Summary

It's the most watched Senate race around the country, and Clarke Griffin is running one hell of an underdog campaign against the favored Cage Wallace. But she has a secret weapon that might save the campaign--and a secret that might ruin it. And both are named Lexa Ward.

Notes

This is going to be a long one, but it's an idea I love. It's early and something of a slowburn so I'll definitely be adding more specific tags and quite possibly upping the rating as we get more into the story. In the meantime, enjoy! Feedback is loved. Shoutout to Sonya and the support kru.

Don't forget to donate to the Trevor Project in honor of Lexa!
https://www.classy.org/fundraise?fcid=625415
Chapter 1

She must hear the sound of her last name a hundred times a day.

It starts every day at 5 AM with the courteous, “Good morning, Miss Griffin,” from her doorman.

“Five more, Griffin!” from the trainer at the gym.

“Large latte, for Griffin!” from the 6:30 AM call from the barista who knows her name and order by heart.

And the echoes of “Representative Griffin!” or “Miss Griffin!” from the dozens of young, anxious campaign interns who crowd around her like ducklings and ply her with questions and requests and wouldn’t dare address her by her first name despite her affability with them.

The “Good evening, Miss Griffin,” from the evening doorman at the end of the day, when she finally makes it home. And on the nights she stays up on conference calls, she hears it even more, from all sides. Even Raven and Octavia use her surname as an affectionate nickname on the rare nights she’s able to let go of work and join them for dinner or a drink. Griffin, Griffin, Griffin, constantly.

And she loves it.

Griffin carries the weight of her mother’s legacy, of course. Clarke has outgrown the vanity of her college and young professional years and now she’s humble enough to see the benefit of people attaching Abby Griffin’s history to anything she does. Especially in her line of work.

But more importantly than that, the sharp, clipped sound of her last name elevates her above everyone’s first impression of her. She’s young, pretty, with blonde hair and blue eyes that naturally preclude her from being taken seriously by those in charge. She’s endured every epithet in the book —Princess, honey, babe, sweetheart, love, doll, darling—with a pit-bull’s determination. She doesn’t even like the sound of her first name in any professional context anymore. It suggests too much intimacy.

But her last name? Griffin removes any possible personal connection, any condescension, any lack of respect. She’s just as serious about this job as any aging, white, male politician. And every time they mark her as their equal, or as a threat, or just as a damn thorn in their sides by using her last name instead of one of their cute pet-names, Clarke burns with pride. She forced them to respect her. She didn’t give them any other choice.

That burning pride in her last name has never been more obvious than now, as she opens today’s newspaper and runs her fingers over the familiar letters in the second page headline:

“Griffin Enters Race for California Senate Seat”

It’s a huge moment. US Senator.

Well, not yet. There are a half-dozen California politicians in one of the most important senate races in the country, and Clarke has only officially been part of it for a few days. There’s still a mountain of work to be done to set her campaign rolling—thanks to Bellamy, the wheels fell off at an incredibly inopportune time—but here, now, sitting in her new office, she can take a moment to revel in the sound of her name juxtaposed to that title.

Sarah, her secretary, gives Clarke a moment to soak it all in before politely clearing her throat. “What
do you think?” she asks.

“It’s perfect,” Clarke replies, in a moment of rare idealism. Realizing this, she shakes her head. “But it’s just the start. We have work to do. What else is on the agenda for the rest of the afternoon?”

Sarah checks the clipboard. “You have conference calls at 1:30 and 2:30, with the San Francisco and San Diego offices, respectively; Miller came by with a new batch of resumes for your potential campaign manager, and he requests that you reply with your input on his selections as soon as possible; and until you do find a campaign manager, you’ll have to revise and update our budget proposal for the next three months for the meeting tomorrow morning. Also, we have journalists ringing off the hook for interviews, they’ll need responses soon.”

“So an easy afternoon, then.”

Luckily, Sarah has been with Clarke since Clarke’s very first campaign; the girl barely bats an eye at Clarke’s wryness anymore. “Good luck, Miss Griffin.”

When Sarah leaves, after handing over both Miller’s file folder of resumes and the unfinished budget proposal, Clarke lets loose an unexpected sigh in the silence. Through floor-to-ceiling glass window of her office that allows her to see into the main campaign headquarters, she can see her young employees, laughing and enjoying each other’s company in the easy afternoon. It’s Thursday, almost the weekend, and it’s so early in the campaign that they haven’t had much to do besides bond. It’s endearing. And positive. And because of that, she doesn’t let herself feel bitter when she looks down at the to-do pile on her desk. She has a half-hour until the San Francisco conference call is due to begin, but if experience is anything to judge by, both this call and the following call will run over their allotted time. She won’t have time for anything else until close to 5 PM.

Still clinging to dreams of making it home before the 9PM evening news, Clarke grabs Miller’s resume folder (it’s far slimmer than the budget file beside it). Stuck to the front of the folder is a post-it note in his lazy scrawl:

*Please make a top two selection and return to me ASAP so that I can set up interviews.*

Clarke grins. Miller is another one who worked with her on her previous campaign, and fortunately so, because if he hadn’t, he certainly would have quit by now. Each time he suggests a replacement campaign manager for Bellamy, she refuses. She’s been wearing both hats just fine since Bellamy’s abrupt departure, and so she’s willing to hold out for the best possible candidate, even if that means she’s down to around five hours of sleep per night.

“I’ll sleep when I’m senator,” she reminds herself.

With Miller’s helpful annotations, Clarke quickly skims the five resumes he had given her. Three men, two women, all with varying blends of experience, education, and connections. There’s a less experienced one who graduated from UCLA and Clarke lurches instinctively toward her alma mater, but his experience puts him outside of her salary cap.

Two other possible candidates she knows by name from their campaign consulting work around town, and therefore, she’s able to disregard them as well, because she already knows how expensive they would be.

*Likeability??* Miller had noted on another resume; she ignores that as well. She hadn’t particularly liked Bellamy but they made a good team anyway, his sudden departure notwithstanding. Besides,
since she is the one standing on the public platform for the people of California to eviscerate, she’s the one who has to be likeable, not her campaign manager. Her second-in-command just has to be damn good at their job.

With another sigh, Clarke flicks her attention over to the budget folder, and it forces her to admit defeat—Miller may murder her, but she can’t accept any of these candidates. The info in that budget folder will tell her what she already knows: at this point so early on, she doesn’t have the funds to hire any of them. Bellamy, for all his faults, had at least been cheap.

Feeling guilty, she tries to be helpful anyway, leaving him a reply post-it note: *Maybe as consultants later?*

Tossing the folder aside, she sits back in her chair and breathes deeply.

The usual mid-afternoon fatigue takes her by surprise, setting in early today. It necessitates an earlier-than-usual coffee run, as well, if she’s to be expected to make it through the next several hours of work and conference call planning. Just as Clarke makes the decision to call for Sarah with a coffee order, the intercom on her desk buzzes.

“Miss Griffin?” comes Sarah’s voice.

“Yes?” Clarke asks, frowning as she wonders how much she’ll have to increase Sarah’s salary to account for psychic abilities.

“I have former Senator Marcus Kane on the phone from you, calling from DC.”

“Kane? Kane? Like my mom’s friend Kane?” She hasn’t heard from him in months, not since her mother’s last charity event. “Uh, go ahead and transfer him through, thanks.”

“The San Francisco conference call—”

“Just hold it if need be. This shouldn’t take long.”

“One moment, then.”

Distracted and confused by the random call, Clarke forgets to ask Sarah for coffee and swears silently, then grabs the phone on the first ring.

“Clarke! How are you, kid?”

She smiles at the sound of Kane’s warm voice flooding over the line. “I’m doing well, Kane. And you?”

“Clarke, at this point, you’ve known me for the majority of your life, plus you’ve been an adult for a while now. You can use my first name.”

“I don’t think so,” she replies politely, because using Marcus feels as alien as referring to her father as Jake. “You’ll always be Senator Kane to me. It’s just ingrained now.”

He chuckles. “Your mother raised you well. But, at the very least, I’ll be calling you Senator Griffin soon, I hear. I saw that you officially joined the senate race out in California, congratulations! I knew you would follow in Abby’s footsteps.”

“Thank you, Kane.” Clarke closes her eyes; she’s starting to fantasize about coffee again.

“The country will be watching this one, and I will be waiting to see them all rally behind you. But
listen, now that you’re officially in the running, I wanted to give you a call because I have some contacts out there that I can set you and Mr. Blake up with. There’s one—"

“Actually,” Clarke interrupts, “Bellamy won’t be managing my campaign this time around. He handled the state rep election well, but he needs more experience before something of this magnitude.”

Clarke’s voice may be perfectly-tailored professionalism, but Kane has been in this business far longer than she has and he has acquired the ability to see the levity where she doesn’t—his chuckle grows to laughter. “Wow, you’re breaking up the Griffin-Blake dream team? You were the youngest state rep in years, if I remember correctly. It was a miracle election.”

“He had other obligations this time around. In the meantime, once I fill the position, I’d love those contacts.”

“Absolutely, absolutely.” Kane pauses thoughtfully for a moment. “You know, I still might be able to help you out right now, Clarke. I assume you’re in the hiring search to build a campaign management and consulting team, right?”

“Yes.”

“Hm. I worked closely with a consulting firm out here in DC, and got to know a few of the employees quite well. There was a young woman who I believe recently moved out to your neck of the woods—she hasn’t run any campaigns herself, but she handles herself beautifully. Visionary girl, just her age holding her back. You can probably relate. I think she’d be a great member of your team.”

The call waiting button had begun flashing while he spoke, drawing Clarke’s attention; worse, Sarah is waving her arms outside Clarke’s office window, mouthing “San Francisco! San Francisco!” Clarke gives her a nod and returns her attention to Kane.

“That sounds great, Kane. You have my personal email address, send me her information and I’ll be sure to forward it on to my HR team.”

“Don’t worry kid,” he replies, “I’ll take care of the legwork for you. I’ll have her call your office. She’ll get snatched up by someone else if you don’t get in contact with her quickly, trust me. January is campaign season, after all, everyone is trying to add to their team.”

Sarah is more and more insistent outside the window; time to wrap it up. “Just give her my email and have her send her information directly, then,” Clarke blurts out, before immediately cringing at her lack of professionalism. A rare misstep.

“Sounds good,” Kane chuckles, glossing over it. “I’ll be in touch, kid! And congratulations again!”

“Thank you. I’ll talk to you soon.” Before she even hears the call click out, she switches the line over to the conference call, announces her presence, and apologizes smoothly for the delay. As managers and department heads of the San Francisco office situate themselves and go over the planned conversation topics, Clarke scrawls My firstborn for a large coffee in big letters on a notepad and holds it up for Sarah to read. Her secretary gives her a thumbs up and heads for the door.

That latte is Clarke’s saving grace for the rest of the day. As predicted, both conference calls on the schedule run a half hour over the planned time, because she needs to reiterate and debate the advertising plans moving forward for both locations. By the time she hangs up with San Diego, the happy laughing interns and employees in the office outside have long since left, leaving Clarke with
an empty office and a budget still to renegotiate and approve before tomorrow’s big financial
meeting. The task of returning journalists’ interview requests she leaves for tomorrow, justifying it
with the questionable logic of playing hard to get.

She has numbers swimming in front of her eyes, so much so that when she finally finishes for the
night and checks her watch, it takes her a moment to read that it’s past 8PM. She’ll miss the 9PM
evening news for sure, a common occurrence these days. She can’t even remember the last time she
was home before the sunset.

“Maybe if you weren’t managing your own campaign,” she chides herself. As she pulls on her
jacket, her gaze lands on the pile of rejected applicants, sitting in her outbox for Miller tomorrow.

She’ll figure something out eventually. She always does.

On the cab ride home, Clarke dozes against the window, the familiar streets of Los Angeles sliding
past outside and the talking points for her financial meeting tomorrow sliding past the inside of her
eyelids. Fundraising goals, donations, lobbying, compromises, salaries…

Her cellphone vibrating in her lap pulls her from her reverie.

[8:32 PM] Raven Reyes: Hey, Madame President. Octavia got back into town late last night, do you
want to meet up for drinks in about an hour?

[8:32 PM] Clarke Griffin: I could have used one this afternoon, actually.

[8:33] Raven Reyes: Wow. I thought substance abuse starts only once you’re elected, not before.

Clarke makes a mental note to delete these messages later, lest they come up in some sort of future
tribunal years down the road, because she definitely has found herself desiring an afternoon cocktail
more than once.

[8:35] Clarke Griffin: I’ll remember that. Anyway, I’m exhausted and I have an early day
tomorrow. How long will she be in town?

[8:40] Raven Reyes: She and Lincoln are basically tumbleweeds, you know that. I’ll ask her tonight
when I see her, and once I do, we’ll make plans for sometime in the near future, got it?


[8:42] Raven Reyes: You’re sounding more and more like the type of politician I would vote for. I’ll
text you later, Griffin.

Feeling considerably lighter, Clarke closes the conversation and moves to slide her phone into her
purse to catch a few more minutes of dozing before her cab arrives at her apartment, but, as always,
the cell phone vibrates once more before she can set it aside. This time, it’s an email.

To: c.griffin@cgsenate1.com

From: al_ward@gmail.com
Subject: Campaign Management

Representative Griffin;

Through an unorthodox process, Senator Marcus Kane directed me to contact you regarding an opportunity for a position within your campaign.

I offer seven years of experience in political consulting, another four years working with campaigns in multiple capacities, as well as the work ethic and ability required to survive in Washington DC’s political climate. I have attached my resume for your consideration. I look forward to speaking with you at your earliest convenience.

Best Regards,

Lexa Ward

The brevity of it is at least enough to pique Clarke’s interest. A brief scan of the attached document leaves Clarke with the same feeling of being moderately impressed: though she’s not supposed to pay attention to things like this, she notes that Lexa Ward graduated from Yale with a political science degree the same year Clarke was graduating from UCLA. It makes them about the same age, and makes Lexa the youngest of the job candidates Clarke has seen thus far.

Her experience is a little sparse, especially for a job of this weight, but Clarke can’t help but think of the rejected folder she left for Miller, so she shrugs and forwards him the email with a note attached:

Sorry, Nate, the CM suggestions didn’t work out for budget reasons. In the meantime, we can bring on some consultants at least. This one was personally rec’d from Senator Kane, check her out and let me know what you think.

--CG

That is by no means the last of her responsibility for the day, but when she finally gets into her apartment fifteen minutes later, she kicks off her heels and gives herself a few seconds to bask in the feeling of her bare feet on the tile in her entryway. This is, unequivocally, her the favorite part of every day, coming home.

That feeling doesn’t last long, though. Thirty second later and she’s off again and elbows-deep in her nightly routine. It’s automatic. Within five minutes of coming through the door, she has last night’s takeout reheating in the microwave, the nightly news replaying on her TV, and her cell phone displaying the google news updates she missed during her busiest hours of the day. She alights on a biographical article on Vincent Vie, a state legislator who also declared for the senate race recently; she skims the article as she settles on the couch with her food, and a news report on an attack in Syria plays in the background. This is how the night goes, how every night goes. Three hours of mass information consumption of everything she missed while she was in the office.
At midnight she makes it to the shower, turns up the heat until the water is hot enough to scald the day off of her. An hour after that, she settles into bed and checks her email one last time. There’s a recent one from Miller, a reply to her late email about the new campaign managing applicant.

Got it, boss. At this point, I don’t care if you pick the barista who makes your coffee to manage your campaign. If you like her, I’ll hire her. So I’ll give this one a call first thing in the morning to see if we can set up an interview.

--Miller

She doesn’t linger on the thought of the new applicant for the rest of the night, and the thought is gone completely by the next morning.

As soon as Clarke gets into the office, she’s fielding questions from all sides—Griffin, Griffin, Miss Griffin!—that’s the downside of connecting with each and every one of them, from interns to young employees to the veterans who worked with her on her old campaign. Among the stampede and the hurried responses that she gives them, Miller’s mention of “Interview at three!” goes mindlessly acknowledged but otherwise set aside. She has a massive budget meeting set for later today. The prep for that meeting takes most of the days with her main financial team locked away in a conference room.

The meeting itself is less math and more arguing, which Clarke is absolutely made for—she was a lawyer first, after all. But passionately arguing with people who prefer numbers to actual human interaction is a tricky task so it’s only after re-negotiating the budget a whopping four times that they are able to come to some sort of compromise, and even then accountants and attorneys only settle for another meeting for a revised budget, in another three months. Clarke leaves the conference room fending off a blistering headache, and craving the solitude of her office. It’s a Friday afternoon, the end of a long day and a longer week.

That solitude lasts fifteen minutes.

A tap at the door interrupts Clarke’s forced state of zen, and she opens her eyes to see Sarah poking her head through the door. “Miss Griffin?”

Too tired to remind her about the intercom system, Clarke takes a steeling breath. “Yes?”

“Just a reminder about your interview—“

She holds back from swearing. “Ah yeah, the journalists. I’ll get back to them before the end of the day, I promise. Give them some time to write about Cage Wallace first, then we’ll save the best for last.” She doesn’t smile, as if it’s a political play instead of a cop-out, but part of Sarah’s job description is not to ask.

Still, though, the secretary doesn’t retreat. Clarke raises an eyebrow at her. “Of course, Miss Griffin. I’d also like to remind you of your interview with Mr. Miller, and his campaign management applicant.”

“…when was this discussed?”

“This morning. It’s on your daily schedule.”

Clarke looks down in shock at the interview sitting right in front of her, as it had been all day, and
sure enough, there’s the interview. Scheduled to start in fifteen minutes. This time, Clarke actually does hiss “Shit,” as she jumps out of her seat and hurries past Sarah out of her office.

Clarke is still smoothing out her blouse as she enters the conference room, to find Miller waiting with impatience written all over his face. Both he and Sarah have been with Clarke for a long time, but Sarah has the professionalism to hide her emotions; Miller doesn’t care, but he gets away with it.

“ Took you long enough, boss,” he says sardonically.

“Busy day,” she shoots back as she takes the seat next to him. There’s a resume and a legal pad sitting on the table, which reminds her that she didn’t give this woman’s details a great read through the first time. “Give me the short version on her. What do you think?”

“No time. She’s already here. Punctual, this one, you could learn something. Sarah went to bring her in as soon as you joined me. I’ll take the lead on the interview, we’ll go over it later.”

Clarke doesn’t have a chance to answer because, as predicted, the door opens a second later and Sarah enters, followed closely by one of the most attractive women Clarke has ever seen.

She immediately bites down on the inside of her cheek for that, because Jesus it’s the last thing she should be thinking in this role. But she would be lying if the air hadn’t changed when Lexa Ward glides in on high heels, exuding the brand of confidence more appropriate for a championship athlete than a young woman interviewing for the biggest job of her life. She can think of a thousand descriptors that better fit this woman than punctual.

Intimidating, is one. In fact Clarke is a little taken aback by her grace as she crosses the room, heels tapping, standing tall and long with her chin raised high, making a strange nervousness flutters in Clarke’s stomach. It’s only after Miller stands to greet her that Clarke remembers her own courtesies; she jumps to her feet just as Lexa arrives at the table.

“Miss Ward,” Miller says, “Nice to meet you. We spoke on the phone earlier, but allow me to introduce State Representative Clarke Griffin.”

“Thank you for arranging this on short notice, Mr. Miller,” she says with a nod, shaking his hand. Then she turns the weight of her gaze, unreadable green eyes, on Clarke. “And Miss Griffin, it’s a pleasure.”

“Likewise,” Clarke says. It takes her a moment, but her ingrained politics and niceties have returned, faithful as ever. She shakes Lexa’s hand and lets go quickly.

They take their seats and Clarke sits back, giving Miller the lead on the interview as he reviews the basics of Lexa Ward’s resume, while giving herself the chance to analyze her. It must be said that this is the first potential hire to have made it to the interview stage—but even if she was one of dozens, in Clarke’s mind, this one in particular has already made a hell of an impression on her. Lexa doesn’t look to be under any pressure at all, never looking away from Miller’s face, hardly even blinking as she answers his questions with the same easy grace she moves with. She’s well-spoken and sharp. The kind of person Clarke Griffin wants on her campaign team.

Hell, the kind of person Clarke Griffin wants around her.

“So...” Miller says, summing up the basic info once she’s confirmed it all. “A Bachelor’s in PoliSci from Yale; a minor in business; a few years of basic campaign work; and then work on master’s degree in marketing from NYU.”

“Just a year of that master’s program, for clarification,” Lexa says.
“Why’d you stop?”

“I started working at a political consulting company in Washington and realized I didn’t need the marketing degree, and that real life experience would get me further than a degree anyway.”

“So that’s always been your dream job?” Clarke asks, speaking up for the first time. “Campaign consulting?”

“And management,” Lexa replies smoothly.

“What about it is the most appealing?”

“The wide variety of knowledge you have to be able to pull from in order to craft a successful candidate or policy. Politics, business, law, people, media, money…there are a lot of moving parts. I enjoy the challenge.”

Politics in general require the development and maintenance of a good poker face, but this is especially true for politicians like Clarke Griffin, the ones who don’t look the part and don’t fit with the status quo. So even though she may be slightly impressed with and appreciative of Lexa’s answer, she gives nothing away.

Nor does Lexa, and that’s perhaps an even better indication of her competence than the answer itself. Clarke runs her gaze over her again. Everything about her is perfectly-tailored: her black suit; her hair, done up to expose the column of her neck; even her answers come across as rehearsed but not unnatural or memorized.

“So even though you’ve worked in campaign consulting for several years,” Miller takes over, “It’s always been through contract work through your company.”

“Yes.”

“And this would be your first independent hiring for part of a campaign management team.”

“Yes.”

“Do you believe your work experience with one relates directly or is there a difference between contract consulting and being a paid employee?”

“There’s a difference, but it’s not a square peg in a round hole. It just requires the proper skills to adapt the experience of one into something worthwhile for the other. And in any case, I’ve always believed that a lack of experience does not translate to a lack of proficiency. Some of the best come out of nowhere.”

Clarke flushes slightly—Lexa’s attention turns to Clarke at those last few words and somehow, somehow that is a deliberately personal connection, because Clarke’s own newness to the political arena has been well-documented over her term as a State Representative, but she made it work anyway. She understands exactly what Lexa’s saying.

Fuck, she’s good.

Miller walks Lexa Ward through a few more topics, standard behavioral-based questions: Which tasks from the following list do you delegate, and which do you handle yourself? How do you handle bad workplace encounters with other employees? Describe your ideal approach to creating a successful campaign. And Lexa handles them as well as she has been. Clarke breaks in only as needed, because at this point, she’s already passed this applicant through to the next round. Now it’s
just a matter of studying her as she answers, which is a far more entertaining prospect than actually answering the questions herself. Since she was a kid, her best skill has always been her ability to read people.

Lextra is a challenge.

“Well,” Miller says finally, setting his pen down on the notepad and looking between Clarke and Lextra. “I think that about covers everything we need to know. Representative Griffin, anything else?”

Clarke sits forward—Lextra has piqued too much of her curiosity and her answers have been nothing but smooth. Clarke hasn’t been able to ignore the strange fluttering in her chest that has irritated her throughout the interview and she fears that allowing Lextra to walk away on Miller’s words is like allowing herself to be intimidated into silence by this girl and her sheer ability.

“One more, more from curiosity than anything. In your e-mail last night, you listed an interesting qualification: survival in Washington DC. Elaborate on that wording, it caught my attention.”

It’s perhaps the first question that gives Lextra any sort of pause; Clarke tries not to feel victorious for stumpng her. She likes that idea of equaling her. Lextra considers Clarke with a sparkling, thoughtful eye, never looking away from her face, before she answers: “You have an excellent political resume and pedigree yourself, Representative Griffin—”

“Miss Griffin is fine. Fewer syllables.”

Lextra stares, then smiles and inclines her head dutifully. “Miss Griffin. Based on your experience and background, I’d venture to say you’ve spent time in the nation’s capital?”

“I have.”

“So you understand me,” Lextra says simply. “One acquires a certain ruthlessness in Washington. Especially a woman, especially young. You have to have that to achieve anything, I’ve learned. And I believe California’s political climate could use an injection of people with that willingness…with that sort of background.”

Her voice maintains its even lilt throughout but Clarke can’t help but rise to the undercurrent of a challenge in those last few words—and judging by the slightest arch of her eyebrow, that was what Lextra intended. She studies Clarke for her reply. Clarke considers Lextra and considers her options, overcome with a strange desire to test this girl and see how well she could really hold her own against a seasoned lawyer and politician…but ultimately decides to pass. She sits back with a smile.

“We probably could use that, Miss Ward, you’re right.”

It’s the note of finality that Miller needs to take back the reigns and wrap up the interview, pulling Lextra’s attention away from Clarke. “Alright, Miss Ward, I believe we’ve about covered everything we need to know today. We’ll look into your references and contact you sometime next week.”

And then they’re on their feet again, shaking hands, smiling, observing all the proper etiquette. Lextra sees herself out—Sarah will be waiting outside to escort her from the office—and Clarke and Miller fall back into their chairs like athletes who just completed a successful game.

“So, you first, Griffin.”

“She was good,” Clarke says with a shrug of her shoulders because there’s not much to it beyond that. “I think she’d work well here.”
“Do you think she’d fit in well, or did you just hear yourself in her last answer about being ruthless?” he asks with a laugh.

“They’re not mutually exclusive, Miller,” Clarke shoots back. “In all seriousness, she handled herself well. And that’s really all I need. Someone to stand up to the pressure and take some of the responsibility off of me. I can handle the majority of it.”

Miller nods. “Understood. But we’re not just hiring you another secretary. We’re hiring people to be your crunch team. Your right hand men—or, woman, in this case. She’s going to be one of the ones stuck to your side for the next year, Clarke. You need to be able to work with her, on a personal level as well as a professional level, not just handle it all yourself and delegate work to her.” He can see that she’s already gearing up to argue, so he raises a hand.

“Tell you what: I’ll set up a personal interview with her sometime next week, over lunch. If you get through that and you think you can work with her, then we’ll look into picking her up for a position on the team.”

“He said, and now—” she glances at her watch, “—It’s almost four, on a Friday. Go enjoy your weekend, Miller.”

“You should too, Griffin.”

“I will when I’m senator.”
As she strides through the central hub of Griffin Campaign HQ after the interview, she slows down well before her office. Not because she dislikes the task awaiting her in her office, but because she wants to take in the view in front of her. The office is buzzing with early weekend excitement: Jasper and Monty playing trash can basketball, shooting increasingly technical and outrageous shots while Fox cheers them on and Sarah chastises them; the newer, nervous interns huddling around the coffee machine, smiling as they get to know each other; and the outgoing marketing crew having an enthusiastically loud debate about Superbowl Commercials. Altogether, it’s a heartening sight, to see them so happy. They’re still in the hiring process so this small group will grow over the upcoming weeks, but they’re already tight-knit and bursting with optimism despite the uphill battle ahead of them. Just the kind of people Clarke needs. She wonders then, idly, if Lexa Ward is the right captain to lead them all. The real work on the campaign hasn’t yet begun. She pictures Lexa’s sharp intensity and her long-legged, high-heeled stride through the office, and thinks that it might be just what they need to focus this group to success once it comes down to all-night shifts on the phones and an entire office running solely on caffeine. They might just be able to do this. A sort of hopefulness begins to rise in her chest at the thought. A familiar, chipper “Griffin!” interrupts any further imaginings and when Clarke turns, there they are. Octavia and Raven beam at her from the front entrance to the office, Octavia with her hands buried in the pockets of her leather jacket and Raven with her arms thrown wide in exuberant greeting. Clarke stops short at the sight of them. "Sarah," she groans to her secretary, "Did you really buzz them through security?"

“Miss Griffin, have I ever been able to control Miss Reyes?”

“Yeah, Miss Griffin,” Raven barks, still smiling. And even in front of her office of employees, Senate Candidate Clarke Griffin can’t help but beam back as she quickly crosses the room and pulls Raven into a hug, warm affection spreading through her. “These hugs are the only reason I’m voting for you, just so you know.”

Clarke hugs Octavia longer and tighter because now that she thinks about it, it’s been weeks since the last time she even heard from the girl. Raven takes the chance to explain: “Since she got back in last night, we figured we might as well come visit, because that way you can’t avoid us anymore.”

“You know I’m not avoiding you,” Clarke says, “I basically live here now. Home sweet home for the next year or so, until the campaign is over.”

Octavia casts an eye over the office, the neutral tones and warm wood paneling and modern art up on the walls. “Nice digs, at least. Step up from the last one, with the cheap carpet.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not Cage Wallace and his plutocracy but I can afford to have a nice work environment, at least. So where were you this time, and for how long?” Clarke asks, noting Octavia’s deep tan and sun-streaked brown hair. Octavia has a penchant for flinging herself around the world for work with no announcement or fanfare, so after a while, stories about a sunny day in Malaysia become as common as stories about a sunny day in Manhattan Beach.

“Australia,” Octavia says, “Linc had an assignment way out in the sticks, photographing wildlife, so
I tagged along for some portfolio stuff. We went the full nine, camping and jeeps and professional guides. Then took a week vacation in Sydney for good measure.”

Clarke laughs, shaking her head. “What a life.”

But Raven scoffs. “Please, you know she preferred the dirt and the bush to the hotels in Sydney.”

“Well, after a while,” Octavia acquiesces with a grin. “You guys ever heard of cassowaries?”

“You’re telling us all about them over dinner tonight,” Raven promises, then looks to Clarke with a raised eyebrow. “And yes, that’s us. Including you, Griffin. We’re here to pick you up, so you don’t have a choice in this.”

“I…” I have a million and one things to do tonight. But she also doesn’t really have much of an excuse, given the way her employees are filing out on either side of the three girls, off to start their weekend. Clarke very well could stay in the office for another few hours, even invite Raven and Octavia to sit in and catch up with her while she catches up on her work, but she can’t do that to them. Or to herself: she tried it once and it ended particularly badly.

“I’m in,” she declares, “Let me get my things.”

“So they’re these giant, mean ducks, basically,” Octavia says, waving her glass of wine for emphasis. Either she doesn’t know or doesn’t care that her wild gesticulations are attracting the attention of the other patrons in the restaurant; it’s all upscale dining and low light, and while Octavia looks the part, her detailed adventure stories don’t fit at all. Clarke and Raven can’t hold back their smirks of amusement.

“So, geese? You’re so worked up about Australian geese?” Raven teases.

“Yeah, if geese were six feet tall and had knives taped to their feet and try to kick you…”

Clarke frowns, shakes her head. “What did Australia do to make God hate it?”

“Let me tell you about the spiders.”

“We’re in a steakhouse, please don’t.”

“Still though,” Octavia concedes, picking up her menu, “You two would like it. Maybe the main cities. Not as many spiders, a lot of pretty girls.”

Taking a long drink of wine, Raven tips her head onto her shoulder, looking thoughtfully at the restaurant ceiling. “Well, since I haven’t had much success with men lately, maybe I should try something with a woman again. Clarke, we should go on vacation and pick up some Australians.”

A part of her fantasizes, the same way Raven is, about the beach and the freedom and beautiful people, both men and women, everywhere. She hasn’t had a vacation in forever. Southern California weather sometimes feels like a vacation in itself, even in January, but it’s the prospect of even a few days on the other side of the world away from her responsibilities that would make her feel like she’s a college student again.

And then, of course, there’s the other part of her that reaches for her cell phone as soon as it vibrates in her purse. That part is just a little bit stronger, and pulls her out of her escapist fantasies. Raven frowns, Octavia rolls her eyes, and Clarke offers only a “Sorry, one second,” as she unlocks her
Representative Griffin—I need the total compilation of our 15 biggest affiliates and donors at this point so I can update the website. I spoke with Sarah but was told you had the final list. Please send it to me when you get the opportunity.

She taps back a quick reply:

I’ll speak with my accountants tomorrow for the final numbers, compile them, and send the list to you sometime early tomorrow afternoon. Thank you. -- CG

It really isn’t her job, but she had insisted on working with the early donors and supporters of the campaign personally, so she is the source of information on that front. She considers it a good thing that Monty asked her for the list, because it’s a reminder that those donors are due personal thank you letters from her. Adding to her mental list for tomorrow, Clarke slides her phone back into her purse and reaches for her wine.

“You do need that vacation,” Octavia notes.

“Sounds great,” Clarke says cordially. “I’ll be free in…probably three years from now.”

“Please, it’ll be another three years before we even get you out to dinner again,” scoffs Raven. “I haven’t seen you this busy since college. What’s up? The campaign is barely started.”

Instead of answering, Clarke finishes off her glass of wine and pours another from the bottle in the center of the table. This steakhouse is an old favorite of theirs, because the long wait for food is always made up for by great wine and the time they spend catching up.

Octavia correctly interprets Clarke’s reticence: “It’s because Bellamy’s a fuck up, isn’t he?”

And she can smirk when she says it, because he’s her brother, but Clarke just purses her lips and Raven shifts uncomfortably. Not only was Bellamy Clarke’s campaign advisor, but he and Raven dated off and on for over a year; both relationships were severed when he decided he needed time away from everything and bailed without warning, leaving Clarke high and dry professionally and Raven personally.

“Listen, I make no excuses for him,” Octavia says when she notes both of their reactions. “I didn’t expect him to skip out on either of you. Not the guy I grew up with. I don’t even know what happened.”

Now it’s Raven’s turn to distract herself with pouring more wine, finishing off the bottle and nodding to a nearby waiter when he hurries forward with another. It’s one of those nights. In any case, Clarke spares her by handling it with a political deftness: “Bellamy did what he believed was best for himself. And I have been managing things just fine on my own, and with the campaign team. It’s just going to be a little bit busier until I get someone in to replace him.”

“Well, hurry up,” Raven says dryly. “Octavia’s running around the world, and you’re trying to rule the world. Figure out someone who can give you some of your life back, because I miss these nights with you guys. You’re still Clarke and Octavia first.”

It’s not a sentiment Clarke gives much thought to. Through the rest of the night and another bottle
and a half of wine, they talk of lighter things, like more of Octavia’s travel adventures and Raven’s project at work and old college memories. They only venture back toward the discussion of politics when Octavia gets drunk and, much to the annoyance of the other patrons, very loudly shouts down the idea of Cage Walce, the front-runner in the Senate race. They hurry her out of there after that.

The following day is a work day for Clarke; her hours are filled sitting on the floor of her office surrounded by spreadsheets with one very exasperated accountant on the line. Throughout the day, she communicates with Monty sporadically until at last they have the web page sorted. She still doesn’t spare a thought to the campaign management team issue.

But 24 hours later, Raven’s words come back to her.

She’s sitting on the beach, watching the sunset over the Pacific Ocean. Raven lies beside her, sleeping in the dying rays of the sun; Octavia and Lincoln trudge towards them across the sand after finishing up their final beach volleyball game against a group of sorority girls from nearby UCLA. They’ve been out here all day, but there are still two or three beers left in the cooler for a sunset toast.

It’s a rare day, one that seems more like a photograph from her past than a real day from the present—it’s been ages since she’s worn a bikini, ages since she’s felt this light and happy, like she’s floating on the light breeze. She looks over at Raven to thank her for convincing her to come today, and suddenly remembers what the girl said about getting her life back.

Before she second-guesses herself, she grabs her cell phone and sends a text to Miller’s personal number.

[5:56 PM] Clarke Griffin: I want to go ahead with hiring Ward for the campaign management team. Set up the lunch interview as soon as possible on Monday; the goal is to have her working for us by next week at the latest.

For better or for worse, when Clarke Griffin commits to something, she fucking commits. Motivated as she is by her weekend realization, the hiring and onboarding as a new campaign management team member to ease some of the pressure off of her becomes Clarke’s primary objective.

At 7:30 AM Monday morning, she stops by Miller’s office before she even gets to her own—she has to return at 9AM when he and the rest of the employees actually get to work—to remind him to call Lexa Ward. She emails him again at noon; an hour later she receives a reply that he secured the interview for the following day and to please let him be after this, because he has work to do as well. Accordingly, Clarke focuses all of her attention for the next day and a half on prepping for the interview and the tasks she will delegate to her as soon as she’s hired, ignoring Miller and even Sarah when they remind her that, “You’ve only ever interacted with her once.”

“Just get a feel for her, and then we’ll figure out what capacity would be best to hire her into,” Miller reminds Clarke the following day, as she readies to leave the office to meet Lexa for lunch. “We have plenty of time to strategize about this after you meet with her.”

“I understand, Miller. This is not my first time.”

Clarke had picked a restaurant just down the street from the campaign office, an upscale French place with huge open windows that allow the warm Southern California breeze to flow through. Because it’s so close, Clarke arrives twenty minutes early, gets seated at a table for two, and begins mentally reviewing her plan of action.
She's punctual, this one.

Not five minutes later, Clarke looks up and sees Lexa speaking with the host at the front of the restaurant, ending her planning. She affixes a pleasant, even smile to her face—Lexa's appearance won't take her by surprise this time—and rises to greet her as the host leads Lexa to the table.

"Miss Ward," she says, shaking her hand, "You're early."

Lexa keeps Clarke's hand firm in hers and gives her a half smile. "Not as early as you, Representative Griffin. I hope I didn't keep you waiting."

"Miss Griffin is fine, as I said." She releases Lexa's hand, and is immediately taken aback by the way she wants to reach out and take her hand again. Instead, to quell that strange feeling, she focuses herself on taking a seat and moving her menu out of the way.

Clarke thinks she is underdressed for half a second, wearing just a skirt and a blouse, but Lexa shrugs off her blazer and evens the field with a button-up rolled to her elbows—with the windows open, it is warm in the restaurant, after all, and this lunch interview is not nearly as formal as the conference room interview Miller ran a few days before. Despite the casual way she slings her jacket over the back of her chair, Lexa remains stoic and professional as she takes her seat.

"Of all the things I'm discovering about California," Lexa notes, "the difference between January here and January back east is the most shocking."

"In a good way?"

Lexa nods. "In a great way."

"There's a reason forty million people live here," Clarke says, smiling.

"And you seek to represent all of them on the national level."

Well, that's jumping right into it. Lexa Ward doesn't do small talk, apparently.

"That's the plan," Clarke agrees, and jumps in after her. "I have five months until primaries, a little more than ten months until the general election. California is a battleground state this year," she adds, as if Lexa Ward doesn't know. Everyone knows. The possibility of a Republican senator from California could factor into which party has control of the Senate. The nation will be watching this one, as she is constantly reminded.

"I grew up in Virginia, so I've always been on the front lines in battleground elections." Lexa takes a sip of water and picks up her menu, but she doesn't break her gaze with Clarke. "They're interesting campaigns, Miss Griffin, always national news-worthy. Are you prepared to run one?"

They've an entire lunch hour to talk over drinks and multiple courses and even after the plates are cleared. And, if need be, Clarke could stretch that hour even longer. She’s in charge in here. Per Miller’s instructions, she is to get to know the woman in front of her: her history, her demeanor, her person. Lexa’s east coast etiquette and the mention of a childhood in Virginia are easy conversation starters that could fill an hour. All around them are the same type of conversationists, casual diners in pairs or small groups who fill the restaurant with a pleasant low hum of voices.

But Lexa’s talk of battleground races interests her far more than any of that.

“I am prepared to run one,” she says, with a hint of a challenge that is reminiscent of Lexa’s tone in the interview yesterday. “I’m looking forward to it. And while you’ve seen those races up close,
have you ever helped win one?”

“Very soon, hopefully.”

It’s too early in the game to give the grin that response deserves. Clarke is all business. Giving Lexa a quick once-over, she says, “We really did like your resume, Miss Ward, and your first interview even more. We’re strongly considering you for a position on the management team.”

Only a slight upward kick of Lexa’s brows shows her pleasant surprise at the suggestion; otherwise, she just nods curtly.

“I’m flattered, Miss Griffin. Thank you. I’ve spoken with quite a few politicians recently, and almost none of them are considering anyone for campaign management roles at this stage.”

That’s a probing question. Why are you still hiring at this stage?

“I have high standards.”

This time, Lexa’s lips do twitch in a small smile. “As I said…I’m flattered.”

A warm breeze floats in through the nearest open window, and between that and Lexa’s smile, both women relax. They are, for a moment, no different than the rest of the diners, coworkers or friends simply enjoying each other’s company for lunch. Lexa holds Clarke’s gaze for that moment of calmness, studying her—and just as Clarke makes the decision to ask Lexa about that childhood in Virginia, Lexa breaks the eye contact to look down at her menu instead. Clarke takes a sip of water and lets her eyes wander over the other patrons nearby.

A waiter takes the opportunity to swoop in and take drink orders. When he leaves, Lexa returns to business, leaning forward with the spark back in her eye.

“So. Clarke Griffin for senator. Tell me more about the campaign. How is the fundraising going?”

“It’s…in progress.”

“How about your endorsements? I’ve read a bit about the campaign, but not much before today.”

This answer comes easier, because it’s a better topic than fundraising. “My mother’s name helps, so I have some public recognition and a few political endorsements already via that. Otherwise, the party is split between me and the two other democrats in the race.”

Lexa nods, checking off a mental list. Next item? “And your platform?”

That’s straying into dangerous waters, enough to give Clarke pause before she fires back an answer just to keep up with Lexa. She isn’t bound to anything, hasn’t committed herself to working for Clarke, and so anything Clarke tells her here could hit the news by the evening.

But before she can reply, their waiter returns with their drinks and asks for their lunch orders. A surprising amount of relief floods Clarke: as Lexa listens intently to the specials, Clarke pulls herself up straighter in her seat, using the momentary reprieve to regroup. She’s been out of things for too long, grown complacent with her role in the state legislature. In her lawyer days, she would have relished the clever bite of this conversation. Her mother used to complain about Clarke's love of arguing, but it's gotten her this far in life, and she works best with the ones who share that love. Lexa just might.

She's more prepared when the waiter excuses himself and Lexa returns her attention to Clarke.
“Without going into the full details,” Clarke says coolly, “the broad scope is on education, civil rights, and tax reform and capital gains.”

“Appropriate,” she appraises, and Clarke feels a strange rush of pride at getting Lexa’s approval on something so trivial. “The first two are sexy enough for the media, and the last—”

“Makes the campaign more serious and respected,” Clarke finishes for her, earning an approving nod. “I may not have had a campaign manager for the past few weeks, but I am surprisingly capable of handling basic politics, Miss Ward.”

Lexa picks up the sarcasm, but brushes it away with a quiet laugh. “That makes you better than many politicians, actually.”

“And how do you feel about my platform topics?” Clarke asks, curious.

“How do I feel? My views don’t matter, Miss Griffin. My job is to get a person elected, not get a set of values elected. I leave the politics to the politicians.”

“That’s cynical.” And melodramatic. “Why even ask about my goals, then?”

“It’s also realistic. And I ask because I want to know if you can win this race.”

Her hand was halfway to the water glass when she processes Lexa’s words and she immediately freezes, hand hanging in the air, as she flushes with indignation. “I can,” she retorts, looking at Lexa with eyes narrowed. “I absolutely will. Cage Wallace isn’t getting anywhere near the senate seat and—”

“Then I think I can help you,” Lexa says simply.

“So do I.”

That wasn’t the answer Lexa was expecting—and truthfully, neither was Clarke. The surprise makes Lexa close her mouth and raise an eyebrow, not mocking or challenging, but in genuine confusion. It’s only then that Clarke realizes what she had said. What she had offered. And since it’s too late to take that back, Clarke licks her lips, leans in, and says what she has known, felt in her bones, since the interview last week.

“Campaign manager. I want to hire you on to run the entire thing. I think we could win this.” Together.

It takes Lexa a moment longer to recover, eyes flicking up from Clarke’s lips and back down again, trying to find a hint that Clarke is lying. When she gives up, she asks, “You’re serious about this? Just like that?”

“Yes. An industry standard salary, benefits, the possibility of bonuses depending on funding. A bonus when I win; and a stable job on my staff in Washington. Do you want the job?”

“I…accept. Absolutely.”

“When can you start?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Just like that?”

Lexa’s eyebrow quirks upward and an amused smile plays at her lips. "Yes."
"I—okay. Great. Done deal."

And, just like that, she has a campaign manager. She takes a glance at Lexa’s silver wristwatch: it’s been fifteen minutes since Lexa sat down.

They haven’t even been served salad yet.

Not long after that, Clarke momentarily excuses herself from the table and slips outside with her cell phone. Miller answers on the first ring.

“Everything alright, Boss?”

"Hey, Miller. Everything’s fine. But I need you to draft up the proper onboarding forms within the next fifteen minutes, and give them to Sarah for me to grab when I get back. I hired Lexa on as my campaign manager."

There’s a long pause on the other end of the line. Clarke checks the screen to make sure the call hasn’t dropped.

"...you…you did what?" Miller asks slowly.

"I hired Lexa Ward," she repeats, with more clarity and force this time, because the decision has already been made and he can’t say anything about it now.

"And…for which position did I hear you say you hired her?"

"Campaign manager."

Another long pause, this time ending in a sigh. Miller’s voice still drips disbelief. "Griffin, you had one easy goal for this: just see how you got along with her. And instead…you hired her after a fifteen minute conversation over lunch. One request, and you did the exact opposite."

"I got along great with her, Miller," Clarke scoffs. "That's why I hired her."

"To run your entire campaign."

"Yes."

"So what, you already decide on a salary too?" Miller asks. She can’t help but smile as his disbelief shifts into exasperation and she imagines the look on his face when she returns to the office. "Are you going to start training her over dessert?"

"Actually, yes, we talked salary," Clarke replies sweetly. "We’ll be able to afford her. She starts tomorrow, so I’ll hold off on training her until then."

Miller knows her. He didn't know her in college and he didn't know her during her period as a lawyer, but he knows that her best and worst quality is her ability to dig her heels in and that once she does, she can’t be swayed. He releases another long sigh.

“Alright, Griffin. The documents will be on Sarah’s desk in twenty minutes.”

Clarke is not one to question her decisions. She can’t, now—her position and her goals don’t really allow for second-guessing—but even when she was younger and could afford to hesitate and waver, she didn’t. At 15 years old she would attend her mother’s fundraising galas and dine with dignitaries.
and celebrities and wealthy businessmen and women as if she were one of them, and she never doubted herself or her ability to delight them. And if she made a mistake, she forged on through it until she resolved it. A confidence she carried with her, and built her career on.

So, despite earning the ire of the human resources department for her hair-trigger hiring policies, her decision to pick Lexa Ward as her campaign manager costs her no sleep. But she can’t say that when Lexa walks into the office the morning of her first day, Clarke isn’t burning with curiosity to see how this decision will play out.

The meeting she calls is the first indication: she stands at the head of the conference table with Lexa at her side and introduces her as the new leader of the campaign. The heads of each department and their assistants greet Lexa Ward warmly, but as Lexa briefly tells them about herself and her goals, Clarke watches their faces flicker between intimidation and admiration for the long-legged, clearly intelligent woman before them. Their reactions are what she imagined hers looked like when Lexa first walked into the interview room—and at that thought, she suddenly remembers the rush of attraction she had bitten back at her first sight of Lexa.

She bites back the thought again before her mind can consider it any further, and instead gives the last few seconds of Lexa’s speech the upmost attention.

Clarke’s second indication of the effects of her decision comes directly after the meeting. She and Lexa stride out of the room and are immediately met by Sarah, who has a legal pad in hand.

“Miss Griffin! I just got another call from a journalist with the Times.” She holds out the legal pad, with six different names and phone numbers on it. “Everyone wants an interview, and you have to call them back to set up times to speak. Even if it’s just a phone interview.”

Before Clarke can reach out for the numbers, Lexa intercepts them. “I’ll handle it, Miss Griffin. This is what you hired me for, after all,” she says confidently, with the shadow of a smirk at Clarke before she looks down to study the list. “Let’s see, six journalists? Alright... We’ll set you up for two interviews. The others, we’ll promise them better access and a better story later in exchange for their support now.”

“Playing hard to get?” Clarke asks her, grinning.

“Exactly. I’ll call them right now—we’ll start interview and narrative prep in a few hours.”

“Thank you, Miss Ward.”

She made a great decision.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all the kind comments and praise, they are hugely beneficial even just to increase my enjoyment of writing and posting this for you all. Thanks to Ren and Sonya for reading through this and working as my unofficial betas :) xx Enjoy!

“And the next major endorsement we have lined up comes from the tech sector, a nonprofit from the Silicon Valley.”

Jackson presses a button on his laptop and red lettering smashes into view on the projector screen. He reads it aloud on the chance that Clarke’s campaign team are illiterate: “Silicon Valley for the Future. It’s a nonprofit, bipartisan education group comprised of different companies. The group wants to throw their public support behind us, and the companies will be donating individually to us. This is a huge win for us: everyone give a round of applause to Miss Ward for securing it this morning!”

There is a chorus of polite murmurs and acknowledging smiles from around the conference table, congratulations directed to Lexa; she accepts with a careful inclination of her head, nothing more. Clarke adds the small gesture to her growing list of observations.

In some other life, Lexa Ward had had something to do with the military. Somehow. Clarke knows it. It’s readily apparent with just a few seconds of observation but in the interest of understanding all of her employees as well as she can, Clarke put several hours into the study of her new campaign manager before she decided on this very important conclusion. Lexa commands attention and respect in the way she carries herself through the office, making heads turn and then duck back to work so as to avoid being subject to one of her calculating glances. If not for Lexa’s habit of gauging every move and individual like pieces of a chess game, thinking carefully before she opens her mouth or makes a decision, Clarke would have picked something regal for Lexa’s past life--certainly, her slender, straight-backed posture almost demands it--but the machinations going on behind her eyes at all times move Lexa out of passive regality and into action. She’s plotting, planning, and thinking at all times.

And it’s gotten quite distracting, she’s found.

“Miss Griffin?”

The sound of her name jars her from her ruminations. She snaps her attention back to the presentation to find Jackson staring at her, waiting for an answer. “I’m sorry, can you repeat that?”

“I asked if we could confirm plans to meet with the Silicon Valley group leaders next week when you travel to speak with your other campaign endorsements up north.”

“Oh. Yes, that’s the plan. I have several meetings lined up for the trip.”

“Excellent.” He bends to change the slide and starts his next point. “Beyond the tech sector, our other targets are more bipartisan groups…” It’s the beginning of what will be a long speech, so Clarke feels the pressure ease off her, and consequently, her attention shifts again.
She turns her head to the left just enough so that Lexa slides into her peripheral vision. She catches sight of Lexa’s green eyes and the feeling of being under a microscope rushes over her, and it highlights the exact reason she’s distracted by Lexa in the first place. Not because she’s attractive—Clarke chides herself for even considering that as a possibility, and even worse, feeling guilty about it. Because it’s definitely not that, she’s an adult. A professional adult. But Lexa’s distraction lies in the fact that as much as Clarke may have committed herself to studying Lexa in the days since she’s been working, Lexa does the same right back. As she does with everyone and everything else, Lexa observes Clarke carefully whenever they’re sitting in meetings or discussing future plans or even greeting each other first thing in the morning. She wonders what determinations Lexa is making about her.

“Miss Griffin,” Lexa says, the sound of her voice and the sound of her name breaking Clarke out of her train of thought again. But it’s been a long day already, there’s no wonder her attention is waning. She gives the whole of it to Lexa: “Do you have any other suggestions or desired industries we should approach next?”

That, at least, she has a ready answer for. “Bird in the hand,” she replies coolly, “Stick with education and tech for now, donors will step forward themselves if we focus on the positive groups and focus on building the campaign more as we move forward. The donations from the tech sector should be a good start.”

Lexus looks to Jackson and he nods. “That we can do. Let’s wrap this up, and everyone can start working on researching good pathways in what we already have.”

Clarke stays silent for the last few minutes, but she stays attentive as she allows the group to discuss the best route forward under her guidelines. And when they begin filing out a few minutes later, she and Lexa stay seated: they have things to discuss.

Sarah, her secretary, is the last out of the room. She stops at the doorway and turns back. “Oh, and before I forget, the journalist from the Times should be here in about fifteen minutes. Should I bring her to your office or here?”

“Here, will be fine,” Clarke says with a glance at Lexa, who nods confirmation.

“Absolutely.”

“Thank you, Sarah.”

Once Sarah leaves, Lexa stands and moves down the table, tucking in chairs and reorganizing the room before the journalist arrives. Clarke busies herself with the notes she had taken during the meeting, but Lexa’s voice soon interrupts her.

“Do you feel prepped for this interview?”

“Shouldn’t be a problem. Straightforward and simple.”

“It’s your first one of the season, so there’s a demand for a good story. I don’t think it’ll be that simple.”

Clarke looks up with a raised eyebrow to find Lexa leaning back against the conference table, almost slouching in a way that is decidedly unlike the impeccable posture she’s displayed so far. Her arms are crossed. It would be arrogant, if the look on her face wasn’t neutral as always. Most importantly, Clarke has learned to read the look on her face and be able to tell when the gears are turning: Lexa’s planning.
“What do you mean?” Clarke asks, setting aside her notes. She’s memorized them anyway.

Lexa drums her fingers on her arm, pensive. “I’ve been thinking about it. The Times is going to want a good story, so they will try to work outside your terms for the interview. Anything unsavory Niyalah Hunter might bring up to blindside us with?”

Clarke’s eyebrow rises even higher. “Do I look unsavory?”

“Not many politicians do, but they are anyway. I know the basics of your story but I need to know if there are any surprises the media or your opponents could throw at us.”

“Nothing that comes to mind. I already have it hard enough in this job without adding a substance or sex addiction.” Lexa shifts uncomfortably, flushing a little, and nods in an attempt to end the conversation on that note. But Clarke is curious now, so she presses her: “What basics of my story do you know? And how?”

“Things the public knows, Miss Griffin,” Lexa says reassuringly. “I did my research even before you hired me, it’s part of my job. Your childhood, daughter of Senator Abigail Griffin, class president and valedictorian of your private schools growing up. A UCLA education, good extracurriculars. Campus activism?”

“A few clubs,” Clarke says, with a casual shrug. “I didn’t realize I’d published my autobiography.”

The corners of Lexa’s mouth twitch. “Well, your leading several student movements against a variety of injustices counts as school clubs, I suppose. After UCLA, Harvard Law and then a few years as an associate in an LA law firm.”

Clarke finishes for her: “And then my start in politics with a state rep term. You’ve summed it up pretty well; nothing unsavory here.”

“You’re absolutely sure?”

“With the way you’re painting this, I’ll probably bore the interviewer.”

“Not quite.” And there’s that look in her eyes again, revealing her inner machinations and piquing Clarke’s interest again. Now that they’re alone, she can afford to give Lexa her full attention and study every interesting thing about her.

“Listen,” Lexa says, dropping her voice. “If you want to succeed in all of your endorsement plans, if you want the public to rally behind you, you’re going to have to make a name for yourself. We can use this interview to get some real attention on your campaign: Cage Wallace is the darling of the race right now, we know he’s going to get the nomination. Attack him, drag him down a little, and it’ll put a spotlight on you for sure.”

“Not a chance.”

Lexa moves to protest, pushing herself off the table she had been leaning against, but Clarke is already shaking her head against any argument she may make. “I am not running a low road campaign,” Clarke asserts. “That’s not what my mother was about, that’s not what I’m about. I’m not going to attack the other hopefuls to make myself look better.”

“Miss Griffin, I admire your integrity but—”

“It’s not integrity, it is strategy. I’m trying to be legitimate—”
“Legitimate is boring.”

“Illegitimate can sink a campaign!”

“Only if it’s done incorrectly!” Lexa fires back, her decorum vanishing. It’s replaced by a strange fire in her eyes, in her voice, a fire that sends a flash of heat through Clarke’s body and forces her to her feet. They stand on even ground, eye to eye, and Lexa Ward doesn’t back down. “If you do it right, you can get the whole public to fall in love with you and support you through anything.”

“I’ll do that via positive policies and maturity,” Clarke snaps in Lexa’s face. “That’s what people need, I’m not running a Hollywood campaign.”

Lexa scoffs. “We are in Hollywood!”

“Miss Griffin?” Sarah asks quietly from the doorway.

Her secretary’s low voice makes Clarke realize how loud she and Lexa had been getting in their disagreement; when she turns to look at Sarah, the look on Sarah’s face makes her realize how close they are to each other. Clarke instinctively steps back out of Lexa’s reach and the world cools again, allowing her to take a breath of fresh air and compose herself. Lexa does the same:

“I have the journalist here for you,” Sarah says slowly, looking between them as if ashamed for interrupting a serious discussion. Lexa smiles pleasantly at Sarah as if she and Clarke weren’t hotly debating inches from each other’s face just seconds before. Everything is fine.

“Send her in, Sarah,” Clarke says with a nod.

“I will. Also, I’m confirming your travel plans for next week.” She checks the notepad in her hands. “You’ll be leaving next week on Tuesday, correct? I have six airline tickets and six hotel rooms for you and the team you’ll be traveling with. Am I missing anything?”

Clarke’s eyes flick to Lexa and she answers instinctively: “Add another ticket and hotel room for Miss Ward, please.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Sarah ducks out again and Clarke turns back to Lexa, and is surprised to see her brow furrowed in confusion. It’s a strange change of pace, from disagreement to travel invitations, especially when the initial plan was to work with only a small team of assistants and interns from the fundraising team. But that was back when Clarke ran this herself, fought her own battles. And, back before Lexa voiced disagreement with her campaign strategy.

She’s a politician. She knows how to play these things.

“I need you there,” Clarke says simply. “You did well with getting the tech companies on board with us, you can travel to meet them. And the party leaders up in Sacramento. Next Tuesday through Sunday, you’re available, right?”

“That’s what you hired me for.”

“Great…that’s settled then.”

A knock on the conference room door announces the journalist’s arrival, and it breaks the heavy silence that had settled between them. Clarke inhales a silent breath of relief at having a reason to step further away from Lexa—she has a strange desire to step closer and keep arguing.
As if reading her mind, Lexa’s voice sounds behind her as she crosses the room. “And you also hired me to advise you—I still think you should go on the offensive for this interview.”

“That’ll be all, Miss Ward.”

The moment the door swings open, Lexa assumes her demure disposition and takes a seat, leaving Clarke to greet the journalist: Niyah Hunter stands there with an earnest smile. She’s young and fresh with a mostly page-two body of experience, but Clarke will take her sort over prickly, jaded front-page journalists any day. As she had told Lexa, this should be simple, straightforward.

They cover introductions quickly as Niyah takes a seat at the table, arranges her notes and tape recorder. “And you can just call me Niyah,” she tells Clarke and Lexa when she’s almost ready, “We can keep things casual for this.”

“Excellent.”

When she’s finally prepared everything, Niyah readies her pen on the notepad. “So, Representative Griffin, before we get into the typical questions about your campaign and your plans, I have to ask the burning question: Everyone knows Cage Wallace is the front runner of the opposing party right now, and a quick review of both your voting records shows that you clash on many of your ideologies. Do you have anything to say about your potential primary race opponent?”

It’s one hell of an opening, foretold by her campaign manager as if Lexa had paid her to ask the question first. And damn it, she can feel Lexa’s eyes on her again. Observing every detail. She has to resist the urge to look over at her.

“It’s going to be a long race,” Clarke says pleasantly. “I think Mr. Wallace will run it well, and I look forward to meeting him in debates.”

Lexa shifts a little in her seat—Clarke refuses to look at her.

“Alright, good to hear.” But it’s not hard to detect the note of disappointment in Niyah’s voice as she scribbles down Clarke’s answer. “And now, let’s get into your backstory. Your mother was in politics as well, wasn’t she?”

Simple. Straightforward. Just as she’d said.

*

Three days later, Clarke is almost finished with her morning workout on the stationary bike at her gym when it hits her.

This feels good.

She feels good.

She pulls in a heavy lungful of air, smiling, and it takes another few minutes of testing this strange new feeling as she pedals imaginary roads and hills before she realizes exactly what it is: she’s awake. There’s energy in her legs and her pumping heart. Her morning workouts are so routine that she can zombie through them without thought, but for the past three days, she’s gotten a full eight hours of sleep each night and it makes the world a little brighter, a little fresher, like spring has swept
away a dreary cold winter.

And for that reason alone, she can count the quick-fire decision to hire Lexa Ward a victory, because Lexa shouldering some of her workload lets Clarke get to sleep before eleven PM. It’s a hell of a new experience for her.

When she enters the office an hour after her gym session, Lexa is already there—she stands bent over the shoulder of an intern, looking at the campaign website on his computer screen, but she instantly stands to greet Clarke.

“Morning,” Lexa says, then cocks her head toward her shoulder with an inquisitive look. “You’re chipper this morning.”

This golden feeling of being alive must be shining out of her face, if Lexa feels it worthy of note. “It’s been a few good days,” Clarke replies. “Anything new I should know about?”

They’ve slipped into an easy routine over Lexa’s first week of employment—each morning, one or the other is waiting near the entrance of the office. Whenever her counterpart appears, they fall into step on the way to Clarke’s office, trading the necessary information all the way until Clarke takes a seat at her desk and picks up her itinerary for the day. The effortless efficiency of a well-oiled machine. There are no pretenses or unnecessary pleasantries to the exchange. Even Lexa’s comment about Clarke’s mood was out of place, but she’s in high enough spirits to dismiss it.

“Good news, bad news, the usual,” Lexa says as they sweep into Clarke’s office. She knows which Clarke likes first, so she doesn’t bother asking. “Good news: Niylah, the journalist for the Times, finally published the article about you.”

“Well, that’s a step in the right direction. It’s about time. The interview was, what, Monday?”

“Yep. Paper’s on your desk. It factors into the bad news, though…” Lexa pauses to give Clarke the chance to pick up the paper and glance over the front page for her name. “It’s not front page.”

“Where is it?” Clarke asks, flipping the paper open.

“Page four.”

“That’s…not bad.”

Lexa just shrugs, allows her boss to have the last word as Clarke skims the article. It’s not bad, but it’s not what they wanted—at least, not what Clarke would admit she wanted. She finishes the article quickly and tosses the paper back onto her desk. “It’s good,” she says. “Even-toned, gets the message across. I’m happy with Niylah. What did you think?”

“If you’re satisfied, I’m satisfied. It did get your message across.”

Clarke deigns not to ask Lexa about the subtle tone of disappointment in her voice, because she already knows why it’s there. She feels the same way. The article is essentially an even-keel biography of Clarke’s history, with a few mentions of her victories as a state representative, and a paragraph at the end detailing her vague campaign goals. It’s perfect for a page-four story, a bigger story would have been a better start to the campaign. They both know it.

Clarke can’t allow it to get to her, though. She made this choice, she can deal with it. “We can play with the narrative in future interviews. What else do we have today?”

“I have another call with Silicon Valley for the Future this morning; you, I believe, have emails to
return. And…” Lexa is halfway to the door when she pauses and looks back with an uncharacteristic hesitation. “I was going to make a coffee run after the phone call. Would you like something?”

“Uh…” She stutters in her surprise at the suggestion that Lexa would stoop to running for coffee. “Yeah, yeah. The usual, would be great.”

Lexa nods, the barest smile on her lips as she leaves.

* 

Despite the bad news about her first interview, Clarke coasts on the wave of peacefulness and zen from the early morning as she works through her emails. Every so often she’ll catch Lexa pass by the window of her office, with a cell phone pressed to her ear, but she hasn’t yet returned with the coffee; thankfully, Clarke doesn’t need the energy boost the way she usually does.

But when Lexa finally does push through Clarke’s office door, coffee in hand, the look on her face tells Clarke that she just might need the boost now.

“What’s going on?” she asks. More bad news.

The way Lexa wordlessly hands over the coffee and works her jaw says right off the bat that whatever bad news she has is worse than poor article placement. Clarke steels herself and nods at Lexa—just say it. Lexa still pauses for a second before answering.

“The tech companies have changed their campaign contribution amounts: ten grand total from all of them.”

Clarke blinks. “Each company pledged a full five thousand. We should have gotten fifty thousand from them total.”

