.

The wind is too biting to spend time wandering around Fort Greene park, though Lexa would prefer the cold and open air to the cramped, bustling space of the coffee shop in which they’re sat. Less than a year away from her city, and Lexa has already adjusted to having more open spaces and less people crowding around her constantly. They huddle near the back of the narrow shop, a favorite of Costia’s for their donuts and baked goods. Brooklyn moves in a hustle around them, and it’s a relief to remember that people in this city rarely pay attention to anyone else. They may as well be alone in a frigid, deserted park.

“Is that what you want?” Lexa asks, her voice even and calm though not without hesitation.

Costia sips at her latte. “I want us to be happy again, Lexa. And, I don’t know if that includes staying together anymore.”

“You’re not happy?”

“Most of the time, I’m too busy to notice, honestly,” Costia exhales. “But that isn’t fair to you.”

Lexa’s leg bounces beneath the small table, her fingers drumming its wooden top in sync to the music until Costia stills them with her own.

“Hey.”

She looks up to meet Costia’s warm eyes and can see her own resignation reflected in them.

“We didn’t know if this would work,” Costia tells her. She means the move up the coast, and staying together when they’d maybe already outgrown one another.

“I wanted it to,” Lexa says truthfully.

Costia’s smile is tinged in melancholy. “Me too.”
Before leaving the coffee shop, Costia kisses her a final time. Just outside the cafe door where the wind takes up her springy brown curls and casts them around her dark brown eyes. Her lips are full and soft, familiar. The kiss feels safe and worn, full of comfortable routine. It’s nice as it always is, but it does not coil itself around Lexa’s spine. It does not send a winding heat through Lexa’s core to settle at the base of her stomach. Lexa may very well miss Costia in the end, but the kiss, more than anything, solidifies her decision. Clarke’s words echo in her ears: she deserves more. And, so does Costia.

Lexa watches Costia walk away, the throngs of morning foot traffic along Franklin Ave swallowing her up, and inhales the cold city air as she heads for the train.

:::

She wants to text Clarke immediately.

They have kept in touch regularly over the past four days—she had woken on Christmas morning to a particularly lengthy text of nothing but emojis, which took her longer to decode than she would admit to anyone. Generally, their messages are mundane details, shared moments throughout the day that nevertheless keep Lexa in constant anticipation of receiving more.

The urge to text Clarke is not because communication with her has become a welcomed part of her daily routine over the past several months. Anything that came before feels infinitely different now. There is a charged energy resting at the tips of Lexa’s thumbs as they hover over her keyboard. She lies on her back in her childhood bed, legs crossed at the ankles, and bottom lip painfully chewed raw, uselessly contemplating how to proceed.

This is how Anya finds her.

“Well this is fucking depressing.” Anya spins the small desk chair beside Lexa’s bed and sits down on it backwards, her arms crossed and hanging over its wooden back.

“If you want me to engage in conversation with you, Anya, you need to be less cryptic with your incessant commentary,” Lexa tells her blandly, never looking away from her phone screen, which has started to mock her.

“You’ve been sitting in here for over an hour like a fucking teenager trying to draft a message to a girl you’ve been having filthy, impure thoughts about for months on end. And, if I know you, which I do, you still haven’t even decided if you’re actually going to send the fucking thing. I find that to be immeasurably depressing.” Anya’s grin is acerbic. “Is that explicit enough for you?”

Lexa huffs, letting the phone fall to her chest as she slides her fingers through her hair and lightly scratches her scalp.

“Let’s get out of here.” Lexa springs from the mattress with purpose, nudging Anya from the chair a second later. “I need a drink.”

Anya clamps her hands onto Lexa’s shoulders as they exit the bedroom. “Fucking finally.”

:::

Anya drags her to a divey bar closer to her own neighborhood, but Lexa doesn’t mind the stale cigarette stench that still clings to the walls years later, or the fact the beers on tap are mostly undesirable and overpriced. She’s in the market for something stronger than beer anyway. She orders a shitty bourbon and a beer back of something light and mainstream and heads to the rear of the bar because Anya has spied an open pool table.
They play two rounds, both of which result in Anya annihilating Lexa by a wide margin. They talk very little, eyes intent on the game. On her third beer and second bourbon, Lexa lines up her cue and cuts her eyes quickly to Anya.

“Do I tell her?” She’s not looking at Anya when she asks, eyes focused on the pool table instead. The cue ball cracks against a solid seven, and Lexa stands to watch it sink into a corner pocket.

Anya sips her beer. “Now who’s being cryptic?”

Lexa moves around the table, swiping her beer from a nearby table where they've left their coats and drinks. “She’s going to find out when I get back anyway, but … I can’t work out if I should tell her before. About Costia. If she knows everything before I get back ... I’m not sure what that looks like.”

She can’t even decide if she’s soliciting advice, more-or-less just voicing aloud an internal monologue. And, Anya remains quiet, watching as Lexa squares up on her next shot. She misses on an unlucky spin. Anya chalks her pool cue while Lexa scowls absently into her bourbon and plunks down the empty glass. She’ll be drunk before dinner. Maybe that was the whole point.

“What are your expectations for telling her now?” Anya squares up to the table, analyzing her own shot. “That by the time you get back she’ll greet you at the bus station in a parka and nothing else underneath?”

The joke seems to jar Lexa out of her own head, and because she’s a little less than sober, she allows an actual laugh and an honest response. “Not that I wouldn’t welcome that sort of arrivals gate spectacle, but no. That is not how I expect things to go.”

Anya sinks her last ball, lining up for the eight ball with little to no effort, and Lexa again grows quiet and thoughtful if not also entirely distracted at the very real prospect of seeing Clarke naked.

“Oh okay so, if expedited sex isn’t your motivation—what’s the rush?”

Lexa has no answer for that, but the mention of sex is enough to sober her instantly.

“I’m getting another round.”

Anya very nearly laughs as Lexa stalks towards the bar with purpose, and ends their third game with another easy win.

:::

“Anya beat me in pool. Three times, Clarke.”

The responding laugh rings sweetly in Lexa’s ear but is somewhat muffled by other noises that she cannot in her addled state define until Clarke says, “Hang on, Lexa.” There’s a distance to her voice then as Clarke has likely moved her mouth away from the phone to say, “I'll be in my office for a minute.”

Lexa closes one eye and then the other, watching her perspective shift on the water glass she’s holding. “You have an office?”

She tries to picture Clarke’s house and place within it a room she never new existed.

Clarke laughs again, and Lexa could honestly just listen to that one sound for the rest of her life. “Lexa, you’ve been in my office. You know I’m working right?”
A glimpse of sobriety has Lexa feeling ashamed for having dialed Clarke while she’s busy working. “Shit. I’m sorry, I’ll let you go.” Not to mention, Anya will be back to check on her soon enough, and Lexa definitely has not been cleared for communication with anyone let alone Clarke.

“Are you kidding me? You’ve been drinking all afternoon, getting your ass handed to you by your older sister, and now you’re drunk dialing me. I could not be enjoying myself more.”

Lexa clings to the one piece of information that solidifies as pertinent in her foggy brain and argues, “My streak of losses to Anya were only due to a lack of focus and not actual ability.”

“Oh? And why were you having such a hard time staying focused?” Clarke laughs.

Lexa thinks about bottling the sound of Clarke’s laugh for preservation. She thinks about making it her new mission in life to reproduce that sound as often as possible.

She’s entirely lost track of time when Clarke says in absolute amusement, “Did I lose you?”

“Oh. I was distracted.”

Clarke is laughing again, and it’s clearer now so she must be in her office—a singular echo into Lexa’s ear.

“Distracted, okay. Just now you were distracted? Or during your humiliating shutout?”

Lexa frowns. “Yes.”

Anya’s almost terrified ‘oh shit’ collides with more of Clarke’s amusement over the phone, and Lexa is ready to murder her sister when she easily swipes the phone from her hand.

“Lexa is a fucking moron and has to go.” Anya promptly hangs up the phone and throws it back onto Lexa’s bed without remorse.

“An, what the hell! I was—”

“Drink the rest of that water so I can refill it.” Anya waits her out, entirely unimpressed by Lexa’s seething petulance as she chugs down the remainder of her water and angrily hands it over. “Don’t be mad. You’re gonna thank me for that tomorrow when you’re sober, kid.”

Anya leaves the room with her empty glass, and Lexa wonders if she could manage to send off an apology text to Clarke before her sister returns. The keypad to unlock her phone proves an impossible task even when Lexa tries closing one eye. In the time it takes her to temporarily lock herself out of the phone, Anya is back at Lexa’s bedside forcing more water into her hand.

She watches Lexa take long swigs of water. “Did you tell her?”

Lexa’s hot anger quickly fades as a sudden drowsiness overtakes her entire body. She maintains eye contact with Anya as she drinks her water and slowly shakes her head.

In a rare display of affection, Anya pats Lexa’s shin once or twice. “Good.”

In the morning, Lexa has messages from Clarke from the night before, checking to see that she’s okay.

Clarke Griffin (11:34pm): I’m fairly certain that was your sister

Clarke Griffin (11:34pm): but she also kind of sounds like an assassin? so i guess please just let
Lexa texts back that she is, in fact, alive though severely hungover if not completely mortified and will be home in two days time.

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When Clarke opens the door two days later, Lexa nearly loses every ounce of her resolve and kisses her on the spot. The shock on her face alone is enough to have Lexa smiling, but Clarke’s under-dressed and likely slept-in attire and her messy, lopsided bun leave Lexa frozen on the doorstep. She looks absolutely beautiful, and Lexa wonders how it is she waited this long to openly admit it.

“You’re back,” Clarke observes dimly, goosebumps running up her bare legs because the door is wide open and it’s a January morning.

“Yeah,” Lexa breathes, trying to work down her nerves enough to remember how to speak when Clarke is standing right in front of her. “I haven’t been home yet.” That unplanned admission reeks of desperation to Lexa’s ears and she almost cringes, but Clarke is breaking into a shocked smile. Her eyes bulge momentarily and all Lexa can see is deep blue. “You mean you just got back? Like, right now? From the bus?” Lexa is vaguely nodding her response when Clarke abruptly grabs the sleeve of her jacket and pulls her into the house. “Jesus, get in here I’m fucking cold.”

Lexa laughs, stumbling into Clarke’s entryway. They’re stood too closely, and Lexa can’t keep her eyes from trailing Clarke’s frame. “It’s the middle of winter. Why are you in shorts?” she questions while studiously keeping her eyes above Clarke’s waist to avoid embarrassing herself even further.

Clarke is wrapped in a bright orange, long fuzzy cardigan that all but covers her mere suggestion of shorts, and Lexa pulls at the lapel of her jacket to keep her eyes from wandering.

“I’m horrible at energy conservation and keep my house at, like, eighty degrees all winter, okay?”

Lexa shrugs, still smiling, and adjusts the canvas bag on her shoulder. “Okay.”

The awkwardness intensifies when Clarke doesn’t have a ready response. The two of them are stood facing at a distance that is both too close and not close enough, and Lexa is trying to remember why she thought taking a car straight from the bus to Clarke’s house was a good idea when her fist crinkles against the paper bag in her left hand. Misguided or not, there was a purpose to her decision.

Lexa presents it to Clarke with a nervous smile. “Merry Christmas.”

Clarke’s eyes again widen, and she eyes the brown paper as if it might hold a ticking bomb. “Lexa, I didn’t—I mean, I didn’t know that we were. Shit, I don’t have—”

Lexa shakes her head with a laugh, thrusting the bag into Clarke’s hand which lightly grazes her own. She swallows, immediately stuffing her hands into her coat pockets once Clarke has taken the bag. Lexa feels a simmering heat low in her stomach even as she anxiously watches Clarke examine the bag.

“Relax, it’s not a bag of blood diamonds or anything.”

Clarke’s curiosity finally has her opening the bag and peering inside a second later. Her resulting laughter ignites inside Lexa’s chest and it is so much better to hear it in person than she
remembered.

“Bagels. From New York.” Clarke looks back up with a wry smile.

“*Authentic* bagels,” Lexa corrects, and Clarke rolls her eyes. “I stopped for them this morning before the bus so they’re fresh.”

“Okay, okay, let’s get into these so I can see just how sub par my bagel experiences have been. You’re staying for one, right?” Clarke asks offhandedly as she heads into the kitchen.

Lexa hadn’t planned on it, but truthfully she hadn’t exactly planned on anything beyond seeing Clarke’s face and being in her general vicinity again. She follows Clarke into the kitchen and settles on a stool at the island.

“Sure. I’ll stay.”

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Lexa instructs Clarke on some mandated bagel preparation for which Clarke only teases her halfheartedly. Two bites in and one too many obscene noises from Clarke later, Lexa flushes at the success of her gift and the effect it’s had on Clarke’s morning.

“Okay, you are officially allowed to be pretentious about these bagels. They are so, fucking good.”

“Thank you for this concession, Clarke.”

“Thank you,” Clarke says, her mouth half full as she stands across from Lexa on the other side of the kitchen island. “How did you even have time to get these before your bus? It’s only like, Clarke checks her watch, “eleven-thirty now.”

“I got up to see my dad before he left for work,” Lexa says, omitting the fact she’d hardly slept the night before in anticipation of getting back home. “He leaves for work pretty early.

“What time was your bus?”

Lexa swallows a bite and wipes at the corner of her mouth with her thumb. “Seven.”

“Jesus—I can’t believe you, I mean thank you,” Clarke stutters.

Lexa’s confidence soars. “Good Christmas present then?”

Clarke’s smile turns bashful, a pretty blush high on her cheeks. “The best.” She looks away after a moment, focusing again on her plate. “So, you came here from the train?”

Lexa looks to her own plate, knowing that even if Clarke isn’t intentionally railroading her, there is only one direction this conversation is headed. She chances a quick breath to steady her nerves.

“I took a bus directly from New York back here, actually.”

“Oh. The C&J line?” Clarke deduces.

Lexa nods, chancing eye contact. “Yes.” She swallows when Clarke doesn’t look away and wills herself to continue. “Costia left for Boston earlier in the week.”

Lexa can see Clarke’s breathing has shallowed, though her tone is still casual when she says, “Oh, okay.”
Lexa licks her lips and forges onward. “She’s going to be staying in Boston, actually. Indefinitely.” Clarke goes very still, and the blood is pumping so rapidly through Lexa’s pulse points she thinks they might be visible.

“Is she—are you—”

“We ended it after Christmas.”

“Lexa,” Clarke sighs.

“It was mutual. Amicable even.” Lexa shakes her head. “It’s okay.”

Clarke’s brow creases in concern. “Are you okay?”

“I’m okay.”

“Are you sure?”

Looking at Clarke now, Lexa has never felt so sure. She nods once, definitive and strong. “I’m sure.”

There is so much else to say. And yet, there is nothing left to say. Lexa falters and fumbles on how to proceed while Clarke watches her. This is what she hadn’t planned: what comes after.

What happens when there is nothing left in the way? What is said? What is done? Or not done. Although, Lexa had never planned for Clarke at all, and here they are—avoidant of each other’s gazes and awkwardly picking at the remains of their impromptu breakfast.

“I should—”

“Do you want—”

Clarke laughs as their words trip over each other, and Lexa exhales a shaky smile. “Sorry, go ahead.”

“Oh, um,” Clarke swallows, rarely this uncertain and clumsy in Lexa’s company anymore, though her enjoyment of Clarke’s nervous foibles has not lessened since the day they met. “It’s just that I have to head into work in, like, an hour, but we could hang out later. If you want. I mean, I’d like to see you later. Although,” she charges on, rushing into a ramble of unnecessary precaution that has Lexa’s smile growing, “you’re probably exhausted from being up for so long and need an early night to, like, re-acclimate and decompress after so much time away.”

*So much time away.*

That has Lexa arching an eyebrow, which almost always gets Clarke to stop talking. “I was hardly gone for ten days, Clarke.”

Clarke’s gaze locks on and doesn’t let go, her nervous fumbling a distant memory. “It felt like longer.”

A wave of goosebumps rolls up Lexa’s arms. She’s wearing a sweater and Clarke’s house is an oven, but she suppresses a shiver just the same.

She can finally be honest, and Lexa intends not to waste a single second of it. “I’d like to see you later, too.”
This seems to settle Clarke’s uncertainties while they continue to stare hopelessly across the three feet of granite countertop in Clarke’s kitchen.

“I should go back to the apartment and take a nap,” Lexa continues, “but then we should definitely hang out later.”

Clarke can’t hold in a smile as she says, "Okay."

"So," Lexa clears her throat. They used to make conversation quite easily; she tries desperately to remember how that was possible. "Was it nice having Lincoln back for tastings in my absence?"

"I only saw him for one tasting, but yeah, it was fun."

"He's prettier to look at at least."

Clarke looks up from her plate with narrowed eyes and fighting a smile, recognizing the baited comment for what it is, but shrugs a moment later. "I think that’s debatable."

Lexa looks away with her stomach swooping pleasantly.

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At the door, Lexa holds up a hand like she expects a hi-five because it’s been a very good two hours, and she feels lighter and freer than she has in ages. It could also be argued that she’s functioning on very little sleep; but Clarke looks at her like she’s got three heads. She laughs even while gamely slapping Lexa’s hand and then surprises her by grabbing hold.

“You’re such a fucking nerd.”

Lexa grins widely, reciprocating Clarke’s hold on her fingers as their hands swing once or twice between them. The touch is intensely innocent, and Lexa cannot believe how badly her stomach flutters from the contact. “I know. Are you sure you want to hang out with me?”

Clarke tugs at their joined hands when she says, “Definitely.”

It’s a thrilling callback to their conversation prior to Lexa’s departure to New York, and Lexa easily allows herself to be pulled into Clarke’s orbit.

Her hand only slips from Clarke’s hold when she reaches up to wrap her arms around Lexa’s shoulders in a slow-moving hug.

The press of Clarke’s body so close to her own makes everything worth it.

“Text me when you’re done with work,” Lexa says, her arms wrapping around Clarke’s waist beneath her cardigan, shaky hands finding purchase against Clarke’s soft tee shirt. It is easily the best hug she’s experienced in years.

Clarke’s quiet ‘okay’ gets lost between the collar of Lexa’s jacket and her neck, and Lexa tightens her grasp without thought at the brush of Clarke's warm breath against her skin. They sway a bit on the spot, where Clarke is barefoot on her tip toes, and Lexa almost entirely abandons her decision to go home.

“I’m glad you’re back,” Clarke says more clearly, her chin now resting on Lexa’s shoulder.

“I’m glad you're glad,” Lexa answers, and she can feel Clarke’s laughter reverberate against her abdomen.
She gradually pulls back as Clarke’s hands retreat from her back to her shoulders by degrees until they are clasping to the zippered opening of Lexa’s navy blue winter jacket.

“I’m gonna text you,” Clarke says, her eyes dipping dangerously to Lexa's mouth. "Later. Like seven?"

“You should.” Lexa rocks back on her heels, mouth dry and pulse racing wildly. Eventually, Clarke’s hold on her finally gives way.

“Thank you again for my Christmas present.”

“Of course,” Lexa smiles, reaching for the doorknob before she allows her lips and hands to make some questionably impulsive decisions.

“Wait!” Clarke grabs again for the sleeve of Lexa’s coat, her eyes accusatory. “How are you planning to get home?!”

Lexa averts her eye with a groan and leans against the wall opposite. “It’s hardly a ten minute walk, Clarke.”

“No, Lexa—it’s January.” Clarke is searching for her shoes by the front door when Lexa’s instincts take over and she backs Clarke into a wall with a hand to her stomach.

"Clarke." Lexa can feel more than hear Clarke's sharp intake of breath against her hand where it is flat against her stomach. She leans in slow and purposed until her lips land somewhere between the corner of Clarke’s gaping mouth and the hinge of her jaw, effectively silencing any further rebuke. A slow, soft press of her mouth—the most physical contact they’ve shared in over eight months and full of promise. "I'll be fine," Lexa says, quiet and close to Clarke’s ear.

She just manages to back away again and reclaim the door handle, heart hammering away at her boldness. "Text me later."

Clarke’s voice is dazed as she belatedly answers, “Oh—okay.” And Lexa is grinning the entire walk home.

Chapter End Notes

it turns out I am both highly susceptible to coercion and poor at estimations because this story just birthed two more chapters.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Everything is completely different, and yet so few things have changed.

She still thinks about Lexa constantly, still wants to spend all her time together, making Lexa laugh and unapologetically pushing her buttons. She still feels her palms sweat if Lexa smiles at her that certain way, amused and adoring. The change Clarke feels is in the liberty of their interactions. When her thoughts drift to Lexa’s eyes or mouth, or the way her jeans sit low on her hips, Clarke doesn’t chase the images away.

When Lexa appears at the bar counter of Dockside, seeing her for the first time since arriving on her doorstep that morning, Clarke allows herself to feel the shock of nervous arousal when their eyes meet—a sensation she’s spent the past several months learning to temper.

The Friday afternoon bar shift had passed in a haze. She’d been almost completely disengaged from her guests as Lexa’s words from that morning rang in her ears.

“I’d like to see you later, too.”

Thank god her immeasurably capable staff is adept at keeping the business afloat because Clarke’s drifting thoughts of Lexa’s voice, and smile, and touch had occupied all available headspace for her entire six hour shift. She has never before considered herself touch-starved, but now that she has felt Lexa’s hands on her, even briefly, Clarke doesn’t know how she’s lived without.

By the time Lexa arrives at Dockside to walk her to dinner, Clarke is more than eager to be in her vicinity again. They walk beneath the residual holiday lighting along the lampposts back into the bustling town square. Clarke can sense a charged difference in the air between them, but so much of their interactions are the same. Lexa is sweet and charming as always, but now Clarke lets herself read into their simple exchanges, their fleeting touches.

They decide on Mexican at Clarke’s suggestion. Shared nachos and swapping beers and Lexa’s sloping grins and quiet laughter. Their table is small, intimately sequestered into a corner of the bar and beside a frosted window. Clarke in her work clothes and Lexa in a familiar cardigan.

“This is nice,” Lexa says as their beers arrive.

Clarke couldn’t agree more, her response perhaps superfluous to her immediate and unguarded smile. “Yeah. It is.”

She isn’t sure if it’s a first date, officially, but if it is—she can’t imagine it any better. Her skin burns at their knees touching beneath the table and their fingers brushing as they exchange sips of beer.

“This is the Hellbrook Pils?” Lexa asks, the rim of Clarke’s glass already drawn to her lips.

Clarke hums, taking a sip from Lexa’s pint, and humming again. “This one is so good. I can’t wait to start carrying it.”

Lexas raises her eyebrows. “The new up-and-coming local brewery has yet to be featured at hallowed Dockside?”
“Uh, limited space equals highly competitive taps,” Clarke jokingly condescends. “We like to give preferential treatment to our best-selling brewers like your boss.”

Lexa smirks, returning Clarke’s glass. “Here I thought you were just playing favorites for my sake.”

“Believe it or not, Indra’s superior product trumps your cute face. At least when it comes to my bottom line.”

It’s something she might not have said before, might have kept to herself instead. But, tonight—and every night going forward—is about honesty. Clarke enjoys the way her admission turns Lexa’s cheeks rosy.

“Noted,” Lexa laughs, reaching again for her glass.

The nachos are messy and the beer is never quite enough to quell Clarke’s jittery excitement as Lexa talks about Brooklyn and Christmas, grumpy Anya and lovable Gustus. She watches as Lexa comes alive before her eyes, gesturing excitedly at times, soft and demure at others. She is so incredible, unique and lovely in so many ways, Clarke can’t believe she ever reduced her attraction to Lexa’s pretty face.

“So, what,” Clarke questions, a chip partway to her mouth. “Anya doesn’t like the holidays?”

Lexa hesitates her response in the most adorable way—squinting eyes and a funny quirk to her already irresistible mouth. “It’s not limited to Christmas, actually. Anya doesn’t really like any of the things that most people enjoy.”

Crunching down on her nacho, Clarke laughs. “Okay. Like what?”

Lexa hums. “Like baby animals, or sunny days. General merriment. Hugs.”

“Yeah, but,” Clarke says, still smiling, “do you even like hugs?”

Lexa’s hand is on her glass, her eyes kept from Clarke as she fights a smile. “I have become more inclined. As of late.”

When Lexa takes a drink, she watches Clarke’s widening smile over the rim of her pint glass.

Such a good first date.

At some point, as they finish their second beer, Clarke nudges Lexa’s thigh with her fingers for some comment she’s made. There’s hardly a valid reason for Clarke’s impulse except that now that she can touch Lexa whenever she wants, she does.

Lexa grabs for her fingers before Clarke can retract them, holding them softly while watching Clarke’s eyes and whispering uncertainly, “Is this okay?”

Clarke can only grin widely, twisting her hand until she has Lexa’s fingers sliding between her own. They remain linked up in that way until the check comes, at which point they fight over the bill because as much as everything has changed, some things never will. Lexa concedes the battle when Clarke suggests she can pay the next time, and seems equally delighted and anxious at the prospect of a ‘next time.’

They decide to force themselves to part ways at Market Square, halfway between Lexa’s apartment and Clarke’s parked car—by some unspoken agreement knowing the tension stretched between
them is already so taut, a pull in either direction will have it snapped in an instant.

“So, I have to be at work all day tomorrow,” Clarke says.

“Okay. I’ll text you,” Lexa promises without pause. “If you aren’t too tired at the end of your event maybe—”

“I’ll want to see you,” Clarke blurts out, her honesty never far from the open air when staring into Lexa’s green eyes. “I pretty much always want to see you.”

Clarke’s heart thumps beneath her wool coat and soft woven scarf even as Lexa smiles down on her and arches an eyebrow that Clarke can feel between her thighs. “Well, that’s exceptionally convenient for me.”

They maintain eye contact for several anxious seconds as Clarke bites at her bottom lip to keep herself from telling Lexa just how much of her she’d like to see. The energy around them is so palpable, Clarke almost doesn’t feel the biting cold. She can sense Lexa’s lingering hesitations warring with her obvious desires even as they stand beneath the twinkling lights of the city’s massive tree.

“You’re shivering,” Lexa observes. Her hands are stuffed deep into the pockets of her winter coat while Clarke keeps her arms wrapped around herself.

“I’m fine,” she lies, hearing the chatter in her own response. Whether it’s from nerves or the chill she can’t be sure.

“I’ll walk you to your car. Come on.” Lexa takes two steps even as Clarke reaches out to grab hold of her bicep.

“No! It’s totally fine—you don’t have to.”

“I’m walking with you,” Lexa argues, nevertheless stopping to stand so close that Clarke can see the fairy lights twinkling against the green of her eyes.

“I really wish you would stop being so chivalrous all the time.”

Lexa is already reaching for her hand, winding their fingers together with a newfound confidence and urging Clarke with a gentle tug. “I really wish you would stop being so difficult all the time.”

In the darkened waterfront lot, they pause beside Clarke’s car, and Lexa exhales a quick breath while looking out towards the harbor. “I didn’t anticipate being so—” she exhales again, a shaky smile.

“Nervous?”

“Yeah.” Lexa finds her eyes, and Clarke can see her own racing thoughts reflected there. “I mean, you’re my best friend.”

Clarke smiles, sympathetic as she softly reaches for Lexa’s fingers. “Don’t you think that’s kind of the issue?”

With a nod of concession and lips curbing a smile, Lexa watches their joined hands. “Good point.”

“So.”

“So. Dinner was nice. Thank you.”
Clarke squeezes Lexa’s fingers. “It was perfect.”

Hesitations spring up between them again, and though she craves more touch, more heat, more everything, Clarke smiles past her racing heart and pulsing expectations. She’s waited for so long to have Lexa—in this selfish, uncompromising way—and she can be patient still, giving Lexa the time she needs to set their pace. During the interim, they are becoming experts at lingering hugs. Clarke tugs Lexa forward until she is pressed into her, the bulk of their coats not enough to slow her rapid heartbeat. As they slowly separate, Clarke leaves a small kiss on Lexa’s jaw—pulled up to her toes with hands clutching to Lexa’s coat.

“I hope that was okay,” she says, returning to solid ground.

Lexa’s eyes darken. “Not even close. But anything more and—”

“I know,” Clarke laughs, exhaling nerves that course up and down her spine. “Believe me, I know. But, listen: we have time. I’m not going anywhere.”

Lexa breathes out her own insecurities, nodding after a quick consideration, and Clarke works to maintain the scant distance between them. As soon as they reach for something more, Clarke knows, there will be no stopping it; she wants Lexa to know there is no rush in getting there.

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Rarely indecisive about her work wardrobe, Clarke tries on four different dresses the following Monday before growing annoyed with herself and slipping into the grey wool wrap dress with delicate black stitching and a teasing neckline that she’d started with in the first place. Her hair is swept up, earrings on, makeup sparse but noticeable, and she’s crunching through snow on the way to her car before she can second guess herself.

It’s the first she’ll see of Lexa since their dinner Friday night, and the anticipation might literally kill her.

A private event at Dockside kept Clarke busy for the duration of Saturday. By the time she was locking up and leaving the bar, she was completely exhausted, despite her lingering desire to see Lexa.

It’s okay. Lexa had texted. Get some rest, Clarke. We’ll talk tomorrow.

Clarke had virtually melted and swooned as she read, wishing she had more stamina even as her eyes drooped and her shoulders sagged. She would be asleep in no time. The Sunday brunch manager called in the following morning, which had Clarke dragging herself back to work and cursing her life’s decisions. What should have been a lowkey brunch shift escalated into patron pandemonium, and Clarke couldn’t recall the last time she worked two doubles on a weekend, but she knows exactly why she stopped. It’s the hardest two days of work she’s had since she started as a bartender years ago.

The chaos at work falls on what should have been a lazy Sunday of lying in bed and making plans with Lexa. She could have put on the charm, wooing her with playful texts and flirtatious phone calls. She could have lured her back to Clarke’s house with a promise of mimosas from a bottle of prosecco she had stolen from her mom’s house over the holidays. All of this potential had been lost to twelve-hour shifts, aching feet, and sheer exhaustion. Clarke had desperately hoped to be exhausted for other reasons.

The soft looks and gentle touches they shared on Friday still have her skin burning two days later
beneath her layers of clothes and coats and scarves. She is ostensibly wrecked by the mere suggestion of things to come while desperately clinging to a semblance of calm. For the past two days, she’s let herself fall into a deep spiral of replaying every moment she spent with Lexa on Friday and furiously masturbating in her downtime to relieve the mounting pressure.

Seeing Lexa again cannot happen soon enough.

:::

This, coupled with the notion of seeing Lexa face-to-face again at work, has Clarke’s anxieties skyrocketing as she walks briskly into Dockside on Monday morning, clicking on lights and cranking the heat.

She skips lunch in favor of more coffee until Octavia very literally pries the mug from Clarke’s nervous grasp and shoves an open-face grilled cheese with smoked gouda and tomato in front of her face.

“Eat.”

“I’m not hungry.”

Clarke looks up with a scowl that Octavia returns tenfold until she finally breaks under Octavia’s oppressive stare because she is weak from lack of nourishment, over-caffeinated, and highly anxious.

Clarke exhales. “They broke up.”

“Aw fuck, was it before Christmas at least?” Octavia looks practically hopeful.

Clarke’s expression slides into mild disgust as she says, “Dude.”

“Sorry, Raven and I had a thing—forget it. So what's up with you? Shouldn’t you be happier about finally getting laid?”

Clarke cringes, issuing a harsh *shhh* towards Octavia while swiveling her head around the bar in a panic. “I haven’t—we just—she only got back on Friday.”

Octavia looks dumbfounded. “Uh, yeah, it’s Monday. Do you know how much sex I’ve had in the span of three days?”

“Okay, well, congratulations on your burgeoning sex life and everything, but—”

The front door swings open, allowing a gust of cold, snowy air into the otherwise cozy bar, and Clarke’s breathing stops. It’s only Dan, their postal worker, brushing snow from his sleeves and stomping his black rubber boots onto the entry mat a few times. Clarke exhales with a smile for Dan as he approaches the bar counter.

“Brutal out there today, girls,” Dan says, slapping a small stack of mail beside Clarke and offering them both a smile.

“Stay for a whiskey?” Octavia teases.

Dan’s laugh is eclipsed by the sound of the front door opening again, and this time Clarke’s heart stops completely.

Lexa’s eyes find her in an instant, and the resulting smile on Lexa’s lips kickstarts the beating of
Clarke’s heart like an electric shock. She’s wearing a winter hat with ear flaps and a red pom pom on top because she is never not trying to kill Clarke with her wardrobe. The hat and her navy blue coat are dusted with snow that quickly begins melting under the heat of Dockside and its crackling fireplace.

Clarke slides off her barstool to meet Lexa near the entryway, adjusting the skirt of her dress as she stands. Her heart hammers and her palms sweat, but as Lexa’s eyes slide up and down her frame, a thrill of excitement has Clarke’s confidence bolstered by the time they’re standing face to face.

“Hey, you.”

Lexa adjusts the solid black strap on her Trikru cooler bag and shifts from one booted foot to the other. “Hey yourself.”

Clarke reaches up and tugs at one of the ear flaps on Lexa’s hat. “Cute.”

“Anya,” Lexa rolls her eyes. “Her idea of a funny Christmas present.” She removes it as she talks, reaching up to comb back stray curls that Clarke desperately wants to run her fingers through.

“WAnt me to take your coat?”

“Sure,” Lexa smiles, setting her cooler onto the floor to remove her coat, which Clarke helps slip off her shoulders before moving to a rack of cast iron hooks meant to look like whale’s tails along the front wall.

Clarke doesn’t notice Lexa has moved in closer until she feels Lexa’s words press close to her ear, and Clarke practically clings to the fabric of Lexa’s jacket to keep from stumbling.

“You look very nice.”

When Clarke spins back around, grinning, blushing, stomach bottoming out in the most pleasant way, Lexa has remained fairly close. Closer than any two work colleagues should stand, in any case. With Clarke in her tall boots with a heel they’re stood eye-to-eye, though it is Clarke’s mouth that holds Lexa’s attention. Perhaps she has also spent the past two days allowing her mind to wander beyond hand holding and warm hugs.

“Thanks,” Clarke says. She clears her throat to avoid leaning in, to avoid pressing her nose against the dip in Lexa’s sternum just to see how she smells. Clarke sweeps a hand towards the booths along the back wall. “Should we—”

Lexa’s eyes never leave hers, but her smile shifts like she has read Clarke’s intentions as she says, “Okay.”

:::

Clarke has no fucking clue what Lexa is talking about.

Her lips are moving, the beautiful sound of her voice is filling their shared booth. Lexa’s eyes are dancing, her hands expressive, her tone soothing. Clarke has not heard a single, solitary word of it.

“Are you planning to write any of this down?” Lexa smirks, her right eyebrow doing that thing that drives a spear of arousal straight between Clarke’s legs.

Clarke crosses her legs beneath the table, feeling herself pulse between her thighs. She laughs as if she hasn’t just been called out for not doing her job.
“Sorry, I’m a little … distracted today.”

Lexa’s smirking intensifies. “Are you?”

She’s always so pleased by Clarke’s honesty, it makes Clarke want to tell her everything she’s been holding back for months. She uncrosses and recrosses her legs, narrowing her eyes at Lexa. “Yes. You’re very distracting, you know.”

Lexa’s smirk grows into an actual smile as she spins a water glass in its condensation along the table. “Hmm, I can’t imagine what that must be like. Working with someone whose mere presence makes it a challenge to effectively do your job.”

Clarke takes a drink of her beer—the milk stout Lexa has presumably been discussing—to hide the heat in her neck and cheeks, but Lexa seems to notice anyway as her eyes dip towards Clarke’s neckline and back up.

*The dress is a success after all.*

“You always give me typed and bulleted product stat sheets anyway,” Clarke says, foolishly trying to redirect them towards work. “I don’t actually have to write anything down during these meetings, you know. I just do that to make you feel more important.”

Lexa laughs prettily. “Oh, I see. Just relying on me to do your job now, are you?”

“You didn’t think I was keeping you around for your personality, did you?”

Lexa scowls adorably, feigning offense as she leans back into the seat and crosses her arms. Clarke finds her knee beneath the table, giving it a gentle squeeze to underscore her teasing. Lexa sits up so suddenly, Clarke’s hand slips and she retracts it to her own lap with some misguided humiliation.

“Sorry,” they both say in unison, laughing nervously a second later.

Lexa leans forward again, elbows on the table and head bent towards Clarke so that she can lower her voice as if there is anyone within a twenty foot radius of their conversation.

“You know,” Lexa swallows and Clarke watches her throat bob, entranced, “I can barely concentrate on work when you’re not touching me, Clarke.”

“Oh.” Clarke’s mouth goes dry, and she again shifts in her seat. “I didn’t think—” she can’t even finish her thought before looking away, a swell of tension expanding between them.

“You have seen yourself, right? I mean, you own a mirror?”

They laugh in unison at that, Clarke finally able to catch Lexa’s eye again as she takes a deep breath. “Sorry.”

“No,” Lexa shakes her head. “I’ve completely derailed our meeting. I’m the one who should be sorry.”

“Don’t be. I was a complete, fucking mess on Friday, and you weren’t even in the building.”

Again, Lexa is visibly pleased by the admission and seems to relax into her seat. “Were you?”

“Well, you left a pretty lasting impression before leaving my house that morning.”
Lexa doesn’t even respond, but Clarke can see her mind wander by the distant look in her eyes. She
too is remembering the way Lexa had pressed into her and whispered against her ear. The image is
enough that she rapidly proposes, “Do you want to come over later?”

“No.” Lexa’s face creases in regret a second later, and Clarke’s pulse marginally slows. “But,
Costia is moving some of her things out of the apartment today. I said that I would help her load up
the car.”

“Oh, no, yeah, of course,” Clarke says with an air of casual indifference that she does not wholly
feel.

“I’m sorry.”

Clarke waves her off, taking a sip of water. “Stop apologizing. Seriously. This is … kind of a big
deal for you I’m sure.”

“It’s not that. I just made a commitment.”


“I’d rather hang out with you, trust me,” Lexa says quietly, but very purposefully holding Clarke’s
eye. “Tomorrow night?”

Clarke winces just as she’s about to agree. “Fuck. I have a standing dinner date with Raven. She’s
been working through an ongoing project for the past, like, eight weeks. We’re supposed to be
celebrating its conclusion.”

Lexa sighs with a wry smile. “Blowing me off to hang out with your ex, I see how it is.”

“I could say the same,” Clarke challenges, cringing just a second later despite Lexa’s face looking
nothing less than amused. Still, Lexa and Costia’s separation is fresh and, despite their heated
flirtations, Clarke fears she is likely still raw in a lot of ways when it comes to her relationship
ending. “I’m sorry, that was insensitive.”

Lexa shakes her head, not seeming bothered in the least, smiling even. “Don’t worry about it,
Clarke. Really. I started it.”

Even still, Clarke can’t shake the feeling that she’s crossed a line when it comes to Lexa’s freshly
dissolved relationship.

“Yeah, but, I shouldn’t have—I mean I know that you’re—and that we—” Clarke’s right hand has
come to prop up her head as she rambles, but her left hand is still sprawled along the tabletop just
waiting for Lexa to grab at her fingers and hold them with her own. The movement stops Clarke’s
cold.

“Clarke.” Lexa smirks. “Do you ever stop talking?”

Clarke looks up at Lexa from beneath her right hand where it is still pressed against her forehead.
She slowly flips her other hand against the table so that Lexa’s fingers can rest atop her palm. She
watches Lexa carefully, wondering if her fingers will begin to drift into small patterns along her
skin.

“On very rare occasions,” Clarke answers.

Lexa exhales a short laugh, her eyes dropping to watch their hands begin to move against each
other. “You’re going to get me fired.”

A glancing thought of Indra’s intimidating glare almost has Clarke pulling away out of sheer terror, but then she remembers that she is an adult who runs her own establishment, and there is no written or underlying policy with Dockside and its vendors regarding sexual relationships between employees. Indra is inarguably a commanding businesswoman, but Lexa’s employment would never be put in jeopardy.

Clarke bites her lip at Lexa’s shallow breathing, her nervous swallows, and the way her eyes have stayed on their hands. “But what a way to go.”

Lexa is smiling even as she glares at Clarke’s audacious hubris. “Pretty sure of yourself.”

Clarke nods with swagger. “Yup.”

They maintain a weighted stare, full of promise and anticipation, even as Lexa sits up, her hand sliding away from Clarke’s at a pace so slow, Clarke has a wave of tingles shooting up her arm.

“Maybe I can cancel with Raven—reschedule with her for another night.”

Lexa is grinning and clearly pleased by Clarke’s suggestion but shakes her head in the end. “No, Clarke. It’s fine. Remember, you’re the one that said we have plenty of time for … everything.”

