Some Angels Fall

by MadeInSpace

Summary

Clarke Griffin was killed in crossfire at 21, four years ago. One day she comes back with no recollection of dying, no notion of time passing, and no clue how to find her girlfriend.

(A repost for download)
Chapter 1

Hi guys, I'm re-publishing this deleted story (with the original author's permission) for the readers who enjoyed it and didn't get to download it the first time. The next part should be up soon. It'll likely be taken down again, but I'll post a message about that on my tumblr. Thanks!

She got drunk. She must have. It's the only explanation that makes sense. She woke up in the middle of a park with mud caked to her clothes—what other than a booze soaked brain could have led her there?

She's Clarke Griffin. It's not so farfetched. It's surprising, yes, but not implausible. All she has to do is sleep the sluggishness off and apologize to Lexa for worrying her.

Clarke makes her way through the neighborhood with little concern for her surroundings. Some things catch her eye, like the new crop of stores and restaurants that seem to have popped up, but she doesn't think much about it. She's thirsty, starving, and in desperate need of a shower. It's not that she stinks, but there's dirt beneath her fingernails, in her hair, in her shoes, and who knows where else.

Clarke really isn't looking forward to the next few days. Lexa is going to be upset—hopefully nothing some flowers and a date can't help; Raven will laugh until she pees herself; Murphy will probably use it to embarrass her at social gatherings, that little shit; and her mom... Oh God, no.

Clarke hopes this never gets to Abigail Griffin. There are only so many speeches about being more responsible that Clarke can take.

She feels invigorated when she spots her apartment building and makes her way in behind an old man. Hopefully her keys and phone are on the coffee table, and hopefully Lexa isn't waiting on the couch with the scratchy blanket thrown over her and her sleepy eyes fighting to stay open.

Clarke quickly climbs the stairs and drags her feet to apartment 14. She knocks on the door and sighs. In just a moment, she'll be able to soothe her scratchy throat, eat, and enjoy a warm bath.

The door opens abruptly and Clarke steps back, not expecting to see bleached hair and hazel eyes.

"Who are you?" She asks with a frown.

The girl in front of her narrows her eyes, just as taken aback.

"Harper. Can I help you?"

"Um yeah, I live here."

Harper blinks, hand on the door. She brings it closer to her, blocking the entrance with her body.

"This is apartment 14."

"I know that," Clarke glowers at her. "I live with Lexa."
"Who?"

Clarke huffs, frustrated that she isn't any closer to devouring a sandwich than she was a minute ago.

"Just look right above the table with the key and change bowl; that's a picture of me and my girlfriend."

Harper turns around confusedly and then looks back at Clarke.

"Sorry, but you have the wrong apartment."

Clarke takes a step forward and Harper immediately steps inside, a worried look crossing her face.

"Look, I don't have time for—" A quick glance inside and Clarke feels her stomach sink. The living room is nothing like her own, all modern furniture and thick carpeting. There's a flat screen TV she's never bought, a coffee table she's never seen, and a tabby cat stretched out on an armchair she's never sat in. Even the walls are painted differently.

"This isn't my apartment."

Harper rolls her eyes. "That's what I said."

Clarke shakes her head, closing her eyes for a second and rubbing her temples with the pads of her fingers. Maybe she actually is still drunk off her ass.

"Can I make a call with your phone, please?" She asks.

Harper seems reluctant but reaches into her pocket. "Can you make it quick? I have to get to class soon."

Clarke nods. She's never seen a Smartphone this damn big but chalks it up to another thing on the what-the-fuck list. She dials the number she knows by heart and waits. The voice on the other end is deep and male and Clarke forgets all manners when she hears it.

"Who is this?" She blurts out.

"This is Daniel."

Clarke looks down at the screen and frowns. "Are you next to Lexa? Did you answer for her?"

"Uh no. You must have the wrong number."

The call ends and Clarke listens to the beep, dumbfounded. She looks at Harper.

"I'm really sorry, can I try another number?"

"Yeah, but last one okay?"

Clarke doesn't dawdle. She presses each number carefully and waits, holding her breath at the third ring.

"Hello?"

Clarke's heart lurches. She knows that voice and its raspy edge.

"Mom? It's me. I'm so sorry for calling this early. I just, I'm freaking out. I woke up in a park and I
can't find my—"

"Who is this?" The voice asks in a bark, angry and rough.

Clarke falters at the tone. "It's Clarke. Can you—"

"You should be ashamed of yourself," her mother spits, voice cracking at the end.

The call ends just as abruptly as the last and Clarke frowns, wondering what the hell she did to get that reaction. Harper stares at her expectantly and Clarke gives her the phone back, face blank.

"Thanks," she murmurs.

Harper nods, eyeing her warily. "Good luck."

Clarke watches the door close and stands rooted to the spot. The 14 on the door is the same one she saw just yesterday, the corridor is the same, but her apartment is gone, Lexa must've lost her phone or, worse, had it stolen, and her mother hung up on her. Clarke becomes alarmed when she realizes she has no clue how any of it happened. She toys with the sleeves of her sweatshirt—Lexa's college sweatshirt—to calm herself, trying to think back on what she remembers instead.

The sweatshirt helps. She remembers grabbing it right before they left to go outside. Lexa laughed when Clarke put it on backwards in her haste and then stepped behind her to help. She kissed her neck and they were out the door.

Clarke remembers it simply; it was going to be a casual evening. They were going to walk through the park and stop at the grocery store for the Mashuga Nuts Lexa is crazy about and some ice cream for midterms. Clarke took Lexa's hand in the park and kissed her silly against a tree, grinning when Lexa's knees almost buckled. An evening that simple couldn't have possibly preceded… whatever today is.

Suddenly, Clarke wonders if she even knows with certitude what day it is. She considers asking Harper but the girl looked spooked enough and Clarke doesn't feel very patient. If not here, there are other places she can try to find a familiar face and a phone. Clarke makes her way out of the building and onto the street with her hands deep in the pockets of her sweatshirt.

The neighborhood is different. Now that Clarke actually pays attention to her surroundings, she notices the bits and pieces that have changed. Somehow the weather went from windy and cool to heavy and warm overnight, Clarke's favorite restaurant turned into a travel agency, the construction site at the end of the street disappeared, more trees have been planted on each block, the art gallery Clarke liked is empty with FOR LEASE written on the storefront, and the bakery changed its name.

Which reminds Clarke: she's really fucking hungry. It's almost scary. She doesn't remember ever feeling this hollow inside, doesn't remember her gums aching to chew just about anything. There was one time when Lexa, Raven, and her got lost in the forest during camping. It got to the point where all they had left were saltines and one protein bar to be divided in three, but that lasted just about ten hours until they found their way back to a trail and finished the day stuffing themselves with burgers and fries.

Clarke would do many things for a burger right now. Digging into her pockets has been fruitless though; all she has is paper tissue, two quarters, and a tube of Lexa's raspberry ChapStick. She might honestly eat the damn thing. If maybe she could go back to the cheap grocery store she last remembers being at with Lexa, she could find crackers or some fruit for 50 cents.

Then she can focus on figuring out what kind of liquid hell she drank to get to this point.
After making up her mind, she makes it to the grocery store in record speed. It's a little different from what she remembers (smaller and smellier) and the jaded woman behind the counter is definitely not the old man she saw the last time. Clarke can afford two small apples and devours them the second after she pays, standing outside the store.

She's licking her fingers when a car speeding down the street stops abruptly at a red light, tires screeching. Clarke jerks at the sound and falls back against the storefront, putting her hands up as if to protect herself. Her entire body quakes and she looks around with wide eyes, stricken by something she doesn't see. Her hearts beat loudly as panic settles in her bones.

Clarke closes her eyes and tries to take deep breaths, remembering times when her mother would tell her to focus on her breathing whenever she felt afraid. It's not exactly how she feels but it's the closest thing. She doesn't know why her body is reacting this way to something so mundane. It's like she got punched in the throat without even knowing it. She knows she just got surprised by the loud noise. It's nothing rational, it's nothing she's actually scared of.

She still really wishes someone was actually there to tell her that.

It takes a moment for her heart to calm. Clarke leans against the window and wipes the sweat off her forehead. The movement in the storefront catches her attention and her reflection surprises her. Beyond her messy hair and dirt-stained clothes, something about it is... off. It feels a lot like déjà-vu, like this exact same thing happened when she came with Lexa. She can't put her finger on it.

Clarke's eyes fall to the embroidered logo on Lexa's sweatshirt. If she weren't so fucking hungry, maybe she would've thought of it before. It's a little early for Lexa to be in class but then again Lexa isn't the youngest grad student in her program for no reason. If Clarke can find her somewhere, it would have to be either the library or some nook of the English department.

After picking up the apple cores and throwing them in the garbage, Clarke tries to forget how wobbly she feels in order to orientate herself toward Lexa's campus. It's a thirty-minute walk without the money for a bus fare, but Clarke isn't opposed to the fresh air.

There's something about the way she reacted to that car that she can't shake, though. She pulls her hoodie over her head and ignores everything but the ground beneath her feet. Tunnel vision is the only way she'll get to her safe place in one piece.

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Clarke feels reassured once she sees the familiar lush greens and warm browns of the massive campus. At least this looks the same. She can't count the number of times she's been here, sometimes waiting on a bench for Lexa, sometimes asleep against a tree like a cliché, other times just hanging around the Starbucks with friends. She doesn't actually study around here herself—the psychology department is a few blocks down and much more drab—but it's been long enough that she's associated every spot with a memory.

Students stroll in and out of the English department building, books and sleek laptops tucked beneath their arms. The atmosphere hasn't changed a bit and it's the first thing today that Clarke actually recognizes. There's an energy here that she's never found elsewhere, a buzz that never seems to end.

Clarke takes her hoodie off and makes her way in discretely, half-hidden by a student's backpack. She's not about to be stopped for a random check of her student ID when she could be this close to finding Lexa. Then again, it might get a little difficult to blend in with how filthy she looks.

She walks down the corridor and makes a beeline for the restroom, relieved that no one is at the sink.
She splashes her face with cold water, shamelessly drinks some of it, and squeezes the liquid soap in her palms to wash her hands and scrub her face. It's not perfect and she probably still needs a two-hour bath, but it'll do. A girl walks in just as she walks out and Clarke manages a smile, feeling fresh-faced and lighter—the miraculous effect of twopenny soap and water.

Clarke follows the wave of students entering a lecture hall, trying to squeeze behind them to get to the library. If Lexa isn't there, there'll still be six other floors to check.

It happens so quickly that Clarke thinks her eyes are tricking her. She turns her head and her heart skips a beat.

Lexa walks past her in such a flash that Clarke can barely open her mouth before her girlfriend is inside the lecture hall. Truthfully, Clarke's a little stunned. Lexa carries a briefcase and wears a white shirt tucked into a pencil skirt, sheer stockings and black heels and—god, when did she start dressing like a hotshot professor?

Unless...

Clarke frowns to herself. She enters behind a few students, taken aback when she sees Lexa at the front desk opening her briefcase and a box of felt tip markers. She's not here to study, she's here to teach. Clarke moves to the rear of the room with her eyes on Lexa's back. Why didn't she tell Clarke? Did Clarke forget? She can't imagine ever blanking on something this important.

Clarke plops down on a chair smack dab in the middle of the row. The lecture hall isn't packed but there's enough people that it's understandable the class is being taught here. The view isn't bad either. Of course if Lexa could actually turn around, Clarke would feel a little more at ease. There's something off, something she must've done to upset her. Clarke thinks she probably deserves it: what kind of girlfriend forgets their partner got a teaching position?

"Today we'll pick up where we left off last Tuesday," Lexa starts in an assertive tone, briefly looking at the front row.

Clarke blinks before cold dread starts to wash over her. Last week Lexa spent four days sick in bed with a headache and cold, nose red and eyes constantly watering. Last Tuesday there was no way Lexa could even get out of bed, let alone teach a class. Clarke remembers it vividly because she spent most of the week on the phone with her mother listing Lexa's symptoms. And unless Lexa means something else, Clarke must've forgotten much longer than a day.

"Later we'll move on from morphology to new word formation," Lexa continues, writing down her bullet points on the board.

Lexa then sits at the desk and opens her book, telling the rest of the class the page number and paragraph to focus on. To be honest, it's not the most engaging class. Lexa is evasive, distant, and even now that she's facing everyone she's plunged in the course textbook.

The rest of the classroom follows suit but Clarke can only stare at Lexa. She looks… cold. Stoic. Older. Not by much, but her face has lost some roundness, lines now sharp but elegant, high cheekbones, hair pulled back in a simple bun. She's stunning, of course, but Clarke has never seen her like this before. She's used to Lexa's wild hair in an array of braids; Lexa in her round glasses; Lexa's fuller cheeks and lips; Lexa in their bed, warm and smiling, sometimes shy, sometimes brazen.

But maybe it's the distance. Maybe it's the fluorescent lighting that makes Lexa's skin look so much paler. Maybe it's the setting that makes Lexa uneasy. She can't have been doing this for very long.
Clarke might not remember everything that's happened recently, but she knows her girlfriend. She knows when Lexa puts up a front.

As the lesson goes on, Clarke listens to Lexa explain and analyze excerpts in a monotonous voice, so different from the softness in her tone when she speaks to her. It's clear she knows the material and has everything prepared, only Clarke can tell it's not what she really wants to teach. Maybe it's a favor to the department.

When Lexa finally lifts her head to check on the class mechanically, Clarke's heart drops. Lexa's eyes seem dull from here, nothing like the vibrant hue Clarke knows by heart. There's emptiness there that Clarke can't even fathom—but why? She aches to get up and take Lexa with her, far away from here, but there's a dozen rows between them.

"Does anyone have any questions?" Lexa asks, getting up to erase the first few bullet points on the board to add a new one.