“As best I can tell, they’re hedging their bets,” Lexa says with a sigh, taking a seat in one of the two chairs opposite Clarke’s desk. “The money isn’t quite an issue right now, there’s essentially no difference between one and five, not when the whole campaign will cost millions. But—”

“But it represents an unwillingness to completely commit so early,” Clarke finishes for her, resisting the urge to groan. Fuck. She had wanted Silicon Valley behind them off the jump. She chews her lip for a moment, then closes her eyes. “All right, you can say it.”

“Say what?”

“I told you so. About the interview. I should have come out stronger.”

Lexa’s silence forces Clarke to open her eyes and search for a nonverbal answer instead—she can’t find it in Lexa’s stoic face, so she waits.

Lexa considers her for a moment, then says, “I’m not going to say I told you so. You made a decision that I respect. It simply changes our options going forward. If you want nationwide donations to start pouring in early, you’ll have to do something that makes a little bit of noise.”

She tamps down the little flame of pride that had flared up in her chest at Lexa’s praise. Her mother always told her that allowing people’s good words to go to your head enables the bad ones to go to
your head just as quickly. But there is something about it being Lexa’s respect that she has earned that makes her smile. Lexa Ward doesn’t strike her as the type to give it freely, and it softens the blow of the morning’s bad news.

Lexa sits deep in thought, her tongue grazing back and forth over her teeth as she stares at a spot on the desk. Clarke is loath to break into her deep thought, but she speaks up anyway because she’s tired of these moments of not being able to read this woman.

“Tell me what you’re thinking.”

She hesitates. “I know you don’t want to run a dirty campaign…”

“I won’t.”

“But we can get clever. Forge some alliances.”

“I trust you, Miss Ward,” Clarke says suddenly; Lexa looks up in surprise at the compliment. “I trust you with this. What do you have planned?”

*

Never, in a million years, would she have picked this for herself. She should have gone for the negative interview.

Instead, she has a storm of clicking shutters and lightning-like camera flashes. A plastered on smile. Heels and a skirt, for god’s sake. The weight of a man’s hand in the small of her back as he guides her past the photographers outside the restaurant, pressing close nonetheless as they snap pictures of the “rumored” new couple. They duck into a waiting car and finally she takes a breath and lets the fake smile fall from her aching cheeks.

This Friday night was supposed to be spent with Raven, after the girl had had a near breakdown at work today, but Clarke had to shift plans for this, because—

“Nice touch with the photographers,” her date says in her ear, with a low laugh.

“My campaign manager’s idea. She called them this afternoon.”

Because of Lexa Ward.

Because of Lexa Ward, Clarke is shoved in the backseat of a town car with Roan Azgeda slouching beside her, grinning, the picture of the tabloid gossip that surrounds him. Long-haired, handsome, a future politician but a current opportunist: the son of a high-ranking congresswoman Nia Azgeda, Roan was born with a silver spoon in his mouth and became the playboy of Los Angeles in his recent years. Like all cringe-worthy redemption stories, he’ll straighten out and become a golden boy politician one day.

“There weren’t as many photographers as I expected,” Roan continues, “But a few more dates and they’ll be flocking. You know how LA is. A love story between two young leaders, they’ll love it.”

Clarke rolls her eyes at his casual tone—she had balked when Lexa suggested this plan, but after her own mishandling of the interview, she wasn’t really in a position to refuse another of Lexa’s
strategies.

“Like I said, Roan, this isn’t a love story. We’re using you for your name. Your mother supports my campaign, we all get some good attention, and in turn, your mother gets a political ally once I’m elected.”

“And I get a pretty girl on my arm and my mother pays off my house in the hills.”

She gives him a side-long glare, not forgetting how comfortable he had been with his hand on her back on the way out of the restaurant. Noting this, Roan sits up in his seat and leans forward until he has her attention.

“Listen,” he tells her, voice suddenly serious, “My girlfriend was about as excited to find out about this as you are right now.”

“Your girlfriend?” Clarke asks in surprise.

“That wasn’t part of the plan.

“Relax. She lives cross-country and our relationship is pretty quiet. She’s not going to damage this set-up. I just don’t want you to think I have any intentions of this being more than I signed up for when your campaign manager approached me. It’s a four year relationship, Griffin, some media relationship is not going to ruin it.”

“Good, I’m glad that’s where you stand.”

They fall into silence as Roan’s driver winds towards Clarke’s apartment, Roan slouching back into his seat and Clarke sitting primly in hers—she’s bored already, longing for the moment she can slip out of her heels and feel her bare feet flat on the floor. A long date at the end of a long day at the end of a longer week.

She picks up on a sort of bitterness emanating from him in the silence, though, and takes a breath. “Thank you, by the way, for agreeing to this.” Thanks for agreeing to a fake relationship so I can win a political race—that’s not something she thought she’d be saying. She’ll have to thank Lexa for that. “I can handle Diana Sydney and Vincent Vie, but when I come up against Cage Wallace, I’m going to need public support and media backing.”

“And being in love with Roan Azgeda will give you all the public support you need.” He gives her a wry smile.

“Well, you know Los Angeles.”

“It’s a weird place. But I’m happy to help, Griffin, especially if it means taking down Cage Wallace. Dude’s a prick.”

“At least we can agree on that.”

This is not a huge risk. If Roan’s willing, and she’s willing, and if Lexa’s smart enough—all three counts seem to be true—this can only benefit the campaign in the long run. It’s a fair move. They’re not exactly playing dirty. That’s what Lexa kept assuring her of, and though Clarke agrees, she can’t shake the weight in the pit of her stomach.

This is politics. It’s what you signed up for. It’ll be worth it when you win.

*
The text comes across the following morning before dawn, when Clarke is bleary-eyed and on her way to the gym:

[5:41 AM] Lexa Ward: You got some social media capital built up, Griffin. They liked your date last night. Pictures are spreading. Sending you the article links and pictures now.

The images ping across one by one, a chronological series of Clarke and Roan walking out of the restaurant, in laughing conversation, as he gallantly guides her past the reporters and opens the car door for her, and Clarke smiles at him as if they’re alone in the world. Article links start coming across next: they’re all positive, and they all mention favorably her best political moments.

[5:42 AM] Clarke Griffin: Eating food and drinking alcohol on the campaign’s dime is a difficult job, but someone has to do it.

[5:44 AM] Lexa Ward: And you looked good while doing it, the most important part. Good work, Griffin. I’ll see you on Monday.

She only caught a few hours of sleep last night, so she’s back to feeling like a zombie as she heads into the gym—but she can’t help herself smiling anyway.
As planned, they go hands off and radio silent for the rest of the weekend after Clarke Griffin's "date" with Roan Azgeda hits the social media circuit. Being young, pretty, influential, and affluent in Los Angeles has the same result whether you're an actress or a politician or just the relative of someone with a famous last name. Unchecked by Clarke or her team—Lexa's stand down orders must be eating them alive—the story of a budding romance begins to grow all on its own.

"Just let LA do what it does best," Clarke tells Sterling, the man in charge of her marketing and PR team, when he calls her Saturday afternoon, frantic. "We'll take control of the narrative later; for now, they can do our job for us and spread my name."

That doesn't stop him from forwarding her every media enquiry and article he receives, as if he'll be able to overwhelm her and Lexa and force them to change their minds. But Tuesday marks the beginning of the first long road-trip of the season, so Clarke lets the messages go ignored.

The constant vibration of her cell phone provides a steady metronome to her preparations for the trip: packing coordinated outfits, memorizing names and statistics, rehearsing conversations, and mentally rewriting her speeches as she organizes her suitcase. She spends most of Monday demonstrating her proficiency to Lexa, Sterling, and Jackson, as they give her the final briefing for the trip. A full day of strategizing.

The first trip of the season is never quite smooth. She has two green interns coming with her, as well as the heads of PR, Fundraising, and her education policy teams. On Tuesday morning she strides into the private airport conference room they're meeting in, prepared to take charge of the group, only to find Lexa standing at the head of a quiet and attentive team as she gives them their final orders.

Just as Clarke imagined back when she first interviewed Lexa, her campaign manager looks every bit in control of the situation, cutting the usual imposing figure in her form-fitting black suit and heels (heels, of course, even though they're about to board a flight). Clarke stops short at the sight with an appreciative smile.

"Morning, Miss Griffin," she says with a nod.

"Ward," Clarke replies cordially.

She greets the rest of the team, who all look cool and prepared, as Lexa hands over a stack of papers and files—and a warm coffee. She describes each of the files as Clarke thumbs through them.

"Your airline ticket, travel itinerary, hotel reservations, a speculation article on you and Roan—"
"I read it this morning as I brushed my teeth."

"—good. Bios on some of the people we’ll be meeting today and tomorrow—"

"I have them mostly memorized."

"—And a final draft of your speech to the education board on Friday—"

"Which I wrote."

"—and has been edited only for a few technicalities. Any questions about any of it?"

If pressed, she could come up with a few sarcastic ones about the possibility of Lexa really being human, but not in a room full of employees and interns and not when they still have Los Angeles international airport security to go through.

"Not at all," Clarke says coolly. "Let's get a move on."

Lexa has the team functioning like a well-oiled machine, but there's still something impressive in the way they fly through the crowds and security checkpoints of LAX, with coffees in one hand and suitcases in another.

That's not to say it's a casual morning. She's in deep conversation with Jackson through most of it, regarding their upcoming meeting with the Silicon Valley leaders—and then with Harper, who wants to discuss their education policy for Friday's speech. The conversations—as well as one anxious moment when Bree, the youngest of her interns, misplaces her ticket—take them all the way to the first boarding call. When Clarke finally gets a moment of calm she intends to leaf through the papers in her arms, but her attention is almost immediately drawn to Lexa standing beside her.

She glances down her body: Lexa's toe drums a mindless staccato on the airport tile; higher up, her fingers tap out of tune against her thigh. Glancing up to her face, Clarke sees that Lexa's gone a few shades paler.

Well that's interesting.

Lexa doesn't say anything and Clarke sets herself on silent observation. It doesn't look to be a problem: when the line starts to move, Lexa still walks like she owns the plane they're boarding. But when they settle into their first class seats, after Clarke organizes her carry on and reading material and nods politely at the flight attendant, she looks over to find that Lexa has stopped tapping. Instead, she's replaced the anxious movement with taut, rigid muscles and a set jaw.

"It's a short flight, at least," Clarke tries. She keeps her voice low to keep from interrupting the end of the safety protocol presentation. "Only ninety minutes up to Sacramento."

"Good."

Lexa's gaze is fixed on her lap, on the cell phone in her hand—her fingers fly over the screen, almost frantically, even as the plane rumbles to life and they make the announcement about electronics.

This isn't the Lexa who leads meetings or has interns skirting her in the halls. This isn't the Lexa who has Clarke feeling like she has to be at the top of her game every day. She sits in her seat like it's a throne but her shallow breath and the visible tendons in her neck betray a brand new vulnerability. She looks small, something Clarke had never thought possible. It's enough to pique a curiosity in her that overrides her courtesy—she leans over enough to glance quickly at Lexa's phone screen.
"Chess?" she blurts out, forgetting that you're generally not supposed to announce when you're looking over someone's shoulder. But Lexa doesn't seem to hear her. Clarke has to prompt her two more times—Miss Ward?—before Lexa looks up in surprise, as if Clarke hadn't been there all along.

"I—" She stares at Clarke for a moment, then clears her throat. "I'm not a fan of flying."

The plane starts to pick up speed, rumbling down the runway even as she says that. Lexa pulls in a deep breath. When it clicks for Clarke, she nods for Lexa to get back to her game.

She's playing chess well. Clarke can tell within a few seconds of watching the game play out on Lexa's phone screen, but it's more clear in the intensity of Lexa's green eyes, the press and twist of her lips, the confident swipes of her fingers—this, Clarke watches for much longer. Lexa only picks up speed as the plane shudders through the takeoff, never slowing or hesitating against the computer opponent. Game and girl are equally entrancing.

It's not until several minutes later that a small “ding” of the seatbelt notification snaps them both out of it. Clarke and Lexa look up in surprise; they've reached cruising altitude already.

Lexa slips her phone away, game unfinished. “Old habit,” she explains, raising her chin confidently to Clarke, as if nothing had happened. “Takeoffs are the worst.”

“We should play sometime,” Clarke replies. “My dad taught me. I haven’t had anyone good to play against for a while.”

Lexa’s brows raise. “Of all the things I imagined you would do with your nonexistent free time, chess is not one of them.”

“Well, we don’t know each other very well.”

“Apparently.”

The lilt of Clarke’s voice and the twitch of Lexa’s lips make it a joke, but when she looks more closely at Lexa and sees the color slowly returning to her face, Clarke realizes the truth of it. Seeing her wound tight like that, unsteady and strangely vulnerable, was just one glance behind the mask, a small reminder of the universe inside Lexa Ward that Clarke has no idea about. She should know more. More importantly, she wants to know more. Maybe it’s the fact that they’ll be sitting here for the next hour and a half with nothing else to talk about or maybe it’s the fact that external observations can only go so far for people like Lexa—either way, the questions pile up on Clarke’s tongue and she’s burning to get them out.

“Who taught you to play?” she asks softly. “You’re good.”

Lexa can’t quite discern the purpose of that question: Clarke isn’t the type for foreplay, and since their first meeting they’ve always just jumped right into the important information. Efficiency.

“My sister,” she says slowly, testing the water. “Anya. Older, by three years. Said she wanted to teach me strategy.”

She’s still a little shaken. Clarke starts to smile until the plane itself shakes and Lexa jumps, swallowing hard; Clarke decides to keep her talking.

“Strategy? Was she trying to get you into politics?”

“I think she just wanted an excuse to beat me at something. We still play. Christmas Eves get rather competitive.”
“With…chess?” Clarke raises a dubious eyebrow.

“With everything.”

That explains more. Sometimes Clarke feels like she’s laid bare for the world to examine, her history and her life on display. And Lexa, just from working alongside her for the past weeks, has gotten a front row view to it. But these snapshots Lexa lets slip of her in competition with an older sister, holidays together with a competitive family, are a welcome leveling of the ground they face off on. Who knew she was human?

“Is she in politics too?” Clarke asks curiously.


She’s genuinely impressed. “Quite a duo.” But when Lexa accepts the compliment without response, Clarke presses her. “Any other siblings?”

“Younger brother, Aden.”


That is the moment she knows she overstepped. By her own self-awareness and by the way Lexa grimaces, her nose crinkling and her lips pressing together for a half second. It passes quickly but Clarke is already backpedaling to where she was a half hour ago, everything from her tone to her body position readjusting.

“I’m sorry, Miss Ward, I didn’t mean to stray so far into—”

“It’s fine.” Lexa waves a hand, shakes her head. “It’s not that. I just prefer Lexa, and rarely ever use my full first name. Hearing it is always strange.”

*Griffin, Griffin, Griffin.* “I know the feeling.”

Though she’s not inclined to drop their professional manner of addressing each other again, Clarke silently rolls the feeling of Lexa on her tongue. She likes it. For a moment she wants to say it aloud, just to hear it, but she’s already made one misstep today—a second would not be tolerated. Rather than let silence fall between them, or let Lexa seek out refuge in another chess game, Clarke pulls out the sheaf of files on their upcoming trip.

“Let’s go over the background on the party leaders for the meeting Thursday.”

Lexa looks at her again, brow raised. “We went over these yesterday, you handled them just fine.”

There’s a strange sense of disappointment that deflates Clarke a little when Lexa relaxes instead of challenging her. Still, though, she holds to it: “I need to know them perfectly. Just in case anything comes up Thursday.”

“Now I see the reason behind the valedictorian accolades.”

Clarke doesn’t play into the slight undercurrent of cynicism there, but simply hands off the folder to Lexa and waits for her to start asking test questions.
They get little else done on the plane ride, besides a reaffirmation that Clarke knows the profiles inside and out—like any valedictorian would. Clarke keeps Lexa talking through the landing about mindless nonsense, anything so that she doesn’t have to reach for her phone again. She still wonders at the girl’s nerves. But by the time they stand to disembark from the plane, Lexa is back to her full height and grandeur, the interns and employees none the wiser to her fleeting moment of weakness. No one but Clarke.

But she doesn’t get the chance to dwell on it, because they are whisked into waiting cars as soon as they exit the airport and taken straight to the hotel. Clarke gets an hour to freshen up—with Bree acting as personal assistant and “image specialist,” touching up Clarke’s makeup—before the image tour begins.

First up, a round-table interview with a half-dozen local journalists in the business center of the hotel. The set-up isn’t designed for them to write articles about her, but rather to give Clarke the opportunity to throw out quotes and maxims and let the journalists run wild. Lexa and Sterling watch it like hawks—it isn’t necessary.

“And, Representative, you have supported small businesses in the past, but with greater ability to write laws, how will you continue doing that?”

“Laws are the problem. Endless, overcomplicated bureaucracy that requires an army of lawyers to keep from strangling small businesses. I don’t want to work with lawyers. I want to work with my people, with policy they can work with. That’s the most important part.”

“On a more pop culture note,” another asks, “Anything you can tell us about Roan Azgeda?”

She raises an eyebrow. “I admire his mother’s approach to politics and would love to discuss some of her policies. Beyond that, there’s nothing to tell yet.”

Chuckling, the interviewers dutifully copy that sidestep down. This is so easy.

And that’s how the rest of the morning and the entire afternoon continues—a series of half hour or hour-long meetings with groups and organizations and businesses, taking pictures and shaking hands and spouting the same easy practiced lines. Lexa has meticulously scheduled them at locations all over downtown Sacramento, even a photo op on the steps of the State Capitol building. It’s all smooth and professional, and truthfully nothing less than one would expect from a girl who comforts herself through flight anxiety by playing chess on her cell phone.

Surprisingly though, given the ease with which Clarke switches between chatting with local kids to talking commercial rent control with business owners to posing for a picture with them all, this isn't what she likes best. She loves the people and the kids for sure, but the calculated image management of it all, in fact, it exhausts her. But she can handle it fine because she was raised the daughter of Jake and Abby Griffin and grew up in an environment where social etiquette was everything, with her mother's job. This is second nature. It’s just not her favorite part of the grind.

"I'm gonna be president one day, and make homes for all the dogs," announces one of the eight year olds of the class she's meeting with. Clarke grins and hands her a Griffin16 pin.

"That sounds like a great plan. I'll vote for you," she replies. "You'd make a great president." The girl's smile lights up the room and she wraps her skinny arms around Clarke's waist before she goes running back to her mother with prize in hand.
Then again, there are moments like that, moments that strike true. Those moments she loves.

But when you get down to it, her heart lies with the behind-the-door talks, the double meanings and vague threats and strategy to it all. The chess games that play out over months. Making decisions and enacting change that will actually mean something, not just smiling for cameras. It wasn’t her mother’s fundraising galas that drove her to this profession, but the late nights her mother would spend talking through points and counterpoints of debates, bouncing ideas off Clarke as she sat watching The Lion King.

That’s what she’s thinking about later that night in the dim light of the hotel bar, staring into her wine glass as she swirls it mindlessly. Tomorrow will be one of those days: a far more difficult meeting with the party leaders to discuss her campaign and their possible endorsement. Earning the love of the public with a nice smile and some well-fitting clothes is one thing, but standing up to the questions of her superiors and begging them for their support is quite another.

She suppresses a smirk and takes a sip of wine.

“We did good today,” comes Harper’s voice from her left. She settles into a seat next to Clarke. “Especially on the education front.”

“Yeah, all those fourth graders will for sure be voting Griffin next November,” Sterling jokes as he takes a seat on Clarke’s other side.

“Which makes them already better educated than some.”

Clarke grins along with them and watches as the rest of her small team files into the bar to join her for drinks. She looks after the entrance for a moment longer, with hopes that Lexa will appear trailing the group, but to no avail.

“We did do good today,” Clarke announces to the group, turning back to them brightly. “I’m thankful you’re all here with me. Everyone order a drink, you deserve it.” It’s praise rarely lavished on them when they’re back at the offices in LA, but they’re out tonight, toasting to a successful PR day and enjoying each other’s company: they already are relaxed, and their boss’s approval means smiles from everyone.

“Just not too much,” Clarke adds, with a cheeky smile. “I need everyone sharp for tomorrow’s meeting.”

“The party leaders,” Jackson says, nodding. “They like your mother, at least.” Jackson worked for Abby for several years, before jumping to Clarke’s campaigns after Abby’s retirement.

“I’m not my mother.”

“Are you ready for tomorrow?” Sterling asks her.

A new voice sounds from behind the group. “You should ask her the voting records of the party leaders, she’ll show you how ready she is.”

“Miss Ward!” Clarke is smiling before she even turns to see Lexa standing there—she had spent the afternoon with her, of course, it feels wrong celebrating without her. Lexa’s presence in the bar completes everything.

“Griffin,” Lexa says with her usual cool formality, humorous in this context now. Clarke’s eyes sparkle.
“What do you want to drink?” she asks. “It’s on me.”

“On you?”

“On the campaign, technically.”

“Whiskey, then,” she says to the bartender. Sterling whistles low. But despite Lexa’s slim frame and her reserve and her softly feminine voice, anything less than whiskey would be a disservice to her perfectly-tailored suit and the type of languid confidence she wears it with. The rest of the group, including Clarke, have traded their business casual for something more relaxed, but Lexa still fits perfectly by popping just one button down from her collar.

Clarke wonders for a moment what the most expensive whiskey this bar would have, and wonders if she should order it for Lexa. It seems only fitting. Especially after the flight today.

But she doesn’t speak up as Lexa takes a seat a few chairs down and the bartender slides her a whiskey neat—it was a strange, fleeting idea anyway. For once the group doesn’t seem tense with their campaign manager there, and they relax into conversation again once Lexa integrates herself.

“So are you ready for tomorrow?” Sterling asks again.

“As Miss Ward said, I know the party leaders backwards and forwards.”

“I’ve never been more confident in a candidate,” Lexa says, tipping her glass towards Clarke. Clarke nods her appreciation.

Harper’s eyes glint. “So what’s the second glass of wine for?” she teases. “Nerves?”

“I don’t get nervous,” Clarke fires back confidently. “Tomorrow will be difficult, perhaps the hardest of the trip, but I’ll come out of it just fine.”

“Then let’s toast to it,” Lexa says, eyes intent on Clarke as she sits forward with her glass. “To future Senator Griffin.”

*

“Representative Griffin. It’s not that we don’t believe in you. It’s just that this incredibly important race means a lot to the nationwide party, not just the state of California.”

Clarke was right. The meeting with the party leaders is, without a doubt, the most difficult of the trip. It is the only agenda item of the day, and she spent the morning preparing for it, but nothing would have been enough preparation for this.

“We want to take the time to consider all options,” the party director says.

“It simply requires a great deal of consideration on our part,” Congressman Connors adds helpfully.

Clarke’s struggle isn’t so much in the ideological debate. It’s in the frustration, the impotency of being unable to challenge the condescension and patronization in their smiles. She has more confidence in her own ability and independence than anything else, which feeds her tendency to argue with anyone. If she rubs someone the wrong way, so be it: she can make it without their help or support. She can stand on her own, or stand with people at her back, following her. Either way,
she will accomplish what she wants come hell or high water.

But now, Clarke is distinctly aware of her powerlessness. She’s sitting across the conference table from a handful of Democratic party leaders, politicians more than twice her age, and she’s in the spotlight for their scrutiny. She needs their endorsement of her campaign; it’s not something she can simply cajole into her possession if they’re unwilling to give it to her. And they know this, too, hence the polite smiles and the languid sips of coffee as she sits waiting for the conversation to continue. They’re icing her.

“I understand the wariness,” Clarke says, each syllable evidence of her determination to maintain composure. She waits until her words have their attention again, a few seconds later. “I’m young—”

“It’s not your age,” one of them grunts. “It’s your inexperience.”

“But you’ve read my proposals—”

“We have, Representative Griffin. But the concern is the election, not the politics.”

It’s a sinking realization. “You don’t think I can beat Cage Wallace in the general election.”

One of the older men at the table speaks up. “Policy in general is decided as a group. As a party. We all work together, my dear. You wouldn’t have to do it all yourself. We want the same things.”

Clarke blanches as the use of “my dear” and clamps her jaw together as he continues.

“But our job, as the leaders and influencers of the California party, is to ensure that we have the best chance at securing the senate seat for the party. We need a candidate above reproach for this race, so we must take our time and make a very careful decision about who we will choose to support officially.”

“I understand,” she says, lowering her head demurely. Play their game. “Have you spoken to the other two candidates in the race yet?”

“Briefly. Congresswoman Sydney and Lieutenant Governor Vie are under careful consideration for our endorsement as well, and we will speak to them more in depth in the following weeks.”

Congresswoman and Lieutenant Governor are also far weightier titles for a Senate candidate. Clarke’s stomach twists as the half-dozen or so politicians go back to perusing the information she had compiled for them, summaries of her work and her proposed policies. If the decision were simply about what was contained in those packets, simply proposals to do better, the men opposite her wouldn’t be agonizing over the decision they seem to be now. Clarke Griffin would be the clear choice. But life is never that simple.

She wonders, throat dry, if perhaps her make-up was too noticeable; or if she should have chosen pants instead of a knee-length skirt. She should have paid more attention, given more thought to how they would judge her appearance. They always do. She’s been in mahogany offices like this a thousand times and faced the same evaluation every time.

None of the men bother to look up at her for a few seconds, so she casts a glance to her side where Lexa sits silently at the end of the table, taking notes and observing. Her campaign manager is glaring at the men, but she shifts her attention to Clarke and reads the frustration on her face. Lexa can only offer a small nod of reassurance.

“Miss Griffin,” one of the congressmen asks. “I read that you were talking to Silicon Valley for the Future and expending support for them. What came of that?”
“We’ve received initial donations, and later ones will be spaced out accordingly.” Not quite a lie.

“They’ve also donated to Vincent Vie, and have held public communications with Cage Wallace.”

Clarke purses her lips. “Well, they’re bipartisan, but the important thing is—”

“Have you actually spoken to them yet, or was it just a standard donation?”

“I’m…meeting with them tomorrow.”

There’s a quiet tutting from one end of the table and she refuses to give whoever does it the satisfaction of her attention. Her steely gaze locks on the congressman who had initially questioned her, until he shifts uncomfortably.

“We’ll take it into consideration. We just need more time to think about all of this, Representative Griffin.”

Clarke stands suddenly, pushing her chair back behind her with the force of the movement. “Would you mind excusing me for just a moment while you consider? I need some air.”

At their leave, Clarke stands and strides from the office as rapidly as she can manage without running.

*

From the chairs where they wait in the hallway, the rest of Clarke’s team look up with hopeful smiles—they turn to looks of confusion and worry when they see her stalk past them without a word, turn sharply into an empty office, and shut the door behind her. As soon as she’s sealed off from the rest of the world, she hisses an exhale through gritted teeth, curling her fingers into fists and then releasing. She kicks off her heels, tosses her purse onto the desk, and leans over it, palms flat against the desk. She tries not to shout.

The door opens behind her and she hears Bree’s quiet voice, prodding her with questions.

“Miss Griffin…” Are you okay? Can I get you anything? What happened? What did they say?

Clarke just shakes her head and stays hunched over the desk, willing Bree to just let her recover on her own.

“Bree, give us a moment,” comes Lexa’s soft voice.

Clarke doesn’t look up until the door closes behind Bree. When she finally does, she’s greeted with the sight of Lexa standing in the center of the room, regarding her carefully, waiting with her hands behind her back. At her service.

“I had to get out of there,” Clarke begins.

“I know,” Lexa replies simply.

“It’s just…” And then her fingers are flexing again, curling in and out of fists, and before Clarke knows it she’s pacing the room and cracking at the seams with the force of her frustration. “They’re enjoying this. My own damn party leaders, my people. They’re progressive but still so stuck in ruts
that they can’t see the bigger picture, they can’t fucking understand what I can offer them.”

“Miss Griffin—”

“He called me dear. They don’t care to take me seriously right now. This is how it always fucking is, I can’t—” Her words choke off in a groan of frustration. “If they would just listen and understand, I can convince them that I’m worthy of their time.”

She shows no signs of slowing down, the momentum of her frustration spilling over itself as it quickly grows and becomes unstoppable. Lexa tries with quiet interruptions that go unheeded as Clarke’s rant continues and she paces back and forth in front of Lexa, who still stands motionless but for her eyes that follow Clarke.

Clarke knows how it looks, ranting barefoot and wild-eyed. But she doesn’t have the willpower to bury it right now, to hide it away even with Lexa watching.

“Miss Griffin, you need—”

“The reason I got a chance in the first place was because of my mother, but I’ve worked twice as hard to prove myself to entrenched old politicians like them and I still get treated as lesser. God, it could be worse, at least I’m here, at least I have a voice, but what they’re doing in there is so wrong that I can’t get my stomach to settle or my lungs to fully fill, I just need to—”

Without warning Lexa’s hands close around Clarke’s upper arms with a vise-like grip. She backs Clarke against the desk and steps into her space when she can go no further, eye to eye. The fluidity of the movement stuns Clarke into immediate submission. Lexa leans in, inches away.

Her lips form one deliberate word.

"Clarke."

That stops everything.

It’s the first time she’s used Clarke’s name. That thought registers dimly in the back of Clarke’s mind. She tries to understand the softness of it, the way Lexa drags out the sound slowly yet somehow puts enough urgency into her voice that leaves Clarke stumbling over her words.

“I—"

"Hey." The tip of Lexa’s tongue appears briefly between her lips as she waits for Clarke to recover from her shock. "Breathe."

With Lexa’s fingers tight on Clarke’s biceps, her face this close, her eyes dark and concerned, Clarke can’t find it in her to do anything else. Her voice fails her. She nods for Lexa and releases a shuddering breath.

"Again."

Clarke breathes, this time without gritting her teeth.

"You're still tensed," Lexa notes.

In any other case, she would point out that any tension in her shoulders may have something to do with the pressure of Lexa’s hands, but Lexa’s concern is genuine, and her presence and pressure so close anchors Clarke here, now. She doesn’t shrug out of her grip—instead, she lets the physical
contact reassure her the way Lexa intends, and focuses her attention on consciously relaxing her muscles beneath Lexa's touch.

It's not an easy task. They hold like that for several seconds, but the silence allows Clarke's mind to drift back into the meeting. "They’re just so—"

"Clarke," Lexa interrupts again, the sharp sounds of her name wrapped in an unfamiliar tenderness. The shock of hearing it, let alone hearing it like that draws Clarke back into the present once more; she cuts off her rant and breathes deep without needing to be told.

"I know, I know," Clarke says, groaning, "Sorry."

"Don't be. You’re justified, but you have to be clearheaded when you go back in there." She pauses as Clarke’s eyes drift shut in a forced attempt at calm. Lexa squeezes her shoulders and the calm deepens. Once Clarke is taking slow, steady breaths, Lexa speaks up again, much more softly. “Are you going to be okay?"

Clarke nods.

Lexa lets her hands fall from Clarke's shoulders and she stands up straighter, clearing her throat as she reassumes her usual stance. But she doesn't step back, and the intensity of her gaze doesn't falter.

“When we go back in there, you can be diplomatic. Play into what they want you to say, and we’ll take a grace period to build up the campaign a little more so that they’ll be more willing to work with us a few weeks from now. Or, we can walk out. Same two week period applies before we go back—but it’ll show them you don’t consider this a joke the way they think you do.”

“Okay,” Clarke agrees. “Okay, I’ll figure it out. I can pull it together. I need to go back in.”

She stands like that for a few more seconds, releasing the last of her anger, breathing in serenity. This close, she can pick up the slightest hint of whatever scent Lexa is wearing, something rich, woody. She lets it calm her. But when she finally nods to herself and shifts to move away, Lexa’s hand on her shoulder once more stops her.

“Wait. One more thing.”

Clarke frowns as Lexa takes Clarke’s bag from the desk beside them and fishes through it quickly, withdrawing a silver tube of lipstick. “Just, before you go back in…let me…just so you feel better…” Her words trail off as her eyes drift down to Clarke’s mouth and her own lips part slightly. There’s a small pop as she opens the lipstick to touch up Clarke but it doesn’t break the heavy silence between them, and Lexa doesn’t move to break her gaze. The seconds start to drag out.

Looking up at Lexa, Clarke’s heartbeat feels oddly powerful in her chest, the blood pounding in her head like a bass drum and sending a prickling warmth all the way to her fingers and toes. She’s sure Lexa can hear it this close, but her hazy green eyes don’t flick up to meet Clarke’s gaze in acknowledgement of it. She appreciates that. The last things she needs are more questions she can’t answer.

Instead, Clarke raises her chin slightly, pressing her lips together as a sort of prompt for Lexa, who still rolls the lipstick tube in her hand. Lexa’s brow furrows, before she snaps back to life.

“You should do it,” she says, jumping back and shaking her head as if she couldn’t understand why she might have suggested otherwise. “I’ll…let me get you a mirror.”

When Lexa steps back it’s like she takes the heat of the room with her. Her skin suddenly cooling,
Clarke becomes aware of the rest of the room around them, the lobby outside, the cabal of veteran leaders waiting to pass an unfair judgement on her and force her to smile as she accepted it. For just a few seconds, the world had narrowed to her and Lexa, and only her and Lexa.

But she buries whatever had shocked through her in those seconds. In fact, she needed that moment, needed to be anchored to one thing for a while so that she could recover. Grateful to Lexa, she dutifully touches up her makeup in the compact mirror Lexa holds out to her, reapplying the perfect mask before marching back into the lion’s den.

“Good,” Lexa says when Clarke pulls on her heels and holds her arms out for Lexa’s inspection. Then, soft again, “Are you sure you’re ready to go back in?”

“I’m going to be fine. Let’s wrap this up, I’d like to get on the road.”

*

“Listen.”

Clarke Griffin strides back into the room with the same force she had left it with, but with an entirely different focus. She doesn’t give them a chance to greet her. She doesn’t bother sitting down but leans forward onto the table, palms flat, just as she had in the small office minutes before.

“You have two other candidates in this race who have a chance of standing up to Cage Wallace,” she says. “You have Diana Sydney, whose policies would struggle to pass even in a Democrat-controlled environment. I know, I’ve read them. And I’ve known her through my mother for years. All Cage has to do is spout a few moderate aphorisms at the first debate and you might as well hand him the Senate seat. Vincent Vie has a leg up on Sydney but he’s made so many dealings with Wallace and his ilk that the media will tear him apart, won’t give him a chance.”

The firmness in her voice borders on threatening, just close enough to stun the men into silence. Good. She doesn’t let them recover.

“And then you’ve got me. You can look at me and see that I’m young, or you can look at me and see that California is injecting something fresh into this decrepit system that is so tired it threatens to collapse in on itself. I have Abigail Griffin’s name, and because of that, I know you read my policy proposals. And you know they’re good.

“If I lose this election, it will be because of your lack of support, not because of anything I do. We have a chance to take the Senate and make sure things flow smoothly if the right president gets elected. When they look to California, I won’t be the one to ruin that chance. It’s going to fall to you when Cage Wallace makes his inaugural speech next year and starts doing everything he can to cripple a liberal president. Unless you make the right choice, right now. I can beat him.”

They stare at her.

Clarke looks to each of them in turn and pushes off the desk, standing tall again to indicate her willingness to wait for their decision. When the men start looking sideways at each other, pleading with someone else to respond, Clarke hazards a similar glance—over her shoulder, to Lexa. Her campaign manager looks just as stunned, eyes wide and lips parted.

Good. Satisfaction shoots through her at that sight. If she can impress Lexa Ward, she can impress
When she returns her attention to the party leaders, confidence coursing through her. She raises her chin and crosses her arms over her chest—she won’t wait for much longer for an answer, and Lexa’s initial advice of walking out jumps up on her list of possible choices.

Finally, the congressman sitting in the center, the party leader, speaks up. “You…make a very compelling argument, Representative Griffin. I apologize if any of us have given the impression that we mean to underestimate you. I believe…I believe I speak for everyone at this table when I say that your proposals and character are worthy of additional consideration from the members of this party. I can see the merit in them already from this brief read-through.”

She has long since learned to hear the meanings beneath flowery diplomacy: the shift in attention from her situation to her proposals is just a cover, a way to distract from a lack of apology for the mistake that was made. He’s backpedaling. He knows she’s the real thing.

“Thank you, Congressman Connors,” she says, not bothering to drift back towards the decorum they would expect from her. “I’ll leave you with them, then, and I’ll wait to hear from you in the next week.”

The look of cool gratification on Lexa’s face as they walk out together of the room says it all.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

I figured it was important to get this chapter out before tomorrow evening. Remember, whatever happens, Clexa belongs to the fandom and lives on in every universe, every reincarnation. And don't forget to trend "LGBT Fans Deserve Better" Thursday night.

As always, the response to this has been phenomenal. I appreciate each and every comment and criticism and kudos. Thank you so, so, so much xx

After a four hour drive to Palo Alto, the mecca of the tech industry where the next day’s meetings will be held, they get to the hotel late, shuffle to their individual rooms with little fanfare, order room service, and head off to sleep early in the evening.

Clarke’s night is by no means restful. She tosses and turns with thoughts of the meeting with the party leaders, still frustrated; when she manages to stop thinking about them, she turns instead to thoughts of the next day, her meeting with the tech industry and her speech on education. As much as she tries to resist, it sets doubts creeping in about both.

In the end, she’s up at her usual 5 AM, double-checking that the hotel has a fitness center.

“Fitness center” is a stretch, however, given that the room has one stationary bike and one treadmill and a single set of dumbbells crowded into about thirty square feet of rubber floor. But, blissfully, it’s empty, and the isolation is the important part.

Clarke doesn’t have to slaughter herself with an intense workout to clear her mind. She runs at a steady pace at a slight incline for sixty minutes on the treadmill, losing herself in the repetitiveness, the hypnotic thrum of the machine. She needs to get out of her own head sometimes. And in a lifestyle where appearance is as important as ability—if not moreso—exercise and keeping herself in agreeable shape is a part of the job description, however unfair. Ever efficient, Clarke turned that necessity into a form of therapy.

“Quite the overachiever,” comes a familiar voice, breaking through the haze of monotony.

“At some point, I would appreciate if you stopped sounding so surprised,” Clarke calls over her shoulder to Lexa. She has another fifteen minutes left for this run and she’s not stopping to talk now; courtesy isn’t required before 6 AM.

Besides, she thinks, remembering yesterday: Lexa has already seen her in far less affable states.

Lexa makes up for Clarke’s lapse in etiquette by appearing beside the treadmill, in Clarke’s field of vision. “We’re on a campaign trip; we didn’t even get in until eleven last night. And you’ve been here since…” she checks the treadmill timer. “4:50 AM. I am surprised. This is unusual for politicians.”

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“Fair enough,” she acquiesces.
Lexa looks down and fiddles with a wristwatch heart rate monitor for a moment and Clarke hazards a glance at her. Lexa’s dressed to work out as well, in grey leggings and a green tank top and her hair braided back—all so different from her every day attire that Clarke stares for a second too long. She’s never seen the skin of Lexa’s shoulders and chest. But Clarke is dressed similarly, in shorts and a cut off t-shirt, so it’s not as if there is an uncomfortable difference.

“Well, at least I’m not the only overachiever here,” Clarke points out between breaths. “You’re up to work out before the day starts as well. I couldn’t sleep; what’s your excuse?”

“Force of habit.”

“Fair enough.” Clarke gives a slight grin. “Give me another ten minutes, and then I’ll be done and it’s all yours.”

Lexa waves a hand. “Take your time; I avoid running.” She starts toward the dumbbell set instead, but pulls back with her lip tugged between her teeth and gives Clarke an apologetic look. “Actually, if you prefer, I can just leave until you’re done. I’ll give you the space, I apologize.”

*Is that what she took that as?* “What? No, no, that’s not what I meant!” Clarke assures her quickly, feeling an odd flush creep up into her cheeks. “Please, go ahead. Stay. Don’t mind me.”

There is, perhaps, too much emphasis on *please*. Lexa studies her for a moment after she says it. But Clarke is nearing the end of the run and talking while jogging is difficult, so random stresses on words are to be expected, even for an *overachiever* like her.

The treadmill is against one wall of the tiny fitness center: there’s a television mounted on the wall in front of her but the position places most of the rest of the room in Clarke’s peripheral vision. Once Lexa steps away from the treadmill to start her workout, Clarke focuses on a news story about a riot in Greece over economic struggles, but she read the same story on her cell phone in the dark on the ride from Sacramento the night before, so she loses interest rather quickly.

Instead, since the monotony and isolation of her workout has been broken, her attention drifts naturally to the source of that break: Lexa. There’s no space for her besides on the floor next to Clarke, which explains why she was willing to leave to give Clarke space to finish her own workout.

Lexa has skipped both the treadmill and the stationary bike and opted instead to line up several sets of dumbbells beside a yoga mat in the center of the room. She has headphones in, removing the necessity of any awkward conversation between sweaty labored breaths, which somehow reassures Clarke that her quiet observation is acceptable—if they’re not communicating, they don’t have to make eye-contact, and Clarke can look over whenever she feels comfortable.

She steals a few glances while Lexa moves through a series of yoga positions, but Lexa doesn’t seem to run in the same vein as Clarke, where she can go for a long, slow workout to burn off stress gradually. Soon enough, Lexa has moved from graceful yoga to a much more intense combination of push-ups, sit-ups, weightlifting, and lunges. At this, Clarke’s eyes drift to her much more frequently.

Sweat shines on Lexa’s bare shoulders and arms within minutes, and her steady, quickened breathing as she works through set after set has replaced the thrum of the treadmill as Clarke’s hypnotic and relaxing rhythm.

She doesn’t know why she feels any sort of surprise at Lexa’s exercise: just like her, Lexa is a young woman in a professional environment. She’s incredibly driven. Concerned about her health and appearance. Plus, the effortless control Lexa wields over everything every day must naturally translate to her personal habits—of course her workouts have an almost militaristic precision.
Her muscles flex and roll beneath her tanned skin each time she drops into a push-up, sweat sparkling in the fluorescent light, face red, breathing coming in short gasps, the sound filling the room. She doesn’t slow down, doesn’t falter, and Clarke is only minutely aware of the way she is openly staring now…

The treadmill beeps and reduces speed without warning, almost sending Clarke stumbling at the sudden shift. The numbers on the screen flash 00:00—workout complete. As if Lexa would hear the signal over the sound of her music and look over to catch Clarke in the middle of her admiration, Clarke puts an inordinate amount of focus on her water bottle and slowing her breathing between sips. Her mouth has run dry anyway. She stretches her shaking legs for a moment, then wipes the sweat from her chest and face and hops off the treadmill.

She hazards one more glimpse at Lexa before she leaves the fitness center, just in time to see Lexa’s gaze dart away from her. Lexa goes for her music instead, pausing it and tugging her headphones from her ears as she sits up to speak.

“Before you leave, Miss Griffin.” Clarke turns quickly. “You’re going to do well in the tech meetings today. Just channel yesterday’s…fire.”

Clarke laughs, looking at her feet. “Hopefully I won’t have to, Miss Ward. Speaking of today, though, do you think I should wear the black suit or the gray one?”

Lexa’s brow furrows. “I was under the impression that you and Sterling had decided on the blue skirt with the white blouse.”

“We did,” Clarke says with a shrug, “But I think I might be taken more seriously in the suit.”

The look of concern deepens. “Don’t…don’t use passive voice and you’ll see what’s wrong with that. You believe that the people we’ll be meeting will take you more seriously in the suit rather than the skirt. It’s not the skirt that’s the issue. The skirt is an excuse—the issue is the system and the paradigm that reduces you to your appearance and gender. But you’re going to change that. Little by little.”

The odd compliment surprises her, and since she’s already been weakened by the early morning workout and the lack of sleep or coffee, it sends a strange wave of affection through her chest. Lexa shifts as well, as if the words were more than she intended to say.

She presses more firmly: “Just wear the skirt.”

“I don’t want it to appear as if I’m trying to…look more alluring—” An uncharacteristic worry, but a worry nonetheless after yesterday.

“What, with your shins? It’s a knee-length skirt, Miss Griffin.”

At this, Clarke grins and laughs again, this time to Lexa instead of her feet. My shins could seal the deal, she wants to say, but that’s a joke for Octavia or Raven or anyone else who is not working for her. Instead, she goes for neutral.

“All right, point taken.” And as she considers Lexa for another moment, sitting there on her floor with the strain of her workout shining on her face and wisps of hair escaping from her braid, Clarke has another idea, that she voices before she thinks about: “And, by the way, we may as well drop “Miss Griffin” now. You’ve seen me at my worst. Clarke. Use that instead.”

Lexa raises a brow. “Your worst? You mean yesterday in the office?”
Clarke nods.

“That was your worst?”

“Well...okay, maybe not. It’s a long campaign. But the over formality will get tiring if we’re going to be working this closely for the next nine months—and maybe more, if it all works out. So, just use Clarke.”

“Your other employees don’t use your first name,” Lexa points out—it’s more of a question than a challenge.

Clarke’s eyes twinkle. “You don’t seem to be as afraid of me as they are.”

“I could say the same to you.”

“So does that mean you’re comfortable dropping the surnames both ways, then?”

“If that’s what you prefer.”

“It is,” Clarke decides after a moment. She really should get to a shower to get her day started, but this conversation has a sort of magnetic draw that keeps her lingering in the doorway. “So I know you don’t like Alexandria...Lexa it is, then.”

Lexa blinks—for a moment, she just stares up at Clarke from the floor, expression unreadable and lips slightly parted, as if she hadn’t heard properly. Then she nods, still wordless.

“Lexa,” Clarke says again, rolling it on her tongue the way she had wanted to on the plane a few days before. “Yes, this is better.”

“Whatever you wish, Clarke,” Lexa replies. She doesn’t need to taste Clarke’s name for the first time, not after yesterday. The ‘k’ pops off the roof of her mouth sharply and Clarke feels another strange surge of affection. She usually avoids the friendliness or nonchalance suggested by first names, but in this case, it might not be such a bad thing.

*

Clarke wears the skirt.

From her first introduction to the technology non-profit leaders, Clarke knows that today will go better than yesterday. They’re grinning and jovial, and it’s genuine—not patronizing, like the day before. They take Clarke and her team on a tour of the Google campus, laughing and joking as they highlight their social outreach programs and pose for pictures at the most opportune spots for the accompanying photographer.

But they’re sharp. You don’t get to be the leader of a multi-billion dollar company without some shrewdness. Even though several of them are competitors in the tech industry, the collective goodwill of a united nonprofit for organization reflects well on them all—as well as whichever politician they choose to back in this race. Money makes kings. Their money.

Once the photographer has been dismissed, the hard questions start coming. What could Senator Clarke Griffin do for them? How has she supported their type of organizations in the past? Will it be
laws, or just lip service and publicity?

She answers them breezily with rehearsed responses—introducing their technology to schools would raise their stock; introduction of STEM courses would lead to an expanding tech sector; blending their group with her education platform would raise their goodwill profile—all easy answers, all favorable to them. The group is nodding along and smiling with her, up until one cutting question:

“And what about your youth? Do you see it as a hindrance?”

This will not go down like it did yesterday, Clarke swears to herself in that moment. But as it turns out, she doesn’t have to whip up another impromptu Braveheart speech.

“You’re right,” Lexa interrupts. “She is young. And you all know youth. You know that youth means malleability, flexibility. You might see that as a liability, but we see it as an opportunity. For companies striving to be on the cutting edge of technology, I would expect you to recognize your opportunities.

“Now,” she adds, straightening her shoulders, “If you’ll excuse us, Representative Griffin has a speech on education across town.”

The nonprofit leaders glance at each other, lighting up with ideas.

* 

Clarke Griffin can be flexible. She stands at the podium and looks down at her speech cards, but the planned introduction has changed: they had ten minutes to rehearse it on the drive over.

“Good morning everyone!” she announces, to the assembly of educators and students and press.

“I’m so happy to be here in the Bay Area, and I have to apologize for being a few minutes late to see everyone today. But, the apology comes with an announcement: I have officially received the backing of Silicon Valley for the Future, the premier non-profit organization for education in the country!”

In one fell swoop, she’s received their backing, their money, their influence, and the thunderous applause of the crowd.

Later that evening at dinner, Lexa nudges Clarke to get her attention, then hands over her cellphone.

“Griffin Announces Tech-Education Endorsement” reads the title of the article, and the paragraphs below spell out a glowing review of Clarke’s speech and her commitment to education—it’s certainly enough for a bump in the polls. She beams at Lexa, thanking her with a nod.

“Good work,” Lexa says simply.

The rest of the weekend goes just as well: Clarke’s publicity has begun to precede her and all she has to do for her appearances on Saturday and Sunday is keep up the smile and do nothing to make them think differently of her. They move down the California coast, stopping in big cities. Finally, after posing for dozens pictures and shaking dozens of hands throughout Sunday afternoon, Clarke and the others finally, finally pile into the cars and start the long roadtrip back to Los Angeles.

It wasn’t until she started going on trips like this that she realized how much she loves home, loves having a place to anchor herself to. Clarke grew up traveling with her parents for her mother’s
campaign, but now that she is spending long trips in a different hotel every night, with a million tasks to worry about, she’s come to appreciate the feeling of coming home, unwinding, and taking time for herself.

For this trip, though, she doesn't get that. They get in to Los Angeles after midnight on Sunday night and Clarke gives the team Monday off, a reward for their hard work.

She's sitting in her office the next morning when Lexa walks in, gives her a small nod through the window. The corners of her mouth turn up at Clarke's small glare of disapproval, and she heads to her own office to get to work.

The first trip of the season signals the true start of the campaign, and the end of the days where the campaign employees coast through the afternoon on desk chair basketball as they wait for the clock to hit 5PM. Now, eight hour days stretch to ten for them, and Clarke's twelve hour days stretch to fourteen, even with Lexa's assistance. They have new donor opportunities pour in, coming from lobbyists and special interest groups and politicians all looking to see how far Clarke Griffin is willing to bend for them. Lexa has the whole office working in teams on communication and reports on the new opportunities, and Clarke reads every single one. And against Lexa's advice, she talks to every single one. Hours on hours of communication and reading.

It's a good thing, without a doubt. But with all the work, she doesn't get a chance to relax at home and shake the road rust off after the trip--she only piles more pressure onto it. By the end of the week, laying in bed late into Saturday morning, she's exhausted and frayed at the seams and lacking the willpower to drag herself to the gym to grit the frustration out. But a session on the treadmill is not her only outlet.


[10:05 AM] Raven Reyes: I’m all yours.

[10:06 AM] Clarke Griffin: Wine or beer?

*  

“I still can’t believe you blew me off last week for a date with some guy,” Raven mutters, for the fourth time tonight.

“A fake date,” Clarke reminds her, even though she still feels guilty for having to skip the night with Raven for her first date with Roan.

“As if that’s supposed to make me feel better.”

“If the expensive wine I brought over doesn’t make you feel better, nothing will.”

On cue, Raven takes a sip from her glass, savors the taste, and nods appreciatively. “It does. But we’re only halfway through the bottle so I’m only halfway feeling better. You hurt my pride, Griffin. And then you went on a road trip for a week.” She places her hand over her heart and gives an exaggerated groan, which Clarke ignores. “Are you at least getting sex out of it?”

“What part of fake relationship didn’t make sense?”
“You haven’t been in a relationship since grad school, Griffin,” Raven points out, “So really, neither fake nor relationship made sense. It just seems especially stupid if it also limits you from having casual sex.”

“Not that it matters, but it doesn’t, really limit me; he has a girlfriend.”

“You fake boyfriend is cheating on you?” Fake boyfriend—but real outrage.

“You really aren’t getting the fake part of this,” Clarke says.

Raven sets her wine glass on the coffee table and turns her whole body to face Clarke, preparing for a conversation that is heavier than what Clarke would prefer right now. Nights like these save her life sometimes; she doesn’t let herself indulge often, in order to preserve their sanctity. Clarke is in sweats and warm socks, curled under a blanket on Raven’s sinfully comfortable couch, a pleasant warm wine-drunk just barely clouding her head and letting her nod along agreeably all evening while Raven vents about work. After the road trip and the week in the office, Clarke really wants to take the evening and binge watch TV and ignore politics for a few hours.

Raven Reyes, however, has always been the most fiercely loyal person Clarke knows. At the slightest hint of anything endangering her friends, Raven goes to war. Clarke has relied on this support in the past, but right now, Raven senses—perhaps rightfully so—that she may have to go to war again, even if it means going against Clarke, to protect her. And that’s not something Clarke wants to fight right now.

“So tell me,” Raven begins. “What happens if someone finds out it’s a fake relationship?”

Clarke shrugs. “What proof will they have? We can just end it amicably and not have to talk about it again.”

“What if the girlfriend surfaces?”

“She won’t.”

“You shouldn’t give Wallace anything to hit you on. He’s the kind of guy who would go after your personal life.”

“Raven, it’ll be fine,” Clarke assures her, shifting in her seat and looking at the TV, for a subtle hint to get back to their Walking Dead marathon. “Cage Wallace has his own skeletons, I’m sure, too much digging in my closet and his might tumble out.”

Inspiration and curiosity and wonder flash over Raven’s face at that—she grins, somewhat roguishly. “You think he has some? Maybe we should do some digging. Hit him first. I have a guy—”

“Reign in that Reyes Revenge fantasy, remember how much trouble it got us into in college?” Clarke laughs. “Look, I love you for worrying about it, but I don’t even want to talk about it anymore. You know I’m way behind on The Walking Dead, let’s just get caught up.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Raven says, giving in and hitting play on the DVR. Clarke reaches over and shoves her playfully; a quiet thank you. “Nothing like splattered zombies and expensive wine to relax you after a bad week.”

“You are without a doubt a better date than Roan Azgeda, if that makes you feel any better.”

“It does. But tell me that when you’re not on your third glass of wine.”
“I will.”

At the commercial breaks, instead of fast-forwarding, Raven vents to her about her week at work: the way her boss favors the male engineers over “the people like me, who actually fix the designs and make them work in the real world” and the lack of funding she gets for her projects because they never seem to fit the “vision” for the company. She talks with her hands, frustration evident in the way her wine slops around in her glass and threatens to spill onto the couch, and Clarke nods along and agrees at every pause just to keep Raven from getting too fired up. They lived together for four years in college and somehow avoided killing each other for the duration; conversations like this are a cornerstone of their friendship.

“All right, that’s basically why I have no interest in Wick anymore,” Raven grumbles, as the final commercial fades out and the show returns, and she turns back to the TV. “But just wait until I tell you why Sinclair has me working with him.”

“Probably because he needs you to save Wick’s ass,” Clarke replies. Raven shushes her, eyes on the screen. Clarke turns back too, but the short vibration of her cellphone on the coffee table grabs her attention instead. Before it can disturb Raven and launch another tirade, she grabs it and flips open the text message.

[10:02 PM] Lexa Ward: You near a TV?

[10:02 PM] Clarke Griffin: Yes. Why?


Clarke nudges Raven to show her the texts, and as Raven reads, Clarke grabs the remote and changes the channel. They’re greeted with Cage Wallace’s face, his immaculately pressed suit and gleaming smile—Clarke instantly sours, gritting her teeth together.

“Oh great,” she mumbles.

“Diiiiiiick,” Raven groans at the screen.

He’s mid-interview, something that was obviously prepped and filmed this afternoon for release tonight.

“Yes, I just have to reiterate how pleased I am to have the support of the education community on this level. I know there had been some news about some other opponents in the race, like Clarke Griffin, working with some smaller organizations or giving some short speeches, but when it comes down to it, the biggest education organization in the United States has backed me and my policies, and I think that’s a pretty fitting indicator to show my weight in this race. I have the experience. Clarke Griffin can work with her boyfriend and his mother, Congresswoman Nia Azgeda, and perhaps in a few years she’ll have the same experience and she can really open up the Democratic party for California. But not yet.”

Raven’s jaw hangs open.

Cage Wallace flashes a broad smile and gives a hearty laugh—clearly meant to show that that last line was just a joke, a light-hearted jab—but Clarke takes it for what it is, a blatant call-out. It’s the type of smarmy condescension she’s come to expect from the experienced politicians she faces off with, who see her as an empty-headed blonde with a nice pair of legs.

The only thing missing was a charming nickname for her: Cage looks the type to use “love” over “Princess.” She can hear it now, and it makes her blood boil.
The news ticker at the bottom of the screen confirms what he’s saying: *US Association of Educators Publicly Backs Wallace in Senate Race.* As Raven swears more at the screen, pausing the news report so that she can yell insults directly at his frozen face, Clarke returns her attention to her phone.

**[10:10 PM] Clarke Griffin:** Fantastic. *I make a speech about education and a week later he undermines me. This was on purpose.*

Instead of a text reply, the phone lights up a second later with an incoming call from Lexa. She doesn’t spare a greeting when Clarke answers, but jumps right into the conversation.

“This has the possibility to undo and overshadow everything you did last week,” Lexa says. “We have to address this now. And you know we need to hit Cage Wallace back.”

“I know, I know.” Clarke squeezes her eyes shut and tries to focus. “Just give me a second.”

“Let’s just meet at the office right now. We can go over things there. How quickly can you get there?”

She looks to Raven, who has concern written all over her face now that she’s exhausted her supply of obscenities on Cage. “I…I’ll have to call a cab, I can’t drive. Raven and I have been drinking. Depending on how quickly it can get to Raven’s place, I probably won’t be at the office for another 40 minutes to an hour. It’s a Saturday night…”

There’s a silence on the other end of the line, then a jingling of keys and the slamming of a door. Lexa’s breath picks up—she’s trotting down stairs. “Text me Raven’s address,” she says. “I’ll come by and pick you up.”

*

“Do I seem too buzzed for this?” Clarke asks, fidgeting in the elevator on their way down.

Raven raises an eyebrow at her. “I drank the other half of the bottle, Griffin. Blind leading the blind right now.”

“Thanks.”

“Always.”

Clarke could have done this on her own, but Raven was intent on escorting her down to the lobby and out onto the street. Outside, they immediately see a nice sedan idling by the curb: the moment Lexa looks over and spots them both, she switches off the engine and gets out of the car, coming around to extend a hand to Raven.

“Lexa Ward,” she says politely. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“Raven Reyes,” Raven replies, with a subtle imitation of Lexa’s formality. She grins to herself as they shake hands and Clarke rolls her eyes.

Lexa looks to Clarke, studying her face as if trying to discern how drunk Clarke actually is, and she seems relieved when there is no real sign of it. She glances down at Clarke’s sweats and sweater, but makes no comment there either—it was a cozy night in, after all. She wears her usual business attire
herself, but the hasty braided up-do says that Lexa probably wasn’t dressed much differently less than an hour ago.

For a moment, Clarke loses herself in that image, on what Lexa could have possibly been wearing in her own apartment, or what she was doing, or what her apartment looks like. She wants to ask, but Raven speaks up first, thankfully.

“So you came up with the fake relationship with Roan Azgeda, huh?”

“I did.” Lexa nods.

“Well…” Raven shrugs, as if expecting a more evasive answer. “Clarke can do better than that. The next fake relationship should be believable, at least.”

“I’ll keep it in mind when she runs for president.”

That pulls a grudging smile out of Raven. “Good enough.”

Clarke clears her throat—her momentary curiosity had Lexa’s home life has passed, and now all she can think of is Cage Wallace’s grin as he announced his groundbreaking education plans. If Lexa just drove twenty minutes to pick her up and was waiting with the car idling, it’s clear that they need to save the pleasantries for another time. Both Raven and Lexa pick up the hint, with Raven pulling Clarke into a quick hug and Lexa jumping back into her car.

“Thank you for the ride,” Clarke says once she’s in and the car pulls away from the curb.

“Of course. Movie night?”

"The Walking Dead."

"I still have to catch up."

"So do I."

"I'm about two seasons behind," Lexa says.

"Four here."

Part of her rages about Cage Wallace, but a deeper part of Clarke smiles at the normalcy of that exchange and wishes that they could take the night off, that Lexa could join her in Raven's living room and have a glass of wine with them. But Lexa, her smile fading back to a look of grim determination, reminds her of why they're headed to the office tonight, and Clarke grows serious.

“So about Cage—”

Lexa shakes her head, with a deep inhale and a quick sideways glance at Clarke. “Let’s just wait until we’re in the office. Can’t do anything in my car. I need to think straight and I…can’t right now.”

* 

“We need to take out Cage Wallace.”
Lexa had remained perfectly quiet as she parks her car in the garage. She hadn’t said a word in the elevator to the empty top floor of the building. She’d waited patiently for Clarke to unlock her office and switch on her computer. And the moment Clarke looks up at her, that is what flies out of her mouth like it’s something she’s been biting back for hours. She doesn’t shout it: she’s all cool rage and dangerous, flashing dark eyes.

“Take out Cage Wallace?” Clarke scoffs. “You don’t know anything about California politics if you think that’s possible.”

“I don’t care who his dad is, Clarke. You still have a fight with the other two candidates before you face him. If he’s attacking you this early, he’s going to make it impossible to get through the primary election, let alone face him in the general senate election.”

“I hate him, but I can’t attack him directly, Lexa, I don’t have the money or the political clout for that right now. He’d destroy me.”

“You can’t just lie down and take this, Clarke,” Lexa says, pursing her lips.

“I can’t stand up and fight him either!”

“If you don’t—”

“I know! I know, Lexa, I know. Just…hold on.”

Accordingly, Lexa shuts her mouth and lets Clarke work it out herself; she runs her fingers back through her messy blonde hair in frustration, sighing heavily at the desk. An hour ago the wine was a welcome haze, but now, Clarke struggles to think clearly through it, and the effect is only worsened by the feeling of Lexa’s eyes on her, waiting. She doesn’t want to deal with this right now.

And then, after worrying at her lips for so long they’ve turned a bright cherry red, she looks up in surprise.

“I have an idea.”

Lexa has never seen this particular sparkle of inspiration in Clarke’s eyes before—she raises her chin, wary. “…what is it?”

Clarke has already pulled out her cell phone and dialed a number, ignoring her campaign manager.

“Well? It’s Clarke...oh come on, it’s not like you’re asleep. You always work late. Listen. I need a favor... Yeah, sure. I have time. I’ll be here.”

She hangs up the phone and tosses it onto the desk, then walks across the room with an anxious, contained stride—all of which has Lexa’s face twisted even deeper in confusion. She waits for a moment for Clarke to explain but when the office stays silent, Lexa sets down her notebook next to Clarke’s phone and follows her to the window. Clarke looks down over the city, the streetlights from far below reflecting in her blue eyes, and seems far away; Lexa stares at her for a long moment before speaking.

“So are you going to explain that? Who’s Wells?”

Clarke smiles softly. “Sorry,” she says, turning to meet Lexa’s eyes. “Wells Jaha. He’s a journalist up in San Francisco, an old friend of mine. We went to college together and have always stayed in touch. He’s on his way home from the office right now, he said he’d call me when he’s out of the cab.”
“Call you for what…?” Lexa leads.

Before Clarke can answer, her phone rings from the desk. She and Lexa cross the room together and Lexa hovers close as Clarke picks it up and answers.

“Okay, good, you’re home,” Clarke says to Wells. “I presume you heard the news about Cage Wallace on the news today? I know, he’s awful. I hate the Wallaces almost as much as you do.”

Lexa’s curiosity is mounting, stress clearly evident in the tightness of her jaw; Clarke is maddeningly calm. It must be the wine. She won’t look at Lexa as she chats idly with Wells about Cage’s statement, her voice like they’re discussing the weather rather than the campaign opponent who has started an early, and petty, smear campaign.

“Clarke,” she whispers, tapping her foot impatiently. “Please explain to me what you’re doing before you do anything—”

“Anyway, Wells, I need you to set up a front-page level interview with Cage Wallace.”

“Clarke—”

“And then, I want you to send it to me and let me write the article for you to publish. Sound good?”

“You’re going to what?” Lexa demands.

And she’s silenced once more when Clarke holds up a hand—on the other end of the line, she can’t hear Wells disagreeing, but Clarke argues her position anyway. She looks Lexa straight in the eye as she speaks, already knowing which objections Lexa will voice. She doesn’t have to hear them. Clarke Griffin’s father taught her to play chess, and she’s damn good at it.