“Yeah, but that was two days ago. I take it all back.”

Lexa laughs at Clarke’s pout. “You should see your friends.”

“They’re around constantly. Seriously, I cannot get rid of them,” Clarke complains, and Lexa’s smile grows. “It’s you that I want to see.”

Clarke watches Lexa exhale, her palms flat against the tabletop as she looks to her Trikru bag for inspiration. “Wednesday. Can I see you Wednesday?”

Clarke isn’t mollified, still mentally planning how she could shove off a dinner with Raven without ending a longstanding friendship, but she sighs as well. “Okay.”

Her sulking seems to amuse Lexa, who taps the side of Clarke’s foot with the toe of her boot until Clarke’s expression softens. “Okay?”

“Okay.” Clarke exaggerates Lexa’s prompting, returning Lexa’s tapping beneath the table with her other foot.

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She lingers at the door as Lexa slips back into her coat and adjusts her ridiculous winter hat over her bouncing brown curls. She watches Lexa’s fingers as she does up the zip on her coat and fastens its buttons. She remembers her own hands as they clasped to its lapels in a hug she wishes they could recreate.

She’s speaking again before she has time to overthink it. “If I weren’t at work, I would hug you right now.”

Lexa looks up smiling, pleased. “Oh yeah?”

Clarke has had the equivalent of half a beer but spent the last hour sneaking touches and smiles and loaded gazes, and she feels emboldened beyond restraint.
She takes a half-step closer to Lexa, lowering her voice. “Actually, if I weren’t at work, there’s a lot of things I would be doing right now.”

Lexa looks stunned for half a second, her throat visibly bobbing as she swallows and reaches up towards the safety of her coat collar. Clarke watches her eyes dip, linger on her mouth in prolonged concentration, and finally return to Clarke’s waiting gaze.

“Let’s not be at work soon then.”

Clarke smiles as her chest swells. “Good idea.”

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“She actually wanted to hang out tonight.”

Clarke is stood at her kitchen island, Raven sitting opposite, a half-finished bottle of wine between them and a pot of Bolognese simmering on the stove.

Raven’s eyes widen to such a degree, Clarke worries they will fall out of her head. “Are you fucking kidding me?!”

Clarke eyes her warily. “No?”

“Why the fuck am I here waiting for pasta when you could be getting laid, Clarke?” Raven practically shouts.

“Oh my god, it’s fine.”

“Oh, it is not fine—do you have any idea how painful it’s been watching you two dance around each other’s vaginas for the past year?” Raven slides off her stool, shaking her head. “No. No way. I’m getting out of here and you’re calling Lexa’s sweet ass to come over A-fucking-SAP.”

“Raven, stop!” Clarke laughs, grabbing her by the wrist. “Chill out—jesus.” Raven’s annoyance continues to crease her brow while Clarke attempts to explain, “We’re going to see each other tomorrow.”

“Clarke, please do not bang this chick in your gross office. That desk is like 40 years old.” Raven’s face turns contemplative. “I mean, you should definitely bang her at some point in your office, but like, not for your first go around.”

“No,” Clarke laughs, shoving Raven lightly against her shoulder. “I mean after work, you perve. I’m asking O to close so I can get out of there before midnight. But, I promise you, it’s fine. We’re, you know, taking it slowly anyway.”

Raven watches her skeptically, eventually taking another sip of wine. “Haven’t you been taking it slow for like a year?”

“No, for the past eight months I’ve been on the best fucking behavior of my life,” Clarke very pointedly clarifies. “Now we are officially taking it slowly. Taking our time, whatever.”

Raven’s eyes narrow even as she asks, “Okay, and what exactly does that look like?”

Clarke finishes a desperate sip of wine and plonks her glass inelegantly onto the granite. “I masturbated three times this morning.”

Raven cackles, throwing her head back. “Fuck, dude.”
“I know. But Lexa just ended this pretty major relationship, and I don’t feel like I can push for more right now.” Clarke sighs, “So I’m letting her set the pace.”

“Uh-huh,” Raven nods, and she’s always had Clarke’s number so there’s no fooling her with forced indifference. “And it’s killing you, isn’t it?”

Clarke whines, practically collapsing onto the countertop. “It’s killing me!”

Raven laughs again, refilling both their glasses and draining the bottle. “Look at it this way, when it happens, it’s gonna be fucking beyond.” Clarke laughs, feeling a bit better as Raven continues. “As someone with firsthand experience in sexual chemistry with Clarke Griffin, Lexa is in for the ride of her life.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Clarke laughs, tipping her glass against Raven’s.

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On Wednesday morning, Clarke opens the delivery hatch to a welcomed if not unexpected face. Lincoln grins up at her, wearing a winter beanie and puffy coat, his breath appearing in frozen puffs that hang in the air.

“Hey, stranger.”

Clarke tries not to look panicked or worried as she says hello, but her eyes must give her away as they dart around the perimeter of the truck.

Lincoln laughs as he hoists himself onto the frosty edge of the hatch. “She’s just finishing up a call with another client. Indra’s got us on a top secret mission today.”

Clarke’s eyes light up, relief flooding through her now she knows Lexa is within reach. “Spill.”

“I’ll let Lexa tell you,” Lincoln smiles, his eyes already cast towards the interior door in search of Octavia.

“No, wait!” Clarke argues, grabbing for Lincoln’s trunk of an arm as he tries to move beyond the hatch’s opening. “She never tells me any of the good details.”

Lincoln laughs as the passenger door creaks open, making his exit while Clarke is distracted by Lexa rounding the back of the truck and swinging up into the hatch in three easy strides. It’s hardly been a day, and they’ve been in near constant contact since Monday evening, but Clarke can’t curb her smile or calm her nerves when Lexa is suddenly so close.

“Hi.”

Lexa smiles in return, “Hi.” Her smile turns to concern when a shiver rips through Clarke. “Aren’t you cold?” She quickly moves in closer to urge Clarke away from the open air. “You shouldn’t be standing back here without a coat. It’s freezing.” Lexa’s hands lightly brace Clarke’s hips as she gently moves her back into dry storage, and Clarke doesn’t know how to tell Lexa that she is actually on fire.

She takes both of Lexa’s hands in her own, easily threading their fingers together. Things may be moving painfully slowly, but asserting some level of contact whenever she is in Lexa’s company has gotten loads easier.

“So,” Clarke grins, making sure she has Lexa’s undivided attention.
“So,” Lexa echoes, gaze locked on the slope of Clarke’s mouth.

“What is Indra planning that has you partnering up with Lincoln and rearranging your delivery schedule?”

Lexa, who had been in the midst of a dangerous sway towards Clarke, tips her head back with a sigh. When she looks back at Clarke it is a humored glare.

“Are you seriously bribing me for work secrets right now?”

Clarke arches an eyebrow. “Maybe. Is it working?”

“I cannot tell you explicitly.” Clarke rolls her eyes even as Lexa continues undeterred, “But Lincoln and I are headed up north to Burlington to inquire about some potential opportunities for the brewery.”

Clarke, momentarily derailed by the possibility of what she thinks could be an expansion of Trikru, drops Lexa’s hands. “Oh my god, she’s gonna snatch up real estate from fledgling Vermont breweries and expand distribution, isn’t she? Is there already a merger in the works?”

Lexa’s mouth gapes before she can hide it. “I didn’t—”

“Wait.” Clarke’s face drops as her brain catches up, and she reaches for the opening of Lexa’s coat that she has left unzipped. “Burlington? When will you be back?”

Lexa grimaces, and Clarke’s heart plummets. “Tomorrow?”

“Lexaaa,” Clarke groans, pulling Lexa forward by the fabric of her coat until her forehead can rest on Lexa’s green Trikru sweatshirt.

Lexa’s hands, which had since been hanging awkwardly by her sides, find their place along Clarke’s lower back. “I know. I’m really sorry. I tried scheduling everything for today, but we weren’t able to find an opening for one meeting until tomorrow morning.”

Clarke picks her head up off Lexa’s chest, but is nevertheless pouting when she tells Lexa, “This has been the longest, fucking week.”

“Believe me, I know.”

Clarke watches Lexa’s eyes drift towards her mouth in the ensuing silence. She wets her lips with the tip of her tongue and watches Lexa do the same. Clarke has waited. She’s been patient. Extraordinarily patient. But Lexa is leaving again, and even one day feels like a hundred.

Clarke tugs very subtly at the zippered fabric to which she still clings, just to test the impulse. Lexa’s eyes clench even as her forehead comes to rest against Clarke’s.

“Clarke. I can’t.”

“Why?” Clarke breathes, her hands sliding down to hold Lexa’s waist, and Lexa allows herself to be pulled just that much closer.

“Because. I’ll lose my job.”

That has Clarke pulling back by fractions and questioning Lexa with some real concern, “Are you kidding right now? Lexa, you know that Indra can’t just—”
“Indra may very well fire me if I ruin this opportunity for her.” Lexa’s gaze is unmoving, and she wets her lips again with the tip of her tongue before saying, “And if I start kissing you right now, Clarke, there is no way in hell I’m going to Burlington.”

Clarke is seconds away from telling Lexa that the risk is worth it, Indra be damned. Better yet, Lexa could leave her job and become a kept woman that Clarke can support and care for and kiss whenever the hell she pleases. None of which she actually suggests because of course Lincoln aptly returns to the stock room before Clarke can open her mouth.

*Goddamn his timing.*

Lexa separates from Clarke’s grasp reluctantly, her hands sliding across Clarke’s waist and her eyes full of regret. Lincoln spies them as he makes his way into storage, pretending without much success that he hasn’t just walked in on something, if his boyish grin is any indication.

“I’ll bring you the order when we’re done, okay?” Lexa says softly, her fingers still toying with Clarke’s left hand.

Still pouting and unhappy, Clarke mumbles a sullen “Okay,” and watches Lexa back away before she turns and joins Lincoln back at the truck. Clarke exhales, tips her head against a box of bathroom paper towels. “Fuck.”

:::

She sits at a table closest to the fireplace where Octavia has stoked an incredible fire in under an hour. She’s working on scheduling when Lexa approaches, bringing some of the outdoor chill on her clothes and coat.

Clarke looks up, smiling at Lexa’s rosy cheeks and bright green eyes despite her sullen mood. “All set?”

Lexa ignores the question and focuses her eyes on Clarke’s paperwork. “You should probably make sure you’re not working tomorrow.”

Clarke glances at the schedule, lost momentarily at the direction of Lexa’s comment. “Why?”

“When I get back, I’d like to see you.” Clarke’s head snaps up then, and Lexa steps in closer to lean towards Clarke’s ear. “And I’d like it if we weren’t at work.”

The sensation of Lexa’s breath against her ear has Clarke grabbing for Lexa’s hand, anchoring herself before losing total control. Lexa is rarely this assertive when it comes to anything for herself, outside of work, and the resulting effects have Clarke swallowing hard. Lexa’s grasp is just as firm but gone too soon as she steps back to a more professional distance.

Clarke stands, signs the order with no concern for its accuracy, and shoves it back against Lexa’s chest. “Okay, you should probably just get out of here before I—”

“You know I still work here, right?” Octavia stands behind the bar, wiping its counters.

Lexa blanches at her unannounced presence, but Clarke is too worked up to care at this point. “Yes, please do fuck off, O,” she suggests to Octavia’s laughter. “And you,” Clarke pushes against the clipboard still held to Lexa’s stomach. “Seriously, get. *Out.*”

Lexa laughs as she stumbles backwards in response to Clarke’s persistent shoving. “Okay, okay. I’ll see you tomorrow.”
Clarke sets her jaw. “You better.”

“I will.”

:::

Octavia finds her just after 10:00 that night, hunched over her desk and scribbling notes onto a product sheet. Clarke looks up when Octavia grabs onto the door frame with both hands and leans forward to stretch her arms.

“Why don’t you get out of here and go home? It’s dead out there.”

Clarke debates it for half a second, but eventually shakes her head at Octavia’s suggestion. She may be miserable and sulking at work, but at least here there is Octavia’s surly company and the small promise of seeing other people. Her dark and vacant house on the water has never sounded so lonely, knowing Lexa will be away for at least another twelve hours.

“I have some stuff to finish up,” she lies, making busywork to avoid thinking about full lips, searching eyes, and soft hands.

“Suit yourself, mopey,” Octavia answers. “Do you at least want me to pour you a drink while you sit back here and stew?”

That brings a slight curve to Clarke’s lips even as she declines. “I’m fine.”

Octavia nods but still she lingers, drumming her fingers against the door jamb a few times. “Hey, so. I think I’m gonna marry Lincoln.”

Clarke laughs, returning to her notes as if one of her best friends hasn’t just revealed a major life decision. “No shit, O. You guys aren’t exactly subtle with your infatuations.”

“I mean, he asked me, Clarke.”

“Wait— what?!” Clarke’s head whips up so quickly, she nearly strains her neck. “Holy shit!”

Octavia sighs as she nods. “I know, dude.”

“You hate weddings.”

“Oh, I’m not agreeing to a wedding,” Octavia scoffs in disgust. “Gross. And the legal stuff isn’t really my thing either, but it’s important to Lincoln so … yeah. I said okay.”

Clarke is laughing again. “I hope you said something a little more definitive than ‘okay.’”

“Anyway, maybe we could have an after-party here or something. Like, after the courthouse shit.”

“Oh, please let that be on the official invitations: You Are Cordially Invited to Join Us After the Courthouse Shit.”

Octavia laughs, crossing her arms over her chest. “It does have a nice ring to it.”

“Wow. Wow, O! I can’t believe—I mean, you guys haven’t even been dating that long.”

Octavia shrugs easily. “Yeah, but I’ve known him for over three years, been in love with him for probably half of that—what does it matter that we’ve only been sleeping together for eight months, you know?”
Clarke nods, dumbfounded. There is a takeaway lodged in Octavia’s words that Clarke feels at the back of her throat. She shakes her head to clear her wandering thoughts and gets up to round the desk a moment later. Octavia grants her the briefest of hugs, and then demands Clarke stop hiding out in her office feeling sorry for herself and join her at the bar.

“Okay, fine. But only if we can open bubbles.”

Octavia links their elbows as they stride back into the main bar. “Deal.”

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Clarke’s key is in the deadbolt of her front door when she hears the crunching pea gravel of her driveway. She’s blinded by headlights as she turns, two bright beams that sit higher off the road than any standard vehicle. Clarke’s hand drops like a deadweight from her keychain when the driver’s side door opens and Lexa hops down from her delivery truck. She has barely managed to park alongside Clarke’s Saab in the slender, roadside driveway. It’s just after midnight, and Clarke has forgotten how to breathe.

“What are you—you said—” Clarke trails off hopelessly as Lexa approaches the front walk, her pace brisk and determined. Her breaths puff out between them before floating away.

Lexa shakes her head. “Forget what I said, we—I managed to change some things around to come back early. And, I promise to stop showing up here without notice, I just—”

Clarke doesn’t let her finish. She pulls Lexa into her space until they are colliding, Clarke’s hands on Lexa’s coat collar, her lips finally making contact with Lexa’s mouth. Lexa doesn’t immediately reciprocate, and Clarke pulls away by inches without ever lessening her grasp on Lexa’s coat. Their breaths just one, shared cloud of frozen air between them.

“Shit, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—fuck, okay. Look, I know how seriously you feel about consent and—and I totally respect that about you.”

Lexa is laughing now, her hands having found their way to Clarke’s waist as she pulls Clarke back in until they are flush together if not for bulky coats and too many layers.

“Clarke. Will you please, for once, just stop talking and—”

Clarke is closing the gap again before Lexa can finish, cutting her off with another kiss. She separates again by a fraction as they stand shaking in the frigid night air.

“Wait, you were gonna say ‘stop talking and kiss me,’ right? I swear, I’m going to stop interrupting you.”

Lexa laughs against her mouth, pressing Clarke towards the front door as she reaches behind her and twists the handle. “No you won’t.”

They stumble into Clarke’s entryway this way, Lexa’s hand firm against the small of Clarke’s back and Clarke’s hands clutching to Lexa’s jacket as they shuffle farther into the house. Lexa must kick the door closed with her foot because it clicks shut while her hands curl around the back of Clarke’s neck, cutting off the wintry air and sealing them in warmth. For all its intensity, the kiss is soft and slow, far more cautious than Clarke currently feels.

It’s not explosive. It does not resemble fireworks or shifting tectonic plates. Lexa’s mouth moving against Clarke’s own feels like honesty. It feels like release. It feels like seeing Lexa for the first time all over again.
Clarke pulls back to see Lexa’s face and finds instead her poorly controlled giggling, momentarily disrupting their long overdue embrace. She gently rests her forehead against Clarke’s and whispers into the space between their lips, “I can’t believe we’re doing this. I can’t believe I’m kissing you.” Lexa’s face sobers in a shuddering breath. “I can’t believe I finally get to kiss you.”

Clarke surges forward again, already so addicted to the soft give of Lexa’s upper lip, the way their mouths move together. Each time opening a bit differently, coming together and sliding apart at varying angles. Clarke can feel her breathing spiralling out of control in no time, and Lexa hasn’t even removed her coat.

That thought alone has Clarke on the move, no longer content to have so many layers between them. She tugs for the zip of Lexa’s coat as Lexa’s hands work the buttons of her own, and then Lexa is sliding her hands over Clarke’s shoulder caps until the garment drops onto the wood floors.

Clarke struggles with the zipper and buttons on Lexa’s coat until she steps back by a fraction, her breathing heavy and cheeks pink as she says, “Here.”

She makes quick work of her own coat until it joins Clarke’s in a pile on the floor, and is back on Clarke in an instant. Hands reach out for Clarke’s waist, pushing back until Clarke is pressed to the wall at her back. They stop and stare for a protracted moment, eyes dark and mouths open. The levees have split, and Clarke lets everything else wash away when their momentum has Lexa crashing forward as Clarke pulls her back in by the hem of her shirt.

“Come here,” she whispers, her voice raw and rasped, and Lexa very audibly whimpers when their tongues first meet.

Lexa’s hands have lost their focus, skittering up Clarke’s sides before clawing their way back down. Clarke holds onto Lexa’s neck, sliding her fingers into loose curls and running her fingernails against Lexa’s scalp. She exhales noisily against Lexa’s mouth when deft fingers find the hem of her loose denim shirtdress and slide underneath.

“Wait—wait,” Clarke pants, and Lexa’s hands stop instantly. “Can we just,” Clarke swallows, still feeling Lexa’s quick breaths against her face because they have remained so close. She doesn’t know exactly what she’s asking for, only that, “I’ve been waiting a really long time to do all of this and … I want to take my time.”

Lexa’s answering smile melts away the last of Clarke’s nerves. She removes her hands from where they had wandered. She kisses just below Clarke’s chin, to the left of her mouth and then the right. Clarke lets Lexa find her hands, tangle them together, and follows dumbly as she leads them towards the couch. Lexa sits first, still holding onto Clarke’s fingers so that when Clarke places one knee on either side of Lexa’s lap, she can feel Lexa’s hands perspire.

Clarke looks down at her, watching her throat constrict before Lexa asks, “How long?”

Clarke cannot concentrate, too entranced in Lexa’s eyes, the gloss on her lips from Clarke’s own efforts. “How long?”

Lexa threads their fingers and unwinds. “How long have you been waiting?”

“For this?” Clarke settles into Lexa’s lap, kisses her sweetly again. And again. When she pulls back, Lexa’s eyes remain closed until Clarke says, “Since the beginning.”

Lexa sits up with purpose, hands pulling from Clarke’s to grab hold of her waist. Clarke’s arms come to rest atop Lexa’s shoulders, and even their languid make-out on Clare’s sofa has her
shifting against Lexa to alleviate a building tension. Her pulse thrums for what comes next, because there is definitely no stopping them this time, though she is in no race to get there. Lexa is so slow and precise, her thumbs pressing circles deep into Clarke’s hipbones, that Clarke wants to stay here just like this for as long as she can stand it.

She has to remember to breathe, no small feat when Lexa’s mouth is so near. So accessible. Finally. She pulls away if only to bury her face against Lexa’s neck, letting her mouth acquaint with the warm skin there. She’s equally pleased to hear Lexa’s resulting gasp as she maps the skin below her ear.

“I wish we could have done this,” Lexa struggles to say, her hands now taking fistfuls of Clarke’s dress as Clarke continues to leaves kisses along her neck, slick and open-mouthed. “Before. Way before.”

Clarke sits up to see Lexa’s face, to appreciate her gaping mouth and kiss-bruised lips.

“I wanted to,” Lexa continues. She swallows, manages a small smile, one that Clarke now knows has always belonged to her. “But, I’m glad we didn’t.”

“Me too.”

“I can’t believe you waited,” Lexa says in disbelief.

“I would have kept waiting,” Clarke tells her.

Lexa breathes out. Kisses her again. “I know.”

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“Do you want something to drink?” Clarke asks, her fingers tucking Lexa’s wild curls behind her ears. “Are you hungry?”

Lexa laughs, reaching for Clarke’s wrist and twisting it so she can see the face of Clarke’s watch. “It’s 12:30 in the morning, Clarke.”

They haven’t moved from the sofa, Clarke still astride Lexa’s lap and enjoying the soft cotton of Lexa’s tee shirt between her fingers now that Lexa has removed her sweatshirt. She’d attempted to lecture Clarke about keeping the heat turned too high until Clarke silenced her with kisses, rolling her eyes as she helped Lexa pull the extra garment over her head.

“Let’s split a beer,” Clarke suggests as her hands trace pathways down Lexa’s shoulders and onto the worn logo across her chest. “I’m kind of parched.”

Their hands continue to roam freely, and Clarke gets a thrill crawling up her spine every time she sees Lexa’s hands on her. Lexa runs her hands up the black leggings of Clarke’s thighs, her fingers momentarily disappearing beneath the red-stitched hem of Clarke’s shirtdress before reappearing. Lexa is grabby and possessive, and Clarke squirms at the sight.

“Oh yeah?” Lexa feigns confusion as her hands continue to rove. “Why’s that?”

Clarke leans in to find Lexa’s lips already waiting, a kiss that has her pressing Lexa into the sofa. “Can’t imagine,” she says against Lexa’s mouth, smiling at the way Lexa chases her lips when Clarke moves away by inches. “Come on.” She slides off Lexa’s lap to her protesting groans, reaching for Lexa’s hand to pull her off the sofa.
They move through rooms without ever losing contact, Clarke easily dragging Lexa behind her as she reaches the kitchen and pulls open the fridge. Lexa presses in behind her, arms wrapping around Clarke’s waist so that she can rest her chin on Clarke’s shoulder as they peruse Clarke’s extensive selection of craft beer.

“Have you tried this Black Hog rye pale ale?” Clarke asks, her hand already reaching for a bright blue can. Lexa shakes her head so that the press of her chin tickles against Clarke’s shoulder. “Mmm, you’ll like it.” She snatches the beer off the shelf and closes the refrigerator door.

Lexa’s arms immediately move to rotate Clarke until she is facing Lexa’s mischievous grin, her arms lightly pinning Clarke against the fridge. Lexa watches her mouth with intent. “Hey.”

Clarke smiles, beer still in hand and stomach dropping. “Hey.”

When Lexa kisses her, Clarke feels it low and hot, reaching up to slide her hand behind Lexa’s neck and wishing she could blindly find a countertop to set down the goddamn can of beer. Lexa must read her mind because she is reaching for it a second later, extending an arm to clumsily place the beer on a flat surface, though Clarke doesn’t actually care where the fuck it ends up.

Her now free hand lands on Lexa’s waist, fingers slipping easily beneath the soft cotton of Lexa’s shirt and seeking skin. Lexa’s stomach clenches under Clarke’s fingertips, her muscles taut, and Clarke can’t stop herself from running her fingers along Lexa’s abdomen.

Lexa exhales noisily, pulling back to rest her forehead against Clarke’s while they catch their breath. “I thought you were thirsty,” Lexa says.

Clarke rubs a sweeping arch across Lexa’s stomach with her thumb, a coy response to match her smile. “I am.”

Lexa laughs, and Clarke’s impish mood dissolves to outright affection at the sound.

“Your laugh,” she says between kisses. “Is so good.”

“Not as good as yours,” Lexa counters, shaking her head seriously.

Clarke laughs in response to Lexa’s tone and watches her green eyes soften as they absorb the sound. Her mind is suddenly made up.

“Let’s drink the beer upstairs.” She says it with intent, her heavy gaze leaving no room for doubt, and Lexa’s pulse visibly quickens.

“Okay.”

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At the top of the staircase, Lexa’s head swivels as she takes in the room—Clarke’s wall of windows that face the harbor and the domed ceiling above.

“I’ve never seen this part of your house,” Lexa murmurs, eyes still scanning as she walks a slow circle around the room.

“Yeah,” Clarke smiles a short laugh, setting their unopened can of beer on her bedside table and perching at the foot of her bed. “That wasn’t by accident.”

Lexa looks up to catch Clarke’s eye, her light laughter fizzling out when she notes where Clarke
has found a seat. Clarke can see Lexa’s throat bob from across the room before she closes the distance in two easy strides. Clarke is already reaching for her when Lexa moves to stand between her legs.

Lexa runs her fingers through Clarke’s hair, stopping when she reaches Clarke’s elastic hair tie and then gently removing it. When her hair falls to her shoulders, she reaches for the bottom of Lexa’s tee shirt to pull her closer.

Her hands find their way beneath the soft cotton, pressing again to Lexa’s stomach, and then lifting the hem of her shirt by inches. Clarke looks up to meet Lexa’s eye only to find she has closed them.

The sight makes Clarke smile and she asks softly, “Okay?”

Lexa opens her eyes as she nods, her hands moving to help Clarke lift the shirt over her head.

Clarke is still processing the sight of Lexa in her black bra, standing there in the low light of her bedroom, when her instincts take over and she leans forward to press her mouth against all the newly accessible skin to the sounds of Lexa’s unsteady breaths. Clarke mouths once, twice, three times against Lexa’s abdomen, her hands sliding down Lexa’s sides until she dips her head to find Clarke’s lips. Lexa kisses her backwards, urging Clarke onto the bed more fully so that she can place one knee on either side of her waist.

With Lexa now leaning over her in soft, worn jeans and no shirt, Clarke swallows. Her eyes trace Lexa’s contours, hands eager to touch. “Lights on or off?”

“Oh.” There is no hesitation in Lexa’s response, and Clarke’s stomach clenches at the confidence in her soft tone.

She reaches up for Lexa’s shoulders then, pulling her down until she can wrap her hands around the back of her neck. The kiss that follows has Clarke breathless in seconds. Lexa settles against her in a way that is entirely new. She has never before felt its weight pressed into her.

Clarke gasps as Lexa shifts because she can feel her everywhere, and Lexa abandons her mouth to leave a trail of kisses down her neck.

“Can we take these off?” Lexa asks, a hand trailing down the cotton leggings on Clarke’s thigh.

“Yes,” she answers in a rasp, sliding her own hands down Lexa’s chest and stomach to tug at Lexa’s jeans. “I want it all off.”

Lexa kisses her quickly in response, gasping into her mouth when Clarke’s fingers begin to work the button and zip of her jeans. Lexa sits up to finish removing them herself then stands at the foot of the bed, watching Clarke pull her dress over her head and lift her hips from the bed to remove her leggings. Clarke stifles a groan as Lexa again settles against her because there is now so much skin touching everywhere.

Lexa kisses her briefly, just enough of her tongue licking into Clarke’s mouth to have her craving more, and then leans away to run the tip of her nose along the line of Clarke’s jaw. “What do you —what do you like?” She thinks Lexa almost sounds nervous, her breaths shaking, and then has it confirmed when Lexa places her forehead against Clarke’s chest, exhaling a short laugh. “Sorry, I haven’t done this in so long.”

“Lexa,” Clarke breathes out. Her heart breaks open entirely, leaving her for once entirely speechless.
She pulls Lexa closer to her with both arms wrapped tightly around her back. Lexa’s nerves seem to settle into Clarke’s embrace, her mouth returning to Clarke’s neck as Clarke runs her hands up Lexa’s back, feeling the muscles she’s ogled for months flex and release beneath her touch.

As her mouth works along Clarke’s neck and chest, Lexa’s right hand starts to toy with the elastic band of Clarke’s underwear. “Do you—do you typically get off with penetration? Or without?”

“Yes. Both. Either,” Clarke rushes to say. For such a clinical ask, it has Clarke’s emotions swelling with her arousal because to her, it sounds more like Lexa wanting to take care of her. “Just, come here, Lexa. Please.”

Lexa complies, her mouth finding Clarke’s as a hand slips into her underwear. She breathes roughly into their kiss, hands grasping Lexa’s sides as her fingers move against her. Clarke is too close too fast, Lexa’s fingers unsurprisingly skilled and efficient. She is desperate for Lexa’s mouth, kissing long and languid as Lexa swirls patterns across her clit and through her folds.

Clarke’s breathing starts to break apart into gasps. “Fuck. Fuck.”

Lexa’s hand slows, and when Clarke opens her eyes it is to Lexa’s face hovering above her with lidded eyes and an open mouth. “I want to use my mouth.”

The request alone is enough to have her coming in seconds, but Lexa then licks her lips, and Clarke is nodding so quickly she starts to see double. She lifts her hips off the bed, helping Lexa remove her underwear, then sits up to remove her bra as well. Seeing her naked chest for the first time has Lexa preoccupied for an amusing moment, and Clarke can almost see her brain split in two as Lexa decides where exactly she wants to put her mouth.

While Clarke is sitting and Lexa is distracted by her breasts, she makes good use of time and snaps the clasp on Lexa’s bra as well, watching hungrily as the black satin straps fall slowly down Lexa’s arms before she tosses it aside.

Lexa settles between her thighs quickly after that, and if Clarke was close before it takes no time at all for Lexa’s mouth to have her careening over an edge so steep, Clarke loses her breath on the way down. She is still loosely clutching fistfuls of her duvet in limp fists when Lexa crawls up beside her, half-draped over her and wearing a smile so full of satisfaction, Clarke can’t help but kiss her immediately. She deepens the kiss in an instant, tasting herself on Lexa’s mouth a kind of accelerant to her arousal. Lexa shifts against her where their legs are slotted, and Clarke pulls her to straddle her lap completely.

She has hooked a finger into Lexa’s black cotton underwear when she says, “Off.”

They come off clumsily, Lexa in too big a rush to make for a sexy disrobing, and Clarke is laughing, toppling her into the duvet as Lexa kicks the final remaining article of clothing off her foot. Clarke holds her weight on her hands and knees and watches Lexa begin to squirm when she drags the backs of her fingers along Lexa’s inner thigh.

Lexa’s breathing is already ragged and strained, and Clarke hasn’t even come close to touching her the way she plans to. “Clarke.” She swallows. “Kiss me.”

Clarke falls onto an elbow to lay across Lexa more fully and kisses her as Lexa’s hands hold tightly to her neck and shoulder. More than anything, she just wants to feel Lexa’s body moving against her own with nothing between them. No boundaries, no layers, no restrictions—just the two of them pressed together for the first time.
Lexa breaks the kiss when Clarke finally touches her, but is just as quickly seeking out Clarke’s mouth when she teases her entrance with a roaming finger.

“Okay?” Clarke whispers into Lexa’s mouth.

Lexa whimpers against her lips, spreads her legs to grant permission, and Clarke’s arousal pools hot and low when her two fingers slip easily inside. She has hardly found a rhythm when Lexa’s hips begin to twitch erratically. Her breathing chaotic and rough against Clarke’s mouth. As soon as she begins to work against Lexa’s clit, Clarke pulls back to watch—she wants to see every strained muscle, every short gasp and strangled cry of Lexa’s undoing.

When she eventually goes slack beneath her, Clarke watches Lexa's eyes open with a smile. They lay there catching their breath, Lexa’s jaw dropping pleasantly when Clarke removes her fingers. She then curls both arms underneath Lexa’s back, laid atop her body completely, and cupping her shoulder blades.

Clarke smiles down on her, so ridiculously happy she honestly feels a bit drunk. “Hi.”

“Hi.” Lexa’s smile grows the longer they lay staring, and soon she’s hiding her face into Clarke’s bicep to keep from grinning.

Clarke kisses Lexa’s exposed neck, the crook of her shoulder, the clavicle she playfully bites. Peppering kisses wherever there is skin within reach. Lexa’s hands slide up and down her back, squeeze at her hips.

“That was incredible.”

“You’re incredible,” Lexa tells her.

Clarke blushes then asks, “Thirsty?”

Lexa laughs at Clarke’s raised eyebrows. “Yeah, actually I am.”

Clarke rolls off of Lexa’s limp form, reaching over her head to grab the still somewhat cold can of beer off her nightstand. “I told you we’d want something to drink.”

She props herself against her pillows and snaps open the tab, its loud crack a deafening contrast to the quiet of her bedroom. She takes a sip and hands the can to Lexa, who has moved onto her side, facing Clarke and propping herself up on an elbow.

“Yes. You were right.”

“You should know, going forward, that I tend to be right pretty often,” Clarke smirks, even as her eyes rove up and down Lexa’s breasts and hips and criminally long legs.

Lexa rolls her eyes with a laugh before taking a sip. “This is really good.”

“See? Right again.”

Lexa passes the beer back to Clarke, shifting so that she can reach behind Clarke’s knee, pulling her leg closer and kissing Clarke’s kneecap. “Are we going to keep score now?”

“Seems kind of pointless since I’m almost always right, but we can if you want.”

Lexa’s laugh flits against Clarke’s skin, her kisses traveling up from Clarke’s knee to her thigh. When she looks back up to Clarke, she says, “I’m not going to work tomorrow.”
Clarke sets down the beer onto her nightstand, finds one of Lexa’s hands, and pulls until Lexa scoots closer, their legs interlocking and Lexa’s face much closer.

_Much better._

Clarke kisses her, and thinks about never doing anything else, ever again. She has wasted years on responsible decisions and plotting a successful career. _This_ is where she would like to focus her efforts from now on. “I’m considering never working again.”

“That’s a good idea.”

They kiss lazily, in no rush to go anywhere and with no regard for the time. Lexa’s teeth drag lightly against Clarke’s bottom lip as she pulls away.

“Actually, we should just never leave this bed ever again,” Clarke says as Lexa’s hand moves slowly up her thigh and settles at her hipbone.

Lexa pulls Clarke on top of her, hands already roaming with purpose. “I like that idea even better.”

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Clarke wakes by degrees, registering first the sun—too bright through the windows she neglected to shutter the night before. Then her state of undress, the bed linens sliding soft around her naked back and thighs as she readjusts. Then the hands, and arms, and legs that are not her own.

Lexa groans as Clarke shifts, groggily clutching at Clarke wherever her limbs had landed in the early morning hours. A possessive hand to Clarke’s ribs beneath her breast. A long leg slotted between Clarke’s knees.

“To early,” Lexa mumbles, her lips pressed somewhere along Clarke’s spine.

Clarke rolls over until she can see Lexa’s pout and smiles through sleepy eyes, rearranging her arms and legs so that they are still touching in as many places as possible. Lexa’s eyes have yet to open, but a scowl crosses her brow until Clarke smooths it away with her thumb.

“It’s almost ten.”

“Still too early,” Lexa argues sleepily.

“I tried telling you we should sleep at two, and then again at three, but someone’s grabby hands had other ideas.”

Lexa’s sleepy grin has Clarke closing what small gap lies between them, pressing her mouth to Lexa’s whose lips are sleep warm and softer than she remembered. The kiss hardly rouses Lexa who responds without much effort, her head burrowing lower after a moment until it's nestled under Clarke’s chin. Lexa’s breaths even out against Clarke’s chest, and before long Clarke has fallen back to sleep to the soothing rhythm of Lexa’s breathing.

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By eleven, Clarke’s hunger wakes her for good, stomach clawing for food, and a mild headache evidence of her heavy reliance on caffeine. She rolls around in empty space, finding Lexa only after opening her eyes. She’s curled around a pillow on the other side of the bed, legs twisted in sheets and blankets, exposed from the waist up. Clarke wants pencils and charcoal. She wants water colors and thick matte paper. The sunlight still slants against Clarke’s bed, and Lexa is perfectly
bathed in light and shadow. It’s easily the best thing she’s woken up to in years, and Clarke wants to capture the image of this incredible woman in her bed, peaceful and sated.

She settles for memorizing Lexa with her hands instead, inching forward on the mattress until Lexa is within reach.

Lexa’s eyes flutter as Clarke’s fingertips make trails down her back. Lexa hums as a smile curves her mouth. “Hi.”

“I’m hungry,” Clarke says, her voice still sleep-rough and scratchy.

Lexa stretches her arms above her head, both lost somewhere beneath the pillows, and Clarke’s fingers flex against the muscles that pull taut along Lexa’s back.

“Are you finally ready to be awake?”

“What time is it?” Lexa rolls onto her back, rubs the sleep from her eyes and yawns.

Clarke watches her with a dopey smile, too blissed out to care that Lexa catches her looking as she slides her hands down to cover her mouth. If Lexa’s answering smile is any indication, she doesn’t mind Clarke’s soft gaze.

Clarke squints at the watch on her wrist. “So late. I do not remember the last time I slept until after 11am.”

Lexa laughs around another yawn, reaching across the expanse of Clarke’s bed to run the backs of her fingers along Clarke’s stomach.

“Do you have food here? I could run out,” Lexa offers.

“No, no, let’s just forage.” Clarke says, declaring a moment later, “You’re not allowed to leave.”

Lexa’s smile never fades as she rolls over towards Clarke, long, slender fingers raising goosebumps all across Clarke’s skin. “Oh, I’m not?”

Clarke scowls. Petulant. “No. No more leaving.”

Lexa’s laugh is better in the morning. Everything about her is better in the morning. The color of her eyes and the smell of her hair. She kisses the slope of Clarke’s breast, her sternum, just below her chin. “Keeping me hostage?”

“Mm-mm,” Clarke decides, an arm curling around Lexa’s back to urge her in closer as if to drive the point home.

“Okay.” Lexa breathes the word onto Clarke’s lips just before kissing her, and Clarke’s hunger is entirely lost to Lexa—consumed by her mouth and the weight of her limbs as they settle over her.

Chapter End Notes

no way in hell this chapter got written without the help of my pal @orangeyouglad8.
they are a wonderful human and deserve to be acknowledged.

and massive thanks for all the enthusiasm in general. i am very often blown away by your comments and support.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

fluff. it’s just an obscene amount of fluff. that is all.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thursday is swallowed up in a looping pattern of eating, sleeping, and falling prey to urges Clarke and Lexa have kept at bay for months on end. Lexa’s hands are on Clarke constantly, not always seeking but present. Perpetual touch as a reminder that Lexa is still there. As if Clarke could forget. She feels Lexa’s hands everywhere, even when they are not on her skin. And, well, it’s not as if the touches aren’t reciprocated evenly.

“You asked me to put on clothes, Clarke.”

Lexa is stood at the kitchen island in her tee shirt and borrowed sweatpants, slicing bread from a half loaf of rosemary sourdough that Clarke had leftover from her dinner with Raven. Clarke doesn’t need to see her face to know that Lexa’s amused reproach has caused an upturn to her lips.

“I know but now all I’m thinking about it what’s underneath them.”

Clarke is meant to be frying eggs, but her hands have slipped beneath Lexa’s tee shirt from behind, fingers flexing against her back before settling on Lexa’s rib cage just below her breasts. Clarke smiles when she feels Lexa’s breathing falter then quicken.

Lexa stutters a laugh, gently placing the serrated knife onto the cutting board, and Clarke’s hands still. “Sorry. This is going to take some getting used to.”

“What—my hands in your shirt?” Clarke presses her smile onto the back of Lexa’s neck, exposed from where Lexa has piled her mussed hair atop her head in a giant nest of brown curls.

Lexa laughs again, shifting slowly so that she faces Clarke, her back now leant against the edge of the countertop. “All of it, honestly.” Clarke’s hands have come to rest on Lexa’s hips when Lexa gestures to the scant space between them. “Just. This.”

“Is it too soon for this?” Clarke tries to curb the worry from her tone, but still ends up holding her breath as she awaits Lexa’s answer.

Lexa’s smile is warm and certain. Her kiss even more reassuring. “Nothing about you is too soon.”

“Okay.” Clarke kisses her again, easily getting swept into the soft slide of Lexa’s lips, the heat of her skin under Clarke’s loose grip. “Okay,” Clarke exhales, her pulse already too fast for such a short encounter with Lexa’s mouth. She pushes her hands flat against Lexa’s chest, laughing at the effort it takes to pry Lexa away from her. “I’m fucking starving, and you’re not helping.”

Lexa’s grin is smug even as she raises her hands in mock surrender, placing them a moment later on the beveled edge of the countertop behind her. “Weren’t you supposed to be making eggs?”
“Yes,” Clarke huffs, narrowing her eyes at Lexa’s lanky form casually propped against her kitchen surfaces. “Just try not to look so much … like yourself.”