A hand just one row in front of Clarke goes up and Clarke can almost tell the exact moment Lexa will see her. Lexa turns around and her eyes flicker up. She's just about to open her mouth when Clarke catches her gaze and holds it.

If Clarke thought Lexa looked pale, she wasn't prepared for the way Lexa so visibly blanches. Clarke waves discretely, just a quick 'hi' to make sure she doesn't interrupt anything and Lexa can get back to it, but Lexa stands motionless, eyes wide and mouth slightly open.

Then Lexa swallows hard and looks away with a shake of her head. She closes her eyes and wipes her forehead with a shaky hand, as if suddenly ill. Students shift awkwardly in their seats, some looking around at classmates, wondering what has startled their young professor. Lexa seems to realize where she is and swiftly turns her back to the class, trying to cap her marker with such trembling hands that it slips and falls on the desk.

"Excuse me," she stutters to the class. "I'll be right back."

Her heels click on the floor and the door slams against the wall when she opens it, leaving in such a state that the murmurs around Clarke grow louder. Students stand up to stretch their legs, looking at each other with mild amusement at the prospect of something that interrupts their routine.

Clarke gets up immediately, hurrying down the lecture hall and pushing the door open. If she's upset Lexa so terribly, she's not waiting any longer to find out why.

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The corridor is emptier than it was twenty minutes ago, just a few straggling students remaining. Clarke looks from one end to the other knowing Lexa can't have gone far. She stops in front of the restroom, hand hovering over the knob. If she weren't so terrified of the truth, she'd be in there already. But Clarke knows something is wrong—there's a chunk of time missing from her memories and too many things have changed for it to be contained in one bad night. She gives the door a gentle push and steps inside.

Clarke hears the rush of water from the faucet before she sees Lexa. There's no one else in the room but her, leaning over the sink with her eyes closed and droplets of water dripping from her face. She seems smaller than Clarke knows her to be, thinner, hunched over and lost to the world. The two top buttons of her shirt have been opened, her look less severe now that she doesn't stand so rigidly.

Clarke hesitates to approach her. Lexa's heard the door close but she shows no sign of it. She
mumbles something to herself, words that Clarke can't make out from here, and the quick rise and fall of her chest never slows. Clarke can't stand waiting any longer. She moves behind her and presses her hand to Lexa's arm.

"Lexa?" She tries.

Lexa retracts her arm so violently that Clarke feels a furious sting run up her fingertips.

"Don't touch me!" Lexa snarls, jolting around to face the stranger.

Their eyes meet and Lexa lets out a strangled cry, face white like marble. Clarke doesn't know what to make of it, equally surprised by Lexa's anguish, but it's seeing her face this close that takes her aback the most. Lexa has changed far more than Clarke could guess from her spot in the lecture hall.

"It's just me," Clarke says with a tentative smile. "Don't recognize your girl?"

"Y-you," Lexa stammers, stepping back until she's pressed against the wall. She feels for the cold tiles behind her, hands desperate to cling to something so her knees won't buckle.

Clarke shakes her head. There's no one else but her that Lexa could be so scared of.

"Lexa, whatever I did—"

It's her voice that must trigger something for Lexa. She lets out a whimper unlike anything Clarke has heard before, her hand pressing up against her mouth to silence her cries.

Clarke's eyebrows knit together, a sense of numb dread settling on her.

"I'm sorry—I-I know it's crazy but I can't—" her eyes follow Lexa as she slides down the wall, body crumpling.

"Lexa, please. Breathe, calm down. What's going on?"

Lexa looks away and squeezes her eyes shut, shaking her head. She takes quick, shallow breaths, murmuring something to herself between them, tears spilling down her cheeks.

It's a twist of the knife to the heart. Clarke feels the tears in her own eyes.

"Are you feeling ill?" She asks, her face screwed up in confusion. She keeps herself from dropping to the floor to wrap her arms around Lexa. Her girlfriend has already flinched away from her and Clarke can't bear another rejection.

She glances at herself in the mirror but finds that she looks no different than she did yesterday, except for the streaks of grime on her clothing. It dawns on Clarke that she doesn't know if her yesterday is the same for Lexa. And maybe the root of the problem is there.

"Am I sick?" She asks again, desperate for answers. "Do I have—what, Alzheimer's at 21? Is that it?"

But hearing her own words, Clarke's exhausted brain tells her that can't be it. Her mother wouldn't hang up on her. Her girlfriend wouldn't cower from her. If only Lexa could—

"Please just talk to me," Clarke pleads, stepping closer. "I'm so fucking confused. Everything's changed. Some girl moved into our apartment; our neighborhood's different. It feels like spring already and you're teaching a class. How could I just forget that?" She finishes, wiping the tears threatening to spill.
Lexa shakes her head in her refusal to listen, mumbling the same words to herself like a mantra:
"It's not her. She's not here."

Clarke feels something snap inside her, frustrated that Lexa won't look at her, that her questions fall on deaf ears, that her world has been flipped over and her memories are failing her.

"Stop saying that!" She exclaims. "I'm here, I'm real! Look at me!"

Lexa flinches as if struck, looking at Clarke like she's not sure what she'll see. Clarke sees a flicker of awe in her eyes before it turns into panic again. It takes everything not to approach her, not to cup Lexa's cheeks and hold her tightly, to feel anchored again. But maybe she doesn't deserve any of it. Her own skin is still sticky from sweat, pores clogged with filth, and Lexa looks at her like—

A thought crosses Clarke's mind and her blood runs cold.

"Did I hurt you?" She whispers, looking at the tiles on the wall.

If she's truly gone mad, if she's done anything that explains Lexa staying away from her, she'd rather die now than live with the memory. Lexa stares back at her with red-rimmed eyes and Clarke has never seen so much heartache on her girlfriend's face.

"I did this to you, didn't I?" Clarke asks again, arms wrapping around her own stomach. "I hurt you and I don't even remember it."

Lexa's breathing seems to slow, tears drying on her cheeks as her eyes fixate on Clarke for the first time, focused in a manner they weren't before. Clarke can't take the stare any more than she can take Lexa's silence. She twists around and flinches at her reflection in the mirror. If this girl has hurt the most precious person in her life, she can only look at her with disgust.

It's an easy thing to let the anger curl in her stomach. What else has shifted when she wasn't looking? What else has she forgotten?

Lexa's voice fills the silence, hesitant and pained, barely a murmur. "Is it really you?"

Clarke shakes her head. Is it really her? She looks down at the specks of dirt still beneath her fingernails. Her hands have done something horrible; they must have.

"What's happening to me?" She trembles.

The fear makes her stomach churn and Clarke lets out a pained gasp, eyes wide when the room seems to shrink around her, lights suddenly bright and harsh, the scrape of Lexa's heels on the tiles making her skin crawl, the bile in her throat starting to sting. She stumbles back, looking right into Lexa's eyes, heart breaking when Lexa doesn't flinch this time, peers back at her like she's someone to be carefully observed. But Clarke doesn't recognize her girlfriend any more than she recognizes herself, and until she knows for certain she won't hurt Lexa again, she can't step any closer to her.

"I'm sorry," she chokes, pushing the door open.

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Clarke doesn't know how long she runs for. She bumps into shoulders on campus, welcomes the burn in her legs and her lungs. She turns into the street she used to know by heart, slows down when sweat starts to bead on her brow. She knows this street. Just a few days ago, she bought herself a hot dog here. She can still remember the taste of it, the drop of mustard on her chin, and Lexa's laugh
when she facetime her. It hurts to think of her now, the pain in her eyes, her rejection, her silence.

Clarke turns around and takes the next street with her eyes looking everywhere this time. She knows these places. She's lived here, walked here, laughed and cried here, been a part of these sidewalks like the thousands of people passing through.

But somehow it feels like waking up in a room where someone has moved the furniture around. It's similar but changed at the same time. The difference is in the colors, the smells in the air, the people with bigger phones, flatter phones, the advertisements for brands she doesn't recognize. None of those were there before. How could it have changed so quickly?

Clarke feels her head spin. She lets it all in, saturates her brain with the information, grows dizzy with it all, heart beating wildly. She needs to know. Her eyes roam everywhere for that one piece of information. She seeks it out like a starved woman. Surely it's not so difficult to get the damn date, surely—

Clarke watches as a bus passes and her heart sinks. It's a simple thing; a movie ad on the side of the bus like the thousand others she's seen in her life. She usually doesn't bother looking. If she does, it's never more than a fleeting glance. But she does this one:

IN THEATERS

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She blinks. Tries again. Squints. It can't be. Clarke shakes her head, looking behind the bus at the clutter of people walking up and down the street, ants amongst the colony, surrounded by skyscrapers and giant screens for giant adverts. The normalcy is suffocating. The tiny newsstand just on the other side of the street throws Clarke back in the midst of it.

She crosses the street when the light turns green, her beat up sneakers starting to hurt her feet. There's a pebble rolling around in her left shoe but she can't be bothered with it now. Once she gets to the newsstand, she'll know for certain.

There are rows of magazines next to candy and drinks and she licks her lips at the sight. Her stomach groans loudly. Clarke picks up the closest newspaper and reads the titles like it's all a dream, because surely it is.

A new president (surely a joke?), more riots, more wars, some the same, some different, sequels of movies she hasn't even seen yet, ads for more finely tuned technology (what the fuck is an Apple Watch?), stock projections for the upcoming months. 2017. Now that she seeks it out, it's everywhere.

Clarke puts the newspaper down and looks at her surroundings with bated breath. Now she sees it.

It's not an illusion. She's not dreaming. She's not being fooled. She missed four years of her life. She's been gone for four years.

The panic attack never comes, though. There's something strange about the realization; it washes over her slowly and satisfies the rational part of her. She can accept this. It fits, makes sense, and answers most of her questions. The ‘why’ is what troubles her.

Clarke walks down the street with a crease in her brows and a migraine coming quick. People don't just vanish four years without knowing why. She turns into a smaller street, this one not as busy, not as noisy, and tries not to fire too many questions at once.
She knows a disease like Alzheimer's is still a possibility, but the pieces don't fit. A coma is more likely. She had an accident and her brain got damaged. Still, it doesn't explain waking up in the park in the same clothes she remembers wearing last night. Or however long ago that was.

Clarke hypothesizes long and hard, feet taking her in a familiar direction. She doesn't dwell too much on where she's going. The explanation is more important.

She was locked up somewhere. Kept away from the world. Clarke read about psychology long enough to know what trauma does to the brain. She could've forgotten. It could've been some sort of cult where she received shock treatment. It's not unprecedented, it's plausible, and ECT could have given her amnesia before she stumbled out of there after four years and collapsed in the park. It's a familiar place, somewhere she would've felt safe if her own apartment wasn't an option. Maybe she already knew that but forgot. Maybe she sought out Lexa at their spot.

It still sounds like a bad movie, and Clarke can't keep guessing. There'll never be any certitude in that. She needs the truth.

It doesn't take too long to figure out where she might find it.

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The bar isn't much more than a hole in the wall, cornered between a tattoo parlor and a laundromat. The street it's on is narrow and empty, cracks running down the walls of old buildings. It holds its appeal, has a certain haunted quality that Clarke could always appreciate, and it makes her half-smile to see it's still standing proud.

The sign on the door reads CLOSED but Clarke knows from experience that the lock won't be turned. She pushes the door open and steps inside, anxious again when she notices the things that have changed; the new tables, the added decorations on the walls, the spotless bar and adjustable stools. The place has done well for itself, that much is obvious.

Her friend comes out of a room in the back, his earbuds blasting loud music as he pulls down an upturned chair. A rag is thrown over his shoulder and Clarke stops short.

Murphy has changed as well. It shouldn't surprise her so much but she didn't think it would be this noticeable. His features have almost softened, less stern and angry at the world, hair shorter and beard neatly groomed as if he actually started giving a damn.

She waits for him to notice her before she raises her hand for an awkward wave.

He jumps back, knocking the chair behind him.

"Holy shit!"

His earphones fall and Clarke clears her throat.

"Hey."

Murphy leans against the table behind him.

"Shit, you look just like—"

Clarke can't deal with disbelief again. She shakes her head, stepping forward.

"Murphy, it is me."
He puts his hands up. "Woah, woah, don't move."

"Murphy."

"This is fucking crazy. You really look—"

"Please just listen to me—"

His eyes sweep over her. "Wait a minute, where did you get that sweatshirt?"

"Jesus, shut up!" Clarke snaps, stepping toward him. "Today's been really shitty for me. I woke up in a park with dirt coming out of my ears and zero clue how I got there. I found out I don't have an apartment anymore, my girlfriend is trying to convince herself I'm not real, and somehow I can't remember the last four years of my life. So I get that seeing my face might come as a shock to you, and I can even appreciate a tear or two, but please believe me when I tell you it's me. Clarke. I'm real and I'm—" she takes a long breath. "I'm here."

Murphy stares at her with wide eyes, taking tentative steps toward her. He stops in front of her and studies every pore and every eyelash. If he tries hard enough, maybe he'll see through her.

Clarke flicks his forehead and he hisses.

"Hey—!

"Stop looking at me like I'm a ghost."

"I don't know what to say," Murphy blurts. "Clarke is—but you're... fuck. Either I'm going crazy or you're a damn good actress."

Clarke groans, stepping away. She looks around, eyes flickering to the collection of bottles on display behind the bar.

"This is your mom's bar," she starts. "Your full name is Jonathan Murphy and your dad died when you were 13. You got kicked out of high school for stealing meds and then you went to juvie for trying to set the principal's car on fire." She turns to face him. "When we were 18 we both got locked into the basement at a frat party. I told you I was dating my RA and you cried about your dad. Then you sobered up and threatened to end me in a non-criminal way."

Murphy's mouth drops open.

"Yeah. I know all your little secrets and you know most of mine. Now can you tell me what the fuck happened to me?"

Murphy blinks twice. "Shit. All right. Crazy it is, then."

He scrutinizes her a moment longer before conceding. "You got me, Griffin."