“Listen. You’re going to do this; I’ll write the questions; you interview; you send them to me and I write the article. It’s going to be incredibly controversial and he’ll attack you for it and you’ll shoot to journalistic fame for asking the hard questions. And three months from now, you’re going to put me in the hot seat and get famous again for it, and I’m going to handle it perfectly and Cage comes out looking like a fool. Deal?”

Lexa falls into a stunned silence. She can hear the silence on the other end of the line, too, until a single word comes across: “Deal.”

A Cheshire cat grin cracks over Clarke’s face.

* 

Wells promises to start calling that night to get the interview in place—he wants Clarke on standby so that he can update her immediately. So while he makes his way through his network of contacts, available to him even at 11 PM on a Saturday night, Clarke and Lexa pull the office chairs over to the floor-to-ceiling windows and curl up in them to wait. Clarke has dimmed the lights in the office; the lights of the city below fill the room now, bathing them in a blue and gold glow.

“I guess Los Angeles isn’t that bad,”Lexa says, after several minutes looking down on the city.

Clarke laughs quietly. “I’m pretty sure every city looks amazing when you’re thirty stories up and
seeing it at night. But I’m glad you’re coming around to LA anyway.”

“It’s a process.” She hums in the silence. There’s a small smile on her lips when she glances at Clarke, and for Clarke, that smile is enough of a victory for her not to push it. This peace between them is comforting, and Clarke is content to leave it that way.

A while longer passes before Lexa speaks up again. “I have to say, even though I saw you with the party leaders in Sacramento… this sort of move was not something I expected from you, Clarke. Not after your adamancy about the first interview with Niylah.”

“You disapprove?” Clarke asks.

“Not at all,” Lexa says with a shake of her head. “There are good lawmakers, and then there are good politicians. I know you can be the former; I questioned the latter. Until tonight.”

“Care to explain that dichotomy, Miss Ward?”

The use of her last name is a little playful, a little threatening: Clarke, with the last tendrils of intoxication wrapping her mind, can’t help but bristle at even the suggestion Lexa ever questioned her competency. But Lexa understands, and remains unruffled by Clarke’s attempt to get a rise out of her.

“Governance and lawmaking are the honest, public benefit parts,” explains Lexa. “But to get to that point requires the ability to play the game. The sort of plan you came up with with Wells Jaha is an excellent example.”

“I enjoy it,” Clarke admits, surprising herself. She chews the inside of her cheek for a moment because she knows that she shouldn’t, she knows that she should keep her feet planted in the light, on the high road; but Lexa, looking ethereal with the city light illuminating her face from below, somehow draws out the truth in Clarke. Has her admitting things she shouldn’t or doesn’t think about. She opens her. “I focus on the governance part and I know it’s the most important but selfishly…I enjoy the other side.”

“You’re not a bad person for feeling that way,” Lexa says with a low laugh. “You’re a very good person. Your intentions are still pure. You will just take whichever road will get you there. The secrets, the lies, the darker side. There’s a draw to it. I don’t fault you at all, Clarke.”

Lexa looks out over the city again, leaving Clarke to study her profile; Lexa’s low, tired voice still rings in her ears: secrets, lies, the darker side. There’s a draw to it. Something stirs deep in her stomach and her breathe catches. Clarke has to swallow several times and force her gaze away from Lexa to calm whatever had suddenly risen in her chest. She wishes she had another glass of wine.

Wells calls again, not long after that. He has a vague promise of an interview with Cage Wallace, one that he is certain he can develop into something concrete by Monday, but he can’t do anything else tonight. Clarke thanks him, and for the next several hours, she and Lexa develop a plan of attack for the interview, writing out a series of questions to send to Wells by tomorrow evening. They take turns pacing, barefoot, across the room, while the other transcribes. Neither is satisfied with the end product but by 2 AM, they’ve begun to repeat discarded questions from earlier and they are forced to call it a night.

*
They talk little on the ride to Clarke’s apartment, besides the occasional directions Clarke offers. On one hand, it’s a good thing: any more talk of work, after a road trip and a full week in the office and six hours of her weekend evening centering around it so far, would quite possibly drive her insane. A few hours drinking wine with Raven was not enough to ease her tension and frustration.

On the other hand, the lack of conversation pulls Clarke’s mind right back to those quiet moments by the window, the sound of Lexa’s low voice as she talked about her Machiavellian philosophy to it all and made it sound appealing. Replaying the scene, over and over again, Clarke feels the same strange stirring in her stomach, something deep, heavy, warm, and not entirely unpleasant—just unusual. She tries to throttle it into submission again and this time, tired as she is, she fails. Clarke shifts in her seat as the feeling grows in her stomach, and she counts the minutes until she’s home.

“You made a good call tonight, Clarke,” Lexa says when she pulls along the curb in front of Clarke’s apartment building. “Sleep in tomorrow. Skip the workout.”

“You should too,” Clarke replies, with half a smile even as she unclips her seatbelt and opens the door, clambering out of the car. “Good night, Lexa.”

If Lexa is taken aback by Clarke’s quick exit, she shows no sign of it. She’s as cool as ever.

“Goodnight, Clarke.”

*

She skips the shower; she can take a long, luxurious one in the morning. But once she climbs into bed and the minutes stretch long without the reprieve of sleep, she begins to regret that decision. The struggles of day still cling to her and she’s restless, her mind tired but her body prickling with an uncomfortable heat. She’s anxious. No position relaxes her.

Gritting her teeth, Clarke considers her options. Sleep seems impossible. She could just stay up for another few hours, finish some reading, and then head to the gym at dawn to grind out whatever frustration burns in her muscles.

Or, she could stay here in bed and…curious, Clarke trails her fingers along her inner thighs and feels her body react to the touch. She closes her eyes in relief. She’s not so anxious and strung out that she can’t still get herself off. Simply to help herself sleep.

Clarke settles into a more comfortable position and lets her hands explore. They glide up and down her body, with just enough contact to raise goosebumps and enhance the sensitivity of her skin, enough to make her body ache for more touch. Her thighs, her stomach, her chest, across her neck and collarbone. Nowhere too sensitive, just enough of a tease.

She wants to want it, first. Before she gives herself anything, she wants that low, curling feeling in her stomach, just like what she felt with—

The sudden vibration of her phone interrupts her thoughts.

[2:55 AM] Lexa Ward: Added one more question to the interview doc when I got home. Give it a look in the morning. I’m still impressed with you and this plan, Griffin.

She doesn’t bother texting back, but the message does put Lexa on her mind.
Vividly, she can imagine Lexa’s face as it was illuminated by the streetlights below, her cheekbones accentuated by the shadows. Her full lips forming a smile as she looked down at it. Her long fingers tracing the arm of the office chair impatiently, or twirling a pen, or reaching out for Clarke to calm her down…

She shouldn’t.

She really shouldn’t.

And the more she repeats that to herself, the worse it gets.

Images of Lexa in the dark slide into Clarke’s mind. Images of Lexa pressing close come next. It’s not just a visual fantasy: Clarke can see her green eyes, with every fleck of blue and grey; she can smell the perfume from the week before in the party leaders’ office; she can feel Lexa’s body heat and taste her breath mingling with Clarke’s own. Laying in bed, Clarke can feel Lexa close and the rush of that is as intoxicating as the wine from hours earlier.

“Oh god,” she whispers, the feeling of desire rising hot and fast from deep within her. She flips over, grinds her hips into the mattress, and wills herself to think of anyone else.

Lexa’s shoulders and back shining with sweat in the cramped hotel fitness center. Lexa, peeling her clothing away, just skin and skin and skin.

Clarke buries her face in her cool pillow and strain for rational thought. She’s exhausted, drained, weak. She’s been stressed all week and as Raven pointed out, it’s not like she’s been having sex, or any other outlet for her emotions lately. In her current state of mind, strung out as she is and probably still feeling the effects of the wine, it’s not like she’ll remember any of this in the morning anyway.

She lets go.

The next image, unbidden, is of Lexa kneeling in front of her, looking up through thick lashes with a darkness in her green eyes, tongue running over her lower lip as she asks Clarke for permission. Clarke nods. Then Lexa’s warm mouth on the inside her legs, the bite of her fingernails raking down Clarke’s lower back. Lexa whispering tender affirmations and dark promises against her skin.

Clarke lets out a shaky exhale, bites her lip, and lets her fingers slip between her legs. The moan jumps to her lips.

“Lexa.”
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Sorry this update took so long, I accidentally wrote ten thousand words.

Thanks for the love, the criticism, the feedback--as always. xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The only way to survive in Clarke's life is through organization and planning. She categorizes, plans, keeps track of endless to-do lists, and when it's time to act, she acts with brutal, swift efficiency. During her years as a lawyer, she had to learn how to kill her racing thoughts of alternative strategies and different routes of attack, or else they would keep her up through the night. Now she can effortlessly ignore her lack of romantic relationships (even when Raven points it out rather often) and focus instead on drafting policy. She can prioritize positive strategy over the emotional response to attacks from her opponents. She can rationalize Saturday night as a moment of weakness that happened to include Lexa, rather than being crippled by the guilt of abandoning her professional stature and getting herself off to the thought Lexa between her legs.

Clarke does a damn fine job of forgetting about all of it. Until Monday morning, when Lexa does a damn good job of reminding her. All it takes is an easy "Good morning, Clarke. How was your weekend?" to crumble the walls Clarke had built up to keep out the guilt. She manages to mutter out a clipped, polite response and then retreat to her office, closing the blinds to indicate she's not to be disturbed.

At her desk in the silence, the thick feeling guilt rises fast into her throat.

Your employee. You're better than that. Pull it together.

Her employee with fantastic—"Damn it, Griffin," she tells herself again, and throws herself into her unread email box with uncommon fervor. She has 384 waiting and she’s not even sure which ones require a response. For most of the morning, she’s left alone to tackle them, making a sizable dent, until her intercom inevitably buzzes.

"Miss Griffin?"

Thankfully, it’s only Sarah. Clarke will welcome any distraction not named Lexa Ward right now. "Come on in."

The door cracks open a second later and Sarah slips in. "I have the agenda for the general department meeting later," she says brightly, handing it over. "And did you want me to make a coffee run for you? It’s already 11 AM."

Exultations of gratitude jump to Clarke’s lips, but instead, she furrows her brow. "Wait, is Miss Ward not going for coffee today?"

"She didn’t mention anything to me about it. She only goes sometimes. I can ask?"

"Oh…uh, no, don’t ask. That’s fine. Coffee would be great, thank you, Sarah."
"Miss Griffin?" And Clarke looks up again, to see that now Sarah is the one with a face twisted in confusion. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine!" Clarke answers, a little too quickly, but a fast answer is better than choking on the sudden churn of guilt in her stomach. Sarah, as always, knows not to ask questions, and bows out with a promise of coffee.

*

Fifteen minutes into the noontime fundraising meeting, Clarke takes a long sip of that latte, pulls it away from her lips, and stares wistfully at it, because she knows that as good as it is, it will not be anywhere near enough to keep her from going insane today. Sometimes you just know that you're going to need more than one.

It starts with her opening line. “Three months out from the primary elections,” Clarke declares, taking a seat. “Where are we with our funds?”

And it just goes downhill from there.

They’ve always been the underdog. Clarke is by no means poor. She’s well-publicized as the offspring of a surgeon-turned-politician and a high-level aeronautics engineer, but she has neither the old family money of the Wallace lineage nor the years of loyal donors that Vincent Vie and Diana Sydney. In a battleground state, the campaign is certain to run far north of twenty million for the successful candidate.

“Until the party gets fully behind us, the big money will come from the special interest groups,” says John Mbege, one of her strategists. “We just need to decide who to work with.”

“I’m working on it,” Clarke sighs. Lately, the entire campaign team regardless of department has been stretched thin because every intern has been assigned to research and reports on the special interest groups interested in working with—and donating to—Clarke’s campaign. She’s spent hours combing through these reports and they still pile up every day.

“We can’t do much until—”

“I’m aware,” she says, voice tight. “I’m trying to balance the money offered by the groups with how much they would help our campaign in areas where we’re lagging in the polls. I have a few dozen more to sort through. What else do we have?”

The tone of her voice reflects in the tension of the room, and John, unwilling to slice through it, shifts the responsibility to Monty with a glance, who passes it to Jasper, and so on down the line, with no one speaking. At last, it’s Lexa who clears her throat: “I have a series of media interviews I’m working on securing,” she says, “They’ll raise your profile, and your donations from individuals.”

“Great.” Clarke notes that without looking up.

She can feel the tension in the room get thicker, but it’s the lesser of two evils: when Lexa had entered the room and taken the seat across the table from Clarke, giving her a small smile and nod of greeting, she had set Clarke’s head spinning. Her presence alone makes Clarke feel as if she’s wearing a corset, unable to pull in air. It’s damn near impossible to look at her and not see the glimpses of fantasy she had used Saturday night. Her fingers twirling a pen, her teeth worrying her
lip as she scans a report, the tight cut of her shirt and the way it ripples when she shifts positions in her seat—the majority of Clarke’s focus while other people speak goes into ignoring these glaring aspects of Lexa, which of course means she zeroes in on them, which just requires more effort to ignore and leaves little energy for the actual political matters at hand.

Sterling is the next one to speak up, and, mercifully, he sits at the far end of the table, well away from Lexa. “I think…” he begins pensively, before he shuts his mouth again. He only continues at Clarke’s urging: “I think we should set up an event for media and donors. A thank you dinner or event, for those groups who have already contributed and the special interests who will soon, and gain the campaign some attention. Fancy, high-brow, at a museum or historical Los Angeles site somewhere.”

Clarke’s answer is immediate: “No. We don’t need some flashy event right now, and we don’t need our resources going to it—”

“I agree with Sterling,” Lexa interrupts simply. “People would love it. It’s something we should start planning immediately.”

“It’s entirely unnecessary,” Clarke argues. “I have a general debate coming up in in a month. Next week, I go on a two week road trip. When are we going to squeeze in a gala? We’re here to talk about how to raise funds, not spend them.”

“This would raise funds, Clarke. It raises your profile in the eyes of your donors and the media, it makes you look good, which draws in more money.”

“It’s a distraction we don’t need right now.”

“It’s a short-term sacrifice you’re going to need to make for long-term benefit,” Lexa says, in a clipped voice that shocks through Clarke: she thinks back to her appraisal of Lexa as a military leader in a former life, and adds this new experience to it. “If you find it distasteful, you only need to make a brief appearance, I’ll handle the rest.”

A dozen pairs of eyes flick back and forth between Clarke and Lexa, sensing the heat in the air between them but entirely unaware of the clenching muscles in Clarke’s stomach as she tries to avoid thinking about what happened the past week. She can’t look away from Lexa, from the way the girl’s jaw works tightly back and forth, but she can feel the gazes of her employees that tell her to finish this battle.

“Fine, have the damn thing,” she sighs. “You’re in charge, Miss Ward. But keep it small—I won’t let it become a distraction at this point. We have way bigger fish to fry.”

Lexa assigns Sterling to the planning commission and they agree to assemble a larger group later. They discuss the style and scope for several minutes: Jasper suggests black-tie; Monroe pushes for semi-formal; Monty makes the head-scratching proposal of hosting it on a yacht out of Long Beach. Clarke stays out of the discussions, knowing that nothing will be solidified right now anyway, until at last Lexa raises a hand to silence the group.

“We’re getting off topic,” she declares. “The only other thing we have left on the agenda is making sure we have the funds for a personnel expansion, because we need to start hiring again for the final push before primaries. Do we?”

Monroe flips through a few pages of her binder. “We should. For a small enough group. I can work with Miller to make sure we do, once we have a list of positions that need to be filled.”
Lexa, satisfied, turns her green eyes on Clarke. “A job for the State Representative. Miss Griffin, can you put together a list of the staffing requirements so that Miller can look over it and start hiring again?”

What’s one more agenda item to be completed in the next five days? “Yes,” Clarke agrees, forcing herself to relax again—and not entirely sure she’s succeeding.

With that, and a few more words of direction, Lexa ends the meeting and the room almost instantly brightens again as the rest of her employees stand and start migrating toward the door. Clarke looks down at her notepad: it is a mess of lists and stats and numbers, scribbled in every direction thanks to the intensity of the meeting and the conversations and arguments within, but most glaring on the sheet is the list of tasks she has to take care of in the next week. It makes her email inbox look like heaven. She drops her pen with a quiet sigh and looks across the table at Lexa.

“So, we got quite a bit settled.” She studies Clarke for a moment, searching for the source of her earlier frustration, but Clarke doesn’t give things away so easily. “How’s your agenda looking?”

“Settled,” Clarke agrees with a humorless laugh, and begins to recite her list of tasks: “I have a week until I leave on the next trip. I need to put together those staffing requirements for Miller, sift through all the potential special interest partners and make play calls on them, approve additional donation strategies, and work with you on those interview requests. And hope that at least one of those things gives me an edge on Vincent Vie and Diana Sydney.”

“They will,” Lexa says confidently.

“And will the gala? Playing dress-up?” As the daughter of Abby Griffin, former congresswoman, she’s no stranger to all manner of events and dinners and galas. She excels at them. But at this point, when she’s behind in the polls against two seasoned veterans, a glamorous night out with the cameras flashing does not sound like a good use of her time—or money.

“That will too,” Lexa says, and she’s almost infuriating in her smooth nonchalance. No, scratch that—she is infuriating, the way she dips her head ever so slightly and focuses on Clarke, clearly searching for the source of this unusual bitterness. With a glance to the door, she leans in close and drops her voice.

“And…did Wells Jaha get back to you about the interview?” She reaches out, her fingers brushing across the back of Clarke’s wrist.

Clarke didn’t hear a single word. She heard the sound of them—the low, rasping, breathy sound of Lexa’s voice whispered across the inches between them—but the English language failed to register. Lexa’s fingers are too near the pulse point on her wrist; she’s going to know. She’s going to feel the jump in her heart rate. Suddenly desperate, Clarke is on her feet in a half a second, as if with the vain hope that she could outrun the sudden jolt of heat that shot down her spine.

“He hasn’t yet,” she says quickly, “but I’ll let you know when he does. In the meantime, I better get started if I want to get out of here before midnight.”

She swears for a moment when she looks back that Lexa’s face is red, but she doesn’t stop to look closer—anything having to do with Lexa’s face is not something she wants to spend any more time on.

*
News of Clarke’s mood must spread fast through the office. On the occasion she has to emerge from her personal office to grab a set of poll results from Harper and her two interns, she’s met with averted eyes and the type of reserved responses that are entirely uncharacteristic for her whole campaign office. She feels a fresh pang of guilt at that, but when she knows she has so much to take care of, she can’t spare time for small-talk to ease the mood. She’ll deal with it later. Beyond that, she’s left alone for most of the afternoon, which would be nearly a record, if not for the intercom buzz at 3PM.

“Miss Griffin, Roan Azgeda is here to see you.”

So there is a god, and he’s working against her.

At Clarke’s reluctant consent, Roan sweeps into her office with a bouquet of roses, strutting across the tile floor and offering them to her with a Shakespearean flourish—his broad grin flips to a frown when her raised brow doesn’t come down and her arms don’t uncross.

“Okay, love of my life, at least pull your weight and take the roses,” he grumbles, rolling his eyes.

Since she can see a few curious looks through the office window, Clarke snatches the flowers from his hand. “You—fake roses?”

Roan shrugs, getting to his feet. “Fake relationship.”

“Funny.”

“It’s one of the many services I offer, your campaign manager paid extra for it. Anyway, I figured we’ve gone too long without a public appearance, so I have reservations at one of the bigger celebrity places downtown. Seven good?”

As if she really has any choice. After pointedly not laughing at his offer to grab some water for the roses, she agrees to meet him for dinner at seven downtown, which necessitates an early exit from work despite the fact that her to-do list is longer than her fake boyfriend’s hair. Clarke has never been one for dressing up outside of work, preferring staying in for dinners and nights with friends, or at least drinks at somewhere that would allow her to wear jeans. But this arrangement is all about appearance, so Clarke spends over an hour putting together an outfit, styling her hair, and applying make-up.

With her last glance in the mirror, she thinks about Lexa and if her campaign manager would approve. Classy, elegant, a black skirt and white shirt that shows just enough skin for a night out—it should be right up Lexa’s alley, Clarke reasons. For the image they’re trying to present of a cool, put-together woman of the people, that is.

When Roan said a popular downtown place, he meant it. He texts her that he’s waiting inside so when Clarke’s Uber drops her off at the curb, she makes the long walk to the restaurant doors on her own, blinded by the lightning storm of camera flashes from the photographers and tourists lined up for celebrity sightings.

“Nicely done,” he says in her ear, once she gets through the doors—she only recognizes him by his voice because purple spots swim in her vision after the barrage of camera flashes. “I’ll make sure to walk you out of here when we leave, there will be even more an hour from now.”

At least the steak is worth it. Clarke is able to forget the photographers outside, and is almost able to ignore Roan’s questions about the campaign—almost—as she works through her filet mignon and
roast vegetables, coming from his wallet instead of her campaign’s tonight. An offer to go with the fake roses.

“I’ve been reading the papers,” Roan says. “You’re polling about average with women, ahead with young voters, and behind in everything else, especially moderate voters. Way behind in male voters. Overall, Vincent Vie has a five point lead on Sydney and an eight point lead on you.”

Clarke knows. She gets alerts when they change—on her phone, and from about six different people in her office. She sees the numbers in her sleep.

“We’re working on it,” she replies. “Those numbers are malleable, it’s early. I haven’t even faced them in a debate yet.”

“The fact that you’re behind in pretty much everything means you’re going to have to go into the upcoming debate ready to argue it all.” Clarke knows this too, but she can sense the point of his explanations coming soon, so she sets down her fork to wait. “Or, you can get ahead of the game now and roll into the debate with a lead.”

Clarke folds her hands into her lap. “And your suggestion for that is…?”

“Use more than my family name: work with my mother and her political allies now, work with their special interest groups. She has connections, and she appeals to all the demographics you’re behind in.”

“There are reasons I’m behind in those demographics,” Clarke says, with a dispassionate shrug. “I don’t agree with many of your mother’s policies, even though we’re in the same party. She has a Vincent Vie style of voting, too many compromises for my taste. I’ll take her endorsement and support her against opposing parties but I don’t need her allies.”

Roan sits back. “There’s a reason my mother and Vincent Vie have been in office for so long. You’re new to this.”

“As I’ve been reminded,” Clarke snaps. “Now, your turn: as an example, remind me what your mother’s policy on LGBT rights is?”

“It’s…more conservative than my own.”

“Or mine,” she says. “Your mother isn’t Cage or Dante Wallace, I agree, but right now I have three LGBT groups who want to pledge money and support to my campaign, sitting on my desk waiting for my approval. I’d take them over your mother’s more conservative allies, even if she would help me in the polls.”

“I’m just trying to make this easier on you, Clarke. Yes, she swings toward the middle ground in order to gain support for re-elections, but you could have a ready-made political army on your side if you use hers, rather than trying to build your own three months before primaries.”

“Your mother has said she’ll support me, and I appreciate her political clout in that, but I’ll forge my own alliances, Roan.”

He shrugs and sits back in his chair, jack and coke in hand. “Suit yourself.”

He manages, at least, to swing the conversation to lighter topics to pass the time until the check comes, and Clarke engages politely while her mind sifts through the pile of donor groups she has sitting on her desk back at her office. Her political army, ready to be built, just as soon as she can make a decision on them. She had planned to leave it for the morning, get an early start, but after she
smiles her way through the photographer’s gauntlet outside the restaurant and climbs into the car with Roan, she gives the address of her office, rather than her apartment.

“It’s almost nine,” Roan points out, brow furrowing.

“Great. Still early, then.”

*

As the elevator rises to the 50th floor, she plans out her attack: three dozen reports and a work rate of one every twenty minutes means she can knock out a quarter of them by midnight. She’s considering the possibility and time requirements of turning on the break room coffee machine, weighing the taste of the coffee against the ask ahead of her, when the elevator doors slide open to her top floor campaign headquarters. As it has been so many late nights, the office is dark and still. As expected, the office is dark and still, but the solitude is oddly comforting: it’s just something she’s used to.

That is, at least, until she notices a light on in a single room across the office. Lexa’s office.

A sudden, insatiable curiosity tugs at her, probably because she had spent almost the entire day sequestered away from the rest of her employees, and most of her human interaction came on her date with Roan. Clarke built that wall up on purpose, so she could focus on her work and keep the intrusive thoughts of the morning out, but the light in Lexa’s office demolishes that wall in half a second.

The sound of her heels on the tile precede her. Lexa is looking toward the door when Clarke leans in, but the papers scattered over her desk imply that she’s has just as much work as Clarke does. Unlike her boss, however, Lexa’s face is calm and smooth.

“Hi, Clarke. Can I help you with something?”

Clarke stammers for an answer to that question, which shouldn’t be asked in such a neutral tone this late at night. “I just, uh—What are you still doing here, Miss—Lexa?”

“Miss Lexa?” she says, raising an eyebrow while the corner of her mouth twitches.

It’s the kind of smile that she should draw away from, that could send her spiraling into more unnecessary stress like the kind she carried throughout this morning, but Clarke ignores it: she allows the fact that there is someone to enjoy the loneliness with her warm her chest instead. She leans against the doorway.

“It’s late. I’m tired.”

“That’s the first time I think I’ve heard you ever admit any weakness, Clarke.”

“You think that’s weakness?” Clarke scoffs. “To be honest with you, on the way up here I was considering drinking the break room coffee. I’m that far gone.”

Her eyes darken and her frown grows deeper. “Jesus.”

She looks so legitimately worried that Clarke feels the need to give her a small smile of reassurance. She nods to the papers on Lexa’s desk. “Desperate times,” she says casually. “Anyway, Lexa, why
are you still here? Seven is the latest anyone stays these days.”

“Anyone who isn’t you, I’ve heard.” Lexa grabs a stack of papers from her desk and strides across the room to hand it to Clarke. “I took care of the personnel requirements for you; just approve that list of vacancies we need filled and I’ll send it to Miller in the morning so he can start searching.”

“You—you did?” Clarke breathes, relief flooding her—the report had loomed ominously over her all afternoon. She flicks through the stack to see page after page of what she is sure are well-written analyses of the departments and their needs. “I mean, thank you. God, I knew we’d made the right call when we hired you, Lexa.”

When she looks up from the file, she catches the last heartbeat of a cocky smirk and glowing green eyes, fixed on her face, not on the file in her hands. Lexa resolves her features immediately into her regular cool impassiveness, but not before the image burns into Clarke’s memory and knocks the wind out of her chest. Warmth shoots down her spine and she has to clamp her mouth shut and force a matching smoothness over her face to prevent her more visceral reaction from showing.

Lexa studies her, and for a moment Clarke thinks she may be able to read the swirling emotions behind her eyes, but if she does, she gives no sign of it.

“Now, why are you back?” she asks instead. “I heard that you went to dinner with Mr. Azgeda, I wasn’t expecting you to come back tonight.” Her eyes flick down from Clarke’s face, running over her black skirt, all the way down her bare legs to the strappy heels she wears. Lexa examines her world constantly, taking her time to study it before she reacts, and Clarke shifts under the weight of her attention. A small part of her wonders, as she had earlier in the evening, if Lexa likes the outfit; that part is overpowered by her sudden self-consciousness. To make up for it, she does her best to adopt a matter-of-fact tone for her response.

“I’m about sixty percent of the way through the special interest groups. I wanted to get through a few more.”

“Devoted.”

“Pissed off. Roan was talking politics at dinner.”

“Whatever works. Well, if you want, I was looking at some earlier,” Lexa offers, “and I have some thoughts. Would you mind if I came and checked over what you’ve worked through so far?”

Having a casual conversation with Lexa is one thing, but when it comes to the idea of spending a few hours working together in her office again, Clarke can only think of a few things she would like less—being forced to drink lite beer, reading Latin, and losing to Cage Wallace, for a few examples. But scattered as her mind is right now, she can’t form a valid excuse to send Lexa home.

“It probably won’t be long. I’m just going to be a few more minutes in my office,” she tries anyway, knowing it’s weak. Lexa nods earnestly.

“Great. I work fast.”

“Clearly.”

Lexa’s brow furrows ever so slightly.

“The report you put together for Miller,” Clarke says quickly. “I didn’t think I would have it for him until Wednesday if I had done it myself.”
“Oh.” Lexa swallows. “Yeah, of course. These special interest reports will be much faster than that.”

Her proximity has Clarke’s body temperature up, whether it be from guilt or frustration or...something else. She steps aside in the doorway to give Lexa as wide a berth as possible and still, as Lexa passes her, it’s too close, it’s too easy to reach out and touch her, wrap an arm around her waist.

That thought is the final straw.

Lexa leaves Clarke standing in the doorway, gritting her teeth so hard her blood pounds in her temples. This is ridiculous. The pathetic avoidance tactic she’s been employing all day is ridiculous. The fact that she would pay any attention to some fleeting impulse that could have a hundred different motivations behind it is ridiculous. Lexa is her campaign manager, she’s a pretty girl, but more importantly, she’s fucking great at her job. Hiding away from ten (twenty) minutes of a mistake she committed at three AM while not in her right mind is not the way to deal with this. Clarke is a professional. She’s going to be a goddamn Senator. This is nothing.

That charming propriety she has cultivated over her admittedly few years in politics is in full swing by the time she sits down at her desk. She gives Lexa a few of the completed write-ups to check over and returns to the half-finished one on her laptop, searching for a good end point to wrap up and leave for the night.

After a few minutes of this, the silence becomes distracting. Clarke clears her throat; Lexa’s attention snaps up.

"Thank you, for staying tonight,” she says quietly. “It's entirely unnecessary but not unappreciated.”

Lexa inclines her head with the type of deference that Clarke's curt tone demands. Entirely professional. Two colleagues. That's all.

"It is necessary, though," Lexa adds, a few minutes later. She looks up again to meet Clarke’s curious gaze. "My job is to run your campaign, yes, but more importantly I’m here to smooth out your rough edges so that people want to elect you to represent them. If you’re constantly on edge, it makes my job infinitely more difficult."

It's part admonishment, part politeness, part teasing joke, leaving Clarke with heat rising in her cheeks when she doesn't know quite how to respond. But after letting her hang for a few seconds, Lexa glances up from the paperwork with a small smirk on her face. Seeing her green eyes spark with amusement, all of Clarke's confusion rushes out of her at once, leaving only a warm, pleasant ache in her chest; she lingers on Lexa even when the girl looks back down to the paperwork.

After a moment, Clarke forces herself to do the same.

* * *

What she had intended as an anxious few minutes with Lexa never becomes anxious, and stretches long past a few minutes once they begin to move through the reports with efficiency. The gratitude Clarke feels with having a partner in crime is more than enough to overpower any lingering guilt for the time being—she wants to shout her appreciation to the roof.

Clarke tends to pace while she works; Lexa, on the other hand, sit enthroned in one of the guest
chairs, her only movement coming from the drumming of her fingers on the chair’s arm as she reads. Neither seems to bother the other. In fact, they barely interact as they go through report after report; they are reassured more by the presence of each other, rather than a stream of constant communication as they work.

The occasions Lexa speaks, however, Clarke finds herself looking forward to. The conversations come when she disagrees with one of Clarke’s decisions, her opposition allowing for Clarke to work debate and argument muscles she hasn’t stretched since her days of working as a lawyer. Mid-way through a discussion about the merits of a Southern California agriculture company versus a Northern California one, Clarke realizes that Lexa is actually smiling, and, with a shock, so is Clarke herself. She wins that argument with a new burst of enthusiasm and Lexa just shakes her head, smiling ruefully and tucking a strand of loose hair behind her ear after it slips free of her neatly styled up-do.

It’s such a simple movement—it shouldn’t draw forth such a strong ripple of affection. But it does. She stares at Lexa, riding high on the intellectual debates and the fact that they’ve nearly completed their goal, and makes a snap decision to try to reconcile the sudden lightness of it all.

“We’re enjoying this too much,” she jokes, with a laugh. “We need to call it a night and get out of here. I can finish the last of these tomorrow during work hours.”

Lexa replies quickly: “You can leave. I’ll finish it for you.”

“Lexa, it’s past midnight, I’m not letting you stay to finish my work for me. You already did the hiring report. Tell me you’re not tired.”

The slow blink of her eyes betrays her and Clarke grins triumphantly. “Come on. Let’s go.”

They take the long elevator ride down in silence, the exhaustion setting in quickly now that they’re not focused on the work anymore. With the muffled feeling of fatigue, Clarke doesn’t care that they’re nearly shoulder to shoulder, leaning together against the back rail. She’s a professional. When the doors slide open on the expansive slate and silver lobby, they nod to the night shift guard, Murphy.

“Evening, ladies. Just a heads up, you got a handful of guys with cameras out there,” Murphy points out before they get to the front door. “Want me to run them off for you? Farthest I can threaten them to is across the street, legally.”

Clarke manages to bite back a curse when she sees a small cadre of photographers waiting outside the building’s entrance. “Ugh, they must have followed me from dinner tonight.”

“They were at dinner?” Lexa says sharply.

“Yeah. My romance with Roan is really taking off.” A shadow of guilt crosses Lexa’s face, and Clarke continues to reassure her, “It’s fine. I’ll stay in here with Murphy until my cab gets here, and hurry past them.”

Lexa had begun shaking her head at my cab. “I can give you a ride home,” she says, like it’s the most natural thing in the world.

She wants to argue, she does. But a cab ride will put an extra thirty minutes between her and her 800 count sheets, and with the way Lexa is looking at her, pitying her with equally tired eyes, she can’t resist.
The last time she was in Lexa’s car, her mind had been swimming with wine and Cage Wallace’s first open declaration of war, and she hadn’t fully been able to appreciate the leather and lines and faint pine smell of Lexa’s BMW. She takes her time to appreciate the car now: they’re driving in silence, and while Clarke has found deep comfort in Lexa’s presence without the need to talk, she hasn’t quite reached the same level with Lexa’s presence without a desk between them. It’s hard to focus on work when they’re not at work, so to keep her mind from going places she’s held it back from all day, she directs it elsewhere.

“So, how was dinner with Mr. Azgeda?” Lexa asks, finally breaking the silence.

“Fine. Steak and a great salad.”

“What pissed you off enough to drive back to the office and go to work when most sane people are curled up at home, watching TV before bed?”

“I could ask the same question, Lexa,” Clarke replies.

Lexa chuckles softly. “I stayed because I need to get ahead of your workload, because I want to win this thing. So I’m willing to forgo my curled up in front of the TV time. You, on the other hand, had a date and still came back to work…was it a bad date? Is Raven right, should I have picked someone better for you?”

The tightness of her voice implies that it’s actually weighing on her; Clarke hums in reassurance. “No, no, Roan is great, on a personal level. But tonight he offered his mother’s allies and special interest connections as if I can’t do it without her help.”

The pause before Lexa answers gives it away. “He’s right, Clarke.”

“He’s not. I’m glad for her endorsement but I don’t need a political partnership that goes against some of my values, just so I can have an easier election.”

“Doing what he said would have eliminated the need for all the work we were doing in your office. It would probably put us ahead in the overall polls without any effort from us.”

“She’s powerful and she swings left but so many of her moves are made to gain the support of the many, not for real change. Look up her old voting records,” Clarke says firmly. “Values.”

She gives a short huff. “You’re infuriating, you know that?”

It’s soft, though, and that softness prevents Clarke from showing just how infuriating she can be and doing something like opening the car door at this red light and walking the rest of the way home. “You’re pretty infuriating sometimes yourself,” she replies instead. “Speaking of, how’s that gala planning coming?”

“Fine,” Lexa answers coolly.

“Good.”

Another huff, this time of amusement. “You know, my ex-girlfriend would have liked you.”
“Your—” And Clarke immediately clamps her mouth shut because the rest of her sentence could go at least three different directions and she can’t pick. Lexa saves her with a small smile.

“Yes, ex-girlfriend. I’m a lesbian.” There’s no sign of anxiousness on her face, practiced and stoic as she always is, but Clarke picks up more than that: the way her fingers massage the leather of the steering wheel, the slow but steady bounce of her knee. “Costia…she had the same bullheaded passion for things that you do. You’d get along well. God help the rest of us, though.”

It might be the most personal thing Lexa has ever offered, flooring Clarke for a good several seconds as she considers her options: she could match Lexa’s confession with the equal one of her own; she could ask more about Costia; she could ask more about the fact that Lexa had just come out to her, a thought that clashes like soldiers on a battlefield with the thoughts locked away in the deepest recesses of Clarke’s mind. She swallows a few times to steel herself against those. And then--

“2117, right?” Lexa asks—they’re outside Clarke’s apartment building. The smile playing at her lips says that they might have been in front of her apartment for a while. To prevent herself saying anything else, Clarke bids Lexa a hasty goodbye, thanking her for the ride and for staying to help her lessen the work load, and scrambles out of the car.

My ex-girlfriend.

The rest of the night, Clarke suffers the familiar itch in the back of her mind, the subtle edges of frustration with it all, and the looming threat of a sleepless night. The kind of stress not easily solved with productivity and a relaxing day with friends. If she had a steady romantic partner instead of a campaign and a fake boyfriend, the solution would be an easy few hours in bed with them. Sans partner, she could always repeat Saturday night and eliminate this frustration with her fingers and a few vague fantasies.

And she can’t do that again. Once, she can maybe survive seeing Lexa’s face every day, but twice would kill her.

Instead, she steams the day away with another scalding shower, and finally falls asleep to a never ending mantra: Professional. Professional. Professional. Nothing more than that.

*

It feels like such a monumental shift between them, leaving Clarke on untrodden ground and a new world before her, and yet nothing really changes.

She passes the next day the same way she spent the day before, buried up to her ass in paperwork and eschewing all forms of human contact. At the end of the day Sarah leaves her with a greek salad and a latte, which saves Clarke from another night of contemplating the merits of breakroom coffee, and when Clarke next looks up from her emails, the office outside has emptied, and Lexa stands in the doorway.

“Prospective interviews,” Lexa says, raising a file in greeting. “I wanted to rehearse some of them so you can do them next week.”

It’s another late night. Another few hours of strange comfort in the dark, lonely office. They rehearse through interviews, working out the best way to phrase each idea, Clarke pacing, Lexa sitting and watching. Hours that used to drag by, suddenly disappear in a few minutes.
And again the next night; Clarke isn’t even surprised when Lexa walks into her office and settles in a chair as the sun sets over the Pacific Ocean. They have work to do.

Lexa doesn’t bring up Costia or anything else about her personal life but she does seem to grow as comfortable as Clarke feels: instead of sitting primly before Clarke’s desk, most of the time Lexa will lean back in one chair and kick her feet up on the other, pen between her teeth and green eyes occasionally following Clarke as she paces around her. She never lets her hair down. She never takes off her shoes. But she smiles more and she slouches languidly, stretched out and content, and that is more than enough to soften her in Clarke’s eyes.

After a week that had begun with Clarke locking herself in her office in an attempt to avoid her masturbation fantasy, by now her interactions with Lexa have become strikingly…normal. This could happen every evening for the next eight months—hell, eight years, if she wins—and neither of them would bat an eye.

She loves this new normal.

*

She gets to the office at 7:39 the next morning. This new calmness, this new normalness, persists for another eight minutes, long enough for her to read the top report on her desk: Lexa’s add-on to the hiring opportunities file she wrote up earlier in the week.

"Are you serious?" Clarke demands the second she strides through Lexa’s open door at 7:49 AM.

Lexa looks up from her computer with brows raised. "Generally. Why?"

"I do not need a whole security team, Lexa."

"Ah." As if she hadn’t been the one to add the security team, Lexa picks up the file Clarke throws on the desk and skims the report. "In my opinion, you absolutely do," she concludes with a haughty shrug after icing Clarke for a moment. "I added the security team once I realized we have photographers camped outside the building for shots of you."

“I can handle photographers!” Clarke fires back. “That was the whole point of this relationship with Roan.”

“The point was to build a media presence and make your name public, not for you to be followed around and harassed outside your work.” Lexa takes a deep breath and re-settles herself. “This moment was bound to happen at some point, I’m just surprised it’s happening so soon. The security team was inevitable.”

“It’s a momentary fascination because I’m new on the scene, Lexa, it won’t last,” Clarke groans.

"Your optimism is misplaced here, Clarke."

“Don’t get condescending.”

Lexa presses forward, into Clarke’s space. “The fascination isn’t momentary and it absolutely will last; it will last for the rest of the race and beyond and only get worse later. You’re young and smart and beautiful and they’re going to be clamoring to know more about you—” She shuts her mouth
suddenly.

Truth be told, Clarke would have accepted the compliments without paying special attention to them, too distracted by the matter of the security—had they come from anyone else. But the way Lexa has to pause to take a breath and swallow hard, raising her chin ever so slightly, gives Clarke a stomach-flipping moment to replay the words in her head. They pull the wind from her lungs and the continent beneath her feet shifts yet again.

Lexa continues before Clarke can spiral any further, her campaign manager’s perfect enunciation and refined tone bringing her back down. "So, when you win the primary and become the democratic nominee for Senator, the attention is going go through the roof. You're going to appreciate that security team if you ever want to go anywhere during normal hours."

She finishes with her words somewhat weaker than when she began and her attention seems more focused on searching Clarke's face for a reaction, uncharacteristically nervous. But Clarke won't think about it.

"It's an unnecessary expense, and pretentious as hell," she says, but relents. "But at the very least, don't hire a whole team. I'll accept three, at the most."

The shadow of relief on her face, and her attempt to conceal it, tells the story. “Noted. So besides you wanting to take on the entire tabloid media yourself, which is not surprising, what else is on the agenda for the rest of the day?"

It’s only 8 AM. Talked down from her angry defiance, Clarke fades back into her early-morning fog. With a sigh, she says, “Coffee’s up first. But I don’t even think Sarah’s here yet to make a run for me.”

Lexa’s nose wrinkles. “Did you ever test out the break room coffee the other night?”

Necessary evil. “Let’s go.”

The new normal. Clarke and Lexa fall into step together as they stride across the office, heels clicking at the same time. And no matter how many politicians decide to endorse her, no matter the campaign’s bank account, no matter her poll results, nothing makes her more confident of a win than striding side-by-side with Lexa in that moment: Clarke walks tall enough as it is, but Lexa radiates power beside her, moving with her easy, cool confidence that infects every inch of Clarke when they’re this close.

She’s so wrapped up in this feeling that she almost doesn’t catch the strains of the conversation in the break room ahead of them, but the sound of Lexa’s name makes her pause. Instinctively, she grabs Lexa’s wrist and pulls her to a stop to listen.

"Listen, man." It’s Jasper. “All I know is that if Ward catches us playing desk chair basketball one more time, she's going to skip firing us and go right to executing us."

Monty gives a bark of laughter. "Stop using that as an excuse, you just suck at your fadeaway and I've been kicking your ass. Besides, I don't think she can fire us."

In a sudden flash of impishness, Clarke presses close to Lexa, grinning as she hisses out “Shhhh, hold on, hold on.” Lexa returns the grin, arches her eyebrows, listening in on the conversation floating through the doorway ahead of them.

"Doesn't matter, she still scares the hell out of me," Jasper says.
"Clarke does too sometimes."

"And the two of them together? God." They clink coffee mugs. “Sometimes when they get into it they look like they’re going to fight each other; and five minutes later, they’re smiling and laughing. I’d hate to be on the receiving end of whoever they team up against, that’s brutal.”

Neither Clarke nor Lexa draw attention to the fact that as Monty speaks, Lexa is leaning into Clarke’s body and Clarke’s hand is still tight on Lexa’s wrist, and their heads are lowered together in conspiratorial amusement as Jasper and Monty keep talking. The warmth of the contact seeps into Clarke’s bones and she’s vaguely aware of it, but she doesn’t draw away, nor does she particularly care to—she’s too focused elsewhere.

"Right?" Jasper says with a laugh. “Shit, just lock Clarke and Lexa in a conference room with Cage Wallace and if he's not conceding the race to Griffin within an hour, I'll photocopy my ass and post it all over the office."

They howl with laughter and the slap of a hi-five echoes out of the break room. Clarke smirks at Lexa; Lexa nods in response to the unspoken question, her eyes sparkling; in one swift motion, they stride into the break room still pressed shoulder-to-shoulder.

"Coffee fresh, Jasper?" Clarke asks brightly.

"It will be, as long as Mr. Green made it," Lexa answers her.

If Clarke hadn't honed the perfect poker face during her four years as an attorney, she would have broken into loud laughter at the way Jasper and Monty go sheet-white and leap back against the counters as if someone had just loosed a lion into the campaign office break room, rather than their bosses. Judging by the way Jasper gapes, he’d probably rather face the lion.

"Yeah," he spits out as Clarke looks at him curiously, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, it's, uh, it's great."

With their mugs in hand, Monty and Jasper shift aside, shooting warning glances at each other when they think Clarke isn’t looking, as Lexa takes her sweet time at the coffee maker pouring two cups.

When Lexa at last sits down and hands a cup over to Clarke, they’re still standing there, locked in place by Clarke’s innocent smile on them, and the pressure is already showing as they agonize over whether or not Lexa and Clarke overheard, and the question of how accordingly contrite they are supposed to look. Clarke lets them simmer, enjoying it, and lets Lexa take the lead.

“Oh, Mr. Green, did you get those donation trends to my office?” Lexa asks.

Monty nods emphatically. “They’re in your inbox right now, I did it first thing this morning.”

“Great. And Mr. Jordan,” she adds, turning on him. “It’d be a good idea if we could get a look at your proposals. I’ll admit I hadn’t thought of the strategy of locking Cage Wallace in a room with Miss Griffin and myself. You might be on to something there.”

Monty looks down into his cup as if he’s considering the possibility of drowning himself in 4 ounces of coffee, and Jasper immediately stumbles over a series of apologies and explanations as Lexa sits back with a serious, civil nod to him; Clarke knows Lexa is sparkling with satisfaction just below that mask, however.

Unwilling to let Lexa take the reins on her own, Clarke leans into Monty and stage whispers to him: "Don't worry," she says, wrinkling her nose. "Miss Ward scares me too."
More stammering. Clarke and Lexa allow themselves to enjoy it only for a moment before Lexa nods to the door and grants Jasper and Monty an escape route, which they damn near run through. Once the two women are alone, Clarke lets her respectful mask fall away to show the amusement in her eyes; Lexa gives her a small smile in response.

“Do I really scare you?” Lexa asks, voice light.

Yes. “No.”

Not as long as she keeps the focus on the paperwork and the reports and the campaign. Everything else about Lexa scares the hell out of her, Clarke realizes, including the way they had pressed together in silence outside the breakroom and the way she feels under Lexa’s gaze now.

Lexa takes a sip of her coffee. “Good.”

“Do I scare you?”

“…no.”

“You hesitated.”

“I did not.”

“Yes you did. Don’t lie, Lexa.”

“I never lie.”

“That’s a lie right there.”

A sarcastic reply on the tip of her tongue, Lexa narrows her eyes and works her jaw back and forth, holding back a smile but desire to fire back a response evident in every line of her face. Her gaze darts over Clarke’s face, back and forth between her lips and her eyes, she swallows—and then she jumps up.

“As much as I would love to continue this juvenile game, Clarke…” She takes another sip of coffee and straightens out her shoulders, casting a haughty look Clarke’s way; it’s meant to make Clarke roll her eyes and smile, and she does. “Some of us have actual work to do.”

“If that’s the case, I want a write-up of everything you do today on my desk before you leave.”

“As you wish, Miss Griffin.”

And 8 PM rolls around and Lexa appears in Clarke’s doorway, as always, with a packet of paper in hand.

“I was kidding,” Clarke groans, mostly at herself because she should have known Lexa would have ignored the humor and taken the assignment seriously, if only to mock Clarke. And, to prove that point, Lexa doesn’t reply as she crosses the room and hands her report of activities over. Clarke snatches it away, flipping through quickly before tossing it on her desk. “Funny.”

“It was a productive day,” Lexa sums up. “I set up a lot of the planning for the upcoming gala—”

“You mean between instances of scaring the hell out of my employees?”
Lexa’s lips twitch. “Rare indulgences,” she says in a low voice.

“Well…” The thought of Lexa’s quiet smirk in the break room had kept Clarke going all day. She hesitates and then goes for it: “Indulge more.”

She’s starting to learn that Lexa’s story is told in her face, not her words or her body. The girl may shrug it off and take a seat in front of Clarke—but her lips part enough to show her teeth and the way her tongue glides back and forth over her incisors, her eyes fall away from Clarke’s face to her desk, and the muscles over the cut of her jaw clench. Clarke loves the way she reacts sometimes, so much contained behind such simple, minute expressions—it’s just that the ambiguity of it all is maddening.

In any case…more for her to study.

“I try not to,” Lexa says finally, her poise returning. “It’s distracting.”

Clarke’s turn to clench her jaw and look down at the desk. The irony of Lexa talking about distractions after Clarke had to lock herself away for so much of this week to avoid her…

“Anyway,” Lexa continues with a deep breath, “I’ve finished most of my work for today. What are we working on tonight?”

Clarke runs a hand back through her hair and tries to coalesce her workload, before she realizes, with a shock: “I…don’t have anything either. I just have to take the weekend to prepare for the next campaign trip.”

“So we’re leaving before 9 PM tonight?” Lexa’s brows raise slightly, her version of complete astonishment.

“I can’t believe it either. Let’s get out of here before you think of something necessary or decide to rope me into the gala planning, which I refuse to do. I have half a cold pizza at home calling my name.”

“In that case, you’re not waiting for a cab. I’ll drive.”

* *

“Thank you, for the third time this week, for the ride,” Clarke says, watching the dark streets of Los Angeles slide past the passenger window. The interior of Lexa’s car is another aspect of this new normal, this surge in power and productivity that they’ve entered into together.

“It’s not a problem. But, you know, maybe we should just hire you a car service with the round of new hires,” Lexa says as she pulls off the freeway and toward Clarke’s neighborhood. “In addition to your security team. Or maybe a bodyguard who can drive you. I’ll put the request in to Miller in the morning; we can have them in time for the gala.”

“What, you don’t like being my chauffeur?”

She can just barely see the flush of Lexa’s cheeks beneath the blue glow of the dashboard. Lexa raises her chin as if in defiance of whatever feeling that causes that redness. “I did not graduate summa cum laude from Yale to be a chauffeur,” she says, enunciating every syllable.
"Really?" Clarke shrugs and in that moment, in the darkness and in the casual comfort of Lexa’s presence, she can’t hold back. “Because the Yale grad driving the Harvard grad around sounds about right in my book."

By the way she reacts, Lexa Ward has never experienced a greater betrayal: her jaw drops and she looses a scoff of pure incredulity. "Don’t you dare even try that," she commands, voice deep and powerful. “You went to Harvard Law, you weren’t even a real part of the Harvard-Yale rivalry. Three years as a postgrad is not enough time to understand how much better Yale is. You have no idea."

"Rivalry? Rivalry?" She turns in her seat to square her shoulders to Lexa, laughing now, but just as incredulous as the driver. “Don’t two entities have to be somewhat equal in order for a rivalry to exist? Is there even a Yale Law?"

“There is. Maybe you would know that if you weren’t such a typical egotistical Harvard grad.” She keeps her gaze steady on the road even as she pulls to a stop in front of Clarke’s building, but lifts an eyebrow and the corner of her lips in quiet challenge, watching Clarke in her periphery.

Clarke takes that challenge immediately. "Well, you’ve got that Yale superiority complex down to a science."

"It’s not a complex, it’s just well-earned superiority."

"Yeah?" Dangerous territory, but she doesn’t hesitate. “Prove it."

“I—what?"

She slams on the brake a little harder than necessary and stops well short of Clarke’s apartment building. The hint of the cocky smirk vanishes and Lexa turns to Clarke with nothing but a shaky incomprehension, her throat bobbing as she swallows, her eyes darting over Clarke’s face for a sign on how to proceed. Her hands twist at the leather of her steering wheel. Those two words can be the most innocuous or the most dangerous of the English language, when used by the right person—and Clarke might be the right one.

“What do you mean, prove it?" Lexa asks, voice quieter and less goading. “Prove what? And how?"

“I’ll show you,” Clarke answers smoothly. “Pull into my building’s visitor parking, at the driveway up there."

Lexa swallows again and shifts in her seat. “Clarke, I—”

“Just trust me, Miss Ward.”

* 

Whatever Lexa had been expecting when Clarke takes her up to her apartment, a marble chess set wasn’t it—she stares at the box Clarke pulls from her closet and sets on the table, then looks up to Clarke, entirely nonplussed. Clarke on the other hand, slows down as she counts out the pieces because she’s so in awe of the picture of Lexa standing in her living room, arms crossed over her chest, top button of her blouse undone because it’s technically time to relax. Clarke imagines her in comfortable clothes, imagines her on different furniture around Clarke’s loft-style apartment. Her
dark hair would look exceptionally good against the white couch—

Fuck. The chess pieces, waiting to be lined up; and Lexa’s face, twisted and confused. She looks up from her spot at the kitchen table and smiles at Lexa, knowing full well it won’t change anything.

“Are you serious?” Lexa asks, looking from the chessboard to Clarke’s face as if this is all a joke.

“Generally,” Clarke says, smiling. “Come on, let’s decide Yale versus Harvard right now.”

“Harvard Law,” Lexa grumbles. “You were technically UCLA.” But she takes a seat anyway and watches as Clarke sets up the chessboard, stone pieces clinking against the heavy black and white board. “This is…really nice.”

“It was my dad’s,” Clarke says. “He gave it to me when I got into UCLA.”

“He passed your freshman year, didn’t he?”

Lexa has done her reading. It’s necessary, as she says, because she needs to know Clarke’s past as well as Clarke herself knows it, in order to get her through the public scrutiny of a political campaign, but that doesn’t mean it’s not still a surprise to hear from someone who isn’t in her family or her miniscule circle of friends. Clarke’s hand stops on the black bishop. For a moment, her fingers shake against the top of the piece, and when she looks into Lexa’s green eyes, she can see the apology already forming, so she cuts her off before it gets any worse.

“Yeah, he did,” Clarke says quickly. “Just after Christmas. Heart attack.” She finishes putting out the pieces, movements smooth and steady. “So, to honor his memory, there’s no way I’m letting you win this. Ready?”

“I’m—yes. Let’s play.”

“For Harvard.”

“Harvard Law.”

*

Turns out, Lexa is good at chess even when she’s not in a plane shuddering up into the air at 500 miles per hour.

Clarke, who has never known anyone more competitive than herself, is struck dumb by the fact that she doesn’t mind losing right now—if only for the fact that winning looks good on Lexa. The girl throws her head back and laughs, face shining, when she makes the final move to trap Clarke’s King. It’s pure and not in any way mocking of her loss, and Clarke hates the way she starts to laugh along with Lexa.

“I gave you that one.” She tries to look serious and intimidating around the laughter that’s still spilling forth. “Come on, let’s play one more.”

Lexa cocks an eyebrow and settles into her seat like it’s a throne she just won in a war, rather than part of Clarke’s dining furniture. “As you wish, Miss Griffin,” she says, maddeningly conciliatory as ever.
This time, she takes the responsibility of setting up the pieces and takes the white set, leaving the black for Clarke. This time, somewhere between their light conversation of the checklist items for tomorrow, Clarke pushes her queen in one final move and wins the game.

“Well, well, well, Yale,” she teases. Lexa’s dark eyes flash in warning but there’s something else there too, something just below the surface, and it has been flitting there just out of sight for the entirety of the game, appearing when Lexa looks up to meet her eyes. Clarke wants it, whatever it is, and so she reaches for it: “Let’s go for best of three.”

Lexa’s laugh fills the apartment for a brief moment, lifting Clarke’s heart in her chest, and then immediately dropping it when Lexa stands up, straightening out her blouse and grabbing her bag.

“If I go for best of three, it'll go to best of five and best of seven and best of nine, and eventually we'll be here all night. You know that.”

The thought washes over her before she can stop it.

That wouldn't be a bad thing.

Self-loathing rising fast in her chest, Clarke walks Lexa to the front door and waits for the girl to shrug on her blazer. Lexa looks around the loft-style place one more time in admiration.

“This is a really nice apartment,” she notes. “Hopefully you’ll be able to spend more time in the daylight here soon, not just at night after work.”

Clarke nods. “The sunsets are nice, from the bedroom windows. But at the very least, I’ll have you to suffer alongside me every night at the office.”

“That’s what I was hired for,” Lexa agrees.

“And you do great work.”

They fall into a silence that turns awkward almost immediately: Clarke is dying to say more, and Lexa is clearly waiting for it by the questioning look in her green eyes, but all Clarke can do is look at her and forget where they are as she examines the bow curve of Lexa’s lips.

“Well.” Lexa’s voice brings her back to this world. “I’ll—see you tomorrow morning, Clarke?”

And she offers out a hand, which strikes Clarke as absurd for some reason; and maybe it’s absurd for Lexa too because she exhales in relief when Clarke shakes her hand in goodbye. “See you tomorrow, Lexa.”

When she’s finally alone in her apartment, she leans back against the door and closes her eyes.

Fuck.

Chapter End Notes

I'm now on tumblr! centuriesofexistence.tumblr.com
Come talk about the fic with me there! What you want to see, what you like, what you don't like...or talk any clexa headcanons to me. I'm flexible.
Chapter Notes

Three days late but who’s counting? (Sorry it's late). Big thanks to Sonya and Ren for betaing this mess; and a huge thank you to Eliza for that black dress, holy shit.

And kudos to the Clexa fandom for those nine wins on the e! poll ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hotel rooms are almost never well-lit. Part of it, Clarke suspects, is that the low golden light from the solitary desk lamp in her room induces drowsiness, and a tired customer is more likely to enjoy a good night’s sleep and therefore ignore the uncomfortable bed and questionable art deco furniture. Except in Clarke’s case, she really needs to stay awake through this Skype meeting, and the lighting is just working against her after such a long day.

“Your point about his shifting positions on taxes was a good one, Clarke,” Wells is saying, reviewing his notes, “but he handled it even better. How are you going to approach that one?”

“I’ll give it to him,” Clarke replies, and maybe there is a little bit of her 14 hour day in that concession. “If the entire article is an attack on the things he says, then it’ll be dismissed. Miss Ward, what do you think?”

“I agree,” comes Lexa’s voice through the speakers. “Anything too glowing or too critical will be dismissed.”

Clarke’s laptop screen has two windows open, one with Wells and one with Lexa, and the three of them have been going over Wells’s promised interview with Cage Wallace for almost an hour at this point. Wells had come through with the interview this afternoon, forcing a late night conference between the three of them. According to him, some of Clarke and Lexa’s questions had made him squirm, and some he was obviously well-prepared to handle. Now it was up to Clarke to use this weapon to her tactical advantage.

“Plus,” adds Lexa, “If this article glosses over it and focuses on the more obvious negatives, he’ll adjust his arguments to focus on those aspects, and he won’t be prepared for you to attack him on this point in the debate.”

“Exactly. How does that sound, Wells?”

His brilliant white smile shines out from her computer screen, counteracting the sleepy light just a bit. “I think it’s genius.”

“How soon do you need the copy?” Lexa asks him.

“I know you’re on a road trip, Clarke, but if you can get it to me in the next three days, that would be excellent. Even just a bare-boned draft would be fine, I can fill it in, you won’t have to—”

“No, no,” Clarke interrupts him. “I can take care of it.”

“We’ll get it to you soon,” Lexa adds. Clarke gives her a wan smile of appreciation.
“All right, all right,” Wells surrenders. “I know what kind of writer you are, Clarke, I look forward to reading it. Now, more importantly…when are you getting to San Francisco to come visit me?”

“I think my next campaign trip—” It takes her a second to register that he’s grinning broadly again and has dropped the business talk, and that second of confusion is enough for him to start laughing at her. “Sorry,” she says, shaking her head, ignoring the way Lexa has a small grin too. “I mean, as soon as I get some time off I’ll head up to San Francisco, I’d love to see you.”

“So in that case, it probably will be your next campaign trip. Whenever it is, I’ll take you out to dinner. I gotta interview you for your article as well.”

“Even if it’s during a campaign trip, I will make time,” Clarke assures him.

Wells swears her to it, walks them through the final few questions of Cage Wallace’s interview, and reaffirms the day he needs the copy by. “By then, just send me what you have—don’t kill yourself over it, Clarke, I can fill in things pretty well,” he says, and she swears to that too, even though all three know that she will turn in a perfectly edited and completed article by Thursday.

When they finally end the meeting, Wells bids them goodnight and ends the call but Lexa remains. Her window expands so that her face fills Clarke’s screen. Left alone with her campaign manager at last, Clarke closes her eyes and sits back in her chair—it’s painfully uncomfortable, probably another intentional design to force her to the bed. She releases the tension in her shoulders with a thankful sigh when Lexa’s voice finally breaks the silence.

“So. How were the meetings today?”

“Long.” Clarke answers, though it feels redundant when she sighs it like that. She doesn’t open her eyes. “The school board meeting ran over by an hour. You would not believe the size of the PTA here.”

“I expected that,” says Lexa, with traces of apology. “The smaller the town, the bigger the PTA. But listen. You just have four more days of this, then you’re back home here for a few days at least.”

It’s day nine of fourteen. A two-week focused road trip through central California. In every small farm town the future Senator rolls through, Clarke has a meeting with local leadership, to listen to them instead of talk to them. It’s beneficial for her decision-making, sure, but it also cultivates a calculated duality. Clarke Griffin: Hollywood fame and genius; small-town relatability and charm. Approachable and human. Real. Appealing all around. It’s not the kind of trip that requires last minute changes or strategy, so Clarke left Lexa behind at the office to handle the real work.

“Four days, four hundred more miles.” Clarke realizes her tone has dipped too far toward bitterness and pulls it back before Lexa can try something to cheer her up, which she has taken to doing lately and which always leaves Clarke feeling guilty. Guilty that she has driven her campaign manager to such unnecessary emotional exchanges… and maybe guilty for finding it endearing.

So, to avoid it, she opens her eyes and adopts a new vigor. “Anyway. Not that I’m complaining. Is everything okay at the office without me?”

Lexa, the defacto commander of the office in Clarke’s absence, raises a brow in offense.

“I’ll be completely honest with you. Without you, everything fell apart. The break room coffee machine caught fire, but we put it out eventually. Jasper spent sixty percent of our budget on strippers for our celebration of your absence, and two of the interns started a fight club with a journalist.”
“As long as the journalist doesn’t talk about it,” Clarke replies with a yawn. She will not reward Lexa’s sarcasm with a smile she’s searching for. She refuses.

“As actually, Dax recorded it and put the videos up on your official twitter account. I told you to stay on top of that.”

Lexa can read the amusement in Clarke’s eyes now, and gives her a small smile.

“If you think it’ll benefit my polling demographics,” Clarke says, “So be it. You’re in charge.”

“It will.”

“Were the strippers good, at least? Jasper always has punched above his weight class, I can’t imagine he would buy cheap ones.”

*Bang.* She can practically hear the way the two of them smack against the invisible outer boundary of professionalism.

As much as Clarke hates long road trips and misses her own bed, there has been a hidden benefit in the nine days she’s been away so far: it is much more difficult to stray near those boundaries. It’s usually an effortless task. But with Lexa, frayed nerves and the late nights in the office and the casual references to the rich, hidden tapestry of her personal life, those boundaries are increasingly foggier. When they’re reduced to nightly Skype meetings just to go over the day’s events, she has no way to stumble toward them, even accidentally.

Except for tonight. But, well, she can blame that on Lexa, who is smiling wryly and accepting the blame for that particular breach.

“Oh anyway,” she says, impassive again but for the ghost of earlier amusement in her eyes. “Yes, Clarke, the office is fine without you. We’re managing.”

“Did the latest campaign finance information get filed with the state?”

“Yes, Clarke.”

“And has Jasper started the work on the donor and finance website?”

“Yes.”

“And Monroe had that meeting with the new volunteer staffers?”

Lexa sighs. “Yes, Miss Griffin.” At the indignant grimace that flashes over Clarke’s face, Lexa rolls her eyes. “This is my job.”

“What, overseeing the volunteers?”

The only thing that Clarke gains from Lexa’s chuckle is that she’s too damn tired to understand. “No,” Lexa says, “The coordination, the oversight, the everyday work. I’m the one that is supposed to handle this, not you. Especially not when you’re on a campaign trip.”