Lexa’s laugh is so bright and open, Clarke scowls harder. “I will try my hardest.”

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Clarke eventually stands at the stove making eggs, defiantly keeping Lexa out of her line of sight so as not to lose concentration on her task. Lexa finishes with the bread and grinds the coffee, lets her hand trail the small of Clarke’s back as she leans in to remove a whistling kettle from the stovetop. Clarke directs her to the correct cabinets for mugs and plates, and Lexa pours the coffee from the French press while Clarke plates the eggs and toast. They each take stools at the island to eat, but Clarke props her feet on the rung of Lexa’s stool so that their legs can slide together while they dip bits of toasted sourdough into egg yolks. Lexa has a dopey smile and arched brow for Clarke’s ravenous appetite and desperate gulps of coffee, but Lexa had kept her upstairs until almost eleven-thirty, and Clarke cannot remember the last time she went so long into a day without sustenance and caffeine.

“Feeling better?” Lexa asks, watching Clarke swipe the last of her bread across an empty plate to collect the remnants of her egg yolk.

“I could eat ten more eggs. I’m still so hungry.”

“Too bad someone only had two eggs in their fridge and little else with a valid expiration date.”

Clarke looks up, affronted. “First of all, Thursdays are my scheduled grocery shop for the week. My fridge is usually very well-stocked.”

Lexa hums. “Shame you’ve placed us under house arrest then.”

“And secondly,” Clarke continues, leaving no regard for Lexa’s sarcasm. “Maybe if someone had given me advance warning of their arrival, I could have been more prepared with necessary provisions.”

Lexa smirks, but Clarke can see the hints of embarrassment tinged pink along her neck. “Would have ruined the element of surprise,” she practically mumbles, her knee bumping gently against Clarke’s a few times.

“True,” Clarke beams. Her stomach jumps at the memory of Lexa’s arrival as her left hand finds Lexa’s right. “It was a very good surprise.”

Clarke leans in while pulling Lexa closer by the worn material of her tee shirt, and Lexa manages to control her grin just enough to accept Clarke’s kiss. Lexa tastes like fresh coffee and herbs, salted butter on her lips. The press of their lips is soft but brief, Clarke pulling back to see the way Lexa’s eyes slowly drift open.

“I almost turned around like a hundred times on the way here,” Lexa shares, some of that anxiety seeming to creep back in as she shifts in her seat and fiddles with Clarke’s fingers.

Clarke swallows another sip of coffee before asking, “Why?”

Clarke knows why. She just wants to hear Lexa say it.

“I’ve thought about kissing you for quite awhile.” Lexa looks up from their joined hands, making swift but pointed eye contact with Clarke before returning her gaze to their fingers. “But, I knew it
was never going to be just that with you.”

Clarke’s heart pounds and her ears ring. Her hands sweat, and she knows Lexa will feel the perspiration between her own fingers. She just manages to tamp down her excitement enough to tell Lexa, “Well, I’m glad you didn’t turn around.”

“Yeah,” Lexa says, her fingers twisting around Clarke’s, a shy smile on her lips. “Me too.”

“So, how exactly did that proposition go with Lincoln: ‘Hey, I know we’ve been in meetings all day and it’s 9:00 at night, but do you want to get in the truck and drive three hours back home?’”

Lexa shrugs, using her free hand to dab up crumbs from the countertop and deposit them onto her empty plate. “It wasn’t that difficult to convince him, actually.”

“Octavia,” they answer in unison, sharing a look that turns to laughter a moment later.

“I think things are getting pretty serious between them,” Clarke says. “Like marriage serious.”

Lexa nods, her eyes widen by only a fraction. “I know. Lincoln told me they’ve been talking about it.”

“It should sound crazier, but I don’t know—they’ve always just made sense together.”

“It happens that way, sometimes,” Lexa says, firmly pressing her lips together as she considers Clarke.

Clarke swallows past her nerves, squeezing tight to Lexa’s grasp to distract from her racing heartbeat, and smiles. “Yeah.”

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“Would it be okay if I used your shower?” Lexa asks, lingering somewhat awkwardly in the broad kitchen archway off the front hall.

Clarke is at the sink, rinsing their breakfast dishes and loading up the dishwasher. She smiles over at Lexa as she dries her hands. “Of course.” She makes her way towards Lexa, runs a quick hand down Lexa’s forearm before moving past. “I’ll get you a towel.”

Clarke heads for the staircase, hearing Lexa pad up the treads behind her, and walks through a door off the left side of her room. She pulls a white towel from the linen closet in the bathroom and hands it to Lexa.

“I’m not going to insult your intelligence by explaining how the taps on the shower work,” Clarke smirks. “but, it’s all pretty standard in there.”

“Okay,” Lexa says, some residual awkwardness having followed her up the stairs as she fidgets the corner of the towel. “Can I use—”

“Lexa,” Clarke laughs, stepping closer to land a kiss along Lexa’s jaw. “Use whatever you need, okay?” She can feel Lexa relax against her and steps back to see a familiar smile.

“I’ll be quick.”

Clarke squeezes her fingers fleetingly. “Take your time.”

:::
When Lexa emerges not twenty minutes later, engulfed in a hanging cloud of steam that dissipates around her as she exits the bathroom, Clarke has all but dozed off on the unmade bed. Lexa’s hair is damp and beginning to curl where she’s dried it with her towel. Her face looks bare and fresh, and Clarke suddenly wants to smother it with kisses, feel its soft texture and smell her own scents on Lexa’s skin.

Lexa has returned to wearing the sweats Clarke let her borrow but has wrapped the towel under her armpits, holding it closed as she approaches the bed. “Do you have a tee shirt I can borrow?”

Clarke looks at Lexa fondly, the entire expanse of her bed between them. She doesn’t move her head off the pillow but bobs it in the direction of her dresser. “Second drawer.”

“Thanks.” Lexa turns to fetch a shirt, hanging her towel off one of the drawer pulls with her back to Clarke as she selects a navy blue pocket tee and slides it over her head.

She disappears with her towel into the bathroom, returning a moment later to sit cross-legged near the foot of Clarke’s bed, close enough to Clarke’s bare legs that she can feel the residual warmth of Lexa’s shower on her shins.

Lexa’s hand rests lightly on Clarke’s ankle, her thumb making a slow arc across the bone. “Were you sleeping?”

“Mmm, almost,” Clarke groans, her eyes threatening to fall closed again at Lexa’s gentle touch. “Didn’t get enough sleep last night?”

Lexa’s shower must have scrubbed away the last of her uneasiness because when Clarke again opens her eyes, the arch to Lexa’s brow and the grin on her mouth is nothing but impish.

Clarke’s shin bumps against Lexa’s knee as she kicks softly. “Not that I’m complaining, but no.”

“You should sleep.” Lexa’s tone turns instantly warm and genuine, and Clarke nearly succumbs to sleep at the sound.

“I really need a shower, though,” Clarke yawns, burying her gaping mouth into the pillow as she exhales.

Lexa’s face distorts mildly in feigned disgust. “I wasn’t going to say anything, but—”

“Oh my god!” Clarke is off her pillow and lunging.

Lexa breaks apart in laughter even as Clarke dislodges Lexa’s hand from her leg and tips her over onto the mattress. Clarke hovers over her, scowling, hands pinning Lexa’s biceps to the bed.

“Oh, I’m going to shower, you ass.”

Lexa catches up with her by the time Clarke gets to the bathroom doorway, circling Clarke’s wrist with her long fingers and tugging gently until Clarke turns. Lexa’s mouth lands off-center in her haste to kiss the grimace off Clarke’s face, but Clarke corrects the angle and then Lexa is pressing her against the door jamb with much more follow-through. Lexa’s lips retain a heat from the hot shower, and Clarke’s thumbs press against the jut of Lexa’s hipbones where the borrowed sweats hang low on Lexa’s trim waist as a result.

“I’m going,” Clarke says, returning to Lexa’s mouth a breath later. Lexa smiles against her lips, hums in amusement even as Clarke reiterates, “I am.”
“Are you?” Lexa laughs, nipping and pecking down Clarke’s neck until she reaches a spot along the column of her throat that has Clarke inhaling sharply.

“Jesus christ, first I can’t eat, and now I can’t bathe with you around either.”

Lexa kisses an earlobe, presses her mouth against Clarke’s ear. “Want me to go?”

“No,” Clarke gasps, a jolt running down her neck and spine at the feel of Lexa’s words against her ear.

She pushes back against Lexa just enough to see her face, the two of them stood closely in a small doorway and breathing heavily into the cramped space. Clarke watches Lexa regain composure in short, shallow breaths. She closes her eyes and smiles, breathes out through her nose, and returns to Clarke’s gaze with a warmer, richer green than any hue Clarke has ever seen. Lexa is breathtaking in that Clarke often, and more so in the past twelve hours, forgets to breathe.

“Go shower, Clarke. I’m not going anywhere.”

:::

When Clarke finally closes the door behind her she almost immediately collapses against it, tempted to slump uselessly to the floor in a boneless mass, which is what Lexa has reduced her to in the span of twelve hours. It isn’t the quantity of orgasms Lexa has thus far given her, but the intensity. The focus and the care. Clarke has known release in myriad forms, but she has never let go in the way she has with Lexa. Lexa is more. Lexa is significant.

Clarke manages to keep on her feet, though just, if only because she knows the commotion of her falling to the floor would startle Lexa into checking on her and Clarke really, really would like a shower.

Clarke tries not to rush the shower—her bones and muscles need the heat and steam to rejuvenate. Her entire body is delightfully sore from a night spent in perpetual tension and release, mapping out Lexa’s dips and curves and letting her do the same. Clarke’s mind needs the quiet to unwind and decompress where it’s been racing full tilt since Lexa’s arrival. She scrubs and lathers, buries her face beneath the heavy shower spray and lets the reality of it all wash over her. She finally has Lexa in her house like this, like she’s wanted for ages—in her bed, in her clothes, out of her clothes, preferably. She can touch, and kiss, and moan, and want. She can stop holding back.

The excitement bubbles up from her stomach into her chest, and her heart registers a dull ache from so much racing. Her thoughts of Lexa propel her from the stream of hot water, and she’s toweling dry too quickly to care that rivulets still cascade down her arms and legs. Clarke exits the bathroom in her towel to find Lexa curled around a pillow fast asleep. The room is still too bright, but sheer exhaustion has ways of coaxing sleep even surrounded by sunlight. Clarke’s smile only grows the closer she gets to the edge of the bed, seeing now in her proximity Lexa’s even breathing and limbs that have gone completely slack in a deep sleep. Clarke keeps her wandering hands from trailing down Lexa’s arms, reaching instead for clean underwear and a fresh sleep shirt from her drawers.

She dresses noiselessly, crawls into the space at Lexa’s back, and notches against her shoulder blades, the backs of her knees. Lexa shifts into Clarke’s embrace, adjusting against the pillow as Clarke’s arm brackets her waist, but otherwise does not stir from sleep. Clarke finds warmth at the base of Lexa’s neck and burrows against the skin there. The house is quiet and the early afternoon sun a blanket of warmth across Clarke’s bed. Her heart rate slows by degrees as a heavy fatigue drags her under. She is asleep within minutes.
When Clarke wakes the sun is all but gone, and the room, though still illuminated, is draped in shadows. She hasn’t moved much since lying down, though a blanket has been pulled over her and Lexa’s legs which have slotted together. Her muscles beg to stretch as she rouses, but Clarke doesn’t want to move just yet. She wants to appreciate waking up next to Lexa a second time. She wants to savor it every time. Clarke finds her body making movements of its own accord—a hand to Lexa’s stomach rubs against the soft cotton there. Her legs shift restlessly, subtly. Clarke’s lips press to the skin exposed at Lexa’s neck, and this is how Lexa wakes.

Her hand flexes against Clarke’s, fingers threading between Clarke’s own as a sleepy groan escapes sweetly, and Lexa rolls over onto her back. “Hi,” she smiles, eyes still fighting to keep from closing again.

Clarke ends up half-draped across Lexa’s legs, her hand still resting on Lexa’s stomach and twined with Lexa’s fingers. At their new positioning, Clarke feels a familiar surge, low and mounting, and she is suddenly very awake.

“Hi,” Clarke croaks, voice scratched with sleep.

She is propped on an elbow, staring down as Lexa looks up, and wondering if Lexa can feel her pulse quicken. The arousal she’d lost to drowsiness hours earlier is back in an instant at the feel of Lexa beneath her.

“Is it late?”

Clarke shakes her head, licks her lips. “I don’t know. Four, maybe?”

“Are you hungry?”

“Not at the moment,” Clarke rasps, her eyes focused on full lips, and Lexa clues in very quickly. She is pulling up as Clarke is leaning down, and the soft kisses they had shared before Clarke’s shower are suddenly much more. Clarke rocks just once against Lexa’s thigh before Lexa is dropping Clarke’s hand for her waist and encouraging Clarke to straddle her completely. Lexa elicits a moan from Clarke merely by shifting her hips, and Clarke rocks again with purpose that has Lexa deepening the kiss and clawing for the hem of her tee shirt.

Clarke has the shirt over her head in one, rough pull, watching Lexa’s eyes darken as they trace Clarke’s chest. She falls back against Lexa, catching her weight on her hands and seeking friction in slow but desperate thrusts of her hips. Lexa doesn’t make her wait, sliding a quick hand down Clarke’s torso and into her underwear without pretense. When Clarke sinks onto Lexa’s fingers, her whimper is swallowed by Lexa’s tongue. Lexa matches Clarke’s canting rhythm with her hand, and the angle must be murder on her wrist, but Clarke feels an orgasm building so quickly she can’t be bothered to remove her any more clothing. She’ll make it up to Lexa later, wholly and repetitively.

Clarke comes when Lexa’s palm provides a pressure for Clarke to rub against, and then again, quickly after, when Lexa removes her fingers to circle her clit.

“Fuck,” Clarke exhales, having since collapsed onto Lexa entirely—arms and legs gone limp, chest reddened, panting breaths expressed along Lexa’s neck and shoulder. “You are … so good … at that.”

Lexa’s soft chuckle lands on Clarke’s bared shoulder and her hands—her beautiful, talented, sculpture-worthy hands—move across the curves of Clarke’s bum and onto her lower back.
“I would say ‘thank you’ if I didn’t think it would make me sound arrogant.”

“Oh, you can definitely be arrogant in that arena.” Clarke’s breathing begins to normalize with some concerted effort. “You have more than earned the right.”

Lena laughs again, and it stirs something low in Clarke’s belly. She raises up onto an elbow, plucking at Lena’s tee shirt with her other hand.

Clarke raises an accusatory eyebrow. “One of us is wearing too many clothes.”

Where the previous night, and even that morning, Lena had been eager but still slightly anxious and uncertain, Clarke half expects her to scramble out of her borrowed outfit without any further prompting. But the Lena beneath her now is smooth and sedate, challenging Clarke with a smirk that has Clarke’s controlled breathing elevating yet again.

Lena’s fingers continue to trail Clarke’s back in delicate lines. “Want to do something about that?”

The thing is, Clarke has always known Lena’s game. Her charming looks and cool demeanor all wrapped up in quiet confidence and unsuspecting humor. Clarke had been wrecked by Lena from the start. But now, with Lena beneath her, touching her, daring her, taunting her, Clarke is completely undone.

It is Clarke who moves at breakneck speed to have more of Lena’s skin, removing her shirt while Lena extends her arms above her head. Grabbing for the elastic band of the sweatpants, only to find that Lena is entirely bare underneath them because of course she’d only had the one pair of underwear, and Clarke has essentially taken her hostage.

Clarke almost chokes on her own breath, pausing with the pants only half off just to look over Lena at length. She resumes her task a second later, if only to expedite settling herself between Lena’s legs. She wants to taste Lena as quickly as possible, but she also wants to go slowly, knowing they will not always have this luxury of endless time. Away from their mutual responsibilities and sequestered from the world outside. Clarke presses her mouth to the inside of Lena’s thighs, one and then the other. She can feel Lena’s muscles tense at each press of her mouth. Clarke works her way up one thigh and down the other, licking and kissing and sucking until Lena begins to squirm in earnest.

When Clarke looks up at her, Lena’s breathing is ragged and her previous smirk gone completely, mouth dropped open and hands grabbing at the loose linens that surround them.

Lena swallows, holds her gaze as Clarke’s mouth hovers over her. “Clarke …”

It’s all Clarke has ever wanted: her name desperate on Lena’s lips as Clarke places her mouth on her.

As Clarke’s tongue gets reacquainted, Lena swears delightfully—these whispered little fucks that spur Clarke on with more intent. She keeps her tongue flat, lapping broad strokes while Lena fights to keep her hips from bucking harshly against Clarke’s mouth. Clarke could honestly come again, just off the sounds of Lena’s desperation. But she keeps her focus, pressing Lena’s hips back into the mattress and speeding up the alternating patterns of her tongue.

Lena arches her back one final time, and Clarke watches the orgasm roll over her in strained tendons and high-pitched whines and held breaths until Lena is panting heavily and gently urging Clarke away, too sensitive for Clarke’s tongue and too wrecked to verbalize it. Lena has thrown an arm across her eyes, hidden them into the crook of her elbow.
Clarke distractedly wipes her chin against the messy pile of linens, grinning at the sight of Lexa trying to pull herself back together as Clarke crawls back up to lay beside her. Clarke stops to kiss her stomach, planed and fluttering. She kisses between Lexa’s breasts and rubs a thumb beneath them as Lexa works to calm her breathing.

“I think—I mean, I’m pretty sure my hearing went out at some point,” Lexa mumbles, her face still gaping in dazed wonderment when she removes her arm to look at Clarke.

Clarke laughs and runs her hand up Lexa’s stomach, finding warm, damp skin wherever her fingers land.

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Clarke orders tacos while they’re still in bed and keeps Lexa undressed until the last possible second when their food is due to arrive. She giggles when Lexa’s legs are still unsteady almost thirty minutes later, nearly stumbling as she slides her long legs back into Clarke’s sweatpants.

“Shut up,” Lexa grumbles, keeping herself from toppling over by tipping into Clarke’s dresser. “This is your fault.”

Clarke laughs still, rounding the bed as she heads to the dresser for clean underwear and pants.

“You’re welcome.” She kisses a frowning Lexa before pulling open a drawer. “Not that I’m encouraging you to put on more clothes, but if you want underwear they're in here okay?”

“Thanks,” Lexa smiles, perched on the edge of the bed while Clarke steps into her underwear.

“Ready to eat?” Clarke pulls up her shorts, red plaid flannel and too short to really count as pants at all.

Lexa’s eyes drag up her legs, and the doorbell sounds just as Clarke is starting to get other ideas. Lexa exhales and meets Clarke’s eye. “Let’s go.”

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“Which one is this?”

Lexa is on her knees, bent over the coffee table with a chip in one hand and indicating one of the nine tacos currently occupying its cluttered surface. Two open cans of beer, bags of freshly fried tortilla chips, guacamole, and at least five different kinds of salsa in plastic ramekins complete their meal.

Clarke leans forward to inspect the taco in question, answering with a mouth full of food. “Are there pickled red onions?” Clarke nods at her own question. “That’s the smoked beef then.”

Lexa seems satisfied by that and hungrily attacks her food if not with more grace and etiquette than Clarke, who finds it hard not to lose multiple pieces of accoutrements to her lap with each ravenous bite.

“Which one do you have?” Lexa asks, finishing a second bite and looking to Clarke.

“Shrimp. Do you want to try?”

Clarke, still suffering from what feels like malnutrition, had gone slightly overboard in ordering food. But the sun is setting, and she’s had a single fried egg and meager piece of toast—not nearly
enough caloric intake for her and Lexa’s new favorite joint activity. Both already on their second taco each and not slowing down, Clarke feels justified in her gluttonous ordering.

“Swap?” Lexa suggests, sliding her paper taco tray down the table towards Clarke.

“Mmm, yes.” They trade tacos even as Clarke examines the remaining food on the table. “Though I think there’s another shrimp around here somewhere if you want a whole one.”

She’s still sifting through paper napkins and to-go containers when she notes Lexa discreetly picking through the half-finished shrimp taco.

“What is it you don’t like?” Clarke asks, sipping her beer as she assesses Lexa.

Lexa looks up quickly and stops her task, but shakes her head a second later. “Nothing.” Clarke’s look continues to penetrate, and Lexa finally relents. “Cilantro.”

“Lexa,” Clarke sighs, fondly if not also a bit exasperated at Lexa’s habits. “We could have ordered them all without.”

Lexa shrugs. “It’s not necessary.”

Clarke stops looking for the other damn taco, resuming her cross-legged position beside Lexa and sliding a warm hand onto Lexa’s knee.

“You are allowed to ask for things, you know?”

“I know,” Lexa nods, laying a kiss at the corner of Clarke’s mouth. “That’s basically what I was doing by showing up here last night, wasn’t it?”

Clarke smiles in concession, lets Lexa kiss her again. “Yes,” she sighs. “But you’re also allowed to ask for little things. Stupid things. Non-life-altering things. And, next time we’ll order them without cilantro.”

Lexa kisses her a third time, quickly but more fully against Clarke’s lips, and is smiling when she pulls back by inches.

Clarke smiles in return but nevertheless asks, “What was that for?”

“I like the idea of there being a next time. Like this.”

Clarke’s smile widens. “Me too.”

“As for the other thing—how about a toothbrush?”

“A toothbrush?” Clarke laughs around another bite of food. “You’re asking for a toothbrush?”

“Yes.” Lexa sets down her taco, reaching for another chip and swiping it through the guacamole. “I keep stealing sips of your mouthwash upstairs, but after this meal I would really like clean teeth.”

Clarke laughs again, covering its sound with the back of her hand. “And what—you think I just have spare toothbrushes conveniently lying around?”

Lexa very purposefully won’t make eye contact when she says with poorly veiled disdain, “Surely you provided one to Mark.”
Lexa’s harsh annunciation of Mark’s name is completely unforgiving and nothing like the soft clicks that she offers to the consonants in Clarke’s name. The result is Clarke’s barking laughter.

“Holy shit,” Clarke continues laughing, no efforts to reign it in as she pokes Lexa in the ribs. “Jealous Lexa: we meet at last.”

Lexa attempts to continue scowling even as Clarke is clearly tickling her. She has grabbed for Clarke’s fingers multiple times, but Clarke evades her grasp each time.

“Anyway, weren’t you the same person actively helping me to find more dates?”

Lexa has shifted away from Clarke if only to make it harder for Clarke to continue prodding her rib cage and now sits facing her, mirroring Clarke’s crossed legs.

“I thought that if you were with someone else it would be easier,” Lexa admits with a sigh. “Not being with you.”

Clarke’s laughter dies in her throat. “Was it? Easier?”

Lexa exhales a humorless laugh. “No. It was horrible.”

Clarke smiles sadly, trying not to let her focus linger on Lexa’s misery. Or her own, for that matter. That was then, and this is now. Now Clarke rocks forward onto her knees, her hands coming to cup the sides of Lexa’s face before their lips meet. The kiss is slow and sweet, maybe the sweetest they’ve shared yet, and Lexa clutches to Clarke’s sides as if she needs Clarke to help keep her balance.

Clarke moves forward on her knees, inching closer until she is sitting in Lexa’s lap, hands still cradling Lexa’s jaw and legs wrapped loosely around her lower back. “Just so we’re clear: Mark never needed a toothbrush. He never even made it beyond the kitchen,” Clarke tells her.

Lexa’s hands run up Clarke’s back beneath her tee shirt. “Is that supposed to be a metaphor about your—”

“No!” Clarke laughs, shoving lightly against one of Lexa’s shoulders which separates them just enough that she can see Lexa’s amused face. “My actual kitchen.” Clarke returns her hand to the back of Lexa’s neck, stretches her fingers into wavy brown curls. “Can we stop talking about this now?”

Lexa is nodding as her hands shift, sliding lower on Clarke’s back to press her closer. Lexa rises up to meet Clarke’s mouth, the tacos and the toothbrush momentarily forgotten.

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“I should get my phone from the truck. It’s definitely dead at this point.”

The sky outside Clarke’s windows is dark, an inky, gradient blue that seems resistant to true black as the moon reflects off the snow and icy marshes. They’ve moved to the couch, Lexa on her back and arms loosely hugging Clarke who is draped over her. The remaining food has been repackaged and put away in the kitchen, their beers finished, and Clarke has never been so content as she is with her head on Lexa’s chest, rising and falling with each breath.

“What time is your first delivery tomorrow?” Clarke asks softly.

Lexa’s hands run up and down the length of Clarke’s back, her tee shirt shifting and smoothing
with each pass.

“I have to be in Salem by nine.”

Clarke cranes her neck enough to kiss the underside of Lexa’s chin. “Did you know my house is technically closer to Salem than your apartment?”

“Oh, is it?” Lexa laughs.

“Yep. By four minutes at least.”

Lexa hums. “Interesting.”

“Guess it makes more sense for you to leave for work from here then. Strictly from a logistical perspective,” Clarke says.

Lexa laughs again, a quiet, little giggle that Clarke is getting used to hearing which nevertheless has her heart stuttering. “I want to agree with that incredibly sound reasoning, Clarke, but there is the issue of clothes.”

“What issue?”

“In that I don’t have any here?”

Clarke sits up just enough that she can make eye contact with Lexa as one hand makes its way under Lexa’s shirt. “Okay but, have you ever considered the immeasurably positive impact on your sales if you started not wearing clothes?”

Clarke wags her eyebrows and Lexa giggles again.

“Naked beer distribution in January?” Lexa rolls her eyes. “I’ll be sure to pitch that to Indra.”

“Do you really have to go home?” Clarke pouts.

“I—I have—” Lexa stutters, inhaling sharply when Clarke stealthily moves a thumb across Lexa’s breast, grazing a nipple and grinning when it peaks under her fingertip. “I could run home in the morning.” Lexa swallows. “If you want me to stay.”

Clarke shrugs, playing at calm indifference. “It’s up to you.”

“Okay, I’ll get going then,” Lexa threatens, coolly raising an eyebrow. Never mind the fact that Clarke can feel Lexa's breathing has shallowed where she’s laid atop her stomach.

“You’d have to move me first,” Clarke challenges, her fingers still dancing across Lexa’s breast distractedly.

“Clarke, I could so easily lift you off of me.”

Clarke’s jaw drops and her hand stills. “Okay, just the fact that you can say that with blind confidence is really, fucking hot.”

Clarke’s shocked arousal brings more of Lexa’s delighted laughter, and Clarke starts to seriously consider asking Lexa if they can stay inside the house for the foreseeable future. There is beer and leftover tacos. She’s got savings. Those things alone could probably float them for quite some time.
Lexa pinches Clarke's sides. “Are you going to make me prove it to you in order to get my phone?”

“Tempting,” Clarke smirks, kissing Lexa’s neck before hoisting herself off of the couch. She offers her hands to Lexa, who allows herself to be pulled up and into Clarke’s space. “Do you want anything else to drink?” Clarke asks between kisses.

“I will if you are.”

Clarke checks the watch on her wrist over Lexa’s shoulder where her arms have wrapped around Lexa’s neck. It’s just after 8pm and Clarke is wide awake. “I think I will. That nap has me wired. I’ll get the beer, you get the phone.”

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“This is very Williamsburg of you,” Lexa teases, lightly running her fingers along the edge of an old record player in one corner of Clarke’s living room.

Clarke rolls her eyes from the sofa where she’s drinking an Allagash Black and texting with Octavia about the day’s sales. “That was my dad’s.”

“Too bad you didn’t just pay three times its worth and have zero sentimental value attached to it,” Lexa sighs. “You’d fit right in.”

“I am highly sentimental about it, thank you very much.”

Octavia has just been texting an endless string of profanity ever since Clarke let her in on the fact that Lexa is still at her house, and Clarke bites her lower lip to keep from smiling too broadly as she vaguely fills her in.

“Should we listen to something?” Lexa has squatted down to a wooden box of records that Clarke keeps beside the table and has begun to sift through them.

“Sure,” Clarke smiles, dropping her phone onto the couch cushion in favor of watching Lexa.

Lexa’s phone chimes from where it’s charging in the kitchen, but Lexa doesn't seem bothered to check her messages and continues flipping through worn album covers that Clarke has not perused in ages. She selects one from the stack, holding it up for Clarke to weigh in, and Clarke nods instantly.

Lexa operates the player delicately, and Clarke cannot look at her without grinning like a smitten idiot. When Lexa had said that kissing her would equal more, she’d probably meant the sex and the orgasms and the lying around naked for hours at a time. But, Clarke has to believe she also meant this—a lazy weeknight in, eating tacos and drinking beer, listening to old Sam Cooke records that have Clarke missing her father. More than that, Clarke misses the memories she and Lexa could be making with her father.

Lexa adjusts the volume to something softer and turns to face Clarke with a look so content, Clarke can no longer want for things she’ll never have. Lexa eyes her with warm intuition, still smiling when she asks, “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Clarke nods, determined to keep her eyes from watering when everything about this moment is too perfect for tears. “More than okay.”

Lexa leans down to kiss her, and Clarke’s throat constricts anyway. She clutches to Lexa’s elbow and wills herself to pull it together by the time Lexa leans back.
“I’m going to check my phone. Anya may think I’ve been abducted if I don’t contact her soon.”

“Okay.”

When Lexa returns with her phone, Clarke pulls her onto the couch to lay between her legs, Lexa’s back to Clarke’s stomach. Lexa begins checking her messages while Clarke rests her head into the corner of the sofa, closing her eyes to the music.

Minutes pass and then Lexa says, “I told Anya.”

Clarke’s eyes drift open as a smile spreads across her lips. “What exactly did you tell her?”

“I told her about you.”

“What about me?” Clarke prods, her fingers carding through Lexa’s hair.

Instead of a response, Lexa just holds up her phone above her head so that Clarke can see the entire exchange.

Anya (4:44pm): If you’re dead, I am taking your inheritance.

(9:07pm): I am alive. At Clarke’s.

Anya (9:08pm): And?

(9:08pm): She kissed me.

Anya (9:09pm): Where did she kiss you?

Clarke laughs so loudly it momentarily drowns out the music. “Oh my god, I think I love your sister.”

“She’s an ass,” Lexa sighs, accepting her phone again when Clarke hands it back.

“She’s funny.” Clarke pokes a finger to Lexa’s side. “So, are you gonna tell her where I kissed you?”

“Clarke. No.”

“Okay,” Clarke laughs. “I don’t have sisters, I don’t know how it works.”

“It’s important to never give Anya more information than she already has at any given point.”

“You know, you make her sound a little terrifying.”

Lessa tosses her phone to the end of the couch where it lands somewhere near Clarke’s, and shifts to snuggle more fully into Clarke’s hold.

“Don’t ever tell her that. She’d be too pleased to hear it.”


Without looking, Lexa finds Clarke’s fingers and threads them between her own as she muses. “Maybe we should just hide out here for a few more days.”

“Yes!” Clarke nearly shouts. Lexa laughs at Clarke’s enthusiasm even as Clarke very calmly says,
“Okay, but seriously, hear me out.”

:::

When Lexa’s alarm goes the following morning it takes Clarke several confusing seconds to place the sound—a ridiculously pleasant bell chime that Clarke is going to encourage Lexa to change to something more appropriately morose if they are often going to be wrapped in the same blanket during the predawn hours.

“Make it stop,” Clarke grumbles into Lexa’s spine.

Lexa hardly shifts, her arms long enough to reach the offending piece of technology on the nightstand without dislodging Clarke’s hold, and once again plunging them into sweet silence. The room is still dark; the sun rises on the opposite side of the house. Clarke can feel warm skin pressed into her from feet to chest and easily dozes back into a soft slumber this way. They’d fallen asleep before midnight, but only after Lexa had Clarke on her back no less than three times. Sated and finally sleepy, Clarke had curled around Lexa as if she’d never slept any other way and drifted off to Lexa’s fingertips slowly brushing along her arm.

Some suggestion of a new day has found its way into the bedroom by the time Lexa’s phone chimes a second time, but Clarke is no more ready to hear it. Lexa again silences it quickly, though moves within Clarke’s arms to slowly stretch and ease her muscles—arms and legs that Clarke had made bend and constrict and release just hours before.

Clarke frowns and whimpers as Lexa eventually extracts herself completely, swooping gently to lay a kiss at Clarke’s temple as she exits the bed. “I’m going to shower.”

With her eyes still closed, Clarke grabs blindly for Lexa’s form, finding only empty space. “Want company?”

“Yes,” Lexa says, and Clarke can hear the smile in her sleepy voice without even opening her eyes. “Though I can’t imagine that would be very efficient, and I’m already a bit behind.”

“I’m excellent with a washcloth,” Clarke tries again, lazily speaking into the corner of her pillow.

Lexa kisses her again, this time closer to her mouth—that corner she seems to favor. Clarke is no doctor, though she’s convinced there is some sort of synaptic impulse between this very spot and her aorta, if the way her chest flutters each time Lexa finds it is any indication.

“I’ll keep that in mind for the future.” Lexa’s voice is so soft, just a register above a whisper, and Clarke wishes she would keep talking to her like this: hushed timbre in the half-light of Clarke’s bedroom. “Go back to sleep, Clarke.”

Clarke does sleep, and wakes only when Lexa has returned from the shower to sit on the bed closest to Clarke’s head. The shift in the mattress has Clarke slowly blinking awake.

“Hey,” Lexa smiles. Her hand is on Clarke’s shoulder, and Clarke wonders if it wasn’t actually Lexa’s soft touch that woke her. “Do you know where my pants ended up the other night?”

Clarke grins when she looks down to see Lexa’s bared legs, the backs of her fingers instinctively running along Lexa’s knee. “If I don’t give them back, will it keep you from going to work?”

Lexa smirks. “I’m afraid not.”

“Fine.” Clarke sighs in defeat. "I folded up your clothes on the chair over there.”
“Oh.” Lexa cranes her head towards the chair. “Thanks.”

“Do you want coffee?” Clarke yawns, rolling onto her back to enjoy a languid stretch of her limbs.

Lexa doesn’t immediately respond, and when she does it is an uncharacteristic and inarticulate, “Um.”

Clarke finds that Lexa’s eyes have settled on her chest, bared from where the sheet has gathered around Clarke’s waist.

“Oh, will these keep you from going into work?” Clarke asks coyly, laughing after a beat when Lexa absently licks her lips and finally tears her gaze away from Clarke’s breasts.

“Yes. Probably. I have to go,” Lexa supplies robotically, standing from the bed and making her way to the chair for clothes.

Clarke’s scratchy laughter follows Lexa across the room. “I’m gonna go down and start coffee.”

Clarke locates a tee shirt on the floor and pulls it over her head before moving in to kiss Lexa’s naked back one last time. Each shoulder blade and the vertebrae between them. Lexa is latching her bra and has yet to slip back into her own tee shirt, and Clarke is already missing all of the exposed skin. Lexa sags against her momentarily, but Clarke steps away just as quickly, knowing just how slippery that slope can be.

“I’ll see you downstairs.”

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In the kitchen Clarke putters, groggily filling the kettle and dumping freshly ground coffee beans into her French press while she awaits the boil. Lexa is down the stairs in less time than it takes to steep the coffee, and Clarke takes advantage of the wait time to curl into Lexa where they’re stood in the kitchen. Just a quiet embrace that Clarke wishes could stretch another full day.

Clarke pours the coffees, offering a thermos to Lexa and taking an old BU alum mug for her own. She watches Lexa slip back into her coat and boots, leaning against the wall opposite while Lexa crouches to tie the laces. The fact they are again stood in her entryway is not lost on Clarke. The hours between now and when Lexa had first arrived seem like entirely insignificant blips of time but also like moments that could span weeks and months. Clarke is nowhere near ready to see Lexa break free of their blissful cocoon, and yet there’s no stopping it.

“When does your shift start?” Lexa asks, her arms folding around Clarke’s frame as they lean against one another, swaying as an indecipherable unit.

“I’ll probably head down around noon.”

“Sorry I woke you so early.”

“Don’t be,” Clarke says, her smile pressed against the fabric of Lexa’s coat. “It was a nice way to wake up.”

Lexa’s head leans down to kiss Clarke’s shoulder cap over her sleep shirt. “Thanks for all your … hospitality.”

“You’re welcome,” Clarke laughs, her arms a loose but unyielding grip around Lexa’s back.
“Do you think you’ll be feeling hospitable later?”

Clarke laughs harder, leaning back to see the grin on Lexa’s face she knows will be there. Clarke leans up to kiss the hinge of Lexa’s jaw. “Mm-hmm,” she hums. “I’ll call you when I’m leaving the bar.”

Lexa looks like a kid on Christmas, bright eyes and broad smile. “Okay.”

Clarke hugs her again, this time raised up onto her toes so that her face can press into Lexa’s neck and cling to the warmth there, the smell of Clarke’s soap on Lexa’s skin.

When Clarke pulls back, sets her palms flat against Lexa’s chest, she can see the resignation on Lexa’s face when she says, “I have to go.”

Clarke kisses her. “I know.”

“I don’t really want to.”

“I know.” Clarke kisses her again, longer and fuller and dangerously close to something they have no time left to see through.

Lexa eventually leaves herself a negligible time frame to get home, change clothes, and still arrive at her first delivery by nine. Clarke had practically shoved her out of the front door when Lexa’s wandering hands had Clarke’s mind cloudy and her breathing accelerated. Her lips were tempted to follow Lexa’s even farther down the drive if not for the biting cold and Clarke’s scant clothing. Lexa had kissed her a final time, sweetly and with less heat, before Clarke clicked the front door shut behind her.

Clarke’s pulse still thrums and her stomach jumps as thoughts of her last two days keep filtering through her brain. She refills her coffee and heads for the stairs to drink it in bed. Her eyes flit across the house as she moves, noting with a smile all the marks that Lexa has already left on her surroundings: the kitchen island, the sofa, the bed, and the yellow toothbrush in the cup on the bathroom vanity beside Clarke's green one.

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Chapter End Notes

all the love and enthusiasm for this fic is as unexpected as it is wholly appreciated, and I'm sorry I don't get around to responding to more comments, but I am reading EVERY SINGLE ONE and quite often flailing about them. so thank you, thank you, thank you!
Clarke gets an unnecessary thrill of excitement as she lets Lexa in through the back door of Dockside, escorting her down the dark, narrow hallway and into her office. The jolt of satisfaction Clarke feels comes with Lexa’s smile as Clarke pushes open the heavy steel door to find her lingering in the shadow of the dumpster. It comes from the way Lexa’s hand finds Clarke’s as they make their way down the short hallway—stemming from Clarke’s fingers and working its way up her arm until that electric current is coursing steadily, reverberating against her ribs. Lexa has been in and out of Dockside’s varied passageways numerous times, and she’s certainly been inside the cramped confines of Clarke’s office. They have navigated the bar’s atmosphere together before. But they have never been here together like this.

“Hi,” Clarke breathes once they’re under the bright lights of her office, not leaving space for Lexa’s response as she pushes into her, closing the door in the process.

There’s no wait time for Lexa’s mouth to being moving against hers—the pressure and potency of lips and heat exactly what Clarke has been craving since Lexa left early that morning. Lexa sighs when Clarke’s fingers hook into her belt loops, her own fingers flexing briefly against the back of Clarke’s neck. They are definitely getting the hang of this, Clarke thinks.

“So, this is why you insisted I come through the back?” Lexa smirks after a moment, her staggered breathing hitting Clarke’s mouth and cheeks.

Clarke raises an eyebrow as she tugs against Lexa’s jeans. “Told you I had a good reason.”

Lexa’s answering hum is pressed against Clarke’s mouth, and she honestly cannot believe she survived more than ten hours away from Lexa’s lips and tongue. That thought shoots straight between her legs, and Clarke knows she’s got to stop this rapidly accelerating greeting if for no other reason than that her massive bed is so much more conducive to good sex than her tiny, cluttered desk. Presumably. In any case, it’s not a theory she’s willing to test just yet. She pulls back just after running her tongue along Lexa’s bottom lip, smiling when Lexa leans after her in search of more contact.

Clarke is breathing heavily and her pulse is racing and her thoughts are brimming with all the things she’d like to do at the moment, but she’s also just incredibly happy at the sight of Lexa. The eyes and lips and hands and calming presence of someone who’s been on her mind all day.

“How was your day?” Clarke asks.

Lexa exhales, runs her thumbs along the apples of Clarke’s cheeks. “It felt long.”

Clarke instantly smiles, a welcomed blush coloring her face beneath Lexa’s gentle hold. She wonders if Lexa will always tell her things without actually saying them explicitly. Clarke knows
the idea of missing someone after half a day is ludicrously codependent and needy, but the truth is she found herself missing Lexa after an hour. If she’s really being honest, she missed Lexa the moment they separated at Clarke’s front door.