Clarke feels her heart jump up, hope starting to grow for the first time. "You're sure?"

Murphy grabs his rag and walks behind the bar. "Well I've gone fucking nuts. There's nothing I can do about it now. Might as well have the company."

Clarke looks at him expectantly, holding her breath.

He rubs the back of his neck. "Right, um, I don't know how to say this. You were at the wrong place at the wrong time." He keeps his eyes on her, still astonished. "I don't know how everything went
down, I could never stomach reading the articles. Just knew about the shots and that was enough. You uh... you didn't make it."

"I got shot?" Clarke whispers.

Murphy nods. "I don't know what you being here means in the cosmic scheme of bullshit but... You didn't even get to the hospital before—it." He winces. "October 17th. That's the day. Had a funeral and everything."

Clarke shakes her head. "Obviously someone made a mistake."

Murphy laughs, a nervous tick. He bends down and picks up a crate stocked with rum. He starts to open it and then stops.

"I saw your body," he says in a tight voice. "A thing like that? You don't forget it. It was you. The same you I see now."

"Well I'm here, aren't I? You see me. People see me."

Murphy nods. "Yeah, you're here."

Clarke's eyebrows knit together. It's not the explanation she wanted. It's not the answer she thought would make sense. But it does. It explains the clothes, the dirt, the apartment, the years that have passed, the feeling she got outside of the grocery store, Lexa, and—

"Was my mom there?"

Murphy nods, setting bottles aside. "Of course."

Clarke sits at the counter, staring at the old wood. She frowns, growing dizzy. It can't be the truth. She's here, she's breathing, she's alive.

"How was she?" She asks in a murmur.

"What you'd expect a mom to be at her only kid's funeral."

Clarke looks away and Murphy cringes.

"Sorry."

"I didn't come here to get coddled." She toys with the sleeve of her sweatshirt. "And Lexa?"

Murphy gives her a look and she gets the idea without him saying it.

"I'm not gonna lie to you," he starts, and then seems to hesitate to say her name. "Clarke, some things you don't want to know. Pain like that... it changes a person."

He finishes cleaning a glass and sets it aside. After a moment he stops and looks at Clarke like he's about to regret his next words.

"To be honest I haven't spoken to her in a while. I know she's around but... I wasn't even that close to her. What difference could I make?"

Clarke shakes her head. "Someone should've been there for her."
Murphy leans against the back table, arms crossed against his chest.

"She wasn't exactly receptive to support."

"She was different when I saw her."

"It's been four years. Everyone's different." He pauses and arches an eyebrow. "Maybe not you. You look like you could use a bath. That hasn't changed."

It's the first time she really smiles today and Murphy's grin is the same crooked one she remembers. He takes out two shot glasses and slides her one.

"Usually I'd point to the clock and kick you out, but I think you deserve a drink." He pours her a shot of rum and sets the bottle aside.

She downs it quickly, wincing at the pleasurable burn. Murphy chuckles.

"Yeah, you're human all right."

Clarke glares at him. "You know, you went from shitting your pants to laughing at me a little too fast."

"I adapt quickly."

"You're a freak of nature, John Murphy."

"Says the dead woman walking."

"I didn't miss you at all."

He laughs and downs his own shot, mouth twisting. So maybe some things have remained the same.

"Did you see Raven yet? Try your family?"

Clarke shakes her head. "My mom hung up on me."

"Can't blame her."

Clarke grabs the bottle, thumb scratching the label.

"This is cheap as hell by the way."

He smirks. "I guess you can certify that now that you've been down below."

She flips him off.

Eventually, Murphy has to excuse himself when his fiancée calls—Emori, who Clarke vaguely remembers being his friend-with-benefits four years ago—and the silence that surrounds her is sobering. He's left her with some snacks and Clarke isn't embarrassed to finish the two bags of chips and half the jar of stuffed olives. Being alone in the room with a fuller stomach helps her focus, but none of her thoughts are very helpful.

What Murphy told her doesn't sound real, and how could it be? Buried or not, Clarke is now here and well alive. A case of mistaken identity comes to mind, but she knows her mother would've been able to tell. Lexa would've seen the difference. Her friends wouldn't have buried someone else in her place. It had to be her they saw and her they mourned.
Clarke rubs her temples and sighs just as Murphy walks back in, sliding his phone in his back pocket.

"You can use my bathroom if you want," he tells her. "Emori's got some t-shirts she never wears and uh, other clean stuff you can use," he adds awkwardly.

It's a short walk up to his apartment right above the bar, a spacious studio with great lighting, cozy furniture, and a double bed taking up most of the space in the middle. He shows her where Emori keeps her clothes and leads her to the bathroom with a stack of towels.

"Right. So, take your time. Don't clog the drain. Don't use my shampoo. Red bottle is what you want."

"Got it."

He hovers at the door, hesitant. "I'm going to call Raven."

Clarke nods slowly.

"Probably invite her over... At least to prove if I'm actually hallucinating or not."

He makes the joke to cover the undercurrent of fear in his tone, something she's noticed despite the easy conversations they've managed to have. She doesn't blame him for it; she's felt equally as terrified ever since he mentioned her funeral.

"That's fine. I don't mind, Murphy. Thank you."

He nods slowly and then steps outside. "I'll be downstairs. Don't disappear on me again, Griffin."  

∞

Clarke doesn't know how long her shower lasts. She scrubs every inch of her body and washes her hair twice, shivers running down her spine when her fingers dig into her scalp. She turns the water off to clip her nails and brush her teeth, relieved when her breath doesn't smell like rum and stale chips anymore. She draws herself a hot bath, sinking into it with a long sigh. It's a lot of water wasted on her but she hasn't used any in the last four years so maybe the world can cut her some slack. She closes her eyes and groans, muscles almost melting.

The small radio clock on the sink tells her it's been nearly forty minutes since she got in. Her fingers have pruned and the skin almost hurts from how tight it is, but the water is still lukewarm and there's something soothing about it. Clarke can think easy in here. Outside she was distracted.

She faces the truth slowly, working herself up to even thinking the words.

She died.

She's dead.

Or at least she was.

The simple truth is that Clarke doesn't feel any different. Her heart beats, she feels hunger, thirst, pain, the same overwhelming love she has for Lexa, the same sense of kinship with Murphy, a desire to know things, curiosity, and confusion. Her legs ache from walking all day, her skin is warm, and when she wiggles her toes she can feel the water between them. She's just as alive as she was in her last memory, pinning Lexa against that tree, and walking beside her through the aisles of the store.
Oh. That's a new one. She didn't remember that last part, actually. Clarke frowns, trying to focus on what happened next. Did Lexa get her snacks? Did Clarke grab the ice cream from the back? Her headache makes her groan.

She rubs her fingers over her stomach, thinking back on what Murphy said. She knows it must be true. Somehow it fits. Somehow it doesn't feel like a joke and there's nothing about it that feels off anymore. The lack of memories, Lexa and Murphy looking a few years older, the world around her that kept evolving and building itself.

Clarke sighs and slides down until the water submerges her. She lies still for a moment, curious to see if the need to breathe will kick in. When she starts to feel the pressure on her chest, the urge to open her mouth and take a deep breath, she wonders if she'd be better off letting the water fill up her lungs.

People have mourned her already. She wouldn't be any more missed than she was yesterday. And what if it was a cosmic fluke? What if the universe notices its mistake and strikes her dead in a week? She can't put the people who love her through that kind of heartache again.

And yet.

Clarke pushes up to the surface and takes a long breath. She sits up in the tub and wipes the water from her eyes, blinking a few times.

This can't have happened for no reason.

She's not sure why she isn't panicking. Maybe it helped to see Lexa and Murphy and know that, at least, the people she loves are still here.

But now she can't help but feel guilty for the way she approached Lexa. Her girlfriend saw a ghost in her class and the ghost pursued her all the way to the restroom. Clarke would almost laugh if Lexa hadn't looked so terrified about it.

She'll have to approach her differently next time, tread carefully to find a way to convince her the same way she did Murphy. And maybe it won't be so difficult. Lexa used to believe in spirits, in reincarnation and century-old myths. She used to read about it before bed and hum deep in thought, turning to Clarke to ask her if she believed in the multiplicity of universes.

It hurts Clarke to think that might've changed, that Lexa shut the world out and lost herself to monotony, but if Clarke can somehow reach that quieter part of Lexa, she might have a chance.

The door bursts open and Clarke startles, covering her chest with her arm.

"Jesus Christ."

It's Raven. Raven with wide eyes, combat boots, and long hair sticking out like she's been running. Murphy hovers behind her, back turned and arms crossed.

"I tried to stop her."

Raven peers at Clarke like she can't believe it's really her and it occurs to Clarke just how ridiculous the situation is. Clarke would've sworn she saw Raven just two days ago, NASA t-shirt and ripped jeans and hair up in a messy ponytail. It's not like she had the time to miss her friend in that time span. Yet there she is in front of her, changed just like Lexa and Murphy, her eyes more guarded.

"How…?" Raven starts, head shaking. "I got a voicemail from Lexa telling me I need to call her
back, that she's freaking out because she's seeing things, and then—"

Raven balls up her fists, inspecting every inch of Clarke's face.

"Murphy fucking calls saying the same shit. That either he's seeing a ghost or you're actually here."

Clarke crosses her legs when Raven steps even closer. "Uh, I'm pretty much naked here, Rae," she points out, quite uselessly.

"You're alive," Raven croaks. "How can you be alive? I was there for every step. I helped your mom pick the flowers. I saw you in that dress, you weren't breathing."

Clarke sighs, sliding her free hand through her dripping hair. "I don't have an answer to that."

Raven's eyes turn cold and she looks furious. "You fucking faked it."

Clarke's eyes widen. "Raven—"

"How could you do that to us? How could you do that to your mom? To Lexa?!"

"I didn't fake it!" Clarke exclaims.

Raven relents. It seems to hit her slowly that nothing that elaborate could've occurred. But what other explanation makes sense?

"You look exactly the same—how—what—" Raven trails off, unable to formulate every thought shooting through her mind.

Clarke chuckles dryly. "Yeah, welcome to my state of mind."

∞

It takes less time for Raven to believe her than Murphy. Clarke supposes it's the fact Murphy is beside Raven the whole time insisting he sees her too. It'd be a little comical if she were a stranger peering in.

Her friends eventually leave the bathroom so she can dry herself and change into Emori's clothes. They're not a perfect fit but they're clean and Clarke has bigger fish to fry. She dries her hair quickly and grabs Lexa's sweatshirt before walking out into the living room where Raven waits on the couch. Murphy has gone back downstairs and Clarke wonders if it was at Raven's request.

Clarke's been here before but the place has changed, more open and less cluttered, not as noisy as it used to be. She feels a pang thinking of her own apartment, knowing she lost her home without having a say in it.

Lexa loved it just as much as she did and Clarke remembers every sound she used to make, every hum and sigh and pat of her feet against the hardwood floor. It's a surprise to people that Lexa is so noisy but Clarke lives for every habit. Lexa leaves documentaries on for background noise as she types out her papers on her absurdly old computer, fingers smashing into the ridiculously big keys. Lexa cracks her knuckles and then looks around, sheepish and apologetic and promising she'll quit when Clarke looks her way with a raised eyebrow.

Or at least that's what she used to do.

Four years is a long time. Clarke remembers being 17 like it's a concept; she was just another kid in high school, just another teen hoping the future would be kind, would be exciting, would be
everything she hoped it would be. Four years feels like an eternity she's missed. Her friends have aged without her, and she can't imagine everything that's changed for them.

"I guess I'm a little jealous," Raven says from the couch. "You don't even have one tiny wrinkle more."

Clarke smiles and Raven gets up, walking toward her to wrap her in a tight hug. Her eyes squeeze shut.

"Jeez, you even feel real," Raven laughs in disbelief.

Clarke lets the happiness wash over her. She hasn't felt the stretch of time like they have but she can feel how much Raven missed her in the way her arms tighten and she brushes her hand over her own face, wiping off a tear she'll insist doesn't exist.

They settle on the couch and Raven just stares at her for a few seconds, shaking her head when she catches herself.

"How do you feel?" Raven asks her.

Clarke shrugs, toying with the hem of her sweatshirt. "The same. Confused. Trying not to freak out."

"Makes four of us."

Clarke frowns, feeling her throat close up. "I hurt Lexa so much. All of you. I don't know how to fix that."

"This isn't something you feel guilty over, Clarke."

Clarke wipes her nose. "Yeah? You're familiar with the protocol in these situations? Because I could use some guidelines here."

Raven brings her knees to her chest. "All I know is you're here. And except for the fact you haven't aged a day, Murphy told me you didn't have a burning desire to chew on him or suck his blood, so we've got two possible problems out of the way. You're here and you're safe—that's all I care about. We can help you figure out the rest."

It feels good to talk to Raven like this, similar to their late night chats if it weren't for the glaring time gap. Clarke realizes she hasn't even asked about Raven's life.

"I don't even know what you do now," she admits with an embarrassed chuckle.

Raven leans back. "Well, you're looking at an MIT grad still drowning in student debt and betraying all her beliefs by working for ALIE in shitty customer service. So much for going to Mars, huh?"

"Wait. Has that happened? Did someone land on Mars?"

Raven laughs. "Luckily for me, not yet."

Clarke nudges her knee with her foot. "Then no problem; you'll get there."

"That's easy for you to say, you're a medical marvel now. You can go on Ellen and be on the cover of Scientific American or Christianity Today."

"Oh god, please stop."
"You can probably sell the rights to your story to Hollywood."

"Raven."

"ScarJo will get the part. You'll be best buds."

Clarke groans, throwing her head back against the couch. Raven laughs.

"Yeah, poor you." And then she adds, a little bittersweet, "At least you'll get the life you always deserved."

That knocks the breath out of Clarke. She sits up and there are tears in Raven's eyes.

"I really—I missed you, Clarke."

"You know it's funny, you were talking my ear off just two days ago."