“What’s my job, then?” she scoffs.

“Your job is to write that article for Wells Jaha and tear Cage Wallace apart. Your job is to make it through the rest of this week and then get back here for the donor gala Saturday night. And then, your job is to win the debate in San Diego four days later.”
The air already feels heavy around her, and it just presses down more with each successive task list until Clarke closes her eyes again and leans back in the chair. “God,” she groans. “I’d rather take overseeing the volunteers as opposed to the gala. You know I don’t like to shake hands and fake smiles and schmooze for money.”

“You are perhaps the first politician I’ve ever met to say that.”

Clarke opens one eye. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It was,” she replies lightly.

She gives a small smile to show her gratitude and lets her eyes drift closed, but the inside of her eyelids are burning with the image of Lexa’s face, lips fighting back a smile and eyes glowing.

“You should get some sleep, Clarke,” Lexa says after a moment. “The world won’t come crashing down overnight.”

The shitty desk lamp has done its job and Lexa, tender and concerned, closed the deal—Clarke gives in and says goodnight with the promise of meeting again at the same time tomorrow night.

After she shuts her laptop—just as it was after she closed her eyes--she can’t shake the picture of Lexa’s face brightening with her smile. Is it unprofessional to admit that she's attractive? Very attractive? She refuses to acknowledge the memory of the fantasy she has used to get herself off weeks ago, but she can admit that Lexa is. Not so much that Clarke would stray across any professional or ethical lines, or anything that would make Lexa uncomfortable. But maybe it eases the weight on her shoulders to admit it; the time away from the office and from Lexa has given her a clear head and a chance to look at this all logically.

Clarke turns and glares at the suitcase she's been living out of for the past week. Hidden blessings.

She's tired and frayed, and yes, the probably uncomfortable bed at the Hilton in Fresno is calling out to her, but she has since learned the danger of going to bed with those kind of thoughts swirling and that ache sitting low in her stomach.

Instead, she opts for a shower, scalding and steaming away the day with the water turned up to a temperature just shy of the point of pain, just where she likes it. She stands under the water long enough to be grateful she isn't paying the water bill.

*

The next morning announces itself with the vibration of her cell phone.

[5:49 AM] John Mbege: Ward moved today's meetings up, nothing until 11AM. She said to sleep in

Clarke rolls over in the bed, smiling in relief against the pillow, even though she knows deep down that the flood of sunlight that just washed through her is not entirely due to the fact that she gets to spend a few more hours in bed.

Oh well. She’ll deal with that later.
Sacramento, Santa Rosa, San Jose, Santa Cruz, Bakersfield, Fresno...nineteen different cities and towns in fourteen days with discussions in each ranging from the danger of big agriculture on local farmers to local streetlight ordinances. And people. Thousands of people. And each long day ends in a different hotel room with a different skyline until they all blend together and it takes a word from an intern to remind her of which city they’re in each morning.

One day, Clarke would love to travel the world. Maybe draw some of it. But God, she gets homesick. Homeweary, if there is such a thing. Her own bed feels like a dream she will never realize.

But finally, come Saturday morning, it's finally within reach: just one more three hour car ride before they’re back in Los Angeles for the donor gala later that night. Sure, she’ll only be there for 36 hours before she has to leave again for San Diego to prep for the Friday night debate, but that's two whole nights she can spend in her own bed.

Instead of going home first, the car takes Clarke directly to the hotel room where Sterling and his publicity team await her, ready to dress her up for the evening. Apparently four hours is not enough, if Sterling’s frustration with her dallying through lunch is anything to go by. He has two separate stylists and Bree waiting to clean her up, which is exactly two more stylists than Clarke needs.

“I'm going to thank donors for giving me money, and this is what I'm spending their money on,” she complains, arching her eyebrow at him in the mirror as he reshuffles the cards he’s using to help her memorize which donors gave what.

“Your appearance makes as much money as your speeches,” he replies offhandedly. “The jewelry, the dresses, the hair—it's all on purpose.”

“Speaking of which, what color dress would you prefer?” Bree asks her.

"What are my options?"

"There are a few but Miss Ward and Sterling narrowed it down to a blue or a green. Cooler colors would work best with the event space. The dresses are hanging in the closet."

"Miss Ward helped pick them?"

"I think she preferred the green, but yes."

As if on cue, Clarke's cell vibrates with a new message:

[6:01 PM] Lexa Ward: If you're ready, the next half hour is the best time frame for your entrance. I'm waiting in the lobby with Mr. Azgeda and two of your new security team.

[6:03 PM] Clarke Griffin: I just have to pick a dress.

Ten minutes later, the silver elevator doors slide open and Clarke steps into the lobby wearing a slinky black dress with a slit that bares her leg to above the knee; the upper half shows off her shoulders and chest and the clinging material shows off everything else. Blue would have been more appropriate and the green more respectable and she would have chosen either nine times out of ten,
but she fell in love with the black dress and some small part of her wants to see the way Lexa reacts to the fact that she was disobeyed.

If nothing else goes right about this night, Lexa's reaction makes it all worthwhile. Roan sees Clarke first, over Lexa's shoulder, and his appreciative smile makes Lexa turn to look too. It's like the walls come down, and in that moment of exposure, Clarke can read everything on her face. Her lips part in shock. Her eyes narrow in momentary indignation, probably about the green dress; then they go wide and her whole body stiffens up as she drinks in the sight of Clarke walking towards them. Her throat bobs and Clarke catches the briefest flash of something deeper and darker across Lexa's face, something that makes Clarke flush warm from her neck down her spine.

Lexa's cheeks tinge pink too by the time Clarke gets close enough to see them, but since Lexa is avoiding looking at her, Clarke doesn't think Lexa notices the color across her chest.

"I—Clarke," she says, into the space between them instead of meeting her gaze. "I thought you were going to wear the...the green dress."

"Is this okay?" Clarke asks.

"That's—that's fine. You look—"

"Gorgeous," Roan finishes, and Lexa nods, clearing her throat. Clarke doesn't really look at him as she tries to reconcile the sight in front of her: for some reason, she hadn't considered the fact that Lexa would be wearing a dress for the gala as well, but there she stands, in a silver dress and her hair pinned high. It's low-profile and pretty and conservative and so very Lexa Ward, save the smooth expanse of her upper back that the dress displays. The only other time Clarke has seen so much of her skin was the morning in the hotel fitness center, where she had been equally speechless.

Lexa forces her to figure it out quickly, though. "Miss Griffin," she says after clearing her throat a few more times. "Allow me to introduce your two new personal security personnel, Gustus and Ryder."

The two other men standing with Lexa and Roan, wearing tuxedos of their own, incline their heads. They tower head and shoulders over Clarke and Lexa, and even over Roan, so there's no doubt the two men are here for security. Clarke greets them warmly, still floating on the cloud of Lexa's reaction.

"Ryder will also be your chauffeur for events, trips, and when you need a car service work."

"Ryder the driver?" Clarke grins.

"I should have business cards with that at this point," he replies with a laugh.

"I promise I'm a good passenger, Miss Ward can attest to that." The grin she flashes Lexa goes unacknowledged, but Roan picks up the slack as he steps to Clarke’s side.

“And do I get a security detail, Miss Ward?"

Her brow arches. "You? When you're with Clarke, you'll be protected by Gustus and Ryder. Why would you need them without her?"

"Oof," he groans, hand over heart in mock pain. There really is no protocol for when your attractive campaign manager innocently insults your media charade boyfriend, so Clarke resorts to her default etiquette and steps between them with a deep breath.
"Miss Ward, didn't you say now would be an excellent window for my arrival? We should get going." She smiles at each of them, including Gustus and Ryder, in turn. "What are the travel arrangements?"

"Ryder will escort you and Mr. Azgeda, and I'll take a separate car. I was going to drive with Gustus, but since Mr. Azgeda fears for his safety, I'll send Gustus with you three."

Roan groans again, and this time, Lexa raises her eyes to meet Clarke's: she can see the mischievous glow in the deep green, and has to bite back a laugh.

Roan looks between them, eyes narrowing. "Okay...are we ready, then?"

"Yeah!" Clarke says quickly. "Yes, we're ready. Let's go. Miss Ward, you'll be right behind us?"

“Absolutely, Miss Griffin.”

*

Lexa continues to surprise her in ways that Clarke knows shouldn't be surprising--as if she would throw a poorly-organized, poorly-decorated event. No; she steps out of the car, smiles to the photographers lined up outside, and strides up the steps and into the building with Gustus on one side and Roan on the other. Inside, the event space is decked out, no expense spared: against one wall is a long, low bar with two tuxedoed bartenders; red, white, and blue banners hang from the walls and she reads Griffin for Senate everywhere she looks; and beautiful, wealthy people in evening wear are split between the half of the room filled with dinner tables and the dance floor.

“This had to have cost so much,” Clarke groans. It was Sterling. Had to have been. He always was extravagant.

“It's not for you, though,” Roan mutters. He nods to the crowd. “It's for them. And they love it, which means they not only don't mind their money being spent this way, but they’ll probably give more.”

“Which is why we start the meet and greet now,” comes Lexa’s voice. She slides into the space Gustus vacated at Clarke’s right shoulder and Clarke feels her skin heat up. “I know it's not your favorite, but go around, greet them, thank them, listen to their stories and laugh.”

Clarke pushes down the strange flutter of nerves. “You're coming with me?”

“If you’d like.”

She would.

It's not that Clarke can't function at these events. In fact, she's a natural: she slides from table to table, group to group, entering and withdrawing from conversations seamlessly and delighting her guests. Roan stays by her side for most of it before escaping to the bar, letting her have her own spotlight; but Lexa stands with her through it all, prompting Clarke with names or companies under her breath on the very rare occasion Clarke doesn't recognize someone. On her second glass of champagne, Clarke promises herself to do something to thank Lexa later.

The process takes almost two hours, and she's nowhere near done, but at least she's two hours closer
to the end of the night. She's considering the idea of going to find Roan to use him as a conversation buffer when she hears Lexa’s voice in her ear.

“This next group,” she murmurs, “you should know pretty well. I'll be over with Gustus and Ryder at the entrance should you need me.”

I do, Clarke wants to say, before she turns and nearly releases a yelp: Raven, Octavia, and Lincoln are striding toward her, the girls in elegant dresses and Lincoln in one of the finest suits she's seen all night. Lexa slips away while Clarke is wholly distracted with their approach.

“What are you guys doing here?” She demands, grinning broadly. They each take a turn hugging her, proper decorum be damned.

“Lexa called me up, invited the three of us,” Raven says.

“We have figured out that the only way to see you is to visit you at work,” adds Octavia, “so we couldn't miss this opportunity.”

“You're one to talk,” Raven drawls before looking to Clarke. “How long are you here for this time?”

“I leave early Monday morning for San Diego, to meet with the office there and prep for the debate Friday night.”

“I might as well get a travel job too,” Raven says, “for the amount you're both here anyway.”

“You're welcome to take up photography, I'll teach you,” Lincoln tells her. “Are you ready for the debate, Clarke?”

“More ready than I was for tonight,” she confesses. But already, being with her friends is relaxing her.

“You better kick Cage Wallace’s ass,” says Octavia. “I hate that guy.”


“I can handle it,” Clarke says with a wave of her hand. “It's not as bad as meeting hundreds of wealthy people though. Did you guys eat yet? Did you get drinks? Let's go grab some champagne—”

"Actually…” Octavia shifts back and forth on her feet, exchanging a glance with Lincoln. “Since we're all here, I thought I'd tell you guys...I'm pregnant. Four months.”

Clarke's jaw hits the floor. "Oh my fuc--"

And she's spared the embarrassment of finishing that expletive by Raven, who smacks Octavia’s drink out of her hand and sends it flying a solid five feet. The glass shatters and draws every eye in the vicinity but none of them care, because their best friend is going to have a baby and Lincoln is laughing out loud and they all feel like they're in college again.

"Raven, what the fuck?” Octavia demands, finger still curled around where the stem of her drinking glass used to be.

"You can't have alcohol when you're pregnant!"

"I was just holding it--"

"Excuse me for being cautious about my future godchild. No alcohol anywhere near you." She gives
Lincoln's bottle of beer a scathing look.

Octavia rolls her eyes. "Look you know I don't care that you or Clarke sleep with girls, but I need you to know that you can't absorb or exchange fluids through your fingers. You know that right?"

"How charming, this kid is going to have such eloquent parents," Clarke grumbles as Lincoln laughs again.

Octavia's sarcasm vanishes quickly, as do all of Clarke's thoughts about the gala, as she fills her friends in on all the details they ask for: they don't want to know if it'll be a boy or a girl, no they don't have names yet, yes they can be joint godparents, and they'll stay in LA for a year after the baby is born but resume the nomadic lifestyle as soon as he or she is old enough.

"I'm so happy for you," Clarke says for the millionth time. "Come on. O you can't, but Linc, let's go grab the best stuff the bartender has and you can have a drink."

"As long as Raven doesn't attack me," he replies with a grin at the girl, who smiles sweetly.

She only gives a few businessmen and women passing greetings as she and Lincoln make their way to the bar, and even those are automatic; as soon as they are standing together at the bar again, out of earshot, she's out of politician mode.

"I'm just so happy for you guys, Linc," Clarke gushes. "You're going to be a great dad."

"And you'll be a great aunt," he replies warmly.

"Just don't take him or her away from me for too long when you go exploring the world, okay?"

The bartender arrives with the expensive bottle of Dom Perignon Clarke ordered and pours four glasses before handing the rest to Clarke. "Of course not," Lincoln promises. "But I didn't get to see much of the world until I met Octavia and we started traveling--our kid is going to get an early start." Clarke watches Lincoln search the ballroom for Octavia and when he finds her, his face lights up like she is the world. And for Clarke, that's as golden as finding out that Octavia is pregnant: they're perfect for each other. Lincoln, Octavia, and their beautiful kid, traveling the world.

Her strange wistfulness is interrupted by Lexa, appearing at her side with a glass of her own, untouched, champagne.

"Is everything okay?" She asks. Clarke only remembers the shattered drink glass after a few seconds.

"Oh, that was nothing, just an accident." She brushes it away with a careless gesture then taps Lincoln on the chest. "Lexa, this is Lincoln; Linc, this is my campaign manager, Lexa Ward."

"Ah, Bellamy's replacement?" Lincoln says with a smile. He reaches past Clarke to shake her hand. "This is a better party than he ever threw. Nice to meet you, Lexa, thanks for the invitations tonight."

They exchange their pleasantries as Clarke works on muting her excitement about Octavia; her first instinct when Lexa had walked up was to blurt it out to her, and that isn't the kind of info you share with your co-worker at something like this. For her part, Lexa looks like she has something to say as well, and at the first break in the conversation with Lincoln, she leans forward and wraps her fingers around Clarke's forearm with a polite smile at him.

"If you don't mind, Lincoln, I need to speak with Clarke privately for a moment," she says. "There's something we need to handle."
"Absolutely. Go save the world, Clarke." He gives her a playful shove and she gives him the bottle of champagne to take back over to Raven and Octavia.

Once they're alone, Lexa tugs on the arm she's still holding and pulls Clarke into step with her, hurrying them out of the main event space and into a dimly-lit side side hallway.Lexa checks the length of it to ensure they're alone, and only then does she stop and release Clarke's arm with a little exhale of relief.

"What's going on?" Clarke asks, a little breathless and well aware of the tingling in her arm where Lexa's hand had been.

"Were you really drinking Dom Perignon Rose?"

"Yeah but not enough to get anywhere near drunk--did you honestly just drag me in here to check what I was drinking?"

Lexa shakes her head. "Of course not. I just--Nevermind. But we have an opportunity."

"An opportunity...for what?"

She seriously reconsiders her previous assertion that she didn't drink enough champagne to get drunk, because her thoughts already feel jumbled and out of order and the way Lexa is looking at her, the way Lexa is standing just inches away, just makes it worse. She has no idea what opportunity could mean--just that Lexa looks very pretty in this half-light.

"Listen," Lexa whispers. "James Thurston just walked in. His company only donated 25 percent of the maximum, but they're surrounded by people who have donated the maximum allowable amount to your campaign. If we do this right, we could make several thousand dollars to your campaign in the next five minutes."

The flashing of her green eyes clears Clarke's head, somehow. "And what's your plan?"

"Put them in a discussion with other donors and guilt them. It shouldn't be difficult, but I need you clear-headed."

"I'm fine," she lies, trying to wet her dry mouth.

"Okay." She nods. "Okay."

In that dark hallway, away from the party and everyone there, they take the moment to breathe, with Lexa's eyes drifting over Clarke's face and burning with her strategy and planning. It's dangerous, Clarke realizes, it's dangerous to be this close, voices this low, in the dark.

At that moment, someone stumbles into the hallway several yards down. Surely they can't make out any details, but Lexa jumps back to allow fresh air between their bodies again, like a teenager who got caught, not two political minds plotting campaign donations together. That's all this is, Clarke reasons as she takes a deep breath.

“Okay,” Lexa says, for the third time. “You’ll go and meet...” she frowns suddenly.

“I'll meet with a group of maximum donors,” Clarke finishes for her, “And you'll greet the cheap CEO, bring them into the conversation with my group, and I'll handle it from there.”

“Yes, that’s...that's perfect.” She still frowning, trying to find the thread of the conversation she had lost along the way; had the conversation been lighter, Clarke would have asked if Lexa had been the
one drinking, not the other way around. But they have donors to go meet, and more importantly, Clarke needs to get out of this damn hallway.

“Let's go take care of this.”

*

“Miss Griffin!”

She's attuned to the sound of Lexa's voice, even in a crowd; she turns away from her conversation with four important donors to see Lexa striding toward her, with a tall, gray-haired man in tow.

“Miss Griffin, this is Mr. James Thurston, of the…” She trails off, pretending to search for the name. Clarke, likewise, stares expectantly between them as if she has no idea who this man is.

“Walker Investment Group, Representative Griffin. Nice to meet you.” He has a firm handshake, a respectable hairline, a nice pressed suit--this shouldn't be difficult.

“Oh, of course, Walker Investments. Nice to meet you as well, Mr. Thurston. Allow me to introduce you to several of my most prominent supporters.” Clarke goes around the circle, listing the names and titles and companies of each of her acquaintances. “They donated the maximum amount as early as possible, and it's been an absolute gift to have their support through the race so far. Have you tried the wine, yet?”

The look in his eyes says it all: he’ll be reaching into his pocket before the end of the night. Clarke locks gazes with Lexa just past the man and she nods imperceptibly.

Success.

*

The glamor of the night fades quickly once Clarke leaves an hour later. Raven spends the night at Clarke’s apartment and Octavia and Lincoln come calling early for a breakfast date at the pancake place down the block. The pancakes Clarke indulges in, but the baby talk--potential names, gifts, their own baby stories--she steps back from and just listens. Now that the gala has passed, there is only one thing on her mind: the debate.

Her strongest team travels with her to San Diego the next morning, five days out from the debate. She’ll be up against the two other Democratic hopefuls, Vincent Vie and Diana Sydney, and the two Republican ones: Cage Wallace and Jason Gilmer (a nonentity in the race).

So the work she does with the San Diego branch covers everything. During the day, her time is split between sitting in on meetings and interviews and discussing cold calling with the interns, whatever it takes to keep busy. The rest of the day, she's working with her policy advisors on everything the debate moderators could possibly throw at her. The days are busy, frantic, with everyone going on different directions, and they leave her tumbling into bed at night, bone-tired. But not before she's spent three hours in her hotel room, rehearsing her arguments.
Those hours to herself are the most important. And there is only one person she trusts and wants in the room with her then.

Two days out from the debate. This hotel room has become a shoddy second home, albeit one without a couch or chair. Rather than one of them sitting on the bed and one at the desk, Clarke and Lexa opt for equality and spread out across the floor, surrounding themselves with statistics and facts about their opponents and talking points to memorize. Lexa quizzes Clarke, Clarke bounces ideas off Lexa, Lexa practice argues points that are so inane Clarke ends up more frustrated than prepared. Long into the night.

She’s stopped looking at the digital clock on the bedside table and her cell phone has been turned off and hidden to avoid distractions, so Clarke can only measure time with the frequency of Lexa’s yawns compared to how often she flips to a new page in her notebook. Clarke is feeling the effects of this dim light, but if Lexa’s sleepy hooded gaze is any indication, they’ve worked well past midnight.

“Let’s call it a night,” she says.

Lexa shakes her head. “Then we’ll be worse off tomorrow. We can go a bit longer.”

“Let’s take a break, at least,” Clarke pleads. “We need a break. Put down the stuff, we can relax for five minutes.”

Turning her head to look at Lexa is too much effort right now, but the silence tells her Lexa has given in. A moment later, the papers flop to the floor.

“Too bad we don’t have any alcohol. A drink right now would calm everything,” she mumbles.

“That’s…hold on.”

Lexa practically flings herself up from the floor in a movement that is far too quick for the way she looked like she was about to fall asleep against the foot of the bed a moment ago. She leaves the front door hanging open and returns before Clarke can even gather her thoughts to wonder why she ran out, only this time, she has a bottle of champagne in her hands.

She hands it to Clarke as she sits down. “It’s the Rose you couldn’t drink at the gala. I took a bottle with the expectation of giving it to you after the debate, but now seems a better time…”

“Now is a great time.”

They sit on the floor of Clarke’s hotel room and drink $300 champagne out of complimentary green and white paper cups, and Clarke’s heart feels so full it might burst.

*  

“This article,” Lexa says, laughing as she scrolls through her phone. “This article is one of the highlights of my political career.”

“Too bad we can never take credit for it,” Clarke says. She refills their cups for the third time, down to half a bottle left of champagne.
Lexa reads aloud. “‘Wallace is the walking, talking product of the tax breaks for the wealthy he quietly endorses, smooth and supremely comfortable with feeding off of the same people his political campaign claims to endorse. He runs a masterclass of shaking hands and charging for it.’ That is the most eloquently aggressive thing I've ever heard, Miss Griffin.”

Clarke hums her appreciation. “I love the next line though, the one you added. About the clashing?”

“‘One article is not enough to chronicle the epic clashing of his political ideals of supporting the status quo, evidenced by his voting record, with his campaign slogan: Building For The Future.’”

“Yeah, that one.” In celebration of Wells’s article being released the next day, Clarke takes another long drink of her champagne and sits back against the foot of the bed, breathless and content with Lexa by her side. “I am still so grateful to Kane for recommending you to me. Best campaign manager I've ever had.”

“What did happen to your former campaign manager? Bellamy Blake?” Lexa asks.

Clarke shrugs. “He was ready, we were prepping the campaign, then a week before I declare he just...ups and leaves to Europe.”

“So...at the prospect of working with you, your campaign manager fled the Western Hemisphere?”

“Wow.” She doesn't have to feign her indignant scowl, even while Lexa smirks at her.

“Perhaps you should have disclosed that when you interviewed me.”

“He just had to work on himself. He was dating on and off with Raven, he and Octavia were in a rocky place...he needed time. I don't fault him.” Plus, I ended up with you. She holds that back, because somewhere in the middle distance, she can feel the outer boundary of professionalism. “And I know I get intense with the workload sometimes, I’m sorry for that. Thank you for sticking with me.”

Lexa waves her cup of champagne. “My job,” she says, as much to assuage Clarke as to make up for her earlier teasing.

“Sometimes it's just... one night off. That's all I need.”

“Mm. Should I tell your boyfriend to take you out more?”

“My fake boyfriend,” Clarke says, and it seems of paramount importance Lexa is aware of that fact. “You pay him.”

“Not enough, apparently.”

“It's not more fake dates I want, because I'm not personally benefiting from that. My career is. I haven't... it's frustrating. I'm... frustrated.”

“Ah.” It takes a second, but Lexa’s eyes widen when she catches Clarke’s meaning, something that had slipped out before Clarke could reel it back. “Oh.” She hurriedly takes a sip of champagne and looks away.

Clarke can't stop talking. It has to be the champagne. At least I didn't straight up say, I need to get laid. “The last time I felt like this was when Bellamy and Raven started dating and then I didn't have any means for a casual... You know. Threw myself into my work instead.”
Lexa chokes on the champagne she just downed. “You—you were sleeping with your campaign manager? Bellamy?”

Clarke’s turn: she spits her champagne out. “*What?* God, no, I didn’t mean him, I—” Suddenly, her own words hit her ears and sobriety hits her like a truck. “I’m so sorry, Lexa,” she sputters, “this is so unprofessional. I’m better than this, I should have never started this conversation. Just...forget I said anything.” If she could stand and back away, she would.

The weight of the silence between threatens to push Clarke through the floor, which she would honestly appreciate at this point. She can hear Lexa gulping down the rest of her champagne, hear the empty cup set down, hear the deep inhale—and then exhale. Clarke has to sit through three more torturous breaths before Lexa speaks.

“At this point, with us drinking alcohol on the floor, at one AM, we might as well go all the way.”

“You—we—what?”

“The story. We can forgive ourselves this night, so you might as well finish what you were saying about Bellamy and Raven? You weren’t sleeping with him?”

She sounds… more than politely curious; the thought of Lexa wanting to know more of Clarke’s secrets makes her shiver.

“It wasn’t Bellamy,” she confesses, “And it wasn’t when he was my campaign manager. We were in college and I, uh, was sleeping with Raven.”

What ensues may be the most damning silence of the night. Fuck professionalism: Clarke needs to know Lexa’s reaction. She turns, her attentions prompting a speechless Lexa to choke out something.

“...Raven?”

She nods. “We were roommates. We were out of our minds with stress at UCLA. It was casual and easy, mostly when we’d had a lot to drink. And when she started dating Bellamy, that ended and we all stayed friends.”

Lexa still doesn't seem to comprehend. “So... so you're…”

“Bisexual,” she says with a nod.

“Wow.” Lexa sits back against the bed, eyes focusing on the wall in a frown as if her whole perspective on life had just changed. “Okay.”

“Is that a problem?”

“Of course not, no, no, why would I have a problem with it?” Lexa says quickly. “I had no idea despite my research. How many people know?”

“Close friends only. Probably some girls I slept with in college, though I doubt they remember. And my mom,” she adds. “My mom built a platform around LGBT+ rights when I came out to her.”

“I remember reading about that, but I didn't know it was because of her daughter,” Lexa says. “We could have done the same, had I known about it.”

“Not a chance. Who I sleep with is not a tool to better my chance of getting elected.”

“Well, at the very least, I perhaps wouldn't have picked Roan Azgeda for your media partner.”
“Who, then?” Clarke shifts, turning her whole body to get a better look at Lexa’s face for some hint—she hates that she feels her heart rate pick up, she hates that she can’t ever pull in a deep breath of air around Lexa, but somewhere, in the back of her head, she has a name she desperately wants Lexa to say, no matter what it might mean. It's all hypothetical anyway, isn't it? She wishes she couldn't but she searches Lexa’s face anyway, looking harder the better Lexa conceals any and all emotion.

“I'm not sure,” Lexa says casually, looking at Clarke’s hands instead of her face, and Clarke’s strange bust of hope comes crashing back down. “But it's over and done now. And we should probably call it a night on the debate practice, as well.”

For the second time tonight, she’s on her feet before Clarke can react, heading for the door.

Clarke’s shower is even longer tonight.

*

The day of the debate seems to drag on forever, even if she is moving at a nonstop pace through practice arguments and speeches with her policy advisers. And when they finally make it to the University of San Diego, where the debate will be held, everything doubles. Backstage, John and Harper have her spitting out facts about the other candidates while she's being caked in TV makeup and her clothes are being decided for her; on a break from the makeup chair as she goes to get a bottle of water, she runs into Vincent Vie and Diana Sydney and greets them warmly, just moments after rattling off memorized lines about the superiority of her campaign. She's pulled away from that conversation by a quiet word from Lexa, but when they turn away, Cage Wallace stands before them.

“Clarke Griffin,” is his only form of greeting. His hands stay in the pockets of his expensive suit, belying his amicable smile.

“Cage.” She’d introduce Lexa, but she doesn't particularly want him knowing her name. “You had a good interview in the San Francisco Chronicle.”

Good, for her accurate description of his physical wealth: perfect hair and expensive clothes and the look of entitlement that makes people like him stand out in a crowd. The rest of it wasn't great for him, and the parts that were are her main targets in tonight’s debate, hence her ability to engage with him now.

“Yeah, yeah it was. Wells Jaha is a friend of yours, isn't he?”

“A fellow UCLA alum,” Clarke says dismissively.

Cage just nods. “Well, I'm looking forward to when he interviews you and the other candidates, Clarke.” Her lips curl at the sound of her name. “Tonight should have a lot to write about.”

“With hope.”

Workers from the TV stations televising the debate appear for both Cage and Clarke at the same time, ending the exceedingly pleasant conversation before Clarke can grind her teeth enough to put her dentist’s kid through college. “Ten minutes until we’re live!” Echoes through backstage. Ten minutes. Ten minutes.
“Are you okay?” Lexa asks once they’re a suitable distance away from Cage.

“Fine.”

“I’m going to go make sure everyone is in order, then I’ll meet you in your dressing room before you go on.”

She gives Clarke’s arm a tight squeeze of reassurance then slips away in the crowd, leaving Clarke to be herded back into her dressing room. Final makeup checks. The TV station mic-ing her and giving her a list of dos and don’ts. Mbege, Sterling, Harper, Jackson, all quizzing her on different elements of the debate until she’s answering the questions with the wrong answers and her head is spinning. She just needs to breathe.

Then, Lexa appears in the doorway. They lock eyes across the room and Lexa reads the expression on Clarke’s face in a heartbeat.

“Everyone, out.”

Lexa barely raises her voice above the usual quiet tone and yet it ripples through the room like a shockwave, every person shrinking before it—except Clarke. It galvanizes Clarke. As everyone files out and Lexa comes striding toward her, she has never felt more prepared to go on stage, and more nervous, her blood pounding in her veins.

“Five minutes. Nervous?” Lexa asks her once she’s close.

Clarke nods. She’s never been one for nerves before—in fact, most of her coworkers in this job and her old ones were convinced she didn’t have them. But the twisting, fluttering in her stomach she feels now...it needs a name and the only thing she can think to call it is nerves.

“If I could just leave the podium and punch Cage Wallace, I would be so content,” she mutters. “It would require no thought.”

“You’d probably get thank you cards.”

She lets out a bitter laugh as Lexa steps closer, examining Clarke’s face with concern. Her hands twitch forward as if to take hold of Clarke’s but she pulls back; honestly, Clarke can’t tell the difference.

“You’re going to do great,” Lexa says, something she’s said several times now but that Clarke hasn’t heard for the buzzing in her ears. But she looks at Lexa, head swirling with facts and stats and lines to repeat, and the green-eyed girl is the light that cuts through the fog, clear and present and feeling like hope.

“Thank you,” Clarke says suddenly. “Thank you. I don’t know what I would do without you, Lexa.”

From the way Lexa freezes up and she looks even deeper into Clarke, Clarke has cut through her fog as well.

The next thing she knows, Lexa is stepping into her space, clear and present and feeling like hope with the way her arms circle Clarke’s shoulders and pull her tight. She whispers good luck into Clarke’s hair and Clarke’s thank you probably comes out as jumbled as her thoughts, because every coherent idea that starts to form in her head is interrupted by the idea that she’s in Lexa’s arms, that she’s breathing in Lexa’s scent, that the quiet sigh that escaped Lexa’s lips was more than just an exhale.
They don’t pull away.

She’ll never be able to explain what it was, whether it was an accident or intuition or the sudden fluttering need in her stomach, but when Lexa tips back ever so slightly, lessening the pressure of her body against Clarke’s, Clarke closes her eyes and turns her head. She brushes cheek-to-cheek with Lexa, velvet warm skin, pulls away, brushes against her cheek again, sighing at the feeling of contact. Their noses bump together.

Clarke’s lips search for her.

So do Lexa’s.

It’s the puff of air against Clarke’s lips that wakes her up, the hot breath and the hot streak of desire that comes with it, begging Clarke to pull Lexa’s breath into her lungs with a deep kiss—something she can never, under any circumstances, allow herself to want during the daylight, let alone act on. The two women rip apart from each other like the other is scalding. Clarke clamps her mouth shut but Lexa isn’t fast enough, capable of just one sound:

“I…I-I-I…”

The stutter sounds like gunfire from her lips, and the panic in her voice is as dangerous, as damning, as final. Clarke backs even farther as if the distance will steady the earthquake beneath her feet. What did she just do? We almost kiss—she can’t even bring herself to finish that thought. Clarke isn’t even sure if it was an accident, or who pushed for what—Lexa looks as guilty as she feels.

“It’s fine—” she chokes out. “That wasn’t—I’m sorry, that wasn’t meant to be—that—and I.”

“You’re on in five,” Lexa interrupts, voice thick and weak all at once. She says it to Clarke’s shoulder. “You have to get out there.”

Clarke tries and fails to swallow down her apologies, and ends up just nodding lest they all come spilling out. “Okay.”

“Good luck.”

Chapter End Notes

As always, the comments, kudos, criticism, love...it's awesome. It's keeping me going; thank you so much everyone xx
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Moo.

I know this took a long time; I'm sorry. I had a bunch of real life stuff crash down on me, but the good news is that it's all over so I promise the next chapter won't be this way. Thank you for the love and the comments and the kudos even as I took forever to get this out, you guys have no idea how much it means to me. And for those of you on my tumblr, I stayed away from there until I had something to offer (this chapter) so I'll be back on tumblr now too.

This chapter gets pretty political in the second half, after the debate, so if you have any questions or need any clarification on what's happening, don't hesitate to ask. Unbetaed this time, so forgive my mistakes!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She must hear her last name a hundred times backstage.

She barely registers it, of course, head still spinning after what happened in the dressing room. She floats through the crowd of nervous interns and frenzied production assistants, only aware of what they're saying when they punctuate it with her name.

"Hey, countdown 'til we're live, starting now! Are you ready? Griffin, are you ready?"

"Griffin, over here!"

"Five..."

"Here we go, Griffin."

"Four..."

"Representative Griffin, I just have to fix this one strand of hair..."

"Three..."

"Okay, Griffin, as soon as they say your name, just walk out, wave to the people, and stand at the left-most podium."

"Two..."

She's last in a line of the other candidates at side stage, only able to see their suited silhouettes against the bright lights as they are announced one by one and step into the glow. She gets a nudge in the back when she doesn't step forward after Diana Sydney is called ahead of her, and a low whisper of "C'mon, Griffin!" at the same time the moderators announce her name:

"State Representative Clarke Griffin!"
State Representative Clarke Griffin walks out onto the debate stage with the weight of the world's expectations, waves to the applauding crowd, takes her place at the podium—it's all automatic and rehearsed.

Because really, the title is a persona. Her outfit, from the gray (slate gray, not gunmetal) color and fit of the blazer to the exact location of the American Flag lapel pin, is designed to present an image of someone experienced and put-together. Black is too plain and other colors are too loud. Her hairstyle and makeup have been carefully crafted to present an image of a clean, simple, elegant woman, one who cares about her appearance just enough to be proud of her femininity but nothing so extravagant as to suggest that she cares about it more than she cares about America. Her lines, her opening statements, her points of argument have all been chosen for her. Everything about State Representative Griffin is manufactured by her aides and strategists and staffers, the creation of the perfect candidate for the country's palate. State Representative Clarke Griffin belongs to the country and to the people who have created her, and she owes them this debate performance.

Clarke herself is only responsible for controlling a small part of this persona: Her emotions, her innermost thoughts, everything she's expected to keep locked away.

And everything she's supposed to control is focused entirely on Lexa Ward.

Clarke stands on stage at her podium and listens to the announcer read off her name and titles, and she nods and smiles accordingly, with the scent of Lexa's skin still clouding her mind, and the taste of need still on her lips. She replays the moment again and again in her head, the feeling of that half second of bliss washing over her repeatedly. But it alternates every few seconds with a deep, crippling guilt: she nearly lost everything in a moment of weakness. Her reputation, the race, her campaign staff, and most importantly, Lexa. Everything that is happening around her is just white noise compared to that.

But how guilty can she really feel?

She'd felt Lexa lean into her. She'd felt the weight of her body press forward; and heard, just barely, a longing exhale.

No. She frowns down at her glass podium surface and admonishes herself. She initiated it. This is on her. She wanted to kiss Lexa and she very nearly did. And she still does. And that is the worst part.

It's not until Cage Wallace is halfway through his opening remarks that the haze starts to clear and Clarke remembers where she is—standing on a stage, farthest to the left, in front of several hundred audience members and several hundred thousand television viewers from around the country.

Had Cage not used Clarke's last name, she probably would have stayed trapped in that haze forever. But it's "Griffin" wrapped in the oily sound of his voice that pulls her from her reverie.

"I've worked with Vincent Vie a long time," Cage Wallace is saying. He stands at his podium, in his perfectly pressed suit, designed for mass consumption the same way Clarke is. He just has a dozen years of experience on her. "He knows how I operate. But State Rep Griffin, new as she is, will have very strong opinions about me. Outside opinions. Naturally. She's young and intelligent and brings a fresh perspective to things. And you know what? I love that. I don't need to hear about myself from people who work behind closed doors. I need to listen to people like Clarke here."

He gives Clarke a smile and the only look she can return is one that she knows is bitterly patronizing, her jaw tight as she wonders where this is going.

Wallace continues to the audience. "There is no better way to learn one's faults than to acknowledge
them when they come from your rivals. I understand that my family's wealth places me in a position that makes it difficult to connect with the less fortunate. I understand that my background makes me seem untouchable. My politics have reflected that on an economic and social level—in the past. But I am a man of the people, and I want to connect to the people, and to do that I need to listen to all of my flaws, I need them to be called out. I have no doubt Miss Griffin will deliver this for me tonight and for the rest of the race. So please, Miss Griffin, and everyone else: I'm listening."

The roar of applause goes up around the auditorium and it guts her to have to smile at such a hollow, ingratiating speech. Clarke isn’t sure if his tactic is to woo the crowd or make her the villain by getting a violent reaction out of her, but they both feel equally likely. The audience loves him and Clarke hates him.

Bread and circuses, right?

At the very least, he doesn’t turn his grin on her again—that would just be too heavy-handed. She gets a friendly one from Vincent Vie, though, and has to return it even as she starts recalibrating her opening statement in response to Cage’s first move against her. She has two minutes for Diana Sydney’s opening statements before all eyes are on her.

Lexa, Lexa, Lexa. What would Lexa say? Thoughts of the girl, and her lips, mingle traitorously with her attempts to restructure her opening statement and straighten out her thoughts; she doesn’t listen to a word Diana Sydney says.

Far before she’s ready, she hears applause replace Sydney’s voice, and the moderator is turning t her.

“Thank you. And Representative Griffin, your opening statement.”

Clarke takes a deep breath and falls back on instinct.

“Thank you. I’d like to thank the University of San Diego for hosting us and providing such a great atmosphere.” Clean and friendly and down to earth, just as they had practiced. That’s the easy part. “I’ve had the honor of serving as a state legislator for the past three years, a job that has opened my eyes to the world of possibilities for change—change the people of California can help create for our nation. I’ve seen the potential to establish a stronger foundation for education, to enhance and support health care reform, and to restructure our financial system to create a stronger nation. California has always been leading the way for change, and now we have the opportunity again—with the right person as your senator of California.”

Canned answers, every one, but she still feels a red-tinged haze at the edge of her consciousness, an oxygen-deprived delirium, as if she had held her breath too long underwater and just now broken the surface—this is the best she can do.

And she knows exactly why she feels that way, but god, and more thoughts focusing on Lexa would drive her back under water again.

Her gaze slides to Cage Wallace, who waits expectantly to hear his name in her opening statements. In the original drafts, this is the point she turns on him, to throw her vague statements into context by comparison to his terrible politics. But he struck first and invited criticism, effectively silencing her valid points before she could even voice them.

“And, as I said,” Clarke continues, “I am honored to be here tonight, among these other decorated candidates, and I am looking forward to opening discussion with them all. Thank you.”

She still has 15 seconds left. The moderators let the audience fill that time, and Clarke just tries not to
It’s a general debate, meaning all significant candidates from any parties are present. Though all of her work and tribulations feel like the center of the universe sometimes, Clarke is very much the underdog in this race, and the favored contenders are Vincent Vie, with his years of experience, and Cage Wallace, with his political dynasty of a family tree. Clarke is shunted to the side at a podium almost out of frame on the television screen, and after the opening statements, the two men take up most of the first part of the debate arguing back and forth.

It takes a commercial break to do what the moderators can’t and bring the debate to a halt, finally, without Clarke getting a single word in.

She knows it’s bad, but that notion is confirmed when she is cleared to head backstage and into the safe retreat of her dressing room. Her team looks less like staffers on a political campaign and more like bank tellers in the middle of a robbery. Lexa stands farthest from the door—her sentinel presence is always the first thing Clarke finds in any room—but the rest of the team is looking to Clarke, not Lexa, for guidance and reassurance.

“It’s fine,” she snaps immediately.

"Fine?" echoes Mbege. “Griffin, what the hell? You skipped half of your opening statement! And that’s just the start—"

Clarke grits her teeth and turns on him, voice dangerously level. "The opening statement was built on the juxtaposition of Cage's faults and Vie's weak points to my politics—except he called himself out for me and made it impossible to go after him so blatantly. I wasn't expecting Cage to take his political strategy from the final rap battle of fucking 8 Mile."

"Great movie," Jasper murmurs, shaking his head.

"Jasper, shut up," someone snaps.

"It might explain why I heard “Lose Yourself” playing on repeat from Cage's dressing room earlier," Lexa notes, with a quiet smile—an attempt to lighten the mood.

Clarke gives her a sharp look. Not the time. Of course she picks now, of all times, to discover a sense of humor.

Lexa obeys, acquiescing into silence, which instantly registers among staffers who perhaps expected something more inspiring from their fearless and sometimes terrifying leaders. Clarke can see them exchange glances among each other. She ignores it; she has as much time to focus on Lexa as she does to debate the finer points of Eminem's acting career.

"The point is," Clarke says, with a heavy sigh, "Cage went off book, not what we were expecting. But it's fine. We can handle it."

"He used that article, the one that Wells Jaha wrote,” Monroe groans. They had all been celebrating it just hours before. “The one that ripped him apart. He turned it on us, he knew we’d attack because of it.”
Clarke forces herself not to look toward Lexa at this—no need for more guilt and more tension. “Hey,” she snaps instead, to break through the staff’s frustration and anxiety. “I know the article. We underestimated Cage but that doesn’t mean this is a lost cause. Vie and Cage can sink each other, I don’t care. I’ll get my chance to speak, and when I do, I’ll make it count, okay?”

It sets off a chorus of grumbling, but at her flashing eyes, no one else speaks out against her. Instead, they jump to their jobs: some stepping forward with notecards full of stats, some with make-up brushes to touch up any imperfections. The duality is not lost on her. When the production assistants warn them that it’s time to return to the stage, Clarke rolls her shoulders and turns to her strategists.

“Anything else before I go back out?” she asks.

They look, again, to Lexa; when the girl doesn’t reply, Mbege, Harper, and Monty surround Clarke instead to shower her with pieces of advice.

“You came across automatic,” Harper says, impatiently shifting aside as another makeup artist swings in with lipstick. “Your responses need to be warm. You need to relax.”

As the woman dabs at her lips, Clarke’s eyes flick to Lexa and she’s surprised to find that Lexa is looking at her, at last—fixated on her mouth as Clarke gets touched up. Relax? Not likely.

“And we still need to go after Wallace, but Vincent Vie is just as important,” Monty adds.

Clarke nods. That is more doable. “I’ll talk about them both.”

“Just do it subtly.”

“Any suggestions?”

Monty freezes up, with a shrug and a shake of his head and Clarke can feel the exasperation from the other staffers.

“Just make the most of your chances,” Mbege interjects, heaving a heavy sigh, like they’re just trying to minimize the damage now. “Few words, big messages, hit hard.”

He doesn’t have anything else for her, and Clarke feels a fresh pang of guilt when she searches for Lexa’s assurance and finds everyone else’s faces instead; they’re counting on her. They’re as much a part of this race as she is, and she’s fixated on Lexa Ward and a mistake that nearly cost everything for all of them. When she does find Lexa, the guilt is palliated by a small rush of relief when Lexa won’t meet her eyes. She’s looking at Mbege instead; she nods once.

The message is clear, then: Just make the most of your chances.

*  

She unequivocally does not.

The first question State representative Clarke Griffin receives concerns her experience. She’s handled it so many times that the answer requires no thought: Number of years does not equal ability or quality; my use of those years speaks for itself. Modest applause and the type of automatic answer Harper warned her against.
Another ten minutes pass and she gets a question on the back of Diana Sydney’s discussion of fiscal policy.

This one doesn’t have an automatic response, but it does have an answer she had practiced—with Lexa. On late nights in the office, late nights in the hotel room, they had discussed the topic from every angle. In fact, the night Lexa had given Clarke the bottle of champagne that they had ended up sharing on the hotel room floor, Lexa and Clarke had argued about this very question and Clarke had rattled off statistics like her phone number. But that memory is suddenly eclipsed by the taste of champagne and the feeling of Lexa’s warm body leaning against Clarke’s shoulder and the realization that she should feel guilty about that too. The numbers themselves slip through her fingers like smoke, and they don’t come back for questions later.

*

The second commercial break comes as a relief...for exactly ten seconds. Clarke strides backstage but rather than finding the open arms of strategists, ready to scrutinize and readjust the minute aspects of her appearance and approach, she finds Lexa, standing alone, waiting. Perhaps it’s Clarke’s state of mind or perhaps it’s the direness of the moment, but Lexa seems even more imposing than normal, in her all black suit and shirt and wearing a hell of a scowl.

“I told them to wait in the dressing room,” she says immediately, reading Clarke’s mind.

“Okay.” She moves to continue walking past Lexa toward the dressing room but Lexa sidesteps in front of her, so that they stand face to face, off to the side of the main bustle of activity.

“Lexa.”

TV production assistants and staffers of all candidates hurry past them in both directions, but the way Lexa steps into Clarke’s space and lowers her voice narrows the world to the two of them.

“Ignore whatever happened,” Lexa whispers.

“What—”

“Shut it out,” Lexa growls. “If you falter like this on your first televised debate, we might as well quit the campaign right now. Pull it together. You have to be able to do that if you’re going to have any future at this level.”

Clarke balks. She wants to pull away and let her anger fill the space between them, but Lexa Ward possess the unique ability to pull her in and keep her there. Shut what out? she wants to demand, just to hear Lexa tell her what happened in the dressing room. Partially because she wants to know what Lexa thinks it was, and partially because she wants to figure it out herself.

Instead, as always, she opts for coldly professional: “Well,” she snaps, “thanks for finally offering some advice.”

Lexus’s eyebrow arches high at Clarke’s acerbic tone. “Thanks for finally showing some willingness to fight back.”

She’ll show Lexa fighting back. “Anything else?” she scoffs.
“Sydney. Side with Diana Sydney, salvage the debate by winning over her voters.”

Clarke looks at her as if Lexa had suggested doing cartwheels on the stage to win over voters. “Sydney? Are you joking?” She gives a humorless laugh. “She’s useless.”

“Taking down Cage is a pipe dream at this point but we can overtake Sydney by this time tomorrow,” Lexa says quickly; people are calling for Clarke’s presence at the side of the stage. “You —”

“I can take down Cage just fine!”

“Come on, Clarke,” Lexa growls. “Use strategy here. Take Sydney’s side, earn the respect of her supporters, win her base. Get some points out of this. Then we’ll have time to take down Vie and Cage later. Don’t make this a total loss.”

It feels too much like defeat, and Lexa’s lack of faith in her scalds; but what stings even more is the fact that she’s right. Clarke bites the inside of her cheek so hard it nearly bleeds.

“You know I hate this,” she says with a sigh, and Lexa knows some of that frustration is turned on her but she doesn’t do anything to mollify it.

“Just win.”

*

When the candidates take the stage again, Clarke is simmering, nearly boiling over, with anger. Not muted frustration, not an omnipresent irritation, just pure anger. At Lexa. At herself. At all of this.

And the moment she takes her place on the stage and her gaze follows Cage Wallace as he takes his place at the center podium, all of that anger narrows her vision to only him, so much so that she almost doesn’t notice the lights go up and the moderators welcome the live audience back.

She comes to when the first question, surprisingly, is directed at her: “Representative Griffin,” the moderator asks, “What do you believe your opponents’ weak points are in this race?”

A fastball. Hard, straight, to the point; easy to miss or scuff, but if she swings true…

“Weak points?” Clarke replies with a little smile. She lets her anger be the guiding force behind her words. “As Cage Wallace pointed out, he is still learning. I don’t have to give you a laundry list of his mistakes; the financial dealings and far-right family legacy are well-documented and old news never gets reported on nowadays. That’s just boring. The same with Vincent Vie, and Jason Gilmer. But I can give you an easy piece of evidence: count how many times they’ve spoken over Congresswoman Sydney this evening. Not even myself, but a proven Congresswoman with more bipartisan policies than the other three combined. She’s barely gotten a word in edgewise. If they can’t even allow her, with her list of experience, space to speak in a general debate, how can these candidates contribute to any sort of legitimate bipartisan discussion for the future of our country if they’re elected? They’re too busy listening to themselves talk.”

The applause that goes up sounds confused at first, as if Clarke’s words don’t match her demeanor and they’re not quite sure what to make of it, but a few whoops and cheers from the more intelligent of the crowd sets the tone; Clarke feels satisfaction start to rise and she can imagine the sudden
flashes of hope in her staffers’ faces.

The moderator waits until the applause has quieted. “And Congresswoman Sydney’s weak points?”

Clarke flashes a smile—a genuine smile—at Diana Sydney. The smile isn’t because of her but because if she was just thrown a fastball, this next pitch is an easy lob and she can’t help but beam. “Weak points? Not worth talking about right now. I look up to Congresswoman Sydney as both a woman and a politician, and her weak points are irrelevant in the face of that admiration.”

The smattering of confused applause swells modestly. Clarke scans the audience, wishing desperately that she could look to the side where she knows Lexa is standing just out of sight. She doesn’t know if she would grin or scowl at her, but god, anything feels better than nothing right now.

Instead, she settles in at her podium, feeling fresh and alive and brilliant. Let the debate truly begin.

*

“To future senator Clarke Griffin!” comes the first toast of the night.

Renting out a restaurant for after the debate had seemed like a presumptive, even arrogant move; but now that she sees her staffers crowded around the bar, Clarke could not be more pleased that she had decided to go for it.

The sound of her name from their lips sounds strange to her, but they’re celebrating, and well…she just fucking won, so she’s not really in any position to admonish them.

“Cage will call that a win for his side, and so will Vie, and so will Sydney, even,” Monty says, grinning hugely at her, “But all of the news sources are calling it for Representative Griffin.” They release another low cheer, everyone clapping each other on the back and smiles everywhere.

Monroe leans in over Monty: “No poll numbers yet, but early predictions is that you gained a ton with women. Obviously. And the answer about taxes…brilliant. That won you voters as well.”

“You should see Twitter right now, Griffin.”

She doesn't have to, because they begin to tell her anyway, reading her and each other the headlines and opinions from social media from all over the country, not just California. The nation is watching a race that could have major implications and Clarke's team is basking in the attention she earned them, clinking glasses and clapping each other on the back as they crowd around the restaurant bar. In most cases a team would already be back on the road toward home, but San Diego is only a few hours from Los Angeles and she doesn't mind letting her team have the night off. Instead, she slips among them the way she did at last week's gala, untouched glass of champagne in hand, smiling and nodding and thanking them for their part in State Representative Clarke Griffin’s debate performance.

"I've learned to never stop expecting brilliant moves like the one with Diana Sydney," Sterling grumbles proudly, tipping his glass to her as she walks past him. Everyone had come down from Los Angeles for the debate. Clarke goes to smile at him—until she sees Lexa standing beside him and she can’t help the way her smile flickers for a moment.

Sterling can’t tell, but Lexa can. She looks away quickly. Clarke feels a flash of the same frustration she felt backstage and doesn’t bother to try to correct it.
“It was only the first debate, Sterling,” she says nonchalantly, waving her wine glass.

“Well we already have to start planning the right interviews and events to build on this,” Sterling replies. He nods at Lexa. “Ward has some good ideas.”

Clarke raises a brow; she can’t help herself. “Do you ever take a night off, Miss Ward?” she asks Lexa. She tries to ignore the way it sounds more like an invitation than a question, but Lexa doesn’t.

“I was about to get a drink, actually,” she replies coolly. This upscale bar is just her kind of place, smoky and expensive. In Clarke’s mind, at least. Lexa eyes her champagne glass. “Do you want another?”

It’s a weird sort of game they’re playing. Convincing themselves and the public that everything is fine.

“I’m fine, thank you.”

With a polite nod, Lexa excuses herself and with her absence, Clarke feels like she can breathe again. Sterling stands there awkwardly for a moment longer, bouncing on the balls of his feet, and then says, “Well, don’t drink too much, we have to get back to work tomorrow!” A lame joke: they both know Clarke won’t touch her champagne on a work night like this, other than her first celebratory glass.

She wishes she would, though.

It quickly becomes apparent that this type of mingling is much worse than the gala the week before: though she was just as tired at the gala as she is tonight, at least on that night, her eyes didn’t find Lexa in the crowd at every available opportunity, like she were a beacon. Tonight it seems everywhere she looks she finds the campaign manager, and every stray thought somehow leads back to something damning from tonight: the almost kiss, the closeness in the hallway, the mingled frustration and anger and attraction that she can’t shake.

What’s worse, is the way she catches Lexa’s eyes on her, too. Across the room, or in conversation, or any time she looks up, she’s always just in time to see Lexa turning her head away.

And then once, at the bar: above the shelves of expensive, untouched bottles of liquor, a long mirror stretches the length of the bar. Clarke extricates herself from a conversation and leans against the bar for a moment of respite from having to explain the debate to someone else again, and she glances up into the mirror—instantly, her gaze connects with Lexa’s, who sits further down the bar. Only this time, the woman doesn’t turn away. She stares at Clarke with dark, questioning eyes; the sight sends a shock of heat rushing down Clarke’s spine and she can’t help but pull in a heavy, shaky breath. Part of her wants to order the strongest drink they have and cross the room to Lexa, but stronger reasoning prevails: she pushes away from the bar and heads for Ryder, near the doorway.

“Time to call it a night,” she tells him quickly as soon as she’s in earshot. “Can you give me a ride back to the hotel?”

“Absolutely, Miss Griffin.”

*
Gustus and Ryder and two other drivers are responsible for ferrying the team from the restaurant to the hotel, meaning the rented SUV is full on Clarke’s ride back. So is the elevator on the way up to their floor. On any given day, Clarke would love to be surrounded by her team; other than today. They’re exhausted, but the thrill of victory runs high and of course, it should be highest in Clarke so she has to act the part while secretly dreaming of the isolation of her hotel room. It’s not something she ever thought she’d long for—most of the time, the loneliness and distance from home drives her insane—but once she steps off of the elevator and the crowd around her disperses to their individual hotel rooms, the long walk down the hallway feels the most like a ten mile trek with a pot of gold at the end.

Of course, the moment she steps into the room, her eyes naturally alight on the desk and the half empty bottle of champagne on top of it, left over as a kind of talisman from Clarke’s night with Lexa—Lexa had bought the bottle for her, after all, only right that they share it. The memory makes her cheeks burn now. She takes a step towards it with half a mind to either drink it or dump it down the drain, when she hears a small thud against the closing door behind her.

"Hey."

She turns in time to see Lexa slip inside the door before it clicks softly shut, sealing out the light of the hallway and plunging them into semi-darkness. Perhaps Lexa hadn’t imagined she would be so close to Clarke when she entered, because she tenses up at their closeness; Clarke’s instincts scream at her to retreat away from Lexa’s presence in the entryway for her own sanity, but her emotions rule--anger rules. Quick and hot and fast into her throat, and far more satisfying than dealing with anything more conflicting. She lets it take over.

“Do not,” she hisses, stepping even closer to Lexa, “Ever, ever question me the way you did during the debate.”

“Never again,” Lexa murmurs before Clarke can say anything else. Her softness absorbs all of Clarke’s vitriol and Clarke blinks in surprise. “I’m sorry,” she says, pressing in her apology. “My emotions got the better of me in a high stress situation. I will not allow it to happen again.”

*Her emotions.* Sometimes, Clarke doesn’t know that Lexa even has them. And sometimes, they shine out of her face like the glow of a supernova. Like right now. Guilt replaces her anger, because she knows it was not the debate that set fire to Lexa’s emotions, and she knows her role in that.

“Well, it worked, at least. It saved the debate.”

Lexa seems to be trying to focus on her face, trying and failing to search her for any reappearance of the anger. Slowly, she shakes her head. “It was a point of focus, maybe, but the victory was entirely yours. You did fuc…you did amazing.”

The air between them feels heavy, feels hard to pull into lungs. Clarke had had a glass of champagne and Lexa had only held the same glass of alcohol—they should not be breathing this raggedly, they should not be so comfortable this close, they should not be speaking so casually but searching each other’s faces for so much more. Clarke should not feel heat pulse through her at the thought of Lexa slipping from her pedestal and murmuring a quiet “fuck.” Lexa should not look so unrepentant about the slip, her eyes dark and the tip of her tongue wetting her lips, parted to allow shallow breaths. And they certainly shouldn’t kiss.

But in the next moment, Lexa’s lips are on hers and it feels like everything she’s ever wanted.

Clarke isn’t sure who closes the gap but she hopes to god it’s Lexa—because that would mean that
Lexa has the same aching need to feel Clarke pressed against her, the same need to taste her, that Clarke does. But at the same time, it feels so natural, the idea that they leaned in together. Like they’ve been doing it for centuries.

But that doesn’t matter, because after the initial shock of finally feeling each other, what they should have done in the dressing room of the debate, Lexa sighs and deepens the kiss and Clarke’s mind goes blank.

Instead, she becomes hyperaware of everything about the other woman: the taste of her mouth, the warmth of her skin, her musky vanilla and sandalwood perfume, the glide of her hands coming up to rest on Clarke’s waist and pull her closer. Every heartbeat pounds against her chest and her body thrums with Lexa and reality doesn’t come rushing back until the moment they break apart for air, eons later.

Lexa is the first to recover her breath and with it, struggles to gasp out two words: “I’m sorry.”

Clarke finds her hands have a loose grip on the bottom of Lexa’s shirt--and she can’t feel Lexa pulling away from her. They keep their foreheads pressed together and try to breathe in the inches between their lips. Eyes still closed, Clarke tries to steady herself. “I wanted to do that in the dressing room.”

A pause. “So did I.”

Even with the hesitation and apology in her voice, Lexa’s arms skate up and down Clarke’s with intention and it’s making Clarke dangerously weak.

“We can’t do this,” she says, and Lexa’s hands freeze.

“I...I know,” she murmurs. “We shouldn’t.”

Clarke’s eyes fly open; the dim glow of the only light source in the room gives off just enough golden light to illuminate the darkness of Lexa’s eyes, her blown pupils and half-lidded gaze. Her lips are already swollen and she looks at Clarke like she’s a vision that may disappear at any moment. Lexa nods in response to Clarke’s silent request for permission. Her breaths come in shudders, and to silence her, Clarke leans in and captures her lips again; she nearly whimpers at her own lack of control and at the way Lexa immediately allows her access.

“We shouldn’t,” she mumbles against Lexa’s lips before dropping her attention to Lexa’s jawline. Please tell me to stop.

“Clarke,” Lexa breathes, a warning, even as she tips her chin back to allow Clarke more access and her fingernails dig into Clarke’s upper arms.  “This is a bad idea. We...fuck.”

Squeezing her eyes shut and pulling back from Lexa’s neck, Clarke’s fingers fist into Lexa’s shirt in frustration, nearly tugging it from her waistband. She wants Lexa to tell her to stop, she wants her to inject some rationality into this. They shouldn’t do this, because it’s wrong; because it would ruin them both…and because she has never wanted anything to ruin her the way she wants Lexa to ruin her right now, in the entryway of a dark hotel room. The human contact after feeling alone for so long is intoxicating on it’s own but to have it be Lexa’s body against hers, after the touches and glances and thoughts she tried to silence over the past weeks...

They can’t.

“Lexa...” Please.
She doesn’t even know what she’s asking for.

When she opens her eyes, Lexa’s gaze is boring through her, her breathing uneven.

“We shouldn’t.”

“I want to.”

Lexa’s chin rises and falls around silent words and the desire is plain on her face, even more obvious in weight of her body against Clarke. She studies her, swallows hard, and leans in, before pausing just as Clarke’s eyes close.

“Is this okay?”

Clarke hesitates. Her life, her career, the media…it doesn’t exist outside this room.

“Yes.”

Her rational thought vanishes again, for good this time, when Lexa kisses her once more: hard and desperate and grasping at Clarke’s blazer to pull her closer.

There is so much power behind Lexa, in her hips and fingers and legs and the way she presses into Clarke to kiss her more deeply, but she holds all of that back. Instead she lets Clarke to steer her body back and pin her against the wall with a dull thud. A quiet groan rises in her throat and vanishes into Clarke’s mouth.

Clarke shivers at the sound. This was only ever ending up one way. They knew that as soon as they first touched. Lexa is always so tight and controlled and smooth, but right now, her hands thread into Clarke's blonde hair with a shaky desperation and Clarke wants nothing more than to see that desperation throughout her whole body. She wants to see Lexa broken open, every feeling and thought she keeps hidden away so well on display, for her. She wants to explore this new Lexa, but first, she really wants to feel her skin.

It’s like Lexa can read her mind. As Clarke ghosts along Lexa’s jawline, Lexa pushes the blazer from Clarke's shoulders and lets it fall to the floor. At Clarke's noise of approval, Lexa's hands then rise to the top button of Clarke's shirt—where she freezes.

Clarke pulls back immediately when she feels her hesitation. "Are you okay?"

Lexa nods and tries to control her breathing. "Just one night?" she asks quietly.

It’s a callback to the night with the champagne; Clarke has half a mind to cross the room to the bottle so that they can share the rest, mix the taste of Lexa with the taste of expensive champagne, but as soon as she nods consent to Lexa, the woman's long fingers undo the first button of Clarke's shirt and the champagne seems miles away.

After that, Clarke can only picture empires crumbling: they give in, surrender, let their reservations fall away with the clothes they drop to the floor. Lexa mouths over Clarke’s neck as she undoes the buttons of her blouse, but she only gets halfway to her waist before Clarke takes control again and switches their positions: she kisses down the column of Lexa’s neck and across her collarbone—Lexa’s head falls back against the wall with another dull thud and the room fills with the sound of her hitched breathing. One by one, Clarke undoes the buttons of Lexa’s crisp black shirt, leaving her mark on each new inch of skin revealed, lower and lower, intensely aware of the way Lexa’s lean muscles flex and release beneath her touch. She takes her time between Lexa’s breasts, as Lexa’s knots her fingers into Clarke’s hair again, but the whimpers of impatience above her spur Clarke on
to the soft skin of Lexa’s stomach. She imagines the bruises she’s leaving, marking her presence on Lexa’s world in a way she’s never been able to before, and the thought makes her shiver.

At last, she unbuttons the final button and untucks the shirt from the waistband of Lexa’s pants, letting it hang open to reveal a black lacy bra. Clarke wants to peel that away, too, but for the moment she sinks to her knees and touches her lips to Lexa’s lower stomach.

Looking up at Lexa from that angle, her chest rising and falling, her skin exposed by her open shirt, her eyes dark and hazy and full of wonder as they drink in the sight of Clarke… Here she is, kneeling in front of her campaign manager, throwing away weeks and months and years of her political career and all Clarke can think of is that she’s praying to a goddess. It’s so much more than she ever imagined or fantasized about; the heat pounding low in her stomach and between her legs feels like it’s going to catch fire and burn her alive—and she hasn’t even been touched yet.

“I’ve wanted this,” she breathes against the soft skin of Lexa’s stomach. The muscles beneath her lips clench but Clarke is just as surprised by her own admission.

“So have I,” Lexa replies from above her.