And so she says, “Yeah. It felt long to me too.”

“Do you have work you need to finish?”

Clarke has a singular focus on Lexa’s mouth, and the only work she wants to do involves getting Lexa out of her multi-layered winter outfit. Clarke forces her eyes away from those lips, which have worked their way into a playful arch, and looks up to find Lexa’s green eyes sparkling with amusement. Clarke’s intentions must be written in neon lights across her forehead.

“Not much, but yeah.” Clarke licks her lips, struggling to maintain focus with Lexa smirking directly in front of her. “Do you want to have a drink at the bar? Octavia’s working.”

“Are you sure that won’t that be too distracting for you?”

Clarke scoffs even as she pushes into Lexa’s hipbones. “Someone thinks very highly of themselves.”

Lexa shrugs, her stare heavy on Clarke’s mouth. “I’ve gathered some pretty substantial evidence over the past few days to support my claim.”

“I know,” Clarke pouts, immediately defeated. “But seriously, have you seen yourself?”

Lexa’s laugh is full and bright. Clarke feels it everywhere.

“If it makes you feel any better, I think you’re equally culpable of distraction,” Lexa smiles.

Pleased with the accusation, Clarke pulls Lexa towards her again. “Is that so?”

Lexa is nodding even as her gaze drops to Clarke’s lips. Clarke lets the kiss happen if only long enough for Lexa’s teeth to graze her bottom lip, and then she’s pushing Lexa back into the door, her palms flat against Lexa’s stomach.

“Let me finish up so we can get out of here.”

Lexa nods distractedly, her eyes dark and focused on Clarke’s mouth. “Okay.”

“Come on,” Clarke laughs, grabbing Lexa’s hand and yanking her away from the closed door in order to swing it open. “I’ll pour you a beer.”

:::

Dockside has all but emptied by the time Lexa is halfway through her Yorkshire porter. A few regular patrons linger, finishing their drinks, but Octavia has settled their tabs so that Clarke can begin tallying sales and closing out the registers.

Clarke sets about her closing procedures in front of Lexa, smartly keeping the short expanse of bar counter between them as she counts out the money, but near enough that they can speak lowly, sharing looks privately.

“Do you like that porter?” Clarke asks, indicating the glass that Lexa is loosely clutching with her right hand. “Queen’s City, right?”
“Yes, it’s very good.”

Clarke reaches out for the glass, a smile stretching her lips when Lexa lets her take it without resistance. She takes a long sip while holding Lexa’s eye over the rim of the glass.

“Jesus. Keep it in your pants, Griffin,” Octavia accuses, under her breath but still loud enough for it to hit Lexa’s now very pink ears.

“Jokes on you, Blake—I’m not wearing any pants.” Clarke’s sing-song retort follows Octavia as she walks past them and disappears into the kitchen with a rack of dirty glasses.

The last two remaining guests are at the door, bundling back into their coats and hats and gloves before facing the late winter chill. Clarke rounds the bar to bid them goodnight and lock up behind them. When she returns to the counter her arms slip around Lexa’s trim waist from behind, and she laughs into Lexa’s shoulder at the way she startles.

“I’m almost done.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Lexa twists in her seat to wrap an arm around Clarke’s shoulders and plants a soft kiss onto her forehead. “I don’t mind waiting.”

Except, Clarke thinks as she closes her eyes to Lexa’s soft touch, they have already waited long enough.

:::

Clarke’s limbs are askew, her breathing ragged, and sweat clings to the creases of her skin while Lexa climbs over her, dropping open-mouthed kisses onto her belly and breasts.

“Fuck. Fuck.”

Lexa laughs against her skin, teeth grazing over a nipple before she briefly takes it into her mouth. When it slides from her lips with a soft pop, Lexa smiles up at her. “You said that already.”

Clarke exhales, runs her fingers through her hair. “I know.”

“You say that a lot, actually.” Lexa smirks, continuing to climb until their bodies are more aligned, her fingertips running the length of Clarke’s collarbones.

“I know. Fuck. Sorry. I just— fuck , that was so good,” Clarke rambles.

Lexa is still kissing, touching, moving against her with a restless energy that Clarke cannot wait to see burst into pleasure just as soon as her arms and legs are no longer useless jelly.

“Just returning the favor,” Lexa says, smiling into Clarke’s neck.

Clarke laughs. “Oh yeah? You spent over thirty minutes down there out of what—common courtesy?”

“Mmhmm,” Lexa nods. “I have excellent manners.”

“Guess we’re even then,” Clarke says even as she rolls off her back and places a firm hand on Lexa’s jutting hip. “No further need for reciprocation, right?”

Clarke’s hand moves as she talks, teasing across Lexa’s stomach before dipping lower. She can see Lexa’s breath catch, can feel Lexa’s hips jerk into her touch. Lexa has stopped smirking altogether,
her playful smile gone and her mouth dropped slightly open as she watches Clarke. There is a mutual gasp between them as Clarke’s fingers slip easily through Lexa, wet and waiting. The idea that Lexa is this turned on from going down on her has Clarke eagerly leaning in to capture Lexa’s mouth.

The taste of herself is still on Lexa’s lips and tongue, and Clarke groans all over again at the visual of Lexa between her legs. She makes quick work with her fingers as Lexa claws to the skin of her back, the muscles of her shoulder. Her kisses turn sloppy, distracted by an impending orgasm that Clarke can feel building as soon as she slips inside.

When Clarke separates their mouths and pulls back to watch, Lexa begins her litany of quiet curses interspersed with calling Clarke’s name. Her head tips back and her eyes clench tight, tendons flexed when she finally breaks. Every time, Lexa’s undoing is one of the most beautiful things Clarke has ever experienced. Her hand stills once Lexa has ridden out her orgasm, but she doesn’t remove it entirely as she kisses along Lexa’s jaw and below her ear.

Lexa’s eyes have opened again when Clarke tells her, “I love watching you do that.”

Lexa is still coming down, her breathing a marked tempo between them that stutters when Clarke gradually slides her hand from between Lexa’s legs and rests it along her hip. She watches Lexa’s throat bob as she swallows. Eyes intently focused and fingers still flexing absently against Clarke’s back.

“Clarke.” Lexa’s voice croaks, and she wets her lips with the tip of her tongue.

“What?” Clarke smiles, tucking wild curls behind Lexa’s ear.

“Kiss me.”

Clarke’s smile widens, though she tamps it down to oblige Lexa’s soft request, kissing her while their hands wander and their bodies shift and their mouths try to consume a need that’s never really sated.

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They spend Saturday much like they had spent Thursday, though Clarke at least had the forethought to do a quick shop on Friday before work so that they won’t again suffer from dangerously low blood sugar. She makes grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup, bringing plates and steaming bowls to the coffee table where Lexa has curled into the sofa, dressed in more borrowed clothing and looking very much like she plans to nap.

“Sleepy?” Clarke unloads the food with the practiced ease of someone long acquainted with the service industry, and Lexa sits up to inspect the sandwiches.

“Just … relaxed,” she says, stirring a spoon through her soup.

“Relaxed is good,” Clarke smiles. Lexa looks up from her bowl and hums.

“Oh, I forgot the napkins.” Clarke starts for the kitchen, but Lexa stops her with a hand to her forearm.

“Sit. I’ll get them.”

Clarke sits slowly, watching Lexa from over the back of the couch a she moves into the kitchen. Lexa does look relaxed. And comfortable. She navigates Clarke’s spaces with familiarity and ease,
returning with napkins and glasses of water and a kiss for the corner of Clarke’s mouth. Clarke exhales, feeling her chest warm long before taking her first spoonful of hot soup.

:::

In the end, Lexa does nap. She drifts to sleep on the couch not twenty minutes after she’s finished eating while Clarke tidies the kitchen. When she returns to the living room, Clarke alternates watching Lexa sleep with watching the falling snow—massive white flakes that cascade slowly outside the windows before disappearing into the harbor below.

She contemplates wedging herself into the slight space at Lexa’s back, sandwiching between the sofa cushions and Lexa’s shoulder blades, where she’s sure to fall asleep in all that snuggled warmth. Clarke pours another cup of coffee instead, folds herself into her dad’s old chair, and scratches aimlessly into a sketchbook she hasn’t flipped through in ages.

Clarke wakes to fingers combing through her hair, Lexa’s warm presence hovering over her. She blinks several times, groaning at the muscle in her neck that will be sore now from having fallen asleep at an odd angle in a chair meant for smoking cigars not taking naps. Her sketchbook and pencil have fallen to the floor at her feet.

“Let’s go upstairs,” Lexa says, her voice soft and soothing to Clarke’s sleepy ears.

Clarke nods through a yawn, accepting Lexa’s hand and allowing herself to be pulled up from the chair. She rouses a bit once they’ve climbed the stairs and gotten into bed, but then Lexa wraps around her from behind—long legs and arms a now familiar brace and head tucked into the back of her neck. Clarke is asleep again in minutes.

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On Sunday Lexa suggests brunch. Clarke is so excited at the prospect of sharing what is arguably her favorite meal with Lexa, it takes them twice as long to actually leave the house. She follows Lexa into the shower, contesting that it will take them less time this way. It is patently untrue, but Lexa doesn’t seem bothered by the company if the attention she gives to Clarke’s breasts is any indication. They dress slowly and sloppily, getting distracted on more than one occasion. Lexa very nearly sulks when Clarke finally clasps her bra into place and adjusts the straps. She laughs at Lexa’s pathetic face from across the room and throws a pair of underwear at her head. They can’t seem to keep each other clothed for long intervals, though Lexa’s wardrobe has always had its own appeal. Clarke is quickly reminded of this as Lexa buttons into her soft plaid and slides her worn, black denim up long legs.

Brunches with Lexa before had been mid-morning meet-ups, carefully navigated interactions peppered with banter that always bordered on flirtatious. After waking up with Lexa for the fourth morning in a row, Clarke is outright in her affections. She finds her hands reaching for Lexa in the car, on the short walk to the restaurant, and as they’re being escorted to a small, sunny table in the front windows of Clarke’s favorite brunch spot. Lexa is always waiting and ready to reciprocate. They’ve never discussed public affection, but Clarke poetically insists they must be communicating through these small, brushing touches. Lexa’s varied smiles, after all, have always spoken volumes.

They’re at a table intimate enough that their knees touch even sat kitty corner, and Clarke takes advantage of the proximity by placing her hand on Lexa’s leg beneath the tabletop. She is halfway through her first cup of coffee, still deciding between the pastrami fried egg sandwich and the griddled polenta benedict, when her phone begins its familiar buzz along the tabletop.
Their mimosas arrive as Clarke takes the call, mouthing *work* to Lexa as she answers. Octavia tells her the scheduling software they use isn’t loading properly and asks if Clarke could email the upcoming week’s employee schedule.

“I’m already downtown. I’ll just drop it by.”

“You mean you two actually remembered how to put on clothes and leave the house?” Octavia jabs.

“It took three or four tries, but yes, we figured it out,” Clarke says, her tone blasé as she takes a sip of her drink. Lexa absentely reaches out her fingers to lightly scratch at Clarke’s shoulder blade while she examines the menu. “I’ll be down after we eat, okay?”

“Take your time,” Octavia tells her.

:::

Clarke has never seen Lexa champagne drunk, but it might be her new favorite thing.

“Okay, give me another one,” Clarke prompts, swiping a melon ball from Lexa’s plate and popping it into her mouth.

Lexa hardly contemplates, her eyes narrowing almost instantly. “Espresso.”

“If you have something against espresso, I’ve got bad news for you about the person you’re sleeping with.”

Lexa’s cheeks, already pink after her third mimosa, darken by at least another shade or two, and Clarke grips her knee at the sight. “Not the drink, Clarke. The pronunciation. There is no ‘x’ in the word espresso. Why do so many people pronounce it *ex*-presso?”

Clarke laughs, leaning in to kiss Lexa’s burning cheek. She’d made a random suggestion to list off some of their pet peeves while waiting for their food—a game Clarke did not expect Lexa to participate in let alone dominate. Champagne-drunk Lexa is a new kind of salty fun, apparently.

“Anything else you need to get off your chest?” Clarke takes another bite of her pastrami, smiling at Lexa’s earnest concentration as she chews.

Lexa stabs a fingerling potato, considering. “I don’t think so. Things don’t tend to bother me, generally.”

“Not even about me?” Clarke baits.

Lexa’s stern concentration finally breaks into a loose smile, looking up to find Clarke grinning expectantly. “No, nothing about you bothers me. Which,” Lexa sighs, “I suppose in itself is slightly bothersome.”

Clarke laughs loudly. “Give it time, babe.”

“See? Even that.”

“Even what?”

“You call everyone *babe*.”

Clarke’s eyes widen by a fraction. “Oh, does that bother you?”
“Usually,” Lexa answers with a sigh, eyes narrowed even though the look she gives Clarke is nothing but unrestrained affection.

Clarke’s smile widens even as Lexa shakes her head in resignation. “Oh man, I am going to enjoy this free rein while it lasts. Because trust me, I will definitely start to bug you at some point.”

“Anya will never let me hear the end of it.”

“Oh, yes! When do I get to meet the revered, big bad Anya?”

Lexa shrugs. “I’m not sure. Maybe this summer.”

“You waiting to see if this sticks first, huh?” Clarke gestures to the space between them with her fork.

“Obviously.” Lexa rolls her eyes, nudging Clarke’s knee with her own.

Clarke smiles down to her own plate, tapping the prongs of her fork against the white porcelain a few times. “Should I be afraid to meet her?”

“Oh yeah,” Lexa laughs, kissing Clarke’s worried mouth with lips that are citrus sweet. “Definitely.”

:::

“This will only take a minute,” Clarke says as they pull into the gravel lot that sits between Dockside and the Memorial Bridge. It is snow-packed and surrounded by unsightly banks of dingy grey snow. “Do you want to come in or stay in the car?”

“I’ll come with you,” Lexa decides.

Dockside is no less busy than the restaurant they just left, and even after two drinks Clarke immediately snaps into work mode as they stride through the front door. She is assessing the open tables, calculating wait staff efficiency on the floor, and scanning for Octavia’s commanding presence.

Lexa is close on her heels, and Clarke leans in briefly to say, “Do you want to wait at the bar?”

She can still see the lingering effects of their mimosas dancing in Lexa’s eyes when she smiles, squeezes quickly to Clarke’s fingers. “Sure.”

Clarke bites back a too-broad smile and a resounding urge to kiss her, leaving Lexa at the bar counter to swing into the kitchen in search of Octavia.

“Hey.” Octavia is plating salads, speaking broken Portuguese to Luan who is manning the grill.

“Thanks for coming up for air,” Octavia smirks.

“Fuck off,” Clarke laughs.

“Where’s your girl? She get sick of you already?”

Clarke almost reflexively corrects Octavia from calling Lexa her ‘girl,’ and the flutter in her chest when she realizes it’s no longer a necessary distinction leaves Clarke stammering a response. “Uh, she’s waiting—she’s, um, at the bar.”
“Okay, well, you can try to get the fucking scheduler to work if you want, but I’m done messing
with it. I hate that piece of shit system.”

“I know. It sucks. I’ll just post a paper copy for now and deal with the software company
tomorrow,” Clarke tells her, grabbing the salad plates as Octavia finishes them and turning to hand
them off to Meg, the server awaiting them.

“Thanks, dude. Please resume your naked weekend romp.”

“Oh, I plan to,” Clarke grins, spinning on her heel to exit the kitchen.

:::

“Do you mind if we swing by my apartment?” Lexa asks as they fasten their seat belts and Clarke
starts the engine.

“Sure.”

Clarke loops the car around the lot and into the marina, filled to the brim in its off-season with
elevated boats wrapped in heavy white canvases. Exiting the lot this way puts them right past the
coffee roaster, and Clarke is tempted to stop in for another brew if it weren’t so fucking cold
outside the already warm car. She makes her way to Lexa’s apartment in three easy turns and
double-parks for lack of any available spaces along the street.

“I’ll be quick. I just wanted to grab clothes for work tomorrow,” Lexa says, her hand already
resting on the door handle when Clarke arches an eyebrow.

“Oh, yeah?”

Lexa bites her bottom lip. “Yeah.”

“Got sleepover plans, huh?”

Lexa swallows, still smiling shyly when she says, “Is that okay?”

Clarke laughs, reaching for the sleeve of Lexa’s jacket and yanking her across the console. She
kisses her once. Twice for good measure. “No, you’re totally cramping my style.” A third kiss
because the soft give of Lexa’s lips is just that good. “Hurry up so we can do more of this with less
clothes on.”

Lexa laughs, their foreheads resting together quickly before she presses one, last kiss to Clarke’s
mouth and pushes her way out of the car. Clarke watches Lexa make her way up the frosty
cobblestone before disappearing into the brick alcove of her building. Clarke leans back into her
car seat, drumming her fingers along the steering wheel and trying to contain her stupid grin.

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“When is your first appointment tomorrow?”

Clarke is in bed, watching Lexa as she stands beside it and removes an elastic hair tie. When she
reaches up to run both hands through her wild curls, the sleep shirt she’s pulled on rides up her legs
until Clarke glimpses the dark blue briefs beneath. She’s only just slipped back into them, and
Clarke already wants to see them gone.

“I don’t have anything until ten,” Lexa says as she crawls under the covers, her long legs
immediately sliding against Clarke’s and an arm wrapping along Clarke’s waist.

“Thank god—please turn your alarm off.”

Clarke turns over, pulling Lexa closer against her back by grabbing the arm hanging over her stomach. Lexa laughs into her shoulder.

“Is there something wrong with my alarm, Clarke?”

“Yes,” Clarke grumbles, just the memory of it sending her into a preemptive grump. “It’s too fucking cheery. Nothing should be that joyful at six am.”

Lexa snuggles in close, her leg pushing between Clarke’s until their ankles are overlapping. She brushes away wisps of hair from Clarke’s neck and places a kiss there.

“I already turned it off. I didn’t pack running clothes anyway.”

Clarke is startled out of a growing drowsiness. “You run in this weather? Lexa, there’s snow on the ground.”

“I’m aware.” Lexa’s hand rubs a slow, soothing circle on her belly. “I like running.”

“You like weird things.”

“I like you.”

Clarke huffs a laugh. “Case in point.”

Lexa shifts against her, pressing more soft kisses into her neck. Delicate, but purposed. When Lexa’s hand makes its way under her shirt, inching without hesitation towards her breasts, Clarke laughs again.

“Are you gonna let me sleep, or …”

Lexa asks, “Are you tired?” as if she already knows the answer.

“I thought you were tired,” Clarke says, her voice cracking into a gasp on the last word when Lexa’s thumb grazes a nipple.

Lexa’s mouth rests just below Clarke’s ear. “I’m never going to get tired of this.”

She does tire, some time later when clothes have been flung and Clarke has lost count of orgasms. Lexa collapses onto her side, limp limbs and dried sweat. Clarke rolls over again and Lexa follows, tucked up behind her until they fall asleep.

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In the morning, Lexa finds the drawing. It’s less of a drawing and more a collection of Clarke’s favored features—sharp jaw, billowed curls, long fingers. Clarke doesn’t expect much of a reaction for such an incomplete and sub par rendering, but the way Lexa kisses her after the discovery has Clarke eager to spend a small fortune on new art supplies.

She’s pouring a second cup of coffee when Lexa finds her in the kitchen, coat on and hat in hand. “Okay. I’ll see you later.”

Clarke softly pushes her into the counter at her back, tasting minty toothpaste on Lexa’s lips. She is
too busy trying to memorize the shape and feel of Lexa’s mouth to respond, eventually murmuring a distracted, “Okay.”

“I’m going to be late, Clarke.”

Clarke settles back onto flat feet, now a full two inches shorter when she eyes Lexa skeptically. “You’re literally never late.”

“Yes, I know.” Lexa’s hands wander, rarely stationary when in contact with Clarke’s body. “You’re having a detrimental effect on my work ethic.”

“Well, then our tasting this afternoon should be interesting.”

Lexa’s nod is cut short when her lips fall again to Clarke’s. “I have very little confidence,” Lexa laughs.

“Guess we better stop hanging out like this then,” Clarke says, her eyes dark as she watches Lexa’s pupils dilate.

Lexa just manages to mutter, “Good idea,” before Clarke has again closed the gap between them.

It’s a small miracle that Lexa makes it out the door with all her clothes still buttoned and zipped, and Clarke gives some real consideration to how sex might actually be jeopardizing their mutual employments.

:::

It’s almost a rush getting ready for work, knowing she’ll see Lexa in a handful of hours. Clarke is practically giddy selecting a nice pair of tailored pants, a top she knows will have Lexa’s eyes drifting, and finally slipping into a pair of black ankle boots before she blow-dries her hair.

Lexa finds her at her desk just after 4:00, casually pretending to organize paperwork and feigning productivity while her stomach contains what feels like a field of butterflies taking flight. Lexa has the audacity to show up wearing her glasses—a look she hasn’t subjected Clarke to since they started sleeping together, and Clarke has her pushed into the nearest wall within minutes.

“How was your day?” Clarke asks distractedly, both hands pressed against Lexa’s stomach beneath her shirt.

Lexa is smiling right up until their mouths connect. “Getting better by the second.”

Clarke nips at her jaw, the dip of her clavicle that’s exposed where Lexa has left the top button of her shirt undone. Lexa’s stomach flexes against Clarke’s hands as her breath catches, and Clarke smiles into warm skin.

“You mean you don’t do this with all your clients?”

“Just you … and Frank.”

Clarke pulls back with a wrinkled nose. “Frank from The Point? Eww,” she laughs, pressing her mouth below Lexa’s ear. In boots with a bit of a heel, she has the best access to Lexa’s sensitive neck.

“What can I say—adult braces really do it for me.”

Lexa has only just pulled her closer, their mouths getting reacquainted while her hands drift
dangerously close to Clarke’s ass when Octavia bangs obnoxiously against the closed door, startling them apart and Lexa, quite possibly, into cardiac arrest. So, things are off to a good start.

“There better be four feet on the floor in there,” Octavia warns, loud enough that she can be heard through an ancient wooden door of heavy oak, and Clarke prays there aren’t other employeeslingering within earshot.

She swings open the door already rolling her eyes to Octavia’s unimpressed, blank expression. “O —”

“Save it, Romeo.” Octavia holds up a hand, eyes cutting quickly to Lexa still pressed against the wall, smoothing out the material of her shirt and avoiding eye contact. “Jeff is late. Can you cover the bar for, like, four seconds while I grab a few kegs?”

“I’ll help you,” Lexa quickly offers, pushing off the wall and moving towards the doorway beside Clarke.

She takes one or two measured breaths, waiting for Octavia’s response, but Clarke can see the way the pulse point along her neck still races.

“Cool. Thanks,” Octavia tells her, making her way out of the dim hallway and back into the bar.

Clarke gestures for Lexa to follow Octavia’s lead, not in the slightest because she plans to appreciate the way Lexa’s jeans fit from behind. Before they exit the back hallway, Lexa stops and turns to adjust the neckline of Clarke’s top, her fingers brushing quickly across Clarke’s shoulder and collarbone.

“This, by the way,” Lexa says, arching an eyebrow, “is not playing fairly.”

Clarke’s answering grin is pure self-satisfaction, but her tone remains completely innocent when she asks, “What—you don’t like my shirt?”

It’s simple stretchy, black cotton with three-quarter length sleeves and a scoop neck that’s more scoop than it is neck, and Clarke is loving watching Lexa struggle to keep her eyes above her shoulders. Her furrowed brow only increases Clarke’s amusement, and Lexa backs her way into the open doorway that empties behind the bar counter without another word. She trails behind Octavia, headed for the back storage room as Clarke makes her rounds with the patrons sat at the bar. Her smile genuine and her chest light as she refills drinks and chats with the regulars.

:::

“Sorry, which one is this again?”

Clarke is taking another sip, smirking into her pint as Lexa sends an exasperated sigh across the table.

Though she can’t hold back a smile when she says, “Can you at least pretend to pay attention?”

“This is me pretending!” Clarke laughs.

They’ve taken their usual booth, sequestered into the back of the bar near the door to storage, and Clarke’s eyes have suggested on more than one occasion that they skip the tasting and rendezvous elsewhere to pick up where they left off in her office. Lexa is annoyingly stalwart in keeping them on task, even as Clarke leans her elbows onto the table and watches Lexa shift in her seat at the change in view.
Lexa is diligently ticking items off a product sheet, her eyes on the table as her cheeks begin to show color. “This is the black lager,” she says stiffly.

“Mmm,” Clarke licks her lips. “It’s good.” She bites at her bottom lip, running a hand through her loose curls and dips her head to try and catch Lexa’s eye. “You okay?”

Lexa does meet her gaze eventually, a thinly veiled desperation shadowing those beautiful green eyes. Her voice is low but her tone soft even where Lexa is clearly on edge. “Was that shirt really necessary?”

Clarke bites harder against her lip to keep from laughing. “You know, we keep coming back to my shirt.”

*Honestly. If looks could kill.*

Clarke does laugh then, Lexa’s visible discomfort something she very much looks forward to alleviating in a few short hours.

“I wear this shirt to work all the time.”

Lexa gives her a look so heated, it’s Clarke who shifts in her seat. “I know.”

“So,” Clarke clears her throat. “The black lager.”

“Is it possible for you two to stop undressing each other long enough to be in a public space?” Octavia has appeared from thin air beside their booth, and Clarke jumps so violently she nearly spills what’s left of her beer.

“We were not … doing that,” Clarke tries, an ineffectual argument for how badly she stutters and the guilty blush all over Lexa’s face.

“Your eyes were,” Octavia says blandly. She sets a plate down between them. “Murphy snacks.”

Octavia leaves without another word, and Clarke smothers a laugh behind the back of her hand at Lexa’s desperate attempts to collect herself. The plate between them smells delicious—something tempura fried with an herb dipping sauce—and Clarke contemplates diving right in. She instead reaches a hand across the table where Lexa has started uselessly shuffling papers.

Clarke places her hand palm up on the table. “Hey.”

Lexa eyes it for only a moment before settling her hand on top and releasing a long sigh. “We’re really bad at this.”

“I know.”

There’s a beat of eye contact and then a shared laugh as Lexa drops her paperwork and leans farther across the table. “I thought it was hard before.”

This somewhat surprises Clarke, and she’s almost delighted in asking, “Was it hard for you before?”

Clarke has never known Lexa’s work ethic to be anything short of steadfast since they met. Her focus on Trikru is unfaltering and her concentration precise no matter the goings-on of their personal lives.

Lexa’s fingers trace Clarke’s palm, and she shrugs. “Sometimes.”
“Me too,” Clarke smiles, working her fingers between Lexa’s.

“I guess I thought it would get easier after—”

“All the sex?” Clarke chimes in, her wagging eyebrows bringing more of Lexa’s resigned laughter.

“Yes.” Lexa’s face settles, but she holds Clarke’s eye if not for the two or three quick dips they make to her mouth. “But all I can think about right now is kissing you.”

Clarke releases Lexa’s fingers for the sole purpose of throwing both hands into the air in her own exasperation. “Oh my god, come here then.”

She’s up and out of the booth before Lexa has time to react, a harshly whispered ‘Clarke’ trailing behind her as Clarke pushes through the black, swinging door and into dry storage. She counts off to seven before Lexa appears in front of her, looking for all intents and purposes like they are sixteen and cutting Geometry.

“Would you relax,” Clarke laughs, pulling Lexa into a row of metal shelving stocked with cardboard boxes. “I kind of run this place.”

Lexa’s resistance is practically nil and quickly replaced by enthusiasm at the feel of Clarke’s tongue sliding across her lips. Her hands do make their way to Clarke’s ass this time, and Clarke readily shifts to get Lexa’s thigh between her legs.

“I love these pants,” Lexa says between increasingly needy kisses. “And this shirt. But, you can never wear them to work ever again.”

Clarke laughs into Lexa’s mouth until her head falls against Lexa’s chest as her laughter grows louder and freer. Lexa joins in, a quieter giggle into the crook of Clarke’s neck and shoulder. This is how Octavia finds them.

“Jesus Christ, Clarke. Will you just go home already?” Octavia stalks past them for the walk-in beer cooler.

Lexa is still hidden in her neck, squeezing to her waist like a lifeline, and Clarke laughs harder.

:::

Lexa wants to take her out for dinner. A date, properly. Fancy clothes and cleverly-named cocktails and good food. Clarke can’t recall Lexa’s exact words, for lack of focus. She was too busy swooning over the ask, recovering from an orgasm, and trying to gather a mental picture of what Lexa’s date wardrobe might entail. They’ve now endured two, separate interactions at work—both mildly embarrassing and unsuccessful—and Lexa has not slept at her own apartment in over a week. Clarke supposes an official dinner date is somewhat overdue.

“Boots or heels?” Clarke walks away from her phone, set on speaker at the foot of her bed, to rummage in the closet.

Raven’s follow-up comes as Clarke reenters the bedroom. “Which heels?”

“The black ones.”

“You wear boots to work all the time—do the heels. Lexa will combust.”

Clarke’s grin is deviant as she snatches a black satin bra off the bed to match the underwear she’s
already stepped into. “You haven’t even seen the dress.”

“Send me a picture, dammit!” Raven demands.

“I will once I’m dressed,” Clarke laughs.

“You’re going to have the best sex tonight, you bitch.”

Clarke laughs again, picking up her phone and carrying it with her into the bathroom to start her make-up. “Uh, not to brag, but I’ve been having a lot of incredible sex for the past ten days.”

“Yes, but this is a horse of a different color, Griffin,” Raven argues. “Also, fuck you, I am up to my eyeballs in projects at work and too busy to get laid. But anyway.” Raven sighs dramatically, and Clarke laughs as she leans into the mirror to apply her mascara. “This is first date sex. This is entirely new territory. A departure from whatever sober, sweet marathon of emotional intimacy you two have been cocooning in for two fucking weeks. Tonight is all about the hours of public and increasingly-drunken foreplay leading up to this sex, dude.”

Raven concludes her rant with a grunt of disgust and Clarke caps her mascara with another laugh. “Are you finished?”

“You deserve this, like without question, but I do hate you a little.”

“I love you, too.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Raven sighs. “Okay, send me a pic of the dress and have fun. I want to hang out soon too, if you can stand to separate your vagina from Lexa’s face for a short span of time.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Clarke ends the call feeling both less nervous and increasingly anxious over Lexa’s arrival thanks to Raven’s frank assessment of their upcoming evening. Lexa had insisted on going home to get ready and showing up at Clarke’s door at the suggested time to collect her. It felt like an added step, but Clarke hadn’t argued, wanting to experience the night exactly as Lexa has imagined it. Lexa doesn’t drive, aside from her delivery truck, and Clarke had turned over the keys to her own car only after mildly teasing her on the mechanics of parallel parking a manual transmission in the middle of winter.

By seven Clarke is completely ready, perched on a stool at her kitchen island and contemplating a glass of wine. Lexa had said their dinner reservations weren’t until eight, which means she probably has plans for cocktails beforehand, but if they start drinking at the house, Clarke knows they’ll never make it out the front door. Lexa doesn’t knock before entering the house, and Clarke’s heart thumps at the sound of Lexa’s footsteps in the front hall as the door clicks shut.

She slides off the stool, swallowing thickly just as Lexa rounds the open doorway into the kitchen. She’s carrying a bouquet of dried flowers and looking more insanely gorgeous than Clarke has ever seen her, which is saying something.

Exchanges of “Hi,” and “Wow,” overlap as eyes roam and cheeks warm and shy smiles turn bright. Lexa wears dark colors over a navy blue patterned shirt—cropped, fitted trousers, a petite blazer, and shiny wingtip shoes. Her hair is down and straight, and Clarke’s mouth goes dry.

“You look … incredible ;” Clarke gushes, reaching out to feel the fabric of Lexa’s blazer between her fingertips.
Lexa is stunning. Words are inadequate where Clarke struggles to form coherent thought.

Lexa’s eyes have not stilled, wide and appreciative as they scan Clarke’s outfit repeatedly. “That … that is a dress.”

Clarke laughs, adjusting the thin strap on her left shoulder. She’ll freeze to death, but it is worth the risk of hypothermia for the look on Lexa’s face. She takes a step closer, loving the height in these heels and the way her mouth easily aligns with Lexa’s.

Clarke smirks, already knowing the answer. “A good dress?”

“A very good dress.”

Clarke kisses her once, softly, and she can feel the warm strength of Lexa’s grasp on her waist through the thin material of her black dress. Lexa immediately angles for more, pulling her closer, but Clarke steps back instead.

“Don’t you have grand plans to wine and dine me?” she teases.

Lexa’s eyes never leave her lips. “They seem excessively unnecessary now that I’m here.”

Clarke laughs, moving to swipe a thumb across Lexa’s bottom lip where a smudge of her lipstick remains. “Well, too bad. I’m starving.”

Lexa rolls her eyes. “You’re always starving.”

“Hey!” Clarke swats the back of her hand into Lexa’s stomach, smiling broadly. “Now you’re catching on.”

Lexa’s smile turns shy as she lifts the bouquet into Clarke’s line of sight. Pale-colored dried flowers and stalks of light green sea grass wrapped in brown paper. “These don’t need water, but I thought they would look nice on that table in front of the windows.”

“They’re beautiful,” Clarke beams, taking the flowers from Lexa’s grip and landing another swift kiss on her lips. She turns to set them onto the island before reaching for Lexa’s now empty hand. “Should we go?”

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The car service arrives as Clarke grabs a black wrap from off a kitchen stool, and Lexa helps her into her coat before grabbing her own off a hook in the front entryway. It takes minutes to wind their way along the coast before they’re pulling up to a bar Clarke has frequented once or twice, a newer establishment with a growing reputation for inventive, locally-sourced cocktails and a laid back atmosphere. Already Clarke knows Lexa is going to annihilate her at this whole dating thing.

“Have you been?” Lexa asks as they skitter across the icy sidewalk towards the front door.

Clarke rushes into the warmth of the bar once Lexa has pulled open its front door. “O and I checked it out when they first opened a couple of summers ago.”

Clarke omits the part where she’s taken one or two other dates here in the past, deciding very quickly that this will be the only night at this establishment with any lasting significance. Lexa follows close behind as they head to the bar, a hand at Clarke’s back that then slides Clarke’s coat off her shoulders when they find two seats at the bar.
Lexa first finds Clarke’s hand, twisting their fingers together and tucking them onto her lap, and then examines the drinks list. By their second drink, Clarke is happily drunk and feeling the effects of good liquor on an empty stomach. She and Lexa have turned into the same space, legs bumping together and fingers teasing along the bartop.

“Where are we going to eat?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

Clarke scoffs and rolls her eyes. “Well, I wasn’t just making polite conversation. It’s almost eight—do we need to go?”

Lexa slips her phone out of her pocket. “Just waiting on the car.”

“Wait. Are we not eating in town? Literally every restaurant is walkable from here.”

Lexa’s screen lights up as the cogs in Clarke’s brain struggle to keep up through a haze of mezcal and bourbon. “Are you ready?”

Clarke narrows her eyes as Lexa slides off her stool and gallantly offers a hand. “You’re not going to tell me, are you?”

“I am not going to tell you, no,” Lexa laughs.

In the car, Lexa sits closely, hand on Clarke’s leg while their shoulders press together. Clarke is distracted from enjoying her proximity only when Lexa gives an address instead of the name of a restaurant. The driver clarifies its location near the old train station, and Clarke’s bewildered face begins to cast around the car windows in search of clues.

Lexa squeezes her hand just above Clarke’s knee and laughs. “Stop trying to figure it out!”

:::

Their Lyft pulls up outside what appears to be an old warehouse, unfamiliar to Clarke. Large brick buildings of the old mills and tanneries are commonplace to their tiny town—now repurposed as upscale Italian markets, boutique home goods shops, and real estate agencies. The glass front doors of the building have been wrapped in brown paper, and there is very little to indicate it’s anything other than an abandoned warehouse except for the twinkle lights strung up outside and the faint sounds of music as Clarke exits the car.

Lexa takes her hand with a mysterious grin that is no less pleased with how she’s managed to keep Clarke in the dark. When she swings open one of the doors, the music swells—Latin flavored with upbeat acoustic guitars and big brass. The space is large but arranged intimately. There are fifty or so other people milling about: laughing, drinking, examining the space; and Clarke’s wide eyes scan quickly before landing on a familiar food truck parked in the far corner.

“Oh my god.”

At her side, Lexa’s smile grows. She turns her head to look at Clarke’s stunned reaction and squeezes once to her fingers. “Good surprise?”

“Lexa—” Clarke shakes her head, words will never suffice.

There is noise everywhere—voices carrying in all the open space, loud music echoing against the brick. But in a breath, Clarke’s world reduces to the curve of Lexa’s mouth, the quiet confidence in
her eyes. She kisses her without restraint, and then again for the catch in her breath that will never not make Clarke’s heart race.

They’re interrupted by an excited, “Lexa!” and Clarke pulls back to see the dazed look on Lexa’s face, the slow crawl of color on her cheeks.

A woman of about forty approaches, beautiful dark hair and brown eyes that shine brightly under all the intricate lighting. Lexa steps towards her, but not before reaching again for Clarke’s hand which had just been cupped around her neck.

“Mayra, hi.”

“You made it!” The woman moves in close, places quick kisses on Lexa’s cheeks before her eyes shift to Clarke. “And you travel in exceptional company, I see.”

Clarke’s laughter bubbles up at the unexpected compliment, but she extends a hand which the woman shoos away like a nuisance. “Hi, I’m Clarke.”

“Put that away and come here, we are all family tonight,” Mayra warmly chides, leaning in to buss Clarke’s cheeks as well.

“Mayra is the head chef responsible for your culinary addiction,” Lexa says with a smile that is exclusive to Clarke.

“Oh, you know the taqueria truck?” Mayra grins, delighted.

“Such an understatement,” Clarke laughs. “I think I’ve single-handedly kept you in business for the past three years.”

Mayra’s laughter is loud and full of life, distinct even in a room brimming with it. “You will eat well tonight then. We have much new things to share with everyone.”

“This is so amazing!” Clarke tells her. “I’d heard you were opening a permanent space, but I had no idea it was this far along.”

Mayra’s eyes cut quickly to the front entrance at their backs, and she must recognize another familiar face as her eyes light up and she rattles off something in Spanish. “Thank you, Clarke. Find a table anywhere you like. Drink, dance, eat. Enjoy yourselves tonight. I will come to find you later, Lexa.”

She leaves with a clasp to Lexa’s elbow, and then Clarke is pulling Lexa around to face her. “Okay. How did you do this?”

“Can you keep a secret?” Clarke nods readily, her eyes wide. Lexa laughs and tugs at their joined hands. “Let’s get a drink first.”

They first sample the tequila bar—a decision Clarke knows from multiple past experiences she will regret in the morning, but in the moment seems like an incredibly brilliant idea. Lexa then orders them sangria, which seems opulent and festive on a cold and dreary night in January, and Clarke suddenly wants to take Lexa on a long holiday to tropical climates. When they finally settle, it is on the same bench of a picnic table, facing the live band but a good distance from the stage.

Baskets of fresh tortilla chips that Clarke knows so well have been placed at all the tables, and she greedily crunches away as Lexa watches her fondly. There are crocks of queso, a rainbow assortment of salsas, and fresh guacamole is being prepared tableside—a young kid of fifteen or
sixteen with impressive knife skills making his way from table to table.

“I’ve been brokering a partnership with Mayra and her team at Metzy’s.”

Realization dawns. “That’s how you got the invite to this soft opening thing?”

“Trikru will feature pretty heavily on the taps,” Lexa nods, “but Indra is also working to construct a Mexican-style lager that they can use as a private label here as well as any other locations they eventually open.”

Clarke’s entire face goes slack. “Holy shit.”

“I know,” Lexa nods, sipping at her drink. “Indra’s even gone to Mexico to collaborate and gather techniques.”

“No, I mean, holy shit you just revealed classified information about Trikru’s business dealings and I didn’t even have to, like, coerce you into it by promising sexual favors.”

Lexa laughs, meeting Clarke’s eye with a small shrug. “I trust you.”

Clarke takes a deep breath, her heartbeat too erratic for three simple words. “I trust you, too.”

“Also, for the record, I am absolutely expecting sexual favors.”

Clarke laughs into her sangria, licking her lips as she sets it back onto the table and makes pointed eye contact. “Trust me. You are definitely getting lucky later.”

Lexa accepts the warm press of Clarke’s mouth, her hand a soothing presence on the small of Clarke’s back. She kisses the corner of Clarke’s mouth, the hinge of her jaw, and leans into her ear to say, “I already feel lucky.”