Raven chuckles. "Right. I think I like your reality better."

Clarke leans forward and brushes her tears away.

∞

Murphy can't leave the bar but they promise they'll catch up as soon as possible. Clarke thanks him for everything and smiles when he hugs her tight at the door, something rare but precious.

Raven drives her around the city at an easy pace, showing her the things that have changed and the things that have endured hard times but remained the same. And it's weird how everything goes on, even something this incomprehensible not enough to stop the world around them. There's still work to do, still people to call, bills to pay, and time to use wisely.

Clarke asks Raven about this foreign present and Raven goes through an array of moods: excited when she mentions new advances in technology, in prosthetics, or annoyed when she brings up politics or the environment. The car stops in a nearly empty parking lot and Clarke freezes when she sees the cemetery ahead of them. She knows it all too well.

"Am I—is that—?"

"We don't have to," Raven's voice softens. "I just thought you might want to see it."

Clarke swallows hard and nods, taking her seatbelt off and opening the door. They walk toward the gate and Clarke feels a strange sense of peace. The cemetery itself is beautiful, tended to regularly and surrounded by rich greens and vibrant colors. She remembers being here not so long ago for her father; maybe five months or so. It was a quick 'hello', a walk in and out because she had the time, a way to end the day before driving home.

She never imagined doing this for herself. Something clenches inside her and she stops in her tracks, pulling Raven's arm.

"This feels really weird."

"We can go back."

"No I—I want to. It just feels like a dream. Like I'll fly away and be somewhere else."

Raven squeezes her hand. "I'm not letting you. Come on."
They walk in slowly and Clarke feels the knot in her throat double in size, eyes reading every name on every grave. There are people who have lived long lives, people who have fresh flowers growing by their names, people who have pictures of themselves looking content. There are people who haven’t lived enough, who should’ve had longer, people who have weeds or bramble in front of their names instead of lilies or roses.

Raven stops her and Clarke looks down for a moment, taking a deep breath. Her eyes flicker up and she swallows back a cry.

Her headstone is marble and black granite, simple but beautiful, and her full name is gold lettering atop the dates, 1992-2013. There are blue pansies growing in front, their petals bright and healthy. Clarke clutches her stomach, thumb rubbing the fabric of her sweatshirt.

"Clarke?"

"She was here. Lexa was here."

"How do you know?"

"That’s her favorite flower."

Raven crouches down and Clarke follows, feeling a petal between her fingers.

"They look like a bitch to maintenance," Raven points out. "I don’t know when she finds the time. No offense."

"None taken," Clarke murmurs, eyeing the bed of flowers and then the headstone next to hers—Jake Griffin.

"I try to come around," Raven says with a regretful expression. "Life gets in the way, you know?"

"I get it, Raven. It's not like I could tell."

Raven sits back on the grass and clears her throat. "You don't—remember stuff? I mean, up there? Or whatever."

Clarke shakes her head. "The last thing I remember is going through the grocery store with Lexa. After that? A big black patch of nothing."

"Well that sucks. Jesus."

"Didn't meet that guy either."

Raven looks around at other headstones. "Someone's gonna have to dig you up, Clarke. If you're not in there, we know."

"Know what?" Clarke gets up and slips her hands in the sweatshirt's pockets. "Me being in there or not isn't going to change a thing. I'd still have more questions than answers."

Raven stands up as well, wiping the grass off her ass. "What kind of questions?"

Clarke snorts. The list expands every minute and she's not sure she's ready for any of the answers. There is one that she can't shake though.

"What happened to Lexa?"
Raven links their arms together and they walk out of the cemetery, the gate squeaking behind them.

"I don't want to speak for her. We all went through a bad time. Everybody loved you. From where I stood, Lexa was just... angry a lot."

They get inside the car and stay in the quiet until Raven chuckles at a memory.

"She called me every name you can imagine. I have to give it to her, she was creative. I stuck it out though. I think she knew I would." Raven's smile fades. "She couldn't live in your apartment anymore though. I thought it was a good idea. I had to stay with her and, not to be a creep, but your smell was fucking everywhere, Clarke."

Clarke swallows hard, fearing the worst. "Please tell me she never—"

Raven shakes her head. "She didn't. I know she thought about it, but I think she saw it as letting you down somehow."

"And then?"

Raven smiles weakly. "Then she stopped talking about it. Locked it all up. I barely even saw her. Whenever I'd go to her new place with some food, she was deep in some essay or thesis or fellowship application. She just... worked."

"But she got better?" Clarke pushes.

Raven thinks long about it before starting the car.

"She got by."

∞

Raven's apartment is in the heart of the city, a large studio with old hardwood floor and large windows. It's organized chaos, most of her clothes on the couch or the chair next to it. Her fridge is stocked and Clarke nearly faints when she spots the leftover pizza. She's two slices down when Raven gets her to slow down.

"I have to call Lexa back."

Clarke swallows and nods, feeling entirely small all of a sudden.

"Do you want to talk to her first?" Raven asks, taking her phone out.

"She'll hang up."

It hurts to say it but Clarke knows it's the truth. Her girlfriend won't just listen to her voice and believe it's her without the shadow of a doubt. But they agreed to call her before Clarke went to her mom's home to give her a heart attack, and even with Raven there to help, Clarke knows she needs Lexa by her side to face her mother.

Raven waits two rings before Lexa picks up and Clarke's heart stops.

"Raven." Her voice is a breathy sigh, as if reassured, and it's a good sign as far as Clarke can hear on speaker.

"Hey. I got your message," Raven starts softly, glancing at Clarke. "And um—look there's no possible way to open this conversation easily, so I'll just..." she cringes. "Clarke is here."
There's silence before Clarke overhears shuffling around, as if Lexa got up to move somewhere else, perhaps somewhere more private. The noise dies down and then Lexa's voice comes back, barely audible.

"You… see her too?"

Raven's brow furrows. "What do you mean? Are you seeing her right now?"

"Earlier, I—but then she was gone again," Lexa admits in a whisper. "Raven, I—I'm losing my mind."

Raven smiles weakly. "Then that'd make both of us. And Murphy, too."

Lexa remains silent.

"Lexa, Clarke is sitting on my couch right now."

Raven passes Clarke the phone despite her shaking her head twice. Clarke clears her throat, hands trembling.

"Lexa," she croaks. "Please don't hang up."

There's a long pause and Clarke holds her breath.

"Raven, who is that?" Lexa asks in a shaky whisper.

Raven answers softly, "Why don't you see for yourself?"

Lexa's answer comes after a long moment and Clarke can tell she's crying. "I'm coming over."
"How long has it been?"

"Four years."

"Promise me no one dies for me."

"No one dies for you."

"Will I remember this?"

"Not even for a moment."

∞

It's a warm night, the sky a dark blue with a stretch of orange slowly rising.

The room isn't large or small, a decent space with the one bed, dresser, and cluttered desk in the corner. It's little more than what a guest would find in a hotel—minibar excluded—but the framed pictures are proof of some intention to make the bare walls more familiar.

Lexa wakes up slowly, eyes squeezing shut twice before she hears padded footsteps on the hardwood floor. She rolls over on her back and brushes a hand over her face.

"It's too early for food, Gus," she croaks.

The heavy breathing comes closer and Lexa cracks an eye open, sighing when her Bearded Collie props his head on the Mattress. Gus is as old and tired as he sounds, nearly fourteen with a coat of coarse white fur and thick hair covering his dark eyes. He's one week cured from his kennel cough but Lexa worries for his lungs now, so fragile that he sometimes needs to pause before he resumes walking.

Lexa pats the top of his head as she glances at the alarm clock—5 AM. If not time for food, it's certainly time for coffee. She gets out of bed and stretches with a groan, bones popping and muscles waking slowly. She doesn't remember tossing and turning but the sheets at the foot of her bed and the pillow on the floor don't give the impression of a quiet sleep. Maybe it was a nightmare—she can't remember for sure with the sleeping pills still lingering in her bloodstream and weighing her memories down.

The blinds are opened and the bed is made, wrinkles gone and pillows fluffed. Gus stays in the corner of the room, a dappling of morning light barely reaching his paws. He gets up to follow Lexa to the kitchen, slower than she is, and lets out a whine when she starts the coffee machine first.

Breakfast is always a quick affair. Lexa sits at the table with a steaming cup, staring into space until Gus nuzzles her hand hanging near the chair. She's like this most mornings, still a little drowsy from her medication. He's hungry and time is not his friend. Lexa shakes her head. Her coffee is black and bitter but it'll do; soon enough it clears her mind and sharpens her thoughts. She just doesn't know why it feels like she's forgetting something today.
Gus is left content with a full bowl of food before Lexa heads toward the shower, her clothes already hung next to her towel. She isn't pressed for time but she washes at the same speed she drank her coffee, eager to start the day so it'll end just as quickly.

Required classes are rarely enjoyable to teach and Lexa dreads every single one of them. She suspects most of her students do, too. Most of what she grades these days is sloppy writing crammed between breakfast and a shower, essays riddled with typos and run-on sentences. The students don't want to be there; she doesn't want to be there; at least they agree on that.

Admittedly she still enjoys some aspects of it—and once upon a time she tried to make it the center of her world, tried to make work a soulmate of sorts—but between the textbooks and syllabus the department imposes and the audible snores in most morning classes, it's gotten hard to pretend this routine is anything more than a dead-end.

And sometimes Lexa isn't sure why she chose this career. She used to want to teach kids. That was the dream job. She never really knew why, only that it felt right when she tutored her young cousins. Encouraging them to learn and dream felt similar to bringing a little good in the world.

But the world doesn't seem to care much for good people, let alone good intentions.

∞

Lexa waits by her building with her phone in hand, scrolling down her inbox to check her emails. She replies to the students asking questions and the ones notifying her of their absence (she wonders why some bother with excuses on the days essays need to be turned in, they must think she was never a student herself), and checks her schedule when it comes to making appointments with the overachievers. She knows sucking up when she sees it but filling her days with distractions is always welcome.

Loud honking takes her out of it, a grating sound she's come to recognize. She slips her phone in her pocket and looks up, face blank when a dented van pulls up on the curb of the street. The duct-tapped window rolls down and her friend peers at her with a smirk.

"Is this the pickup address for the jaded youth?"

Loud honking takes her out of it, a grating sound she's come to recognize. She slips her phone in her pocket and looks up, face blank when a dented van pulls up on the curb of the street. The duct-tapped window rolls down and her friend peers at her with a smirk.

"Is this the pickup address for the jaded youth?"

Lexa walks around the van and settles on the passenger seat.

"You have to be the worst driver in the state."

Her friend laughs, the van taking off shortly after. "Miss Sunny Personality is full of compliments at the crack of dawn. I'm charmed."

"It's 9 AM, Anya."

Anya pushes her sunglasses on her head. "It's ungodly."

The streets are already busy and loud, glutted with taxis and Ubers and every frustrated pedestrian attempting to make their way through the crowds. There are too many cars and too many angry bikers in between, too many people restricted in movement by too many red lights and drivers ignoring the lights altogether in favor of being on time.

Lexa looks away from the mass of hurried businesspeople zigzagging between tourists and food stands, instead glancing at the various stickers stuck on the dashboard. She presses her thumb against one starting to peel off.
The van is like a home in itself, familiar and comfortable, clean in corners and messy in others, dented here and there, a good-looking vehicle for the most part. Anya's Nepali charms and pendants hang from the rearview mirror, their gold and silver chains twisted into a giant knot that Lexa has tried and failed to entangle. It smells like whatever food they last ate in here, sushi or pizza usually, and the glove compartment is full of Anya's taffy wrappers.

Lexa sits back with her elbow pressed against the door, a sudden shiver rolling down her spine. Her skin feels clammy and cold and she wonders if she's getting sick.

Anya glances at her with a funny smile.

"So, do I have to bring it up?"

Lexa looks sideways with a frown. "Bring what up?"

Anya scoffs, eyes on the road. "Tremblay. Your date."

Lexa thinks back on it, the words slow to reach her brain. She blinks and then remembers.

"Oh. Yes. Dinner. It was nice."

"Dinner? You think I asked to know what seasoning you had? Give me something better to chew on."

"What are you talking about?" And then— "Oh. Oh my god, no. That didn't happen."

"Why the fuck not?"

Lexa shakes her head and rolls the window down.

"It's morning. I'm not going into the details of my sex life with you."

"You don't have a sex life."

"And yet you ask."

Anya turns into another street, hands smooth on the wheel. There's a pause in the conversation until they're out of the heavy traffic and into a crisscross of smaller residential streets.

"You chickened out of the whole thing." Anya doesn't bother turning it into a question.

Lexa doesn't like being caught lying but she knows this one was poorly masked.

"She's not my type."

"She's everyone's type. She's smart as a whip; a real poet—and she has a crush on you. What more do you need?"

Lexa shifts in her seat, her neck starting to feel hot. "I don't know. I tried."

"One date."

"She wasn't... We didn't click, that's all there is to it."

"Here we go again with the clicking. Sometimes you just need someone who knows what to do with their hands."
Lexa bites the insides of her cheeks when she feels an unexpected surge of anger. "Maybe that's enough for you."

Anya glances at her from the corner of her eye as if sensing the change in mood. The morning sunlight peeks between skyscrapers and she brings down her sunglasses from the top of her head. "Fair enough."

Lexa's eyes soften and she's grateful for the ensuing silence, grateful that Anya is the type to tease but not press.

"Why don't you ask her out?" Lexa suggests with a tentative smile.

Anya relaxes in her seat. "Trust me, I would if she wasn't so hard-pressed on getting to know you through me."

"Well. What can I say, it seems I have an aura."

Anya lets out a hearty laugh. "Oh yes, the infamous aura of the ever mysterious English professor."