“In the dressing room?”

“And in the office, with the party leaders, weeks ago,” Lexa groans. It’s almost apologetic. “I almost…And when we played chess in your apartment. I should have.”

She’s rambling, breathless—and it probably has something to do with the feeling of Clarke’s tongue just above her waistband—but Clarke can already feel her already waning self-control vanishing even faster if Lexa continues talking about all of the illicit thoughts she’s held back for months. Trying to maintain some of it, Clarke digs her fingernails into Lexa’s hips and squeezes her eyes shut.

“We have all night now,” she says, and hooks her fingers into Lexa’s waistband. But before she can tug the skirt down Lexa’s long legs, Lexa stops her.

“Wait.” Clarke looks up in surprise and Lexa just shakes her head.

“No here. The bed.”

Her heart fills with the tender way Lexa lifts her from her knees. They meet in a kiss that is more heated than the others, mouths open and tongues sliding against one another before Lexa pushes off the wall and begins to walk them both back towards the bed, and Clarke’s deep satisfaction makes her compliant until they’ve nearly crossed the room. Just before they reach the bed, she spins them so that Lexa sinks onto the mattress. As Clarke follows her down, Lexa’s hands push Clarke’s skirt up around her waist so that she can straddle her lap.

It’s all instinct between them.

What had begun as tender, hesitant kisses and touches against the wall of the hotel room turns more frenzied now, emotions taking over and heat running through their veins, fire at every contact point between their bodies. Clarke’s breathing comes fast and hard through her nose as pushes Lexa’s shirt from her shoulders with one hand and tugs it out of her flawless, professional up-do. Lexa’s brown hair cascades down over her bare shoulders and Clarke sits back for a moment to look down at Lexa in admiration of the sight.

Lexa’s arm wrap around Clarke’s waist, pulling her closer, and she tips her chin up to meet Clarke’s eyes. Are you sure? she asks silently.
Clarke nods and descends on Lexa’s neck once more, sucking a bruise into it. “I’m sure,” she whispers in Lexa’s ear. “Now take off the rest of your clothes.”

With a low moan Lexa scrambles to comply, lifting her hips off of the bed so that Clarke can peel her pants away to reveal panties that match the black lace bra. She bites down on Lexa’s lower lip and pulls when she sinks onto Lexa’s lap again and feels a bare thigh between her legs. The whole room spins and Clarke is reminded that as much as she wants to see Lexa unravel, she needs Lexa just as much.

Clarke rolls her hips experimentally on Lexa’s leg and is rewarded with fireworks shooting through her body, even with her underwear still on and separating skin from skin. She groans, lifting her eyes to the ceiling. As if sensing Clarke’s sudden weakness, an opening, Lexa takes her chance and sinks her teeth into the juncture between Clarke’s neck and shoulder; before Clarke can even hiss in a breath of pain, Lexa’s soothing the spot with her tongue—and her soft laughter.

Clarke pulls back, one eyebrow arched at this little betrayal. “What?” she demands when she sees the hint of a smirk on Lexa’s kiss-swollen lips.

“What about your clothes?” Lexa asks instead of answering, with a nod to Clarke’s skirt, riding up on her waist, and her shirt that hangs half-open, revealing the tops of her breasts. Clarke’s chest sits just below Lexa’s eye level and suddenly the request makes much more sense.

She considers, for a moment—they are unfairly balanced with Lexa in only her matching lingerie and Clarke still mostly clothed—but before she can do anything, Lexa moves back to her neck and kisses her way up to Clarke’s ear. “Take them off,” she breathes, and instantly Clarke is scrambling for the last of the buttons on her shirt.

She doesn’t make it a tease. Lexa is glassy-eyed enough as it is. The moment her shirt hits the floor her hands move to the clasp of her bra, but she’s stopped again by Lexa’s hands on hers.

“Let me.” And the low rasp of her command has Clarke’s eyes at the ceiling again.

Lexa’s legs between thighs, Lexa’s hands skimming the bare expanse of her back, Lexa’s bare skin sliding over hers—and it’s not until she feels Lexa’s lips drop to her chest that she’s aware Lexa has peeled her bra away. She looks down to see Lexa’s eyes closed against her skin as she leaves sloppy kisses through her cleavage and she can’t help but moan at the sight, and begin to grind down on Lexa’s thigh, all base instinct, no thought.

Lexa spurs her on, caressing Clarke’s breast with one hand and working the other with her mouth, sending shockwaves through her body.

“Fuck, Lexa,” Clarke stammers, the speed of her hips picking up, and she swears to god she can feel satisfaction in the way Lexa nips at her before switching to the other side. The girl smiles between flicks of her tongue and open-mouthed kisses, like she’s thoroughly enjoying this, and soon enough the sight is too much for Clarke; she has to tip her head back, feel Lexa instead of watching her, and focus on building a rhythm with her hips instead.

Between Lexa’s mouth and her thigh, and her free hand dragging scratches down Clarke’s back, Clarke can feel herself peaking quickly, even as she tries to hold back by digging her fingers into Lexa’s long hair. Lexa’s name becomes a metronome for the movement of her hips as the heat builds at the point of contact.

“Lexa…Lexa…fuck…I’m so…”
That delirious thought ends in a strangled moan when Lexa’s free hand disappears from Clarke’s back and slips between their bodies, and between Clarke’s legs, pushing her panties to the side and sinking into her, all in what feels like one deft movement. Suddenly Clarke is no longer grinding on Lexa’s leg but instead riding her fingers, and it’s too much all at once.

“Let go, Clarke.”

She flies over the edge rather than falls, body going rigid and motionless and silent for several seconds before she snaps like a band and collapses down on to Lexa, moaning and shaking and trying to keep up the rhythm of her hips as Lexa fucks her through it—she knows it’s uneven and sloppy and jerky but Lexa is whispering reassurance in her ear that she can’t even make sense of as the waves of pleasure wash over her. She clings to the low thrum of Lexa’s voice and digs into her back and holds on with everything she has.

It takes her several minutes to return to earth, breath coming in shudders but slowing gradually. The first thing she becomes aware of is Lexa’s touch tracing up and down the arch of her spine; she rests her forehead on Lexa’s shoulder, breathing heavily down over her chest, eyes closed.

“Are you okay?” Lexa asks, her voice far away.

The question jars Clarke to life. “Am I okay?” she echoes, smirking, but it vanishes when she pulls back and sees the softness in Lexa’s eyes and realizes how tenderly the girl touches her now, like Clarke is the most precious thing in the world. In this moment, they’re not politician and campaign manager, not colleagues, not butting heads—the eyes she’s staring into belong to Lexa alone, stripped of her titles and responsibilities, the way Clarke has always wanted to see her. A quiet smile replaces the smirk.

“I’m okay,” she murmurs, and presses a chaste kiss to Lexa’s lips.

“Good.” Lexa brings her hand up to Clarke’s cheek and brushes her thumb over her smile; teasingly, Clarke parts her lips and flicks her tongue over the pad of Lexa’s fingertip, drawing a quiet laugh from the girl beneath her.

She could stay like this forever, feeling Lexa’s eyes roam her face in wonder and feeling her hands search out any place on Clarke’s body she hasn’t yet explored, but the more Clarke returns to the world, the more she realizes that heat still rolls off Lexa’s body and she hasn’t even gotten close to feeling her break open the way she wanted. There’s no rush of guilt at the thought—they have all night, for this one night. She just wants it more than anything right now.

“Lay back,” she prompts Lexa, voice hoarse and low and gentle.

They shed their clothes, clumsily—Clarke’s muscles still feel week and Lexa looks like she can’t think straight—and soon enough they’re flooded with the innate satisfaction of skin on skin as Clarke lowers her weight onto Lexa, pressing her into the mattress. Perhaps because of this deep-seated satisfaction, they abandon any ideas of frenetic dancing or twisting of their bodies in favor of constant contact, in favor of a desire to feel as much as the other as they could at any given moment. Their kisses are long, slow, deep. Desperate and tender in their constant repetition as it becomes more of a celebration of their connection than movements with an end goal in mind. So long as they stay in the semi-darkness of this room, they have all the time in the world.

Gradually, though, Clarke becomes aware of the shallowness of Lexa’s breathing and she knows brushing fingers and soft kisses aren’t enough. She could explore Lexa’s body forever, each tender spot that makes her shiver and moan, but she has a job to do.
She props herself up on her elbows to look into Lexa’s face. “Do you want my fingers, or mouth first?”

“You want to go down on me?” Lexa asks weakly.

Clarke never expected to hear surprise in her voice—it’s a strange side effect of peeling away all of the aloofness and professionalism from her, and having just Lexa beneath her body. She drops a soothing kiss to the side of Lexa’s neck.

“Can I?” she asks.

“God, yes.” Then she seems to regain some control. “Fingers, first, though… please.”

That’s a request she eagerly obliges, desperate again to make Lexa feel anything—she drags her fingernails down Lexa’s body, over the ridges of tightening and releasing muscles, and when her fingertips find slick skin, she’s rewarded with a breathy gasp in her ear.

“Shhh,” she urges, “just relax.”

Lexa’s hand moves to the back of Clarke’s neck and keeps her there cheek to cheek with Lexa, fingers digging in as if letting go would mean losing her. Clarke’s struck with how good it feels to be needed: Not wanted or desired, but needed. Clutched close to the heart. It forces her hand faster, flicking back and forth across Lexa before dipping inside of her, and reveling in the way Lexa clings to her fingers. Her hand starts to burn with the angle and the speed but Lexa’s desperate and Clarke’s desperate for her.

“Clarke, don’t stop, please…”

Her name sounds so good on Lexa’s swollen lips. She can’t help but laugh softly in Lexa’s ear, nipping at it teasingly. “Lexa…I told you to relax.”

And that was the mistake.

Neither of them are the type to back down from a challenge, they already know that much, and Clarke may as well have just offered Lexa one on a silver platter. As if offended by Clarke’s teasing, suddenly suddenly Lexa’s fingers brush between Clarke’s legs. The unexpected touch against her sensitive, heated skin nearly throws her off balance and her hand slips from Lexa, and then it’s Lexa’s turn to chuckle.

“Really?” Clarke growls, smirking. She rolls her hips against Lexa’s but it only increases the pace of Lexa’s fingers, moving smoothly in and out of her as if nothing Clarke is doing affects her; with a playful snarl, Clarke bites down on Lexa’s lower lip and tugs it, earning a laugh, and then she redoubles her efforts, sinking into Lexa with two fingers and using the heel of her palm to grind over Lexa’s clit, faster and faster.

She delights in Lexa’s low groan but it doesn’t stop Lexa’s fingers, and Clarke realizes what’s about to happen just before it does.

Maybe it’s the way Lexa’s looking up at her this time that makes Clarke come a second time, much shorter and weaker than the first but nonetheless an orgasm that leaves her lungs breathless and her legs shaking to the point where she wants to collapse back down to Lexa’s body and lay there for eternity. But as the world stops spinning and she recovers her balance, the only thing she knows is that Lexa is still wanting and writhing beneath her and she can’t waste any more time.

She doesn’t recover her breath before she’s kissing her way down Lexa’s stomach, between her hips,
on the inside of her thighs. She’s still coming down from her last orgasm and she’s hazy and intoxicated by Lexa’s skin but she knows, when she hears a long, low moan above her and tastes all of Lexa for the first time, that this is where she wants to be.

Clarke wraps her arms around Lexa’s legs and positions them over her shoulders, both to give herself better access and to hold Lexa’s hips down, because they’ve started searching for a rhythm to match Clarke’s long, slow licks up and down. The faster she moves, the more of Clarke’s strength it takes to hold Lexa’s hips down and Clarke can’t help but chuckle against Lexa’s soaked center—the vibrations make Lexa jerk up and sing Clarke’s name to the ceiling.

“Clarke, Clarke, Clarke…fuck…” It becomes a chant that echoes around the room and Clarke has never been so glad to hear her first name.

She’s in love with the taste of her, Lexa’s wetness spreading on her tongue, and in that moment she wants this for more than one night; she wants to be able to lay between Lexa’s spread legs and taste her again and again, for as long as Lexa will allow it. Lexa’s fingernails digging into her shoulder blades are confirmation enough: she has this girl broken open and desperate and she wants to be able to have this forever—her politics be damned. It’s a scary thought, but not quite so terrible as the idea of leaving Lexa hanging, now, when all she can do is moan Clarke’s name and gasp for air above her, dangling over the edge.

Clarke pulls Lexa’s clit into her mouth and picks up speed, releasing one of her hips so that she can slide two fingers into her. The angle isn’t quite right and not quite smooth, but it’s enough: after being built up for hours, Lexa comes crashing to pieces and the way she moans Clarke’s name and comes on her tongue is worth all of her dreams and aspirations.

She doesn’t know when they fall asleep, hours later, just that she loses consciousness to the feeling of Lexa’s warm breath on her cheek and her fingers trailing through her hair.

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Morning comes way too early.

It comes with the bright outline of sunlight around drawn curtains, but it’s the dull, pleasant ache in every muscle of her body that wakes Clarke. She’d been sleeping so deeply and peacefully that her arm, hanging off the bed, had gone numb, and her first thought is to massage life back into it—before she realizes that she’s naked in the sheets; before she realizes that she’d been thoroughly, satisfyingly fucked the night before, to the point where she lost count of orgasms; before she realizes that the other side of the bed is empty.

Those realizations come in quick succession, but she doesn’t get to deal with them.

The moment she sits up, movement catches her eye: it's Lexa, fully clothed, sitting at the desk chair. The moment she sees Clarke’s eyes on her, she drops her gaze away, to the patterned floor instead, as if she was never looking in the first place. She stares at the same spot until Clarke prompts her.

"Lexa?"

She's about to say it again when Lexa jars to life. She stands and crosses the room, offering out a file folder to Clarke. She still won't look at her. When Clarke can't catch Lexa's gaze, she shifts to the folder in her hands: no title, no decoration, just expensive paper. It is too damn early for paper that
expensive.

"What's this?"

Her voice is quiet but Lexa doesn't hesitate. "My resignation."

Chapter End Notes

come suffer with me at @centuriesofexistence on tumblr. I promise this cliffhanger won't take as long as the last one.
Okay hear me out... the wait time on this was not my fault...I've had a pretty girl distracting me for the past month and we all know how life gets when that happens. Thank you for the patience and for the nonstop support, it's the best!

Enjoy!

The words hang heavy between them for an absurdly long moment. Clarke goes numb, the blissful dreamy memories of last night turning to ice cold reality and crashing down on her. *One night,* echoes in her head, a ludicrous idea now that she’s not high off the exhilaration of kissing Lexa Ward.

She has to clear her throat to find her voice. “Your resignation.”

Without response, Lexa extends her arm to hold the file closer to Clarke as if it will answer the question implicit in Clarke’s statement. *Yes, it’s real.* But she doesn’t need to read it to know that—it’s written in every line of Lexa’s face.

“Fu—” But the daylight is bright enough to allow her to see the world crashing down around her the way she couldn’t last night, so she cuts off the obscenity. “God, I’m so sorry. That was never supposed to—”

“Clarke.”

She falls silent as she looks up and takes in the sight of Lexa: she’s in last night’s makeup and last night’s clothes, which still look respectable despite the wrinkles from laying wherever they had flung them in the dark. Lexa hasn’t thought or cared to put her hair up, so it hangs down over her shoulders, messy and loose and beautiful, stray wisps caught in the sunlight from the window behind her. Clarke had pulled that hair loose of her styled up-do, she had run her fingers through it, knotted her hands in it, fallen asleep awash in the scent of it and the taste of her—she stares at it until she realizes that Lexa’s wavy hair also serves to hide the trail of purple marks that dot down her neck and disappear beneath the collar of her shirt.

They’re not even in a straight line. She grimaces. Even this one small, ridiculous thing…isn’t like her. So desperate and thoughtless as to leave discordant reminders of her presence.

Clarke should feel guilt for leaving the bruises at all, but she can’t; at least, not until her eyes move from the bruises to Lexa’s stony face and the bruises become incriminating evidence of their mistake. This isn’t a joke, this is not something she can talk her way out of.

But that won’t stop her from trying.

“Let me get dressed, first…please.”

She’s still naked in bed, sheets drawn up around her chest. Lexa’s face flashes red as she turns away with a nod. Clarke moves quickly, automatically, pulling on her clothes without a care as she focuses on finding the words for this impossible situation and deliberately avoiding checking to see if Lexa
glances at her as she dresses. It’s not the time.

She hasn’t found the words by the time she’s dressed, but she settles on the edge of the bed and clears her throat softly. She lets instinct take over when Lexa turns, her chin raised respectfully to await whatever it is Clarke has to say.

“I’m sorry, Lexa,” she begins with a sigh, when it becomes clear that the other woman won’t start the conversation. “It was…a moment of weakness. I won’t let that happen a—”

Lesa’s firm voice cuts through. “We slept together, Clarke. The only responsible thing I can do now is offer my resignation. And—” As suddenly as she interrupted Clarke, she halts.

Several seconds of silence pass. “And…what?”

Lesa shifts her weight in an uncharacteristic show of discomfort, but it disappears a moment later when she lifts her chin with resounding confidence. “And after what happened in the dressing room, I was going to submit it anyway. I wrote the letter during the debate.”

The words drop with almost as much force as the resignation announcement did. “The dressing room?” Clarke repeats. It puts her on her back foot, with Lexa leading the advance.

“Before the debate. What happened in there distracted you, it distracted me. It nearly cost us the debate. My goal is to see you elected to senate over Cage Wallace and if I’m the one standing in the way of that, I’ll remove myself. There’s more to this than us sleeping together.”

If Lexa's initial declaration left a void in Clarke, left her struggling for words, Lexa's tone now fills that void—with frustration. Of course there’s more to this than us sleeping together, Clarke wants to shout. Lexa should not be so robotic about this. So noble and self-sacrificial as to gloss over the gravity of what happened and why it happened. She would reduce it to a conflict of interest, a minor footnote in some HR file one day, while Clarke looks up at her and sees the way the morning sun backlights her and filters through her brown hair like a halo and she can feel her heart beating in her chest. There’s so much more to this and she can’t let it go.

The professional etiquette she knows she should be drawing on feels like quicksand, dragging her down, as she attempts to balance it with the emotion flooding her. Her words stick in her throat but she gets them out one by one.

“What happened…shouldn’t have happened. I know that. But…” She takes a hard breath. “You saved that debate for me. You’ve pulled in donors and negotiated political allies I hadn’t dreamed about and saved this campaign when it was barely off the ground.” She can’t tell if she’s losing or gaining ground with Lexa’s unreadable face and the words start to come faster, with only one thought echoing in her head: “I wouldn’t be at this point without you. You’re the difference maker. I need you on this campaign with me…Lexa, please. Please don’t do this.”

Lesa’s name falls from her lips on an almost desperate gasp. For a fraction of a second, life flickers through Lexa’s green eyes and she softens as she takes in Clarke’s face, from her eyes to her lips to her neck and back up again, but it’s gone before Clarke can react.

She stands firm and tall. “I’m sorry, Clarke. I won’t be able to…” The pause comes with a thick swallow and she continues on. “We can’t continue to work together. Not after this. And you know that.”

Her words are like iron. Clarke Griffin will fight anything, but that doesn’t mean she doesn’t know when she’s fighting a losing battle. She lets her eyes close.
In a show of acquiescence, she takes a deep breath and accepts the folder Lexa is holding, flipping it open to reveal the one-page letter. She doesn’t have to read it to understand, but then her gaze falls on a two bolded words at the bottom; she reads them aloud in surprise.

“Effective immediately?” Clarke’s attention snaps back up to Lexa for an explanation.

“Were you expecting something different?”

It’s a last ditch effort and she scrabbles desperately for it, unashamed and instinctive. “You’re just leaving me like that? Without a replacement? We have a press tour today, Lexa; I’m supposed to do handle it all by myself the night after the first major debate?”

“Clarke.” Pure exasperation.

She fires back without thought. “Lexa.”

“Are you—”

“You’re the brains of this campaign, Lexa,” Clarke presses. “At least give us the standard time to figure something out.”

A muscle twitches in her jaw as she considers. Finally, when she speaks, it’s soft surrender: “Two week’s notice. I’ll work with Miller to find you a suitable replacement in that time.”

It’s something; they both agree with a nod and Lexa leaves the room with a stride that Clarke dares not call back. Once the door clicks shut behind her, Clarke falls back onto her bed, boneless and exhausted. She doesn’t know whether to shout or call Lexa back or reprove herself for her own choices. She can still remember the feeling of Lexa’s hands on her waist from the night before and she’s not entirely sure it’s a memory she wants to lock away. The guilt might be worth it.

She does, however, come to one decision: she can’t let her go.

Clarke has two weeks to convince Lexa Ward that they can still work together and save her campaign.

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The June primary election is only a little over a month away, and the cool spring days are fading into early summer warmth. Not that means much to the citizens of San Diego, who live in a perpetual golden summer existence. They come out in crowds, in everything from Bermuda shorts to board shorts, to enjoy the 80 degree April weather and watch the fascinating young Clarke Griffin address the public after last night’s debate performance. These people, Clarke thinks as they cheer for her infrastructure proposal, probably haven’t experienced a true, dark, hopeless winter day in years; as such, they can’t see that her sunny demeanor is a façade carefully constructed to hide a storm of roiling emotions that threaten to throw her off balance, just as they did before she went onstage at the debate.

But she reads off her points, as crisp and precise as the folds on her pressed shirt. She engages the crowd and they respond back, and she draws on their energy to make it through without a single sideways glance to Lexa’s lean form, observing from just off-stage. Lexa avoids Clarke throughout the morning, so it is the crowd that gets Clarke through most of the day, keeps her focused.
Enamored as they are with this young politician who seems to encapsulate the spirit of California, her ardent supporters even congregate outside the windows of the restaurant where she plans to host a series of roundtable interviews with local journalists after lunch.

And what the crowd can’t make up for, her staffers—strategists and publicists and moral supporters and even her security team—do the rest. Perhaps they’re still remembering the near disaster of the night before, but their preparations for her interviews are exceedingly thorough and intense as they work their way through three lunch courses.

“You’ll have topics altogether to avoid, and some you can answer however you want,” they tell her. “Small business, yes; other candidates, yes.”

“Within reason,” Harper cautions.

Clarke rolls her eyes. “I’ll still be digesting, I don’t particularly want to discuss all of the sordid details of Cage Wallace’s life. I can stay civil.”

“Avoid education for now because you’re already polling so well on it, focus on other things. You can answer questions about initial policy changes if elected; as for personal life—”

“No,” Lexa interrupts, quiet but sharp, from Clarke’s left.

The whole of the table turns to look at her, as she has offered little before this; she doesn’t give them anything more than the command now. But in the time her team pauses to give Lexa a chance to speak, Clarke has her first real chance to examine Lexa all morning. She looks perfect as always, loose locks of hair framing her face in order to look as “casual” as the rest of the team. The skin of her neck, Clarke notes, is free of all blemishes, despite how the bruises had glowed in the sunlight this morning.

Clarke has to smile, free from the guilt for a moment.

If Lexa couldn’t compartmentalize as well as Clarke could, then she wouldn’t have gotten to this level in her career. This morning, Clarke herself had hidden away her thoughts of last night with each button of her blouse that she did up, with each pearl earring she put in. Now she looks at Lexa and images the girl doing the same, sealing away her thoughts as she smoothed make-up over the sides of her neck. Cover it up, stash it away, nothing but straitlaced and clean and pristine. That’s how they get through this. They lie.

“Immigration,” Clarke declares to regain her team’s attention when Lexa deigns not to speak. “I’m going to need to address the weaknesses in my plan before the next debate, I got lucky last night.”

What a fucking terrible choice of words. She almost wants to laugh but that’s probably the only thing that would make it worse. Well, that and looking over at Lexa. She does neither.

“Later,” Mbege replies. “Talk to Dax on Monday when we get back, we’ll strengthen the plan and release it with positive spin.”

“What else?”

Harper has to nudge Jasper, who has the list of topics. “Economy,” he says, after a jolt and a bleary-eyed glance over the list. Poor kid is wildly hungover and exhausted—apparently they celebrated late into the night, but Jasper got the worst of it. She can’t in good conscience come down on him, though.

“Economy is pretty vague,” she says skeptically. “Do you have anything more specific for me?”
Jasper just shrugs; Harper rolls her eyes and takes over.

“Just stay vague then. Reiterate the standard lines, the party lines. We can’t put too much on it.”

Monty pipes up: “We need to develop a better plan for it, though, like with immigration. Where are we on that?”

“We’ll work on it, but not over lunch,” Clarke decides before her overzealous, overinspired team decides to start building her future presidential platform. “I’ll stick with Harper’s plan for now.”

“How are we going to develop it?” someone asks, more from curiosity than a strategic standpoint.

Clarke doesn’t want to discuss it anymore, but she needs to finish it off. “We’ll talk to the party leaders. Develop an approved plan with them based on their general platforms. They should line up with my old standpoints from the previous election, so no one will call me on it.”

“You don’t think we should develop our own plan?” Monty asks.

Harper speaks up for Clarke, who has taken a long sip of water. “Why would we? We’d need to call in experts anyway for such a big topic, let’s just use the established party plans and curry favor with the leaders.” Clarke nods in agreement but keeps the water glass to her lips to avoid jumping in.

“We’d get more attention and more moderate voters if we came up with an individualized plan—Jasper, back me up on this!”

Jasper groans, but Monroe takes up a stance with Monty: “I agree. We’ve come up with our own plans on everything else, why not get out of the standard party platforms and create something better? Give people new choices, not the same old, that’s how we’ll get elected.”

One by one, the team members take sides. They argue for Harper with evidence from past successful senators; the staffers who support Monty counter with the fact that this race has three democratic candidates and Clarke needs something to set herself apart.

“The old ways don’t get anything done anymore!”

“At least the old ways are realistic!”

Clarke remains blissfully removed, content to watch, until she realizes that the lack of attention on her allows her eyes to wander. Naturally, she looks to Lexa—the quiet smile on her face, the intelligent spark in her eyes as she follows the conversation back and forth like a tennis match the way a retired player would. And the feeling of familiarity that washes over Clarke at the sight stuns her.

This is so…normal. As if last night, this morning, none of it ever happened.

Lexa feels Clarke’s eyes on her and glances over to meet her gaze. The relaxed look falters, for a half second—and then returns just as smooth as before. Clarke’s heart leaps strangely in her chest at the sight.

Maybe it’s okay. The thought echoes in her head a few times before she silences it with a verbal question that both gets Lexa’s attention and silences the entire table:

“And what do you think, Miss Ward?”

It’s like a peace offering; Lexa accepts the invitation with a nod.
“I agree with Monty’s side. Trying to work within the bounds of the existing system is ultimately unsuccessful,” she declares slowly. “Instead, revolutionize it. Think wider. You want to do that with small business, changing the structure of the law to make things simpler for them, but you still want to try to make these changes while working within a static system. Why not change it all?”

Clarke frowns even as Lexa sits back in satisfaction. “That’s like burning down a house and rebuilding when you can change several parts of it to improve it as a whole,” she points out. “It’s actually simpler my way, in the long run, plus it’s much easier considering today’s party lines. You can barely get minor laws changed as it is due to the divide, let alone massive overhauls. I want to create positive change, I want to help people.”

“If the house is unfit for habitation, a new coat of paint won’t change anything,” Lexa replies coolly. “Perhaps appealing at first but ineffective at addressing underlying structural issues.”

They are quickly entrenched on their philosophical sides, in part because of their beliefs and in part because each knows the other is smart enough to undermine them if they show a weakness. Clarke and Lexa have gotten to this point of impasse before with everything from economic policy to which coast of the country is better—they often pass their late night hours in the office this way.

But Clarke feels the rush of argument and she can’t help but engage with everything she has, throwing away her reservations about the situation.

“You can’t be serious,” she snaps, and Lexa’s eyes light up as Clarke sits forward in her seat to make her next point. “Some of our greatest political victories throughout history have worked within the system,” she says, “And they changed it for the better without tearing it down and starting anew every decade. That’s way too chaotic, Ward.”

“And just imagine where we would be today if we had started the process of macro-level change way back during those periods of history?”

“Seriously?” Clarke scoffs—she raises her fingers and ticks off the first four examples that pop into her head, and Lexa sits back with her arms crossed until she’s forced to interrupt.

“So what? The system works, in that it’s still surviving, but we could make it better for the people. Economic policies, social and civil rights—the issues we have now have been issues for years because we refused to address the flaws in the system meant to prevent them. So we rebuild. Insurrection. It’s war now for lasting peace later. It’s the only strategy, Clarke.”

“Institution,” Clarke fires back. “Stability now, gradual change. You can’t anticipate how effective insurrection will be or where you’ll end up—ahead or behind where you started. At least a focus on working within the institution results in measured positive change, however slow.”

Lexa rolls her eyes. “You’re far too optimistic.”

“It’s a natural reaction to your cynicism.”

“Realism,” she corrects, in the same polite tone Clarke uses, smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

There are years and years of research she’s done and experience she’s collected to back it up and years and years of litigation experience she could draw on to get her point across, but suddenly, Clarke just wants to laugh: this is still so normal. She glances around at the table. Easy smiles light up the faces of all of her staffers, the customary amusement they show whenever their two fearless leaders get into their frequent debates. As normal as it is for Clarke, it’s normal for them too.
They depend on Lexa Ward as well, Clarke realizes. They depend on the campaign for their livelihood and the campaign depends on Lexa. She can’t let them down; it only strengthens her resolve to make this work.

The waitstaff arrive to whisk away the last of the plates before Clarke and Lexa can continue any of their conversation, which is probably for the better. It signals the end of lunch, and her team lever themselves to their feet to leave her to her impending interviews. Lexa doesn’t say another word to Clarke, but the debate has left Clarke’s blood thrumming pleasantly in her veins, her teeth sharpened.

“The first of the journalists are arriving, Miss Griffin. Ready?”

Of course she is, now; perhaps that had been Lexa’s plan all along.

“Ready.”

*

That feeling—the freshness and the resolve—fuels her weekend after they return from San Diego. It’s her first weekend off and her first weekend at home in weeks. Nonetheless, she crackles with anxious energy that she channels into campaign projects. Everything needs to be smooth by Monday. Efficient. Well-oiled. Because Lexa needs to know that they can make this work and any unnecessary issues just make that all the more difficult.

Whatever good energy she puts into the universe over the weekend fills the office on Monday. She walks in expecting to get down to the war planning before she even makes it to her office, but she's greeted with smiles that light up the office in celebration. It takes her a moment to remember that they only know about the debate performance, and it seems such a minor event in comparison to the secret she harbors about Lexa. Sleeping with Lexa eclipsed all else; Clarke has to smooth her face into a smile and pretend to be as happy as they are, accepting a new word of congratulations or admiration every few steps. Even the flock of usually starstruck interns seem anxious to please instead of just anxious.

She didn’t realize how much of a relief it would be to be back in the wood paneled campaign office, with her name flashing from almost every wall and the usual suspects scurrying across her path. A weight rises from her shoulders. Clarke makes it to her office with a confident stride, waving off the last of the admirers, to find Sara waiting for her at the door with her hands behind her back.

"Congratulations Miss Griffin!" Her secretary beams. "We were all here cheering for you Thursday night."

"Thank you. How much time before the Monday briefing?" Clarke casts an eye around the room as she asks--of all the staffers who had greeted her and those she can see right now, Lexa's instantly recognizable form is not among them. But she'll be at the meeting. She always is.

Sarah's brow furrows at Clarke's immediate seriousness. "Um, scheduled for ten thirty."

"Great. Can you have Harper come in and see me before then? I need to make sure everything is running smoothly on education since that's what I'll be questioned on next. Then send in Dax so we can improve and publicize my immigration policies, they've fallen by the wayside."

"Okay, absolutely." Sarah blinks and nods rapidly as she tries to shift gears as quickly as Clarke did.
"Anything else?"
"Coffee?"
"Already on the desk."
"You're a lifesaver."

*  

Clarke had made plans all weekend. Contingency plans. Improvement plans. She's not the type to sit back in comfort with Plans A and B—her father used to joke during their chess games that she would have plans for the other twenty-four letters too. Wearing sweats and with her hair in a bun, she had paced her apartment all weekend, rewriting old policies and enhancing new ones and having mental discussions about them with the heads of each department. Education needed to be smoothed out following questions in the debate: Clarke surprises Harper with an already polished new proposal and within ten minutes, they conclude that meeting and Harper rushes off to photocopy it for her team.

Additionally, immigration had come up in the debate and she had been hit hard there. When Dax takes a seat in her office, he has suggestions, but he too is blown away by her preparations. Over the course of an hour, they implement a campaign-worthy new immigration plan, the kind of thing that should take them a few days, at least.

“Run it by Miss Ward,” she suggests, when he has his hand on the doorknob to leave. She voices a note of concern, as if suddenly anxious that the policy plan may need another set of eyes before it goes out to the rest of their staff.

“Will do, Representative Griffin.”

As if Clarke’s marathon of planning and plotting hadn’t also included imagining conversations with Lexa. Clarke had planned out all aspects of these potential conversations: pleas for her to stay, small jokes by the coffee maker, political debates like the one over lunch in San Diego, all the way to all-out arguments over why Lexa had kissed her in the hotel room if she was planning to resign and walk away from it all. The fantasy exchanges with Lexa had fueled Clarke’s desire to prepare herself for the week, and her preparations always brought her back around to thinking of Lexa—it was a nonstop 48 hour cycle, which she is reaping the rewards of now.

The buoy of early Monday morning success motivates Clarke into calling in Miller as well, so that she can review with him the recently hired interns she has yet to meet. This meeting runs over time and they hurry together to the biggest conference room in the office for the general office meeting, five minutes late.

When she and Miller enter the room, most of the department heads and their assistants are already seated around the conference table, laughing and talking with the lighthearted celebratory attitude she should have enjoyed the weekend with. The room buzzes with so much energy that several of them don’t notice when Clarke walks in, and she decides not to interrupt, slowing at the back of the room to enjoy their delight.

“I’m telling you,” Mbege is saying to Sterling, “Next time we have another weekend off, we’re heading back down to San Diego. The dive bar scene is great.”
“Beautiful, smart girls, too.”

“Even Jasper got laid, man!”

Harper scoffs and rolls her eyes, but the rise in laughter from the rest of Jasper’s co-workers doubles as both appreciation and mocking.

Jasper grins sheepishly and starts to reply, but Miller cuts him off with a sharp noise. “Unless she’s voting Griffin,” he announces, “it’s no longer important. We’re starting this meeting ten minutes late already and we have a lot to get through.”

Silence overtakes the room immediately and everyone sits up a little straight in their chairs as a way of apologizing to their boss. Miller looks to her expectantly. Clarke, however, takes a moment to answer because she’s scanning the room for the third time, searching in vain for the one person she expected to be there. Lexa is never absent. She’s never late.

And yet her chair sits empty.

“Yes,” she says with a deep breath, sitting down at her own spot at the head of the conference table. “Obviously I’m happy to celebrate, but we’re celebrating because we successfully entered a new stage of the campaign and if we want to get to the next one, it’s work now and celebrate later.”

They know this. Clarke Griffin is famous for it. No one objects. “So, first, let’s—”

Then door swings open, cutting Clarke off, and there she is.

The picture of Lexa Ward is unchanged: she strides into the room with long legs and clacking heels and maybe her murmured apology is lost in the noise of the door closing. They hadn’t been talking before she arrived but upon Lexa’s appearance, the rest of Clarke’s team seems to grow even more serious, adopting small frowns and ramrod straight spines to match hers. They arrange the papers that sit in front of them to more orderly piles and watch with rapt attention as she walks the length of the table and takes her seat without a word. The air crackles with new electricity, and Clarke loses her train of thought and chides herself for the involuntary way her muscles tense.

Lexa Ward certainly changes a room.

“Sorry I’m late,” she says simply. “Please continue.”

“The debate,” Clarke declares suddenly—it’s not where they were when Lexa’s arrival interrupted them so she doesn’t know what prompts her to say it, but she gets an odd satisfaction in the way Lexa’s attention focuses on her. “I was just going to thank everyone for their contributions. Miss Ward,” she announces to the group, “definitely saved the debate by coming up with the tone-shifting strategy, and she deserves credit for that.”

Lexa’s still flustered from being late and gives an awkward nod of acknowledgement when the room applauds her. She goes back to organizing her papers until they quiet down, but then Miller speaks up.

“I knew we’d made a good choice with you. Representative Griffin knew it from the start, she wanted to hire you as soon as you walked in for our first interview.” This is met with smiles and quiet laughter, except from Lexa, whose green eyes widen slightly when she looks to Clarke. “I had to convince her to at least give it a second lunch interview before we called you in.”

Clarke cringes internally. It feels like a lifetime ago and in this new context, the story is so, so bad.
Lexa handles it smoothly, with an easy, “I appreciate the opportunity.” Clarke has to continue her spur of the moment lie, so the next ten minutes of the meeting go toward the staffers complimenting one another. It’s great for teambuilding but Clarke starts to chafe at the time lost. Lexa sits peacefully detached.

“Okay!” Clarke cuts them off at last. “Let’s get down to our next moves. Mbege, you compiled the poll results, right?”

He nods and clears his throat. “You increased in everything—all the demographics, and in the perceptions of your ability. You’ve jumped Diana Sydney completely and you’re closing in on Vincent Vie, with a month left until the first election. It’s a success in my book.”

Celebrations—again. They’re on a roll today and everything is golden at Griffin Campaign HQ. Clarke affords a small smile, but after a few moments, Lexa finally takes the responsibility of reigning them in.

“So, what does this mean?” she asks them, when they’ve settled again.

No one has an answer, and it seems only half are aware it’s a rhetorical question. Lexa stands up to launch her speech.

“It means that Clarke Griffin, having officially entered the race, is now a target. We’ve been collecting donations and establishing a presence but now Representative Griffin is a threat, and they’ll start coming down on us.

“Expect the negative press to start over the next few weeks,” she continues. “Sterling, I want you and your PR team paying extra attention to the media for hints of negative stories, so we can counter them. I also want you to pump as many positive stories into the press as we can. Whoever will publicize them, do it.”

“Got it.” The celebration is gone, they’re just soldiers being handed their next orders.

“I’m serious. With the amount of national focus that is on this race, things could get nasty. Be prepared.” Lexa switches her gaze to Jackson, who shifts uncomfortably. “Jackson, your priority is engaging respected politicians and getting them to endorse Griffin, however you need to achieve that. We need the backing of any past or present politicians who will have us. Dax, I need to meet with you to go over a new immigration plan—”

“I already did,” Dax interrupts. “With Representative Griffin, this morning. We wrote a new one.”

This catches Lexa off guard—her eyes go from Dax to the paper in her hands to Clarke, surprise written across her face. “I’d sketched out the general framework of a new plan over the weekend. You took care of it?”

“We did,” Clarke confirms. “I wrote one this weekend, too. We took care of education, as well.”

Lexa looks down at her papers again. If that had been next on her list, she gives no indication of it, but Clarke knows her. “What about the economic policies?”

“That will be our focus this week.” Clarke smiles slightly when she thinks of their argument in San Diego. “I need to meet with some of the economic advisors from the party to develop one. Your insights would be welcome at the meetings.”

“You’re the candidate, you write the policies,” Lexa says evasively. “In that case, if we’ve taken care of those three policy issues, then we can circle back to preparation for the next few weeks.”
Clearly, Clarke is not the only one who spent her weekend preparing; Lexa is just as obsessive in her foresight and planning of their next moves. “They’re going to come after you for a variety of reasons over the next few weeks,” she says. “We have to be two steps ahead. What could they attack us on?”

No one at the table answers, but Clarke sees the sideways glances thrown her way. Who wants to critique their boss and the campaign she’s been running? Who would dare critique Lexa or Clarke?

So Clarke takes it upon herself. Trying to think of the first thing Lexa would criticize, she declares, “My idealism. My youth.”

“That’s a good one,” Lexa says with a nod. “What about your background—any unscrupulous details, old classmates who don’t like you?” Even when Clarke shakes her head, Lexa looks dubious. “It doesn’t matter, those will come out anyway. We’ll have to look into your past more to be ready to defend. They’ll also likely go after your mother’s history, personal and political, and even go for your appearance. All of this, we have to be ready for.”

And that’s what the next hour consists of: the team brainstorming positive press releases and rumors and ways to spin anything negative that comes their way.

When the meeting adjourns, her staffers are more than eager to escape the room before Lexa assigns them any more jobs; they leave so quickly that Lexa is left still packing her files away and Clarke is left simply lingering. It’s only once the room clears that Clarke speaks up.

“Well, you’re certainly on top of things for someone who’ll be leaving in two weeks,” she observes, stepping closer and leaning against the table beside Lexa.

“I still have a job, Clarke,” Lexa shoots back, “I’m not going to abandon that. And you do too,” she adds before Clarke can reply. Clarke stiffens at the implications and figures out what’s coming a moment before Lexa says it: “I wasn’t going to bring it up in the meeting, but it’s important we push the narrative of your personal life even more. We’ll increase the attention on your relationship with Roan, make it more open, and use the increased press to build up your positive image.”

“Meaning you want me to go on a date with him and kiss him in public?” Clarke demands, scowling. The way Lexa’s throat bobs with her hard swallow does not go unnoticed, and Clarke gets a small twinge of satisfaction from the sight. “You don’t have to kiss him,” Lexa says in a small voice. “I wouldn’t make you do that.”

“So, what then?”

“Just…” Lexa casts around for the right answer. “Be more intimate. Hold him closer, look happier. You don’t have to kiss.”

Clarke can’t help the way her own voice softens. They’re alone in the conference room now, no reason to keep strategizing like wartime generals. No need to brush away the events of the previous week, either; this is the first time Clarke and Lexa have been alone together since Lexa delivered her resignation in the hotel room.

“Are you doing okay?” Clarke asks before she can stop herself.

Whatever implication Clarke put into the words, Lexa picks up—she can tell by the way her face hardens. “I’m fine.” We’re not talking about this right now. “And I haven’t spoken to Miller yet about finding a replacement, but that’s part of my schedule for the day.”

She forces out the next works, pure professionalism so as to not scare Lexa off with her true
objections to that idea. “Thank you. But…you could always stay. That meeting went well. I don’t think…anything is impacting our working together.”

The muscles in Lexa’s neck tighten anyway. “Anyone could have led that meeting.”

“Of course,” Clarke nods—it’s like disarming a bomb, she can’t make a wrong move. “Do you have plans for what you’ll do if you leave?”

“I’m sure I’ll find someone in need of a strategist with my skills and experience,” Lexa muses, avoiding eye contact and definitely avoiding Clarke’s use of the word if.

Her stomach drops. “Another campaign?”

“There are several,” she says, “And not just for senator. It’s a huge election year.”

“Regardless, after you worked with me, wouldn’t that be a conflict of interest?”

Lexa raises one perfectly manicured brow and the irony hits Clarke a half-second later. She drops her gaze to hide any emotion and leaves without a word.

*

And so Clarke does what she’s told, bitterly, reluctantly, because Clarke’s style of rocking the boat wouldn’t help convince Lexa that they can work together. Lexa already believes herself to be in the way of Clarke getting elected, Clarke doesn’t need to make things more difficult and join her as an obstacle in her own path.

She goes to dinner with Roan a few nights later. As instructed, they linger in public, closer and more intimate than before. Held hands, tight hugs, a careful kiss on the cheek in greeting while the cameras flash. Lexa was right: now that Clarke’s poll numbers are rising, so is the media attention on her. The attention will only grow more intense and more negative, so it’s important to get ahead of it with positive press, like a stable relationship between two attractive political figures. Clarke and Roan are nothing but smiles and sparkling eyes for one another.

At dinner, Roan tells Clarke how excited he is about his girlfriend, a local news reporter in Florida. She just got a promotion and he had half a flower shop delivered to her. Clarke comments that Lexa did a fantastic job setting this up because the fact that Roan is not the least bit interested in her makes him the best possible choice.

After dinner, they find that some other Los Angeles celebrity must have arrived for a late meal, because the swarm of photographers has more than doubled. When they see the underdog Senate race candidate, the feeding frenzy starts.

“Stay close to me,” Roan mutters under his breath as the photographers press in. He circles a protective arm around her and starts to push through the crowd.

“I can handle myself!” Clarke grunts, even as she ducks into him to avoid a camera thrust into her face.

“You are a blonde pain in the ass and I’m sure you’re totally imposing in a board room, Griffin, but you’re also five foot five inches, five-eight in the heels you’re wearing right now, and sometimes you
Roan muscles his way to the car where Gustus stands waiting with the door open. Clarke sits in petulant silence for the entire ride home, and Roan grins out the window.

*

Once they’ve driven Roan back to his apartment, Clarke finally relaxes in the backseat. Her sigh attracts Gustus’s attention: she sees his eyes watching her in the rearview mirror.

“Tough night?” he asks.

“I’m not cut out for the celebrity side of things,” she admits.

“I can tell,” he agrees, sympathetically enough to avoid rousing her defiance. “When you were swarmed earlier, I was halfway out of the car to pick you up and carry you out. Luckily Mr. Azgeda took care of it first.”

“Yeah, well. Great date, and all. Gallant and responsible. He’ll be in politics soon…”

Clarke drifts off while muttering the memorized lines she usually gives to the press. When she snaps awake a moment later, Gustus still watches her in the rearview mirror, brows furrowed.

“I’m your driver and part of your security team, Miss Griffin,” he says. “I have to know what’s going on in order to do that. So you can trust me like you’d trust any other advisor, like Miss Ward. Miss Ward told me several times that your relationship with Roan Azgeda is only for the media.”

“She did?” Clarke asks in surprise.

“It was one of the first points of information she gave to me and Ryder, and she’s reminded us since.”

“Oh. Well then he’s an ass.”

“You don’t like him?”

She relents after a second of consideration. “No, he’s okay. Just…not my type.”

“Based on how many times Miss Ward told me that it would definitely not be romantic and was purely professional,” Gustus chuckles, “I had figured that much out for myself.”

There’s no way to keep Lexa Ward out of her thoughts for the rest of the night—as if she had ever vacated them since last week’s debate. But somehow, talking to Gustus about Lexa, even in such a nonchalant manner, ignites something in Clarke and she can’t shake the thought of her campaign manager. She quits trying to study her financial reports only a few minutes into them, distracted by the memory of Lexa at the meeting early this week; later, when she’s in bed, her memories of Lexa turn far darker. The frustration burning in her skin keeps her up until the early hours of the morning, until she finally gives in and slides a hand down her body between her legs.

The rest of the week, Lexa’s avoidance tactics just increase this frustration. She sends new interns to drop off files to Clarke’s office, and relays messages via email. At their meetings, there are always
too many people in the room for a conversation and Lexa is always the first to leave. And on the instances where Clarke has found reason to walk past Lexa’s office, her door is always closed and a glance through her window reveals she’s in deep conversation on the phone.

If she was walled off before, she’s damn near rebuilt her fortress by now.

When they get to Friday, Clarke is wound tightly enough to snap, yet again. She has one week left to make Lexa stay and she’s no closer to that goal than she was on Monday.

* 

It’s rare that she gets to spend time in Lincoln and Octavia’s ultramodern loft—they travel so much it’s rare that Lincoln and Octavia get to spend time in their ultramodern loft—but Clarke has to admit it’s even more unusual to see Lincoln’s musclebound, model-perfect frame bent over a pile of dainty, half-assembled white baby furniture. To add to the picture, Octavia sits beside him, legs spread around a rocking chair she’s been working on for over an hour; she’s proven far more effective at handing him tools one by one like a surgeon’s assistant. The tools look foreign in her hands and they look like children’s toys in his, but somehow, they’re slowly churning out piece after piece.

“Of course, this would all be easier if we had the actual engineer helping us,” Octavia gripes with a dark look at Raven, who lounges on the sectional, munching on an apple.

Lincoln chuckles. “Babe, I got this. And you’re doing great on the chair. It’s our first kid, I want to build everything.”

The tenderness and patience there is enough to placate Octavia and make Clarke smile (mostly out of relief, because she’s had a sheet of directions for a shelf sitting in her lap for the past half hour and she does not have the energy to decipher them right now. She can just enjoy the afternoon on the couch with Raven).

“Yeah, Babe, he’s got it,” Raven jokes. “Good thing, too, because I can’t help. All I do at work is help otherwise competent men streamline their designs to make them work better—I can’t do it in my off hours too. Lincoln has it covered.”

“Make yourself useful then, find us another article about Clarke and the politician’s son.”

Clarke rolls her eyes as Raven gleefully goes back to her phone screen. “It’s a—”

“Fake relationship, we know,” Octavia cuts her off.

“You doth protest too much,” Raven adds. “You haven’t been in a relationship in years, we can at least go along with it.”

“There’s been no need,” grumbles Clarke. “No one is worth getting distracted from work for.”

*How the mighty have fallen.*

Raven, however, looks more and more discouraged as she scrolls through search results. She groans and says, “There all the same. They’re either from two days ago, with you and his mom shaking hands, or they’re from weeks earlier when you were first spotted.”
“How big a role is this gonna play in the election, Clarke?” Lincoln asks. “Seems like it could backfire.”

“It’s about playing the media, making my name appear more frequently.” Lexa’s words, almost verbatim. “I get talked about more in whatever capacity and people start looking to see what else there is to know about me—the important things. Plus, I get the boost from his mother.”

Lincoln shrugs in response, bent over one corner of the crib he’s building. He doesn’t have a background in politics or a particular vested interest in her personal life the way Octavia and Raven do, but a world-traveling photographer like Lincoln knows the ins and outs of media. Clarke trusts Lexa’s plan, and she agrees with it, but she still tucks Lincoln’s skepticism away in her memory, just in case.

Raven, apparently missing this interaction, gives a low “aww” to regain their attention: “The article Wells wrote about Cage Wallace just popped up,” Raven says, smiling affectionately at her phone. “I miss him; when are you going to see him next, Griffin?”

“I don’t even know my schedule two weeks from now,” Clarke says honestly. “He’ll be interviewing me soon, though.”

“I’m coming with you when he does. He was one of the best study partners I ever had at UCLA, even though he was a journalism grad.”

“Only journalism grad you ever respected,” Octavia grumbles.

“One, you do photojournalism, it’s different; two, you didn’t go to UCLA, so of course it was only ever Wells; and three, you were a history grad like B…like your nerd brother.”

The breezy conversation stops and swells with sudden tension. Raven goes back to her phone with a tellingly false nonchalance, but Clarke and Octavia exchange worried glances. Raven and Bellamy’s most recent break-up had been particularly messy and Raven has a habit of letting these things fester; she’s buried with her hectic work life but they know it can only stay that way for so long. In a valiant attempt to change the subject, Octavia clears her throat.

“Read some of that one, that one Wells wrote.”

“We’ve already read it,” Raven replies flatly. “Let’s do some other ones…here: ‘Griffin soars in debate and in polls.’ Well that’s not very creative.”

“Better than the ones about my love life.”

“‘Griffin rising past Sydney in race for senate seat.’ Good. ‘Griffin lags behind Vie and Wallace in key demographics.’ Fuck off. ‘Ten questions for Clarke Griffin.’ Yeah, ten questions they could probably never ask you to your face.”

“Your political commentary is on point, Raven,” Lincoln observes. “You’re in the wrong industry.”

She continues, encouraged to theatrics by his dry tone. “‘Clarke Griffin, history of a California girl.’ Great, I wonder which misogynistic keyboard smasher wrote this hot take. I’m sure it won’t be offensive or sexist at—oh…shut.”

Clarke’s eyes snap open. “What?”

Lincoln and Octavia freeze what they’re doing and turn with rapt attention; Raven wordlessly hands her phone to Clarke. The unfamiliar title fills the screen but when Clarke scrolls down, it’s the picture
that turns her stomach. It’s from college, Halloween her freshman year—she still remembers the nurse’s outfit she wore that night. The night had been safe, sane, but the picture shows her with her eyes half shut and leaning sideways, hand in hand with a girl whose face is mercifully blurred out. As responsible as Clarke may have been that night, she was the daughter of a politician and therefore stayed away from social media, and definitely never let pictures like this get out.

So where did it come from?

“Do you recognize this picture?” Clarke asks Raven sharply, and then shows Octavia and directs the question to her when Raven shakes her head. “Do either of you have anything on your social media?”

“I have no idea,” Octavia sputters, tools forgotten. Raven leaps off the couch and crosses the loft to Octavia’s laptop to pull up the article. “What does it say? Does it say where it came from?”

Clarke’s heart sinks the more she reads, but she doesn’t need to skim the article to know what it’s going to say. Clarke Griffin, stereotypical rich girl. Clarke Griffin, too immature for the senate seat. Clarke Griffin, binge-drinking and probably drug-dabbling college student—old habits die hard. Do the people of California really want someone like Clarke Griffin representing them?

“I can’t find anything on the journalist,” Raven says from the other side of the apartment. “No political positions, random guy—someone must have given him this to hurt you.”

“Obviously.” Raven ignores the snap in Clarke’s voice and starts running more searches. Clarke goes through her email accounts but finds nothing; this just landed. “We have to get control of this, as soon as possible.”

“I’ll start searching up anything else people might use,” Raven offers, “get it pulled down or wreck the pages myself.”

“You can do that?” Octavia asks.

“Better than I can build baby furniture.”

Clarke has Monty on the line in ten seconds and gives him a short, clipped order to collect whatever of her IT department and publicity team that he can and get them to the office, now. “Raven, come with me? You can keep pulling stuff down in the office, you’re better than half my team anyway.”

“Sounds good. What does your genius camping manager matchmaker have to say about this?”

As she says it, Clarke is staring at the name on the screen, her necessary next call. Her finger hovers over the call button. So much for smooth and efficient.

*  

“We need to fix this, now.”

Her voice rings like clashing metal, sending a ripple of obedient, robotic nods through the small group they’ve assembled in the office. Lexa is alight with a rarely-seen cold fury; Clarke stands back, out of her way, and allows her to wage her war.
“I want pictures pulled down, I want journalists contacted for interviews, I want us to spin this, now,” Lexa says, looking from staffer to staffer until they’re frozen in their seats, only able to nod in response until she moves onto the next one. “And I want to find where this came from. Pressure the journalist or the agency they work for, whoever you can. Get it done.”

With those three words, Lexa sends the dozen staffers scurrying to their jobs, as if they’re rushing to deal with a natural disaster rather than an attack on Clarke’s character. Only Raven stays in her seat at Clarke’s side, tapping away at her laptop, not listening to a single word of Lexa’s Braveheart speech.

“I thought this wouldn’t happen until closer to the primary election,” Clarke mutters when Lexa joins them.

She shrugs. “Apparently you were more of a threat than we thought.”

For Clarke, it would be flattering on any other day, but now her stomach is in tight knots. If someone has this picture, there’s no telling what else they have and what the world will begin to say. She can’t stop thinking of all the other

“Raven,” Lexa says with a nod of greeting. She receives a grunt of acknowledgement. “Thanks for helping. I’m having Monty—”

That jars Raven out of her reverie; she cracks the first smile of anyone in the office and sits up from her laptop. “Monty?”

Lexa’s brows raise. “You know Monty?”

At the sound of his name, Monty has perked up from his computer and crossed the office; when Raven sees him, she jumps up to greet him in a hug. “I’ve missed you, you punk!”

“We’ve known each other since college,” Monty tells Lexa when he breaks apart from Raven.

“I know a few of her staffers,” Raven explains. “Clarke believes in nepotism, a lot of them are hires out of UCLA. Monty was my suggestion, only because he didn’t want to work with me at my engineering firm.”

If this were any other moment, Clarke would snap at her the way she usually does: it’s not nepotism if you don’t actually know them when you hire them. She prefers the phrase loyalty to one’s alma mater.

Raven renders the explanation unnecessary, however, when she notes, “Monty’s younger than us though, by almost five years. I was just his graduate TA for a bunch of his basic engineering classes and I hooked him up with an internship before he sided with Clarke, so—”

“Raven.” Clarke’s barely holding it together and Lexa’s jaw is twitching as she tries to remain polite. “Pictures. Time is valuable. What do you have so far?”

“All right, all right.” She goes back to her laptop. “I’m, uh, trying to trace it back still, see where it might have come from. In the meantime, Monty, my company has a facial recognition program. I’ll send it to you, you can start running searches for any pictures of Clarke we want to get ahead of.”

He nods quickly, automatically taking orders from Raven the way he usually gets them from Lexa. “Anything else?”

“Dig up what you can about the journalist who posted the article.”
“Like…”

“Keep it legal for now,” Raven says, holding back a smirk. “Anything else, come find me.”

Keep it legal for now. Clarke’s stomach sinks. They’re only an hour into this, there is no doubt more old pictures will surface, and the mess is only going to get bigger. “I’ll be in my office,” she blurs, before retreating away.

They give Clarke five minutes of precious solitude before the door cracks open and Raven enters, laptop in hand and concern written all over her face. Lexa slips through the door more subtly and waits away from the desk as Raven marches forward and waits for Clarke to lift her head out of her hands.

“I have good news and bad news.”

“Bad news first.”

“I…” She hesitates, uncharacteristic for her fiery and relentless nature. “I didn’t want to say it in front of Monty, but the chances that this came from someone close to you are extremely high.”


“Campaign close, or family or friend close. The picture is old. It’s never been leaked before, even while you were criticized for decisions as a state rep. Which means it came from someone who knew it existed and only now had a reason to go back and find it. Someone around you probably got paid off by one of the other candidates. I’d bet Wallace—he’s the one with that kind of money and it’s a response to your article with Wells.”

“When I jumped in the polls,” Clarke reasons, with a glance to Lexa. She had called this, to be fair. “What’s the good news?”

This, Raven seems more excited about. Her eyes gleam as she says, “I found a way to wreck the webpage hosting the article. It’s not very ethical—”

“Or legal,” Lexa snaps.

“—Or legal,” Raven agrees with a glare over her shoulder, like Lexa took her favorite toy away. “But I’m also not part of your campaign team so there’s a gray area. It wouldn’t do much, but it would slow things down for a bit while we get ahead of it. And send a message.”

Clarke drops her head back into her hands again, running her fingers through her messy blonde hair —she hadn’t even had time in her rush from Octavia’s apartment to put it into a suitable style. After a few deep breaths, she can sense Raven getting uncomfortable and impatient in front of her and knows she needs to make a decision, the way a leader would. She’s never felt so far from being a leader.

She raises her eyes to Lexa instead, and receives a small nod.

“Do it,” Clarke says, shaking her head.

Raven, despite the approval, knows something is wrong. “Clarke?”

“Fuck it, go ahead, do it.”

“Talk to me, Griffin.”
“I wasn’t expecting negative press for a few more weeks,” she mutters. “I just—wasn’t ready. It’s fine. I’ll be fine.”

“You’re not fine,” Raven says softly.

“I will be.” She pulls in a breath and releases it in a long, shuddering sigh, trying to gather up some resolve. “I—I should call my mom, she’s going to get dragged into it sooner or later. And then we need to—”

“Breathe, Griffin. Your mom is the toughest woman around, she’ll be fine.”

Clarke snaps. “There’s just a lot going on right now, Raven!”

Her outburst rings in the air, Raven and Lexa stunned into silence. Clarke holds back a groan—everything she’s been working at containing for the past week is on the brink of exploding out of her, with her sharp reply to Raven being only the merest preview. She takes another long breath and lays her hands flat on the table, trying to relax.

Raven, motionless for a few seconds, steps forward and places her hand over Clarke’s, lowering her voice.

“Hey. It’s going to be okay. It’s one minor thing, a few pictures won’t wreck your whole campaign. You’re still the best of all of them, Griffin.”

She rubs Clarke’s knuckles and the words are supposed to be comforting, but all Clarke can think of is the single moment when her lips were pressed to Lexa’s throat and her fingers were digging into her hips. In that moment, the thought that this could wreck her campaign had flashed through her mind. She hadn’t cared then—the risk seemed so far away and Lexa was so close and so real and so perfect against her. But the release of the old pictures, the attack on her personal life, has thrown her night in the hotel into sharp relief: she’s teetering on a thin wire and she has so, so far to fall if it any of it ever gets out. A picture and a smear article would be nothing compared to that nuclear fallout.

Before Raven can say anything else, Lexa’s quiet voice takes them by surprise. “We can fix this,” she says, all her impossibly strong confidence contained in such a feather-light voice. Clarke glances up at her and sees Lexa’s eyes fixed on where Raven’s hand rests over hers just before Lexa adds, “Raven, can you give us a minute?”

Raven stiffens; mother bears are more easily separated from their cubs.

Clarke, though, looks to her and nods, and only after a murmur of reassurance does Raven reluctantly slip away, taking her time at the door to glance back and check on Clarke one more time.

Lexa waits until the door closes, and then even longer before she steps closer to Clarke to force her to look up.

It’s someone close to you, Raven had said. Someone with access and a reason to want an in at another campaign…no. Clarke shakes her head to clear it. It’s Lexa’s current closeness making her judgement go bad—nothing unscrupulous about Lexa. But she can’t bring herself to step away.

“We can fix this,” Lexa repeats. “We’ll come out stronger with policy and publicity. And privately, we’ll wreck anyone who had a hand in it: the journalist, whoever gave them the picture, whatever campaign backed it…don’t worry. Don’t let it get to you. That whole team out there, the rest of the staffers, we’re with you, Clarke.”

The sting of the one remaining week until Lexa’s resignation is final rips Clarke’s answer out of her
before she can catch it.

“Are you, though?”

The very slightest of hesitations, green eyes flicking down to Clarke’s lips and back up. “…We’ll take care of it. Don’t worry.”
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

here we are! Again, thank you for all the love and support and constructive criticism; getting to share this with you guys really is half the fun of writing it.

Enjoy!!

Chapter Notes

come rant with me at @centuriesofexistence on tumblr!

"McCarty."

"What about her?"

Tapping her chin, head tipped toward the ceiling in thought, Clarke muses, "Do you think she could be the one leaking everything? She's been with us since the start. She'd know about any of the old stuff."

"McCarty works in my department," Miller retorts sharply.

"So?"

"I'd know."

"How would you know?"

"Because I'm her boss. Plus she's terrible with technology, we would all know if she sent that picture, she'd probably use the company fucking computer."

Clarke glares at him for his slip of profanity—she's historically always against anything that might lower the professionalism in the office and at least has to pretend like she hasn’t broken her own rule half a dozen times—but quite frankly, she feels like shouting out a few herself. After Saturday's debacle, the pictures continued for another three days, progressively worse each time. Clarke with a bottle of alcohol. Clarke with her hand around the waist of a man with his face blurred out. Some of them even included quotes; nothing that Clarke ever remembers saying, but who would question their validity when paired with private pictures?

"It only makes sense if they're coming from someone inside the campaign," she says with a sigh. "We have to figure out who."

"We've been over the personnel files half a dozen times already," Miller replies, equally exhausted. He taps the well-thumbed pile of folders sitting on her desk and nods to the clock. "If you haven't found anything yet, throwing out names to see if we can conjure up some fact we missed isn't going to work. I have a job to do, Clarke, and so do you. Don't you have a debate coming up?"
She runs a hand back through her loose hair—it's become a habit to undo her buns and braids when she gets into her private office and only re-do them when she returns to the public eye. Helps with stress. "No, I can't focus knowing that this is happening," she admits.

"I can focus on this. I can talk to the staffers. You have a million other things to worry about."

Someone out there has old pictures of her. Pictures that are hitting the headlines. Pictures that are sure to raise questions, take attention away from her strong policies and performance, and affect her poll numbers weeks before the primaries. She's already getting endless calls for interviews and the TV stations have begun to run the story daily.

She reaches for the stack of personnel files again. Miller smacks his hand down on it.

"Other. Things." She relents with a glare and he scoops the pile into his arms. "God, you and Ward are too similar. I haven't been able to meet with her about finding her goddamn replacement, she's been so focused on this. Please ask her to return my emails next time you see her?"

Clarke sits up straighter. "You haven't started the search yet?"

"I've started it," Miller snaps, "It's Ward who hasn't come through with any sort of input. I need to meet with her soon if we're going to have to fill her position by next week."

"I'll...I'll talk to her."