:::

They drink buckets of sangria and too many samples of mezcal. Clarke loses count of tacos—panko crusted cod, fried pork belly, and slow-braised chicken. She is full of good food, drunk off of way too many drinks, and ready to take Lexa home.

“Best date. Ever.” Clarke snuggles in close when they’ve slid into the backseat of their ride home, nuzzling into her neck as Lexa confirms Clarke’s address with the driver.

“I’ve set the bar too high then,” Lexa says, her hand high on Clarke’s leg as she crosses them into Lexa’s space. “Our dates can only get worse from here.”

Clarke sits up to examine Lexa’s profile. “Why do I feel like bad dates with you will still be better than any other dates I’ve been on?”

Lexa laughs, her hand gripping Clarke’s leg as she places a kiss along her jaw. “Because you’re drunk.”

Clarke’s tone softens with Lexa watching her. “No, I don’t think that’s it.”

:::

If they’re keeping score, and Lexa has obviously championed the date itself, then Clarke is feeling pretty confident in having the upper hand during the post-date activities. She can’t even get her coat on the hooks in the entryway before Lexa takes over, missing the hook entirely and letting the
coat fall in a crumpled heap to the floor. Clarke’s thin wrap is next to go, landing at her feet when Lexa pushes it off her shoulders. Lexa has a hand flat against Clarke’s stomach that slides around to grip at her waist as she kisses her backwards, farther into the warmth of the house. Lexa hasn’t even removed her own coat by the time she’s pressed Clarke into a wall just outside the kitchen, her mouth urgent. Clarke kicks off one shoe and then the other, falling to flat feet and pulling Lexa down to meet their new difference in height with both hands wrapped around the back of her neck.

Lexa wears a slim belt with a brass buckle that Clarke then works to unclasp as Lexa awkwardly shakes her arms out of her coat, letting it drop to the floor. Her hands run up Clarke’s sides, thumbs swiping arcs just under her breasts as she breaks the kiss and rests her forehead against Clarke’s to pant into the space between them.

“Jesus christ, this dress.”

Clarke leans up to mouth kisses along Lexa’s jaw, stopping just below her ear. “Get me upstairs, and I’ll let you take it off.”

Lexa doesn’t even hesitate for half a second, grabbing Clarke’s hand and rushing for the staircase, Clarke laughing behind her as they stumble up the steep spiral and somehow make their way to the top without falling.

For all of Lexa’s appreciation of the dress itself, she doesn’t seem heartbroken to see it go once she’s seen what’s on underneath, eyes going dark and breathing shallow when Clarke perches at the foot of the bed in nothing but black satin and lace. Lexa has removed her blazer and shoes and stands gaping in front of Clarke with her shirt half untucked and opened at the top by three or four buttons.

Clarke smiles up at Lexa, partly disheveled and always more beautiful than Clarke can ever fully process. She crawls backwards on the bed until she can rest against the pillows and then tells Lexa, “Come here.”

Lexa rapidly finishes undoing buttons as she stands at the foot of the bed then removes her shirt as she makes her way towards Clarke on her knees. Clarke reaches up to run her fingers down the flat of Lexa’s stomach, tugging at the button and zip of her pants with a pout.

“No pants.”

Lexa’s drunken smile is radiant. She falls to rest her weight against the palms of her hand and quirks an eyebrow. “Go ahead.”

Clarke curses her clumsy fingers—eager but completely inefficient at buttons and zippers in her addled state. Lexa further slows the process by sucking her earlobe and the sensitive spots of her neck that have Clarke’s hips rising off the bed. When she’s finally mastered the zip, Clarke slides into Lexa’s underwear without preamble. Lexa collapses into the pressure of her fingers even as she chokes out Clarke’s name.

Clarke doesn’t have the patience to get Lexa out of her pants, but she’s also extremely frustrated by this restrictive angle. In the end, Lexa makes the decision for her.

“Clarke, wait,” Lexa gasps, sitting up and dislodging Clarke’s hand in the process. She sits back on Clarke’s thighs and runs her hands down Clarke’s chest and stomach until fingers hook into the waistband of her underwear. “I really need to—” Lexa swallows and a chill runs up Clarke’s arms and legs. “Do this.”
“So do it,” Clarke says, canting her hips just once. “But take off your fucking pants first.”

Lexa’s hungry stare is broken by her gorgeous laugh, and Clarke feels her emotions spin wildly out-of-control for the woman sat on her legs. Lexa is completely devastating. Her pants come off with drunken effort but then there are long, smooth legs sliding along Clarke’s as Lexa starts at her mouth and works her way downward, stripping Clarke of her bra and underwear as she goes. Clarke comes to Lexa’s tongue and fingers. Her body feels weightless, hands seeking purchase in Lexa’s hair as orgasms roll over her in shockwaves. She soon gets her turn at breaking Lexa apart, tasting her for as long as Lexa can stand it before she’s begging Clarke for release. They collapse against each other for scattered intervals until hands and mouths start to wander, and they begin again.

Clarke feels unmoored in the eventual aftermath, emotions raw and exposed where she’s been repeatedly pried open for Lexa’s taking. Clarke clings to her like an anchor. Lexa’s fingertips eventually slow, no longer moving along Clarke’s skin with purpose other than comfort as sleep drags them under. Breaths slow and sync, and bodies pleasantly twist together.

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Clarke has not been this hungover since she woke up with Lexa on her couch and a weighted guilt lodged in her chest. The weight on her chest now is Lexa’s head, wild mane of hair splayed across her neck and arm wrapped loosely around Clarke’s waist. Naked cuddling with Lexa on a Sunday morning would be idyllic if Clarke weren’t on death’s door. She opens her mouth and works her jaw, feeling like she will never be able to rid the terrible taste on her teeth and tongue without swallowing bleach. Fucking tequila.

*Why, Clarke? Why?*

She is sore everywhere—some places delightfully so. Others, like her fucking skull, not so much. She feels so instantly and acutely awful, it will be impossible to fall back asleep. She attempts to crack open one eye and winces immediately, a sound just loud enough to rouse Lexa.

With both eyes again closed, she can only feel Lexa move off of her, chasing the warmth of Lexa’s skin when she rolls over and grumbles into a pillow. Clarke finds that moving has been her worst mistake yet, razors slicing into her temples and at the base of her skull until she very seriously considers vomiting off the side of the bed. Lexa has begun making similarly inarticulate noises, muffled by the pillow she has folded over her head.

Clarke makes the same, naïve oath she always does when in this predicament. “I’m never drinking again.”

Lexa whines something in response, but Clarke can’t make it out even with her forehead pressed against Lexa’s spine. She tries to prompt for Lexa to repeat herself, but the result is equally inaudible and garbled.

She’s not even sure Lexa is making actual words at this point. “Babe. Are you speaking English?”

There is more whimpering, and Lexa reaches back for Clarke’s hand to pull it around her ribs and up to her chest. Boobs of any variety, but particularly Lexa’s, are almost always a cure-all for Clarke’s ailments. Today, however, they don’t stand a chance against this fucking hangover. Miserable as she is, Clarke’s instincts soon kick in, and she knows there are some elements strictly necessary for their survival.

She starts to move, hating every second of it even as she struggles to say, “I gotta—coffee. And, headache.”

“No, don’t leave me.” Lexa’s sad, desperate plea is the first Clarke has been able to interpret, and she would laugh at Lexa’s high-pitched urgency if she didn’t think it might split her head open.

Lexa grips harder to her hand, refusing to relinquish her hold until Clarke is forced to fall back to the mattress at Lexa’s back. “I’m coming right back,” Clarke promises.

It takes several, long seconds before Lexa finally loosens her hold, but it is not done without further whimpering and sad grumbles into the mattress. Standing upright is the first treacherous step, but navigating the stairs is its own challenge. Clarke does so with one hand on the banister and the other gripping her head. She sprawls naked on the couch, waiting for the kettle, and then again as the coffee steeps in the press. Just the aroma of it filling her house is enough to give Clarke life, and she climbs the stairs feeling a notch above death with two empty mugs, the French press, a bottle of water tucked under her arm, and a day-old croissant between her teeth.

Lexa has not moved, and Clarke sets their items haphazardly onto her bedside table before walking into the bathroom to pee and find ibuprofen. Clarke swallows down her own pills before sitting on the edge of the bed closest to Lexa, placing a hand on her waist where Lexa has kicked off the sheets and blankets. She has come out of hiding from under the pillow, and wears an adorable grimace while Clarke’s thumb rubs at her hipbone.

“You need to sit up a little to take these,” Clarke says, her voice scratched and raw as she holds two pills in her left hand.

Eyes still closed, Lexa declines with a grunt. “I can’t move.”

“You’re not going to start to feel better until you have something to eat and take these pills.”

“Just leave me here to die,” Lexa groans.

Clarke rolls her eyes through a chuckle at Lexa’s dramatics. “After last night? Not a chance.”

There is the smallest lift to a corner of Lexa’s mouth, but it feels to Clarke like a massive victory. “S’good,” Lexa mumbles.

“It’s what now?” Clarke laughs, squeezing Lexa’s hip until her legs begin to squirm.

Lexa opens one eye and then the other. “Last night. It was really good.”

“Mmm, one for the books.” Clarke leans over to kiss Lexa’s temple. “You really need to sit up and take these, though.”

Lexa doesn’t move but instead lets her eyes crawl up and down Clarke’s frame. “You’re not wearing any clothes.”

“You’re quick today,” Clarke laughs. “If memory serves, you are directly responsible for that.”

Lexa smiles again, hums, and closes her eyes as a hand wanders onto Clarke’s leg.


“I really cannot move,” Lexa says, whimpering again when Clarke tries to gently pull her up by an elbow. “Clarke, no.”
“Lexa, for fuck’s sake—okay fine. Open up.” Clarke pinches two blue pills between her thumb and index finger and holds them above Lexa’s mouth.

Lexa hesitates only briefly before complying, swallowing a few sips of water that Clarke offers next while rivulets run down her chin and onto the pillow.

“Even my teeth hurt,” Lexa says, closing her eyes again. “How are you sitting up right now?”

“Somebody had to make sure we didn’t perish from all our overindulgence.”

Lexa digs her fingers into her hair, frowning as she scratches her scalp. “I think I have to quit my job.”

“Why is that?” Clarke asks, ripping off a piece of pastry and stuffing it into her mouth before pouring coffee into their mugs.

“I don’t think I can ever leave this bed.”

Clarke laughs around another bite of croissant. “Have you always been this dramatic and I just never noticed?”

“I feel so sick.”

Clarke dangles a bite of croissant above Lexa’s lips. “Here.”

“Oh no, I can’t eat yet.”

Clarke exhales, taking the bite for herself. “If you’re going to lie motionless and naked in my bed all day, do I at least get to have my way with you?”

She’s already moved to press kisses against Lexa’s stomach and then lower, teeth grazing a hipbone.

“Clarke.”

“What?” A kiss lower, Lexa’s thigh.

“How can you possibly—” she jerks at the first swipe of Clarke’s tongue.

“Orgasms are supposed to be great for migraines, you know.” Clarke tastes her again, smiling at Lexa’s sensitivity as she twitches against the contact.

“Jesus, Clarke,” Lexa breathes out, but it’s the last words either of them say for quite some time.

Clarke starts to feel better after just four or five minutes between Lexa’s legs, and with the force of Lexa’s eventual orgasm, Clarke wagers she’s now feeling a bit better as well.

“So, how conclusive is the evidence? Head still pounding?” Clarke asks with a grin, wiping her chin on the back of her hand as she rests her head on Lexa’s stomach.

“I can’t even feel my head right now.”

Clarke laughs, kissing Lexa’s stomach as her fingers comb through Clarke’s hair. “Coffee?”

Lexa hums, and it’s significantly less feeble than Clarke has heard her all morning, though neither moves to sit up for a long and quiet stretch of time.
Lexa has her own algorithm for curing hangovers, and in an hour’s time Clarke finds herself laid between Lexa’s legs, back to front, in an empty bathtub while the hot shower rains down on them. It’s dusky with the lights off, though a clouded, mid-morning sun provides soft light even behind Clarke shower curtain.

“This helps?” Clarke’s head lolls where it rests on Lexa’s chest, angling so she can kiss the underside of her chin.

“Mmhmm.” Lexa rubs at Clarke’s shoulders, digging her thumbs into the muscle there. “Tried and tested.”

Clarke takes a sip of their shared beer, holding it up for Lexa and then running her fingers up and down Lexa’s legs when she has two free hands.

“Not that I actually care about the outcome. This is really nice regardless.”

“It’ll help,” Lexa says. “And it is really nice.”

They stand and wash before the water turns cold, kiss languidly under the spray, and work the tension from their muscles under the hot water and steam. They finish one beer between them, wrapped in towels and laid on the bed, while Clarke pitches food ideas and scrolls through her delivery app. It is easily one of the worst hangovers of her life, but it is not at all the worst morning.

Clarke gives Lexa her comfiest pair of sweats in exchange for the soft, practically threadbare cotton tee of Lexa’s she’s had her eye on, they eat their combined weight in Chinese takeout, and collapse onto the sofa in front of the TV. Clarke slots into the space between Lexa and the back cushions, hugging to her waist and head on her chest.

Lexa groans, content and sleepy, and Clarke feels a smile pull at her lips. “Have you recovered?”

“I feel much better, yes,” Lexa confirms.

“Good. I was pretty concerned for awhile there.”

Lexa scoffs, hands still rubbing up and down Clarke’s back. “I think it’s safe to say we were both feeling rough, Clarke.”

“Okay, but,” Clarke laughs, sitting up to prop her chin on the back of her hand where it rests on Lexa’s chest. “You threatened to quit your job. You were, like, epically pathetic.”

“There was nothing epic about my pain levels,” Lexa scowls, pouting harder when Clarke laughs again.

“Aw, poor baby.” Clarke leans up to press into Lexa’s protruding bottom lip. Against Lexa’s mouth she says, “No more tequila for you.”

“If you could just be sure I’m not consuming it along with several other forms of alcohol, that would be great.”

Clarke lands kisses to her cheek and chin before laying her head back down. “I can do that.”
They quiet again, Clarke’s eyes drifting shut to the low sounds of the television. Lexa’s hands still against her back, and Clarke thinks she might have fallen asleep when she feels a shuddering breath and then Lexa’s hands begin to move again.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” Lexa’s response is pitched too high, her voice shaken on just that one word, and Clarke raises her head to Lexa biting her lip and staring at the ceiling.

“Hey.” Clarke’s voice is gentle, even as her pulse races. “Lexa.”

“I’m okay—it’s just … so nice.” Lexa shifts her eyes to Clarke, their intensity sending a shock through her chest. “I love being here with you, Clarke. Like this.”

Clarke’s smile grows, her own eyes threatening to water even as Lexa tries to pull herself together. “I’m glad. I sort of plan on doing this kind of stuff with you on a regular basis.”

Lexa only pinches her lips together, moves to hide her eyes into the crook of an elbow. “I can’t stop thinking about before—how we could have had this before if I just would have—”

“Hey, no.” Clarke now props on an elbow, reaching out to gently pry Lexa’s arm from across her eyes. “Don’t do that. Lexa,” her voice does crack then, heart hammering loudly in her ears, but Clarke keeps on. “I got to fall in love with my best friend. Do you have any idea how rare—how amazing that is?”

Lexa’s answering smile could power a small nation, her eyes blinking back the water that has gathered around Clarke’s favorite shade of green.

“Clarke.”

“You don’t have to say anything—I mean, I just kind of figured you already knew, but seriously I don’t need for this to be immediately, like, an equal exchange or anything,” Clarke rushes to say, exhaling forcefully when Lexa pulls her down for a kiss.

Lexa separates their mouths only enough to say, “I’m so in love with you, Clarke.”

“Yeah, I sort of guessed.” Clarke’s laughter feels lighter than air, a buoy behind her chest walls that, when in chorus with Lexa’s, is the best sound in the world.

...
January is cold and grey—maintaining a frigidity that shoots straight through the spine while the city sits covered in snowbanks that are dull and unsightly. The sun hardly shines, and spring seems like a cruel, taunting light at the end of a wintry tunnel that doesn’t end. The weather is, in a word: shit.

Despite her bias, Clarke hardly favors her coastal region of the Northeast at this time of year, and more often ends up suffering some degree of seasonal affective depression as winter keeps its harsh grasp on the first few months of the year. The days drag, and the mornings are long and dark. She resents the lack of warmth as much as the falling snow at any point beyond the Christmas holiday.

Except this year, Clarke hardly notices. Not with Lexa in her bed most nights, curled around her; or snuggled together on the sofa, eating dinners that Clarke has prepared; or sat at her bar, keeping her company on nights when business is slow and Lexa knows Clarke will be bored. Lexa is the perfect antidote to the gloom and cold, and Clarke is almost surprised when February arrives as if January had passed by at a brisk if not enjoyable pace.

“I’m trying to have Raven over for dinner,” Clarke announces from the kitchen island. She’s set up a small work space there: laptop, phone, paperwork from Dockside. Tasks she would normally have worked on in her office at Dockside but that she has begun bringing home to accomplish in Lexa’s company. “Thursday, maybe.”

Lexa’s voice comes over her shoulder from where she is sat on the couch watching college basketball. “Oh, okay. I could see if Lincoln wants to hang out that night.”

“What? No,” Clarke spins in her seat to give Lexa a confused look as she laughs, “With you, dummy.”

Lexa takes an unexpected deep breath, releasing it as she says, “Oh.”

“I haven’t seen her since we became, you know, us,” Clarke starts, pausing briefly at the way Lexa’s face lights up. “So, you’re good with dinner?”

“Of course,” Lexa responds easily. Though a beat later, her attention back on the TV, she adds, “Dinner with your ex-girlfriend always sounds good in any context.”

“Lexa,” Clarke half-groans, half-laughs, sliding off of her stool to approach the back of the sofa. “She’s not an ex-girlfriend, like in the traditional sense. Raven is one of my closest friends. We dated a million years ago.”

Clarke drapes herself over the back of the couch, arms wrapping loosely around Lexa’s neck as she smacks a loud kiss against her cheek.

“Yes, I know,” Lexa drones. “It was a million years ago that you—how did you poetically express it—spent quality time with each other’s vaginas?”

Clarke has since buried her face into Lexa’s neck but her head snaps up at Lexa’s words and she very nearly yells, “Oh my god!” She rounds the couch to find Lexa biting back a grin but continues to scowl harshly as she climbs atop Lexa’s lap and pokes at her chest. “You are so not allowed to
“do that.”

“What am I doing?” Lexa laughs, eyebrows raised challengingly.

“That was information shared within the confines of friendship. Meaning you are not allowed to then use it against me in the context of—” Clarke momentarily struggles, suddenly realizing they haven’t exactly redefined much of their relationship beyond an insufferable need to be around each other, preferably naked, at all times. And being in love, Clarke mentally amends. There’s also that. She rolls her eyes and inarticulately waves her hand between them, “Of this.”

Lexa’s tone may be petulant, but her hands are a familiar comfort—a pressure that works up Clarke’s thighs and onto her hips. “I’m happy to have dinner with any of your friends, Clarke. It’s only fair I be properly vetted for … this,” and here she raises an eyebrow that has Clarke forgiving all of her previous taunts, so primed to kiss her already that Clarke is perturbed at her own weakness for Lexa’s face. “Particularly if you’re eventually going to be subjected to Anya.”

“Raven might be worse than Anya,” Clarke winces.

Again, Lexa challenges, though she is almost regretful as she says, “You’ve never met Anya.”

Lexa leans up to kiss her, lingers in a soft press of her lips until Clarke reciprocates and slides her hands from Lexa’s shoulders into her hair. “Make the dinner plans with Raven. Of course I’ll be there.”

:::

It’s been just over three weeks that Lexa drove through the night to arrive on Clarke’s doorstep when Clarke finds her at the same bar counter as Raven Reyes. Despite her good intentions, Clarke has yet to organize a proper group hang—Raven’s schedule never quite aligning with Clarke and Lexa’s—but that doesn’t stop Raven from swinging into Dockside on a random Wednesday to catch up with Clarke and Octavia over beer and appetizers. Knowing it’s their longest shift of the week, Raven also brings coffee and pastries because she is the kindest, most intimidating person Clarke has ever met.

Clarke pops into the kitchen to help resolve a matter between the kitchen staff and one of her servers, and when she swings back into the mostly empty bar a moment later, Lexa is sliding into a bar stool.

“Hey!” Clarke heads straight for her, whose face of impassivity immediately softens when her eyes land on Clarke.

Lexa’s coat is unzipped and her hat removed, a bulky knit cardigan shows at the coat’s opening, and Clarke fantasizes snuggling against it with Lexa on her sofa.

“Where was that smile when I walked through the door, huh, Griffin?” Raven, two stools down and halfway through her first drink, unapologetically inserts herself into the moment Clarke is having with Lexa’s eyes.

Clarke’s gaze never leaves Lexa’s as she rounds the countertop and lightly says, “Shut up, Raven.” She stops beside Lexa’s stool, immediately too close and not close enough.

“I’m just saying, you haven’t seen me in close to three weeks, and I brought danish.”

Lexa has a brief smile for Clarke, who rolls her eyes at Raven’s commentary, before turning her head down the bar. “Hello, Raven.”
It’s not an icy tone, by any means, nor is Lexa’s greeting strictly friendly, and Clarke reaches out to help Lexa out of her coat in order to press a warm hand against the middle of Lexa’s spine, resting her arm along the back of the bar stool.

Raven’s eyes gleam, a pleased smirk stretching her features at Lexa’s formality. She tilts her head as if in fond memory. “Hey, I remember you.”

“Raven,” Clarke warns.

Raven stabs her fork into a shrimp, smiling broadly. “What?”

“Yes, it’s been quite awhile,” Lexa says. “It’s nice seeing you again.”

“It’s always nice seeing me.” Raven winks, finishing off her drink and sliding it back across the bar where Octavia seamlessly swipes it off the counter to refill. “But you—there’s something different about you. Is it the hair?”

“Jesus,” Clarke breathes. “Okay, ignore her.” She pulls Lexa’s attention by running a hand over her shoulder blade and quietly saying, “Hey.”

When Lexa turns, her eyes have slightly hardened and her jaw set, if only to Clarke’s careful perceptions. At her creased brow of concern, Lexa relaxes, sliding an arm around her waist to further close the distance between them.

“I’m fine, Clarke.” Her tone is low, a register for Clarke to hear and no one else.

“I know you are,” Clarke smiles, feeling the world outside of the loose grasp of Lexa’s arm melt away. “But are you also hungry? Thirsty?”

“Have you eaten?” Lexa’s voice takes on that soft quality that Clarke thinks might be responsible for her irregular heartbeat.

“Here and there,” Clarke shrugs. “I’ve grazed.” Her fingers trace patterns on Lexa’s back. “Do you want me to get you those scallops you like?”

Lexa takes in a short breath to respond only to be interrupted by an exaggerated gagging sound over her shoulder. Clarke’s eyes cut to Raven who is miming the act of vomiting onto her appetizer plate. Octavia has begun polishing the taps in front of her, paying no mind to anything going on that isn’t work.

“How can you possibly work in this hyper-affectionate environment?” Raven says to her, all while watching Clarke and Lexa with feigned disgust.

Clarke is a breath away from defending herself, not to mention Lexa, when Octavia dimes her out in the worst way.

“You should see what goes on in storage.”

“Okay, that was one time,” Clarke tries, her weak protests lost to the sound of Raven’s loud cackles. To Lexa she says, “Sorry about them. I didn’t know you were coming in tonight.”

Lexa has a sloping grin and soft gaze that completely distracts Clarke from her friends’ commentary. “It’s your longest day,” she shrugs. “I wanted to see you before midnight.”

Clarke’s heart swoops. She grins at Lexa and asks, “Do you want to grab a booth? I could sit with
The phone behind the bar rings, and Octavia pauses her cleaning to answer it. Clarke is halfway to asking Lexa if they can first spend about fifteen to twenty minutes in her office because she really needs to kiss her right now, when Octavia hangs up the receiver with a mild but completely audible: shit.

“What is it?” Clarke asks as Octavia approaches.

“That was Tris from Breakers. They just cashed out a couple of men’s basketball teams, and she overheard them saying they’re headed our way.”

Clarke casts her eyes around the quiet bar longingly. She’d had visions of an easy close, maybe even locking up early now that Lexa was sitting right in front of her. She tries to remind herself that she is first and foremost a successful businesswoman and that any business—even potentially rowdy and half-drunk basketball players—is good business on an otherwise slow midweek night in the dead of winter.

“So much for dinner,” Clarke pouts.

Lexa squeezes her side. “I can just sit here at the bar and eat. Unless you need the room?”

“No,” Clarke smiles. “Stay.”

She slips away before the already potent urge to kiss Lexa proves too tempting and swings behind the bar while Octavia heads for stock and storage, determined. Ready for battle. She can play at disdain for a late night crowd all she wants, but Clarke isn’t fooled. Octavia lives for this shit.

“I’m going to order you some food,” Clarke says. “Do you want a drink?”

Lexa scans the taps, her eyes landing briefly on Raven’s petite jam jar that holds her fresh gin and tonic, lime wheel resting flat on its surface. “I’ll do a Stillhouse. Please.”

Clarke pours the drink with a smile, remembering the first time Lexa had tried it at Lincoln’s party, and how she always seems to return to it when given the chance. She turns from the rows of liquor bottles to find Raven on the move, skimming across two bar stool seats until she is directly beside Lexa. Clarke grabs a coaster and sets Lexa’s drink in front of her while carefully watching for any early signs of unrest between the two now sat elbow-to-elbow.

“Bourbon,” Raven chuckles, eyeing Lexa’s drink. “Of course she drinks bourbon.”

Lexa’s only response is the barest tick of an eyebrow, fingers casually wrapping around her glass as she looks to Clarke with a smile. “Thanks.”

“I’m going to tell the kitchen we’re likely to get hit for late night food and order your dinner,” Clarke says to the pair. And then to Raven, pointedly, “Play nice.”

Raven scoffs around a sip of her cocktail. “Those two words lose all meaning for me when in conjunction. You know that, Clarke.”

Still, Clarke threatens her as best she can with a lethal glare that falls flat against Raven’s devious grin. She backs her way into the kitchen with one, last glance to Lexa—who is by no means a shrinking violet but who Clarke is no less driven to protect—and hopes she doesn’t return to bloodshed. It’s not as if there’s ever been any open animosity between Lexa and Raven. Whenever Clarke had previously worried of discontent, her concern was always fleeting—convincing herself
each time that she’d only imagined a latent tension between them. Still, there is something simmering that Clarke can’t define.

She talks quickly with the kitchen, makes her requests for Lexa’s dinner, and exits through the swinging door to find the patrons of her establishment have multiplied exponentially. The men, presumably from a local rec league, aren’t loud or out-of-hand as of yet, but they are many in number. Octavia makes her first pass, taking orders in mass quantities that no one person should be able to recall, starting pints as she goes, and Clarke follows in her wake to pick up the minimal slack. She chances a quick glance down the bar to see Raven speaking with her hands, Lexa’s face stern in concentration, short nods at random intervals. Raven must be on a long-suffering engineering rant.

*Good. Shop talk.*

She’s submerged again in pouring drinks and starting tabs before their second bartender emerges from storage with more stock, and Clarke takes over refilling the canned beer cooler at the end of the bar closest to Lexa.

“—because we’re trying to gradually step away from exclusive reliance on four-stroke trunk engines. Fucking diesel, ya know?”

“Haven’t you always wanted to befriend an exuberant gearhead?” Clarke teases, smirking at Lexa who had been listening intently before Clarke appeared in her line of sight.

“If you’re gonna talk shit, Griffin, you can at least pour me another drink,” Raven snipes, tapping her empty glass a few times against the bartop. “What’s your poison, Esquire?”

“I’m—it’s, uh, the whiskey. The Stillhouse.”

Clarke looks up from restocking at the sound of Lexa’s mild stutter and finds her mouth a hard line, a light pink blush high on her cheeks. She tries to assess Lexa none-too-subtly, mind reeling to determine what caused her swift change in mood. To the untrained eye, Lexa remains the picture of reserved calm enjoying the last dregs of her drink. To Clarke, she looks unsettled. Unbalanced like she’s been shoved onto the backs of her heels.

Raven rolls her eyes, drumming her hands against the counter. “That’s right. A bourbon drinker. You know what? Never mind—after the week I’ve had, I think we need a shot,” she decides, right hand landing on the bar’s surface with a loud smack.

“Is that a great idea?” Clarke hedges, eyes now darting between Raven’s amused grin and Lexa’s rigid posture.

Lexa finishes her drink and sets her glass delicately onto the bar counter, angling herself in Raven’s direction. “I’m in.”

Raven laughs with a singular clap. “Yes. Perfect.” She holds up two fingers and grins broadly at Clarke. “*Patrón. Dos.*”

“Great,” Lexa responds, her smile for Raven more lethal challenge than outright enthusiasm.

Despite her recent promises to Lexa regarding tequila consumption, Clarke restrains herself from snarking: *are we just going to pretend your near-death experience last Sunday didn’t happen?*

She certainly isn’t about to drag Lexa’s epic hangover out into the open, particularly not in the middle of whatever oddly hostile bonding ritual she’s currently engaged in with Raven. Instead, she
pours the damn shots and slides them across the bar, nevertheless arching an eyebrow in Lexa’s direction.

Lexa maintains her challenging glare, unwavering even under Clarke’s scrutiny, and picks up the small glass. Clarke would be lying if she said she weren’t at least mildly curious to see how this all shakes out.

“Let’s toast to … Clarke,” Raven suggests, raising her own glass.

What should be a thoughtful gesture, in the hands of Raven, has Clarke bracing herself.

“To one man’s trash being another man’s treasure.”

“Oh, fuck you,” Clarke scowls, returning to the cooler at her back to finish stocking. “As if you ever had any complaints.”

“Aw, you know I love you, Clarkey,” Raven coos through her laughter.

“To common interests,” Lexa amends, which Raven seems to accept as they raise glasses and tip back their shots.

Clarke empties the last cases of canned beer at her feet and closes the cooler, ready to move towards recycling when Raven says, “So, Esquire, we still haven’t determined what’s changed about you since the last time we saw each other.”

Lexus left eyebrow arches dangerously and Clarke swallows nervously. “I’ve been having an inordinate amount of sex with your ex-girlfriend recently. Maybe that’s the distinction.”

Clarke’s mouth gapes to the sounds of Raven’s delighted peals of laughter, her hand now banging repeatedly against the countertop as Octavia calls Clarke’s name from down the bar.

“Dude, bring us more libations on your way back from helping O. I think we’re just getting warmed up here.”

Clarke is stunned still, her widened eyes landing on Lexa before she finally turns. Lexa’s self-satisfied smirk shadows her down the length of the crowded bar counter until she approaches Octavia.

“Food’s up in the kitchen—can you grab it? I need to change a keg,” Octavia grunts, lifting an empty keg out of a cooler beneath the taps.

“Oh, yeah.” Clarke shakes her head. “Yeah.”

Octavia snaps the valve to the beer line off the keg top with a loud hiss. “Everything okay?”

Clarke’s eyes dart quickly in the direction of Lexa and Raven, calculating Lexa’s facial expressions—the curve of her mouth as she speaks, the quick roll of her eyes when Raven presumably interjects. Octavia has hoisted the keg onto an orange dolly when Clarke looks away from a conversation she can no longer hear.

She exhales a short puff of air. “I’ll let you know.”

::: The business is good, the bar is lively, and Lexa is so drunk. Though she has thankfully moved onto beer, and Clarke has continuously shoved small plates of food and glasses of water in front of
her, she is nevertheless adorably inebriated. She and Raven seem to have skated across any further tumult and have been speaking amicably for quite some time when Clarke begins observing them through the porthole on the kitchen door.

“Does it look like they’re getting along to you?”

Octavia, as aloof as she is disinterested, scowls. “Who?”

“Raven and Lexa.”

“Do not make me do this, Clarke.”

Octavia stands beside her, her back leant up against the stainless steel surface of the kitchen line as she tears into a piece of chicken satay.

“Do what?”

“Spy on our friends for your own personal benefit.”

“I’m just observing, okay?” Clarke argues, her eyes narrowing as Lexa appears to grind her jaw, eyes cast to her glass of beer while Raven’s teasing grin needles her profile. “I’m not spying .”

“You are literally hiding behind a door and peering through a small window, Clarke,” Octavia points out around a mouthful of chicken.

Clarke huffs and turns away from the window. “Okay, but you don’t think Lexa dislikes Raven though, right?”

Octavia’s face of boredom somehow manages to fall even further as she drones, “Are you asking me to pass her a fucking note in gym class?”

“Octavia—”

“I don’t know, dude! Lexa and I talk about beer and sports, and like, very little else.”

“I want them to like each other, but I can’t shake the feeling that there’s some kind of unspoken tension between them,” Clarke frowns, using Octavia as more of a sounding board than anything.

“Maybe it’s got something to do with them being snatch sisters,” Octavia shrugs.

“Ew. That is gross, O. Even for you.” Clarke steals a skewer off Octavia’s plate and takes a bite before giving it back.

“Whatever you wanna call it, Griffin. They’ve now both been on a first name basis with your bits. I imagine that could potentially complicate the dynamic for them a little, you know?”

“Yeah, but Raven and I—that was nearly a decade ago!”

Octavia looks at her like she’s grown a third eye. “You’ve met Raven, right? Like, you’ve actually seen her with your own eyes?”

Clarke growls, returning to the porthole with a deeper frown. “You were supposed to tell me I was worrying for nothing.”

“Oh.” Octavia places her empty plate into a dish bin of dirty plates and claps a firm hand onto Clarke’s back. “You’re worrying for nothing.”
Clarke turns her frown on Octavia as she pushes through the door and back into the bar. “Thanks a lot.”

She exits behind Octavia, intent on leaving Lexa and Raven alone to work out whatever intricacies still remain between them when she hears Raven’s boisterous if not slightly aggressive, “You have to be fucking kidding me.”

Clarke turns towards them, Lexa’s face impassive if not also challenging as she takes a long drink of beer.

“It’s fucking shameful, dude.” Raven shakes her head, finishing the last of her drink. “Just when I was beginning to like you.”

“There is no shame in a tradition of loyalty.”

Clarke approaches slowly, still trying to pick up the thread of their dispute without overtly eavesdropping.

“A tradition of pain and misery!” Raven nearly shouts.

“How easily support is garnered for a franchise that has never known defeat,” Lexa counters.

Raven throws up her hands. “We literally just lost the ALCS this past season!”

Clarke exhales in relief. Fucking baseball. Thank god.

“Yes, how tragic. That they will never know the sweet victory of a world championship.”

“Hey,” Clarke attempts to interject.

“Fuck, no. Get that heavy-handed, pathetic underdog bullshit away from me, Esquire,” Raven argues, ignoring Clarke’s greeting in favor of continuing her assault on Lexa, who appears more annoyed than defensive.

“Hey,” Lexa grins at Clarke, glassy-eyed and slouched against the bar in a way that Clarke has rarely seen her outside of the relaxed atmosphere of her own house.

“How’s it going over here?”

The roll of Lexa’s eyes is directed at Raven, but she has an unguarded smile full of drunk affection for Clarke. “Good. But, I need to pee,” Lexa then bluntly announces to Clarke’s surprised laughter.

“Okay,” she answers even as Lexa is sliding off of her stool and making her way towards the bathrooms under what appears to be strict concentration at remaining steady.

Clarke is four seconds away from trailing behind Lexa when Raven scoffs in disgust, “A fucking diehard Mets fan, Clarke, seriously? Have you no moral fibre left?”

“Exactly how many drinks have you had?”

“Not enough,” Raven scowls. “I need to obliterate the knowledge that you are sleeping with some whiny-ass, glutton-for-punishment—”

Clarke arches an eyebrow. “As if you weren’t inconsolable after the Yankees lost game seven.” Without allowing Raven to defend herself and before Lexa reemerges from the bathroom, Clarke leans in to ask, “Also, why do you keep calling her Esquire?”
“Esquire—you know,” Raven snaps her fingers once or twice, “because of law school. She’s a lawyer, dude. An *esquire*.”

Clarke’s face falls and her eyes briefly close as a few of Raven and Lexa’s earlier hostile interactions slot into place. “She’s not—Lexa never took the bar.”

Raven’s jaw drops into a wide smile. “Ahh-haa. Oh shit, that’s even better.” She’s still laughing, leaning back into her stool and clapping as if Clarke has just told the world’s best joke, while Clarke rounds the bar and heads for the bathrooms to be sure Lexa hasn’t fallen into a toilet.

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“Raven and I are going to Fenway.”

Clarke laughs, buckling into her seat and cranking the heat, which may not even warm by the time she pulls into her driveway but feels like a necessary attempt against the frigid midnight air. “Uh, it’s February, babe.”

Lexa tries once with her own seatbelt and then a second time when the buckle won’t clasp around her waist. “Not now, Clarke. It’s—we’re—*damnit*.” She gives it a third go before Clarke is shaking her head and reaching for the buckle herself, soundly snapping it into place in seconds after swatting Lexa’s hands away. “This spring. Or summer. It’s undecided when it will be optimal weather for hate-watching the Red Sox.”

“I see,” Clarke smiles. “So, you and Raven are friends now?”

Lexa frowns. “When were we ever not friends?”

“Oh, right. Good point,” Clarke nods with a contained smirk, pulling from the snowy parking lot onto the deserted street that leads home.

“She’s pretty great,” Lexa continues. “I mean, she can be a bit of an asshole, but I think she’s very intelligent. I believe her brand of humor is often misunderstood.”

Clarke laughs outright. “Oh no, she’s definitely an asshole. But, lovable all the same.”

“You’re also very lovable.” Lexa grins as her hand drifts across the middle console, landing on Clarke’s thigh as she leans in to place a prolonged kiss on Clarke’s cheek.

Her breath is pungent, and Clarke isn’t sure Lexa should be trusted that close to the gear shift, but the sentiment, drunk or not, is still very sweet. “Thank you,” she giggles, lovingly if not also forcefully shoving Lexa back into her own seat. “I love you too. Now please refrain from making me swerve off the road.”

Even in her peripheral, Clarke can see Lexa’s wide grin and the way her head is turned to face Clarke, leaned against the headrest. “I promise to use restraint for the time being, but when we get back to the house I am going to do more of that.”

“More of kissing my cheeks?”

“More of kissing you all over,” Lexa clarifies.

Clarke exhales a short laugh because Lexa is still fairly intoxicated, and it’s late on a work night—the combination of which does not bode well for either of them. Even still, the intent heavy on Lexa’s tone makes Clarke flush, momentarily forgetting the outside chill still trapped in the car.
She covers Lexa’s hand with her own, the one still draped across her leg, and squeezes her fingers as they wind their way down the coast.

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Lexa makes good on her promise, coming up behind Clarke as she undresses to place sloppy kisses along her neck and spine. She makes a particularly valiant attempt at sobriety once Clarke has removed her bra and turns to face wide, green eyes. Lexa’s hands smooth over Clarke’s breasts while her gaze fights to remain focused.

“I missed you,” Lexa very nearly whispers, and Clarke wraps her arms around Lexa’s slender waist to rest their foreheads together.

“We just spent the past three hours in the same establishment.” She kisses Lexa’s ear, the corner of her mouth. “But you’re very sweet.”

“No, Clarke.” Lexa’s eyes are cast downward, her voice somber. “I was talking to them.”

Clarke laughs loudly, head tipped back even as she shoves Lexa backwards who, on unsteady feet, tips over onto the bed. Lexa is perceptive and kind. She is achingly beautiful and impossibly charming. But Clarke still sometimes forgets that Lexa is also really, fucking funny.

“Well, the three of you are welcome to reunite just as soon as I wash up for bed. Get out of your clothes and come brush your teeth.”

Lexa is propped up on her elbows, a broad smile and bright eyes on Clarke as she says, “Okay.”

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Clarke exits the bathroom not ten minutes later to find a sprawled Lexa—eyes closed, mouth ajar, jeans unbuttoned but otherwise completely clothed. Clarke huffs a laugh, crawls onto the bed and begins tugging at Lexa’s denim until she scowls, mumbling incoherently.

“You’re not sleeping in these jeans,” Clarke tells her. “And you’re going to be really unpleasant to deal with tomorrow if you don’t at least brush your teeth and drink some water.”

Lexa shakes her head, curling onto her side to wrap her arms around Clarke’s waist and lay her head in Clarke’s lap. “Need sleep.”

“Lex—no, Lexa!” Clarke fights against her hold but is both impressed and alarmed by the strength Lexa maintains even while clearly inebriated. “Oh my god,” Clarke groans, finally wrestling free to stand at the bedside and work at removing Lexa’s jeans.