Lexa crosses her feet, lips quirking. Talking with Anya has always come naturally. Her fellow professor only ever talks about the present or the nearby future and Lexa finds their banter easy, almost a relief. Anya isn't the type to respect much of anything, carefree in both her attitude and spirit (not to mention a thorn in the uppity English department's side) but she respects a person's privacy and Lexa supposes that was the trait that allowed them to be friends in the first place.

Of course, sometimes Lexa wonders if Anya knows more than she pretends. She must. She's intuitive, sharp, and scarily good at telling the truth from a lie. But Anya also has a code of honor of sorts—parts of it scratched on some piece of paper that Lexa glimpsed at once—and personal boundaries seem to be at the heart of it.

For a moment in the day it's nice to pretend there's only the two of them in a van.

"What about that TA—Maya, something?" Lexa wonders after a while, spotting the tops of tall trees in the distance. "You went on a date?"

Anya clicks her tongue. "Very sweet but boring where it matters. You know the type. I'm staying away from assistants."

Lexa shakes her head. She doesn't know the type and she doesn't want the crass details. "Sometimes I wonder how we get along."

Anya smirks, driving toward an underground parking lot. "We don't. You take advantage of my van to avoid smelly pits in the subway, and I get company that doesn't bore me to tears."

"There'll be tears when I finally buy my MINI."

"That car is obnoxious."

"You drive a beat-up van from the 90s. You don't have a say in this."

Anya parks the van between a wall and an empty space. "How far do you expect to go in that lemon? You'll be laughed off the highway."

Lexa grabs her briefcase and opens the door. "I'll miss you, too, Anya. Thank you for the drive."
Anya rolls her eyes. "This was a shit rideshare!"

Lexa throws her hand up before exiting the parking lot. She makes it to her class with ten minutes to spare, as usual. Intro to Linguistics goes by quickly. Lexa has the material memorized by heart and her students are particularly unresponsive today, which means she talks for three hours but hits every point she wants to cover. There are hands raised and notes taken, brief exchanges and few interruptions. All in all, it goes as expected.

When it's over and Lexa sits in her office crammed between a potted plant and her desk, she reminds herself this is the routine she wanted. Routine is simple, unsurprising, and reliable.

Later that day it's no shock to Lexa that the subway is packed. Anya teaches a night-class and so Lexa stands for forty long minutes between an old man and a gel-slicked teenager. She catches herself dozing off on her arm at least six times. She picks up Gus at her neighbor's apartment, crouching when he sees her and lifts his head. Her dog walks so slowly that her heart twists and she picks him up instead, lugging him back to her apartment.

"I'm sorry, Gus," she murmurs near his floppy ear. "You can stay home tomorrow."

He settles in his bed and she pushes back the hair from his eyes. He pokes her hand with his snout and she smiles, remembering the same tender nudge at the shelter a good three years ago. He was too old and wary to interest most people but she knew he'd be easy to love. She didn't come for a pup. He needed a home and she needed a constant. Gus made her new apartment less silent. He was protective and loyal and he didn't deserve the ache in his legs and the heaviness in his lungs.

His eyes fall closed and Lexa gets up to start dinner in silence. She knows there's an end in sight.

Routine dictates that Lexa is in bed by 11 PM, back pressed against the pillow pressed against the headboard. She reads about war throughout history, the wars that man made up to appear stronger, and she skips the parts where love comes into play, the sort of love that destroys cities and ruins civilizations. She picked the book up at the library to read about fictional conquerors, not delve into Agamemnon's wrath or Zeus' jealousy.

Inevitably the book addresses man's ego and Lexa finds herself entrenched in a philosophical debate with the silent author. She opens her mouth to speak aloud.

"Do you think—"

She freezes when she hears herself. There's no one else in the room but Gus' sleeping form and Lexa is suddenly so aware of being alone that a knot forms in her throat. Did she really just—?

The book is set aside and Lexa lies back, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. She's not sure what's been different these last days, what happened for her routine to be challenged so easily. She got used to the silence at night; there's no reason she'd be surprised by it now. She wrings her hands over her stomach and still wonders why it feels like she's waiting for something, patient and nervous at the same time. Maybe her body is too accustomed to the sleeping pills and it's time for a different brand. Maybe it's deeper sleep she lacks, the sort you wouldn't be pulled out of even if the world crashed around you.

With one last glance at Gus in the corner, Lexa pulls the sheets to her neck.

∞

It shouldn't come as a surprise that she dreams about her.
And yet it's strange. She doesn't even recognize her at first. She can't pinpoint why it takes her so long. When the realization sets in, she's ashamed it took her more than a glance.

Clarke is… difficult to put into words now. She's a vision, eternally young, sun-kissed, and at peace with a book in hand and a lazy smile on her face. Even in this land of unrealities, she takes Lexa's breath away.

It's been a while since the last dream, but not for lack of hoping. Lexa cherishes the images. They don't turn ugly and bloody anymore. Now they hurt in a good way; remind her she isn't hollow.

Lexa wakes up at 4 AM with her cheeks wet. It's the split second after she realizes it was only a dream that her chest feels empty once more. She thought she'd gotten over the false hope. She brushes a hand over her face and the other over her heart, willing it to stop hurting so damn much. Lexa hates it a little for such a betrayal. She closes her eyes hoping to cling to her dream a little while longer.

She succeeds for a second, reaching out to grasp her sheets with a white-knuckle grip. A woman stands by Clarke's side and seems to chat idly with her. Lexa frowns and, slowly, Clarke slips further and further away. Lexa tries to focus harder, tries to reach out, but the more she concentrates the further out of reach the image is. And then—

Clarke lets out a startled cry as she is flung out of her void and into another.

It feels and looks so real that Lexa's eyes snap open and she jolts up, looking around for a moment before realizing she let her mind get the best of her again.

(But she can still hear Clarke's gasp as if she'd been right next to her and Lexa feels guilty, as if it was her fault that Clarke's peace was disrupted.)

The same white-hot anger she felt in Anya's van flares in her stomach and Lexa gets out of bed intending to take a boiling hot shower. She was doing well. She leads a decent life. She doesn't pity herself. She doesn't mention the past and she's reminded why now. Memories make her insides twist. Scars aren't meant to tear open after four years. Everyone insisted that time helped, that time made everything fade, but Lexa can't help but feel angry at them, too.

Was it what Anya said that triggered the past? Quickly Lexa thinks back on their conversation, if it held any weight. But Lexa tried. She did. In the last year she gave the women who asked a fair shot. She smiled and wore nice clothes and split the checks and held doors open. She asked the right questions and gave the right answers. She never got past first dates, no, but at least she tried to get on with her life. Wasn't that enough?

Gus' feeble whine cuts through the silence and Lexa turns the light on. She drops to her knees in front of him and feels her heart plummet. His body is curled and twitching, slow and short breaths making him drool on the carpet. It's too much suffering for one body and Lexa feels her tired eyes prickle with tears.

It occurs to her then why her dream clings to her so painfully:

Death has a sick way of announcing itself.

"Oh Gus," she whispers brokenly.

∞

It's the vet's last appointment of the day and Gus was never braver than he is in that moment. Lexa
brushes her hand over his stomach the entire time, murmuring words she won't remember in an hour. Her eyes are red-rimmed and it feels like she might choke on her sobs. She can't process a thing. She knows Anya is there. She knows Gus is still looking at her when his body slowly stills. She knows he recognizes something the moment right before—he blinks twice and his snout moves toward her palm and then he's gone.

∞

Take one element out of routine and the entire thing seems like a joke. Lexa wakes up at 5:37 AM the next day but there's no food to put in a bowl and no chewed up ball to move out of the doorway. She wears her white shirt and her skirt, slips her stockings on, puts on her heels, and ties her hair up in a bun. She grabs her briefcase.

Time doesn't pause for anyone.

She declined Anya's offer to carpool so of course she runs late. The campus is bustling with students when she makes her way into the English department. A chill runs up her spine when she takes out her felt markers and waits for her students to settle in their plastic chairs. She squeezes her eyes shut before she walks to the board and starts the lesson. Something strange has undeniably settled in the pit of her stomach and she tries not to fidget as she writes her bullet points.

She twists around and, disinterested in the answer, asks if there are any questions. When her eyes flicker up, she feels every part of her shut down and freeze. And there's no doubt in her mind now what the world has been trying to tell her these past few days.

Her dream had its consequences. Or really it wasn't a dream, it was a feeling, a premonition if one believes in that sort of thing. Lexa feels her throat close up like the time she was alone in her bedroom. But god—Clarke seems as real to Lexa as the row of students starting to frown.

It snaps her out of it. Reality makes a fool out of her and Lexa finds herself shaking like a leaf. She gets away as soon as she can and when her ghost catches up to her in the restroom, Lexa half-begs her to disappear. Is there such a thing as not being ready to be haunted? There must be.

It's only when Clarke grows angry and confused herself that Lexa wonders if perhaps—

"Is it really you?"

But Clarke leaves with an apology on her lips and Lexa finds herself alone in a room again. She goes through the rest of her class as quickly as she can, avoiding the few stares and furrowed brows when she lets them out early. Then, she waits in her office forever. Her face is still as white as a sheet when she calls Raven and leaves her a message. Anya wouldn't understand and Lexa wouldn't be able to explain it.

She paces around. She attempts to read for an hour and then finishes grading some horribly written essays. She googles 'dementia' and 'hallucination'. She thinks about Gus, how she misses his heavy steps in the morning and the way he'd bark at the sky, that silly boy.

Finally she closes her eyes and allows herself to see Clarke. It's been too long.

Lexa wishes she'd said something else. Now that she thinks back on it, the confusion in Clarke's eyes was more unsettling than her own. Would it have made a difference if Lexa had waited for her in the corridor instead? Would she have been able to—

Lexa's phone rings and she breathes easy when she sees Raven's name. Raven knows her in a way Anya can't. There's familiarity there that will never disappear. But even Raven can't quiet every part
of her that hurts in the way Clarke's voice can. Hope surges through her and she couldn't stop it if she tried.

Lexa grabs her briefcase and rushes out of her office.

∞

Clarke finds herself staring at the clock obsessively. It's been twenty-two minutes since Lexa said she'd come to Raven's apartment and not a second has passed without Clarke imagining what she'll say. Anxious, she glances at Raven and fiddles with the sleeves of her sweatshirt.

"Hey um... do you mind maybe... just a few minutes..." Clarke clears her throat awkwardly and Raven's eyebrow ticks up.

"Forget it, I'm not leaving you alone until she gets here. If you disappear on me, she'll never forgive me."

Clarke opens her mouth to argue but Raven has a point. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to kick you out of your own apartment. I'm just nervous."

Raven nods, finishing a slice of pizza before glancing at her watch. "Any minute now. On the downside, my lunch break has officially lasted two hours too long and my boss is gonna murder me. But hey—my best friend is back from the dead. Think you can write me a tardy slip?"

Clarke shakes her head with a laugh.

A shy knock at the door wipes the smile off her face.

It's not that she isn't happy she gets to see Lexa again. She's just never felt this jittery at the thought of even talking to her. It was easy in the restroom when she thought Lexa was still her 22-year-old girlfriend. And yes, something was off, but she could still vividly remember kissing her and laughing with her and planning their weekend. She still thought they were close. Now that she knows Lexa has lived four years without her, Clarke fears everything between them has changed.

After a reassuring glance her way, Raven opens the door and steps aside.

"Hey," she says.

Clarke stands straight near the couch, fingers entwined in front of her.

In this light, Lexa looks different than she did this morning, more strands of hair out of her bun, her posture not as stilted, her eyes not as guarded. If anything, her eyes are the reason Clarke feels her throat tighten.

Lexa puts her briefcase down and looks at her in the way she wouldn't allow herself to before. She looks at her without flinching, without fear, without confusion.

"You see her, right?" Lexa eventually choking out in Raven's direction.

Raven grins, misty-eyed herself. "Yeah."

Clarke keeps herself from moving forward, knowing Lexa has to initiate that. There's so much to make sense of that she isn't surprised when Lexa rubs her forehead. Clarke's head hurts too.

It's surreal. It's impossible to even differentiate what she feels.
Finally Lexa swallows hard and steps closer, stopping right in front of her. Clarke wants to scream at herself not to throw her arms around her neck. She can't startle her the way she did before. Lexa's eyes sweep over every inch of her face and her trembling hand hovers in the air, inches away from her cheek. Clarke's heart stops when Lexa's lips part.

"Clarke," she whispers.

Clarke can't stop herself any longer. The day has been too draining. Her mind and her body hurt from exhaustion, and she's gone far too long without her girlfriend.

She flings her arms around Lexa's neck and buries her nose in her hair. The sob that ripples out of her stuns her, and once it starts she can't stop it.

It's too much.

She doesn't register Raven grabbing her keys and closing the door behind her.

She doesn't register that Lexa has yet to hold her back.

It's when Lexa lets out a shuddering gasp and wraps her arms tight around her waist that Clarke feels home again.

"Clarke, Clarke—oh god—Clarke—" Lexa repeats her name until her voice is too broken and raw to separate the letters.

It must last longer than Clarke waited with Raven. Clarke thinks it could even last as long as four years.

"I miss you, I miss you so much," Lexa suddenly cries, lips just an inch from Clarke's ear.

It scares her—the way Lexa says it that way. Clarke pulls back and brushes the hair that sticks to Lexa's wet cheek.

"I'm here," she firmly says.

Lexa nods, wide-eyed, and Clarke can see in her eyes how much she wants it to be true.

"You're here, you're really here…"

"I am. I promise you."

Lexa sucks in a breath and her fingers touch Clarke's cheek, thumb brushing softly against the reddened skin.

"Tell me—" Lexa trembles, struggling to get the words out. "Tell me something. Talk to me. Anything."

Clarke wracks her brain for the memories that never fail to comfort her. "Okay. I—I asked you out in the laundry room. You said, 'take that dumb beanie off and we'll talk'. I said—"

Lexa lets out a choked gasp and Clarke takes her hand in hers, squeezing it before she continues.