She tries to kill the hope surging in her chest as he leaves, the vague theory that maybe, if she hasn't been searching for a replacement, she might have decided they don't need one. It's the first thought all day that replaces the leaked pictures, so Clarke jumps to her feet and grabs a random report off of her desk. A walk would do her good anyway.

Clarke closes her office door whenever she needs to shut out the outside world and focus, but Lexa always leaves hers at least partially ajar, perhaps as a noble play to invite questions that would otherwise distract the senate candidate. Today is no different, except for the fact that Lexa's usually quiet voice now echoes down the hall through her doorway; Clarke slows to listen as she arrives at Lexa's office.

"Representative Griffin is surging in the polls, she's going to win this election against Cage Wallace—your only options between the two," Lexa is saying. "She already has the major support of over three dozen newspapers statewide—no, not because she's attractive—and let me tell you, pledging for the wrong side would be career ending."

A pause.

"Yes," Lexa says. "Not only for the embarrassment but also for the lack of support you'll receive when she is in office. Are we on the same page? Good."

There's a sharp, cutting edge to her voice that Clarke hasn't heard since the early days, or at least not since the last time they argued about something—and based on how Lexa has avoided her since the debate, it's definitely been a while. Enraptured, she steps forward, pushing open Lexa's office door. She's greeted by the sight of Lexa sitting at her desk, work phone lit up like a christmas tree with numbers on hold, handset in one hand, and cell phone in the other.

She glances up when she sees movement by her door, and she stumbles over her words when she sees Clarke. "I—we—all right, Representative Grand, hold on for just one moment, I have Representative Silverman on the line."
Lexa presses a button on the desk phone, but before Clarke can step forward and speak, Lexa holds up the hand that holds her cell phone and reveals she actually does have Representative Silverman on the other line. Clarke steps back, dumbfounded after the expectation that Lexa wanted to speak with her, and watches a masterclass political display unfold.

"Yes, Representative Silverman, thank you for being patient with me. Obviously, you will have the full support of the Griffin campaign, but more importantly, Representative Grand will be supporting your bill on sex trafficking. He found common ground in the fact that you both support Clarke Griffin for senator."

Clarke arches an eyebrow.

"Now, I have the LGBT+ Youth Homeless initiative on the other line, a group I'm sure you would be delighted to have support you; hold on for just one more moment."

Click. "Representative Grand! As we discussed, now that you've agreed to support the campaign, we've found you political alliance with Representative Silverman and he'll expect support on his sex trafficking bill. Yes, I appreciate it. Thank you."

Click. Lexa moves her cell phone to her ear this time.

"Hi, Miss Hunter. I'm sorry I had you on hold for so long, I've been on conference calls with Representatives Grand and Silverman and Senator Marcus Kane from Virginia. Yes, I'm aware they don't see eye-to-eye but it has been a very interesting discussion. I'd love to speak with you more about it, but for now, we can expect a positive article about Representative Griffin's immigration platform, correct? Great, thank you."

Click.

"Hold on!" Clarke snaps, before Lexa can press the next flashing "hold" button on the desk phone. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Rallying your public support to counter the pictures," Lexa replies simply. "Just watch."

Click.

"Thank you for holding, Congressman Nogales, I've spoken with the LGBT+ Homeless Coalition and they've agreed to make a public endorsement to your re-election campaign, as long as you support their chosen Senate candidate, Representative Clarke Griffin... Absolutely."

Lexa switches phones once more, with a nod at Clarke as if to imply this will be the last one. "Yes, Mr. Black, I have spoken to Congressman Nogales and he agrees that a partnership would benefit both himself and the LGBT+ Youth Homeless Initiative. For you?" She frowns. "Of course. You'd get his public support following his re-election. I also have potential interest from Representative Grand. If that's not enough, how else could I make the deal better?"

Whatever they tell her, Lexa's chin lifts and her jaw tightens. Clarke, burning with curiosity steps closer as if she would be able to hear the conversation even from across the room.

"Yes, that can be arranged," Lexa says with a clipped voice. "When all parties agree, I will confirm with you. Thank you."

Finally, Lexa hangs up the phone and the last of the flashing lights disappear. She tosses her cell phone onto the desk and leans her elbows onto the mess of notepads and papers, tenting her fingers and resting her chin on them to observe Clarke.
It takes a moment before Clarke realizes Lexa is waiting for Clarke to comment on the display.

"Well-handled," she says with a nod.

There is an undercurrent of sarcasm there, an intentional under-reaction from Clarke, that only Lexa would pick up on. "I don't care what it takes, nothing is better than political support when your character is being attacked by the public. So the agreements, threats, anything. I do what needs to be done."

“Glamorous,” Clarke offers dryly. “Very ethical, too.”

“Politics,” Lexa shoots back in the same tone. “None of it crosses the line but it would raise eyebrows. But that’s why I’m the one handling it, not you. You keep clean hands.”

Clarke crosses her hands over her chest, turning petulant and defiant. “I don’t mind doing it either.”

Dropping her pen, Lexa sighs and sits back in her chair. “You have enough responsibilities to focus on without needing to manipulate other politicians into your favor,” she says, not unkindly. But then her eyes drop down to the folder in Clarke’s hands and her brow furrows, her tone sharpens. “…Which is why it’s odd that you’re hand delivering that report when I just hired you half a dozen new college interns last week to take care of things like this.”

She’s caught. Clarke doesn’t try to hide it. With a glance over her shoulder to make sure none of her staffers are close enough to hear, Clarke admits it: “I wanted to check on you. Miller told me you haven’t—that you’ve been too busy for the search for a CM replacement.”

Lexa arches one eyebrow, then waves a hand over her cluttered and messy desk. "I have been. But now you have the support of two representatives and a congressman, and a new article from Niylah Hunter, amidst this mess. I'll get to the campaign manager replacement search after lunch today.”

Clarke wants to press again with "I wanted to check on you," wants to make it personal and find out how Lexa is really doing—but she can’t do that anymore. Instead she tries to read the lines in Lexa’s face, the tightness in her jaw and the way she chews the inside of her cheek. But before she can make any judgement on it all, Lexa speaks up again:

"Did you get any further on who might have leaked the pictures?"

And again, the thought rings in her mind before she can stop it: trading pictures for employment seems a sure-fire way to land a job at another big campaign when you’ve made the decision to leave your first one for sleeping with your boss.

She hates herself for thinking it.

"Raven and I worked on it all weekend," Clarke says automatically, "And I went over the staff files this morning with Miller, but Raven and I have decided the best bet is to pull anything else down and ride it out. It'll be virtually impossible to find out who leaked them at this point, but we're going to keep looking."

She watches Lexa’s face carefully throughout, looking for tells; she isn't expecting Lexa to give anything away, so she gets a tiny jolt of shock when Lexa purses her lips and raises her chin, eyes dark. She starts to speak, but the topic is beginning to eat away at Clarke again and she's not sure what she wants to hear Lexa say, so she changes the topic.

"You were speaking to the LGBT+ Youth Homeless Initiative, right? What did they want in addition to support?"

"From who?" Clarke presses.

"Nia Azgeda."

She forgets everything about the photos in that half second.

"You're kidding."

"No." The gears in Lexa's head start to turn as she rolls out her strategy like a true chess player. "Nia Azgeda, perennially conservative, usually on the side of people like Cage Wallace, comes out and announces her support of them. Then they owe us a favor. So, they donate to Nogales's re-election, and he owes us a favor. Then he supports us. It's simple." Lexa reaches for her phone. "So, we need to meet with her and Roan, probably over lunch."

"We?" Clarke asks in surprise. Lexa nods.

"We."

For the rest of the day, Clarke works on her debate talking points with her department chiefs, but it feels hollow against the backdrop of growing controversy around the campaign—each hour she spends not trying to find the culprit feels like an hour wasted. Eventually she has Sarah hold all of her calls to stop the inundation of interview requests from reminding her of the situation, but even then she goes through the motions with the department heads. On the ride home, she bounces topics off of a genial Ryder; in her apartment, she rehearses to her reflection in the dark floor-to-ceiling windows.

When she gets Lexa's text, she feels the strangest rush of relief, if only to have something else to think about:

[10:10 PM] Lexa Ward: Lunch with NA and RA tomorrow, 1pm, Marcello's downtown. Press will be out in force; wear business casual, cool colors.

*

"Don't let emotion get in the way of this," Lexa says quietly.

She has no reason to keep her voice so low, as their lunch table has been set away from the rest of the restaurant patrons and Nia and Roan have not yet arrived, but she remains conspiratorial nonetheless.

"I'll be fine," is Clarke's curt reply.

She's never met Nia Azgeda; neither of them have. Lexa arranged the situation in a matter of a few days after a meeting with Roan and a few phone calls with the congresswoman's publicity team and personal aides. Clarke doesn't agree with all of her politics, but her power and her appeal, well...that aspect is invaluable for a young politician, a fact she admits through gritted teeth. But she can remain logical.

Lexa angles her head down and drops her voice even lower, warmer. "I know it's a personal topic
"Isn't it for you?"

"Of course," she says. "But you're the impassioned one; that's why you're the politician and I'm the strategist."

For how long? Clarke wants to snap. She doesn't because, for one, she's already made that childish move and secondly, she already knows how long. It's Tuesday, Lexa's two weeks will be up Friday—they have four days left.

"I'll be fine," she repeats, and Lexa doesn't press her after that. They fall into thoughtful silence, Clarke contemplating the possibility of her losing her cool and standing up to the dynastic politician; Lexa's thoughts mysterious as always but betraying her usual strategizing.

It doesn't sink in until that moment the importance of this lunch: keep her cool, and Clarke wins a series of major political endorsements; tell Nia Azgeda what she really thinks, and Clarke Griffin is nothing more than a senate candidate with a brazen streak a mile long and a newly-surfaced party-girl history, and one less media-savvy fake boyfriend.

A burst of activity from the journalists loitering outside the long windows of the restaurant signals the arrival of Clarke and Lexa's lunch guests. The two girls sit up straighter, if that were possible.

Power and appeal. The congresswoman exudes it, even from across the room. And influence. And affluence. She looks like a Silver-screen era star, born and raised in Hollywood; it's no wonder this woman agreed to a media relationship for her son, who looks equally rich beside her, but far less icy and determined. Roan already looks bored, despite his immaculate apparel, and a spike of amusement shoots through Clarke's focus.

"Congresswoman Azgeda," Lexa says in greeting.

They rise to greet the mother and son. Nia is even taller in person, and when she smiles, there's no coldness to it, but it also lacks warmth. This is all business for her. It has to be, for anyone who has been in politics for as long as she has.

"Miss Griffin," Nia replies, shaking Clarke's hand before looking to Lexa. "And…?"

"Lexa Ward," Clarke answers, "My campaign manager."

She can't keep the acid from creeping into her voice; there's no doubt in her mind some aide told Nia the names of the two she would be meeting with, and someone like Nia doesn't forget names when they're important, but pretending to forget the names of people one considers unimportant is a standard move.

"You're running an excellent campaign, Miss Ward," Nia says. "Miss Griffin is lucky to have you. Perhaps you should work for my son, when his career begins."

"We'll see," Lexa says. "Roan, nice to see you again."

"You as well." He nods to her, leaning in to give Clarke a short kiss on the cheek—photographers outside snap their pictures and then Clarke sits down hurriedly, cheeks burning. The other three follow her lead.

"Well, it's nice to finally meet my son's significant other," Nia begins, her tone the same as when she forgot Lexa's name.
"It's a pleasure to meet such an illustrious politician," Clarke counters stiffly. She can do cool. She can manage. At Lexa's request.

Nia smiles. "Roan refused the meeting for too long."

"You always did say I was protective, Mother," Roan says, cryptic. Nia ignores it.

The pleasantries continue for some time, each bit of small-talk more irksome than the last. She can do cool. But she—and Lexa, in fact—have never suffered idle conversation like this; they have more important things to attend to. The four of them get all the way to the soup and salad before Clarke is ready to drop the facade, but luckily, Nia seems to reach her limit as well.

"So, tell me about the campaign," she says presently. She clearly knows this isn't a personal meeting—she wants to know why.

"It's going well."

"You've had some troubles in the press lately," Nia says, quiet amusement sparking in her eyes. "Have you addressed that yet? I haven't read the papers today."

She can hear Lexa's voice: tread carefully. "If you or I addressed every rumor that others spread, we would never get anywhere in our careers."

Nia nods, reaching for her water glass. "A good position. But some are worthy of comment. I would sincerely hate for these rumors to affect your personal and political relationships. Or to infect your acquaintances."

If this affects my son, you will regret it.

Clear message. Lexa picks up the slack for Clarke: "Fortunately, political endorsements from respected figures like yourself carry more weight than unsubstantiated rumors in a smear campaign."

"Conditional endorsements."

"Mutually beneficial endorsements," Lexa replies icily. "Politics are more cut-throat than they were thirty years ago, survival in this world requires alliances now."

The temperature in the restaurant must fall twenty degrees with the way Nia studies Lexa over the rim of her water glass: worthy opponent or victim to be devoured? But Lexa meets it with equal force. Nia's observation then switches to Clarke and never before has Clarke stared anyone down with this amount of stoicism. The room is colder, but Clarke's skin is burning and tingling after watching Lexa—Nia's stare is nothing.

"A good politician chooses alliances and enemies well," Nia finally says, and it's too non-committal to escalate the situation. "And, based on how they benefit her. I expect that's why I've been summoned today."

Clarke opens her mouth to dismiss that—play it cool—but Nia scoffs before she can get the words out. "Come on," she says. "Neither of you have the experience I have, you're not fooling me. I know what this is. You give my son credence in the political world and rehabilitate his image—"

"Mother-"

Nia ignores him and continues: "In addition to supporting my future political endeavors. In turn, I lend my name and power to yours and support your plans. Since I have no need of you yet and the
plan for Roan's influence is working—revelation of Miss Griffin's colorful past aside—it must mean you want something from me. So, what is it?"

Ten seconds of silence.

The possible replies roll through Clarke's mind, ranging from cool to impassioned, but, unsure of which to settle on, she glances to Lexa. Her campaign manager remains determinedly set on Nia, but Nia's eyes follow the movement from Clarke to Lexa. Her gaze flicks back and forth between them, curiously studying them as a pair where before she had sized them up as individuals. Clarke worries, for a moment, that she gave something away...

Then Lexa breaks the silence. "We want your support," she says bluntly.

"In?"

"We have a new partnership with a homeless LGBT youth initiative."

"No."

Lexa stiffens and Clarke nearly shouts in protest—Roan just sinks into his chair.

"No?" Clarke asks, barely composed.

"No." Nia sits forward. "I've cultivated too many "alliances" and partaken in too many initiatives against such movements to throw that away now to support my son's girlfriend."

"That's exactly why they want you," Lexa says, body almost rigid. "To show your anti-equality position can be reversed. To show that people like Cage Wallace, one of your allies, is behind the times. That if someone like you can change, someone like him must change or be left behind."

Nia makes her fatigue known with a heavy sigh. "They want me because I'm the most powerful person either of you have access to," she growls. "I will not compromise my political beliefs for something like this."

"Your personal beliefs," Clarke points out quietly.

"Excuse me?"

"You align with party positions on all but a few key issues—those clearly affected by your personal beliefs and friendships. Like homophobia, and your friendship with Cage Wallace."

Nia narrows her eyes. "Do you think it's wise to accuse people more powerful than you of something like that, Miss Griffin?"

"When it matters." Clarke digs her heels in. "You see, I'm—"

"Clarke," Lexa warns.

She bites the inside of her cheek and runs her tongue along the edges of her teeth, struggling to abide by Lexa's earlier command and her present reminder of it. "I'm passionate about this," she finally revises. "And it would be a platform issue for me if the California majority didn't already consider it common sense."

"Which is an excellent reason for you to support it," Lexa adds.

"I will not," Nia says.
"This current agreement depends on it."
"Do you think I can't achieve a similar agreement elsewhere?"
"I don't," Clarke says coolly. "If you—"
"Is that a threat?"
"Only if you take it as one. We—"
"You are on thin ice. And this is absurd."
"Can you let her speak, Congresswoman?" Lexa snaps through gritted teeth.
"Can you reconsider your position in this?" Nia shoots back.
"Can you?" Lexa replies with a cock of her eyebrow.
"Can I get a whiskey?" Roan begs a passing waiter.

Nia scoffs in exasperation, pulling her attention away from Lexa. "Roan, it is one in the afternoon. Act the way you are expected to."
"I'm sorry, Mother. Clarke, would you like a whiskey?"

The way this is going, she's half-tempted to reply in the affirmative when Lexa reads her mind: out of sight beneath the table, she places a hand on Clarke's thigh and gives a slight warning squeeze, which absolutely erases all coherent thought from Clarke's head. It takes her a second to shake her head and Lexa withdraws her hand, but it takes Clarke several moments after that to regain control of her thoughts.

And it's fine, because Lexa takes over for her.

"First of all, you will refer to her as Representative Griffin," Lexa says quietly. Nia looks incredulous as she turns back to Lexa but something in Lexa's voice prevents her from replying. "Second, you will support our initiatives if you have any hope for future success in a political field. Positions of power and influence can change extremely quickly in a world that is so affected by public perception—you recognize this, or else you wouldn't have agreed to this situation in the first place.

"People like you, with your personal beliefs and your political history, need people like Representative Griffin if you have any hope of surviving. She needs you for an election, yes, but she is powerful in her own right; your power wanes with each new politician like Representative Griffin elected. Each time you refuse to progress with the rest of society, you become more obsolete. What Representative Griffin and I are suggesting benefits us, and more importantly benefits at-risk youth in need, but it also saves your political career by making you at least look like you have a shred of basic human decency. If you are adamant about remaining in the past, we can end this whole situation right now and with it, end your career. Or, you can take the necessary steps to stay alive in a world that is trying to leave people like you behind."

With the utter shock and incomprehension with which Nia Azgeda stares at Lexa Ward, one would think Lexa just punched her in the face.

"It's your choice," Lexa finishes. "Congresswoman."

Clarke and Roan stare too. She can't be sure which emotion flares across Roan's face, but Clarke
can feel pure admiration and astonishment and reverence shoot down her spine like she’s been
electrocuted, coalescing into a warm weight that curls low in her abdomen and reminds her of things
she’s tried to make herself forget for a long while now. She lets out a long breath.

Slowly, gradually, *glacially*, Nia turns to Clarke, her face completely unreadable. Clarke’s heart is
pounding.

“Representative Griffin.” Nia chokes on every syllable. *Victory.* “Your campaign manager—”

“She has a name.”

Nia looks murderous: she forces out the words. “Miss Ward makes an excellent point. I agree to
support your various LGBT initiatives. Please send me the necessary information.”

“Absolutely. Thank you, Congresswoman.”

*

Clarke doesn’t say anything to Lexa as Nia requests the check and makes incredibly forced small-
talk for the next ten minutes. She doesn’t say anything as Roan and Nia leave the table and exit the
restaurant without a backward glance. She doesn’t say anything about the two glasses of whiskey
that get delivered to the table a few moments later, courtesy of “the gentleman seated with you both.”

She waits until they’re in the town car with only Gustus and Ryder in the front seat to overhear them.

“So. Who’s the impassioned one now?” Clarke mutters to Lexa with a smirk.

Lexa laughs and rolls her eyes. “Still you.”

“Oh sure.”

She lets it go though, because her heart is still beating hard against the inside of her chest and she can
feel her pulse throughout her body--what Lexa just did, Clarke lives for as a politician. The rush of a
battle won the clean way against a distasteful but necessary ally is what keeps her in this job.

She wants to praise Lexa for it, tell her how much she loved it and how it proves she’s the most
necessary part of this campaign. She wants to say she can’t lose her. But maybe Lexa already knows:
the fire in her eyes suggests she feels the same as Clarke. There’s still work to do, however. Before
Clarke can say much of anything, much less articulate her deeper and more conflicting emotions,
Lexa pulls out her cell phone and swipes across the screen.

“I need to call the LGBT group, let them know about the arrangement with Nia,” she says. “It’ll only
take a second.”

As Lexa dials the number, Clarke forces her own adrenaline down and reminds herself to focus on
her job too, since they still have another eight hours left in this day before they get to go home. She
reaches for her cell phone as well, to find three messages waiting for her.

[2:20 PM] Roan Azgeda: Ward is brilliant. You two work well together. She’ll get you a presidency
one day. I appreciate the number she did on my mother, too, but be aware she won’t forget this.

Smirking, Clarke texts out a short reply.
The next message down comes from Sarah. Journalists are beginning to catch on to the fact that Clarke’s photos are being leaked, and that is a far more interesting story than the photos themselves—they’re begging for comment. Clarke ignores that one for the time being. She clicks into the third message and is surprised to find it’s from Raven.

[2:01 PM] Raven Reyes: Hey, do you have a second to talk? It’s important. Call me when you can. I need to talk to you.

Lexa is deep in conversation about the LGBT initiative’s endorsement of Clarke; glancing forward, she sees Gustus and Ryder similarly distracted in the front seats. Work can wait, Clarke decides, tapping Raven’s name. She picks up on the first ring.

“Clarke.”

“Raven? What’s wrong? Did you get something on the pictures?”

Beside her, Lexa stiffens and pauses in her conversation, but Clarke doesn’t give her any acknowledgement: the single syllable of Clarke’s name was filled with distress when Raven answered. Something is wrong.

“It’s not about the pictures,” Raven says. “I just needed to...fuck, I hate this job, Clarke. I’m hiding out in the women’s bathroom because I am this close to losing it and I really need you to talk me down right now.”

“What happened?” Clarke demands, no less worried. Enraged as Raven sounds, Clarke knows her well enough to hear the possibility of tears in her voice.

“They cut my funding!” she shouts. “Pulled me completely off one project and cut funding to two others. All three of my most recent designs, trashed. And the other one? Wick has been added to “oversee” me. He’s going to get half the credit for none of the work. My work.” Her rant cuts off in a strangled cry of rage and the thump of a fist against a tiled bathroom wall. “This place treats me like shit.”

“Quit,” Clarke says automatically. “Fuck them. They don’t deserve you, or even a two week’s notice.”

What is happening? Lexa mouths to her; Clarke holds up a hand.

Raven laughs humorlessly. “I would in a heartbeat if I could. I barely make enough for rent and food, I haven’t saved enough to survive between jobs. I’m just sick of the comments about my body and sick of being treated like less. I work twice as hard for half as much and my funding still goes to people less qualified. I hate it.”

Moments before, Clarke had adrenaline and success coursing through her; now it all acts as an accelerant for the fire that ignites in her chest. She doesn’t even fully form the idea in her head before she’s going ahead with it.

“Raven, are you still at work?”

“Yeah. Women’s bathroom. It’s safe in her because I’m the only damn woman who works here.”

“I’m ten minutes away. Hold on.”
“Wait, what?”

“I’ll talk to you in a minute.”

Raven gives more bewildered protest, none of which dissuades Clarke or gets her to give more details. After they hang up, Lexa’s confusion is much louder.

“What the hell happened?”

Clarke ignores her and leans forward to her driver. “Gustus, I need you to take us to 18th and Wilder, please.”

“Is Raven okay?” Lexa presses. “Did she find out anything about the pictures?”

Clarke’s blood thrums in her ears and she’s so set on this half-cocked idea that she can’t answer, she just shakes her head. “You’ll see, just hold on. I have to deal with this.”

“Clarke…what are you doing?”

“She doesn’t deserve this.”

“Talk to me.”

“I’m going to fix something for her.”

“Clarke, if you’re going to do something drastic, stop and think first.”

None of it works on her single-minded focus. She directs Gustus to double park in front of the building she points out, and then she scrambles out of the car and storms up the front steps, with Lexa close on her heels. She’s still muttering warnings, and trying to reign in some of the alarm and frustration that radiates off of her—Clarke ignores it all. She’s doing this, this half-cocked plan, with or without Lexa.

The high-speed elevator opens to the floor of Raven’s engineering firm and Clarke begins her rampage.

“State Representative Clarke Griffin, she greets man at the front desk, with no politeness and enough force to make him jump in alarm. “I need to speak to Raven Reyes’s supervisor immediately. Whoever her superior is. And I will not wait,” she adds, when he opens his mouth to speak.

He gives half a terrified nod before she’s marching through the door to the right of his desk and onto the main office floor.

“Sinclair! I’d like to speak to you.” She’s met Raven’s boss once or twice, just enough to recognize him when she sees him. Since she doesn’t spot Raven in her first sweep of the office, she heads right for her boss instead. He’s standing over the cubicle of a blonde man Clarke has never met but for some reason feels like she can identify from Raven’s rants alone. Both men turn at the sound of Sinclair’s name and their eyes widen at the ferocity of Clarke’s approach.

“State Rep Clarke Griffin,” she says again for her introduction, “Candidate for Senator this election. This is my senior campaign manager and strategist, Lexa Ward.”

“Uh, h-hi,” Sinclair stammers. “What can I—”

“Where’s Raven Reyes?”
“She should be at her desk—”

“Clarke?”

It’s the voice she wants to hear; she spins, relief flooding her chest, to see Raven emerging from a hallway, red-eyed but wearing fresh make-up. Her brow furrows in confusion when she sees Clarke in full confrontational mode with Sinclair, her eyes darting between them, to Lexa, to Wick, asking for answers.

“Raven,” Clarke calls. “I’d like to offer you a job working on my campaign.”

They’ve been roommates and friends for years, more than enough time for Clarke to see the minute flash of elation on Raven’s face—and that is enough for her. She turns back to Sinclair, vindicated and electrified and full of her original vitriol. “Raven Reyes will no longer be working for Mecha Engineering and Construction,” she announces. “She’ll be taking a full employment position in my campaign and among my permanent staffers instead. In addition to her technical expertise, she’ll be in charge of vetting and recruiting government engineering contracts from local firms and firms around the world, all of which would be lucky to have her employed there.”

Wick and Sinclair stare at Clarke as if she’s just punched them in the face. All around her, heads begin to pop up over cubicles, forming an audience for this grand performance. Raven looks just as stunned, but Lexa stands by Clarke’s side without wavering.

“And what’s more,” Clarke continues, louder and more forcefully. “Linda Alvaro is the incoming director of city planning. I know her personally and I will encourage her to continue her policy of strict reviews of firms that submit city contracts. In an effort to encourage diversity and equality, she refuses any and all contracts from firms with any history of discriminatory policies or behavior, or poor workplace demographics. I’m sure you will be under review for a long time.”

And with that, she gives the final flourish. “Pack your desk. The car is outside.”

Raven just nods, dumbstruck. Then Lexa takes them all by surprise by speaking up from behind Clarke. “If you need, Gustus and Ryder are downstairs and would be happy to help you carry anything out.”

Raven nods again.

“I’ll go get them.”

Lexa excuses herself. Clarke doesn’t say another word to Sinclair or Wick, just walks at Raven’s side through the silent office, ignoring the stares they get until they arrive at her cubicle. They quickly pack her files, drawings, personal pictures, and electronics into two large boxes, and by the time the hulking figures of Gustus and Ryder arrive with Lexa, Raven is ready to go. The stares only become more blatant now that the tiny angry blonde and the two women with her are flanked by two huge bodyguards carrying boxes.

No one says a single thing against any of them, and then Raven is free.

It’s silent in the elevator on the way down, silent through the lobby, all the way out to the car. Raven climbs in first as Clarke holds the door open for her, but Lexa’s touch on Clarke’s shoulder stops her before she climbs in after her. In a quiet moment with no one else watching, Lexa leans close.

“Now who’s impassioned?”

Clarke laughs. “Still you.”
Lexa’s eyes are sparkling and she tries to fight back a small grin. “Sure. Let’s get back to the office, we’re already a half hour behind.”

Clarke didn’t really think through the plan past her triumphant exit from the engineering firm after rescuing Raven, and she doesn’t put much thought into it on the drive back to campaign headquarters. Raven finds her voice about halfway there, and after a shocked, disbelieving thank you, she launches into a cathartic rant against her former employers and co-workers. She peppers the insults about Wick with gratitude toward Clarke and even Lexa for what happened.

It’s only once they get into the office that Clarke comes up with some sort of role for Raven. “Monty!” she calls, attracting the attention of every staffer in the vicinity. Raven and Lexa follow Clarke through the maze of cubicles until they come upon Monty’s space, where he, Jasper, and Dax are reclining in their desk chairs. All three immediately sit up at Clarke’s arrival, but she waves them away.

“Monty, Jasper, Dax, I just hired Raven,” she explains without ceremony. “She’ll be working as a jack of all trades, but for now, Monty, she’ll be taking point with you on the leaked photo situation.”

Raven couldn’t be happier to be set to work so quickly, and on something where she has complete freedom. “Ready to start cyberstalking some ex-boyfriends, guys?”

“Glad to have you, Raven,” Monty says with a smile.

“Been a while, Reyes,” Jasper adds. They both know her from UCLA, but Dax is new; he stands to shake her hand.

“The pictures, you said?” he asks. “Are you a computer person, like Monty?”

“Kinda,” Raven says with a smirk. “Monty’s much nicer and more ethical than I am.”

“That’s why he’ll set you up at a desk,” Clarke tells her. “I have to get to some journalist requests that Sarah has for me, but when you’re set and you want to talk about how we’re going to go about the pictures, come get me.”

Raven nods; before Clarke can turn to walk away, Raven takes them all by surprise by pulling Clarke into a quick hug.

“Thank you, Clarke,” she whispers. “Love you.”

“Love you too, Raven.”

On the way back to her office, Clarke picks up the requests from the journalists from Sarah and takes them into her office, but she tosses them onto her desk without a second glance. She’ll worry about them once she has a name. Instead she sinks into her chair, dropping her head into her hands. What a day.

Lexa, who has followed her into the office, shuts the door carefully behind them and leans against it. She regards her for a long time, studying her, before she finally speaks.

“What you did in the engineering firm was stupid, and impressive.”

“Why, thank you,” Clarke replies sarcastically.

Lexa gives a soft laugh. “At this point I shouldn’t be shocked that you will go through hell and swing way above your weight class to get what you want, but you continue to take me by surprise.
The kind of person who does that for a friend is the kind I would vote for.”

“I fight for what I consider important. That’s why I do all of this, Lexa.” She hesitates, then goes all in. “And I’d rather have you working with me over voting for me. Have you given any thought to your resignation? You can still withdraw it, if you want.”

She already knows Lexa’s answer, and she’s shaking her head in surrender before Lexa even says it; her campaign manager says it anyway. “After what happened, Clarke…”

“I know. I know.”

It kills her to hear the apology in Lexa’s voice, as if this were her fault. Clarke could have controlled herself better, could have shut down her feelings—and then she wouldn’t have lost the best asset of any campaign.

“Well,” she says, trying for some silver lining. “If I’m losing you I might as well promote Raven into the spot. Save me from going through the hiring process. I’ll talk to Miller in the morning.”

“Raven?” Lexa asks sharply.

“Yeah. Bellamy was a personal friend from college who managed my campaign the first time,” Clarke explains. “In name. I did most of the work. I don’t see why I can’t do that again, especially since we’re already halfway through.”

“That...sounds like a great idea,” Lexa says stiffly. “I’ll start compiling lists of tasks, ideas, and contacts for her.”

“Thanks, Lexa.”

“Of course, Miss Griffin.”

They have three days left together after this and Lexa is back to forced formality. Clarke’s heart sinks in her chest.

*

Three days left with Lexa.

One week until the next debate.

Two and a half weeks until the primary election, where the field will be narrowed down to just two candidates—Cage Wallace and his democratic opponent.

This chaotic calendar that hangs over Clarke’s head every single day is the source of her headaches and her sleepless nights, so of course she seeks to combat that by working harder. She gets up earlier for her gym sessions and she gets to the office well before seven each morning. Raven, bursting with loyalty for Clarke and her famous resolve to find the source of the leaked pictures, shows up not long after Clarke and they spend most of the early hours going over possible sources from Clarke’s past.

Finn, Clarke’s ex, is Raven’s favorite option from outside the campaign; Clarke still tends toward an internal source. She reasons that if it’s Lexa, they won’t have much longer until they find out; the pictures will come out en masse in a few weeks if Lexa gets hired on at another campaign.
Each morning for those next three days until the end of the week, Lexa arrives at campaign HQ well after Clarke and Raven and well before the rest of the employees. When she walks through the open door of Clarke’s office on that first day, she stops short, surprised to see Raven and Clarke bent over Raven’s laptop. She excuses herself after short pleasantries, and Clarke doesn’t go looking for her, too distracted by the program Raven is showing her.

The second day, it happens again: Lexa arrives after Clarke and Raven, this time entering Clarke’s office with two coffees in hand.

“Oh—morning, Raven. Representative Griffin.”

Clarke cringes at the sound of that. She leans away from Raven and studies the surprise on Lexa’s face, as if she’s shocked that Raven coming in early wasn’t just a one-off. “Hi, Miss Ward. How are you?”

“I picked up coffee,” Lexa says shortly, looking down at the two cups. “For you, and Raven.”

Her manners are too refined, it’s almost supernatural. Clarke knows Lexa’s coffee order and she knows what Lexa’s coffees look like—Lexa had bought the first for Clarke and the second for herself, but she hands them both over to Clarke and Raven as if it were always the plan.

The third day, that Friday, Lexa walks into the office with three coffees.

Starting the day with caffeine and the sight of Lexa like that usually ensures the first six hours breeze by. But coffee can’t help the feeling that rips through her chest when she meets Lexa’s eyes for the first time that day, the way the coffee is an apology and a last-day gift all in one. A heavy, pressing sense of loss crashes down on her when Lexa quietly excuses herself from the office after that.

It’s Lexa’s last day with the campaign, her last day with Clarke. And nothing is going to change that fact.

Most of her morning goes to other activities. She can compartmentalize. She’d worked on it all through her gym session and all morning while prepping for the debate. Lexa’s busy, too; Clarke has no idea what she’s doing and that makes it easier to avoid thinking about going to her.

But the moment Clarke gets a break, her feet carry her automatically to the other side of the office.

“Hey,” Clarke calls softly, poking her head into Lexa’s doorway.

Lexa looks up from her immaculate desk. It’s bare save for her laptop, with most of her belongings already packed away in boxes already, but it appears she’s taking a break from packing. “Hi,” she says quietly. “What do you need?”

Clarke could answer that question a hundred different ways.

“Nothing,” she says instead, after considering a few dozen. “I just wanted to check in and make sure….see that everything is going as it should.”

“It is. How’s Raven doing?”

And the lilt on Raven’s name makes Clarke raise an eyebrow, just for the briefest of moments—it is a strange, uncharacteristic tone from Lexa, not something Clarke wants to name because jealousy sounds so petty for someone so striking and resplendent. Surely, not Lexa.

“She’s…fine. She’s doing fine.”
“Good.”

“We’ll be sorry to see you leave, you know” Clarke says, more officially. And god, it’s so shallow. So expected. The lines and movements of a standard resignation and final day but no acknowledgement of the monumental shift that Lexa has caused in Clarke’s state of existence, in her personal and private life. As if she feels it too, Lexa takes a deep breath, standing to walk around to the front of her desk and lean back against it. Clarke leans against the doorway, but they’ve never felt so out of sync.

Lexa just nods. “One day, when you’re not so busy, we should get lunch, and catch up. I’ll be following the campaign, obviously.”

“I think we could,” Clarke says with a polite nod. “We’ll keep in touch.”

No one who ever says they’ll keep in touch actually does keep in touch. It’s just the kind of thing people say. They both know it.

That Friday afternoon, Clarke exercises her executive privilege for the first time in the entire campaign, and leaves the office early.

*

With everything that’s happened in the past two weeks, with everything that’s going to happen in the next two weeks before the election, Clarke is desperate for a distraction.

She has mountains of work. Emails to return, talking points to rehearse, budgets to balance even though she has a whole team to worry about that sort of thing. She could trawl the internet for old pictures of herself, the way Raven has been. Anything to jump start her weekend and get ahead of the massive crush of work facing her on Monday as they go into the final two weeks before the election.

Hell, being busy might even get her mind off Lexa for a few hours, Lexa and the aching sense of loss.

But Clarke also has a couch. A couch that is too large and too comfortable to be used as infrequently as Clarke uses it. Likewise, her energy bill is too low for the size of the apartment because she never spends time here. And most importantly, she has a bottle of wine that will do just as satisfactory a job of making her forget about Lexa. For a few hours. Hopefully.

Maybe.

She’s still going to try. So Clarke takes her usual scalding shower early tonight. She dries her hair and pulls it up into a messy bun, slips into soft grey sweatpants she wears about as often as she uses the couch and turns on the second season of The Walking Dead, which has remained untouched on her DVR for years, much to the chagrin of her friends and colleagues. Until tonight. With a glass of wine cradled against her shoulder and the rest of bottle on the table, Clarke curls up under a blanket to start a series catch-up she knows she’ll never finish.

"It gives me something to aim for when all else is lost," she mumbles to herself, fast-forwarding through the opening credits.
She’s fifteen minutes and one glass of wine into the first episode when she hears a knock at the door.

Something in her knows who it is before she answers—that doesn’t stop her sharp intake of breath when she pulls open her front door to see Lexa standing there. Lexa’s eyes, focused on the floor, widen as they raise over Clarke’s body to meet her gaze and match her surprise, as if she doesn’t quite know what she is doing there either and didn’t expect to find Clarke in anything but business casual (which is what Lexa wears herself, heels and all). Lexa freezes, lips slightly parted.


Lexa stays frozen as if she hadn’t heard the stumbling greeting, and then all of the words pour out at once.

“I’d like to withdraw my resignation and stay on as manager of your campaign.”

Clarke nearly swears again. Lexa is all nerves, drinking in Clarke’s appearance wondrously while lines of worry slowly crease her forehead—as if Clarke would ever reject her. Clarke wants to reach out to her, reassure her, say something—there are a million ways she could reply—but in that moment, all she can do, with the surging rush of relief and happiness in her chest, is give a half-laugh.

“And you couldn’t just call?”

Lexa's eyes widen. "I--"

Clarke shakes her head, cringing at herself. “Bad time for a joke,” she says quickly, before her voice softens. “I’d…like you to stay too.”

Whatever Lexa rehearsed in planning this, she needs to get it out; she doesn’t let Clarke say anything else before she launches into it. “I stand by the fact that it will always be difficult to work together after…” She swallows hard but doesn’t take her eyes from Clarke’s. “After what happened. But after these past two weeks, facing the reality of leaving the campaign has become much more difficult to deal with. You’re going to become California’s youngest ever senator, and I will help you get there, no matter what happens. I’m in this through the end, Clarke, because this is more than a job to me and I won’t risk losing it again.”

“Lexa—”

“And I had to tell you this in person; a phone call didn’t feel right,” she finishes, the rambling fading away to silence.

Maybe that wasn’t rehearsed.

“I accept,” Clarke declares without a moment of hesitation.

Really, she should have said it the moment Lexa told her, but in the space after Lexa’s announcement Clarke couldn’t come up with the two simple words among the jumble of “thank god” and “the staff needs you” and “you mean everything to me” and “don’t do that again.” It took her all of Lexa’s speech just to come back down to earth.

The way the worry slips from Lexa’s face with Clarke’s unconditional acceptance makes her initial mistake of hesitation worth it—her lips turn up at the corners and her green eyes shine their relief. She looks down to try to hide the smile, but Clarke knows.

“I just—”
“Do you want to come in?” Clarke asks.

It might be a bad idea but with the way she feels right now, she could face any consequences without faltering.

Another shadow of doubt flickers over across Lexa’s face—she looks up and glances past Clarke into the apartment, as if it’s a trap, as if she’s not supposed to be here, but when she looks back to Clarke, her resolve vanishes. She nods.

Clarke makes the mistake of inhaling as Lexa steps past her, and that’s the moment she realizes that this is indeed a bad idea. The scent of Lexa’s perfume sends her back to that night, upending her world with flashes of the dark hotel room and Lexa’s long hair between her fingers and the smell of her as Clarke kissed her neck. God, she smells good. It’s enough to ruin her but not enough to stop her.

As Lexa walks ahead into the apartment, Clarke hangs back a second to lock the door and clear her head. The wine, she thinks. She’s already had one glass, she absolutely cannot have another, not with the way the night has changed. As she rests her head against the cool wood of the front door, she makes the resolution to herself, affirming it once, twice, three times.

Then Lexa’s amused voice floats back to her.

“Wow, wine and The Walking Dead?”

“Yes,” Clarke answers automatically. “Would you like a glass?”

Christ, Griffin.

Naturally, Lexa accepts. There’s still an element of nervousness in her face when Clarke returns from the kitchen with an empty glass and fills them both, but she relaxes once Clarke hands her a full glass and she’s able to take a sip.

Trying to cover for herself, Clarke doesn’t set the bottle back down on the coffee table, even though Lexa has already seen it and knows damn well what Clarke’s plans for the night were. The sweatpants and messy hair only add to the picture. Lexa’s smirk gives her thoughts away, even though Clarke gives her a warning glare.

“So,” she says, all feigned innocence and curiosity, “TV binging, is that a new method of debate prep?”

“It is, actually,” is Clarke’s sarcastic reply.

Lexa cocks a brow. “So I could test you and you’d have it all down? We could hold the debate right now?”

She’s already jumping right back into the manager duties, and Clarke can’t really complain because Lexa as anything other than campaign manager tonight would only exacerbate the problems that arose when Clarke made the mistake of inviting her through the front door. As much as Clarke wanted a night free of politics, that kind of night can’t include Lexa Ward if she wants to keep her.

“Try me,” she says.

Lexa nods to the kitchen table where Clarke’s father’s chess set still sits from weeks ago. “How about we skip the bloody TV watching and play another game?”
“As if that will be any less bloody, Yale,” Clarke grumbles, but she agrees, if only to put a table and marble chess set between her and Lexa.

One game. Lexa takes it easily. Clarke swears that it’s because of the disparaging looks Lexa gives anytime Clarke stumbles over a talking point when trying to decide where to move her bishop. It’s distracting. But Clarke takes the second game when she decides to abandon her practiced lines. Three games. Four games. They open a second bottle of wine. The debate topics begin to fade into regular conversation with each new glass of wine.

Every glass is a mistake that Clarke loves making.

She’s supposed to be planning her next three moves, especially since Lexa has trailed off into silence in the middle of a story about a previous campaign she worked on in DC and is now focused on the board, but Clarke forgets about the chess pieces as she stares at Lexa instead. The wine is getting to her, just as much as Clarke: her usually sharp green eyes slip in and out of focus as she tries to envision the movements. As Clarke stares at her, she realizes that she knows every line of that pretty face, especially when it’s creased with concentration, but more importantly, she realizes how complete this picture looks. The two of them sitting at her kitchen table, glasses of wine between them and Lexa set against the backdrop of the floor to ceiling windows and the LA skyline at night behind her. The apartment is silent and dark otherwise and it feels so normal.

“So what were you saying, about the judge?” Clarke prompts her.

“Shhhhh.”

“Lexa.”

Lexa reaches for a piece, considers, and withdraws her hand.

“You’re done. Admit it.”

“I’m not.”

“You’re about to be.”

“You’re drunk.”

“So are you.”

Lexa looks up to argue, her face glowing, soft, flushed red; and a smile breaks across it when she meets Clarke’s knowing eyes. “Maybe,” she admits. “And maybe we should finish the game tomorrow.”

“You’re only saying that because I’m gonna win. Yales are cheaters,” Clarke protests, but she raises her palms in surrender when Lexa lurches up from the table and stands on unsteady feet.

To be wine drunk with Lexa is almost as good as champagne drunk with her.

“This was a bad idea,” Lexa mumbles, shaking her head and giving a quiet, almost self-deprecating laugh. She takes a few cautious steps toward the front door.

Clarke jolts from her chair. “Hey! You can’t drive, ‘n Gustus is done for the night.”

“I’ll call a cab,” Lexa says sleepily.

“It’s two AM,” Clarke says. A guess, really, but it’s somewhere after midnight and that’s what
Lexa swings around and it’s only at the sight of her face that Clarke realizes how close she accidentally pursued Lexa; she has to put a hand on Lexa’s shoulders to prevent her momentum from carrying her forward into Lexa’s body. She can smell her perfume—and maybe Lexa can smell Clarke’s judging by the deep, sudden inhale and the way her body tightens at their closeness. Maybe she’s thinking the same thoughts Clarke fights back.

Then Lexa sways, or Clarke sways. She doesn’t know. Just that everything suddenly looks unsteady and she’s reaching out to catch hold of Lexa’s shoulder and tighten her fingers into the fabric. Lexa pulls in a breath and stays perfectly still.

“My bed,” she repeats, mustering up the last of coherent thought. “It’s nice. You sleep there, I’ll take the couch.”

“Not a chance.”

She knows her reflexes are dulled but she still marvels at how quickly Lexa pulls out of her grasp, stumbles across the room, and stretches out onto the couch. Out of Clarke’s reach before she can say a word to call her back. Her face half-buried in a pillow and her feet hanging over the armrest, Lexa sighs contentedly.

“Lexa…” Clarke groans.

“Go sleep in your nice bed, Clarke.”

It does sound nice…though not as nice, she realizes, as the look of the sliver of space between Lexa’s body and the edge of the couch. Clarke could fit there. She stares at it for a moment, every muscle in her body wanting, the wine making it easy to envision falling forward onto the leather, but she grits her teeth.

“Fine. Goodnight Lexa.”

Because as much as she craves that with Lexa, it’s more important just to have her again, in whatever capacity Lexa and all of her obstinate defenses will allow.

She’s halfway to her bedroom, fingers trailing along the hallway wall, when she hears Lexa’s voice.

“Clarke?”

“Yes?” She doesn’t mean to sound hopeful.

“In the morning…in the morning we have to talk about this.”

“This?”

“You know what.”

She knows. She knows tonight was about more than work and she knows that the hotel was more than sex—wine always tells. And Lexa’s right, they can’t ignore it anymore.

But first, sleep.

“We will. Goodnight, Lexa.”

“Goodnight, Clarke.”
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Technically, this is two updates in one month, so that’s not bad, right?

Large pieces of this were written over the Thanksgiving weekend; rather than fighting my family about politics, I wrote a paragraph every time I objected to something they said. The result, well...

As always, thank you for reading and for all the support, comments, criticism, everything!! Enjoy xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She expects regret when she wakes. Clarke doesn’t regret much, but the lingering taste of red wine usually demands it. And if not regret, then she expects to wake to stress, frustration, anxiousness, determination, and a repetition of the lines she’s been using for weeks. This is what she normally wakes to; the life of a political candidate.

But instead, Clarke opens her eyes, stares up at the ceiling, and lets them drift closed again. She sinks into the pillow with a contented smile as the crystal clear memories of last night play in her mind like a movie. Lexa.

She remembers it all and she regrets none of it. For once, everything had gone right. Maybe she hadn’t gotten all of her debate prep in and she’s definitely sure she’ll never finish The Walking Dead at this point, but she got Lexa back on board. And that is what matters.

Well, back on board and passed out on her couch.

The thought, in addition to Clarke’s complete inability to deal with this strange feeling of contentment, swings Clarke out of bed. She pads down the hallway in bare feet; just before she reaches the living room, the low drone of the morning news floats back to her.

She’s still here. It’s a shocking realization, not because Clarke was expecting her to leave, but because she hadn’t even considered the fact that Lexa would leave—and she’s flooded with relief at the fact that she hasn’t.

The back of the white leather couch faces Clarke, so she can see the TV on the opposite wall but not the person watching it. All she knows is that Lexa’s feet no longer hang over the arm rest where she passed out last night—nothing else has changed. Clarke gives herself one last moment to bask in the serenity of the early morning, then steps around the couch, bringing Lexa into view.

“Morning.”

Her quiet voice barely reaches Lexa but the girl still jolts in surprise: she quickly unfurls from the small ball she’d been curled in, sits up, and rubs her tired face.

“Morning,” she replies, voice hoarse, before she looks up at Clarke. “I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

Clarke cuts her off with a soft smile. “Don’t apologize. Do you want some coffee?”
Lexa looks up at her like Clarke is the entire world and all the heavens above it. “If you have it.”

When Clarke returns with the coffee—“better than the office but not by much”—she and Lexa sit quietly on the couch, both aware of the familiarity they’ve slipped into, one which allows them to be comfortable without words. Waking up is far more important. Lexa is aware of Clarke watching her, just as Clarke is aware of the glances Lexa sneaks her way, but it’s hard to keep pretenses so early on a Saturday morning after a late night of wine and confessions, and they’re okay with that. Finally, when Clarke has finished more than half her cup, she feels alive enough to speak.

“Soooo…” She nods at the TV, and the remote at Lexa’s side. “You’re making yourself at home already?”

Lexa looks away, flushing. “I’m sorry. The Walking Dead was still paused when I woke up, Daryl Dixon was staring at me. Had to change it before I fell asleep again.”

“I don’t blame you,” she replies with a grimace. At a loss for what else to say to a sleepy, hungover Lexa hunched over a cup of coffee, Clarke adds, “How’d you sleep?”

“Fine. I was cold. You?”

“Shit— I’m sorry!” In the back of the apartment, her bedroom stays the warmest, so Clarke forgets how cold the living room can get at night. She has half a mind to jump up and find Lexa a blanket or get her more coffee, but the reassuring smile on the other woman’s face calms her.

“It’s okay, I’m fine,” she assures her.

“I know, I could have at least brought you a blanket or—”

“We should talk about last night. And what happened between us.”

And Clarke, still distracted by the thought of leaving Lexa in the cold all night, stops short in her apology—the feeling of morning serenity vanishes at last. She half-wishes she had spiked her coffee as she swirls the cup and watches it stir, before looking back up to Lexa.

“Of course,” she says. “I’m happy you’re coming back…”

“…but we should figure out what that means,” Lexa finishes for her, nodding. They’re on the same page. “This election. We need to win you that Senate seat. So everything else that’s going on, our careers come first. They’re the most important.”

Lexa is deliberate, but there’s an odd lilt in her voice at the end of the assertion, a rise in tone that adds a question to the words—one that Clarke hastens to answer.

“Of course. The most important,” she says. She just got Lexa back; she’s not going to do anything to jeopardize that. “You don’t have to worry about me giving in to anything again. I’ve learned my lesson, I’m completely dedicated to the campaign.”

It’s the answer Lexa wanted. She nods quickly. “Likewise, you have nothing to fear about me giving in again either.”

Clarke’s brow furrows in confusion, a gut reaction. “You…?”

“Did you—did I give you the impression that I didn’t want what happened in the hotel room?” Lexa asks slowly, studying Clarke’s face.
Clarke’s memory of the night is hazy at best, and she had blocked out every word Lexa had said the moment she delivered the letter of resignation the next morning. It seemed as much a personal rejection as a professional gesture in that moment, so of course Clarke forgot about everything before it. She tries to find the words to articulate this without sounding pathetic, and fails.

“After you resigned, I just…shut all of it out.”

Lexa softens, letting out a deep breath and letting her eyes trace Clarke’s features before she speaks, much more quietly than before. “I regret it. And I regret wanting it. But I did. What I feel for you…I am attracted to you. And I can’t remember a time I’ve…connected with anyone the way I have with you, Clarke. It interfered with my work long before we slept together and that night, I couldn’t hold it back anymore. In any other case, I wouldn’t hesitate to leave, but…not you. You’re not any other case.”

And Clarke has no response to that.

Lexa has always chosen her words with great care. They come out stiff and formal when she speaks—except for moments of heart, like that last line—but each one means something and she watches Clarke’s face for her reaction as they fall. But Clarke doesn’t know how to react; she’s torn between two roads that lead to very different resolutions. The Lexa sitting in front of her, hair mussed and eyes tired and honest, makes Clarke want to spill everything before she leans in to kiss her, to hell with everything else. The Lexa she knows from the office, the one who will cut throats to win this election and beat Cage Wallace at Clarke’s side, is one she can’t lose and one who makes Clarke want to continue to seal all of it away.

For better or for worse, Clarke ends up somewhere in the middle, after hesitating to the point where Lexa opens her mouth to apologize.

“I’ve felt the same way,” she says, almost breathless in her rush to explain herself. “You’re not just anyone. And maybe getting this out in the open is the best thing for us and the campaign, because I need you, Lexa. We—”

“…in contrast, the third candidate, relative newcomer and State Representative, Clarke Griffin, has gained seven points in recent polls…”

Lexa and Clarke whip around, fixed to the TV at once. The news report had droned on and provided suitable background noise for their quiet morning, but the sound of Clarke’s name is like a firework going off in the middle of the apartment.

“What did they say?” Lexa demands, looking between Clarke and the TV.

Clarke gestures at the remote near Lexa while she goes for her phone. “Rewind it, start the report from the beginning.”

The reporter hadn’t gotten far since the beginning: the report is a weekend morning piece governing the general topics of interest in the Senate Race, starting by detailing the position of each candidate. Cage Wallace is so far ahead the only other Republican candidate in the race that the news doesn’t bother to devote much time to reporting his polling results, but the report on the other side is far more interesting.

“Congresswoman Diana Sydney has dropped by five points in recent polls among all voter demographics, while Lieutenant Governor Vincent Vie has dropped by two points. In contrast, the
third candidate, relative newcomer and State Representative Clarke Griffin, has gained seven points in recent polls, pushing her into second place for the democratic nomination, only one point behind Lieutenant Governor Vie.”

“Holy shit,” Clarke breathes, staring at the handy infographic the news report shows: she’s surged in the past two weeks.

“These positive results for Representative Griffin come amid highs and lows for her campaign. Despite recent endorsements from a number of prominent California politicians, Griffin has received a blow to her image following the release of pictures and quotations that make critics question her suitability for office.”

One of the latest leaked pictures flashes onto the screen: again from college, this time of Clarke in a crowded kitchen, red cup in hand and arm around the shoulders of an unidentified man as she scoffs at someone out of frame.

“That wasn’t—that was Finn!” Clarke exclaims, pointing to the man in the picture before it vanishes and the report continues. “It was a group dinner, with some of his younger fraternity members at UCLA, he was my long term boyfriend!”

“How did things end for you and Finn?” Lexa asks sharply.

“I went across the country for law school,” Clarke says. “We agreed to end it, he wasn’t happy, but we haven’t been in contact for years. It makes no sense for him to leak pictures for money either, his father pays for everything.”

Lexa nods, working her jaw as she tries to make a decision. “We should talk to Raven about it on Monday, she knew you back then. She can help us make a decision.”

The report drones on, this time turning toward the future: “These polls results come just two weeks before the primary election, painting the picture for a final sprint that the nation will be watching. Across the country, Republicans lead in senate races, and in California, Cage Wallace presents a strength for the Republican Party. California could become a decisive state when it comes to determining control of the United States Senate.”

“Two points,” Lexa says at last. “Two points off Vie.”

“The media likes to pull it tighter than it actually is, though.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re not close.” Lexa sits up straighter, eyes afire with this new opportunity. “Vie’s camp will be sweating going into the final days; if push hard, you have a very good chance to take a last minute lead going into Election day.”

Clarke can’t help but buy into the look on her face. “And then I have my shot at Cage Wallace.”

“The next two weeks will take everything. We have to get the staffers in earlier and have them stay longer—”

“—get people on the phones, all the time—”

“—boost interviews, get your name out there…”

It’s a thrilling, rushing realization and suddenly her breathing shallow. “We can win this, Lexa.”

“We can,” she agrees with an earnest nod.
“Everything that happened, we can put it behind us. We need to.”

“We can sleep together and still work together.”

At this, Clarke freezes—she raises a brow and opens her mouth to comment, thrown by the wording, but Lexa beats her to it with a quick revision: “The fact that we slept together doesn’t mean we can’t work together.”

“Right,” Clarke says, swallowing to wet her dry throat. “That’s what it means. We can work together, and win this, exactly.”

Maybe not the most convincing, but they’ve aired their confessions, they’ve moved past them, they’ve agreed that none of their feelings for each other matter in the face of the election. They can do this.

“I just…” Lexa turns uncharacteristically uncertain in that moment. “I have one question: are you absolutely sure you’re all in on this? Because once you’re up against Cage Wallace, there’s no going back. It’s going to be messy, we’ll miss sleep, everyone will examine every inch of you the way they haven’t up to this point. Are you sure you’re up for this fight?”

She could take on the world, right now, with the way Lexa’s looking at her: dilated pupils and breathless anticipation. Like they’re going to war and have boundless faith in one another.

“I am,” Clarke says with a nod. “As long as you are.”

“To the end.”

*

The week prior, rumors had swirled about Lexa Ward’s impending departure and her potential replacement. Everyone knew she had issued her resignation; no one knew why. Clarke had every intention of making an official announcement that Monday, but instead, when she walks into the office at Lexa’s side, no one bats an eye—no one has time to before they’re set to work by what might be considered to be the most terrifying and inspiring duo in the entire race. When they’re on the same wavelength.

And they absolutely are.

They move beyond acting in concert. Maybe it’s the catharsis of confessing their feelings and agreeing they can put them aside; maybe it’s the addictive first taste of the possibility of victory, finally close enough. Maybe it’s both. But Clarke and Lexa change, and with them, the campaign headquarters becomes unrecognizable after the first three days.

“Raven!” Jasper’s whine carries across the office, over the conversations of all the frantic staffers. “The coffee machine is broken again!”

Raven, head bent over a travel itinerary with Clarke, ducks her head even lower in frustration and almost knocks it against the desktop. “Again? That’s three times in three days!”

“Yeah, well, if we gotta be here at six AM people need their coffee!”
Clarke doesn’t have to see Raven’s face to know the questioning glare the other woman gives her, before Raven heaves a sigh and stalks away across the office to fix the coffee machine—again. She’ll never complain, not least because this is standard work for a progressing political campaign, but on the other hand, Clarke can’t blame her: the increase in workload and energy across the office over the past few days, at the hands of her and Lexa, has knocked the staff on their ass.

Lexa handles the behind-the-scenes work: running the departments like they're war regiments, striding from section to section with a command of the room that keeps everyone sitting up straight. The interns and low-level staffers love going out to hit the pavement, putting up signs and shaking hands and getting Clarke's name into the mouths of as many people that they meet, just to avoid Lexa's watchful eye.

Clarke, on the other hand, handles all of the public business. She’s hosted a dozen different interviews and meetings, made appearances at local businesses, and started working more closely with her social media team; the headlines, already dominated by the race, start to include Clarke’s name more and more often.

“Griffin Edges Closer to Lead in Senate Race”
“Griffin Envisions New Gun Control Policy”
“Vie versus Griffin: A Tale of Two Generations”
“Roan Azgeda, son of Congresswoman Azgeda, speaks out on relationship with Senate seeking Griffin”

Because it’s about more than just her policies—at this point anything that will give Clarke positive press is fair game, so close to the election. Hollywood loves a pretty couple. With a few key quotes to curious photographers, she and Roan had officially ended the rumor mill and began a life in the limelight of one of America’s potential adored political couples.

The people love Clarke—and suddenly the two point difference between her and Vincent Vie seems much more like a margin of error than an actual difference.

They might actually be able to pull this off.

Raven comes trotting back to Clarke, seated at Raven’s desk, a moment later.

“That was quick,” Clarke observes.

“That was quick,” Clarke observes.

“Yes, it was a simple fix. He probably just broke it himself to get out of working for ten minutes.” She falls back into her seat with a sigh and takes a second to relax herself before returning to work.

Clark scans the office, feeling a little twinge of inspiration at the energy level as she watches the staffers rush from cubicle to cubicle with reports and shout to each other and answer ringing phones and filling the office to the ceiling with a frenetic, crackling energy, all awash with the desire to win this. Maybe it doesn’t burn for them the way it burns for Clarke, but that doesn’t mean they’re not devoting everything to it right now.

Clarke shrugs. “Well, if we win this primary and I get the chance at Cage Wallace, I’ll pay for coffee catered every morning. Deal?”

“We keep running at this rate, Griffin,” Raven says, pulling next week’s travel itinerary toward her once more, “and you’ll need to make it cocaine.”
“It’s the only thing the campaign lacks so far. A nice scandal.”

“Clarke.”

God, Lexa has great timing sometimes.

Clarke and Raven turn to see Lexa leaning against a file cabinet, sleeves rolled to her elbows and arms folded across her chest, and somehow even in her nonchalance she exudes the same power as she does when she’s drawn up to her full height and objecting vehemently to an idea at a campaign meeting. Clarke stands a little straighter to match her, feeling much less straight inside.

“Niylah Hunter is here for your next interview,” Lexa says, “about your bipartisan work. Are you ready?”

“No problem,” Clarke replies, reaching back into the archives in her head for those specific talking points. “My encouragement of the current projects, my old voting record, and my involvement in the last big piece of legislation. And—”

“It’s not about identity or party politics,” Lexa prompts.

“But about values and the betterment of the people of California,” Clarke finishes for her. “Got it.”

*

“So, Representative Griffin, after the recent pictures that have surfaced, do you plan to release a statement on the claims that you don’t have the respectability for a leadership position?”

It’s somewhat difficult to turn that into a discussion about working across party lines.

Niylah looks far too pleased with herself to suggest that she’ll let the topic go easily. What journalist would, given the chance to quiz Clarke Griffin about it? Still, though, Clarke makes a valiant effort.

“You know, I’ve been so focused on the positive aspects of my own campaign that I haven’t bothered with the negativity from a few websites. I try to apply this to all aspects of my life and career, especially—”

“Most major newspapers are reporting it, actually,” Niylah interrupts. “To your detractors, it’s the main strike against you.”

Clarke smiles. “And if it weren’t that, it would be something else.”

“Like what?” She grins back like she’s caught Clarke in a lie and it takes a surprising amount of willpower for Clarke to lock her muscles into that smile.

“I’m sure they would come up with something, they always do. Now, I know you wanted to discuss my work across party lines.”

“I do! But not to lead with a commentary on the public perception of Representative Clarke Griffin would be a serious mistake,” Niylah explains, putting her pen to paper at long last. “So, you don’t have any comment on the pictures?”

Over Niylah’s shoulder, in one of the floor to ceiling windows separating the conference room from
the rest of the office, Lexa glides into sight with a watchful eye over the proceedings. When she catches Clarke’s attention and reads the look on her face, she raises an eyebrow in question: Do you need an out?

In response, Clarke raises her fingers from the desk and twitches them horizontally like she’s at a poker table. Not yet, hold for now.

Lexa nods and returns to her observation, allowing Clarke to look at Niylah with a renewed sense of confidence. “Just that I want to focus on the important things and not let anything else distract me from that.”

“Excellent.”

It’s not exactly the drama Niylah had been hoping for, the drama she hopes for every time she comes in for an interview, Clarke can tell. And even though something is better than nothing, the lingering threat of the journalist’s thirst for a story hangs over the interview, forcing Clarke into an exhausting quest to choose every word with care. She discusses the motivation behind some of her early votes and policies, highlighting those she worked with the other side on, and bringing up the most successful projects from her first four years as a politician.

“And then were were some that weren’t so successful,” Niylah says, “Either in their eventual application or straight out failure. Do you stand by your voting record in those situations or do you attribute the mistakes to inexperience and youth?”

The intention there is about as subtle as a trainwreck.

“I stand by the goals of the voting record,” Clarke says slowly. “No one is perfect. The intention to improve things is the important part.”

“In his years of experience, Vincent Vie has also expressed a desire for bipartisanship, arguably to a greater degree than you have, to the point where he has been criticized by people in his own party for too much compromise. What—”

It only takes Clarke a single glance to the window for Lexa to come swinging through the door with a brisk stride and a throat-clearing apology. “Miss Griffin, you have a phone call from Senator Marcus Kane in Virginia, it’s urgent. Excuse us, Miss Hunter.”

When they duck into Clarke’s office, Clarke turns with a sigh of gratitude to Lexa. “Kane?” she asks, with a smirk. “He’d call my cell phone, he’s like an uncle to me.”

“She doesn’t know that,” Lexa says.

“You know him, right? He had suggested I interview you.”

Lexa nods. “Yes, he called me and recommended you to me.”

"Kane recommended me to you?"

"Something wrong with that?" Lexa asks, cocking her head.

"Yeah," Clarke scoffs, “usually another politician will recommend an employee to a fellow politician. Not the other way around.”