Fifteen exasperating minutes later, Clarke has forgone Lexa’s toothbrush but has managed to disrobe and partially hydrate her, crashing into bed beside her limp body to wrap around her. Lexa sighs sleepily, reaching for Clarke’s hand as it rests beneath her bare breasts to pull them tightly together.

Clarke is exhausted, but there is no trace of annoyance in her tone when she kisses the back of Lexa’s neck and says, “You owe me so many orgasms for this.”

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“There’s been a large, green delivery truck parked outside your house on a consistent basis for over a month, Clarke.”
“Would you believe me if I told you I’ve decided to utilize my connections within the industry to cut out the middleman and I’m having product delivered straight to my fridge?” Clarke says breezily.

“Clarke.”

She withholds still, unable to resist getting a rise out of her. “Yes, Mother?”

“People are starting to ask.”

Clarke barks a humorless laugh. “No one, literally no one is asking about this, Mom.” She cracks the lid on her Dutch oven, careful to avoid the billows of fragrant steam, and wedges her phone between an ear and her shoulder while stirring the thickening soup on her stovetop. “Now, are you actually asking me a question about my personal life? Or just trying to incite paranoia over intrusive neighborhood surveillance?”

“I wish I didn’t have to ask, Clarke,” Abby sighs. “Sometimes I wish you would just tell me things.”

Clarke has a sigh of her own, though she is always warmed by her mother’s persistent interest in her mostly boring life. “You’re my mom. Withholding information from you is basically a rite of passage for me.”

“Clarke.” It’s not a rebuke, but more of a mother’s plea.

She’s finally had enough of Abby’s chiding and, moving away from the heat of the stove, Clarke runs her fingers through her hair, lightly scratching the back of her skull. “The truck is Lexa’s, Mom.”

Abby’s answering tone is nothing but smug omniscience. “I know the truck belongs to Lexa.”

“Then why are you asking me?!”

Clarke checks the watch on her wrist while making her way towards the sofa, collapsing on it a moment later after noting that Lexa’s arrival is approximately five minutes away. Sometimes her freakish punctuality is a real advantage. It will be a good excuse to shove off this conversation with her mother, but for now Clarke closes her eyes and tips her head against the sofa’s armrest. Lexa wasn’t terribly hungover in the morning following her tête-à-tête with Raven, but Clarke still wonders how she fared during deliveries feeling slightly depleted.

“Do you want to tell me why Lexa has been leaving her truck at your house for the last several weeks?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Fine, Clarke. If you’re not going to tell me about your relationship, can I at least ask about this coming Saturday?”

Clarke doesn’t consider her relationship with her mother strained any more than she views them as especially close knit. They have always sustained a familiar reliance without it registering as dependence or particularly intimate. It’s familial. It’s instinctual. Clarke loves her mother, and relishes the presence Abby has in her life—if not partially because she knows what it is to lose a parent. Her bond with her mother will never be what it was to be Jake Griffin’s daughter, and yet Clarke is wholly committed to maintaining their relationship for what it is.
She exhales, fiddling the hem of her tee shirt—Lexa’s tee shirt, actually—a sudden burst of nerves fluttering through her stomach. “Lexa is—” Clarke swallows, trying again to encapsulate something that feels so incredibly consuming into a few short words. “I’m—because she’s been—we’re together.” Clarke frowns, feeling the inadequacy in her own words, the way she’s massively shortchanged her relationship with Lexa. Her furrowed brow only deepens when she registers Abby’s secondary question. “What about this Saturday? I thought brunch wasn’t for another week.”

“It’s the fourteenth, Clarke,” Abby reminds her gently. Clarke can hear the smile in her tone. “Should I assume you and Lexa will have made plans?”

“I don’t—” realization dawns, and Clarke again runs a hand through her hair. “Oh. No, we don’t, actually. I’ll definitely be there.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Clarke reiterates. “I wouldn’t miss it.”

“Bring Lexa, if you like,” Abby suggests easily. Then amends, “If you think she’d be comfortable.”

The sound of the front door distracts Clarke from answering for quick seconds as she stands from the sofa and makes her way towards the front hall. “She’d be more than comfortable, Mom. Thanks. We’ll be there around nine?”

Lexa drops a messenger bag onto the floor below the coat hooks at Clarke’s front door before removing her coat and hat, finding empty hooks beside Clarke’s own garments and turning to Clarke with a tired, questioning smile.

“Yes, nine is perfect. And, I’m buying brunch afterwards,” Abby tacks on, and Clarke rolls her eyes while returning Lexa’s smile and moving closer to run a hand down her stomach and around her waist.

“Fine, Mom,” Clarke concedes—whatever gets Abby off the phone quickest now that Lexa is here and waiting to be properly kissed. “Very smooth, by the way.” “What exactly about having brunch with my daughter constitutes being smooth?” Abby challenges lightly.

“Forget it,” Clarke laughs, her skin tingling in anticipation as Lexa’s hands slide around her waist. “I have to go, okay?”

Abby’s voice takes on that uniquely mothering tone when she says, “Tell Lexa I said hello.”

“I will. Bye, Mom.” No sooner has Clarke ended the call and slid the phone into the back pocket of her jeans than her mouth is pressing against Lexa’s, lips sliding into place as Clarke lifts up to her toes.

When she pulls back a long moment later, Lexa breathes out against her lips, her smile broader than before. “Hi.”

“Hi,” Clarke echoes, resuming their kiss a second later when Lexa’s tongue peeks out to wet her lips.

“It smells so good in here.”
Clarke hums, twisting a lock of hair that’s fallen loose from Lexa’s ponytail around her finger. “Dinner.”

Lexa’s hands press against her sides, fingers seeking warmth beneath the cotton fabric. “How is your mom?”

Clarke nods, distracted by Lexa’s hands, her mouth, the scent on her clothes. “Good. She says hi.”

“Does she?” Lexa pulls back from nuzzling into Clarke’s temple to watch her elaborate.

“I may have agreed to brunch in a few days.”

Lexa says nothing but raises an eyebrow that has Clarke zeroing in on her mouth again. Lexa leans back, withholding, even as Clarke advances in a chase for her lips, and she ends up tumbling farther into Lexa’s space. Lexa supports their weight against the wall at her back and pulls Clarke in close.

“Okay, so brunch with your mom,” she says with mild consideration. Her hands brace Clarke’s hips, gaze calculating where her height allows her to look down on Clarke’s features. “What else have we agreed to?”

Clarke presses her lips together and winds her hands behind Lexa’s neck. “What are your thoughts on Valentine’s Day?”

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Clarke had pushed for the train, but Lexa offered to drive the Saab, naively opposing Clarke’s warning that surviving brunch with her mother would require them to both be “at least a little drunk.” Lexa’s perpetual refrain of *I’m fine* had Clarke rolling her eyes, preemptively making contingent plans to leave the car at Abby’s apartment and take the bus home. Even as Lexa pulls into the visitor’s lot at Boston Children’s, Clarke is already clocking the small tells of her nerves, undisclosed and yet so obvious to the trained eye.

“Remind me exactly how important your mom is here?”

Once the car is parked Lexa releases the knobby gearshift she’d been holding, reaching up to adjust the zip on her coat, and Clarke smiles at her subtle movements before answering. “Vice-chairwoman of Pediatric General Surgery and Director of the Pediatric Transplant Center.”

“Right.” Lexa nods once, resolute.

“But, don’t think of it like that, babe. She’s a doctor for sick kids.” Clark lifts one shoulder, “A very talented doctor, but it’s the kids we’re here for. Just don’t think about the rest, okay?”

“Okay.” A deep breath. Another tug on her beanie where it’s slipped above her ear. “Are you ready?”

Clarke chuckles lightly, leaning across the console to kiss the worried lines off Lexa’s mouth. “Of course. I’m great. Are you good?”

“Yes, Clarke. I told you, I’m—”

“Fine,” Clarke sighs. “Yeah, yeah, I know.” She’s bitten by the cold the instant she swings open the passenger door and hurries to haul her things out of the backseat. “Can you grab that other bag for me?”
Lexa does as she’s asked and then they are rushing towards the elevators. The hospital air is dry and sterile, but it’s also exceedingly warm which is all Clarke cares about at the moment. Reception greets them warmly once she explains why they’re there, and then a nurse is showing them to an open area—brightly-colored and full of soft looking furniture. At one end they’ve arranged several squatty tables and child-sized chairs.

“This is perfect!” Clarke beams, setting down her bags. “Thank you.”

The nurse returns her smile. She doesn’t recognize him, but he seems to know who she is—the perks of being Abby Griffin’s daughter. “Anything else you need?”

“No, this is so great—oh! Actually, we’ll need cups of water eventually. And, probably, like a lifetime supply of paper towels.”

“You got it,” he answers, offering a quick smile to Lexa as well before leaving to fetch Clarke’s request for supplies.

They’ve arrived precisely at nine, literally not a minute past the hour, because Lexa is the only person in the Commonwealth that can maintain her punctuality even while commuting into a city known for its horrific traffic patterns and gridlock.

“What time will they be here?” Lexa asks, setting the bag she’s been carrying onto a nearby table and removing her coat.

“Not until about 9:30.” Clarke moves to begin emptying the contents of her bags. “Do you want to help me set up some stations on these tables?”

She looks up to see Lexa nodding stiffly, pulling reams of thick colored paper from the bag. She drops the half-empty bags of her own back onto the table and moves into Lexa’s space until she makes eye contact. Lexa is wearing the coziest sweater—soft and woven and hanging loosely on her frame. Clarke wants to crawl inside it and share its warmth. She settles for slipping her hands into its opening, snaking her arms around Lexa’s back and pulling her in closely.

“Thanks for doing this with me.” Her voice is soft and scratched, whispered against Lexa’s neck. She can feel the nervous tension as it leaves Lexa’s body, deflating her posture into something more relaxed and pliant. Clarke rubs soothing patterns against Lexa’s back and nuzzles closer to the crook of her shoulder. She hopes it is always like this—that she will always be capable of absorbing Lexa’s unease with a simple touch or embrace. That, in return, Lexa will always calm her rambling nerves in a single look. These interactions between them feel so practiced and familiar for how new everything currently is, and Clarke thinks she probably has almost a year of friendship to thank for that. There is a comfort they’ve carried over that she wouldn’t trade for all the months she could have gotten to Lexa sooner.

“Thanks for bringing me with you,” Lexa answers.

They part after a chaste kiss, Lexa’s smile warm and relaxed when Clarke pulls away.

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The children arrive in droves at half-past the hour, herded by one or two nurses and instantly rambunctious as they descend on the small tables Clarke and Lexa have arranged with art supplies. Clarke is greeted by one or two kids who remember her from the previous year, but she’s relieved not to see too many familiar faces. She has to believe that the majority of the children have gone on to full recoveries, living happy, healthy childhoods in remission from a savage disease. For as long
as Clarke can recall, Valentine’s Day has been less about flowers, chocolates, and fancy dinners, and more about these kids in the cancer ward at her mother’s hospital.

Clarke interacts with enthusiasm, squatting by each table and crawling around the floor on her knees to address every child at their level. She has kids hugging her knees and propped on her hip. She is animated and loud, and the kids flock to her presence. Lexa’s smile is warm and welcoming but her demeanor is predictably reserved where she sits at a mostly empty table, interacting quietly with the paint-splotched children as they are cautiously pulled into her orbit. Clarke watches her with open adoration, distracted from her own table of kids for a long moment as Lexa speaks quietly to a shy boy of about four or five, hair cropped shorter on one side of his head from a recent surgery. He has gradually moved closer to her over the course of the hour, now standing just beside her knee as they work in hushed collaboration.

“Look at mine, Clarke!”

Lexa catches her watching just before Clarke’s attention shifts back to a small girl standing in front of her, arms waving her artwork excitedly. The girl wears a blue hospital gown and baggy sweatpants and cannot be more than four years old. Clarke thinks her name might be Hazel. She’s painted several large, oblong hearts and a smiley face.

“This is amazing!” Clarke beams, taking the paper from Hazel and examining it carefully. “Your brushstrokes are superb. Let’s hang it up to dry, okay?”

“Oh, okay!” Hazel bounces.

The concept is simple: create something for someone else. At the end of an hour, Clarke has pinned up a beautiful collection of paintings for nurses, parents or guardians, siblings, and other kids too sick to participate, stuck in a hospital bed somewhere but nevertheless on these kids’ minds. She stands back to admire their work, tiny expressions of goodwill and blooming artistic talent, her smile widening as Lexa joins her. The kids have since been ushered off for lunch and naps, though not before getting cleaned up and smothering Clarke with hugs. Lexa, too, gets a fair share of affection as the kids file out of the craft area, and Clarke’s heart thumps wildly in her chest.

“This was so amazing,” Lexa says eventually, her eyes still scanning the wall of drying artwork. “How long have you been doing this?”

Clark exhales as she mentally calculates. “At least seven, maybe eight years?”

Lexa reaches for her fingers, tangles them together with her own. “You’re very good at it. With them,” she amends, glancing briefly at Clarke. “They were all very taken with you.”

“Can you blame them?” Clarke smirks, squeezing once to Lexa’s hand.

“Definitely not.”

“So, not a bad way to spend Valentine’s Day, right?”

“This might be the best Valentine’s I’ve ever had, actually,” Lexa says, finally looking over at Clarke fully.

Clarke thinks her face might split open if her smile gets any wider and defers to wry humor instead, “You say that now, but we haven’t survived brunch with my mom yet.”

“I’m surprised we didn’t see her already.”
“She doesn’t typically intrude on this activity.” Clarke begins moving around to collect her things, packing art supplies and rinsing brushes and wiping down tables. “A lot of the kids know her, some as their surgeon, and that can produce sort of a mixed bag of emotional responses, you know?”

“Right,” Lexa nods, trailing behind Clarke to help in the clean-up.

“So eager,” Clarke teases. She turns to smirk over her shoulder in time to see the tail end of Lexa’s eye roll.

“Eager to prove you wrong about how unbearable a meeting it will be.” Lexa has grabbed a black trash bag and is filling it with balled up paper towels and empty cups. “You act as if I’ve never met a girlfriend’s parents before.”

It really doesn’t warrant a reaction. Lexa has slept in her bed consecutively for almost a month. The short spurts of time they spend apart now pale greatly in comparison to their time together. Lexa loves her. For all intents and purposes, Clarke can admit she’s probably had a girlfriend since the moment Lexa stepped off that bus. Still, she can’t stop herself from staggering mid task to turn and see Lexa’s face at the distinction. For about half a second, she wonders if Lexa even realizes what she said, but the arched eyebrow she gets in response says it all.

Clarke’s stomach jumps, even as she plays at indifference. “Girlfriend, huh?”

“This comes as a surprise to you?” Lexa smirks, confident.

Lexa winds around the tables, plucking trash from the surfaces until she’s standing near Clarke with a mostly full bag. “I just feel bad,” Clarke dramatically sighs. “I told Lucas I would be his girlfriend, so …”

“If you’re now dating a preschooler … does this mean I don’t have to meet your mom?” Lexa ties off her bag and drops it to their feet, taking an extra step until she is directly in front of Clarke.

Clarke slides her hands onto Lexa’s waist, eyes intent on her mouth where Lexa is trying to curb a smile by biting her lower lip. “Wow. Slacking on girlfriend duties already?” Clarke’s pulse hums in her ears as she says it, her own smile ridiculously bright.

Lexa narrows her eyes, feigning affront. “I’m an excellent girlfriend.”

Clarke nods, already closing the distance between them. “So far, I have no complaints.”

Lexa kisses her a bit more enthusiastically than Clarke expected, and if she weren’t already trying to get out of brunch with her mother, she definitely wants to cancel now.

“Good,” Lexa says, Clarke’s breathing already quickened. “Neither do I.”

Clarke takes a deep breath, exhaling it with a smile as she pushes away from Lexa to create some necessary distance. “Good,” she echoes.

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Abigail Griffin is a fierce surgeon. She is a brilliant physician: progressive and discerning. As a mother she has always been a strong presence. Opinionated. Influential. Stalwart.

In Lexa’s company, she is utterly charmed.
Clarke finds herself grinning into her Bloody Mary at Lexa’s casual confidence and the effect it’s having on her mother. Nerves may very well be coursing beneath Lexa’s cool demeanor, but she hides it well as she and Abby engage in small talk.

“This feels long overdue,” Abby says, smiling broadly, the absolute picture of a doting mother.

“It does,” Lexa agrees.

Clarke gets caught trying to roll her eyes, because it’s barely been four weeks, when Lexa’s eyes cut briefly to hers as if to say: it feels like much longer.

“Well, you’ll have to come by the house for dinner sometime,” Abby suggests, a pointed glance at Clarke to note she is clearly responsible for facilitating this. “I won’t subject you to my cooking, but I’m sure Clarke has warned you of my disastrous record in the kitchen.”

“She hasn’t, actually. Though, my father is significantly lacking in that arena,” Lexa smiles, prompting Abby’s laugh as their food is brought to the table. “My sister and I more or less survived on take-out.”

“If it hadn’t been for Clarke’s father, her nutrition would have been much of the same.” Abby thanks the server, ordering another round of drinks before he rushes off to his other tables.

Lexa then says, offhandedly, “Clarke is an excellent cook.”

Clarke couldn’t control her answering smile if she tried, her cheeks blushing pink at the compliment as she nudges Lexa’s leg under the table. Abby is also smiling warmly, though now at Clarke, who senses her mother’s approving gaze in her peripheral while she maintains eye contact with Lexa.

“And you two eat meals together frequently?”

Abby’s tone is innocent but her question completely invasive, and a different Clarke in a different relationship would have reacted harshly. Affronted at the intrusion. Instead she shrugs easily, eyes still on Lexa as their hands seek contact beneath the table.

Clarke smiles broadly as their fingers interlock and answers honestly. “As often as possible.”

“I just assumed that ever since the food trucks descended on our city, you’d stopped cooking all together,” Abby teases.

“Metzy’s does often play a vital role in our weekly diet,” Lexa grins, laughing outright when Clarke scoffs and tries pulling her hand from Lexa’s grasp.

“Excuse me, I cook constantly.” Clarke raises an eyebrow at Lexa’s pleased expression. “Remind me when you last prepared a meal for us?”

“I can make a decent fried egg,” Lexa tells Abby. “My culinary talents basically end there.”

Abby raises her glass, taking a sip while considering the two girls sat in front of her. “Lucky to have found Clarke then.”

Lexa takes a deep breath, nodding as she turns to look at Clarke who is caught between embarrassment and unguarded affection. “Very.”

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Abby scoops up the bill, brushing off Lexa’s attempts to help split the cost, and sends the server away with what Clarke knows will be an exorbitant tip.

“Clarke, call me in the next week or so and we’ll have dinner at the house. Invite the girls, too,” Abby says, arms wrapped around Clarke in a quick hug.

“Okay. I will. Thanks for brunch, Mom.”

“Anytime, honey.” She moves towards Lexa as they linger near the entrance, bundling back into coats and hats before braving the brisk, mid morning chill of Newbury Street. “Thank you so much for coming, Lexa. It was nice to finally meet someone I feel I already know.”

Lexa looks a bit unprepared for the hug but reciprocates without much pause, making eye contact with Clarke’s broad smile over Abby’s shoulder. “Likewise. Thank you for brunch.”

“Don’t be a stranger,” Abby says, and pointing at Clarke she demands, “Either of you.”

“Oh my god, Mom,” Clarke rolls her eyes, instantly the irritable teenager of years past. “I see you constantly.”

“I look forward to seeing you again,” Lexa adds, and Clarke is tempted to call her out for trying too damn hard but the look on her mother’s face has Clarke biting back her retort.

“I had a feeling I was going to like you,” Abby smiles, finishing the buttons on her coat before waving them out of the restaurant. “Drive safely—let me know when you’ve made it home, Clarke. And try to stay warm.”

“We will,” Clarke says, burrowing into Lexa’s side as they head out into the cold with their arms linked and their bodies pulled close.

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“That was not even remotely unpleasant, Clarke.” They’ve come to a coffee shop in Back Bay a short but miserably cold walk from the restaurant, Clarke claiming she needed a fix as if she hadn’t had at least two refills over brunch. “It was enjoyable even.”

Lexa grabs two or three brown cocktail napkins while Clarke carries their drinks, and they make their way to a small table near the front windows. “I know,” Clarke grins as she slides into a seat across from Lexa. “I was mostly giving you a hard time. My mom is pretty great.”

Lexa scowls, cupping her hands around the steaming paper cup. “Just for the sake of clarity—you purposefully exacerbated my anxieties surrounding an otherwise enjoyable event?”

“Ah-ha! So you admit you were anxious!”

“Clarke—”

“Okay, on some level, I thought if you went into this thinking it would be terrible, the inevitable outcome would seem really great in contrast. But truthfully,” Clarke admits, knocking their knees together under the table, “I just really like pushing your buttons.”

Lexa looks at her like she’s just told her the sky is blue. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“I’m glad you liked her.”

Lexa exhales what must have been a longheld breath of relief. “I’m glad she liked me.”
Clarke tilts her head fondly. “What’s not to like?”

Lexa takes the compliment with a bashful smile, eyes falling to her drink while she lifts it off the table and takes a careful sip. She’s gone for something sweet and indulgent—mocha and caramel and completely out-of-character from her usual coffee order. Clarke watches with interest as she then licks her lips before taking another sip. A swirl of arousal settles low in her belly as she stares, and Clarke is suddenly very ready to be home.

“Hey, let’s finish these in the car.”

“Are you okay to drive?”

“Yeah, I didn’t even finish my second drink.” Clarke begins slipping back into her coat, standing beside the table while Lexa grabs for her hat. “Besides I want to give you your present.”

Lexa looks up, startled. “I didn’t think we were—”

“Relax,” Clarke smiles, tucking stray curls behind Lexa’s ear. “I don’t need chocolates and fancy dinners—I mean I do, for the record, need fancy dinners. It’s just not necessary they coincide with this specific holiday.”

Lexa has an adorable pout as she stands, jostling long arms back into her navy blue coat. “Okay, so what is this gift you so conveniently neglected to tell me about so that I can’t return the favor.”

Clarke’s eyes gleam with mischief as she leans in with purpose, pressing her lips to the shell of Lexa’s ear as she says, “I’m wearing it.”

Clarke spins on her heel and heads for the door of the coffee shop. Just before pushing it open, she glances over her shoulder to see Lexa practically gawking, stumbling after her while clumsily pulling her hat onto her head and nearly tripping over her own feet in a rush to catch up to Clarke’s laughter.

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As it turns out, Lexa does return the favor. More than once and with enthusiasm. Clarke enjoys watching her head nearly explode as the new bra and underwear she’d purchased are revealed, and then Lexa is an unstoppable force. Hands and mouth moving with purpose—Lexa in complete control and Clarke left willingly helpless.

“Did you like your present then?” Clarke asks, still breathless and recovering from Lexa’s head between her legs.

Lexa is draped over her, hands drifting across warm, damp skin and head tucked in close. Clarke can feel her breaths in small puffs of air on her neck and chest. They are a sated pile of limbs in twisted sheets as the afternoon stretches into evening.

“Yes. I definitely did.”

Clarke laughs at Lexa’s serious tone, her own hand coming to slide along the contours of Lexa’s back. “Are you sure? Because you sort of just flung it carelessly onto the floor.”

The room holds the light of a fading sun, and as Lexa props up onto an elbow, her face is bathed in its warm tones. Clarke gets lost in color of her eyes, the tricks the light plays in them and how her chest expands the longer she is trapped in Lexa’s gaze.
Lexa then arches an eyebrow, finding the peak of Clarke’s breast with a wandering finger. “I assumed it was what’s underneath that was meant to hold my attention.”

“Obviously,” Clarke laughs. “Did it work?”

They trade kisses lazily, neither ever quite satisfied in breaking contact fully until Lexa rests her forehead against Clarke’s to catch a breath.

Lexa kisses her once more, mouth lingering so close that her lips brush against Clarke’s as she says, “Obviously.”

Chapter End Notes

we're not talking about it.
“Gross.”

Octavia’s rebuke comes from over Clarke’s shoulder where she sits at the delivery hatch opening, legs dangling off its edge and Lexa slotted between them.

It’s the first properly warm day of the year, the late March sun finally making feeble attempts at chipping through some of that icy cold and bringing about a welcomed warmth to New England’s frosty coast. Lexa is dressed in jeans and a dark green long-sleeved Trikru tee shirt, but she’s since pushed up the sleeves to her elbows and has a pink tinge to her sharp cheekbones.

Clarke only has smiles for the girl in front of her, unbothered and perfectly content to ignore Octavia’s commentary, which at this point has become routine.

Lega of course makes an attempt at civility, as she always does. “Good morning, Octavia.”

“Is Indra doing the Heater again this spring?” Octavia grunts, hoisting a case of beer off the ground.

“O, you know Lexa has a legal obligation not to divulge upcoming brews under penalty of—what is it? Death by a thousand cuts?” Clarke smirks.

Lexa narrows her eyes at Clarke’s dramatic interpretation of her confidentiality agreement, but she can’t keep from smiling, her fingers still twisted with Clarke’s as they twine and untwine in the space at their sides.

“We’re sourcing from a new farm this season for the jalapeños, actually,” Lexa offers easily to Clarke’s audible scoffs.

“Uh, what the—”

“Cool,” Octavia responds, cutting off the petulant complaint Clarke was intending to unleash. “I’ll let you get back to whatever disgusting shit you two do back here.”

“Excuse me,” Clarke tries again, still ignoring Octavia and frustrated when Lexa—standing directly in front of her and literally attached to her by multiple points of contact—will not catch her eye.

“See you later, Octavia,” Lexa calls to her retreating form as she exits storage with her case of beer.

“Hey!” Clarke snaps, finally yanking hard enough on Lexa’s hands that the girl between her legs looks over with an easy grin.

“Yes, Clarke?”

“Do not yes, Clarke me,” Clarke scowls, Lexa’s growing smile impenetrable to her frustrations. “Since when does Octavia get insider knowledge of Trikru product when I had to toil for months, months to get even a sliver of information from you?”

Lexa exhales a long-suffering sigh. “Clarke—”
“And even then, I mostly attributed that to you wanting to sleep with me.”

They don’t often reference that time period explicitly, not with much definition in any case. Never wanting to put too fine a point on how their friendship often blurred lines and comprised some questionable interactions. But it’s been over three months, and Lexa’s relationship with Costia so often feels like a distant memory from another lifetime.

Clarke can no longer see Lexa’s face since she’s chosen to bury into her neck, lips finding pulse points and a particularly sensitive earlobe.

“What are—” she can’t control the sharp intake of breath, the way her hands flex against Lexa’s fingers. Still, she fights for the sake of fighting. “What exactly do you think you’re doing?”

“Distracting you,” Lexa says against her skin, smile stretching into Clarke’s neck.

“Lexa— ugh.” Clarke nevertheless kisses her, tugging her hands away from Lexa’s to lightly grip the sides of her face and connect their mouths with plenty of force and very little propriety.

“So easy,” Lexa says a moment later, her arrogant grin still hovering closely.

“I don’t exactly think you’re in a position to throw stones, Lexa.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means,” Clarke says just before landing a loud, smacking kiss on Lexa’s cheek and rejoining their hands, “that you have actually tried barring pieces of my wardrobe because you’re so easily affected by my cup size.”

“It’s not—I’m just,” Lexa frowns, and Clarke leans in with a laugh to kiss her downturned mouth.

“No more spilling insider secrets to Octavia. At least not in my presence.” Even as Lexa is about to object, Clarke continues, “Just let me live in a world where I’m privy to information that no one else has based on the fact that I see you naked, okay?”

“Octavia and I are members of the same gym so technically she has seen me fairly naked—”

“Lexa !”

Clarke’s girlfriend laughs. She laughs and laughs while Clarke scowls, trying desperately not to enjoy the sound of it.

“Okay, no more trade secrets,” Lexa promises, kissing the corner of Clarke’s mouth. “Though, I must argue that on this particular occasion, I wasn’t telling Octavia anything she likely didn’t already know. Indra has done the Heater every spring season since she opened. Not to mention, Octavia is about to marry Lincoln, who easily ranks above me in terms of having access to valuable Trikru information.”

“Are you done stating your case?”

Lexa nods once. “Yes.”

“Good. Then kiss me again.”

Lexa complies without hesitation, falling back into Clarke’s frame and squeezing her fingers.

“I have to get going,” Lexa eventually whispers into the space between them, pulling away a
moment later and leaning back against the tension held between their hands until Clarke slips off the steel edge of the hatch and onto the gravel below.

“Are you coming back later?”

“Of course,” Lexa smirks. “You know I’m incapable of feeding myself.”

“Oh, is that the draw? I thought it was the ridiculously attractive general manager.”

Lexa face scrunches in disgust though she can’t hide her smile. “Not really my type.”

“Liar,” Clarke laughs, pushing against Lexa’s stomach until she stumbles backwards and her smile widens even as her hand slips from Clarke’s. “Don’t work too hard.”

“I won’t. You either.” Lexa takes one or two steps backwards, her eyes locked with Clarke’s in the most intensely comforting way as she nears the driver’s side door. “I’ll see you later.”

Clarke smiles, wondering if her stomach will ever stop jumping under Lexa’s gaze. “Okay.”

Lexa swings easily into the cab while Clarke watches, leant up against the open hatch and arms folded along her stomach when a hand brushes up against something sat on the ledge. Lexa waves as she drives off, and Clarke looks down to find her fingers resting against an untouched bottle of water. She’d brought it out for Lexa, as she’s done on almost every warm delivery day for nearly 11 months, though it remains unopened because Lexa clearly had more pressing matters to attend to than hydration. Clarke laughs and snatches it off the ledge before heading towards the harbor to enter Dockside from the front, shaking her head at all the subtle ways in which her life has changed in under a year’s time.

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Clarke is doing inventory in Dockside’s drafty storage room the following Monday when Octavia leans into the doorway, holding open the swinging door with her extended arm. “Yo, Trikru is here.”

Clarke looks up before checking her watch, silently congratulating herself for managing to create a distraction from her obsession with the 4:00 hour by doing actual work. “Since when do you not just call her Lexa?” Clarke says as she approaches Octavia.

“It’s not just your girl today.”

Clarke’s confusion intensifies as she exits stock and storage to find Lexa already setting up at a table near the fireplace with a young-looking kid. Blonde hair. Face of innocence. He watches Lexa’s movements like she is creating the universe.

“What the hell?” Clarke is muttering when Lexa looks up and catches her eye.

She doesn’t exactly smile, but even at a distance Clarke can see the way her features soften, and Clarke takes a deep breath. Three months in, and Clarke still finds it incredibly difficult to maintain focus and concentration, let alone professionalism in Lexa’s presence. She wonders if she shouldn’t have Octavia take the meeting instead of risking a lack of composure in front of a third party that likely won’t have the grace of Lincoln when it comes to Clarke’s antics.

“You brought a sidekick,” Clarke says as she nears the table, her eyes leaving Lexa’s only when the boy stands and extends his hand.
“Yes. Clarke, this is Aden.” Clarke shakes his hand even as her eyes drift back to Lexa, brow raised expectantly until Lexa says, “As my earlier messages to you briefly detailed, he is currently Indra’s lead intern at the brewery, and she’s asked me to take him along on my routes this week.”

Oh, right. Messages. On her phone that’s been charging in the office for the past three hours. Her eyes scan Aden again, a slight recollection of his name surfacing from previous conversations with Lexa. Was it last week over dinner, huddled around Clarke’s coffee table? A quiet early night in bed, talking softly about their work week before falling asleep? Maybe it was those two bottles of wine they shared last Friday that, in retrospect, have blurred her memories considerably. She’s scrambling to remember any context for the kid at their table when Lexa clears her throat, and Clarke realizes she’s probably been staring.

A good start then.

“Right, of course,” she smiles, recovering quickly and inviting Aden and Lexa to sit before taking her own seat and crossing her legs. Without thought, her foot comes to rest against Lexa’s shin in the process, and Lexa looks at her as if to say please behave, though she doesn’t move to reposition her leg.

“Aden will be finishing his Bachelor’s from UMASS in just a few months, and Indra is interested in taking him on full time should he maintain interest.”

“I am. I will,” Aden answers eagerly.

Clarke pinches her lips together to temper her smile at Aden’s earnest looks for Lexa and begins pouring ice water into three of the six glasses on the table.

“That sounds awesome,” Clarke says, her focus on the water glasses. “Trikru is an excellent company to have taken you in, and with Lexa particularly—you’re in very capable hands, Aden.”

She means nothing by it, certainly not the innuendo Lexa takes it for, but Clarke catches the double-meaning at Lexa’s startled cough and very nearly pours ice water into Aden’s lap.

“It’s been an amazing experience so far,” Aden shares, his eyes bright and innocent and entirely unaffected by Clarke’s near gaffe.

“We will be fortunate to have you with us on a permanent basis,” Lexa adds, a brief twitch to her mouth when her eyes slide to Clarke as if she’s still fighting the urge to laugh.

It’s uncharacteristic for Lexa to be so outwardly amused by sexual innuendo in a professional setting, unintentional or other, and Clarke can’t help but feel pleased by the slight change after only a few months of being in a relationship with her. Clarke’s determined not to break first, though, and clears the laughter from her throat.

“So, what did you bring me today?” she asks as she sets the water pitcher back onto the table.

This seems to reset the atmosphere, and Lexa starts off at a familiar clip in describing their first tasting. Clarke is no less drawn to Lexa’s soft, measured tone at work than she is when they are lying face-to-face in Clarke’s bed. She can feel herself relaxing as Lexa speaks, her mind casting off in a daydream of the past several weeks until she hears Lexa say her name.

“Yes,” Clarke answers reflexively, straightening in her chair to find Aden’s expectant face and Lexa’s barely contained smirk.

“Aden, would you retrieve it from the truck?”
“Yes, of course,” Aden says, standing briskly from his chair and accepting the key ring from Lexa before heading for the front door.

“Are you still with us?” Lexa teases, her fingers lightly poking into Clarke’s hand where it loosely holds a tasting glass.

“I’m sorry—I wasn’t expecting him today.” Clarke shakes her head. “And why do I know that name?”

“We are officially not allowed to shop-talk over Montepulciano ever again.”

_Ah-ha, so it was the wine._ Clarke leans in closer, her tone dark with seduction. “Oh my god, say Montepulciano again.”

Lexa laughs as she pushes Clarke’s hand away from where it had started to crawl up her knee. “You’re ridiculous, and lucky for you, Aden in brilliant.” She gives Clarke a pointed look. “As I mentioned last Friday, you could potentially be seeing more of him in the upcoming months.”

Clarke sits back in her seat, the memory finally clicking into place. This is why his name had jogged a vague memory. In recent weeks, Lexa had begun talks with Indra on redefining her roles within Trikru—something that would speak more to her background in law, and has been bouncing ideas off Clarke in the process. If things continue to evolve the way Lexa hopes, and Clarke is confident that they will, she’ll move away from distribution the way Lincoln had but in an entirely new direction. As a result, Aden’s name had come up on more than one occasion as a potential replacement liaison between Dockside and Trikru.

“Does he know—”

Clarke’s inquiry is cut short both by Lexa’s curt head shake and the front door swinging open, Aden striding back through and headed for their table, gripping the neck of a growler with an easy smile.

He’s brought from the truck, Clarke soon discovers, a third brew: an Indra concoction not yet finalized for distribution. It’s highly unusual for Indra to test anything outside of her tightly-knit Trikru family, collaboration never really a part of her business model. Clarke has to wonder, not for the first time, just how far-reaching Lexa’s influence has been on the company, let alone Indra herself. The confidence and pride with which Lexa speaks on the new pour is indicative, at least to Clarke’s trained ear, of her hand in this unexpected move for the brewing company. Clarke smiles at the thought and her chest inflates with warmth, watching Lexa with satisfaction at the place she’s found for herself on this unexpected path.

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When the meeting concludes, Lexa sends Aden ahead with their coolers to the truck, hesitating near the door while Clarke crosses her arms over her chest and watches her zip up her coat.

“I like him,” Clarke says.

Lexa looks up with her own small smile. “Me too. He’s exceptionally bright.”

“He thinks the sun shines out of your ass,” Clarke says with an eye roll.

Lexa’s smile widens as she adjust the sleeves of her jacket. “I rest my case.”

“Jesus Christ,” Clarke laughs. “Now who’s the ridiculous one?”
“Still you.”

Clarke scowls halfheartedly, nevertheless leaning in for a brief press of her mouth against Lexa’s as they hover near the coat racks. Lexa licks her lips as Clarke pulls away and looks over her shoulder towards the bar where absolutely no one is paying them any mind.

“Am I picking you up later?”

“Yes. I’m having Aden drop me off at the apartment and asking him to take the truck back to the main office.”

Clarke’s eyes bulge comically. “Is he even old enough to drive?!”

Lexa rolls her eyes, moving closer to tuck a stray curl behind Clarke’s ear. “See? Ridiculous.”

She backs out of the door with a fond smile, and Clarke begins counting the minutes until she’ll see it again.

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“Deliveries go okay today?”

It’s a random Thursday at the tail end of March, and Clarke will head into the bar before the sun goes down. They see each other plenty, but their schedules so often still put them as ships slipping past in the harbor. Lexa had collapsed onto the sofa moments after arriving at the house, and Clarke had promptly climbed onto her lap, knees pressed against the sofa cushions to bracket Lexa in place. Her fingers scratch lightly at the back of Lexa’s neck where her hair is pulled into a loose ponytail.

Lexa groans softly, blinking slowly to Clarke’s touch. “Yes. They went as well as expected, though I will not necessarily miss this part of my current position.”

“Still a few months until Indra finalizes your new role?”

“I meet with her again in a week. It’s going well, it’s just … a lot of moving parts,” Lexa sighs. “I did, however, get an interesting phone call once I was back in the office.”

Lexa’s hands have landed on Clarke’s thighs, fingers teasing the hem of her shorts as they slide up and back along bare legs.

“Oooh,” Clarke says with a raised brow. “Intrigue.”

Lexa, always with a flair of dramatics, further draws out her reveal. “Trillium.”

Clarke’s eyes sparkle with interest, widening by a fraction, and Lexa’s mouth arches pleasantly. Trillium Brewing Co. is a farmhouse-style brewery based out of Boston that Clarke has long admired as much for their community engagement and innovation as for their incredibly tasty saison. Lexa has only recently started using her connections through Trikru to partner with Trillium on projects of joint interest.

“I’m listening.”

“They’re hosting a fairly exclusive event in a couple of months, and I was just offered two tickets.”

“At the brewery itself or on the greenway?”
Lexa lifts one shoulder a fraction. “They’re planning on using the beer garden if weather permits. Since the event is a charity benefit, I’m sure they’ll want to exploit that location to impress the donors in attendance.” Lexa leans up to press her lips against Clarke’s chest—a patch of skin just below the dip in her clavicle. “I think Mayor Walsh is supposed to be there.”

Clarke’s smile grows as she finds Lexa’s hands moving against her thighs and threads their fingers together. “Oh my god, my girlfriend is so important.” Lexa’s laugh settles against Clarke’s lips as she leans down for a quick kiss. “So, do we get to dress to the nines for this high society event, or what? Because you know I love an excuse to go dress shopping.”

Clarke thinks Lexa looks remarkably contrite for someone who just scored VIP tickets to an exclusive charity event in Boston, and narrows her eyes at Lexa’s fallen face. “Oh.” Lexa clears her throat. “I was planning on inviting Octavia, actually.”

Lexa is already laughing, wrestling Clarke back onto the couch as her jaw drops in disgust and her hands fight to escape Lexa’s tight grasp. She tries pushing away from Lexa’s hold fruitlessly, continually surprised by her strength for such a wiry and unassuming frame.

“You’re such an asshole,” Clarke scowls, even as a smiling Lexa pulls her onto the sofa fully, covering Clarke’s limbs with her own.

“You love me,” Lexa grins.

Clarke frowns, nevertheless giving in and wrapping her arms around Lexa’s back. “I used to.”

Lexa kisses the underside of Clarke’s jaw, nuzzles into her neck and inhales deeply. It is the sound of satisfaction, as if she’s finally found the place she wants to be. “Of course you’re coming with me, Clarke.”

“Well, I’m not sure. I’ll have to check my calendar,” Clarke says primly, still not willing to concede to Lexa’s cruel joke.

Lexa only laughs again, hugging tighter around Clarke’s body with arms and legs that constrict her in the best way. She can’t move, nor does she want to.

Lexa mumbles into the crook of her neck and shoulder, “So dramatic all the time.”

Clarke allows a smile that Lexa can’t see, rubs her hands along her back and waits for the contented sigh that always follows. “You love me.”

Lexa does sigh then. “So much.” They lay in silence for a long stretch, Clarke relaxing to a point that it’ll be that much harder to actually get ready for work and leave the house. Lexa must read her mind because she then asks, “When do you go in?”