"I said 'take that dumb top off and you've got yourself a deal'." Clarke smiles shakily as she presses her forehead against Lexa's. "Hey. Hi. Can you feel me?"

Lexa nods, her breath evening out as she focuses on Clarke's lips. "Don't stop," she pleads.
Clarke continues, digging through countless memories for the ones she knows Lexa cherishes the most.

"You make me so nervous," Clarke whispers. "I remember our second date. The first one—"

"—doesn't count," Lexa finishes with a watery smile.

Clarke laughs. "You were so mad at me."

"You took me to the space fair."

"There were rocket ships and pizza."

"And teenagers. Lots of them."

"But also pizza."

Their shaky laughs mingle and then Lexa presses closer, burying her nose in Clarke's neck. "You don't know —" she says with trembling lips, "—how many times I dreamt of this, how many times I wished that I could hold you like this. Just like this. I miss—m-missed every part of you. Every day. Every night."

Clarke lets the words wash over her, feels the warmth in her chest extend to her stomach, legs, and toes.

Lexa pulls back and it almost feels like they used to be: tender and soft and not so twined with pain. She cups Clarke's cheeks softly.

"I don't understand. How is this possible? I can feel you, you really are here—"

"I don't know how."

Lexa worries her bottom lip and the remorse in her eyes makes Clarke frown.

"The restroom," Lexa remembers. "I didn't—I'm sorry I didn't listen to you."

Clarke shakes her head. "It doesn't matter. I had to figure this out. I didn't know yet."

Lexa's eyes widen, bewildered. "You didn't know?"

Clarke looks around and entwines their fingers, motioning toward the couch. It doesn't surprise her that Lexa doesn't let go once. Clarke just hopes it's not out of fear she'll disappear again.

"The last thing I remember is the grocery store. The memory feels older than it did this morning though. I think my mind's starting to figure out I'm missing something."

Just like Raven, Lexa seems to stare harder than she listens. But Clarke doesn't blame them for trying to adjust. If her father were in the room just now, she doesn't think she'd hear a word he said. She smiles when Lexa shakes her head.

"I'm sorry, I just—"

"It's okay," Clarke assures her. "I get it."

Lexa shuffles closer. "I want to know everything." Her eyes flicker down to Clarke's sweatshirt and she traces the logo with a finger.
"I haven't seen this in so long."

"Yeah? I woke up with it."

Lexa nods, hooking a finger in the pocket and gently rubbing the fabric.

"I left it with you," she murmurs. "It always fit you better than me."

"Lexa—"

"But it was selfish," Lexa adds, blinking new tears away. "I wanted a piece of me there with you. It was so selfish."

"Hey, no, listen to me."

"I couldn't think, Clarke. It felt like I couldn't even breathe."

Clarke takes her hand in her lap. "I might not get what's going on, or why, but I'm going to do everything to figure it out. And I can't even imagine how it felt, because if I lost you like that—" she swallows hard and shakes her head. "But it happened. And for some reason I woke up wearing your sweatshirt. I want to believe that means something. That maybe it helped bring me back."

Lexa takes in a long breath. "Okay."

Clarke smiles and leans forward, freezing when she realizes what she means to do. It's almost ingrained in her. How many times has she leaned forward for a kiss in the morning? How many times have they kissed goodbye without even thinking about it?

But it's been four years since their last kiss. Their eyes meet and Lexa looks so different that it startles Clarke. Four years is a long, long time.

Does Lexa not—?

Just as Clarke's heart starts to sink, the door opens and Raven peeks inside.

"Are the tears dry yet?"

Lexa turns to her with a smile that lights up her face.

∞

The three of them in a room is an adjustment. It's not strange to Clarke, obviously, but there's something between Raven and Lexa that has changed. It becomes clear they don't exactly… hang out. They went through a lot together, that much Clarke knows, and Lexa must've felt safe calling Raven, but beyond that, Clarke can tell they don't see each other too often.

"So how are classes?" Raven asks suddenly, sitting on the kitchen chair she dragged near the couch.

Clarke glances at Lexa and, sure enough, she seems just as perplexed. "Fine. And work?"

"Good. Might get fired tomorrow. All good."

Clarke smacks her arm. Raven raises an eyebrow at both of them.

"Okay, small talk over. Are we really ignoring the zombie in the room?"
Clarke glares at her. "Really?"

Lexa fiddles with the hem of her skirt, seemingly worried. "Clarke, do you want to go see your mother?"

Clarke knows she has to. Wants to, truly, but not today.

"To tell you the truth, I'm really… fucking tired."

Lexa stands up immediately, surprising them both. "You can sleep with me. I mean—at my apartment. I can make dinner or snacks, and I have vitamin water, and Raven of course you can come, too. I know you missed her and—"

"Lexa, relax," Raven stops her. "Of course she'll stay with you. I'll drop you off and give you your privacy. This running around has got me beat."

∞

It's not a long trip to Lexa's apartment but Clarke feels strangely nervous when Raven squeezes her tight and leaves them be. Lexa leads her quietly up the stairs, reaches for her keys in her briefcase, and opens the door without so much as a glance back. It takes Clarke a moment to realize she's equally as anxious for Clarke to step inside. Lexa moved out of their own apartment years ago and this must feel as surreal to her as it does for Clarke.

And the apartment is not… Well, it looks a lot like a hotel room.

Lexa closes the door behind them and takes her heels off, puts the keys in the key bowl, and her briefcase on the kitchen table. Clarke can pinpoint a habit when she sees one. It's just a little more organized (and not boring, no, though it does come to Clarke's mind and she does bite her lip for thinking it) than she remembers Lexa being.

"So, this is it," Lexa says from behind her.

Clarke looks around: there's the kitchen space near the living room—a couch, a television set, a bookshelf—the bedroom next door and, she assumes, the bathroom next to it. It's bigger than their old place but somehow feels smaller. The walls are shades of white and blue-gray but the lighting is nice, most likely even nicer in early mornings.

The small toys in the corner of the living room catch Clarke's eye.

"You have a pet?" She asks with a smile, looking around for the dog or cat.

Something crosses over Lexa's face and she shakes her head. "I did. He passed away."

Clarke freezes. "I'm so sorry, I saw the—"

"It was just yesterday evening. I didn't have the time to put them away."

"Oh. Can I help?"

Lexa stares at her before a smile grows on her face. "Clarke."

"Yeah?"

"I missed this."
Clarke blinks. "This? This never happened before. Unless we lost a hamster I forgot about."

"No. *This*. You. I don't want to think about anything else right now."

It's not a bad idea. Clarke pulls her by her sleeve and smiles.

"Which door's your bedroom?" She asks.

And she doesn't mean it like that. But.

"Over there—um, right there," Lexa answers, cheeks a lovely color.

Of course she's forgotten to point to which door she means but Clarke thanks her nonetheless.

∞

"That's my side of the bed," Clarke points out later, teeth brushed and clothes traded for soft pajamas. Lexa smiles softly before pulling the covers and sliding in bed. She never once looks away from her and Clarke still doesn't know, really, what this means for them, but she's also never had someone look at her the way Lexa still does.

"It's my side now," Lexa says slowly. "But you can join me. I'd like that a lot."

Clarke feels her grin hurt her cheeks. She slides in bed and Lexa can't seem to control herself either. She pulls at her and all at once it feels so right, like the rest of the world has disappeared, like maybe, just this once, time has paused for them.

Their legs tangle and god—Clarke wants to kiss Lexa badly. There are fingers sliding up her back, beneath her t-shirt, and Lexa's mouth near her pulse, her nose against her neck, and her arms tight around her. Lexa lets out a small whimper but refuses to budge, and Clarke wonders if maybe it still doesn't feel entirely real to Lexa. She can't blame her for that. Lexa has known four years without this and Clarke can't fathom the kind of strength she'd need to do the same.

She embraces Lexa just as tightly, welcoming the weight of her body against hers. She doesn't know who falls asleep first, emotional exhaustion finally taking its toll. They dreams deeper than they ever have.

∞

*She's sunbathing in the gazebo, reading the pages on the beginning of the universe. It's interesting, of course, though now she itches to laugh in the faces of science and religion. Neither had it right. A woman approaches her and she looks up with furrowed brows. She wonders what the inked marks on the woman's dark skin mean. 'I've decided,' the woman tells her.*

Chapter End Notes

It seems there will be 3 parts after all :)
"Your pain was excruciating; too much for anyone to bear. Your body won't forget it."

∞

She remembers it like she's in a trance; a spectator in her own living room.

The faded couch has pillows thrown on it and the carpet is frayed at the edges, an old thing they got from the last tenant. There are textbooks stacked on the floor, pencils, post-its, and phone chargers next to empty mugs on their coffee table. There are photos they couldn't afford to frame just yet, each one pinned to their cheap bulletin board. It hangs crooked but Lexa loves it and Clarke loves that they have enough pictures that the thing is covered from corner to corner.

Lexa sits in front of the desk, one leg bent up so she can prop her chin on her knee as she stares at her laptop. Her hair is long and curly, her eyes tired, but they're both young and determined and Clarke knows Lexa will go to bed at 2 AM and manage to wake up before sunrise. There isn't much that can stand in the way of her girlfriend's ambition.

Clarke looks down at herself and suddenly remembers why she itches to go outside.

"Store's closing soon," she hears herself say. "We still have to get that rocky road."

Lexa adds a line to the text on the screen. "You want rocky road. I just want some nuts."

Clarke grins, so used to these interactions and the familiarity of their banter on a warm evening. Lexa is right of course; Clarke has had ice cream on her mind all afternoon. She thinks it must be the weather, the recent peak of fall, the warm colors slowly browning and the leaves shriveling up and scrunching beneath her boots. Nature dying around her has always made her melancholic. Clarke misses summer and everything that came with it. Maybe she can cling to it a little longer.

She leaves her purse on the couch and moves around the coffee table, nimble and amused as she bends down to wrap an arm around her girlfriend's neck. She kisses the soft spot above her pulse and props her chin on Lexa's shoulder.

"You might want to phrase that differently."

Lexa stifles a laugh and Clarke is so in love she can't help but press even closer to her, wishing the week would be over so responsibilities could be damned for a little while.

"You can finish tomorrow, right?"

"Sort of. Deadline is 6 PM."

Clarke glances at the word document and zeroes in on the number of pages Lexa has written. A quick scroll wouldn't be enough to see the end of it.

"How many more pages do you need?"

"Three. But I do have to finish my argument first."
"Hm. Can you post it online?"

"Hard copy."

"So much for saving trees."

Lexa closes the laptop and swivels the chair around, hooking a finger in the belt loop of Clarke's jeans. "Mother Nature and I have a deal. When I publish my own stuff, I'm going digital."

Clarke presses a knee down on the space between Lexa's legs, tilting her chin up with a gentle hand.

"My girlfriend's going to be a published teacher."

"That's the dream. Underpaid, underappreciated…"

"Oh I'll appreciate you every night," Clarke grins.

Lexa is so close now that Clarke can see the green, blue, and grey in her eyes, the great mystery she'll never be able to solve. She cups her cheeks and bends down, eager to taste her lips. It feels like an eternity since they last did this, a crime almost. But Lexa is gone before she can close her eyes.

Clarke stands alone in the living room, the living room that changes quickly into something she doesn't recognize yet. She turns around, hollow and lonely as the walls crumble down and the branches of trees tear through their pictures. Her apartment is split apart and gutted, hardwood flooring turning into dirt and dirt turning into grass.

Her voice is powerless here, like screaming underwater, drowned out by the earth groaning around her. Lexa's name fades into the trickle of a fountain and the world suddenly softens as the evening sky paints itself above Clarke. The moon glows, not whole but still bright. This is familiar.

Clarke blinks hard when she feels a warm hand clutch her fingers and squeeze.

"…and maybe we could go to that dive bar. Raven really liked the vibe. I think she'd prefer that."

Clarke shakes her head, remembering they took the short cut through the park. "What are we talking about?" She quickly asks, falling into step beside Lexa.

"Raven's surprise party. Do you think it's a good idea? I know we liked the corn maze last year but sometimes I still see that scarecrow and I feel—"

There are memories there that Clarke recalls in bursts. She's heard this before.

"—like you could punch the pumpkin out of him. I remember."

Lexa bumps Clarke's hip. "Anyway. This year we won't get thrown out of the bar because someone isn't legal to drink."

"Shut up."

"Is that a yes?"

"I'll have an opinion once my stomach is full of ice cream."

Lexa chuckles next to her, carefree and happy. Clarke has nearly settled back into the lull of it when she looks at the end of the path and sees the open gates. She stops abruptly, surprising herself with how fast her feet dig into the ground.
"Wait." It's the second time this evening that her mouth speaks before she can command it to.

Lexa steps closer, protective in the dark. "What's wrong?"

Clarke stares at the gates and wonders why they seem so old and heavy, why the thought of crossing them is so intimidating. She pinches her thigh, worried for a second that someone is playing a trick on her. And when she looks back at Lexa, she gets a sudden urge to map everything they have done today.

"Did I kiss you earlier?"

"What?"

"I… can't remember. Did I?"

Lexa softens. "Yeah. You kissed me this morning, and then before you went to class, when we met for lunch, when you came home… And before we left, just a moment ago."

"Oh. Yeah."

"We also kissed against a tree."

Clarke notices the tree behind Lexa and smiles, warm all over. "Right. I think I'll remember this one."

Lexa pulls her by the front pocket of her sweatshirt and Clarke follows dutifully.

But the tree is gone when she opens her eyes.

The light above her is harsh and the beep of a cash register pulls her out of her daze. She's just a stranger in this body, it seems, hopping from one place to another. Her lips tingle as she walks down the aisles of the grocery store. She watches as Lexa's fingers glide over the ice cream. There's cookie dough and vanilla-cherry and chocolate brownie—none as good as the one Lexa settles for: rocky road with a twist, the twist being that the marshmallows are nonexistent in the much cheaper brand. Clarke doesn't mind it.