Her response comes with that breezy and unaffected tone that has a way of driving Clarke crazy. "I was looking for a new job; he had multiple suggestions."
"Why pick me?"

"I found your interview questions the most compelling," she replies automatically, smirking.

Rolling one’s eyes at a co-worker is generally considered rude, especially after Lexa just came through with an exit so Clarke could regain her composure, so Clarke swallows back her laughter, inhales a deep breath, and closes her eyes, drawing in her motivation and resolve. She and Lexa hover near the door of her office, the blinds closed to shield them from curious staffers; when she opens her eyes again, Lexa feels so much closer. Like they did on opposite sides of the conference room window, they meet gazes and exchange silent affirmations.

With Lexa’s support and confidence behind her, Clarke goes back into the interview and manages to turn it around, languidly escaping Niylah’s attempts to pin her down and achieving enough sound bites to create an article that won’t destroy her chances in the race, even if they don’t boost them. Clarke will take breaking even any day.

Once Niylah is finally out the door, Clarke leans back in her seat and releases the tension in her shoulders in one long breath. She can feel Lexa’s eyes on her from the doorway, but she doesn’t look up. Lexa allows her the decompression period before she speaks.

“Are you okay?” Lexa asks, from the opposite side of the room.

“Fine,” Clarke promises, releasing a breath through gritted teeth. She jumps to her feet. “I need a break. Have you eaten? I’m hungry.”

Lexa shakes her head. “Not yet. Tell me what you want, I’ll have Sarah—”

“No!” It’s not so much the food Clarke needs; it’s the escape. “Let me get it. I’ll even take Ryder with me. What do you want? I could swing by the dinner place down the street, get take-out.”

“We have to go over the talking points for your town hall meetings tomorrow, Clarke, we can just send for take-out.”

“Five minutes,” Clarke pleads, “That’s all it’ll take then we’ll be here for the night.”

Lexa doesn’t hold out for long, relenting and ordering a chicken pasta from the restaurant down the street they usually order from. On quick, sharp strides, Clarke escapes the office quickly, only taking a deep breath once she hits the street and starts weaving through the evening downtown crowd, slowing down to savor the freedom and the taste of the night. And once she’s back in the office, Italian takeout in hand, she can share a dinner with Lexa and then sequester herself away for a few hours, bask in the silence and read through reports. The thought keeps her floating happily after she walks into the restaurant and orders, as she watches the other patrons from an out of the way seat near the entrance.

And then, to her surprise, she recognizes Jasper Jordan’s profile at a nearby table.

He’s bent over the candlelit table, deep in conversation with a girl—he breaks into a goofy smile whenever she starts talking. Clarke smiles at the sight for a moment, until she looks more closely at the sharply dressed young woman he’s sharing dinner with. The blazer, the skirt, heels, they look far too beyond Jasper’s realm of eligible women. With a curiosity mingled with a strange dread that Jasper has begun dating one of the interns, Clarke makes her way across the restaurant to get a better look at the girl he’s with.

She slips past a waiter and skirts her way around a twelve person table, until at last the girl’s face comes into view. Clarke recognizes it immediately—she has a thing for faces—but the name takes a
moment, because she met her so long ago.

Maya Vie.

It clicks into place in half a second and Clarke’s heart hits the floor as she fumbles for her phone.

[6:11 PM] Clarke Griffin: Get down to the restaurant

[6:11 PM] Clarke Griffin: Jasper’s the one who’s been leaking the pictures.

The response is almost instantaneous.


[6:12 PM] Clarke Griffin: Just get here, you’ll see

She must run the three blocks from the office to the restaurant, because Lexa appears in the doorway just minutes later, phone in hand. She spots Clarke at the bar by way of finding Ryder’s towering form, and makes her way over, demanding to know what happened before she even says a word.

“Where is he?” she asks, voice dangerously low. “How do you know?”

Clarke points across the restaurant to where Jasper is still enjoying dinner and a comfortably intimate conversation with the girl. “He’s with Maya Vie, daughter and campaign staffer of Vincent Vie. She was at the first debate, I remember seeing her. They must have met that weekend—the pictures started coming out after we got closer to him in the polls, remember? Monty and Jasper are younger than me, but they were at UCLA at the same time. That’s why I hired them.”

Lexa accepts the explanation without any need to consider it. She takes a step toward Jasper, but Clarke pulls her back. “Wait. Don’t ruin the date. I sent a note along with the waiter for him to meet someone at the bar.”

On cue, Jasper gets up from his table and starts a jaunty stride across the restaurant; it dies when he gets within ten feet of the bar and recognizes his two bosses waiting for him.

Clarke lets Lexa take the reigns.

“Maya Vie?” Lexa asks, with a nod at his dinner partner.

The world crashes down around Jasper. “It’s not—I didn’t—”

“Did she pay you for them or is it a romantic relationship in which you shared the pictures?”

He stumbles over his words in the desperate attempt to backpedal. “I didn’t realize that she was going to leak them at first, I was just showing her, but listen, I really like her. I want to keep her—”

“You can,” Lexa says evenly, threat plain beneath her calm voice. “You are absolutely, unequivocally fired from Clarke Griffin’s campaign, and should you ever try to take up another position in politics, I will be in contact with the politician who tried to hire you.”

All of this happens under the soft cover of clinking plates and quiet dinnertime conversation, and Lexa remains so steady that no one would ever look twice to see the fire in her eyes as she steps toward Jasper and he shrinks back. “You will never set foot in the office again, you will never have anything to do with this campaign again, and should another picture surface or your name connect to any commentary or story related to Clarke Griffin, you will find yourself with a lawsuit that will take everything you own. But you can keep your girlfriend.”
Jasper’s eyes dart past Lexa toward Clarke, looking for a lifeline. Clarke takes a long sip of her drink without looking away.

“Now go back and enjoy your dinner,” Lexa says in a low murmur, and Jasper nearly stumbles over himself as he escapes.

She turns back, looking for Clarke’s approval; the blonde offers her a small nod.

“I liked that,” Ryder says proudly. “Good job.”

“Thanks, Ryder. Clarke, let’s get the dinner and get back, now I have to add that to my paperwork.”

*

Back in Clarke’s office, though, Lexa concerns herself much more with her dinner than with the termination paperwork, perhaps out of a desire not to bring it up. As satisfied with the scene at the restaurant as Clarke may have been, Lexa can read her face and she knows this is something that is going to eat away at Clarke for a long time.

“Well, that’s the pictures handled at least. It could have gotten far worse.” When Clarke doesn’t respond, Lexa softens her approach. “What’s on your mind?”

Clarke rolls her eyes. "It's just laughable at this point. We've made all this progress...and I'm being attacked based on leaked pictures from college. From someone within my own party." The sarcastic laugh becomes a heavy sigh, and she sits back in her chair to stare up at the ceiling. “And someone from my own team was leaking them!”

"They pictures aren't awful," Lexa says. "The reason they have to go so low is because they have nothing else to attack you on besides your experience."

It's not exactly comforting.

Lexa watches Clarke for another moment, before fishing into her jacket pocket for her cell phone. "Here," she says, clicking it on. Curiosity momentarily distracts Clarke for a moment as Lexa strides across the room and offers the phone, showing Clarke the picture on the screen. "This was me and my girlfriend, in college."

She can't hold back the snort of genuine laughter at the picture: Lexa's Happy New Year's hat is falling off her head and the 2002 sunglasses are pushed halfway up her forehead as she presses a kiss to the cheek of a beautiful girl, who drinks from a red cup. The girl looks into the camera with one eye closed as Lexa's lipstick smears across her cheek. "Right?" Lexa says with a small smile at Clarke's amusement. "I wasn't even drinking that night, not really. I was just happy. But I look ridiculous."

Clarke looks at the picture again, studying it more closely. "No...you just look happy. You're right. Is this the girl you mentioned...Costia?"

It catches Lexa a little off-guard. "Yes, it was. Costia. We dated through high school and into college."

"She's pretty. What happened to her?"
"Went our separate ways," Lexa says, with a nonchalant shrug. Clarke waits, thinking it will be all Lexa offers before the walls come up again, but then Lexa glances at the picture. "I had a whole career in front of me, graduate school, a life in DC, and she didn't want it. We ended things; she went north, got a job up in Canada. We lost touch."

"Have you dated anyone since?" Clarke asks quietly.

"I..." Lexa shakes her head, still distracted by the picture, until she seems to remember where she is. She tucks the phone back into her pocket with a short, self-deprecating laugh. "My point is, anyone could take that and ruin me, if they wanted. They would call it whatever they want. An interracial lesbian relationship, two college students who partied too much, a drinking problem, a sex addiction, immorality. And the people who claim that, do so because they're afraid of us, so they have to invent things to fear. They're the people who make anything of these pictures, or who object to you wearing a skirt. That's what we should be fighting, with the election and with your position and persona."

Clarke’s stuck thinking about Lexa’s girlfriend, about this small insight into Lexa’s past, and it takes her a moment to get back to Lexa’s speed. “Of course,” she says, exhaustion returning too. “That’s the goal. Winning this first election would be a good sign of it.”

“It really would…”

Clarke pauses; there’s a thoughtful upturn in the tone of Lexa’s voice. “What are you thinking?”

“Nothing,” Lexa says quickly, shaking her head and waving a hand. “It’s nothing. I have to go make some calls to see how our field offices are doing, send an intern over if you need me.”

She leaves the office without offering any more insight to her thoughts, leaving Clarke in the empty room with nothing to distract her mind from exploring the idea of a younger, happier Lexa wrapped around a pretty girl at a New Year’s Eve party.

It’s a lovely way to pass her time. She even ignores the pang of guilt she feels when she imagines herself in Lexa’s arms instead of Costia.

She is so, so far gone.

*

Luckily, perhaps, for her, the final days of the election are a mad dash to the finish. Midnight closing hours become one a.m. becomes two a.m. becomes staffers and interns crashing on couches for a few hours of sleep before they get up and get back to work. Clarke herself gets between one and two hours of sleep per night, and even the precious rare moments with Lexa like the one in her office vanish completely under the weight of all the work.

They travel, too; a four day road trip up through the agricultural heart of the state, appealing to as many questioning voters as possible. They make appearances at three country fairs, four school board meetings, two town halls, and 17 local businesses along the way. Much to Raven’s delight, Clarke’s social media presence skyrockets as the pictures circulate.

Positive pictures, for once.

It’s all well and good, but the push seems too last minute, and too small to make any real effect as the
days tick away to the primary election. The polls refuse to adjust to anything they do, and even though no more pictures come out, Vincent Vie sits just a few points ahead of Clarke.

“Has he done anything illegal?” Sterling asks one morning, as they sit in an eleventh-hour war room meeting, looking for a solution. “Anything from his past we could blast out, anything to get him out of the race?”

Clarke shakes her head, skimming an old article about him that Raven procured from god knows where. They have been working all morning and haven’t been able to find anything. “We can--”

The conference room door bangs open and Miller strides in. “Where’s the TV remote? You guys have to see this.”

They never use the conference room TV, and the news that they even have one surprises half of the people in the meeting. Apparently Miller spends most of the time wishing they were watching it. But after a quick scramble for the hitherto unknown remote, they get the TV clicked on and Miller turns to a news channel just in time to read the ticker at the bottom.

Congresswoman Diana Sydney claims Lt. Gov. Vincent Vie has made “worrying” remarks about women; produces e-mails

“Are you serious?” Clarke asks, jaw dropping. Miller flips to another channel and catches the report in the middle.

“In a surprise move, Congresswoman Diana Sydney has levelled criticism at Lieutenant Governor Vincent Vie for worrying remarks about women, marriage, and “the place of women” in the workplace and at home,” announces the reporter. “Despite strong opposition from within her own party, Sydney has declared her support for young Senate hopeful Clarke Griffin and released e-mails allegedly sent between Vincent Vie and others containing the quote “worrying” remarks.”

The screen flashes to an impromptu interview with Diana Sydney. “Representative Griffin demonstrated a dedication to a clean race and support of her opponents at the first debate,” she says. “I have decided to honor her support and kind words about me by supporting her in the final days of the race. Clarke Griffin is the best choice to oppose Cage Wallace in the general race for Senate.”

All eyes in the room turn toward Clarke, who stares at the TV in shell-shocked disbelief as different, damning quotes scroll across the screen. As promised, they smack of old boys club attitude, the kind that has been rife in politics since Vincent Vie’s early days.

They don’t have the emotional state for politics; women in business slow the process down; I wouldn’t want my wife, daughter, or girlfriend involved in any of this.

There’s no doubt that these quotes are from ages ago and perhaps unfair to the current candidate and the news doesn’t bother to question where Diana Sydney got the e-mails from, but Clarke’s heart leaps in hope now.

“This is huge,” Jackson says quietly.

“What did she mean when she said you supported her at the debate?” Miller asks Clarke.

Clarke doesn’t have to strain to remember; she looks right to Lexa. “Miss Ward came up with the last second idea of allying myself with Sydney in the debate to find a footing. Now she’s repaying it.”

Lexa inclines her head to the praise inherent in Clarke’s words, but offers nothing else, and for once Clarke finds that strange. She narrows her eyes slightly, questioning, but Lexa either doesn’t pick it
up or refuses to give her any acknowledgement of the curiosity.

“Let’s jump on this,” Lexa announces to the table. “Use it at the phones and as you’re out canvassing. Get your departments on it, now.”

It’s too late for any of Vincent Vie’s quotes to show any effect in the polls, but they breathe new life into an exhausted campaign for the final two days of the campaign. The controversy dominates the news cycles as well as the conversations the interns have with prospective voters they’ve cold-called and Clarke begins to get the feeling that they might have just pushed her over the finish line.

*  

She doesn’t sleep the night before the election, but she ends up wishing she had. After sending a few personally composed tweets and social media messages, Clarke has little to do for most of the day, and she fills the hours with caffeine to keep her awake and keep her occupied. The pacing is awful. Finally, at three in the afternoon, Lexa boots Clarke from the office altogether, sending her home to ready for the evening.

“It’s going to be a long night,” she says, the closest thing Clarke will get to an apology.

Some of Clarke’s biggest donors had rented out a small event space for a dinner and celebration, with all of Clarke’s staffers and big ticket donors welcome. Open bar, steak dinner, and hopefully, a nomination acceptance speech from Senate hopeful Clarke Griffin.

The coffee fixation continues once the dinner begins, partially because she can’t touch the open bar and partially because the caffeine in her bloodstream is the only thing keeping her upright after six hours of sleep in three days.

“Congratulations, Representative Griffin!” come the early toasts.

One cup.

“To a senate candidate we can all believe in!”

Another cup.

“Clarke, you’re going to crash so hard when you come down from all of that.”

One pointed glare to Raven.

“Miss Griffin, your mother must be so proud of you!”

She isn’t going to have another cup after what Raven says, but at the same moment she hears that, she sees Lexa picking her way through the crowd. So she has another. She blames it on the mention of her mother by a donor old enough to be her great grandfather.

Naturally, the organizers have set up projectors that display the election coverage on the wall; on Clarke’s third cup of coffee, the results start rolling in.

It’s much like a presidential election—maybe not for the rest of the state, given that only around five million of California’s 40 million strong cast votes in the primary election—but for Clarke, the gnawing pressure in the pit as the votes seem to trickle in one by one is not unlike the feeling she gets
when she’s watching her country teeter on the edge. She wants it now, wants the results all at once, to break either her or break this weight around her shoulders. The end of her political career as she knows it, the concession cards in her pocket, or the start of it all and the validation for all of the work her team has done over the past six months. Her against Cage Wallace.

The rural counties roll in first. While the majority of the votes go to Cage Wallace, for his conservative position, the democratic voters go overwhelmingly to Vincent Vie. It’s how the polls broke down, they remind her, repeatedly. It’s still a shock to see Vincent Vie still ahead. Is there something more she can do? She feels ridiculous as she is now, in a skirt and fancy, shoulder-baring top, especially when so many of her staffers came straight from work. Lexa wears her usual business casual, sans blazer, with the sleeves rolled up and top button undone; it’s probably the most casual she’ll ever get, and Clarke is jealous, somehow, that Lexa is so comfortable. Her eyes travel over Lexa when no one in looking more than once.

Clarke is beginning to consider the open bar when the democratic counties begin to roll in.

“Holy shit,” Roan says.

70% for Clarke Griffin. It’s early and the numbers will fall but Clarke still damn near knocks the coffee machine from the table when she sees the numbers jump. The celebration starts and the crowd of campaign workers and interns and volunteers and donors ride the changing tide of numbers.

70-30.

65-35.

55-45.

Back up to 60-40.

Down to 45-55, with Clarke trailing, but it comes in the wake of reports from one of the largest counties where Vie had a clear lead. The campaign workers on the phones make their desperate calls and find that everywhere that still has left to report, is a location that polled better for Clarke.

“Breathe,” Lexa says, appearing suddenly at her side. “This is good.”

Clarke doesn’t have it in her to speak--but she reaches over and her fingers wrap around Lexa’s forearm, gripping tightly for the next twenty minutes as the results continue to come in. Lexa never wavers.

Los Angeles is what tips the scale, for good. As the reporters on TV discuss the obvious impact of Vie’s statements about women, Clarke’s numbers climb into the green and never come down again. Across social media, the politically inclined who follow the primary races tweet their satisfaction at seeing Vie trail a woman--a young, blonde, pretty woman who has one fifth of his experience--after suggesting that they don’t have what it takes. It doesn’t sit right with Clarke to see his statements from years and years ago spilling out now, when the natural progression of history has no doubt changed his mind, but seeing the percentage beside her name tick higher and higher until it reaches 70% soothes that guilt.

It never falls again, and at 11 PM, it becomes official.

Clarke Griffin will be the democratic candidate for the US Senate.

What follows is a mess and madness of toasts and popping champagne bottles and hugs and congratulations for the new Senate candidate. In the pure chaos, Clarke isn’t even sure what’s
happening, or how to react; she’s surrounded by so much joy that she simply shuts down, blank-faced. She’s ushered backstage, behind a small platform and podium, and surrounded by a tighter group of friends and staffers: Lexa, Raven, the department heads, the party organizers. They’re no better than the general party outside, but at least they’re congratulating each other as much as Clarke. They open their own bottle of champagne and give Clarke a quick toast. The moment it’s over, she ducks her head and slips away, muttering something about needing a moment.

Of course, there’s only one sober person brave enough to seek Clarke out after that. After a ten minute cushion, Lexa finds Clarke in a lonely corner backstage, leaning against a table and studying the opposite wall with narrowed eyes. Lexa tucks her hands into her pockets and waits.

“They’re ready for you to come on and give your speech.” Her brow furrows when Clarke doesn’t reply. “Clarke?”

“Did you…” Fuck, she doesn’t want to ask, and she glares down at her feet because she knows she needs to or else it will eat her alive. It’s too clean not to question. “Did you have a hand in this?”

“Did I have a hand in what?” Lexa questions, voice even and clear as ever.

“This. ” The way she waves her hand at the celebrating event center on the other side of the curtain is more violent than need be, but that’s only because she’s trying to keep from shouting. “Diana Sydney’s accusations, the headlines, Vincent Vie’s numbers falling just enough to get me the nomination. Did you have anything to do with it? Because if it’s discovered that we had any connection, you know Cage—”

“Clarke, even if I did, it wouldn’t be ‘we.’ It would be me,” Lexa says quietly.

“It would be ‘we!’” Clarke shouts. “You and me, us. We’re in this together. You can’t go behind my back and undermine my opposition. I’ve told you since the beginning I want to run a clean race.”

Yes I can, Lexa wants to say; Clarke can read it all over her face, the indignant raise of her eyebrow and the shadow of arrogance just beneath the surface. But it’s gone in a second, replaced once more by even features and pursed lips.

“I didn’t,” Lexa says softly. “I promise, I had nothing to do with this. The campaign had nothing to do with this.”

“If you’re lying…”

“I’m not,” she breathes, so close that the heat of her breath sends a shiver down Clarke’s spine. The crowd outside is clamoring for Clarke and there’s no one close enough to see them, it would be so easy…her gaze drops to Lexa’s lips to avoid the hunger in Lexa’s eyes, but the view doesn’t lessen the heat deep within her.

“I have to talk to them,” she chokes out, pulling away. “The statement, where’s the statement?”

“Here.” Lexa grabs the notecards from a nearby table and offers them, as if nothing had happened. They’re professional about this. “We both know you already have it memorized.”

“Just in case.” Just in case I can’t think straight.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you! It is an honor to stand here in front of you, having been chosen by the people as the democratic candidate for the US Senate for the State of California. And perhaps
more strikingly, it is an honor to stand before you knowing I have such ardent support from some of
the hardest working, most intelligent, devoted team members and benefactors any candidate could
ask for. To stand among you and engage and know you, makes your belief in me one of the most
humbling honors of my life. This extends to all the people of California as well: your belief in me
means we share the same vision, for a nation we can be proud of, led by a state, a home, that we
already are proud of. We have work to do, and a long way to go, but I could not be more proud to
have the support that I do tonight. Thank you.”

The party goes on for a while.

Clarke lets them enjoy it; after she gets the time to understand what just happened, she enjoys that
they enjoy it. A night of too much coffee blends well into a night of too much alcohol. A week of no
sleep should end with a fitting celebration. Tension, release, or else things snap and break. Clarke
Griffin, the underdog, coming from behind to take the primary is something worthy of raising a few
glasses to. Clarke doesn’t engage herself, first because she’s too busy fielding congratulations in
person and on the phone, and secondly because she feels it’s more a celebration for them, not her.
Her mind is already turning toward the fight they have ahead of them, but she keeps up appearances
by smiling and nursing the same glass of champagne late into the night.

Lexa doesn’t find her until late, when Clarke is bowing out of a conversation with one of the wealthy
donors invited to the celebration. “I set up some press conferences for you, in the morning,” she says,
appearing out of nowhere behind Clarke and skipping the greeting.

Clarke spins around—they haven’t seen each other since the heated conversation backstage. “Oh,
thank you. Perfect, I knew we would need to get that set up.”

“Of course. You should probably get home and get some sleep. Want me to call Gustus?”

It’s clear Lexa hasn’t had any alcohol either, nor engaged in the celebrations with any sort of revelry
or enthusiasm. Clarke’s surprised she’s still here and hunched over a desk, not planning their next
move.

“Yeah, yeah we can call him,” Clarke agrees. “I have to swing by the office first, I left some stuff on
my desk that I want to review before tomorrow.”

“My car is there, I’ll come with you then.”

*

On the way over, in the quiet leather interior of the car, Clarke accepts joyous congratulations from
her mother all the way from New York, where she’s helping take care of a sick aunt. Abby is beside
herself and promises a hundred times to fly out to California as soon as she can. Meanwhile, Lexa
works out the finer details of a press release for the morning. Gustus uses the underground entrance
to the building and walks them to the door just to be sure, so it’s not until Clarke and Lexa are in the
elevator again that they finally have a moment to face each other.

“So. Future US Senator.” She smiles, and Clarke’s heart softens. “How does it feel?”

“I just…we did it,” Clarke says, shaking her head in disbelief. She runs a hand back through her
loose hair, smiling weakly at Lexa, feeling affection course through her so powerfully that it must
shine out of her face, and she doesn’t mind. “Are you still with me?”

“Of course, Clarke,” Lexa replies quietly. “I promised you I would be.”

They watch each other, leaning back against opposite walls of the elevator; the smile on Lexa’s face
fades slightly as the silence grows. Her eyes travel down the length of Clarke’s body, shamelessly,
darkening as they do, but her face is unreadable as always. Clarke can’t look away under her gaze—
god, she’ll never get enough of Lexa, brilliant and gorgeous and deadly as she is. Suddenly, the
elevator doesn’t have enough air and the space between them is nowhere near enough to stop what
happens next.

“Fuck,” Lexa says and it comes out in a strangled sort of gasp and then she’s there, pushing off the
opposite wall and stepping within a foot of Clarke, and then within inches of her. She fills Clarke’s
vision and her perfume fills Clarke’s nose and the quiet sigh of her shallow breathing fills her ears.

Lexa fills all of her senses, except touch. And taste. And Clarke wants both; her own willpower
snaps within her as Lexa gets closer, gliding forward until they’re close enough to feel the heat of
each other’s bodies, without touching.

“Can I?” Lexa breathes into the space between them. Clarke can only nod.

Lexa’s green eyes stay steady on Clarke’s all the way in, watching and waiting for any sign of
hesitation, but the only sound in the elevator is Clarke’s quiet whimper of relief when she finally has
Lexa against her again. Lexa kisses Clarke with everything: her hands come up to the sides of
Clarke’s jaw, she steps between Clarke’s legs, and they press chest-to-chest until Clarke hits the back
of the elevator—and then it’s Lexa who releases a sigh of satisfaction.

The elevator continues to rise to their top-floor destination and the feeling of dwindling time turns the
kiss sloppy and heated. They don’t stop to question what they’re doing—that conversation happened
two weeks ago in Clarke’s living and has been ignored ever since. Instead Clarke revels in the way
Lexa’s lips slip when Clarke’s hands run up her stomach to palm both breasts through her shirt.

37, reads the screen above the elevator doors. Thirteen floors left and Clarke kisses Lexa with more
urgency, like this is the only chance they have. 38. 39. 40. Clarke’s fingers toy with the edges of
Lexa’s button-down, scraping the skin beneath and searching for the promise of more, and Lexa’s
only response is to roll her hips into Clarke’s, a silent plea for more.

“God, I’ve needed this,” Lexa murmurs against the line of Clarke’s jaw. Clarke glances over her
shoulder as Lexa moves lower, toward her collarbone. 45. 46. 47.

“Lexa…wait—”

The elevator doors slide open to reveal Clarke and Lexa standing side by side, hair a little out of
place and lips a little swollen, but with smooth stone masks of innocence and nonchalance, as if they
hadn’t been one stray touch short of fucking in the elevator. No one would ever question them unless
they looked closely, if they had the courage to look closely.

Then again, there’s no one in the office to question them.

The automatic lights click on when the doors slide open, illuminating a ghost town of empty desks
and cubicles beyond the front desk. Clarke blinks in surprise at the silence, and at the fact that she
had somehow forgotten that everyone would be gone tonight, celebrating at the donor’s dinner or at
bars, after they had spent so many nights here over the past week.
Lexa reacts first. “What did you need to get?” she prompts, looking over at Clarke.

“I…” It takes her a moment to clear her head and remember. “I had a folder of information to review for press conferences, I want to review it for tomorrow.”

With a deep breath, she takes the first step away from Lexa, and every step farther away from that elevator gets easier. She didn’t realize how much easier it is to breathe in the office until all she was inhaling was the air from Lexa’s lungs. She hears Lexa’s footsteps behind her—they make it a little difficult to keep walking forward, make her legs a little shakier and the air a little thicker, but somehow Clarke makes it all the way to her office and through the door. This is normal. Her fancy attire and Lexa’s slightly rumpled shirt, hastily-rebuttoned shirt don't change that.

“We could spend some time going over it,” Lexa offers, following her in. “Prepare you for tomorrow. The press—”

Clarke turns on her heel. “I really don’t want to.”

Lexa doesn’t stop walking. “Good.”

They crash into each other again, never missing a beat from their separation in the elevator, and Clarke bends to meet Lexa in all the right places, pure muscle memory. There’s no wall behind Clarke to back her into, but Lexa keeps pressing, slowly walking her backward, her hands on either side of Clarke’s jaw as Clarke works herself out of her own blouse and then scrambles for the buttons on Lexa’s shirt. Each pop and release of fabric pulses desire through her, but Lexa—maddening, frustrating, beautiful—slides her fingers back into Clarke’s hair and holds tight, earning a satisfied moan from Clarke but making it impossible to get the shirt all the way off her arms.

“Take this off,” Clarke hisses. Her ass hits the heavy mahogany desk and Lexa presses into her, grinding their hips together and completely annihilating Clarke’s train of thought.

She bites down and pulls at Clarke’s lower lip. “Deal with it.”

Lexa presses the length of her body into her and sets Clarke on fire with the warmth of skin on skin and the friction between her legs and yeah, Clarke can deal with it.

In open appreciation of the feeling of Lexa’s lean body against her, Clarke lavishes open-mouthed kisses up and down Lexa’s neck, from the shell of her ear to the graceful curve of her shoulder, while Lexa tips her head back to allow Clarke access. She basks in the feeling, grinding her thigh up into Clarke, until at last Clarke’s smooth, even rhythm breaks in a shuddering gasp.

Then Lexa takes over.

After everything that’s happened, after the wringer her body has been through and the way Lexa is touching it now, Clarke’s resistance has entirely eroded; she allows Lexa to lift her higher on the desk and she doesn’t have the coherence of thought to object when Lexa reaches behind her and sweeps the desk clear with one free arm. She pushes Clarke down, slowly, kissing and fumbling for the zipper on Clarke’s skirt as she goes. Clarke helps her with clumsy, heavy fingers, too lost in Lexa’s lips and hair and scent; when the skirt finally slides down Clarke’s legs and Lexa’s fingers run up the bare skin of her thigh, stopping just short of the wetness and heat pooling between her legs, Clarke moans.

At the sound, Lexa whimpers too, dropping her forehead against Clarke’s to gasp for air. But instead of pushing any further, she pulls her head up, stumbling over words Clarke doesn’t hear clearly the first time. “Do you bruise easily?”
“Do I—what?” Clarke shakes her head impatiently as she pushes herself up to kiss Lexa again, but the woman above her turns her head to avoid the kiss and repeat the question.

“Do you bruise easily?”

“Well?”

“Because I scheduled your press conference and it’s in—” With a free hand, she scrabbles blindly for her phone, knocking objects off the desk as she tries to avoid Clarke’s searching lips. Finally she finds it and clicks on the screen. “—eight hours. You’re going in front of them in eight hours and I need to know what they’ll see on your throat.”

Clarke lets out a groan and rolls her hips, but Lexa’s steel will-power somehow holds out.

“I don’t,” Clarke promises, sitting up to press a kiss to Lexa’s jaw, and then her ear. “And I can put on makeup if I do. Now forget everything else and—please—”

Whatever she was going to beg for is choked off in a sharpened moan as Lexa sinks two fingers into Clarke and bites down at her neck, just as impatient, and Clarke snaps. At the feeling of Lexa suddenly inside her, she throws her head back and her body jerks up off the desk—and Lexa is there to catch her one hand snaking under her back and splaying out between her shoulder blades to hold her up off the desk while the other hand begins a slow grinding rhythm.

With Clarke’s head thrown back, the marble column of her neck is too much for Lexa to ignore. Even with her fingers inside of Clarke and Clarke’s moans building until they fill the room, all of Lexa’s obsessive focus is on marking her, biting and sucking into her neck with a hunger she didn’t show the night in the hotel. With every kiss she waits until Clarke’s moans turn to a gasp before she moves higher up her neck to the next unclaimed stretch of skin.

They’ve admitted their feelings, they’ve buried them, and in the past two weeks, they haven’t slept enough to ignore them or hold anything back the way they did that night.

It’s a night of stress to the point of breaking, and the release that follows. That’s Clarke’s only explanation for the speed at which Lexa takes her to the edge. Lexa’s ministrations between her legs and the possessiveness in her mouth lights Clarke on fire and before she knows it, she’s desperate.

“Please, fuck—Lexa, please, I need…”

Finally, Lexa pulls away from her neck and hovers above her as she fucks her, watching every reaction her fingers elicit like she’s memorizing Clarke’s face. Clarke can feel her watching, so she lifts her head, enough to make eye contact and see the darkness in her eyes, the way her pupils fill her irises almost to the edge as if they’re trying to drink in more. When their gazes meet, Lexa’s speed picks up, the driving force of her fingers relentless as Clarke shudders and rolls her hips unevenly against Lexa’s hand, racing desperately toward a finish. She could look away, she could reach up and kiss Lexa, but something about the mingled tenderness and desire in Lexa’s eyes keeps Clarke locked there, looking up at her, until at last her body tenses and arches up, her breath freezes in her throat, and the hand hanging on to Lexa’s shoulder digs in tightly enough to draw blood. And then the release crashes over her like an ocean wave and she comes, shaking and moaning in Lexa’s arms.

Lexa muffles Clarke’s cries with her own lips in a long, tender kiss. There’s no one around to hear them but god it tastes good to kiss her as she rides out her orgasm. She holds Clarke up off the desk for long after the shaking subsides and she draws out tiny aftershocks by trailing her fingers between Clarke’s legs, but truthfully, when Lexa’s burning arms at last lower Clarke back down to the desk, Clarke’s body feels so blissfully weightless that she can’t feel the hard surface of the desk. She stares
at the ceiling, gasping for breath.

Another couple of thumps sound as Lexa pushes a paperweight and binder off of Clarke's desk and onto the floor, then lays beside her in the newly cleared space. She's breathing just as heavily, cheeks flushed pink with exertion and lips swollen and wet from their attack on Clarke's neck.

Clarke turns to look at her: idly, staring upward, Lexa takes her glistening fingers and traces them over her lips and the pink tip of her tongue.

"You're gorgeous," Clarke murmurs.

Lexa looks sideways and reaches over, brushing a few sweaty strands of hair from Clarke's forehead. "So are you."

She can't help a small smile. "You're not going to resign this time, right?"

A long, heavy pause passes between them before Lexa speaks. "I think we both knew this was going to happen again if I didn't resign the first time. We knew and decided to work together anyway."

"Can we?" Clarke asks her. "You said it in my living room that morning. Can we sleep together and still survive working together?"

"We have so far," Lexa replies quietly.

It's not nearly enough reassurance of their position. They stand on thin ice, a single wrong move away from the collapse of the lives they've spent a decade building, and all they can use to justify their position is that it hasn't fallen apart yet. But fuck it. Clarke's still coming down from her high and Lexa truly does look gorgeous laying beside her, with her shirt open and still hanging off her arms, her hair mussed, her flushed skin covered with goosebumps from the open air.

Clarke sits up, bringing one arm across to trace down along the edge of Lexa's open shirt, from her bra to the soft skin below her hipbones. "Your turn. I have to repay the favor."

She meets no resistance in hands and lips as she straddles Lexa, then drapes herself down to leave sloppy kisses up her neck and just below her jawline.

"Let me take you home," Lexa offers, prompting Clarke to sit up and look down at her. "We can't stay here all night, and you need to sleep too before tomorrow. We both do."

Clarke studies her face before she leans down and kisses the corner of Lexa's lips with the softest touch she can manage. "Stay with me, though?"

Lexa nods.

*

It's a short drive through LA's nighttime streets, the air in Lexa's car heavy with the scent of sex rolling off their bodies. Exhaustion sets in too, and the result is Clarke's body settling into the seat, bones aching and muscles pounding and heady cloudy, as if she could spend the next hundred years there. Lexa glides into the garage and into one of the visitor spaces and has to gently prompt Clarke out of the car.
It doesn't stop Clarke from seeking out Lexa's lips once they get into the sanctuary of her apartment. They skip chess and they skip the wine. Clarke pulls Lexa back down the hallway toward her bedroom, helping her out of her clothes along the way, and they lose themselves among the sheets and pillows of Clarke's queen bed.

“We should go to sleep,” Lexa whispers with a yawn.

“Mmm. No,” Clarke mumbles sleepily against her collarbones.

“Clarke, you’re exhausted.”

“Wanna taste you. Please?”

The small jerk of Lexa’s hips is enough of an answer, but when Clarke looks up and sees Lexa nodding, she begins her descent over the slopes of her breasts and the smooth plane of her stomach. Clarke isn't even sure she's entirely awake, but the feeling of exploring Lexa's body with her eyes closed and her lips mapping it out, to the symphony of Lexa’s sighs and moans above her, is so much better than dreaming. And when she at last sinks between her legs, after leaving bruises on the insides of her thighs to match the ones on Clarke’s neck, the taste makes her come alive again.

“Oh, Clarke, fuck…”

Lexa spends the night, and when Clarke wakes in the morning, Lexa is still there, sound asleep beside her, fingers spread out over the curve of Clarke's hip in a more gentle form of claiming than her mouth was the night before.

She has to face the world today, but Clarke lets herself enjoy the feeling for a little while longer.

Chapter End Notes

*special thanks to my two fantastic betas for all the help I so desperately need sometimes!*
Chapter 12

Well, I'm back! We'll call the two and a half months since the previous updated a miniaturized hiatus. I recommend re-reading the previous chapter because this one picks up pretty much exactly from where the last left off, and references things from it.

For those of you who follow me on tumblr, the first chapter of the promised two-shot--an apology present for the way I made everyone wait--will be posted tomorrow afternoon!

Credit to the awesome girl who's kept me motivated for this...and made me promise not to commit to any more concrete deadlines. And thanks to everyone who is still with me!

It's only once she finds herself living them does Clarke realize that in all her fantasies and distracted thoughts of Lexa, not once had she considered the idea of a morning after with her. It makes sense, given that most of these thoughts were furtive and guilt-ridden, not exactly foundations on which to build image of a sleepy sunrise together. As nice a feeling of Lexa's warm body fitting perfectly against hers may be, once Lexa begins to stir, Clarke realizes she has no plan for what is to happen now.

They've made a monumental choice not only to sleep together, but to stay together. When everything builds to that single moment, what next?

Clarke inhales, ready to voice this to Lexa, but before the words come out, Lexa tightens her grip on Clarke's thigh and Clarke instantly relaxes into her touch. There's something in it that reassures her. An anchoring. Her whispered concern instead leaves her lips as a content sigh.

"Good morning.

"Good morning," Lexa replies. Her breath warms the back of Clarke's neck. She pauses, and there's an eerie calmness in her voice when she says: "Please tell me we didn't sleep through your press conferences."

Clarke gasps.

"Oh my god."

L Lexa clenches her hand and her fingernails dig into Clarke's hip; the shock of pain is more than enough to make her drop the act before it has really begun. Clarke lets out a soft laugh.

"I'm kidding! It's 6:15," she says quickly. They still have three hours. Lexa relaxes, digging her fingernails out from where she had embedded them in Clarke's thigh—and then she rolls away entirely from Clarke. The rush of cool air where there had previously been nothing but skin along her back and legs is, to Clarke, way more of a punishment than the crime deserves.

"Jesus Christ, Clarke."

She can't help but laugh again. "I'm sorry!"
When the press of Lexa's body does not immediately return, Clarke groans and rolls over to find Lexa on her back, hand over her eyes.

"Did I really scare you?" she asks, grinning.

Lexa lifts her hand to shoot Clarke a sardonic glare. "Your bedroom window faces north, so I can't see the morning sun. I have absolutely no idea how long we slept."

"Well apparently, even if we don't know, our bodies can tell what time it is and wake us up automatically." Clarke snuggles back down into the sheets, and infinitesimally closer to Lexa, just enough so that their arms are touching. Lexa doesn't pull away. "In fact, this is sleeping in, by my standards. Old habits die hard. Even if it's only three hours of sleep and I'm...sore."

Lexa looks over at her, eyebrows raised in concern. "Did I—?"

"Nothing you did. I'm just...more used to beds than desks."

The concern falls away and the corners of her lips turn up. "You should have told me you weren't a fan of desks."

"I never said that."

They watch each other, waiting for the other's next move as they try to fight smiles, a quiet amusement in Lexa's eyes and a coyness in Clarke's. The longer she holds Lexa's gaze, the more she finds herself slipping into the self-rumination from earlier. Just before the ominous thoughts of "What's next?" return, she grabs for the first conversation topic she can:

"So I've been thinking about the press conference."

Lexa heaves a sigh, one that lifts into a chuckle at the end. "Ah. Of course you have. Even now."

"Like you haven't," Clarke scoffs, stifling a grin.

Whatever lie Lexa was going to tell, she realizes Clarke has already prepared to disprove. She bites it back with a smile and rolls over onto her side to face Clarke, tucking her arm under her head and settling in, letting her eyes drift shut, face smooth and peaceful. "Okay," she says. "Let's go over the standard talking points again. They're going to ask you the personal questions first. Answer those genuinely. Then they'll get into your opinions on Cage Wallace."

"I'll keep it polite and professional."

"So we can hit him hard and go dirty later," Lexa agrees. She opens one eye and notices Clarke drumming her fingers on her stomach, nervous, so she extends her free hand and entwines their fingers to stop the movements and focus Clarke's attention. "They'll move into your weak points compared to the other two candidates."

“My lack of appeal with older voters and those in the more rural portions of the state.”

“And?”

“I'll talk about my ground game and our travel plans.”

"What will you say if they ask you about policy plans you haven't yet written?"

"That it will be revealed in the days leading up to the first debate with Cage Wallace."
"No," Lexa says tersely. "Be vague. Use it as an opportunity to talk about your willingness to work with the party leaders, as well as Vie and Sydney. Use the vague questions to your advantage and make it as positive as possible."

"What about the specific ones? For example..." She turns impish, but keeps her voice serious. "What if they ask me, specifically, if I'm sleeping with my campaign advisor?"

Lexa pauses to pretend to consider it, trailing her fingers over Clarke's palm in absent-minded intimacy as she thinks. "Well, in my capacity as your closest advisor, clearly, and your campaign manager, I would suggest you lie like your life depends on it."

"Thank you for your input," Clarke replies regally. "I will take it under advisement and make a decision at a later time."

She doesn't have to glance over to know that Lexa is rolling her eyes. But then, before Clarke can get in another joke or return the conversation to the press conference, Lexa's voice breaks the silence.

"You used sleeping."

"What?"

"You used sleeping," Lexa replies, "Instead of slept. I'm sleeping with my campaign manager. Like an on-going..." The next word out of her mouth was going to be affair, they both know it, so the way Lexa clamps her mouth shut is not necessary. Affair sounds so official, though. So damning. The crackle of amusement in the air vanishes as the suggestion of something so serious and Clarke struggles for the right words in the new, charged atmosphere. Lexa is asking a very pointed question.

"We...said it would be a one-time thing the last time," Clarke says slowly. "We tried to limit it, to hold back. You even quit, and it was still all I could think about. The campaign nearly fell apart...and here we are again. After all we tried to limit it."

"So your proposed solution...is sleeping together?"

Clarke shrugs. "My proposed solution is to not try to limit it. Not worry about it. Accept what happened, keep it a secret, and focus on what we have to do."

Lexa stares at her.

"Win the race," Clarke finishes. She's more confident than ever, the competitive spirit and will to win blowing up in her chest. "If this ever happens again, we can call it stress relief."

"Okay," Lexa says, nodding. "Okay. That's what it'll be."

They lace their fingers together again: a pact, an agreement, a promise.

* 

As it turns out, despite the exceedingly diplomatic and professional agreement to accept the sexual and emotional attraction for what it is, Clarke's question of "what happens next" is still a valid one. And an immediate one.

"We'll have to stop by my place," Lexa says, picking her bra up off the floor as Clarke grabs a towel
from the closet.

The suggestion stops her on her way to the bathroom. "Will we have time to go there?"

"They took pictures of you last night, Clarke," Lexa says. "Which means they have pictures of us
leaving together. I can't show up with you wearing the same clothes I was wearing last night in the
same car we left together in. I have to shower and change too."

"Would anyone actually—"

And then it hits her: yeah, they would notice. She chides herself for letting her focus slip so early and
so easily. She got so secure within the four walls of her bedroom and within the walls Lexa uses to
keep everyone else out that she had somehow forgotten the rest of the world outside them. The way
they microscopically examine every detail in a public persona. The obsession with finding cracks in a
facade, be it in a politician or celebrity or just a beauty on the street, is one of the more bizarre
ingrained traits of public consciousness, and also one of the most fruitful. It's paparazzi who discover
affairs, loyal followers who pick up patterns, reporters who profit on secrets.

And if she wasn't already a part of this world, she certainly is now. They both are. She and Lexa
share the biggest secret in this year's political landscape in what may be the most important senate
race in the nation.

They cannot afford slip-ups like this.

"Shower here."

Lexa reacts just in time to catch the towel Clarke flings her way before it hits her into her face.

"What?"

"Shower here," Clarke repeats. "I'll shower after, get ready here, take my own car; you swing by
your apartment in the meantime, get dressed, and meet me at the office before the press conference.
How long is the drive?"

It's an instantaneous snap into their everyday selves, and the reason she and Lexa work so well
together is that they match each other stride for stride as soon as they begin to move, no matter the
destination. Lexa grabs her watch from the nightstand. "Twenty minutes. Thirty with morning
traffic."

"You should be able to make it then," Clarke says. "Just hurry."

Lexa nods.

It's not that Clarke times her...it's just that she only gets halfway through her short press conference
notes before she hears the water shut off—Lexa can't have taken more than eight minutes. The
thought of Lexa getting out of the shower is more than enough to end Clarke's press conference
preparations, but she waits respectfully in her room to let Lexa dress, as if she hadn't mapped every
inch of her bare skin last night. She waits until she hears the bathroom door open and bare feet pad
down the hallway toward the living room before she grabs her towel and heads for the bathroom
herself. Seeing Lexa now would just slow her down.

"I made coffee and there's bagels!" Clarke calls down the hallway after Lexa. "Eat before you leave
and I'll see you there!" She doesn't wait for a response.

She beats Lexa's time by more than three minutes, easily: she's in no desperate haste to wash the
memory of Lexa from her skin, instead doing just enough to make herself presentable for the day.

Time is of the essence. Pressed with thoughts of showing up late to her own press conference, of anyone sensing an irregularity and investigating, she slips into a skirt and tugs on her blouse as soon as she steps out of the shower, only buttoning her shirt as she strides down the hallway to grab her own cup of coffee.

...Only to find Lexa still in the kitchen, leaning against the counter and tipping back the last of her cup of coffee.

Clarke stops short in the archway to the kitchen in surprise, and when Lexa lowers the cup, her eyes go wide. The path of her eyes is so apparent as to be almost deliberate: she looks down over Clarke's wet hair, her half buttoned shirt, the bare legs below the skirt. Under her gaze, Clarke flushes, pink from her cheeks down into her chest. And when Lexa's jaw opens and closes a few times before she speaks, the realization strikes Clarke that she wouldn't mind a few more mornings like this.

Finally Lexa remembers what words are. "I...didn't want to take one of your mugs," she explains slowly, waving the coffee mug.

Clarke nods. "We're gonna be late." She watches as Lexa's eyes make a second pass up and down her body, and the sight makes her do the same over Lexa's long form. "We will be late."

She has to affirm that to herself as well as Lexa, because the warmth coiling in her stomach is weakening her willpower.

"You're right." Lexa snaps out of it, setting the cup on the counter and heading for the front door. Of course, this takes her past Clarke within inches, and as Lexa passes her in the doorway, she drops her gaze to Clarke's neck one last time. And then she nearly stumbles.

"Clarke!"

"What?!"

"You said you don't bruise easily!"

"I—" She can't even remember stringing that many words together. "I did?" Lexa ignores her. She forgets her usual decorum and brushes Clarke's damp hair away from her neck, grimacing at the purple and blue masterpiece her own mouth had made. Clarke knows they're there. Even if she doesn't remember promising anything of the sort in her Lexa-induced haze, she remembers past engagements where she did bruise quite easily, and she remembers the force with which Lexa had loved her. The evidence will be painted on her neck and chest and wherever else for days. And she rather likes that.

"You have to cover this up yourself," Lexa tells her, with a sternness belied by the reverence with which her fingers trace the bruises. "If you go into work to get it covered, they'll ask questions. Don't let anyone see."

"You forget I have a fake boyfriend I can blame it on," Clarke says. "It's fine."

That's what pulls Lexa back, with a flash of emotion that makes Clarke regret the words immediately, for the void they create between her and Lexa.

She's usually always prepared with the right thing to say, but now she falters. She doesn't even try to search for the words that will keep Lexa close, keep her from stepping irretrievably back into her
everyday façade—kissing Lexa is the most natural thing in the world, and Clarke doesn’t even realize she has stepped in until she’s exhaling against Lexa’s lips again and hearing Lexa’s happy sigh in return.

That kiss is the most reassuring of all, a far cry from the last morning after they shared. Lexa parts her lips and allows Clarke’s gentle advance, and there’s a softness, a sweetness in it. No fear, no looming resignation, nothing between them. Just the two of them and all the world outside. She could lose herself in it, angling her head into Lexa’s hand when it rises from the marks on her neck to the sides of her face. Their first break for air is her only chance to make sure they don’t stay here against the wall for the rest of the day.

“We’re gonna be late,” Clarke murmurs one last time.

A tiny groan escapes Lexa’s lips. “Okay, okay,” she says, pulling back and heading for the door. “Get the marks covered, go over your notes one more time, and I’ll see you there. Nervous?”

“For the press conference?” Clarke asks, leaning back against the wall. “No.”

Lexa gives her a smile before she slips out. “It’s all going to be fine. Nothing to worry about. Good luck, Clarke.”

*

“You’re late.”

Raven’s two words, amid the wave of greetings and congratulations she receives when she makes it to the office an hour later, catch Clarke off guard. She wasn’t that late: just twenty minutes past the predicted 9:30, an hour before the press conference. She takes a moment to hug Harper and nod to another employee before she can turn to Raven with a smooth reply.

“I’m the candidate, nothing can start without me.”

“Spoken just like your campaign manager,” Raven says, with a nod of acquiescence. “I’m not questioning you. You’re my boss, it doesn’t matter to me when you show up. It’s just that in college, you would show up to my engineering project presentations before I would. Celebrate hard last night?” When Clarke waves that mixture of amusement and concern off and moves toward her office, Raven follows her, with a more direct question: “You’re okay, right?”

Once in her office, she is. Quiet, isolated, room to breathe. “I’m fine,” she tells Raven honestly, checking her reflection in a mirror from the desk drawer. The bruises are covered. Good. “Have Sarah Miss Ward, I want to go over—”

“She’s not here yet.”

Clarke looks up. “…What?”

Raven shrugs. "I figured she would come in with you, but no, she's not here yet. You haven't talked to her this morning?"

"I—no, I haven't," she says, scrambling. Raven raises a brow. "Have Sarah call her, then you and I can go over my key points one last time as I go through makeup."
She can feel the weight of her friend's gaze as she digs out her notes on the press conference, and she knows that in any other situation, Raven would have questions or suspicions; she's the smartest girl Clarke's ever known. But as she said, right now, Clarke is her boss. But something about the look on her face makes her sure she can expect a comment the next time they're drinking wine and trying to make it through an episode of The Walking Dead. Or in front of Octavia and Lincoln. If Clarke ever gets time to see them again within the next six months.

[9:45 AM] Clarke Griffin: Everything ok?

Over the next twenty minutes, aides surround Clarke with make-up brushes and styling tools; when Sarah comes in to report that calls to Lexa went to voicemail, Clarke has to force down any noticeable reaction. Raven provides a solid enough stand in for the press and Clarke does her best not to seem distracted, a goal that she's not sure she achieves. She's not used to worrying like this, especially when she's not sure exactly what she's worried about. Los Angeles doesn't have ditches for cars to crash into; even if they did a dozen morning joggers would have tweeted about it and Clarke would have known as soon as it happened. Since when does Lexa running late equal Lexa never returning to the campaign, ghosting her texts? Lexa's punctuality and precision has become as regular as the sunrise but no one is perfect, not even her. It's something about the new world she and Lexa have entered into, the new reality of the secret they carry between them, that has Clarke so shaken by the smallest irregularities. Maybe Raven's suspicion has something to do with it too.

“We can't wait much longer, Clarke,” Raven says finally. “Candidate or not. Press is downstairs, are you ready?”

Clarke checks her phone again; no new messages. She steels herself and wipes her mind clear, then nods to Raven, who directs the entire entourage out.

Once in the elevator, the preparations continue as they sink to the 2nd floor, where the press conference has been set up. Clarke is in the middle of reciting a practiced answer to a question about immigration when her phone vibrates and she nearly drops it in her haste to grab it.


And then a moment later, it buzzes again and she can't help but look despite the glares her aides give the phone.

[10:12 AM] Lexa: Good luck; you'll do great.

*

The assembled journalists sit in restless anticipation for their first shot at the official Senate nominee, the out-of-nowhere underdog of the race coming down off her first unexpected victory. Clarke watches them from the doorway on the side of the stage, and she can practically read the headlines across their individual faces. Most, at least, she knows well—not that that means much if she makes a mistake.

“Ready?” Raven asks at last.

She’s abandoned her concern from an hour ago; nothing but support now. Clarke’s confidence swells strangely with the two words and her reassuring face. Raven hugs her like a friend, not a coworker or an employee, and then it’s out onto the stage. Cameras flash. She’s supposed to give
them ten uninterrupted seconds to get used to her presence, to thank them for coming, nod in greeting: she uses up all ten of those seconds to draw herself up as high as she can and project an image of strength for her first official appearance. And then, just before she launches into her opening remarks, she glances sideways.

And there she is: Lexa stands beside Raven with her hands clasped behind her back and a frenzied, panicked look about her. But the moment she sees Clarke’s eyes on her, she settles and dips her head with a look that communicates volumes: *I’m here. I’m sorry. I’m proud of you. You’ll do great. Now get it done.*

And with that, Clarke faces the media calling her name.

If she didn’t know already, as if they hadn’t gotten her across the finish line in the primaries, Clarke is now convinced that she has the best damn team in the world when the first half dozen questions at the press conference are almost verbatim repeats of the ones she practiced all morning. As she recites a perfect answer about immigration she had rehearsed that morning in bed, she struggles to hold back a smirk at the realization that she could have spent the early morning hours kissing Lexa instead of needlessly running lines for the presser. Even her noncommittal politeness about Cage Wallace is well-received because of her casual, confident delivery.

OF course, nothing lasts forever.

“Representative Griffin!” calls a journalist from San Diego. “In the past you have commented on your desire to keep your political career separate from your mother’s. Will she be joining you on the campaign trail and do you think any differing positions between your two careers will hurt you in the long run?”

That's a targeted question, one that she's been lucky to avoid so far. Having Abby Griffin play no part in her campaign is an almost unprecedented move--especially since Cage Wallace has had his famous father Dante stumping for him since before he declared his candidacy--but it springs from a childhood of striving for independence and anonymity and never quite achieving it with her mother's name attached to hers like a title. She was never just Clarke Griffin...she was also Abby Griffin's daughter, an identifier all on its own. Newspaper articles with "Clarke Griffin, daughter of former senator Abby Griffin" have always left a bad taste her mouth. This is her race.

But that's not something she can afford to divulge to the press like the podium is a leather couch and this is a therapy session. "I love my mother," Clarke says, "and she's been a great guiding force in my life. I don't want her career to serve as nothing more than a springboard for mine, however. And after a lifetime of politics, I want her to have a break from it all, but I'm sure her instinct will be to help me as much as she can however she can. She always loved the campaign trail so there's always a possibility she'll be out there with me."

She glances off to the side, to receive an approving nod from Lexa. *Be vague,* she had said that morning. This will be the first frustrating answer for the press but with hope, they're more dedicated to her politics.

Another journalist stands up; Clarke doesn't know where she's from. "Diana Sydney, who conceded days before the race and endorsed your campaign, worked with your mother for several years. Did this have any role in her concession, and will she have any connection to your campaign going forward?"

*Maybe if I was trying to appeal to the doomsday preppers living off the grid. She’s crazy,* Clarke wants to say. Very diplomatic of her. "My campaign hasn't had any contact with Congresswoman Sydney, but I look forward to any opportunity to work with her in the future."
"What about Lieutenant Governor Vie?"

"Lieutenant Governor Vie as well," Clarke says. "He--"

"Even despite the quotes released from old correspondence, regarding the place of women in politics?" asks a sharp younger woman.

Clarke steels herself. "I have spoken previously about the quotes and I don't want to continue to discuss them, especially because they were so long ago."

They begin to feed off one another, sensing a potential story by directing the press conference this way and keeping Clarke on her heels, out of her comfort zone. "Building off that question, Representative Griffin, Vincent Vie nonetheless had a strong base in more of the rural communities, a demographic you lost. Given that your youth and hopefulness has become a motif of your campaign, how can you hope to reconcile that with communities that supported Vie despite his comments?"

It's not something that she had planned for, or needed to plan for; she has no idea how to reconcile that. The election had been only last night and no one could have predicted the way the votes fell in specific communities and regions.

If she's being honest, it's probably something she should have made a decision on last night. It's just that she was rather occupied by the gorgeous woman laying her back on her desk and pushing her skirt up.

"You know," Clarke tries with a genial smile, "that's something we still have to go over. I think one of my qualities that I've yet to really demonstrate is my ability to win people over personally, so I'm hoping that on a basic level many of those people who don't fully believe in me yet will come to support me in the coming months."

"You're just going to hope for it?" But he's shushed down as more questions come pouring in, about her actual strategy, her use of politicians, her ground game: all everyone wants to know about is how Clarke will compensate for her weaknesses. The talk of policy and ideas for the future has long since passed, and now she's left defending her choices over the past several months with a desperation that didn't exist this morning when she was answering sample questions with Raven. Best laid plans. But she doesn't duck out of the conference and she doesn't shut them down, she just hangs on.

When the allotted half hour is up, it comes as a blessing when the officials call it and she can gracefully exit the stage, into the protection of the cabal that waits just outside the door. The group envelopes her with smiles and words of praise, and as one, they move off toward the elevator.

It's Lexa who walks closest; she slips a hand around Clarke's upper arm and leans in. "You did fine."

"We need to get our asses in gear and start planning."

"I've already set-up a meeting upstairs."

Relief floods through her at such a simple gesture, and if she were anywhere else, she'd turn and kiss Lexa. As it stands, she can't even show that relief, because relief means weakness. "Thank you," she says curtly. Lexa gives her arm a squeeze. She knows.

*
Clarke sits weary at the head of the conference table, but despite that and despite the crumbling atmosphere of the last quarter of the press conference, Lexa stands at the opposite end of the table, feet planted as firmly as they would be if she stood at the front of an army. She has her arms crossed across her chest.

“I want the next two months planned before any of us leave this room,” she announces.

And if the assembled team wasn’t so afraid of her, they would tip their heads back and groan. Half the office has the day off while the eight of them are stuck in this conference room.

“Come on,” Clarke says, seeing their support for Lexa waver. “We’ll do it quickly and then break for lunch. Miss Ward, lead the way.”

She won’t pretend that there isn’t an additional benefit to having Lexa lead the discussion: while all heads are turned toward the campaign manager, Clarke is free to decompress from her hectic morning and admire the lines of Lexa’s body across the conference table. She always looks delightfully intimidating in a business suit with pants, but god, the way skirts hug her figure always provides a welcome relief to the stress of the day.

“Miss Griffin.” Lexa’s voice snaps with a school teacher’s authority, as if Clarke has been caught not paying attention in the back of class.

…she buries that thought as quickly as humanly possible because god, the fantasy she’s living is already transgressive enough.

Luckily, though, focusing her attention on Lexa means that she did absorb some of the conversation: they’re deep in a discussion about road trips versus taking advantage of LA’s PR possibilities for another few weeks. “The road trip,” Clarke decides. “I’d rather meet with undecided voters in person than promote myself to them from Los Angeles.”

Lexa gives her an approving nod, as she had been leading the argument in favor of the road trip. It’s decided, discussion over. And when she moves on to the next topic, maybe there’s a minute chance that Lexa knows where Clarke’s eyes had been before Lexa had said her name; because when Lexa reaches to make a note of the road trip dates, the curve of her body moves ever so slightly slower, more seductively, leaving her on display for a half second longer. Clarke bites the inside of her cheek.

Sterling had been the one arguing for Clarke’s continued presence in Los Angeles. “Okay, then. We still need to turn the road trip into publicity opportunities, so I’ll bring most of my team. How long will this trip be?”

“At least a month,” Lexa says, looking to Clarke for agreement. Clarke nods. They’re on the same page. “A month long trip. I’ll meet with you and your team tomorrow to divide up the weeks.”

Sterling makes a note of this. “And will you be on the trip too?”

“If requested.”

“I’d like you to be” Clarke interrupts.

She won’t stay sane on a month-long trip without Lexa at her side.

“Then I will,” Lexa says smoothly.
Clarke sits forward, not wanting to linger under Lexa’s gaze for too long and draw attention to the moment. “And Raven, how are the polling and engagement systems coming?”

“Another week and I’ll roll them out,” she says. Raven may be an engineer, with little practical experience or skills for a political campaign, but the foundation of her technical expertise is an unrivaled creative ingenuity that makes her invaluable. She had developed a new strategy and program for precise engagement with supporters and potential supporters and if it works, if could prove to be a huge boost to the campaign going into the critical second half of the race.

“Then you’ll run the office while we’re gone,” Clarke declares. “Everyone who stays behind will be committed to your project.”

“Got it, Griffin.”

With Lexa at her side for the trip, Raven is the only other person Clarke trusts to run the office in her absence; so Raven would be invaluable even without the new system she’s implementing. Over the next twenty minutes, the group begins to plan the specific path of the road trip, Clarke turns to call for Sarah so that she can begin making hotel reservations—only to find her secretary waiting in the doorway already.

“Miss Griffin? I have Diana Sydney on the phone, and I also have a message from your mother, who requested that you call back because she can’t reach you on your cell phone.”

Clarke’s brows knit together. “Diana Sydney?” she asks, at the same moment Lexa’s voice rings out across the room: “Forward Diana Sydney to my voicemail and tell her I’ll call her back after this meeting so that C—Miss Griffin can speak with former Senator Griffin.”

When Clarke gives no alternative orders—not like she has any better ideas—Sarah nods and ducks out of the room again. No one makes any further mention of the interruption, but even as they get deep into the planning of which cities and towns specifically to visit and what to do there, Clarke’s thoughts drift away from the appreciation of Lexa and her appearance and instead to the fact that Diana Sydney has come up twice in the first half of the day. She conceded. She should have been long gone, at least for Clarke’s first day as the official candidate.

Her thoughts don’t stay there for long, though. They return to more entertaining places rather quickly.

*

As usual, when the meeting finishes, Clarke lingers in her seat and Lexa lingers over her shoulders as the rest of the staff files out. Once they’re alone in the room, Clarke rises and makes the long walk down the conference table toward her.

“You should call your mother,” Lexa begins. “I know you’re against her influence in this, Clarke, but…”

“I am,” Clarke agrees. “But I’ll talk to her.”

Lexa looks up in surprise, a smile breaking over her face. Agreement at this stage? It’s new. She stops the false pretense of reorganizing her files and leans back against the conference table, inviting Clarke’s advance. Clarke casts a careful glance to the door—no one watching, and no one in the
hallway beyond—before she steps closer to Lexa, close enough to be pressed with the desire to reach out and touch her.

“Are you doing okay?” Lexa asks softly.

“Fine,” Clarke breathes, in what feels like the first real breath she’s released all day. “Thank you for coming with me on this road trip.”

“Well, you are my boss…”

Clarke rolls her eyes as Lexa smirks. “You know what I meant.” Thank you for the support.

Instead of responding—not that it needed a response—Lexa scans down over Clarke’s face, dropping her eyes to her neck. She checks the door again before reaching out and brushing the hair off of Clarke’s neck again, checking the skin for any sign of what had happened last night. As promised, Clarke had covered the marks well; Lexa traces the area anyway, and Clarke just wants to sink into her touch for the rest of the afternoon. She closes her eyes. Lexa gives a soft laugh.

“This is a terrible moment for a subject change,” Lexa murmurs, without removing her hand. Clarke grimaces. “But we need to set up another public outing with Roan this weekend.”

Her grimace becomes a long groan. “Why? Why now?”

“Because you and I left the election night celebration together instead of you and him,” Lexa points out. “And because he’ll probably be joining you for a few of the campaign stops. Just a publicity night.”

None of this wipes the grimace off her face, but when she sinks into Lexa’s touch, it becomes more comforting. “I never should have agreed to this in the first place.”

“You would have. You’re a politician at heart. It’ll help you win.”

She opens her eyes. “You’re okay with it then too, right?”

For a moment, a hardness flashes across Lexa’s face before she regains her repose. “Of course I am. I’m not technically a politician but I want to win this as much as you do, and this will help you win.”

“Okay then,” Clarke sighs. “Set it up.”

* 

“We probably should have left the election night party together,” is the first thing Roan says to her when he slides into the backseat of the car the following evening.