Clarke groans, her body already warm and soothed by Lexa’s familiar weight. “I told Octavia I’d be there by six. This month has been unbearably slow. I’ll be glad when it’s over.”

Lexa squeezes quickly to her ribs, nuzzles a few kisses into her neck and then shifts, offering her hands to Clarke once she’s stood beside the couch.

“It’s almost five already—if we lay here any longer you’re going to fall asleep.”

Clarke pouts even as she accepts Lexa’s hands, allowing her pliant frame to be pulled off the sofa cushions. “When can we revisit the notion of quitting our respective jobs and never leaving the house?”
Lexa smiles her response, gently urging Clarke towards the staircase with hands cupping her shoulder caps. “As soon as you tell me that you’re secretly independently wealthy.”

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Clarke is wearing a black blouse with capped sleeves and black pearl buttons that she’s not yet fastened as she stands at the bathroom mirror finishing her mascara. She exits the still-steamy bathroom buttoning the blouse, eyes focused on the task as she approaches her closet for pants and boots. She finds her ankle boots beside a pair of Lexa’s grungy work sneakers, but the black slacks she’d planned to wear are nowhere to be found. Empty hangers where the pants should be next to pastel plaid and soft flannels that make Clarke smile.

“Babe?” Clarke leans over the short banister at the top of the staircase until Lexa appears from the kitchen doorway wearing soft-looking clothes and eating a bowl of cereal. “Are there still clothes in the dryer?”

“You started a load last night, didn’t you?”

“Can you check for my black pants, please?”

Lexa nods while finishing a bite and directs her spoon to the top of the stairs with a smirk. “This is a nice look, though.”

“When I’m late for work, I’m blaming it on you.”

“Octavia would never believe you,” Lexa counters, nevertheless shuffling away from the staircase in the direction of the laundry room.

She returns a moment later without the bowl of cereal and carrying Clarke’s pants as she quickly ascends the stairs and meets Clarke with a teasing smile. Just as Clarke grabs for the garment, Lexa pulls it out of reach, steadying her with a hand to the waist when Clarke collides into her from exertion. They laugh together, stumbling backwards until Lexa catches their weight on the backs of her knees as they hit the edge of the bed.

“Hi.” Lexa has disregarded the pants in favor of running her hands down the backs of Clarke’s thighs.

“Um, hi,” Clarke laughs, tilting her head towards the pants Lexa has flung onto the duvet. “Are you planning on letting me put those on?”

“Depends. How much time do you have until you have to leave?” Lexa’s eyes have darkened with mischief, giving no indication she’s concerned with time constraints whatsoever.

Honestly, if Lexa is this motivated by Clarke merely pantless, she can only imagine what efforts she might be up against if she’d left her top unbuttoned.

“Definitely not enough time for that.”

“You sure?”

Lexa kisses her anyway, and for a moment Clarke allows it, because she has yet to encounter a situation in which she wouldn’t want Lexa to kiss her. Even for unfairly brief measures of time.

“You’re very mean,” Clarke grumbles and presses her palms flat against Lexa’s chest, wanting to chase her lips but knowing she can’t.
“I’m nice,” Lexa grins, hands still roving over curves and under hemlines until Clarke is forced to physically separate them by shoving Lexa back into the mattress. She lands with a soft bounce, resting on her elbows while Clarke reaches for the damn pair of pants. “Can I make it up to you later?”

Clarke scoffs through a laugh as she steps into her slacks and fastens the clasp. “Now you’re just being an asshole.”

“What? Why?”

Clarke reaches for her boots at the foot of the bed as she responds. “Lexa, I won’t even be home until almost eleven-thirty, in bed by midnight if I’m lucky, and you will definitely be asleep.”

“I never defined later explicitly as later tonight, Clarke. Maybe I have plans for tomorrow morning.”

“Nice save,” Clarke smirks over her shoulder. She grabs her phone off the nightstand and checks the time. “Follow me downstairs—I have something for you.”

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Clarke finds two silver earrings in a small brass tray she keeps on an entryway table in the front hall—a catchall for keys, discarded jewelry, stray pieces of mail. The watch she wears, once a constant on her father’s wrist, sits beside Lexa’s petite ring of keys. She directs Lexa to her purse, hung on a hook beside her lighter spring jacket, while she slips the earrings into her ears and fastens the watch around her wrist.

“There’s an envelope in there. Do you see it?”

Lexa picks through a few items and pulls out a tiny manilla envelope, something small and nondescript stamped in red on one side. She holds it up to Clarke with a questioning look. “You wrote me the world’s tiniest office memo?”

Clarke crosses her arms, quirks an eyebrow to Lexa’s sarcasm and says, “Open it, smartass.”

“It’s a key.” Lexa deposits the item into her palm, looking up in confusion as if Clarke might be suffering dementia. “You already gave me a key, Clarke.”

“No, I gave you a spare key. My spare key. This key,” she clears her throat. “It’s yours.”

Realization strikes Lexa’s features beautifully, and Clarke approaches her with a comforting smile, even as Lexa struggles to say more than her name. “Clarke—”

“You’ve been trying to talk to me about this for like a week.”

Lexa’s gaze alternates frenetically between the key in her outstretched palm and Clarke’s reassuring smile. “About what?”

“Moving. Your lease is about to be up, isn’t it?”

“May first.” Lexa looks stunned. “How did you—”

“Because despite never having finished college, I’m really fucking smart.” Clarke thinks she sees Lexa relax by at least a fraction and moves to circle her arms around her waist which further lowers the tension in her shoulders. “Not to mention, I have this vague, mildly significant memory of
meeting Lincoln’s new distribution rep. near the end of May last year.”

“Oh yeah?” Lexa has completely relaxed now, her arms folding around Clarke’s as they sway just once to keep balance. “I remember that day quite well.”

Clarke hums, leaning up to kiss Lexa’s waiting mouth. “Because I dazzled you with my charm and grace?”

Lexa kisses back, her smile threatening to break the press of their lips. “Something like that.”

She pulls back after too short a moment, some of those worry lines again creasing her eyes. “Should we get back to the part where you just handed me a key to your house and what that implies?”

Clarke shrugs, feeling Lexa’s arms shift with the gesture. “Let’s not make it a thing, okay? Just … move in with me.”

“Clarke.” Lexa almost sounds admonishing though her bright smile lights up the entire entryway.

“What exactly was your plan anyway? Get a month-to-month lease for a place you’ll essentially use as a storage unit? Ask me to help you find another shitty downtown apartment? You’ve been staying here almost exclusively for months, Lexa.”

“My apartment is nice,” Lexa grumbles.

“Is that why you never sleep there?”

Lexa scowls adorably. Clarke can practically hear the whir of cogs churning in her busy little head and wonders just how brutally Octavia would murder her if she were late for the sake of giving her girlfriend a quick orgasm just to ease her mind.

“Listen, I had that key made weeks ago. And, honestly, I knew where this was headed even before that. I think you did too.”

Lexa’s smile returns, small and reserved. “You really are very smart.”

“I know,” Clarke grins. “And— shit,” she happens to catch the time on the clock in the kitchen, already a quarter to six. “About to be so late. I have to go. Like, five minutes ago.”

She manages to wriggle from Lexa’s arms and makes her way into the kitchen for her thermos of coffee before Lexa catches her by the wrist again.

“Babe, I am seriously gonna be so late.”

“You run the place, Clarke. Didn’t you once tell me that?”

Lexa has bracketed Clarke to the island, underhandedly using her height difference to Clarke’s disadvantage. “Yes, but Octavia is really scary,” Clarke pouts.

Lexa laughs, pressing closer. “When you show up late, I’ll tell her it’s my fault. She does not frighten me.” She rests her forehead against Clarke’s, voice softening above a whisper. “Just let me say thank you.”

Clarke relents, knowing her protests will always be futile in the face of Lexa’s determination.

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Lexa’s things arrive in a gradual procession—innocuous bags and boxes, an influx of button-down shirts and baggy sweaters in the closet, a basket or two of toiletries, and extra sneakers. She sells most of her larger items to avoid hiring movers, and it’s not as if Clarke’s house is in need of what little furniture Lexa has anyway. When it comes down to the last of it, Clarke offers to help Lexa load up the final boxes into the Saab and deep clean the apartment before she turns in her keys.

“Whoa—hold up a second.” Clarke is in the now empty bedroom while Lexa is doing a final sweep of the bathroom.

Lexa pokes her head out of the en suite to find Clarke hovering over an open box by the closet. “What?”

“I thought you already moved your shoes to the house.”

“I moved some of them.”

Clarke looks up, mouth gaping. “How many pairs of the same exact sneaker do you own?”

“They are not all the same shoe, Clarke,” Lexa frowns.

Clarke crosses her arms along her chest, unimpressed. “How many?”

“I don’t know. Some.” Lexa returns to the bathroom. “You’ve seen me almost every day for a year—how did you fail to notice my vast collection of shoes?”

Clarke follows after her, practically shouting despite the confined space. “I always assumed it was the same pair!”

Lexa squats to her haunches and opens the vanity cabinets. Her amused smile is directed at Clarke when she says, “Does this mean my Vans aren’t invited to live at your house?”

“No, of course they are I just—never realized the girl who literally does not own a single piece of luggage and wears the same pair of jeans every day was also hoarding identical pairs of shoes.”

Lexa laughs, standing again and moving to join Clarke in the slender doorway. “They’re not identical. I have several varying colors.”

“Hauntingly similar, whatever.” Clarke then braces Lexa’s hips before she can move back into the bedroom. “Wait—how many pairs of black denim do you actually own?”

“I have two pairs of jeans, Clarke.”

She eyes Lexa skeptically. “Okay, just checking.”

“Let’s get out of here, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Clarke exhales, reaching up to kiss Lexa’s jawline. She returns to flat feet and takes one of Lexa’s hands in her own. “Let’s go home.”

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Boxes litter the front hall, spilling into the living room near the base of the stairs, but Clarke cannot be bothered to lift a single thing. She drops her keys into the tray by the front door, leaving the front door open behind her, and heads into the kitchen. Lexa finds her once she’s pulled open the fridge in search of beer. She’s just snapped open a second can of Foolproof—a farmhouse brewery out of Rhode Island she’s considering carrying for the summer. Clarke hands over the can
to Lexa and they take long sips of beer in tandem, quenching their thirst and easing the strain of lifting multiple boxes. Clarke makes her way to the couch, collapsing on it with an audible grunt. Lexa sits gingerly at the other end, smiling at Clarke’s dramatics as she takes another drink. Her cheeks are pink from unloading the car, hair falling out of her ponytail in wisps.

Lexa swivels her head towards the front hall. “I should start putting those away.” She sound particularly motivated, nor does she make any attempt to move.

“After this beer,” Clarke proposes, her limbs still sore from several trips up and down the stairs of Lexa’s old apartment as they carted boxes out to the car. Clarke likes the sound of her own musings and the distinction they carry: Lexa’s old apartment. She grins at the thought, kicking Lexa’s sneaker with the toe of her own. “Hey.”

Lexa’s eyes her strangely. “What?”

“You live here now.”

Lexa nods, casting her eyes around the room with her own broad smile. “Yes.”

Clarke is still grinning like an idiot when Lexa’s gaze meets hers, and even a rapidly diminished can of beer can’t temper her excitement. They drink quietly for a few beats, but Clarke’s skin is suddenly humming with the sight of Lexa. She looks no different than she normally does, but she’s backdropped by a scattering of boxes—the concrete evidence of this new step they’ve taken, and something about it sets Clarke in motion.

She sets down her own beer before taking Lexa’s, who surrenders the can without question and is already reaching for Clarke as she crawls down the sofa cushions and climbs into the space between Lexa’s legs. She is pulling at the hem of Lexa’s tee shirt almost as soon as their mouths touch, Lexa sitting up to help get it over her head and then working the buttons of the shirt Clarke wears—a blue striped shirt of thin cotton that Clarke recently pilfered from Lexa’s side of the closet. When she first saw the way Clarke had left the first few buttons open as they’d dressed that morning, Lexa hadn’t complained about losing yet another garment to Clarke’s thieving hands.

Lexa’s kisses intensify at the reveal of Clarke’s blue bra, her hands moving to snap the clasp along Clarke’s back. The shirt and bra come off in quick succession as Clarke works the button on Lexa’s jeans. She’ll never get to the zip from this angle and pulls back from Lexa’s greedy mouth to hook both hands behind the backs of Lexa’s knees. With one, solid pull she has Lexa laid flat, her mouth gaping and eyes dark as they catch their breath. Clarke returns to the zipper, feeling a steady pulse of arousal when Lexa wordlessly lifts her hips from the sofa cushion so that Clarke can remove her jeans.

She presses a firm hand against Lexa stomach when she moves to sit up, already grabbing for Clarke’s pants. “No, you first.”

Lexa acquiesces easily, pulling Clarke back on top of her with fingers hooked into her belt loops. A hand slips into Lexa’s underwear as Clarke’s tongue finds Lexa’s and then it is quick minutes before she has Lexa panting against her mouth and hands gripping her back and sides. She watches Lexa unravel bit by bit, and thinks of cold, winter mornings spent in bed. She thinks of the pantry shelf, filled with Lexa’s sugary, indulgent cereal. She thinks of lazy afternoons and Lexa’s catnaps on the sofa—the way she always seeks out Clarke for brief touches and soft kisses once she’s woken.

“I love you,” Clarke says, and Lexa’s eyes open at the sound only to clench shut a second later as her orgasm hits.
Clarke kisses her back down, waiting for the tremors in Lexa’s legs to still before her hand slows to a stop. Lexa no longer grips her lower back, fingers now sliding along Clarke’s skin as she opens her eyes with a contented sigh.

“I think I’m going to like living here.”

Clarke collapses into Lexa’s neck with a laugh before sitting back on her knees and tugging on one of Lexa’s hands. “Wait until I show you the bedroom.” Lexa gazes dumbly at Clarke's naked chest for long seconds before she's scrambling to her feet and impatiently urging Clarke towards the stairs.

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Clarke likes to mark the seasons not by the calendar, or the length of days, or the warmth of the sun, but by the boats in the harbor. The weather usually turns grim by the beginning of November when the last of the sailboats and skiffs have been hauled, drained, and cleaned. The marina’s gravel lots suddenly burst with winterized boats in white canvas wrapping, leaving the waterfront bleak and abandoned. On the other end of things, dockhands and marina workers have begun launching the first vessels back into the water by the first of May, and Clarke’s harbor starts to resemble something more familiar. New England comes out of hibernation—perhaps no less ornery than it was during the icy, wintry months—but a sense of rejuvenation arrives along the riverwalk all the same. Clarke does not rest on tenterhooks for sixty degree days of full sun, she just needs to see boats in the water.

“She said no decorations—what do you want me to do?” Clarke shrugs.

Raven is at the empty bar, Dockside having closed early on a Thursday for what will be one of the largest private events Clarke has ever hosted the following evening. Everything is in place for Octavia and Lincoln’s wedding party with the exception of some finishing touches, thus Clarke had called in Raven. (Or, The Closer, as Raven had proudly self-proclaimed her title, only to grumble in annoyance moments later as Clarke had stared blankly in confusion.)

“Do what I do.”

“Which is what?” Clarke asks, narrowing her eyes.

Raven leans back into her stool and raises her drink with a grin. “Whatever the hell I want.”

Clarke huffs a laugh, taking a drink of her IPA—it’s just about as local as it gets, crafted at a microbrewery one town over from ingredients sourced within a ten mile radius. They’ve not yet begun distribution but have reached out to a handful of local bars to sample their extremely limited product. Based on the few she’s tried, these guys are going to give Indra a run for her money, and Clarke can’t wait to wind up Lexa about the competition.

“This might be the best IPA I’ve ever had. Have you tried this?”

“Oh my god, can you please not be a massive beer geek for, like, forty-five seconds.”

“Oh, sorry.” Clarke pulls back from trying to offer Raven a taste of her deliciously complex can of beer. “So, you’re looking to usurp Octavia’s wishes. On her wedding day. Is that what you’re saying?”

Raven exhibits a dramatic eye roll. “Yes, Clarke. Of course. Way to clue in.”

“Okay, good because I’ve been stashing a bunch of shit at the house.”
“Excellent,” Raven cackles. “Octavia is going to murder us.”

Clarke tips her can of beer towards Raven’s drink when prompted. “I know. It’s gonna be great.”

They both drink, basking in their insubordinate scheming, until Raven cocks an eyebrow and Clarke knows they’re about to switch topics. “So, how’s that going anyway?”

“How’s what going?”

“Co-habitation.”

It’s been just over a month since Lexa moved in, and Clarke makes a feeble attempt at hiding her smile behind another sip of beer. She fails immediately as her mind drifts to Lexa out of habit. Their shared space. Their bed. The discreet, little touches around the house that she’s noticed since giving Lexa that key.

Raven gags before Clarke can respond. “You guys are so fucking disgusting. I’m serious.”

“Lexa is good. The house is good. We’re … good.”

“That ridiculous smile says you’re more than good, Griffin.”

“I mean, yeah, I’m—happy.”

“Stupid happy,” Raven adds, prompting Clarke’s smile to expand into laughter.

“Yes. Exactly.”

The answering smile from Raven says so much more than her understated, “Good. I’m glad.” But she quickly swerves any further sentimentality by adding, “I guess I can’t fault her for taking so long to wise up about you. She’s loyal to a fucking embarrassing baseball franchise.”

“Oh my god, dude, let it go. I’m going to text her about this beer, actually,” Clarke decides, reaching for her phone along the countertop. “Lexa will appreciate its subtle complexities.”

Raven scoffs. “Whatever. Is that how it goes then? You two have some weird beer kink going on in the bedroom?”

Clarke types smugly, not deigning to give Raven eye contact. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

“Jesus, yes. Please tell me something unsavoury and sexually explicit for once.”

Clarke laughs, finishing the message to Lexa and returning to her beer. “Not a chance, Reyes. You’ll just have to use your imagination.”

“Don’t tempt me. Speaking of which, are there going to be any fuckable people at this thing tomorrow?” Raven asks casually, sipping from her drink as Clarke’s expression turns judgmental and appalled.

“We’re celebrating one of your best friends finding someone she wants to spend her life with, who just so happens to be one of the most incredible humans on this planet, and this is where your head’s at?”

“Yes! I’m ecstatic for O, and I’d like to celebrate by getting laid.” Raven takes a sip, pointing a finger at Clarke as she swallows. “Are we sure she didn’t want us to do something for her tonight? Should we not be taking her out for a night of reckless drinking and debauchery?”
“Nope. She is refusing anything that could be construed as ‘typical wedding fanfare.’ Including but not limited to bachelorette type activities.”

“What a pain in the ass.”

“Yup. Okay, so we meet back here tomorrow morning, yeah?” Clarke shakes her head and starts fretting over their list again, tapping her pen against the yellow legal pad between them as she scans the scribbled notes and numbered lists. “Is eight early enough? What time does your friend need to get in to set up her DJ table?”

“Dude, you need to relax.” Raven overlays her hand atop Clarke’s to stop the tapping pen. “I’m not showing up any earlier than ten and neither should you. We’ve got plenty of time and literally every detail has been sorted.” She pats Clarke’s hand twice. “You’re working with the brilliant mind of a nautical genius, remember that. Keeping ships afloat: complex. Party planning: easy-fucking-peasy.”

Clarke’s phone buzzes with a message that has her face suddenly drawn and paled. “She’s here.”

“Lexa’s here? I thought I was driving you home.”

“No,” Clarke swallows, still eyeing her phone screen warily. “Her sister.”

Raven looks delightfully surprised and then nods several times with a dry laugh. “The sister. That’s right. No wonder you’re anxious.”

“I’m not anxious, I’m … expectant. Excited,” Clarke lies, taking two gulps of beer in quick succession and reaching for her jacket.

“Uh-huh.” Raven clocks her movements with the practiced speculation of someone who has known Clarke for far too long and isn’t easily fooled. “Let’s get out of here then. Since you’re so excited to go meet—what’s her name again?”

Clarke’s voice cracks on the name as she rounds the bar, and if Raven wasn’t convinced before she is blatantly amused when Clarke answers, “Anya.”

“An-ya,” Raven repeats, drawing the name out thoughtfully. She stands from her stool and follows Clarke towards the front door as they weave through the open room of shadowy tables stacked with chairs. Clarke has unlocked the door and pushed through into the moderate chill of an early June evening when Raven muses, “Do we think she’s fuckable?”

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“Do you need me to hold your hand?”

“No,” Clarke answers distractedly. “I’m fine. I’m good,” she amends quickly, reaching for the handle of Raven’s passenger door and taking a deep breath. “You don’t even have to come in if you don’t want to.”

Lexa had texted that she and Anya were at a bar downtown. After she’d collected her from the train and dropped the car back at the house, Lexa and Anya had enjoyed a walk back into town for drinks and food. Clarke is expected to meet them when she’s done with work, and Raven, as stalwart as she is curious and fiercely protective, had insisted on tagging along.

“Not a chance—I am totally coming with you. And, look, if she doesn’t like you, she obviously has terrible taste in humans. Lexa will be the first to point that out, but I will definitely be the second.
And the loudest.”

Clarke expels a breath through a forced smile. “I know.” She pats Raven’s thigh. “You’re very scary.”

Affronted, Raven rears back from Clarke’s patronizing gesture. “I am scary. I’m a fucking menace, Clarke.”

“Okay, you’re right. I’m absolutely terrified,” Clarke laughs, more relaxed now that she’s insulted Raven’s harsh exterior.

“People have been known to cower,” Raven is still arguing as Clarke exits the car and waits on the sidewalk in front of the pub-style establishment.

“Well, based on what I know of Anya, she doesn’t scare easily.”

Raven joins her on the sidewalk looking smug. “Good. I’ve always loved a challenge.”

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Lexa finds her eyes as they push through the front door because she’s sat at the bar facing the entrance, which means Clarke’s first look at Anya is of the back of her head. She doesn’t turn to face them as they approach, even as Lexa’s entire face lights up clearly indicating their arrival.

Lexa slides off her stool to meet Clarke halfway across the bar. “Hey.”

She kisses her before Clarke can respond, though she prefers to say hello this way anyway—soft lips and warm breath and Lexa’s hand finding one of Clarke’s own.

“Raven.”

“Esquire.”

Lexa narrows her eyes at the persistent moniker before returning her attention to Clarke. “Was bringing Raven with you a great plan?”

Eyes askance at her friend, who is already carefully observing at least a portion of Anya’s head with unwarranted suspicion, Clarke shakes her head. “I have no idea.”

“Because I already gave Anya a shot of Jameson.”

“Will that help?”

Lexa shrugs. “No idea.”

So, this should be fun.

The bar isn’t one they often frequent, and Clarke wonders if it speaks more to an atmosphere Lexa felt her sister would enjoy, or if it was just the first place with empty seats. There aren’t many patrons but enough that it doesn’t seem dull, and the music is just loud enough that conversation won’t be labored by shouting. All in all, it’s a good location for introductions and small talk, and Clarke realizes belatedly there is nothing coincidental about it. Lexa, of course, would leave very little to chance when it comes to a meeting of this proportion. Clarke smiles at what was likely days of planning and forethought, squeezing Lexa’s hand briefly as they come up behind Anya’s bar stool.
“Anya, this is Clarke. Clarke,” Lexa squeezes back. “My sister Anya.”

Clarke is staggered. Anya is somehow exactly what she imagines an encounter with Lexa could have been under different circumstances. Had it not been within the confines of a friendly working relationship; or, had Clarke not been so immediately drawn; or, had Lexa not been so easily charmed. Anya, Clarke surmises, has not felt charmed a day in her life. She is hard lines and steel gaze. A sharp kind of beauty. Slouched confidence and the cool demeanour of a discontent. Intimidating, honestly, is a bit of an undersell.

And Anya hasn’t even opened her mouth yet.

“Hi,” Clarke manages, slipping her now sweaty hand from Lexa’s and extending it to her sister. “I’m so glad to finally meet you.”

Anya’s gaze is penetrating, calculating Clarke’s features at a slow, roaming pace until Lexa abruptly swats one of her kneecaps and Anya finally accepts Clarke’s handshake. The grip is firm but brief as Anya oddly and ominously says, “Clarke Griffin.” And nothing more.

“Yes, that’s me.” Clarke clears her throat and moves aside, closer to Lexa as luck would have it and finding Lexa’s hand already reaching for hers. “And, this is our friend Raven.”

“If you’re not going to offer to order drinks, you could at least make room at the bar for someone else to do it,” Raven snaps, inserting herself between Clarke and Anya while bodily shoving long legs out of the way with her hip and resting her elbows on the bar counter.

Anya’s expression doesn’t particularly lighten, but it does shift into something less stoic. Clarke sees a flash of something like interest in her eyes and the barest tick to an eyebrow as she moves to take up less space and watches Raven’s profile. Clarke looks sideways with wide eyes to Lexa whose face remains calm and impassive if not for the mild upturn to her lips as she watches her sister.

Clarke is about to try again with Anya while Raven orders something for them to drink when Lexa says, “Let’s get a table.”

She hasn’t specified to whom she’s speaking, but she doesn’t have to. The tone Lexa uses when addressing Clarke is soft and gentle, a quiet intimacy between them even when Lexa is making a joke at Clarke’s expense or purposefully out to annoy her. When she speaks to her sister, Lexa’s voice takes on a worn quality—that familial cadence that comes from years of varied exchanges. A shared history that creates its own language in a lot of ways. Clarke isn’t surprised to hear it, or to see the way Anya responds—up and moving even before Lexa has released Clarke’s hand—but it does make her that much more curious to know the woman who helped raise Lexa.

Raven hands her a drink, and Clarke doesn’t even care to ask what it is before she’s taking a generous sip. Vodka and soda. Perfect.

“Does she speak?” Raven comments with derision.

Clarke shakes her head as they wait by the bar for Raven to pay for the drinks. Her eyes trail Lexa and Anya as they head for a pool table instead of a booth. “My instincts say: not much.”

“Brevity a family trait then?”

“Apparently.”

Raven leans against the bar with her drink as they watch Lexa rack up the balls and Anya examine
a wall of pool cues. Raven smirks over at her after a moment and Clarke smiles back.

“So, you wanna be the shark? Or the decoy?”

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Lexa’s first mistake is presumption.

Her second mistake, is trying to backpedal. Raven suggests doubles split Lexa/Anya and Clarke/Raven, and Lexa is quick but delicate to propose that she and Anya might outrank Raven and Clarke in terms of skill.

The look Clarke levels her with is nothing compared to her icy challenge. “You’ve never seen me play.”

“Clarke, I don’t doubt that you or Raven have—”

“Oh, but you do,” Clarke argues, squaring up in front of Lexa with her arms crossed until Lexa looks away with a conceding laugh. “You think your girlfriend, who you’ve never once engaged in competitive sport with is somehow at an automatic disadvantage.”

Lexa removes both hands from her front pockets to place them on Clarke’s waist. “Maybe I just wanted you on my team.”

Clarke arches an eyebrow, nevertheless allowing Lexa to pull her in closer. “Maybe you should have phrased it that way.”

“If you two are finished mentally undressing one another, some of us are ready to play,” Raven says. “I’ll even let the professionals have first crack. The break is yours, Esquire.”

Lexa lets go after a quick squeeze to her waist, and Clarke reaches for her drink off a nearby table as Lexa squares up at the table with her pool cue. The first game goes quickly, Clarke performing moderately to Raven’s exaggerated frustration while Lexa and Anya beat them handily with very little effort. Lexa appears relaxed and amused, bantering with Raven and leaving Clarke with brushing touches as she moves around the table. Anya remains frustratingly silent.

At the end of their first round, Raven complains about needing more alcohol and drags Lexa to the bar with her, leaving Clarke behind to fend for herself with Anya. She has yet to speak much more than single-word responses, mostly to Lexa, despite Clarke’s multiple attempts to make conversation. Anya seems content to keep to her quiet observations, which is why Clarke is surprised that, when left alone, it’s Anya who breaks the silence.

“So, this is what all the fuss was about?”

Clarke’s head snaps up at the sound of a voice she still doesn’t recognize for how little Anya has said since they met. She finds Anya’s eyes on her and tries not to stutter. “Sorry?”

Anyá doesn’t clarify right away. Her gaze on Clarke’s face is contemplative. Her mouth its own assessing, though not unkind, thin line. Clarke isn’t sure if she feels intimidated or insulted by Anya’s cryptic commentary. Maybe both.

“You made a mess of her head, you know.” Anya drinks, watches the bar as she swallows then returns her focus to Clarke.

It’s not what she expects to hear—not that she knew what to expect from Lexa’s sister, but it
certainly wasn’t this—and suddenly Clarke’s defenses are up, though her voice remains low. “Look, if you have some problem with me or something you want to say—”

“Thank you.”

Clarke blinks, dumbstruck. Anya nearly, very nearly smiles.

“Lexa has always been too orderly, too measured.” Anya taps an index finger against her temple. “Especially up here. You’ve properly upended things, I think. A little chaos has been good for her.”

There’s a long pause while Clarke tries to cobble her racing thoughts. “You’re … welcome?”

Anya dips her head in a quick nod, a response so reminiscent of Lexa Clarke can’t help but smile. “Relax, Clarke Griffin. I like you.”

“Oh. Good.” Clarke chances a quick glance over her shoulder where Raven and Lexa are still posted at the bar, seemingly distracted by one of the televisions suspended over the counter playing sports. Turning back around, she hunches in conspiracy over the table in Anya’s direction. “So, just how much of a fuss was there exactly?”

Anya flicks her eyes in a rapid eye roll. “It was fucking pitiful.”

Clarke laughs, feeling delighted at the turn of events and deciding quickly that she and Anya will get along just fine.

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During their second round of pool, Clarke decides to make an effort. She and Raven clear the table so quickly, it’s almost cruel. Lexa looks torn between offended at Clarke’s ruse and aroused at her skill as Clarke saunters the table, obliterating her girlfriend’s chance of a second win.

“Nice game,” Lexa offers dryly as Clarke cracks the eight ball into a side pocket.

She sidles up to the table where Lexa is stood, taking a smug drink of beer. “Thanks, babe.”

“So, I take it you and Raven have played a lot of pool.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say a lot. Not as much as you and Anya, clearly,” Clarke exaggerates, gesturing between the sisters as she sighs. “I mean, it’s not like my dad had a table in his study or anything. And, we definitely didn’t have family tournaments regularly. Right, Raven?”

“Definitely no cutthroat competition in the Griffin household. Nope.”


“So, are you in the habit of befriending all of your exes? Or, is Clarke the exception?” Anya, who had been quietly propped against the pool table, breaks into Lexa and Clarke’s exchange by addressing a still smiling Raven.

Raven leans a hip against the edge of the pool table and crosses her arms, the smile slipping from her face as she turns towards Anya. “Are you in the habit of crashing weddings regularly, or is this weekend the exception?”

Clarke’s mouth drops open to correct Raven’s assumption, but it’s too little too late as Anya smirks and finishes a drink. “Lincoln is a fast runner.”
“What the fuck does that mean?” Raven snaps in confusion.

“I know this because we once escaped a group home together and ran like hell for twelve city blocks from social services. We were thirteen.”

Clarke cringes, wishing she’d taken the time to debrief her friend on the underlying connection between Lexa, Anya, and Lincoln before letting her stick her foot in it. She’ll pay for that oversight later. Raven looks properly stunned, but Anya is almost fully grinning as she takes a step in Raven’s direction and plucks the empty glass from her hand. In any case, she looks pleased to have shocked Raven into silence.

“Next round’s on me if you rack the table.” Anya heads towards the bar with her easy stride as Raven clenches her eyes shut in humiliation.

She opens them with a lethal glare to Clarke. “Dude—”

“I know, I’m sorry,” Clarke quickly apologizes. “I forgot you didn’t know how Lexa knows Lincoln.”

“It’s fine, Raven,” Lexa softly interjects. “Anya has always been one for dramatics. You probably made her night by giving her a chance to tell that story.”

“It’s not fine!” Raven argues. “I look like a huge dick for not knowing she’s been friends with Lincoln since fucking puberty, and I insulted her.”

“I don’t think she minds insults coming from you,” Lexa smiles.

Raven frowns. “What does that mean?”

“Yeah, what does that mean?” Clarke echoes, already not liking the implications of Lexa’s grin.

Lexa shrugs, finishing her drink. “Nothing. Forget it. I’m going to help Anya with the drinks.” Lexa walks off after collecting Clarke’s empty pint glass and landing a quick kiss against her confused frown.

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By midnight, Clarke is ready to call a car and head home.

Raven calls her a grandma instead. “You are so lame these days, Griffin. You're not even thirty yet and already so lame.”

In the end, Lexa employs a diplomatic strategy, inviting Raven to drink back at the house with her and Anya so long as Clarke is allowed to crawl into bed as soon as they arrive. Determined not to be hungover for Octavia’s big day, Clarke is asleep within minutes of cocooning herself beneath the duvet. Lexa falls into bed some time after 2am, rousing Clarke only slightly as she tucks into her back and wraps an arm around Clarke’s stomach. Clarke groans and shifts, hand brushing Lexa’s arm as she readjusts.

Her voice is scratched and sleep-heavy. “Did Raven get home okay?”

“They’re still drinking,” Lexa whispers. “I think they’re both waiting for the other to show signs of weakness.”

“Shit. They’re not going to settle it with a knife fight in our kitchen, are they?”
Lexa exhales a sleepy chuckle against Clarke’s back. “I don’t think so.”

“Okay. Good.” Clarke is quiet again, nearly drifting off under Lexa’s gentle hold. “Hey.”

Lexa hums, presses a kiss to the knobs of Clarke’s spine.

“Your sister likes me.”

“Oh yeah? Should I be worried?”

Clarke moves around until she’s facing Lexa with a sleepy smile. “I think I’ll stick with the one I’ve got.”

“I like that plan.” Lexa closes the scant space in a breath, lips pressing to Clarke’s as her eyes fall closed. “Big day tomorrow. Go back to sleep.”

Clarke hums, rolling over again so that Lexa can fold around her. She falls asleep to Lexa’s measured breathing and the low sounds of a distant conversation as it drifts up the spiral staircase.

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Chapter End Notes

The plan is to get chapter 12 (which is essentially the second half of events from chapter 11) out relatively quickly, but have I mentioned that estimation is not my strong suit?

Your comments and kudos continue to bring me life. I’m still banging on about beer and general nonsense over on tumblr @mopeytropey so come say hi and I’ll give you unsolicited beer recommendations.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Clarke is in love.

Octavia is happy.

Lincoln is married.

Raven is charmed.

Lexa is home.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

In the morning, Raven is gone—a note pinned to Clarke’s refrigerator that reads: *Raven 1, Anya 0*, and a nearly illegible scrawl about meeting Clarke at Dockside later that morning. Clarke studies it groggily while the coffee steeps then presents it to Lexa, who merely shrugs while rubbing sleep from her eyes as she shuffles into the kitchen. Anya has yet to emerge from the guest room by the time Clarke has packed the car full of lights and candles and assorted decorations for which Octavia will kill her, so Clarke makes Lexa promise to probe for intel at her earliest convenience, knowing that Raven will be predictably evasive.

“In what world do you expect Raven to exceed Anya’s reticence?”

“You studied law, babe. Didn’t they teach you the art of getting people to admit things they’d rather keep to themselves?”

Lexa frowns adorably at the blatant reduction of her education but kisses Clarke at the kitchen island anyway, her lips still sleep-soft and warm. She looks for all intents like she’s ready to go back to bed as Clarke pulls away and Lexa’s eyes remain closed.

“I’ll be home in a few hours to get ready.”

“Okay,” Lexa yawns, voice still so scratched and worn that Clarke wants to crawl back into bed at the sound.

“You should go lie down for a bit so you’re not falling asleep at this big, swanky party I’m throwing tonight.”

“No, I’m awake.” Lexa smiles, widening her eyes as if to prove the point. “See?”

“Okay,” Clarke laughs, kissing her again before sweeping out of the kitchen for the front door.

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“So, you’re not going to tell me then,” Clarke frowns, folding her arms across her chest.

“There’s nothing to tell,” Raven insists, annunciating each word as if this will persuade Clarke...
more effectively. She won’t make eye contact either, as if that isn’t a blatant indication that she’s keeping something from her, and continues stringing lights through some of the exposed beams of Dockside’s ceiling. “We drank. We talked about New York. Drank some more. Argued about sports. The end. The salacious details you’re looking for do not exist, Clarke.”

Clarke narrows her eyes through a pregnant pause. “You didn’t sleep with her.”

“You live in a glorified loft. If I had fucked someone in your house,” Raven grins lecherously, “you’d have known.”

“Okay, ew. I feel like that was an audio-visual reference I could have lived without.”

Raven hops down from the stool she’d been using as a makeshift ladder, dragging it noisily to another location. “You’re the one who won’t let it go, dude!”

“If you didn’t sleep with her, then what’s with the note? Why are you keeping score and at what game are you winning?”

“Do you even know me?” Raven scoffs. “I am constantly keeping score, and I always win.”

“Fine. Don’t tell me. But I’m gonna find out anyway,” Clarke threatens to Raven’s amused laughter. “Are we almost done here?”

“You tell me, boss. This is my last strand of lights.”

Clarke turns in a slow circle, her eyes scanning the bar’s new look. Understated, but classy. Candles of every variety are scattered on random surfaces, twinkling lights have been strung up above, and petite, metallic globes shimmering black and gold hang from random beams throughout the main room.

“I think we’re good. I need to go home to get ready anyway.”

“Cool. Let’s plug this shit in so we can marvel at my breathtaking handiwork.”

Clarke rolls her eyes, nevertheless reaching for the extension cord and squatting down to the nearest outlet. Once the sun sets over the harbor, it should be glowy and festive without bordering on gaudy—just enough decor to piss Octavia off without ruining their friendship permanently. Plus, Lincoln will love it. Clarke sighs with a nod, satisfied.

Outside in the gravel lot, empty save for Clarke and Raven’s vehicles, she pauses from climbing into her car when Raven calls out over the hood of her luxury SUV, “Oh, hey. Meant to tell you, I really love that new print hanging over the guest bed.”

The implications register on a lag, just long enough for Raven to hop into her own drivers’ seat with a cackle, slam her door, and start the car. Clarke’s jaw drops, her palm slapping several times against Raven’s passenger window. “Hey! No, Raven! What the—”

“Bye, Clarke!” Raven waves, her voice and laughter both muffled by the sound of her engine and the closed windows. She speeds off a moment later, leaving Clarke scowling in a cloud of dust.

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“Hey, you look nice,” Clarke smiles. She’s towelling dry her hair and walks through the open french doors of the bedroom to find Lexa reading in a chair on the deck. An early afternoon sun is burning off a light fog that hovers along the harbor, but the air is warm and the weather should be
beautiful for Lincoln and Octavia’s party later in the day. Clarke isn’t dressed yet, still too warm from her shower for anything but a tee shirt and sleep shorts, but Lexa looks ready for a night out.

She adjusts one of the cuffed sleeves of her shirt. “Do you think this will pass inspection?”

Per Octavia’s stringent demands, no one is allowed to dress ‘formally,’ which to Lexa translates into pairing her dark slip-on Vans with a patterned oxford shirt and simple grey slacks. The sleeves are rolled just below her elbows, showcasing the banded tattoo on her left forearm, and Clarke reaches out to run her fingers across it. “You look great, babe.” She perches on the wide arm of the Adirondack chair, and Lexa lets her book fall closed to wrap an arm around Clarke’s back.

She runs a few fingers beneath the hem of Clarke’s loose tee shirt, squeezes the soft skin at her side. “I like your outfit, too.”

“Shut up,” Clarke laughs, swatting Lexa’s hand away. “I’m just not ready for the dress and heels stage yet.”

“Are you kidding? Octavia would be thrilled if you showed up in this instead.”


“She took a phone call. I think it was work.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t Raven?”

Lexa lets her head tip back against the wooden chair and fixes Clarke with a look. “Any chance you’re going to let this go at some point?”

Lexa had been utterly useless getting information from Anya, and Clarke has to wonder just how hard she even tried to pry into her sister’s personal affairs before giving up entirely. She’s far too respectful of others’ privacy to be of any use to Clarke’s mission.

“Nope.” Clarke pops up from the chair, throwing her damp towel over one shoulder.

Lexa sighs. “I figured as much.”

Clarke is ready in under twenty minutes—light blue cotton dress, wavy curls, simple make-up, casually appropriate for a wedding that refuses to be called a wedding. She is slipping into strappy leather sandals when Lexa wanders back indoors and tosses her book onto the bed.

“Is that a new dress?”

Clarke does a performative little spin. “It is.”

“I like it.”

“Good,” Clarke grins, walking towards the bed to stand between Lexa’s legs. “That was the point.”