She leaves Lexa to it—she isn't sure why, just that she does it—and moves around to the front of the store. She sees her reflection in the windowpane and wonders why the shelves behind her aren't reflected as well. When she turns around, Lexa is staring intently at a bag of trail mix.

This is their usual, their familiar. Clarke knows exactly how and why her girlfriend got sidetracked. She stands next to her and loops their arms together.

"We said no distractions."

Lexa turns the pack over, weighing it in her hand.

"It's a good deal."

"It's peanuts and raisins. It's boring."

"They call it brain food for a reason."

Clarke groans, pressing her forehead against Lexa's back. "You're killing me, babe. Just pick one, they're all healthy and gross."
Lexa grabs the jar of Mashuga Nuts instead. "I'm sticking to the classics."

The cashier abandons his magazine to scan their items, the bucket of ice cream already leaving a wet ring on the counter. Clarke bumps Lexa's hip as subtly as one can and Lexa smiles, hand sneaking around her waist.

They're chatting idly on their way toward the park when Lexa stops them.

"Oh no."

Clarke sees the heavy lock on the entrance gate and her shoulders drop, knowing the distance between them and home has been extended.

"They closed early," Lexa says, looking at her watch. "That's not fair."

Clarke looks into their plastic bag. "Well… do you think we can make it before this turns to slush?"

"I'm sorry. We should've left earlier," Lexa mumbles, apologetic.

Clarke kisses her cheek. "Come on, it's a nice night. Let's stretch our legs."

Going around the park takes much longer but Lexa discusses her paper and Clarke enjoys that voice of hers a lot, in love with how passionate she sounds. She'll make a fine teacher one day, firm with the troublemakers and patient with the introverts. Clarke wonders if they'll still live in their apartment, if they'll still go to the movies at midnight on Saturday nights, if they'll still kiss in the shower for much too long, dizzy from the steam and that well-placed thigh, if their wardrobe will still be a mess of their clothes, socks and tops in the same piles, if Lexa will still put a dab of perfume on her pulse points, if she'll still mumble in her sleep, or if their lives will still be intertwined in the most wonderful way. She hopes nothing will change, reluctantly aware it might be naive.

They take the fourth street out, narrow but somewhat illuminated by street lamps. Clarke clings closer to Lexa, glancing back once when the same heaviness she felt at the park settles in the pit of her stomach. She won't stop here, though, not when they are so close to their home, to the warmth of their living room and the safety of their bed.

She briefly notices the end of the street where five men are huddled together, two of them seemingly talking in harsh tones. There is nothing extraordinary about this night, nothing that should worry her.

"You okay?" Lexa asks, herself rather relaxed. It's a nice evening after all, the sky clear and the breeze pleasant.

Clarke nods, throat suddenly tight.

"I'll finish the paper tomorrow," Lexa says. "There's a bunch of Halloween movies on cable. We can have rocky road and watch Chucky, what do you think?"

"Rocky and Chucky?"

"It's meant to be."

Clarke laughs. "God, I hate your taste in movies."

"We watched action stuff for a month."

"The fact that you want to teach kids scares me, babe."
Lexa draws closer to her and Clarke suspects the horror film is an excuse to cuddle. Clarke doesn't have the stomach for jump scares and her girlfriend knows it, secretly amused whenever Clarke buries her face in the sleeve of her top.

"Well I don't care, as long as we—"

The shouts make both of them stop in their tracks. Clarke looks toward the end of the street, freezing when one of the men is shoved hard against the cracked wall. They are just a few feet away and Clarke can see their faces, most of them in their twenties, if even that. She's so caught up in details that she doesn't feel Lexa pull her toward the curb.

"Let's get out of here."

The fight erupts quickly, yells turning into threats, two men against three. They hurl insults at each other and then the punches erupt. One's nose must crack because Clarke swears she hears the bone crunch from where she stands. Her heart jumps in her throat when she sees one of them detach from the fight and bolt their way with bloodshot eyes. Another one notices him and swears loudly, careening toward him.

"Lexa!"

Clarke moves in front of Lexa, gripping her wrist so tightly she's certain it'll leave a bruise. The running man stumbles instead into Clarke with a hard shoulder, pushing her off to take something out of his pocket. He turns around quickly in his panic, his face marble white and dripping when he raises his arm and sees the man charging toward him.

Lexa's voice comes out in a horrified shout. "Clarke, stop—!

Clarke doesn't hear it at first. In the back of her head, she registers it as a car backfiring. The sound rips through her like lightning—one strike of it and her ears are ringing loudly.

Gunshot.

She bites her tongue in shock.

Lexa is on her quickly, pulling her toward her, hands cupping her cheeks, her eyes wide, yelling at her. Something like her name, maybe. Clarke can't make it out.

She sees the rest of the men run in different directions, disorganized and panicked, fueled by instinct and fear like rats in sewers. She hears more expletives, more screaming, and a string of words that sloshes around in her ears. But why does nothing come out of her own mouth?

Her knees buckle.

Lexa's words twist into a choked scream, something guttural as Clarke feels her body tremble violently. She's on the floor and Lexa is holding her close, pressing her between her chest and the ground. Clarke knows she only means to protect her, but it hurts to be held so tightly. She must let out some kind of noise to cause Lexa to back away.

Something leaks down the corners of her mouth and she hates the taste of it, copper and salt sputtering out. It hurts to breathe, like someone is pressing their heavy boot on her chest.

Her girlfriend is crying now, her fingers lifting Clarke's head until Clarke can feel the cold ground against her neck. It's the only thing she feels, that and the collapse of her lungs, the slow thud of her heart pulsing in her head.
She thinks back on the gunshot ringing in her ears, and does that mean—

What? No. Just like that?

She brings her hand to her face, stunned by the blood. And knowing makes it worse. Knowing brings the pain out, and the pain is unlike anything she's ever felt.

Clare—Clare—

Lexa is barely coherent, her words fragmented, stuttered from shock and fear. Clarke is tempted to brush a hand through her hair but the numbness in her limbs is so overpowering that all she can do is stare. Stare as Lexa sobs into her phone, her hand so shaky that she almost drops it.

Stay with me—I'm on 911, I'm—I'm right here—

Clarke can't remember a time Lexa looked so pale. She silently begs for a few more minutes with her, long enough to feel her hand in hers again, to say something, anything that would give Lexa a shred of comfort. But breathing is a struggle now and Clarke is scared with how quickly her body is abandoning her.

She wonders if the ice cream has completely melted by now, what her mother is doing, if this means Lexa won't be able to finish her paper. She wonders about her father, if this is how it felt for him, too.

Something presses against her stomach and Clarke realizes Lexa is hopelessly trying to stop the bleeding. But her hands were made to write, not heal, and nobody can fault her for that.

Stay with me, stay with me, Lexa pleads.

Some seconds must pass between the then and now. Clarke knows the beat between the agony of silence and the chaos of sirens is when she can't fight the pull of slipping away any longer. She squeezes Lexa's hand as hard as she can, grips it tightly until the muscles don't work anymore.

Listen to my voice, just breathe, please, Clarke—Clarke!

Her eyes never close but somehow the darkness takes over.

She's gone by the time she sees Lexa hold her from afar, a little like a dream within a dream, sees Lexa cradle her face when her body stills. Clarke regards the girl she loves so simply, the sort of love that always ached in all the good ways, in every corner of her heart, in every brush of a finger.

The ambulance pulls up quickly, and then the police cars, heavy guns and helmets and boots that make the ground shake.

Clarke can't stand hearing Lexa's sobs anymore, even less the angry pleas she can't answer.

Someone puts a hand on her shoulder. Clarke turns around without a thought, as if nothing ever felt so easy.

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It takes Clarke a moment to remember where she is.

She knows it wasn't exactly a dream, not the kind she'd dismiss. Some of it felt like memory, the rest like she was trying to piece things together, not exactly right in the way it unfolded. She brushes a hand up her stomach, below her breast, feeling for the spread of pain she felt so clearly a moment
"Sleep okay?"

Clarke looks to the side and blinks at Lexa, or rather the space between them. She wonders if Lexa moved away during the night.

"Sorry," Lexa murmurs. "I didn't mean to startle you."

Clarke stops herself from inching closer, yearning to find the closeness from last night but knowing it isn't her move yet. If she could bring up the dream she would, but already it seems like a blur, like jumping from one frame to another while trying to keep every detail intact.

"You look tired," she says.

"I couldn't sleep."

"Yesterday was a lot."

Lexa nods slowly. Clarke doesn't have the patience to stay away for too long. She shuffles closer, head at the edge of Lexa's pillow. The morning is chilly and Lexa pulls the blanket over Clarke's bare shoulder as soon as she notices her shiver.

"All the dreams I had," Lexa murmurs. "When I woke up there were a few seconds I could pretend."

Clarke wonders if Lexa believes she might be dreaming still. "I'm here."

"I know. But closing my eyes felt like the worst mistake I could make."

Clarke cups Lexa's cheeks, brushing her thumb over her cheekbone.

"Does this feel like pretend?"

"No."

Waking up next to Lexa has been a constant for so long, Clarke can't imagine living without it. But the picture has changed since Clarke's memory of their last morning. Lexa is hard to read, constantly surprised by her touch. It'll take time to get used to it again.

There are things that even time couldn't change, though, like the way she feels when Lexa looks at her.

"You're so beautiful."

Lexa scoffs. "I'm old."

"What? You're 26."

"I remember being 21 and thinking that was old."

"How very Millennial of you."

Lexa softens, moving closer. Clarke can tell there's a lot more she wants to say. She wonders if one morning can be filled with four years' worth of memories.

"What I mean is I'm older by more now."
"Does it matter?"

Lexa smiles into the pillow. Clarke finds herself grinning back, dumb with adoration.

"Any other concerns? Do you have arthritis yet?"

Lexa shakes her head, nearly bashful now, and lifts herself on her elbows. They are so close now that Clarke thinks she might kiss her, prays she will, but Lexa's lips glide over her pulse instead, and Clarke's arms find their way around her waist. She takes a deep breath, her lungs almost shaking from how good it feels.

If Clarke's mind has yet to process the four years between her last memories and these newer ones, her body tells her it's missed Lexa desperately. It has missed other things, even ordinary things like feeling the grain of the kitchen table, brushing a hand through her hair, or stepping on the cold tiles of the bathroom, but holding Lexa makes her soar.

Lexa settles in her arms, breathing slowly. "If this is another dream, I won't survive waking up."

Clarke ventures a hand at the hem of Lexa's top, finding comfort in the warmth there.

"I remember," she whispers. "That night. It was 32nd street, right? That group of guys."

Lexa stiffens. "I don't want to think about that night ever again."

"They looked so normal; dumb kids picking a fight."

"Clarke."

"I'm just trying to understand. How can something so stupid—"

"One moment we were happy and the next you were gone. What else is there to understand?"

"I just wonder if maybe the hospital... I don't know. If something kicked me back to life it means I must've gone somewhere, right? I must've seen things, heard things, something more than just a block of nothing."

"Maybe you're not meant to remember."

Maybe it's part of the rules. Maybe someone, something, found the end of her life just as meaningless as she does. The wrong time, the wrong night, the wrong place—there isn't more to it than that. But surely there are deaths more unjust than hers every minute of every day, all over the world, and yet she's never heard of a story like hers before, of someone coming back.

"What if I'm not really myself anymore?"

Lexa looks down at her, running a finger down the arch of Clarke's brow. "Do you feel different?"

"I feel like someone's put me on an axis and I can't stop spinning."

"You feel the same to me."

It should be enough to hear it. She's felt no different than before and her body has remained unchanged. She knows there isn't a switch to turn on for all the answers. Lexa, Raven, Murphy, each one has needed only one glance at her to know she wasn't a trick of light. Even Raven's rational brain has found no way around the truth. And her mother... Clarke thinks back on their phone call and how her voice alone was enough to hurt her. She wonders how much more pain she'll cause if
she were to disappear for another four years.

"I don't know if my mom can take it," she rasps. "If she'll even believe it's really me."

The thought of it is enough to make her reconsider the day's plan. She thinks of all the people her mother has lost—her best friend, her husband, her daughter—and wonders how much suffering the heart can take before it shatters entirely. If she's made peace with her grief, can Clarke stand to disrupt it?

Lexa seems hesitant to answer, wishing she could provide more than uncertainty.

"Some of the people at the wake kept telling your mom you looked beautiful," Lexa starts, voice above a murmur. "They said it like it was a small consolation, that they were so sorry but... at least you looked at peace." Her jaw tightens and Clarke brushes a hand over it to relax the bone. "I remember looking at you, thinking you’d wake up. They make it look that way on purpose—like the person's just sleeping. They curled your hair; painted your nails... they angled your face a certain way. It wasn't you."

Lexa settles her head on the pillow again, an arm over Clarke's waist.

"I would've given anything for you to look like this, with your hair undone and your eyes a little tired. That would've meant we'd be back in bed and that no one could hurt you."

Clarke can't wrap her head around it. She thinks about a stranger examining her naked body and draining it. She thinks about the same stranger dressing her in the clothes her mother chose, stuffing her cheeks, smoothing out her wrinkles, positioning her hands in the way that was agreed upon. She tries to picture it, tries to feel violated, to feel vulnerable, but the only thing that comes to mind is her father's body and the sweaty palms of distant relatives.

"I remember hearing that at my dad's wake," Clarke says. "That he looked handsome in his suit."

Lexa nods, understanding the sentiment. "People try to find positives even if the world is falling apart. It made me so angry they would even dare. I think your mother felt the same, if she heard them at all." She sighs, lost in the memory. "So I know you're you because the last time I felt this way, looking at you... we were happy. And your mom will know it, too. You're her daughter. She'll know."

Clarke stares at the ceiling, thinking of all the ways her mother might react. She hopes that Lexa is right, that Abby will look at her and know the truth without Clarke having to fumble her way through an explanation.