Lexa smiles up at her and runs a hand through her long, brown tresses, somewhat windblown from her time on the deck but maintaining the natural curls that Clarke continues to envy. “Should I wear my hair up or down?”

Clarke considers her for a moment with a tilt of her head, sliding her own hand into Lexa’s hair. “I think either is fine, but I do love that swept-up messy braided thing you do with it.”

“Is ‘messy braided thing’ what we’re calling it?”
“Oh, I’m sorry. Is there a more technical salon term for pinning your hair in random braids to the back of your head?” Clarke challenges.

Lexa laughs lightly, wraps her hands around Clarke’s waist and pulls her closer. “Point taken.”

“Smartass,” Clarke scowls, even as she leans down to meet Lexa’s waiting mouth. The kiss extends, enough to have Clarke leaning closer, her hands flexing against Lexa’s shoulders.

“How much time do we have to get to City Hall?”

“Oh-uh,” Clarke laughs, shaking her head. “I’m gonna stop you right there.”

“What?” Lexa grins, even as Clarke is pushing her backwards, forcing distance between them.

“If we show up late to my best friend’s non-wedding just because you got handsy, I can guarantee that every single one of our friends will disown us.”

“When have I ever been late to anything?”

“Lexa, I am not taking off this dress.”

Lexa fidgets with the hem of Clarke’s blue dress with deft fingers, causing goosebumps to race down the backs of Clarke’s thighs. “Who said anything about getting undressed?”

“Lexa!”


“Why would you want boring, sober sex now when we could have wildly uninhibited, drunk sex later tonight?”

Lexa arches an eyebrow. “I didn’t realize the two experiences were mutually exclusive.”

Clarke rolls her eyes, wrapping her hands behind Lexa’s neck against her better judgement and leaning down for another kiss. “Do you want help with your hair?”

Lexa hums, her eyes drifting open again after a long moment. “I’d like that.”

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The cluster outside of City Hall is small—an intimate gathering of friends and family who surround Octavia and Lincoln in a broken circle as they exchange a few words, sign papers, and tastefully share post-nuptial kisses. There are whoops and hollers called out from the broad steps at the front of the city building and honking horns from passing cars, but no white dresses. No tuxedos or bowties. Raven officiates. Clarke cries. It’s over and done within twenty minutes, and Lexa grips securely to her hand throughout. Lincoln hugs everyone, Octavia genuinely smiles, and the sun begins its descent as their staggered processional walks towards the water. For all that it was succinct, and Clarke would hardly even call it ceremonial, the gathering had been emotional. Touching and personal. A perfect moment between, Clarke would argue, two nearly perfect people. In the end, she has to think Octavia made the right call by shunning all the traditional fanfare and keeping it simple.

She’s still lost in her thoughts when Lexa squeezes her fingers once or twice, wiggling their joined hands to get Clarke’s attention. “You’re quiet.”

The June temperatures in late afternoon are mild, a dry warmth not yet weighed down by humidity.
It’s a pleasant walk, breezy and sunlit, as they make their way from City Hall to Dockside.

“Just thinking,” Clarke says.

Lexa smirks as Clarke catches her eye. “Should I be worried?”

“No, it’s just—that was nice,” Clarke answers, her voice still soft and small from crying, and Lexa’s smirk fades to something more sincere.

“It was.”

Lexa’s gaze holds, not searching but warm and constant. Clarke’s stomach somersaults. She doesn’t respond to any of the things Lexa isn’t saying, instead squeezing their fingers together and looking back towards the water as it blushes pink under a golden, setting sun.

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What Clarke can’t figure out, is who sought out whom, though she has her suspicions. All she can see from this distance is that Lexa is smiling, looking relaxed in Abby’s presence as they chat idly and sip their respective drinks. Clarke watches closely, contemplating her need to intervene. Lexa catches her eye at a certain point, and Clarke silently questions her by raising an eyebrow. There’s a fair distance between them, at least half the room which is filled with several clusters of people, but Lexa hears her loud and clear. With the gentle tilt of her head, she indicates that she’s fine. Clarke exhaled. No swooping rescue necessary.

She turns back towards the bar counter, watching with satisfaction as guests are served quickly and efficiently by her smiling staff—a roster hand-picked by Octavia for today’s event. People are milling happily around the indoor tables and crowding the decks along the water under paper lanterns and twinkling lights, their laughter carried through the open doors to mix with the music. Clarke’s champagne glass is empty and before she can do something about it, someone has plucked the flute from her hand, replacing it with a can of IPA.

“This is your party. Stop working,” Clarke chides as Octavia seamlessly hands off the empty glass to a passing server.

“I could say the same to you.”

“Yes, but I didn’t get married today,” Clarke argues. “I have every right to oversee the party I planned and facilitated. Quite expertly, I might add.”

“Humble brag,” Octavia scoffs. “And don’t think I didn’t notice the candles and shit, you dick.”

Clarke winces, biting her lip. “But, it looks so amazing, and you’re so moved by the gesture from the people who love you that you’re not mad?”

“Like I ever trusted you and Raven to follow instructions in the first place.” Octavia gives her a resigned, sidelong glance. “Anyway, it looks nice.”

Clarke smiles at the concession then lets her eyes dart around the room. “It’s getting dark enough. I should start to light the candles.”

“Make someone else do it. We should get drunk instead.”

Clarke laughs, slinging her arm around Octavia’s waist and clinking their drinks together. “Deal.”
“Where’s that slutty engineer you used to date?”

“Probably slutting it up with Lexa’s sister somewhere.”

“No shit?” Octavia’s brow ticks up, looking impressed even as her tone remains neutral.

“She’s being super dodgy and won’t answer me explicitly, but,” Clarke huffs, casting around for any sign of Raven as she and Octavia make their way behind the bar counter. “Things are definitely suspect between them.”

Getting Raven to admit anything has always come down to one ingredient. Octavia sighs, “I’ll grab the tequila then.”

She returns Clarke’s definitive nod as they reply in unison, “Truth serum.”

As they make their way towards the open deck doors with a bottle of tequila and three glasses, Clarke catches a glinting to Lexa’s eyes—not quite panic, but a nearly imperceptible widening. A subtle desperation in the clutch of her empty pint glass that has Clarke veering off her intended route.

“I’ll meet you out there,” she says to Octavia, taking the most direct path to Lexa’s side.

Her hand comes to rest on Lexa’s back, body angled protectively as she smiles suspiciously at her mother and says with accentuated warmth, “Hello, Mother.”

“Hi, dear. This turned out lovely.”

Clarke hums. “Thank you.”

“How is Octavia?” Lexa asks quietly, calmly slipping an arm around Clarke’s waist as if she hadn’t just sent emergency flares into the atmosphere to beckon for Clarke’s intervention.

“We’ve decided to get Raven drunk and interrogate her about your sister.”

Lexa inhales, giving Clarke an appraising look as she considers the prospect. “Fun.”

“Speaking of interrogation,” Clarke says, spinning her head purposefully towards her mother. “What have you two been discussing over here?”

“This and that,” Abby answers breezily, sipping innocently from her glass of white wine.

“Uh-huh,” Clarke answers, unconvinced.

“How is Octavia?” Abby muses, shaking her head with a motherly fondness. “Did you ever think we’d see the day?”

Octavia, the product of dysfunctional parents who were always too involved in themselves to properly nurture a child, spent a majority of her childhood in the Griffin house. At times Clarke hardly felt like an only child for how often Octavia slept in her bedroom, fought over TV shows, and rounded out the table at family dinners.

“I know,” Clarke smiles. “Although, I suppose once I’d met Lincoln it wasn’t that far-fetched.”

“It was pretty instant between them?” Lexa asks.

“Maybe not immediate, but,” Clarke considers, “it definitely makes sense that they ended up here.”
“All it takes is meeting the right person.” Abby regards them warmly, eyes flitting between Lexa and Clarke with open affection.

“Oh-kay,” Clarke says, drawing the word out to effectively squash her mother’s sentimentality. “I am officially not drunk enough for this conversation, and Lexa is in desperate need of a drink.” She quickly kisses Abby’s cheek before she can respond and grabs Lexa’s hand before she can politely protest. “Enjoy the party, Mom. I’ll come find you later if you promise to stop mentally planning my wedding.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” Lexa says as they make their way back towards the bar.

Clarke eyes her skeptically over her shoulder. “How bad was it before I got there? Did she ask you about a ring? Badger you about proposing?” They arrive at the counter, and Clarke rests an elbow onto its surface, turning her body to face Lexa. “Did she want to know if we’re planning to secretly elope? Oh my god, did she try to offer us her wedding dress?”

“No,” Lexa laughs, setting her empty glass onto the bar. “Nothing like that.”

“Oh. Okay, then what was with the panic-stricken face?”

Lexa pauses, her eyes scanning the taps in front of them.

“Did you know that multiples run in your family?” Clarke looks on, horrified, as Lexa continues. “In fact, nine of the last twenty-four pregnancies for Griffin women resulted in twins or triplets,” Lexa recites. “Just in case you were planning to carry our first-born child.”

Clarke’s face drains of color as she palms her forehead. “Jesus christ. She skipped over marriage and went straight to grandchildren?!”

Lexa laughs easily, propping her own elbow onto the bar counter to mirror Clarke’s position. “Never let it be said that Abby Griffin is a staunch traditionalist.”

“I’m gonna go talk to her.”

Lexa places a quick hand on her forearm, halting Clarke from leaving the bar. “No, don’t. It’s fine, Clarke. Really.”

“I’m so sorry,” she cringes.

“Don’t be,” Lexa shrugs. “We were discussing some of my volunteer work, actually, which led to the topic of children. Adoption, fostering, that sort of thing. And then … us. It was nice, I guess, in a mildly intrusive way.”

Clarke huffs a laugh. “That’s Abby Griffin in a nutshell.”

“She could despise me,” Lexa points out. “Horrified at the prospect of us building a family together. Wouldn’t that be worse?”

“Debatable.”

Lexa orders another drink and Clarke’s fuming begins to simmer after a few sips of beer until Lexa looks at her in serious consideration. “So, what color do you think we should paint the nursery?”

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On the way outside to join Raven and Octavia, they’re intercepted by Indra. Clarke realizes,
startling, that it’s the first time she’s been in her presence as both a work colleague and as Lexa’s girlfriend. Indra has always been perfectly civil, though Clarke would hardly call her friendly. She’s strictly business all the time, and her success is a direct reflection of her unwavering focus. Clarke finds her to be so consistently intimidating, she makes Anya look like a labradoodle puppy. Clarke tenses as Indra approaches, determined not to flinch as they shake hands, but Lexa’s arm around her back never falters while they exchange swift pleasantries.

“The party is excellent, Clarke. I’m pleased to be in attendance.”

“Oh, thank you. I’m really happy you were able to make it,” Clarke smiles, absently taking a sip of her beer. “I know it means a lot to Lincoln.”

Indra suddenly zeroes in on the can of IPA. Clarke swallows, wondering belatedly if it’s poor form to be in a serious relationship with a high-ranking employee of Trikru Brewing and in conversation with its founding CEO while drinking a competitor’s can of beer. It’s a completely baseless line of thinking—she obviously supports multiple distributors from hundreds of different breweries—but Indra’s unreadable expression causes Clarke to second-guess her own logic.

“You’re drinking Darren’s double IPA.”

Clarke looks down at her beer as if noticing it for the first time. “Oh, um, yes—”

“I find it to be too hop-heavy, lacking in complexity. He should stick to the simplicity of his real breadwinner,” Indra states.

“The Regional Pale Ale,” Lexa chimes in. “I agree. It’s where he excels.”

“I don’t mind the hops, but I mean, no one’s doing double IPAs better than Night Shift right now,” Clarke offers, prepared to backtrack a second later when Indra’s eyes snap to hers. Trikru doesn’t even have any DIPA in rotation, and still Clarke worries she’s overstepped.

“The 87,” Indra says. “One of my current favorites. It’s exceptional.” Clarke thinks it may be the closest she’ll ever get to sharing a connection with this woman and exhales with a nervous smile. Indra then turns to Lexa and tips her glass. “On Monday morning I’d like to further discuss our venture with the organization you’ve been exploring. For now, enjoy your evening.”

“Thank you,” Lexa nods. “I look forward to it.”

Once outside, Clarke exhales again dramatically, her body going limp against Lexa’s where an arm is still looped around her waist. “She is so intense! I honestly don’t know how you work with her every day.”

Lexa’s easy smile returns. “She’s very forthcoming, which I find refreshing. If she doesn’t care for something, she tells you. I never have to try and guess what she’s thinking. It’s efficient.”

“That’s one way to put it,” Clarke sighs. “It sounds like things are moving forward with Treehouse though?”

Lexa’s face beams with unchecked pride as she answers. “Yes. It’s going very well.” Clarke leans up to kiss her jawline.

It’s been just under a month since Lexa took the reins on her new position at Trikru, and Clarke has marveled at the transformation. As a distributor and brand representative, she was always exemplary—a focused and dedicated employee. In her new role, taking on special projects for the brewery and expanding Indra’s partner relations, Lexa is an unstoppable force. It didn’t take long
for her to forge a relationship with the Treehouse Foundation, a local organization that works on behalf of foster children. A major initiative of the foundation focuses on mitigating the number of kids at risk of aging out of the foster system before finding permanent homes, something Lexa herself could have faced had it not been for Gustus.

Through Trikru, Lexa is able to organize events, collaborating with other breweries and local businesses, that will directly benefit Treehouse. Clarke could not be more impressed, watching Lexa excel within the new opportunities Indra has given her.

“I’m really glad,” Clarke says, wrapping her arm more securely around Lexa’s waist as they make their way towards Octavia’s table.

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“Are you two serious right now?” Raven gripes, frowning from her seat across the table. “Are we sure it was Octavia who tied the knot today?”

“What?” Clarke responds innocently, perched on Lexa’s lap in the chair they’ve been sharing since they joined the table. She’s just bent towards Lexa’s ear to comment on something innocuous, prompting Raven’s outburst.

“Your public displays of affection are nauseating.”

“Stop trying to change the subject,” Clarke argues. “Let’s get back to why you were in my guest room last night.”

“She’s not wrong, Clarke,” Octavia chimes in, shrugging through a sip of her drink when Clarke shoots her a look of betrayal. “You guys are grotesquely affectionate.”

“Please. You hardly have a leg to stand on, O,” Clarke says. “I have photographic evidence of you engaging in some pretty heavy PDA with your new husband earlier.”

“Ew, do not call him that,” Octavia shudders. Lincoln, sat beside her with his arm propped along the back of her chair, chuckles quietly.

“That’s precisely how the Commonwealth now defines him,” Clarke counters.

“Fuck a piece of paper and the societal construct of ownership, Clarke. He isn’t my anything.”

“I feel like we should have gone over the logistics of marriage prior to today,” Clarke frowns.

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t care what the legalities imply,” Octavia argues, her sharp tone softening only as she turns to look at Lincoln’s calm, dark eyes. “He’s still his own person.”

Lincoln’s hand massages the back of her neck and Octavia further relaxes. “Thanks.”

“Okay, now you’re all grossing me out,” Raven grumbles. “And I’m out of alcohol.”

“There’s literally a bottle of tequila six inches from you,” Octavia points out.

“I can get you another drink,” Lexa offers, placing her hands at Clarke’s hips and squeezing once, a suggestion for her to stand. “I was going to look for Anya anyway.”

“Cheers, Esquire,” Raven grins, handing off her empty glass once Clarke has stood to allow Lexa out of the chair.
Clarke loves that she can always hear the change in her tone—that Lexa is polite and friendly with almost everyone but something altogether different with her. This soft, careful cadence that feels like hers alone. “I’m good,” she answers, smiling up at Lexa as her chest balloons.

Lexa leans down and presses into Clarke’s mouth with a force that lingers, despite their brief contact. When she pulls away Clarke is flushed, lips tingling, and Lexa regards her with a satisfied smile.

“Hey,” Raven calls as Lexa is moving away from the table with their empty glassware. “Tell your sister I said: game on.”

Raven grins, Clarke scowls, and Octavia pours the tequila.

“What is this game?” Clarke demands, edging forward in her seat to place her elbows on the table.

Raven, in turn, leans back into her chair. “What do you care?”

“You’re my best friend, who—” Octavia scoffs, and Clarke rolls her eyes. “You’re one of my best friends, who may or may not be trying to sleep with my girlfriend’s sister. Call me curious,” she finishes dryly.

Raven holds up a commanding finger and arches an eyebrow. “First of all, I never try to sleep with anyone. I either do, or I don’t. And, more importantly,” she reaches for the tequila Octavia has poured, pausing dramatically to examine her shot glass. “I would never sleep with a fucking Mets fan.”

Clarke folds her arms over her chest. “So you were in the guest room, what? Checking the thread count on the linens?”

“Oh my god, Griffin,” Raven groans. “Beat a dead horse much?” She braces her hands on the armrests of her chair and pins Clarke with a look. “Girl thought she could drink me under the table. Me. Totally discounted my Latina fortitude,” Raven laughs, shaking her head. “Needless to say, Anya lost handily. When she got sloppy, I helped her to the guest room, okay?”

Clarke digests the information in silence. The story is doubtful, at best. Anya is perhaps the last person on the planet that Clarke can imagine showing her ass after too much to drink. She narrows her eyes, reaching for her own glass before nudging the remaining shot in the direction of Octavia. She leans back in her chair, assessing, before raising the tequila and turning towards Octavia with an expectant quirk of her mouth.

Octavia leans over to clink their glasses together. “Hundred bucks says they leave together.”

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“We are dancing to this song,” Lincoln announces, grabbing Clarke’s hand with determination and
hoisting her effortlessly to her feet.

There isn’t a dance floor, specifically, though Clarke and Raven arranged the tables and chairs around the main room’s perimeter to allow for dancing should the mood strike. Clarke laughs, allowing herself to be gently dragged to an open area of the bar where a small throng of other increasingly drunk guests have started to move to the music. Lincoln himself might be a little drunk, and Clarke beams to see her friend so relaxed and open. So happy.

“So, you’re officially off the market.”

Lincoln grins, his hands moving to hold Clarke like they are chaperoning a middle school prom. “I won’t tell Octavia you just used the phrase ‘off the market,’ but yeah, I think we both know I haven’t been available in the dating pool for a long time.”

“Good point.”

Lincoln has shed his overshirt and vest, which he wore to City Hall despite Octavia complaining that he’d broken the rules and overdressed. He’s now in a plain white tee shirt, the straps of his suspenders hanging low on his thighs as they move to the music. He’s this giant gentle beast, kind and reserved where Octavia is often harsh and loud. She smiles at the contrast, and her chest warms for her two friends. Clarke moves in closer to lay her head on Lincoln’s broad chest in a long hug.

“What’s this for?”

“I’m just really happy for you. And O.” Clarke gives him one, last squeeze before pulling back. “I’m happy for you both.”

Lincoln has wrapped his arms around her, returning the hug, and momentarily lifts her off her feet with a light chuckle. “Thanks. I’m really happy for me, too.” Clarke laughs as her feet find the floor again, and Lincoln encourages her into a dramatic, mostly unsuccessful spin. “What about you? Are we going to be throwing you and Lexa one of these parties eventually?”

“Oh my god!” Clarke gawks, scandalized. “Now you sound like my mother.”

“Hey,” Lincoln smiles. “You know I’ve always been Team Abby.”

“How about Team Let-Clarke-Enjoy-Her-Six-Month Relationship?”

Lincoln’s laugh is full and loud. “I’m a founding member of that team!”

“Maybe the founding member. At the very least, you were a witness to it all from the very start.”

“You mean your eloquent introductions at the delivery hatch?” Lincoln smirks, earning a light shove to his immovable shoulder. “Hey, whatever you did, it clearly worked out in your favor,” he laughs.

Clarke feels smug for half a second before an urgency sets in, and suddenly she wants to be near Lexa, who has since wandered from their table. She needs to touch her hands, and watch her smile; to have Lexa kiss the corner of her mouth. She wants to move in close to her and inhale the fragrance that so often lingers in their bathroom after Lexa has already gone to work. Clarke’s eyes cast about as the music tempo changes, fading to something more upbeat.

“I’m going to—”
“Yeah,” Lincoln says, his eyes already glinting when Clarke looks up. “Tell Lexa I said she owes me.” He leans down, placing a quick kiss to Clarke’s forehead. “And, thanks for the dance.”

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She starts off in no particular direction when her eyes catch something of interest, despite her desperation to find Lexa. Clarke is halfway to the bar, her gait determined and eyes unwavering. She’d spotted Raven and Anya from across the room, the two of them angled together at a secluded corner of the counter, and she’s just drunk enough to confront them both at once. There’s barely a handful of guests between Clarke and her target when a rough hand catches her elbow, abruptly halting her movement.

“What are you doing, Clarke?” Octavia sounds bored, as if she couldn’t be less interested in Clarke’s answer, yet her grasp is unrelenting.

“Raven’s at the bar with Anya.”

Her eyes flick once in their direction, then back to Clarke. “I know.”

“Oh, then why am I being detained?” she attempts to shake free of Octavia’s hold and is wildly unsuccessful.

“Because I think you need to see something before you barge over there like a deranged assailant.”

Clarke relents, allowing Octavia to guide her a few paces to the left—a new vantage point where she can now see Raven and Anya in profile. They’ve been friends long enough, beyond the relationship which brought them together, that Clarke has seen Raven date multiple times with countless people. She has seen her feigned disinterest and brazen confidence. Raven is a lot of talk, but she’s not all talk—the girl is bold and self-assured like no one Clarke has ever known. But Clarke has never seen her like this.

“What is happening?”

“I know, dude.” Octavia stands beside her, sipping her drink while their eyes remain locked on the scene unfolding at the bar. “See? I told you. Not to be interrupted.”

Raven’s smile is not uncommon, she laughs almost as much as she yells, but it’s the way she’s now smiling that has Clarke rooted to the spot where Octavia dragged her. She looks so relaxed—this easy slope to her mouth at whatever Anya is saying. Not just engaged with but practically endeared to the woman in front of her. Her eyes are dancing, and Clarke has to stop herself from gaping. There’s just enough space between them that she registers the movement of Anya’s hand as it slides across the bar for Raven’s drink. When she doesn’t flinch as Anya downs the drink in one go, Clarke knows Raven is a total goner. No one takes anything from Raven Reyes without risking their life. She could have predicted an attraction between them—some sexually-charged game of cat and mouse that seemed apparent from the start. What she did not expect was this level of genuine interest.

“Raven is totally going to be your sister-in-law,” Octavia grins.

“Oh my god, she likes Anya.”

“Likes her?” Octavia scoffs. “Look at her—she’s fucking besotted.”

Raven laughs, and Anya’s mouth twitches as she sets the glass back onto the bar. Watching them, Clarke’s shock wanes to something more fond, and now more than ever, she’s determined to find
“Have you seen Lexa?” Clarke asks, already resigned to giving Raven her privacy in favor of finding her girlfriend.

“Last I saw she was outside.”

Dread fills Clarke’s stomach. “Oh god, please say she was not with my mom.”

“What has Mother done this time?”

“Oh nothing,” Clarke responds drolly. “Just encouraging Lexa and me to further the Griffin bloodline.”

Octavia laughs, raising her glass to Clarke. “Cheers, man. You can name your firstborn after me.”

“I’m leaving you now,” Clarke grumbles, turning towards the open deck doors without another glance.

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The air on the deck is cool and comfortable, salty sea breezes drifting over tables of happy guests and carrying their conversations out across the harbor. Clarke doesn’t find Lexa, but she is almost immediately accosted by an exuberant Murphy who is glassy-eyed and smoking a cigarette.

“You’re not still grilling food, are you, Murph?”

He laughs, taking a drag from his cigarette. “Nah, Raven manhandled me off grill duty after I nearly scorched off my eyebrows.”

“Okay, good. Maybe go drink some water, too.”

Murphy laughs again, clumsily smashing the remains of his cigarette into a nearby ashtray. “Only if there’s whiskey in it.” He claps a hand to Clarke’s shoulder, pulling her in for another brusque hug. “Love you, girl.”

He stumbles off in the direction of the bar, and Clarke wonders how long it will be before she is helping him into the back of a car and sending him home. The guests have already begun to diminish as the evening hours fold into night. At Murphy’s exit, Clarke scans the remaining groups of people on the deck in search of Lexa. There are boats bobbing in the dark water, a few passing by with their blinking lights and softly clanging bells. She takes a moment for herself, resting her elbows on the old deck railings to enjoy the view and let the day settle over her. This is how Lexa finds her.

“Hey,” she says, arriving at Clarke’s side with two fresh drinks in her hands and wearing a smile that Clarke has loved for the past year of her life.

“Hi.” Clarke stands fully, turning to face her and accept the drink that Lexa offers. “I’ve been looking for you everywhere.”

“I’ve been looking for you, too.”

“Here I thought you’d been swept away by the magnificent party atmosphere.” Clarke eyes Lexa
over the rim of her glass as she takes a sip of something smoky and tart—a grapefruit citrus and, “Mezcal?”

“Yes,” Lexa grins, taking a sip of her own drink. “I asked Mindy to get creative for you.” Clarke hums, licking her lips. “And, I was definitely having a nice time, despite wishing I were with you. I saw that Lincoln stole you away at a certain point.”

“I’m a very hot commodity.”

Lexa grins and nods. “Yes, I’m aware. As it turns out, my girlfriend throws a great party.”

The significance of Lexa’s words, the pointed reference to that moment in time, and how they’re now stood in a very familiar spot isn’t lost on her. They are drenched in soft light from the paper lanterns overhead, and Lexa looks so beautiful that Clarke feels a tremor in her chest. She moves closer to her just because she can. “That seems like such a long time ago.”

“I remember it very clearly,” Lexa says, leaning an elbow onto the railing and angling herself towards Clarke.

“Yeah,” Clarke smiles, her fingers brushing back the finer strands of Lexa’s braids that have come loose in the breeze. “So do I.”

“I was such a mess that night.”

Clarke’s heart jumps as her hand drops from Lexa’s hair and reaches for her fingers. She’s never heard Lexa talk about that night, or so many other moments from their carefully crafted friendship. “Were you?”

Lexa sips her drink, letting the sounds of other conversations fill their silences. “Do you remember earlier that day? On the water?”

Clarke has to control her reaction, squeezing to Lexa’s fingers in lieu of barking laughter in her face. As if she could ever forget the day her entire perception of Lexa shifted—they would not date, they would not fall in love. They would be friends; and Clarke would be okay with that. She swallows roughly, exhales a rueful smile, and says, “Yes.”

“At a certain point that morning, I realized I had to tell you about Costia.”

Clarke does laugh then, a smaller, more controlled expression of her residual embarrassment from that day. “You mean when I asked you out?”

“Actually, no.” Lexa’s mouth shifts in consideration. “It was before that.”

Properly shocked out of an urge to kiss this conversation to an end, Clarke’s brow ticks up. “Oh.”

“I remember you were headed to work, and we were ostensibly parting ways after the coffee shop, but I—” Lexa’s eyes are bright, her mouth a shy, sloping smile as she exhales. “I didn’t want you to go. I mean, I didn’t want to not be around you.”

Clarke’s pulse races. She cannot believe that six months in and Lexa is still capable of having this kind of effect on her nerves. “Lexa,” she breathes out.

“Beyond that, I also realized I had been purposefully avoiding telling you about Costia.” Lexa’s mouth twists, looking apologetic even after all this time. “That was the first time I’d ever dreaded telling someone about her.”
“It was definitely not what I expected you to say in that moment,” Clarke admits, heart hammering and feeling as if she’s finally unloading a burdensome secret. “But, didn’t you feel better after telling me? Having everything out in the open?”

Lexa gives her a very pointed look over the rim of her jam jar as she takes a drink, and Clarke’s smile is acquiescing even before Lexa responds. For too long, they were hardly open with each other about a laundry list of things. “I left the party that night after spending so much time with you, and I just kept thinking: I’m in so much trouble.”

Clarke laughs at Lexa’s candid phrasing, moving closer to cup a hand around her jaw and finally making contact with her lips. Their mouths slide easily into place, a growing familiarity to the press and warmth of their kisses. When Clarke pulls away by inches, Lexa’s free hand has found its way to her waist. “That’s maybe the most romantic thing you’ve ever said to me.”

Lexa kisses her again, the lingering press of her lips followed by a gentle nip to Clarke’s bottom lip. “Clearly you’ve set the bar too low then.”

“You’ve never told me about any of that stuff,” Clarke says softly.

“Whiskey makes me nostalgic,” Lexa shrugs, the hand still on Clarke’s waist squeezing once.

Clarke moves to kiss her again, but Lexa slowly dodges the contact, instead swiveling her head towards the stretch of deck at her back. One or two tables still play host to a smattering of guests, and when Lexa turns back to her, she says, “How long do we have to stay before I can take you home?”

Clarke has possibly never been more ready to shed her clothing and fall into bed with the person she loves, and all it took was a simple question dropped casually from Lexa’s smirking mouth. She gapes once, snapping her mouth shut again when she sees how smug it has made her girlfriend, and downs the rest of her drink in three gulps. She grabs Lexa’s hand and pulls her away from the deck railing with an urgent force.

“Let’s go find Octavia and tell her we’re leaving.”

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They locate Octavia easily, sat on a stool at the bar beside Lincoln, their heads bent in quiet conversation and hands linked on the bartop. She looks unguardedly happy, more content than Clarke has ever seen her. Clarke does a quick scan of the room, counting roughly twenty remaining guests. They’d booked a shuttle service until eleven, and given the current hour she thinks about asking Mindy and the bar staff to announce last call.

Lexa is close at her back, her words landing soft against Clarke’s ear. “Stop working.”

“I’m not,” Clarke tries to argue, spinning to face a very unconvinced Lexa. “I’m not, I was just thinking—”

“Mindy will handle it—she’s highly competent and has had far less to drink than you. This entire evening has been a seamless success, Clarke.”

“I’m not drunk.”

“You’re not sober either,” Lexa counters happily, her lips landing briefly against Clarke’s pout before she is pulling them towards the bar counter.
Lincoln sees them first, turning in his stool to greet them with his dashing smile. “Hello, favorite people. You guys headed out?”

“I don’t know,” Clarke falters, looking around the room again. “Shouldn’t we wait until the final shuttle has taken everybody home?”

“You seriously need to stop working, dude,” Octavia says, sounding a little more drunk than the last time Clarke saw her.

“I tried to tell her,” Lexa offers.

“That is fucking rich coming from you, O. I’m surprised you aren’t playing bar-back right now.”

“Oh, she tried. I had to employ brute force just to keep her in her chair,” Lincoln smiles to Octavia’s eye roll. “Listen, before you two wander home, I think a toast is in order.”

“What? Are you serious?” Octavia says. “Linc, you know I love you, but don’t you think we’ve celebrated ourselves enough for one night?”

Lincoln laughs, reaching an arm behind the bar where he has apparently stashed a half bottle of champagne and four glasses. He begins unwrapping the foil. “We’re not toasting us. We’re toasting the new owners of Dockside.”

“What—no!” Clarke starts. “We haven’t even begun to file all the paperwork yet.”

“Clarke,” Lexa soothes, a warm hand slipping around her waist. “You know that the deal is as good as done. The rest is just signatures and notaries. You and Octavia’s accomplishments should be celebrated.”

“Okay, fine,” Octavia concedes as Clarke falls into a quick kiss from Lexa. “But, when we toast this shit for real, you assholes better bring a bigger bottle of champagne.”

“Yeah,” Clarke scoffs through a smile. “What the hell, Lincoln?”

Lincoln takes the jibes like a pro, calmly and quietly popping the cork. The pours of bubbly wine are extremely small as Lincoln passes one to each of the three women surrounding him before raising his flute to make a brief but touching speech.

Once their glasses have been emptied, Octavia says, “Don’t feel like you have to stay, Clarke. In case you hadn’t noticed, you won’t even be the first of the trifecta to bail.”

“Wait—where’s Raven?” Clarke realizes, eyes darting around the nearly empty space.

Octavia nods to Lexa. “Left with your sister while you two were outside proposing to each other.”

Lexa doesn’t seem bothered by the insinuation, smiling easily at Octavia while finishing her drink, but Clarke finds herself bumbling a response. “I wasn’t—that is not—we were just,” Clarke huffs when Octavia cracks a wicked smile. “I hate you. What about Raven?”

“Oh, yeah. You owe me a hundred bucks.”

“No way, “Clarke argues. “I was betting they would leave together.”

“So was I,” Octavia shrugs.

“So was everyone,” Lincoln adds. “Despite Anya accusing Raven of being ‘insufferably loud and
arrogant.”

“She’s so full of shit,” Lexa says, and Clarke’s shocked laughter is echoed by Octavia and Lincoln’s. Even Lexa laughs as she clinks her empty glass onto the counter. “If Anya left with Raven then we no longer have a houseguest.” Her eyes find Clarke’s with intent. “I’m ready when you are.”

Clarke’s dropped jaw gradually widens into a broad smile. “Are you making sexual references in mixed company right now? Is this actually happening?”

Lexa rolls her eyes, nevertheless loosely pulling Clarke in the direction of the front door by their joined hands. She tips her head and says, “Lincoln, Octavia. Goodnight and congratulations.”

Clarke is still smiling, allowing herself to be led away from the bar even as she says, “Babe, I could not be more proud. Guys! Did you know that Lexa was talking about sex just then? You heard that, right?”

“Bye, Clarke!” Lincoln waves with a mirroring smile.

“Wait!” Clarke stops just short of their exit, bringing Lexa to a halt with her. “I didn’t hug you!”

Octavia waves her off. “Hug us tomorrow, loser.”

Lexa pushes open the front door, ushering Clarke through with a hand at the small of her back. Clarke makes a failed attempt to curb a satisfied grin that the tips of Lexa’s ears have gone bright red.

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Clarke wakes feeling tired and parched, a little achy, but overall significantly less hungover than she’d anticipated. The sex had been less wild inhibition and more of a soft, gentle experience, Clarke’s emotions still tenuous after the long day. Despite the amount of alcohol they’d consumed, it had still been considerably memorable. She opens her eyes to see Lexa returning from the bathroom and smiles, realizing Lexa’s absence must have been what woke her.

“Hey,” Lexa whispers, seeing that Clarke is awake.

They hadn’t taken the time to remove every braid from her hair the previous night, focusing instead on removing the pins, leaving Lexa’s head a mess of brown curls and partially detangled braids. She’s shuffling quietly across the wood floors—bare feet and a loose tee shirt that drapes off one shoulder. The sun has already begun to filter through the smaller windows of the ceiling arch, though it’s not yet hung above the harbor to flood the room with bright light.

“Hi,” Clarke answers, voice scratched raw as it often is in the morning.

“I was getting up to make coffee,” Lexa says, even as she crawls back into bed and shimmies long legs beneath their light, cotton duvet.

Their hands begin to roam and fidget, finding bits of warm, soft skin as Lexa settles beside her, and it isn’t long before Clarke is dozing off to sleep. Lexa never fully comes to rest, her hands skating the length of Clarke’s back as they lay quietly. Clarke is adrift in a sort of half-sleep, roused from being pulled completely under every time she feels the light press of lips to her hairline.

She stirs after twenty minutes or so and stretches languidly, pulling up to her elbows to land a proper kiss on Lexa’s smiling mouth. “Let’s have coffee.”
In the kitchen, they move wordlessly, performing their little morning rituals with an unspoken ease. Lexa fills the kettle and Clarke moves towards a narrow upper cabinet where Lexa has arranged coffee-related items. It wasn’t as if the kitchen was terribly cluttered before, but Clarke estimates that Lexa has increased their available counterspace by nearly thirty percent just by her meticulous organization. She pulls out the french press, grinder, and a bag of coffee, mouth practically salivating as the aroma of freshly ground beans hits her nostrils. Her relationship with coffee is probably highly questionable, though she would never admit that to Lexa, who constantly if not subtly hints that she should reexamine her coffee intake.

“I love these beans. So much.” Clarke scoops the contents from the coffee grinder into the french press and turns to see Lexa closing the fridge with a knowing smile. “I hope that doesn’t bother you—having to share my undying affection with these beautiful beans.”

“I’m not threatened by them, Clarke. I bought them.”

Lexa has pulled out a carton of eggs, fruit she probably sliced up the previous morning, and a container of yogurt. Clarke squats to a lower cabinet and retrieves small frying pan for the eggs. She would have never splurged on the bags of coffee from her favorite roaster, always content to brew something a bit more pedestrian at home. But, Lexa’s promotion has meant a substantial pay raise, and despite how ardently she would deny it: Lexa likes to spoil Clarke.

The kettle whistles just as Clarke selects a spatula from a canister beside the stove, and Lexa reaches around her with a hand laid softly on her waist to turn off the burner. They prepare the food side-by-side: plates of scrambled eggs and fresh fruit, plain yogurt for Lexa and toast for Clarke. They eat at the island, Clarke groaning obscenely at her first sip of coffee as Lexa rolls her eyes and grabs at Clarke’s bare knee until she squirms from being tickled, laughing too much to continue groaning properly.

They leave the dishes in the sink, vowing to finish cleaning later, and curl up on the sofa. Clarke peruses Netflix for something mindless while Lexa sifts through the newspaper in search of the crossword. Clarke didn’t know that anyone under the age of fifty still relied on print as a news source, but Lexa says that something vital is lost when tracking her baseball stats digitally. She prefers the tangibility of the inky print between her fingers. For months, she’d gone out regularly on Sunday mornings in search of a New York Times or Boston Globe until Clarke finally had enough and ordered her the damn subscription of both papers. The truth is: Clarke likes to spoil Lexa, too.


Clarke is propped at one end of the sofa while Lexa lays between her legs, holding the crossword and tapping a pencil against her temple. Clarke cards her fingers through Lexa’s hair in search of more braids to disentangle. She hums, hands pausing as she thinks.

“Oh: duct.” Clarke resumes her detangling while Lexa scratches in the letters then cranes her neck so that she can kiss the underside of Clarke’s chin.

“You’re very good at this.”

“That’s a skill that only years of slow, weeknight bar shifts can foster,” Clarke sighs.

“Anya and I used to do these with Gustus,” Lexa says, and Clarke leans forward to kiss the side of her face.

“You’re very adorable.”
She waits for another clue, letting her mind drift in the calm and quiet of a lazy Sunday morning. The sun reflects off the water and the seagrass along the banks sways from a summer breeze that filters in through their open windows. Lexa slotted between her legs is such a familiar weight against her chest, as they so often find themselves laid together this way. Tomorrow she’ll start to get things in order for transferring the deed at Dockside—she and Octavia finally taking ownership of the business they’ve successfully run for nearly four years with very little oversight. It’s long been on her mind, the idea of taking legal ownership of her bar, but it was Lexa’s influence and her gentle persuasions that finally set things in motion.

Lexa is massaging soothing patterns into her thigh, silently considering her puzzle, and a smile breaks over Clarke’s face that she can’t control. “I can’t believe this is my life.”

“I often have similar thoughts.”

Clarke wraps her arms around Lexa’s chest, nuzzling closer. The paper is forgotten as Lexa reaches for her hands, bringing one to her mouth and kissing Clarke’s fingers.

“We’re lucky, right? I mean, it doesn’t always end up like this, does it?”

“No.” Lexa exhales once before threading their fingers together. “Almost never.”

There will be fights—arguments had and grudges held, nights spent in anger and resulting in tears. They will struggle, at times, to be kind or to see the other side. They will fall into rhythms and patterns, not all of which will be lovely or filled with desire. They will stop and question certain facets of their dynamic and what it means to make a life with someone. They’ll laugh. They’ll sulk. They’ll make amends. Clarke loves Lexa not because she anticipates it will be a simple task, but because no matter what, she knows that it will always be worth it.

“Yeah,” Clarke echoes. “Very lucky.” She thinks if they can just remember that one thing, there will always be moments like this.

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Chapter End Notes
Let me try and keep this concise (though be prepared for me to fail miserably). What started as a passing headcanon about a displaced beer distributor and a flirty bar manager, soon took on a life of its own and became more of a long-winded, public love letter to my wife. She is now, and has for the past fifteen years, been my best friend, and I feel incredibly lucky to have found her. Luckier still that she kept me around. A good portion of this story pays tribute to our own ridiculous shenanigans, as friends and then more-than-friends, and so I have her to thank for a fair amount of inspiration in writing this version of Clarke and Lexa. While I'm thanking people, it goes without saying that I owe a great deal of thanks to my wonderfully salty beta, The Salty Citrus, as so much of this story came to fruition with her unyielding support and encouragement. I can say with certainty that I never expected much by way of readership when I posted, in blind fear, my first chapter of this story. Your incredible responses and excitement and support have meant so much, and I love that I was able to share this story with you. It has been my absolute pleasure.

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