"Have you seen her recently?"

Lexa looks away, shaking her head like she's ashamed. "I couldn't. One afternoon I saw her at the cemetery, but I— I didn't know what to say. It hurt to talk about you, knowing it was my fault."

"Lexa—"

"I know, I know. But it felt that way for a long time. And then I worked so much, I just didn't really... and I know she kept busy, too."

Clarke never concerned herself with it too much, but she knows her mother never adored Lexa the way she would've wanted her to. There was always a wall there, a difference in personalities and in worldviews. It was a cordial relationship in that both knew Clarke wanted them to get along. There were no ill feelings or even disapproval on her mother's part, and Lexa found Abby's strength and
career inspiring, but Clarke accepted that they would never grab lunch together or bond over baby pictures. Still, if anything, she wished her death had brought the two people she most loved closer rather than further apart.

"I'm sorry," Lexa murmurs, "I know that's not what you wanted to hear."

"No, I understand. Life went on."

"I wish I hadn't... that I'd been there for Raven, too, but I... seeing her just reminded me of you all the time. Of our evenings with everyone, the hikes we'd go on, our lunches, our horrible birthday parties."

"Hey, those are fun."

Lexa chuckles. "They were horrible, Clarke. I think you might realize that soon."

"What's horrible about booze and cake?"

"The sugar high, the lack of sleep, the hangovers—"

"Ok, all right, but you're just focusing on the aftermath."

Lexa smiles. "I guess I don't really like the idea of celebrating anymore. Some students call me 'ma'am' in class, that's how old I feel sometimes."

Clarke grins into the pillow. "It's like you think you're fifty or something."

"Feels like it."

"At least you're not 'mom'."

"Maybe when I hit 30."

Clarke groans at Lexa's stubbornness, wondering how long it's been since her girlfriend's looked at herself in the mirror. Surely she hasn't gone blind in the last four years to believe she's anything but the most gorgeous woman.

"Come on. You're probably breaking hearts left and right. You don't see yourself the way I do, how I felt when you walked into that classroom," Clarke tells her, inching closer without thinking about it. She remembers how she felt when Lexa walked down the corridor like she owned it; the desire and the pride that swelled when she realized her girlfriend had achieved her dream. But Clarke forgets again there are four years between them.

Lexa pulls back when her hands brush against the skin beneath her top, as if she's only willing to be close in the way a friend would be. Clarke feels dejected, the question on her lips gutting her. There's a horribly long silence between them before she dares ask it aloud.

"So what's her name?" She can't help that it sounds bitter, that her voice is like gravel, broken by sleep and the threat of tears.

Lexa's lips part and she trembles, looking away, a wider gap between them.

Clarke feels her stomach churn with anger. She's not supposed to be thinking about her girlfriend with someone else. She never thought she would have to. Their relationship wasn't like that. She never worried, never even thought about the possibility; Lexa's love for her was never in question, and she always made sure Lexa knew how deep her feelings ran as well.
But she isn't supposed to be here either, which means Lexa had every right to move on, to cling to someone else's hand in the winter, to wrap her arms around another woman's waist, to kiss her good morning. Lexa is 26, a working adult already accustomed to a world of responsibilities. Clarke can barely remember how to use the washing machine at the Laundromat, let alone the fancy one Lexa has beneath her new age dryer. How can she hope to match up?

It's even more painful to realize she has no right to feel this way. Lexa has done nothing wrong. If anything, she's only tried to chase happiness for herself. But it doesn't help that Lexa won't answer, that she stares at the ceiling with tears in her eyes, incapable of looking at Clarke when she finally reveals the truth:

"I was lonely, Clarke," she whispers.

Clarke swallows back her own tears. More than one name, then. She tries hard not to be angry, not to walk away and slam the door. Lexa hasn't cheated. They weren't together the day before. Lexa lost her years ago, enough to build something new. And wouldn't Clarke have encouraged that, if she could think anything at all?

Being alive has never felt so agonizing. Lexa was hers a few days ago, and now she isn't. As much as she tries to fight it, the bitterness that boils inside her threatens to burst. She slips out of bed, startling Lexa.

"I'm gonna make coffee."

"Clarke—"

She feels her heart beat out of its cage, wild and breaking.

"Wait!" Lexa pleads.

Clarke swivels around, wiping away her tears. "What do you want me to say? That I get it? Because I do, and I fucking hate it, Lexa. I don't even want to think about it."

"It wasn't like that—"

"God it's making me so angry, and I know I'm not—that it's not your fault, that you had every right —"

Lexa pushes the covers off and walks toward her, pale and nearly crying. "It didn't mean anything. You have to know that."

"But I don't, Lexa. I only know you were kissing me two days ago and now it's four years later and I'm a fucking ghost!"

"Clarke."

"And it's not fair that I didn't have a say in it, that I couldn't even fight it. That I died because we wanted to get snacks. How does that make any sense?"

Clarke doesn't realize she's shaking and crying until Lexa's arms are around her shoulders and she's telling her to breathe. Clarke struggles against her for a moment before she lets go, releasing the last of her sobs.

"I'm here," Lexa repeats. "You're here. You're not a ghost."
She breathes long and slow with her, slowly feeling her limbs loosen. "I don't want to lose you."

Lexa looks at her, pushing a blonde strand of hair back. "You're never losing me. How can you think that?"

"If you're happy with someone—"

"I'm not. It wasn't like that, Clarke. It wasn't us. I came home from dates agonizing that I was cheating on you. Every time I went to sleep I'd wish I'd dream about you. It never even compared."

Clarke sniffs, her forehead against Lexa's shoulder. "I miss us."

Lexa strokes her back gently and her lips brush against Clarke's neck, tentative and soft. "I want to be with you like before," she whispers.

Clarke shivers, looking back at her. "Then be with me."

"I'm not who you remember."

"I don't care."

"But you will. I—I don't go to Arkadia every Saturday night; I don't smoke pot or watch movies until sunrise. Most of the time I wake up at 5 AM without knowing why. I stay in my office all day and I grade papers on weekends. I don't live the way we used to live."

"I get that."

"You don't," Lexa trembles. "You look at me like you used to, and you touch me the same, and I wish I could forget the last four years, that I could pick up where we left of, but I can't give you that. I can't turn on a switch and be 22 again."

Clarke shakes her head, rejecting any argument that might keep them apart. "We'll figure it out."

"And what if you realize you don't love me the same?"

"Lexa." She presses her hand at the back of Lexa's neck and pulls her toward her, close to hushing her with a kiss. "That's nonsense."

Lexa's hand grips the hem of Clarke's top, voice thick with emotion. "If I start I'll never stop."

"You remember our last time?" Clarke whispers. She knows it's the desire to silence the anger inside her that leads her down this path.

Lexa seems surprised, but not unaffected by Clarke stepping closer to her. She nods, swallowing hard. "That morning when we—"

"You said you had a dream about me."

"I—I wanted you so much. I always want you," Lexa trembles, hesitant with her hands, cautious but willing. She leans her forehead against Clarke's, eyes closing.

Clarke's fingers slip in her hair, down her neck. "It was like someone lit a fire in you." Her other hand toys with the string of Lexa's sleeping-shorts, pulling the loop undone.

"You. You did."
"I can still feel your mouth on me, how much I needed you," Clarke whispers, slipping her hand in Lexa's shorts.

"Clarke," Lexa trembles.

"I was afraid you didn't want me anymore. That I lost you."

"No, never."

"I don't want to waste time."

Watching Lexa let go of her doubt is like watching a dam burst and knowing it's a force that can't be stopped. Lexa cups her neck and closes the gap between them, kissing her fully and drawing out a moan. There's something new about how eager Clarke feels, how desperate she is to have Lexa again. Lexa complies of course, her heart beating so fast she thinks perhaps Clarke can hear it. Clarke draws her closer and Lexa lets out a small gasp, hands on Clarke's hips, pushing forward until Clarke feels the small desk behind her.

Lexa is bold in what she wants, lifting Clarke on the desk to step between her thighs, as if this moment might be robbed from her. She doesn't know which one of them is trembling but touching Clarke's body again feels like heaven, or better yet feels real, every inch of her pressed firmly against her. She doesn't know where to start, her lips impatient to taste her mouth, to find her neck, to map their way down her body, from collarbone to full breasts and the warmth between her legs, already so tempting. There is so little fabric between them and a whole day ahead.

Clarke moans in her mouth, so eager and messy it makes Lexa smile. She pulls her closer, coaxing her mouth open with a gentle tongue. This kiss is slower, deeper, and Lexa aims to continue this forever. She kisses down Clarke's neck like she dreamed of doing, but suddenly she feels her heart speed up again, as if it's just caught up to the reality of the situation. The bewildering, incredible reality. She watches as Clarke opens her eyes in confusion.

"Lexa, baby, what's wrong?"

"I—I—" she struggles to focus, feeling overwhelmed.

"Hey, hey," Clarke cups her cheeks. "Deep breaths. It's okay."

She stares at Clarke as they breathe together, slowly calming down.

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. We should slow down."

"I don't want to," Lexa insists.

"Me neither, but I think we need to."

After a moment Lexa nods, though she remains just as close to Clarke. They allow the silence to settle around them, until Clarke feels Lexa toy with the bottom of her shirt, eyes on her stomach.

"H-have you…" Lexa looks up, unsure. "Have you looked at…?"

Clarke frowns, and then,"Oh. The wound?"

She sits back and lifts up her shirt, revealing the smooth spot where Lexa expected a scar. Lexa's
fingers brush against her skin.

"It's like it never happened," she murmurs.

Clarke thinks on this. "Maybe this is what this is."

At Lexa's confused frown, Clarke brings her shirt down. "Like it never happened."

Lexa seems to welcome the thought; a night where they went to the grocery store and the park didn't close. A night where they ate their ice cream at home cuddled on their couch. She leans forward to kiss Clarke again, gentle and soft.

The buzz at the front door startles them.

Clarke feels Lexa stiffen and then watches her grimace. "It's a friend of mine. I forgot to tell her I called in sick."

"You did? When?"

"You were sleeping."

Clarke lets out a sigh, lips still tingling. She feels dizzy and unfocused, too caught up in what Lexa makes her feel to remember there's a world out there. Lexa's eyelids are just as heavy and she has to extract herself from Clarke to bring them both back to earth.

"Come on, I'll introduce you."

Clarke's eyebrows crease and Lexa bites her lip. "I'll figure something out."

There's a quick attempt to look composed before they walk out of the room. Lexa opens the door slowly, seeming nervous.

"Good morning, Anya."

Anya takes one look at their messy hair and Clarke almost cowers like a child, taken aback by this woman. She isn't who she expected Lexa to be friends with, with her fingerless gloves and smoldering eyes, but then again Clarke hasn't known what to expect ever since she woke up in the park.

Lexa steps aside, her voice a little more stern than Clarke knows it to be.

"Anya, this is Clarke."

Anya ticks an eyebrow up and Clarke swallows the knot in her throat when Lexa doesn't say anything more.

"I'm a friend from college," she offers.

Anya eyes her like she's spoken out of turn, somehow, and Clarke hates how young and stupid she feels, as if she shouldn't even be in the same plane of existence. She wonders if maybe Anya sees the truth that way.

"Some kind of reunion you're having?" Anya asks Lexa.

"Something like that, yes."
Anya nods. Clarke can't remember the last time she felt this awkward.

"Tremblay not up for a second date, then?"

Clarke looks down for a second, hating that the happiness she felt a moment ago twists into jealousy again.

"I told you it wasn't like that," Lexa snaps. "Can you please stop pretending this is a private conversation?"

"I'll tell you what," Anya fires back. "Next time I ask, how about you be straight with me and I'll extend the same courtesy."

"Fine. I don't need a ride today. I called in sick."

"Right."

Lexa's features soften. "I forgot to tell you. I'm sorry you drove here."

"Yeah." It's curt and Anya glances at Clarke once more before nodding. "Enjoy your sick day."

"I will. Goodbye, Anya."

The door closes and Lexa leans against the wall. "I'm sorry. That was uncomfortable."

Clarke thinks maybe it's their silence that makes everything around them feel so heavy. And because Clarke is a glutton for pain, she asks the question on her mind:

"Who's Tremblay?"

Lexa joins her hands together, nervous. "Costia Tremblay. She's a part-time teacher in the department."

"Did you date?"

"She asked, I said yes, then canceled. That's all."

"Who else?"

"You want a list?"

Clarke relents, knowing she's pushed Lexa into a corner. She shakes her head and turns away. "I'm sorry. It's none of my business."

Lexa stops her. "I didn't mean it like that." She takes her hand carefully. "I'm just trying to get used to this again."

It's an honest confession and Clarke understands the weight of it. Lexa didn't have room for her in her life a few days ago.

"Maybe I shouldn't stay here."

Lexa's eyes widen. "What?"

"Everything's happening so fast, I don't want to disrupt your life."

"That's nonsense," Lexa echoes from earlier, taking a step forward. "I don't care about that. God,
Clarke, I don't care about any of it."

Clarke sighs, wishing they could've forgotten about the world a while longer. There's too much to do now to be selfish.

"I have to see my mom."

"I know."

"I can't do this without you."

Lexa kisses her cheek, slow and tender. "I'm here."

Clarke looks up at her, those steady eyes and that serious brow. She feels a pang when she realizes she misses what she dreamed about, the charming grin of her girlfriend and how easy everything felt. Now more than ever, the last four years feel like a heavy presence between them.

"Come on," Lexa gently says. "I'll make you breakfast."

And Clarke thinks the rest of the world can wait. It owes her that much.

∞

She's in his arms before she thought she'd reached him. She's five again, a little girl seeking out her protector. His laugh is both happy and sad. It was too soon, he thinks to himself, too soon for his baby girl.

Chapter End Notes

This is it. You might notice some minor changes; they were added to make the end a little more satisfying, maybe. Hope this helps those who wanted to read the story again!

- xx

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