“So I’ve heard.” Clarke waits until Gustus shuts the door and walks around the car toward the driver’s seat before she gives a longer reply. “I had work to do,” she says simply. “It wasn’t a frivolous night where I needed to be seen dancing out with my significant other, I needed to get to the office to review my plans for the following day.”

“You recognize that tonight isn’t going to be a frivolous night, right?” he says, uncharacteristically apprehensive with her nonchalance.
“It’s dinner with your family,” she says with half a laugh. “In the grand scheme of the political race right now, it’s pretty frivolous.” When Roan doesn’t reply in kind, with his usual devil may care attitude, it’s Clarke’s turn to be apprehensive. One of the main things she appreciates about him is that he takes her side against Nia as much as he takes his mother’s side, so this is unexpected. “Why, is this going to be different from our usual dinner photo op?”

“I come from a family of politicians, Griffin,” he grunts. “If you think they’re not gonna grill you, grill us both, you can’t hack it in this profession because you can’t predict something so obvious. This is going to be rough. Hope you’re prepared.”

She lets her stunned face speak for itself for a long moment. “This would have been pertinent information to disclose to Lexa before we set this up,” she replies. “What are they going to grill us on?”

“Politics. And then personal life.”

“Seriously?”

“A family of politicians,” he says, emphasis clear on both aspects before he sits back and shrugs. “I warned you though.”

In the past, Gustus would open the door and Clarke and Roan would stride past any photographers into the restaurant. Tonight, however, it’s been perfectly arranged that the dinner guests all arrive at the same time for a gathering in front of the restaurant, in full view of onlookers. Clarke’s handshake with Nia Azgeda lasts less than a camera flash, but she’s warmer with Roan’s father: he’s just as icy as his wife, but probably more for appearances than anything else, since he’s never been involved with politics. Roan’s grandparents are warmer. His grandfather is a genial former governor; his grandmother, a tiny, delightful elderly woman who clasps Clarke’s hand in both of hers when they first meet.

The “personal” and “political” dichotomy Roan had made sure to warn Clarke about makes perfect sense now. Clarke readies herself as they head into the restaurant.

*

“So Clarke, dear.” They haven’t even made it through salad yet and Roan’s grandmother has already made Clarke the center of attention. “I read some comments in the papers the other day, about your work with homeless youth? That’s very sweet of you.”

“Good article,” his grandfather grunts. Nia simply coughs, which turns Clarke’s goodwill toward the seniors into simmering irritation for her.

“Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Azgeda,” Clarke says sweetly. “Actually, Roan’s mother was a huge help on that campaign, working with queer homeless youth. We couldn’t have done it without her.”

Roan’s grandmother beams with pride and Nia looks like she’s envisioning tipping Clarke’s chair back through the window. She’d surely love to, but she’s in too deep now to extricate Roan from the façade, so she has to play along and that is Clarke’s small advantage.

The old woman continues. “What else have you collaborated on? And Roan, are you going to get into any politics?”
Nia hands the question off to Clarke with a smooth shrug, and Roan looks up from his salad with a mouth full of lettuce and cashews, forcing Clarke into the spotlight. “I, uh…we haven’t worked on anything since that, and I haven’t really spoken to Nia, I’ve been busy. But I’m sure Roan would like to get involved.”

“Oh.” She deflates. “That’s nice.”

Clarke hazards a sideways glance at Roan, who looks alarmed at the suggestion of himself becoming involved in Clarke’s politics; his grandmother looks between the two of them, waiting for elaboration on the answer, and shifts uncomfortably when Clarke busies herself with her wine glass.

Sensing a weakness, Nia finally enters the conversation. “So Clarke, tell my parents where you and Roan met. It’s a great story.”

And now it’s Clarke envisioning tipping Nia’s chair back. She gives the congresswoman her brightest false smile.

“Roan and I…” Clarke begins, before reaching for her wine glass again. This is the kind of thing they would establish before an interview with a lifestyle magazine. Dinner with parents was never in the cards. “You know, we just met casually at a restaurant one night, recognized each other’s names, and it went from there.” Be vague be vague be vague. She grimaces internally at her inability to come up with a functional lie.

Roan’s grandfather has already lost interest, and his grandmother looks more disappointed. Clarke just continues to stumble through a series of questions that vary from her political opinions on Nia’s foreign affairs positions to her favorite date with Roan. Going to coffee will never be anyone’s favorite date.

At last, before the dinner course arrives and before his grandmother can ask another question, Clarke jumps to her feet with a quick, “Excuse me.” She makes for the bathroom, slipping her cell phone out of her clutch.

[8:24 PM] Clarke Griffin: This isn’t going well so far.

[8:25 PM] Lexa Ward: Did Nia say something?

[8:26 PM] Clarke Griffin: It’s all more personal than I expected.

[8:28 PM] Lexa Ward: What, you can’t do personal?

Lexa isn’t one for emojis, but Clarke knows damn well from the way that’s phrased that Lexa is smirking at her phone, wherever she is. It pulls a smile out of Clarke as well, and she can’t help but respond in kind.


[8:29 PM] Lexa Ward: So I’ve seen. Try to be personal and just get through dinner, and you’re free for a month. Let me know afterward when you’ve made it home.

When she returns to the table, she makes it back just as the waiters arrive with dinner. Clarke and Roan’s meals—which he had ordered for the both of them—consist of tiny servings of filet mignon and two crossed stalks of asparagus. It’s pretty, sure, but beyond the noticeable issues of it not being enough food for a small child let alone a fully grown adult, the tiny dinner servings also allow far more room for conversation than Clarke desires.
“So, Clarke,” his grandmother begins again, almost immediately. Nia is openly smirking now. “What do you and my grandson like to do together?”

Suddenly, it’s Lexa’s face that flashes into Clarke’s mind.

“Actually, we…” A shy smile grows slowly over her face, despite her attempts to suppress it. “We bonded over our inability to catch up on the Walking Dead, and it’s become a running joke that every time we try to watch an episode, we can’t make it through because we so often have other things going on.”

“The Walking Dead!” she exclaims in a high voice. “I love The Walking Dead!”

“So do we,” Clarke says. “When we have the chance to sit down and watch it.”

“Yes, you must be busy all the time! It won’t be until after the election that you get any downtime, right?”

“Probably not. But…Roan still fits around my schedule. He’s always there for me, despite how hectic life may get. I think that’s one of the reasons I appreciate him so much, he’s steadfast when I’m going in a million different directions.”

It’s probably the wine. But she wants to spill her heart out…as long as she keeps saying the right name.

“And what will you do after the election?” she asks Clarke.

“I haven’t even thought that far ahead,” Clarke says, truthfully. “But a getaway would be nice, just a brief one. Whether I win or lose. Hopefully Roan will want to come with me.”

Roan’s grandfather speaks up with his gruff voice again. “And Roan, son, will you be on the campaign trail with Clarke?”

“Oh,” Roan looks to Clarke. “I think so.”

“He will,” Clarke answers for him. “And it’s a relief for me. That sort of support is invaluable…I’m so glad to have someone I can trust and count on, especially in private. The quiet moments. He knows the real me.”

God, this is way too easy.

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The stories she weaves for Roan’s grandparents delight her in the way that Nia can’t stop rolling her eyes, but that’s not why she goes home glowing inside. And it’s not the wine, either. She does her best to hide her happiness on the ride home with Roan. It’s only once she bids Gustus goodnight, gets into her apartment, and changes out of her dinner clothes that Clarke releases the lock on her thoughts and allows them to drift to the person who inspired every story. She reaches for her phone.


[10:01 PM] Lexa Ward: Final verdict?
[10:02 PM] Clarke Griffin: Not as well as I expected, but that was overconfidence on my part for assuming a fake relationship required less work than a real one.

[10:04 PM] Lexa Ward: In your defense you’re the only person I know who would put the same amount of work into a fake relationship as you would a real one, so it’s passable. How was the food?

[10:08 PM] Clarke Griffin: Not passable at all. And even if it had been, I would have needed to eat everyone’s plate to actually feel full. I’m starving.

[10:11 PM] Lexa Ward: Well I’m picking up tacos right now; you a fan?


[10:16 PM] Lexa Ward: Good. You Californians are spoiled; it would be criminal not to take advantage of the wealth of Mexican food you have here. Chicken or beef?

[10:17 PM] Clare Griffin: Chicken.

[10:19 PM] Lexa Ward: I’ll be there in about twenty then

Smiling, Clarke tosses her phone onto the couch and strides across her apartment, going nowhere in particular but just needing to get some of the fitful energy that overflows with every small interaction with Lexa. She can’t, however, wipe the grin off her face. But she doesn’t get far from the couch before she hears her cell phone buzz again and she’s back to it in half a second, already swiping across the screen to open Lexa’s message.

But it’s not from her. It’s not even a text; her email client opens and the new message is from one D. Sydney, to Clarke’s direct server. Subject: My position and policies within your campaign

And oddly, both Lexa and Raven are listed as recipients as well.

The body of the email doesn’t reveal much either, just a request that Clarke please return one of her many calls because Diana Sydney has “pressing concerns and commentary for the campaign moving forward.” Instead of replying, Clarke simply screenshots the email and sends it to both Raven and Lexa separately, asking what they know. In two minutes, Clarke’s phone buzzes again, and this time it’s Raven calling.

“Do you know anything about this?” Clarke asks as soon as she picks up.

There’s a long pause from Raven on the other end. “This should be a conversation we have with Ward.”

“I’m meeting up with her in about ten minutes. Explain, Raven.”

“You’re seeing her in ten minutes?” Raven asks.

“Raven!” Clarke says, patience growing thin.

“You’re not going to like this,” Raven says with a sigh. “We weren’t planning on telling you. But after we found out about Jasper leaking pictures to Maya Vie, Lexa recognized we could use that. She had me contact Maya, securely, and work out a deal that would preserve both her and her dad’s image in exchange for the emails. Attacking a young woman now versus stupid comments decades ago, essentially. She traded the old emails, and since Diana Sydney was too far behind to win, we worked out an agreement for her to concede, leak the emails and torpedo his campaign, and in
exchange, the campaign would owe her. Essentially.”

Clarke sinks onto the couch, her skin crawling and her jaw locking up from the sudden way she tightens it. “You’re kidding.”

Raven’s voice fills with apology. “We should have told you, but—”

“I never would have approved it.”

“Exactly. But in one move, we took out both sides of your competition. And we came out looking clean in the process, not involved with any of the leaks. I’m not well-versed in politics but as chess moves go…”

This isn’t a chess game, Clarke wants to snarl. This is real, with real people and real consequences. She’d seen her mother’s late night war room plans and the moves she agonized over, the bad press and the people she hurt. Clarke had grown up in politics and vowed never to take part, and at least if she did, she wouldn’t play it like that. Raven knows this. Clarke wants to shout all of it at her anyway, vent her frustration, but she can hear the regret and guilt in Raven’s voice and knows that she wasn’t the mastermind here.

“Okay,” Clarke sighs. Not in surrender or acceptance, but in vented frustration. “We’re gonna have to deal with this. Fuck.”

“I’m sorry, Clarke. But we’ll handle it.”

“I know. I know.”

There’s a pause, and then Raven’s voice comes softer. “Don’t be too hard on Lexa, either. She didn’t want to do it either.”

This stops Clarke in her pacing. She lets her tired eyes drift closed as she pushes a hand back through her hair and when she opens them, her gaze lands on the wall clock above the archway to the kitchen. Lexa will show up at her door at any minute, and Clarke doubts she will have bothered to check her phone before she gets through the door. This conversation is imminent and Clarke doesn’t know how it’s going to turn out.

“I won’t,” she says, without conviction. “We can talk more about this on Wednesday before the flight out, okay?”

Raven’s reluctance to hang up shines through, but she agrees anyway and wishes Clarke a sincere goodnight before the phones click off. Clarke throws hers back onto the couch, for good this time, and pours herself a necessary glass of wine; it proves useless for tamping down her thoughts and the raw feeling of betrayal, even as she tries to rationalize what happened. Betrayal is too strong a word, she tells herself, and yet…she remembers the way she was taken by the earnestness of Lexa’s face when she promised she had nothing to do with this the night of the election. It hurts more now, even though it’s not something that should hurt at all. It’s just politics. She should be used to this.

The clock ticks closer to Lexa’s expected arrival. With a sigh, Clarke pours a second glass of wine and resigns herself to waiting for Lexa to knock at her door.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

As always, thank you for all of the love and support!! The kudos and comments mean everything.

Fair warning, so that it's not jarring: we get a little more of Lexa's POV here. Let me know if it works; I want to use it as an introduction to her point of view rather than just jumping into complex chapters from her POv after 100k words of Clarke's.

Anyway, enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She's left her door unlocked. When the handle turns and it cracks open, Clarke has one last chance to pull in a breath before Lexa knocks it out of her.

The first time she ever saw Lexa in anything other than a professional situation, Clarke had taken her road team to celebratory drinks, a casual affair at the hotel bar; while everyone was dressed casually, Lexa had appeared in the same suit she had worn that day, with the exception of rolled up sleeves and a single undone button at the top of her pressed button-down—her idea of casual. When she walks into Clarke’s apartment tonight, she wears dark jeans and a black sweater, with a bag of takeout dinner in hand.

For a moment, forgetting the situation with Diana Sydney, with Cage Wallace, with the race altogether, Clarke stares at Lexa and imagines a world where this is normal. Lexa in casual streetwear, walking into her apartment and closing the door behind her, tossing her keys onto a nearby table without looking. Laying on her couch. Beating her in chess. Eating tacos and drinking wine late at night. The political stage worlds away from them. The familiarity rife in this picture sends a warm giddiness rushing through her as Lexa turns away from the door to face whatever may come.

Her face pulls Clarke out of her domestic fantasy. The guilt, the paleness of her lips from the way they’ve been pressed together. Clarke’s chest caves in as the dream rushes away, replaced with reality.

“You talked to Raven,” she surmises from the mask of anger Clarke managed to put on before Lexa met her gaze. She puts the bag down on the table Clarke envisioned her tossing her car keys onto. “I’ve already spoken to Diana Sydney.”

"Lexa."

Lexa tightens her jaw and closes her eyes to block out the look on Clarke’s face. "I know."

"You know?"

"It was...messy."

"Messy?” She jumps to her feet, advancing toward the other woman. “Lexa, you lied to me. Directly. I trust you more than anyone, I have to trust you more than anyone, and you lied to me on
the night of the primaries when I asked you if you had anything to do with this.”

Bewilderment shadows Lexa’s face—she had clearly prepared a full report of the Diana Sydney situation and the steps she would take to rectify it, and the point Clarke attacks first is the most minor, the personal betrayal that bears no effect on the campaign itself. Clarke doesn’t quite understand her outrage either, just that the more she thinks about the way Lexa had so smoothly lied to her, the more it feels like something sharp is carving its way through her stomach. She clamps her mouth shut and narrows her eyes before she can continue on too long and reveal the emotion it’s bringing forth.

Lexa holds herself up with remarkable poise under the weight of Clarke’s glare, but the strength in her tightened jaw wavers. “I didn’t want to ruin your achievement with a discussion of what I did for the campaign.”

“Clearly, it wasn’t an achievement if it was won underhandedly,” Clarke says, icily. The dangerous flicker of emotion dies when she focuses on the professional, so Clarke turns full force to the argument Lexa was expecting: “So now I have loose fucking cannon Diana Sydney calling my office and emailing me, making demands like she has my mother hostage, like she was promised a position on my goddamn advisory team. What did you promise her, Lexa?”

Lexa stiffens. "I did not—"

"And for what? So that she would leak dirt on my opponent? Do you know me at all, Lexa?" she demands, throwing her hands in the air and turning to stomp back across the apartment.

"I do,” Lexa says quietly, behind her. “I know that you would never have done this."

Clarke whirls. "Then why did you?"

"Because without someone doing it, you wouldn't have won, Clarke!"

“We wouldn’t have won! We’re in this together!”

At the correction and the emotion Clarke pours into the word we, Lexa’s mouth opens and closes. The hint of personal betrayal echoes in Clarke’s voice again, and it’s visibly difficult for Lexa to swallow. This time Clarke doesn’t change the tone to the professional problems they face, but allows the words to hang in the air, enveloping them both in the complicated implications, as Lexa searches for the words to de-escalate. They come soft but firm when she does.

“I promised you I was with you, and I am. I still am. I also promised you that we would win this election. We were too far behind Vincent Vie for an organic, high-road victory in the primaries. I did what I had to do to win. Because that’s what matters.”

She’s right, and it burns, and Clarke fights back however she can.

"God damn it, I don’t care about winning if it means doing it this way!"
winning, but I know you care about the people he would be governing if he wins.”

Clarke brings herself close to Lexa’s face, refusing to back down any more. “If I play the game like this, the people won’t be any better off, because I’ll be no better than Cage Wallace.”

“You will always be better than Cage Wallace,” Lexa whispers back. “You’re better than any of them.”

Before she knows it, her hands are gripping Lexa’s shirt and Lexa is letting herself be pulled in until their lips collide in a heated, angry kiss. Their bodies push roughly into one another, like they’re both struggling for control, and Clarke bites down, hard, on Lexa’s lip. Her only response is the soft brush of Lexa’s tongue against her upper lip, an acknowledgement of all of Clarke’s emotion and a silent apology. A promise to take whatever punishment Clarke will mete out as long as this kiss lasts.

And that forces Clarke to break the kiss.

“Fuck,” she hisses out, breath coming shaky against Lexa’s lips. The two women stay locked together, forehead to forehead, just far apart enough to breathe.

“My Clarke,” Lexa murmurs. No response. “I’m sorry. I never should have kept it from you, the night of the primary election. I never should have lied.”

“You’re not sorry for the decision itself?”

“I am, for what it’s done to you.” Clarke heaves an angry sigh, but Lexa’s grip on her side keeps her there for the moment. “I will not apologize because I would do it again, for you. But we will never again be in the position where it’s necessary, and I won’t betray your trust again, ever. It’s too valuable.”

Deep down, part of Clarke knows. Come what may from the inclusion of Diana Sydney in her campaign plans, whether Lexa handles it or not, whether the truth comes out, Clarke knows that she was always going to have to sever ties with the idealism she had so tightly clung to growing up. In the grand scheme of politics, the underhanded public destruction of an opponent is, at worst, a necessary evil. This is the reality Clarke lives in, and for the moment she resents it, but she knows Lexa is right.

It doesn’t make her feel better. The storm of emotions rages on in her chest.

Lexa can tell. When Clarke doesn’t say anything, radiating anger instead, Lexa prompts her quietly.

“Do you want me to stay?” she asks.

“I—don’t know. I want you to tell me it’s going to be fine. I want you to never lie to me again. I want you to leave me alone. I want you to keep kissing me. I want you to go.”

Sometimes it’s so needlessly complex, the campaign and her life. Trying to balance her innate morality with necessary ruthlessness. Dating a politician’s son for the positive press while kissing her campaign manager in secret. Grappling with the question of whether she truly wants to win this at all, or if she just wants to ensure that Cage Wallace doesn’t win. Spending hours meeting people, thanking them, making speeches, giving interviews, coming up with complex plans for every aspect of American life, all for the simple goal of winning someone’s approval over her opponent. The hours her parents argued about her mother’s decisions still pull at the edges of her mind during the dark, sleepless nights when she doubts her choices the most. What she needs is someone who understands all of this and knows what to do when Clarke doesn’t.
And in that moment, Lexa is that person. She scans Clarke’s face and she can tell it all from the catch in her breath as she tries to find the words. Lexa has them before Clarke has to search anymore.

“I’ll leave,” Lexa tells her. “Take the night to yourself. No work, no studying; ignore Diana Sydney and Cage Wallace. Turn your mind off and try to relax. In solitude.”

They still stand with foreheads pressed together; Clarke lets her eyes drift shut as Lexa speaks, but Lexa gives Clarke’s arm a squeeze to get her to open them again.

“And enjoy the tacos to the fullest.”

Gingerly, as if afraid Clarke might rebuke her, Lexa lifts her head and kisses Clarke’s forehead, sighing in relief when she doesn’t react, as if Clarke has granted her a stay of execution. Clarke stands listless and exhausted as Lexa pulls away; once she hears the door shut behind Lexa, everything floods out of her at once and she wants nothing more than to get into her bed and leave the day behind her. The tacos, she saves for another day.

*

“I’m so glad you kicked that one guy’s ass after what he said about where women belonged.”

“Technically I only won by five points,” Clarke reminds her, bored. Octavia stands in the kitchen with her back to Clarke, cutting chicken for dinner, and she doesn’t pick up on Clarke’s tone.

“Still. Now you have to beat the other guy and prove to both of them that women are better and misogynists get their asses kicked.”

The way she brandishes the butcher knife as she speaks, abandoning the chicken breasts on the cutting board, Octavia looks about three steps away from proving women are better and misogynists get their asses kicked herself, rather than waiting five more months for Clarke to do it by beating Wallace. Unsurprisingly, her growing baby bump and the traditional softness that comes with impending motherhood has not affected Octavia’s fire in the least. It’s almost always refreshing to relax in their apartment and listen to Octavia rants replace Clarke’s own constant self-talk, but with the longest road trip of the campaign looming, Clarke would rather talk about anything other than politics. Especially about what happened with Vincent Vie’s old quotes.

“We will,” Clarke promises. She lapses into silence, waiting for Octavia to return to chopping the chicken, before she changes the subject: “So, you’ve bought and built most of your baby furniture already. What’s next with the, uh, pregnancy thing?”

Octavia stops mid-slice and turns to Clarke in disbelief. “The pregnancy thing?”

Weak, but it works as intended—Clarke shrugs bashfully and Octavia switches gears.

“You’re the most single-minded person I know,” she says. “Well, next in this pregnancy thing, I go to that doctor place for a six month check-up. Then I have one of those whatdayacallems…a baby shower. Thing.”

“When will that be?”

“Whenever.” Of course she’s lukewarm about it. “Since you’ll be gone for a while and you’ve all
but indoctrinated Raven into the political cult, I’ll just wait until the two of you have a weekend afternoon off. My mom is ready to fly in whenever I let her.”

“It’s only a month,” Clarke promises; a baby shower when she returns from her road trip will be a perfect way to decompress. “Raven and I will have off whichever day you choose.”

“Isn’t that a dereliction of duty, or something? Abuse of power?”

“I’m in charge, I make the rules, so no.”

“You always have,” Octavia says, with a little too much ire to be friendly joking. Clarke doesn’t mind—her control got them through plenty of sticky situations when they were younger, she doesn’t need gratitude for it. “Are you seeing Wells when you’re up in San Francisco?”

“It’s…on the agenda. Among a million other things.” She’ll be lucky to have more than a half hour for an interview with Wells, let alone dinner or even coffee. As Octavia dumps vegetables into a pan for her stir fry, she plays sounding board for Clarke’s long list of scheduled items for her trip, which she of course has memorized like the back of her hand. Halfway through, upon an explanation of a committee meeting she’ll be sitting in on, even Octavia seems exhausted by the proposed schedule.

They’re interrupted before Clarke can finish—Lincoln swings into the apartment, two grease-spotted bags of fast food in hand.

“Dinner!” he calls, grin wide, and Octavia practically collapses into his arms as she swoons with gratitude.

“I don’t know what I would do without you,” she tells him. He trades the bags for a kiss and takes her place at the stove, tending the simmering stir fry as Octavia fishes through the bag for a hamburger and extra-large fries…and then an order of apple pies, a shake, and two boxes of chicken nuggets.

Clarke stares. “Didn’t you just spend forty minutes making dinner?”

She speaks around a mouthful of fries. “That’s for Linc. I was craving this.”

“Pregnancy cravings,” Lincoln provides for clarity, since his mouth isn’t full.

“Sometimes you just need it,” Octavia says, with an appreciative smile at her husband as she reaches for her shake. She’s in heaven and judging by the way he looks back at her, so is he.

Clarke finds herself aching, looking between the two of them. They light up the kitchen together. Sometimes you do just need it.


Lexa stares at her desk phone. The empty office outside is silent in the early morning, and she too has been motionless and quiet for the past five minutes as she deliberates.

She got sloppy. She can admit it, anyone can see it, and even Clarke had called it out. For someone who prides herself on thinking three moves ahead and having several options at all times, the desperation with which she had pulled such a cheap move with Vincent Vie’s old quotes and Diana
Sydney haunts her. She’s better than that. She can’t drag the campaign down like that. Worse still was the way she had never considered how Clarke would react to it. As much as her future senator may press upon the ethics of her campaign, Lexa will never forget the look on Clarke’s face when she pointed out how Lexa had lied. She doesn’t want to face eyes stung by betrayal again. It’s left her with a sense of trepidation and hesitation hanging over her for the past several days now, forcing her to step away from her darker plans and take her time with even the standard ones, which is not how Lexa operates. But maybe it’s for the better.

This one, though…this phone call can’t be anything but beneficial. To the campaign, at least. Clarke stands staunchly opposed to nepotism—Clarke and her beautifully frustrating, infuriating golden idealism— but even Clarke could admit that bringing Abby Griffin into the fold would be a good idea. What Lexa is considering isn’t nearly as impactful as Mrs. Griffin’s presence—surely it would be acceptable.

With a sigh, she checks her watch. It’s still early there, but the campaign team’s flight leaves in a few hours and right now, in the serenity of the empty office, her mind is the clearest it will be for the next month. And she’d much rather make this choice with a clear head and have the option in her back pocket for the future, rather than debate the pros and cons when they’re in full crisis management mode on a road trip.

Finally putting her pride aside, Lexa grabs the phone and dials the number.

* 

The flight to Sacramento, the first stop on the month-long road trip, takes only an hour and a half, but it feels far shorter than that. As they soar over the 350 mile trip between Los Angeles and the state’s capital, Clarke feels as if her aides have 350 different tasks and reminders to discuss. Any other time, she’d want the 90 minutes to herself, planning and rehearsing, but on this particular flight she’s sitting across the aisle and one row back from Lexa, which gives her a perfect view of Lexa’s frenzied chess game on her phone and the white knuckle grip she has on her arm rest. They haven’t interacted much since Lexa left her apartment that night, beyond the necessary exchanges in the office, and Clarke still isn’t sure how she feels, but the desire to lean forward and mutter a small, personal comment—whether a joke about chess or a reassurance about the flight—is more goodwill than Clarke is ready to demonstrate and the aides keep her mind off of it.

Clarke can only imagine the disapproving look her career politician mother would give her for her pettiness, as well as Clarke’s objection to the problem in the first place. But Abby has played a role in the situation, however indirect, so Clarke really don’t heed her mother’s imagined reactions.

As the flight drags on, though, the aides do more than just distract Clarke. She’s able to conceal her feelings from them, and there’s a new sense of determination among the group, like they’re starting a brand new race. Clarke feeds off their energy, basks in the feeling of hearing her last name said with new strength and reverence. By the end of the flight, she’s so busy and motivated that she almost doesn’t catch Lexa playing the chess game again upon their landing—but she does. She’s feeling so distant from the personal regrets and problems that she nearly taps Lexa on the shoulder and asks for a friendly rematch.

She restrains herself. Then they’re hurried off the plane and after that, there’s no time.

The California state capital lacks the glamor of the more famous San Francisco or Los Angeles, but
what it lacks in beauty it makes up in history. It originally sprung up during the California gold rush as a mining town in the foothills of the mountains, and prospered as a central hub of commerce as gold miners became farmers. Clarke’s trips here are always more business than personal, but she does appreciate the hard-working people who live here, and has always endeavored to connect with them.

The first stop of the trip is a press conference, which have become so familiar to Clarke over the past week since the primaries, that she’s finally able to relax throughout it. She can rattle off the same answers to the same questions the way a bored actor does at a fan convention, and even still, she’s rewarded with applause and appreciation for the slightest variations on her words. Unlike actors, the media will eventually tire and she’ll have to pour more effort into the publicity side, but until then, this is enough.

The first true even of the trip is a meeting with local small business owners, a weak area of support in past years. But, as Lexa reminds her in the moments before the meeting, Clarke’s platform on small businesses is one of the more popular in recent memory.

“It’s a personal meeting,” Lexa reminds her, “So get personal. They’re still going to question you. But if it comes down to it, appeal to their emotions and then remind them that this meeting is as much for you to hear their concerns as it for you to share your ideas with them.”

“Diana Sydney had a good rapport with small business owners,” comes Clarke’s flippant reply, directed at nearby Harper instead. In her peripheral vision, she sees Lexa roll her eyes.

That little spike of satisfaction stays with her as she goes into the meeting.

Lexa is proven right, though: the personal feel of the roundtable meeting engenders cordiality among Clarke and the half-dozen business owners. What could be a heated discussion stays casual and polite, for the time being at least, but that doesn’t mean they don’t have demands.

“The simplification of the legal code is a great first step,” one man concedes, “But we need much more than that if we’re gonna survive.”

Clarke can only nod as the other attendees echo their agreement.

“Lower taxes.”

“Health insurance.”

“Relaxed regulations.”

“Middle class support.”

And so on. “I completely agree,” Clarke says. She does get it: these people feel overlooked, overworked, and left out to dry by politicians playing games with their support. They’re rightfully mistrustful, and when Clarke wholeheartedly agrees with them, she can see flashes of annoyance spark in their exchanged glances. Only the coterie of media members there to record the meeting keeps the frustration from surfacing, a situation which Clarke uses to her advantage. “There is a lot more that the government can be doing for you. I know this. That’s why I’m here to listen to your concerns.”

“It’s not just that they could be doing more,” one man says. “We’re neglected in favor of other groups. We’re asked to provide for other groups.”

Even in California, one of the most liberal states, class differences and concerns about inequality
exist. These men and women recognize the programs in place to help the poor and disadvantaged within their community, and they know that their tax dollars pay for them: the feeling of not getting the same obvious benefits from their taxes gnaws at them. Clarke’s proposals are more modest, but the business owners still have reason to object. This is going to be a precarious conversation.

“I can tell you that my proposals don’t come from a personal bias or preference toward one side,” Clarke tells them. “Rather, it’s economic—”

“Your party makes terrible economic decisions for the middle class,” someone interrupts.

“I won’t speak for my party: my goal is to make decisions that benefit everyone, regardless of class. The economic basis for my plan—”

The same mane interrupts: “The economic basis is—”

“Let her talk!” one of only two female business owners in the room says, exasperated. Behind her, Lexa nods approvingly when she thinks no one is looking. “That’s why we’re here.”

Clarke nods to her. “Thank you. But we’re not here for me to talk at you; rather, this is a session where I want to hear your concerns, about my proposals as well as the current state of things. I’ll go over my proposals a little before we get into it.” They seem to accept this, and fall silent.

“I know you feel that politics is a game played to advance special interests,” Clarke continues, “And oftentimes, they are. I’m trying to break that cycle and create plans that will benefit as many people as possible. In Sacramento, there isn’t the same presence of millionaires and billionaires like there is in San Francisco or Southern California, so even if trickle-down economics did work, it wouldn’t work here. My proposals are reversals: I want to support a strong economic base that will feed into local business. Stability first.”

“You’re not from here,” another man says, quietly. Clarke stares at him and she’s struck by the similarity to her father: ashy blonde hair and broad shoulders. “You make decisions for the state, but you don’t feel the effects on locals, you don’t really see how taking care of one class first and another class second leaves us out to dry. You’re forcing local business owners to provide for others.”

“I know my political background belies it, but I know exactly where you’re coming from,” she tells him. “I really do. More than you know.”

The sentiment is immediately met with scoffs and disbelief; she pushes on, knowing she’ll regret this but refusing to stop now.

“I…” She takes a deep breath to work up the courage for this speech. “My father, before he passed, owned and operated a local engineering firm. Seven days a week, ten hours a day, he worked, in our town just outside of Los Angeles. Hired local, filled local contracts, got involved with local goodwill projects. He prioritized his community even when his work was recognized on a bigger scale and he was offered more lucrative jobs elsewhere.

“Now, my mother started in local politics as well, and expanded into state and national politics the way my father didn’t. You all remember my mother, right? Abigail Griffin? Just imagine the dinner table discussions she and my local businessman father got into. Not unlike the discussions we’ve had today. I learned the arguments on both sides, very well, but the most important thing I learned from them was their shared passion for their community. They just had different ways of going about it…but they always found a compromise for the good of the people around them. As local business owners, you all have pillars of your community, and as much as I can do to help in my political position, you all have far more day to day influence on this city than I do—so I am here to support
you, so that we can make this community even better. And I don’t think that anyone will disagree that a better community is a far more stable economic prospect than policy decisions that the next politician can just sweep aside. It’s a step-by-step process: we invest in the community and form an economic baseline that will support your businesses, and then once that’s stable, the steps that I will personally take to help you won’t be as necessary. The policy decisions will come, I will support you, but we have to support each other in order to make this community better for everyone, including you.”

Their nods embolden her. “That’s what my father always said, and that’s why I do this,” Clarke finishes.

Eight more votes for Clarke Griffin, at least.

*

The next meeting is across town, a trip through city traffic long enough to allow a pensive silence to descend on the three occupants of the car—Lexa, Clarke, and Gustus. Gustus rarely says a word, but Clarke knows by now that silence is Lexa’s time of introspection, and her periods of introspection almost always end in a serious conversation. She waits, and it’s not long until she’s proven right… just not in a conversation she’s expecting.

“I thought you were against bringing your parents into the campaign,” Lexa says.

Clarke turns away from the window in acknowledgement of her comment, and the question therein, but says nothing: there are a dozen directions that statement can go, and Clarke’s still feeling diplomatic—or wary. She lets Lexa lead on.

“I understand the concerns for privacy and the desire to avoid the appearance of nepotism…” She pauses. “So why tell that story about your parents?”

It’s pure curiosity, over a deeper feeling of consternation. No strategy, no rhetoric. Just a question.

Clarke considers for a moment before replying, “You said to make it personal.” She shrugs. “I gave them a personal story.”

“It was effective,” Lexa admits. “You do well with emotional appeals—if this means you’re no longer opposed, you should use them more.”

Another question, dressed up as advice this time: Are you still opposed?

“Stories like that are…hard. Even when they’re nothing more than stories. My dad…my dad really did not like some of the decisions my mom made when I was growing up at the same rate her political career was.”

“So it was a little more than ‘dinner table discussions?’” Lexa guesses.

“And never about small business policy,” Clarke says with a nod. “They loved each other. I had a good home life. But he hated the cutthroat political life. He hated the deals she cut. And the arguments would last hours, days. Election years were the worst. She was brilliant and pragmatic; he was principled and idealistic.”
It’s beginning to click for Lexa, all the conflict and Clarke’s obstinacy about certain things, going back to day one.

Clarke has launched into her story though, like a leather backseat therapy session. “When I was twelve, she was going on the campaign trail for a few weeks, and my dad and I were to join her after the first week. So he took me camping in the meantime, just me and him. We would go fishing and he would tell me all about that world, all his thoughts. I never told him, but I swore I wouldn’t get into politics, no matter how many people at how many of my mother’s events told me I’d be perfect for it.”

Lexa gives her a smile, half apologetic and half endeared. “And here you are. What changed?”

“What do you think? You tell me.”

“I think you realized your own ability and what you could do, and you knew you had to do it.”

It’s a good enough answer, and probably better than Clarke herself could articulate, so she accepts it. “I amended my promise after he died: I’d be better than my mom, in honor of him. Otherwise, I’d never be able to survive this life. And yet…” She gives a bitter laugh. “Here we are. Leaking damaging email quotes about an opponent via another opponent and telling stories to business owners for single votes.”

“It was mostly true,” Lexa points out.

“And partially a lie.” Clarke runs a critical eye over her face. “But you’d know better than anyone the need for a beneficial lie…sometimes.”

Lexa looks down at her lap. It’s more gentle admonishment than true vitriol—Clarke seems too tired to light the fire again. Still. The memory makes her cheeks burn.

Clarke continues to speak, but now with a note of finality. “Even still, days like today, rehashing all of the old memories…I knew I needed to get into politics way back when, but sometimes I need a better reason to continue doing it, you know?”

Clarke looks out the window again and doesn’t see the way Lexa’s face absolutely crumbles: such a simple collection of words, but pure emotion shines through the space where those walls once stood. She wants to reach out, wrap her fingers around Clarke’s shoulder, and turn her back so they’re face to face—to do what, Lexa doesn’t know. Yet.

But she never has the chance. Gustus is still in the car, just a foot away in the front seat, plus he’s pulling to a stop in front of their destination. Lexa’s out of time.

“You’re not the only one who feels that way, Clarke,” Lexa reassures her quietly.

A number of aides and staffers have already arrived ahead of them, and they wait curbside to escort Clarke into her next meeting. Ryder opens Clarke’s door and clears a path for her, as Gustus jumps out to open Lexa’s door. But before she can step out of the car and follow Clarke into City Hall, Gustus steps into her path, insistent.

“I took a longer route here,” he confides. “It seems like that conversation was important, I didn’t want to interrupt.”

Looking up into his surprisingly kind, intelligent eyes, Lexa feels an unexpected rush of gratitude. “Thank you for that, Gustus. It was important, and needed.”
He nods. “Miss Griffin is important, and so are you. Don’t let her quit now.”

“I won’t.”

*I don’t even think she possesses the capacity.*

* *

Day three of the campaign trip dawns bright and early across a coffee shop filled with political aides who have not yet adjusted to the rigors of Clarke’s ground game. Some sit reviewing the plans for the day as they sip coffee, but most recline in armchairs, watching with bleary eyes as the rising sun turns the street outside from blue to orange to pink. To her credit, Representative Griffin sits among them with a stoic face, looking more alert and prepared than most, but she had retired to her hotel room early last night after they returned home from a long city council meeting—early nights are one of Clarke’s only demonstrations of weakness.

It all makes Lexa even more confident of her plan and its necessity.

She snaps her fingers and heads snap around to give her their full attention as she stands in the middle of the coffee shop; she’s trained them well.

“Today, instead of the appearance at the local mall this morning, we will be attending a local elementary school. The entire campaign team will spend the morning teaching the kids about the various roles of the campaign and politics. The mall appearance has been pushed to tomorrow.” Only one person dares utter a small groan of the frustration they all feel—tomorrow was supposed to be a light morning—but Lexa silences them with a raise of her eyebrow. “Order any additional coffee or breakfast now. We leave for the school in fifteen minutes.”

Clarke Griffin is the only person in that coffee shop with the authority—and more importantly, courage—to question Lexa. The rest of the staffers passively accept the orders and shuffle to the counter like zombies. Lexa turns, only to find Clarke inches from her face.

“What is this?” she demands.

“Change of plans,” Lexa replies simply.

“Why?”

“I know you have no reason to, Clarke…but trust me.” Clarke narrows her eyes. Lexa adds, “Please.”

Lexa accepts that she’ll never know if Clarke really does trust her. Nonetheless, she doesn’t object again as they start their day.

The briefing is short and sweet on the drive across town to the school. Third, fourth, and fifth grade students, ages 7-10. The poorest school in the district. Clarke will explain who she is and what she’s doing, introduce a few key campaign staffers (“The ones with more interesting jobs than mine,” Lexa commands). Then there will be a Q and A, and then they’ll spend lunchtime recess with the kids, playing games and getting to know them.

“And the media will be there, I assume?” Clarke asks.
“Some. But they’re not the objective.”

“What is?”

“Trust me.”

And she sounds so self-assured that Clarke can’t help but comply.

*

Children, as it turns out, are far more difficult to handle than upset local business owners, mostly because they have far less to say. Yesterday Clarke hadn’t made it through more than ten seconds of talking before being interrupted or rebuffed—today, she gives an entire speech about the functions of a senator and what happens on a campaign to a room full of students and receives not a single word in reply, not even after she tries to prolong the speech with increasingly simplistic details.

“Senators also form little teams to decide on different rules,” she says. “And I….also get to do interviews on TV sometimes. That’s fun!”

The group of sixty-odd eight year olds stare back at her, unblinking.

She’s dealt with kids before. She even likes them. But the way she’s dealt with them has been the way that Mall Santas deal with kids, in that she poses for a picture and asks them a few questions before sending them on their way. She’s good at doing things that way. She’s not quite as adept at trying to teach a government and ethics class.

Finally, one boy raises his hands. In relief, Clarke calls on him before it even gets all the way into the air.

“Do you know the president?” he asks.

Clarke blinks. “N-no. I don’t know the president, no.”

Another hand.

“Do you know Demi Lovato?”

“…I don’t know Demi Lovato, either.”

“But you live in L.A.”

“Yes, but—“

“Demi Lovato lives in L.A. So how come you don’t know her?”

“That—I haven’t met her yet. She’s very busy.” Clarke stumbles as the kids start to gain momentum with the thread of conversation, and more hands go up. Warily, Clarke points to the next student.

“Do you have a boyfriend?”

There’s a minor commotion as two of Clarke’s staffers duck out of the classroom and explode into laughter in the hallway; the kids sense the levity and begin to giggle too. Helpless, Clarke turns to
Lexa, who stands off to the side of the room, and she’s even more dismayed to see that her campaign manager has her hand against her cheek, palm covering a mouth that is undoubtedly turned up in a wide smirk. Clarke can’t see it but she can see the way that Lexa’s eyes are shining as she too tries to maintain her composure. Not only is she useless, the sight causes Clarke to start laughing, and she’s desperate to avoid the situation crumbling apart even further, so she turns back to the kids with a clap of her hands to regain control.

“You know what?” she declares. “We’re gonna move on to a more fun part. I’m gonna introduce you to some of my team! There are lots of different jobs on the campaign. Lots of people have to work together to make everything happen. I’ll introduce my friends and let them tell you what they do, and you can ask questions. Okay?”

She introduces them one-by-one: Jackson, in charge of all the money and fundraising. He tells stories and inflates the numbers to wow the kids with all the money in the campaign. Sterling, in charge of media and publicity, tells them all about photoshoots and TV appearances and the glitz and glamor. Then comes Monroe, who oversees all the volunteers for the campaign and tries to convince the kids to get involved in their local campaign. In general the kids seem mildly more interested, if only for the expanded stimuli of different people to look at and listen to, but Clarke still isn’t satisfied with their engagement. As Sterling details the grand fundraising dinners he helps set up, Clarke glances to Lexa, hoping that this time, she will have a lifeline. She does: with one look, she understands Clarke’s silent plea and nods; she deliberates for a moment before leaning out into the hallway.

“Everyone!” she calls at the next lull in conversation. “Next up, I’d like to introduce Gustus, my security guard. He keeps me safe and gets me to where I need to be. Gustus?”

Finally, it’s the reaction Clarke is looking for. Sixty pairs of eyes—sixty-four pairs if you count the teachers standing by—go wide when the six-foot six-inch, 280 pound Gustus lumbers into the room, in his suit and tie. A mix of wonder and fear lights up their faces. A man that big is infinitely more interesting in a little blonde lady in a casual business suit. Clarke can’t hold back her grin as the kids explode with questions.

“How tall are you?” “Have you ever fought anybody?” “Do you have a gun?” “What kind of car do you drive?” “Do you have a girlfriend? How tall is she?” “How much can you bench?”

Gustus zeroes in on the boy who shouted the last question, and a hush falls over the room. “How much do you weigh?” he asks, in his deep monotone.

The boy juts out his chin proudly. “Fifty pounds.”

“I can bench press eight of you.”

They lose their minds. Immediately, there are at least three different requests for him to demonstrate, and more questions about his physical power and how they can be as strong—Gustus explains that he grew so big by eating his vegetables and voting in every election—and the noise in the room allows Clarke to throw her head back and laugh unnoticed. Feeling all of her stress melt away as the kids excitedly clamor for Gustus’s attention, she glances to Lexa, and lights up when she sees Lexa’s smile, unhidden this time. They share a long, understanding look, and their smiles don’t fade.

*
After Gustus’s introduction, the kids and the staffers together go out to the playground for lunch, and it seems that these two events warm the kids up considerably to the campaign race. A decent group still hovers around Gustus—their heads only come up to his waist—but others branch out to the rest of the staffers, pulling some to the lunch tables to sit and talk and others to the playground for games of chase and pirate, while a handful of local journalists and photographers snap pictures for articles that will run in the coming days.

Clarke has to give a few statements to the assembled press members, but she refuses to comment on anything beyond the current happenings at the school, so she’s released from the interviews relatively quickly and allowed to survey the playground.

“Miss Griffin?”

Rather than another journalist begging an answer about Cage Wallace, this voice comes from a small girl leading a group of her friends over to Clarke’s side. Clarke looks at them and smiles, which seems to embolden the girls.

“I just wanted to tell you that your hair is really pretty,” she says, and then giggles.

“Thank you!” Clarke replies with a laugh. “So is yours! I like your braids.”

The girl tells her, “My mom does them!” at the same time two other girls jockey for Clarke’s attention, asking about their own hair.

“Can you have braids and be the president?” another girl asks once Clarke has complimented all of them.

“Absolutely.”

“Then I’m gonna be president.”

“I think you being a president with braids would be an improvement on other presidents and their hairstyles.” This sets off more laughter, even if the girls are giggling mostly out of nervousness, and Clarke gives them a reassuring smile. “What makes you want to be president?”

“To make the rules!”

Clarke laughs. “That is the perfect reason.”

“Why do you want to be president, Miss Griffin?”

On the edge of her vision as she talks to the girls, she sees Lexa’s shape approach. God, even in the busiest time, Clarke can always sense her coming closer. She can feel Lexa’s eyes on her as she interacts with the girls, but Lexa makes no move to gain Clarke’s attention and the kids are too earnest in their questions for Clarke to disengage with them. This is head and shoulders above the classroom session, and Clarke finds herself truly enjoying it for the first time today.

“I want to be president one day so that I can help people,” Clarke says. “It’s a very hard job, but if you do it the right way, you can help a lot of people all over the world. But first, I’m going to start as a senator and work my way up.”

“Do schools have senators?” the girls ask Clarke.
“I don’t think they do. Why, would you like to be a school senator?”

The response is a chorus of yeses.

“You should tell your teachers and your principal that, then,” Clarke says. “I’m sure they would love to do that. And if they don’t, you can always be the school president, the vice president, the secretary, or the treasurer. Four jobs, for the four of you!”

They’re interrupted by a boy bellowing excitedly: “Hey! Hey! Gustus is going to show everyone how many pushups he can do!” He’s waving the girls over, encouraging them to join the rush toward Gustus in the middle of the playground.

Clarke gives them a nod and they take off. When it becomes clear that no other kids are going

“I knew you’d be popular with them,” Lexa says. “I didn’t know their first compliment would be your hair. I’m not surprised though.”

It’s a simple thing to accept from the kids; Lexa says it with an easy, almost amused smile, like she’s teasing her. Clarke feels herself blush and fights it back, clearing her throat. She waves an arm at the scene before them.

“This was a great decision,” Clarke tells her. “You set this up last night?”

“It didn’t take long; one of these teachers was on your donor list, so I reached out. It seemed you needed something like this. To remember why you do it in the first place.”

Clarke just nods because she doesn’t want to admit it, but Lexa knows without needing confirmation.

“Thank you,” Clarke says instead. And just like Lexa, she doesn’t need a verbal response either. That’s just how they work.

Together, they watch the playground for a few minutes, both relishing the chance to be removed from it all and free to observe in peaceful silence. It doesn’t last long though. A group of boys play with Styrofoam swords, swinging and hacking at each other as they shout about being knights.

Clarke and Lexa watch as a young girl approaches them and asks a question, only to be loudly rebuked and sent away while the boys resume playing. She stumps off, looking at the ground as if she’s about to cry, but before Clarke can react, Lexa is already striding forward. Clarke hurries after her.

“What’s wrong?” Lexa asks the girl when they draw close.

“The boys won’t let me play,” the girl explains sadly. “They say it’s because they don’t have any more swords, but they never share them. They say girls aren’t allowed to use them.”

Clarke is stunned into silence when Lexa kneels down so that she can be eye-level with the girl: her campaign manager gives an exaggerated snort of disbelief at the young girl’s words.

“Girls are definitely allowed to use swords,” she says. “In fact, I think you would be even better than the boys.”

The girl looks up with mingled hope and disbelief.

“Really!” Lexa says. “Here, I can teach you some secrets.” With that, she looks around, then jumps up and grabs a thin tree branch from a nearby sapling, ripping it from the trunk. After a second of stripping away the excess twigs and leaves, she hands over the makeshift sword. “There. Now you
have a sword. It’s a little bit longer than the boys’ swords, which will make it harder for them to get to you. Plus, you’re smaller and faster, so if you keep moving, they won’t be able to hit you and you can hit them.”

The girl holds the branch in pure awe, like it’s the mystical weapon given to every superhero as they begin their quest; as soon as Lexa gives her a slight push, she goes bounding off to join the boys.

Lexa straightens up, grinning, only to look over and see Clarke’s mordant stare.

“You just gave a seven year old a stick and told her to hit her classmate with it.”

“She seems intelligent enough to avoid seriously injuring them,” Lexa muses.

“Maybe I should make her my campaign manager instead.” In her determination to be tetchy, maybe to cover the fluttering in her chest, Clarke glances at the sapling Lexa had taken the ‘sword’ from. The branch is twisted and broken, white wood standing clear against the grey. “Oh, great, and you vandalized school property on top of it. The media will love this.”

Lexa is wholly unconcerned. In fact, the corners of her mouth are twitching, and the longer Clarke looks at her, the harder it is to keep her face locked in petulance, so she quickly glances away and coughs to cover a reluctant laugh. Somewhat conspicuously, Lexa checks over their shoulders to see if any of the reporters nearby noticed. If they did, they give no sign.

“No campaign is complete without a scandal,” she says sagely. “Since ours has been so pure and clean so far, I guess encouraging violence among children is our scandal.”

Clarke scoffs. “Pure and clean. Right.”

Sure, it could be about the most pressing matter over their heads, Lexa’s lie and the potential Diana Sydney issue. But on Lexa’s words, Clarke’s first thought naturally goes to the dark, hazy nights they’ve shared together. The scandal of the century; Clarke’s darkest secret. Despite every effort she’s made to run the perfect campaign, a clean campaign, this is one hidden scandal she loves, if she’s being honest. And then she realizes, with a jolt as she looks over again, that’s exactly what Lexa meant—Lexa’s lips part in a slight smirk and her tongue sweeps over the edges of her teeth, roguish amusement etched into every line on her face.

Clarke raises her chin and gives a huff. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

And Lexa just nods, seeming to concede the point before she leans in to mutter in Clarke’s ear. “That needs more practice before you’ll be able to make the media believe you.”

* 

It’s weary and quiet staffers who start the day, and it’s weary and quiet staffers who end it—the difference is that when they return to the hotel at the end of the day, Clarke’s team is worn out in the best way. The kids have left them exhausted but glowing, spirits lifted to the sky as their feet drag. It’s a get back to the room, kick off your shoes, and collapse into bed for ten hours of sleep kind of evening.

Which means, of course, that Clarke gets back to her room and immediately opens her laptop to review the most recent international, national, and statewide news stories; then she moves on to two
dozen unread emails; then tomorrow’s itinerary; then a status report from Raven back home at campaign headquarters; then she begins her nightly homework reviewing her policies. She orders room service while she works, but even dinnertime doesn’t remind her to stop and check the clock as she goes. She just knows she works late into the night.

This is how Clarke works best. The job is always more difficult when she gets jaded, but after a renewing day like today? Clarke devours her work. With energy like this, she feels most comfortable sitting cross-legged on her hotel bed, with her laptop in front of her and various papers, files, books, and an empty dinner plate spread out around her.

It’s not until Clarke’s phone vibrates and she glances at the screen that she’s reminded that time is a real thing: the clock at the top of the screen reads 11 PM. She disregards that, though, when she sees that the message is from Lexa.

_Lexa Ward [11:04 PM]: Are you awake?_

She has a real talent for questions that could take the plot in any direction.

As much as her head tells her to ignore the message and hang on to her simmering resentment about Diana Sydney, a curiosity drives Clarke instead. Before she loses her nerve, she replies a simple: _Yes._

She doesn’t get another text. Instead, two minutes later there comes a soft knock at her door.

“I figured you would be awake; I still thought it would be proper to check,” Lexa says when Clarke opens the door. She’s still wearing her clothes from the day; not that Clarke can comment, because she hasn’t changed either.

“Why did you figure I’d be awake?”

“Because we think the same, and I’m still awake. I assume you’re burying yourself in work?”

Clarke wordlessly steps aside, revealing the mobile office scattered across her hotel bed.

“That’s about what mine looks like,” Lexa says.

That functions well enough as a password that grants Lexa entry; Clarke doesn’t move back into the doorway and instead inclines her head, inviting Lexa in. Only so no one happens to leave their room and find their two bosses in a midnight meeting in the hallway.

That’s what she tells herself, at least.

Rather than predicating her visit on sympathy, Lexa gives a more complete explanation once she steps into Clarke’s room. “Apparently the first of Cage Wallace’s political TV ads have been spotted tonight. I haven’t been able to find anyone who has seen them, and we probably won’t have copies until tomorrow, so I wanted to see if you wanted to scan the channels with me for a few hours as we work.”

Her words end a little hopeful, a little rushed, a tone of voice that takes Clarke by surprise. Maybe she was wrong earlier, when she convinced herself she was alert and ready to dive in to the evening’s work while her staffers went to bed early. She feels suddenly as tired as they were.

And with the wave of sleepiness, comes an unwillingness to bring up healing wounds.

And an unwillingness to be alone.
“I’d like that, actually,” Clarke says, smiling.

Lexa finds the TV remote and flicks through the channels as Clarke quickly cleans up her mess of a workspace—her cheeks turn pink when she grabs her dirty dinner plate from the bedspread, and she checks to see if Lexa noticed, but the other woman focuses intently on her own mission.

“All I know is that it’s supposed to, or already has been running tonight. No tips about what time, what channel, or the content,” Lexa admits. “We’re flying blind here.”

“Well, the Wallace family owns shares in a broadcasting company with a station in Northern California, so we can start with that channel.”

“Someone’s been doing their research.”

Clarke can’t see her face, but Lexa’s smirk is audible in her voice as she switches to the correct channel.

“Since I didn’t have to tell you which channel it was, it seems like that someone is you,” Clarke fires back.

Point taken. Lexa still wears her amusement when she sets the remote aside and turns to Clarke, only for it to slip off her face when she finds Clarke reclining against the pillows, with the space beside her on the bed cleared for Lexa to lay down.

Clarke jolts the same way Lexa does when she sees the sudden hesitation on Lexa’s face: she didn’t register the implications of the gesture until that very moment. Clarke and Lexa constantly find themselves on shifting grounds, caught between the roles they play—a lover or a close friend wouldn’t have hesitated to take the spot next to Clarke, a more casual acquaintance would have opted for the desk chair, and a true professional partner would have never fathomed being in Clarke’s room this late at night in the first place. Clarke and Lexa are all of these things and therefore none of these things, something different, something uncharted, something in between. But what Clarke does know is that lately, she feels most natural in Lexa’s presence. And despite the current rift between them because of the Diana Sydney situation, in that moment, the most natural thing was for Lexa to lay beside her. She hadn’t imagined anything else.

Clarke watches Lexa’s eyes dart between the bed and the desk chair, which had clearly been her original plan, but before Clarke can sit up and rectify the situation, Lexa swallows her uncertainty, kicks off her shoes, and joins Clarke on the bed, all her smooth confidence on display.

Close. But not too close. The bed feels smaller than it did when Clarke was alone upon it. There’s a palpable tension between them and it envelops them, forcing muscles to tighten and breaths to stay trapped in lungs. Slowly, they force themselves to exhale, in unison.

This is normal. Acceptable.

Right?

“So what were you working on before this?” Lexa asks lightly, breaking the silence with water-cooler conversation. She stares at the TV screen, currently showing an ad for an auto body shop, instead of making eye contact.

Clarke waves an arm in the vague direction of her desk. “As you guessed, a little research.”

“So was I. We should have already been putting ads together against Wallace.”
“He has the benefit of a last name worth 650 million dollars,” Clarke points out.

“Our donations have been better lately,” Lexa assures her, but she has to concede the point. “We’ll make better use of our money than he does, even if we have less.”

“I agree.”

They’re both more than aware of the uphill—or sheer vertical—road before them, especially now that advertising expenses are about to quadruple, but it’s been common practice to avoid talk of the difficulties coming in the future and focus on their strengths. Between that unspoken agreement and the still-present awkwardness of their positions on the bed, they lapse into silence for a few moments as they watch a candy commercial give way to the opening credits of some movie. Clarke begins to ask what Lexa had been working on, when Lexa suddenly lets loose an unexpected chuckle.

“Have you ever seen this movie?” she asks, glancing over at Clarke for the first time.

Clarke doesn’t recognize the opening titles, and shakes her head.

“It’s The Untouchables,” Lexa says. “It’s one of my favorites.”

She returns her attention to the screen without waiting for a response, leaving Clarke shell-shocked at the uncharacteristic, unfettered delight Lexa shows in discovering the film on TV. Clarke is suddenly just as breathless as she had been that afternoon when she watched Lexa teach the little girl how to swordfight. And, just like that afternoon, she manages to hide her smile when Lexa glances at her again.

“What, do you not like gangster movies?”

Clarke’s torn between asking “You do?” and “Is that what this is?” and “Who are you?” and before she can find the words for any of them, Lexa just lets out another laugh at the obvious look of confusion on Clarke’s face.

_God what a nice sound._

“Do you mind if we leave it on this channel while we work and wait for the commercial to come up?” Lexa asks. “I’m sure it’ll run at least once or twice during a movie about corruption and wealthy criminals who are eventually taken down for tax evasion.”

Clarke finds her voice this time, though she’s not sure she manages to keep the wonder out of it. “I need a break from work, actually. Let’s just watch it for a half hour before we get back to the campaign work.”

Lexa raises a brow. “You, of all people, need a break?”

Clarke glares.

Lexa smiles, shaking her head. “You’ll last fifteen minutes, but I won’t argue.” And she doesn’t, instead settling into a more comfortable position on the bed, fixing her gaze on the screen as the movie begins.

It takes Clarke longer to shift her attention away from Lexa—blessed with the opportunity to study her without anyone else noticing, Clarke takes full advantage of the opportunity. Her eyes relearn every curve she’s forced herself to ignore and forced her hands to forget over the past several days, and she smiles again as she marvels at the fact that she’s been trying, sometimes subconsciously, to unravel this girl for months and yet the most personal insights into Lexa’s life have revealed
themselves in chance moments. A late night drive home, a plane taking off, the discovery of a favorite movie on TV during a late night strategy session. These moments are all too rare. Clarke craves them more each time.

They have five months left on this campaign. If the kids hadn’t renewed Clarke’s energy and drive this afternoon, this quiet serenity with Lexa would have. Five months is not enough time to explore the depths of Lexa’s existence. Clarke needs more time. And for more time, she needs a career that Lexa can be a part of. She needs to win.

Presently, Clarke’s pulled from her plans by the realization that she’s missing the beginning of the movie. She follows Lexa’s lead and settles into a more comfortable position, breathing deeply and releasing the tension in her bones.

*

The next thing she knows, she’s lifting a heavy head from the pillows and looking around in confusion.

The room is still dimly lit, as hotel rooms always are. Lexa still lays beside her on the bed. Only the TV has changed: it feels like just seconds ago she was watching the movie, but now some infomercial about mops plays out on the screen. It takes Clarke several seconds to think to look at the clock on the nightstand.

2:14 AM.

Lexa hums beside her and Clarke turns, comment about falling asleep on the tip of her tongue, only to bite it back when she sees that Lexa’s eyes are still closed. As Clarke stares at her, Lexa shifts her body closer to the center of the bed, her arm flopping onto Clarke’s half. She nuzzles deeper into the pillow and stills again, fast asleep.

Lexa still wears her business clothes from that day. There is a route Clarke should take here, the high road, the professional choice.

Instead, she does what she truly wants: she reaches to the nightstand, clicks off the light, and curls back down onto the bed. Close to Lexa. Not touching—but almost. Their hands lie just inches apart.

She wishes this soft stolen moment could last forever. Instead, sleep overtakes her before she knows it.

*

“Clarke.”

Clarke groans.

“I’m sorry,” Lexa is murmuring. “We fell asleep, I didn’t mean to stay here all night.”

“’S’okay,” Clarke replies, still half-asleep. She doesn’t open her eyes but she feels the bed shift,
hears the sound of bare feet against the floor—that jars her awake. “Lexa, it’s okay,” she says more clearly. “We just fell asleep sometime during the movie. We clearly needed it. It’s okay.”

And contained in her words, a silent plea: *Stay.* Lexa, thank god, hears it. She stays on the bed. Clarke opens her eyes to the sight of Lexa watching her, emotions hidden as always. She glances away quickly.

“It’s five thirty,” is Lexa’s only weak protest, but she doesn’t want to move any more than Clarke does. “I should get back before anyone wakes up and catches me in the hallway in yesterday’s clothes.”

Clarke groans. “And I should get up for my morning workout.” Then, after a pause: “Ten more minutes.”

Lexa doesn’t argue with that. At Clarke’s quiet prodding, Lexa eases herself down onto the pillows once more: she and Clarke never make contact, but in the soft grey light of the early morning, their closeness on the bed feels as intimate as anything they’ve ever done. Clarke watches Lexa’s chest slowly rise and fall, feels her exhales ghosting down over Clarke’s face. She basks in the warmth of their closeness.

“I’m sorry about Diana Sydney,” Lexa says after a few minutes.

“It was a good strategy. It needed to be done.”

“That doesn’t make it any less regrettable. Your trust is too valuable to betray.”

“Then don’t betray it.”

“Never again.”

And Clarke believes her; she lets her know with a contented sigh. She doesn’t know who reaches out, just that their fingers first brush and then entwine together. Time passes far too quickly.

“It’s been fifteen minutes,” Lexa says, after what feels like seconds. Clarke groans. It will never be long enough. “I have to go for a morning workout as well. Let’s meet in twenty minutes.”

Agreeing, Clarke sits up at last; she reluctantly lets go of Lexa’s hand and rubs the sleep from her face as Lexa stands and stretches. “Fine,” Clarke says. “Twenty minutes. I’ll meet you down at the gym.”

She doesn’t say anything more as Lexa crosses the room, but just as her hand touches the door handle, Clarke speaks up again: “And Lexa…don’t get caught.”

She thinks she hears a soft laugh. “We won’t,” Lexa promises.

Chapter End Notes

That scene of Lexa teaching the little girl how to fight is borrowed pretty shamelessly from the 2009 Wonder Woman animated movie, for those of you who recognized it and cried foul. I would never pretend to come up with something so cute on my own—it’s
just that Lexa teaching someone how to play tetherball doesn't ring true the same way.

Thanks again for reading! I know I haven't been very active on tumblr, but this should mark the start of my sheepish return, so find me there!
@centuriesofexistence.tumblr.com
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Thanks to RXD and a catfish for helping to edit this for me!! Always there with invaluable contributions. For everyone that’s still reading, I’m so, so appreciative!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Only the elderly and the perennially busy and uptight ever exercise before the sun comes up. As such, when Clarke and Lexa arrive at the hotel gym, a handful of senior citizens already occupy various machines. Clarke, however, welcomes their presence: as soon as she walks in, a group of three women huddle together for a moment before approaching her with eager smiles.

“Hi, Representative Griffin!” The first woman, a lady in a full pink sweat-suit, beams in greeting. “My name is Joanne Wharton, and I have voted in every election for the last 38 years, ever since I moved to California. I want you to know that I’ll be voting for you instead of that Wallace fellow.”

Clarke smiles graciously. “Thank you!” she replies, turning on the charm as easily as turning a tap, even so early in the morning. “I—”

“And I’m Gertrude White!” another of them interrupts. “I liked what you said about immigration! You have my vote!”

The third elderly woman steps in. “Anita Taylor, Representative Griffin. I think having another woman senator will be a very good thing for California.”

Clarke entertains them all, thanking them for their support and trying her best to hasten their stories and memories of past political candidates so that she can get to work. She has never loved being approached, preferring to keep her head down unless the situation requires it for publicity, but today she appreciates it, and not just because of the glowing commendations from the women: if these three women know her, it means she can’t spend the duration of her run on the treadmill staring at Lexa as she works out. Lexa had slipped away from Clarke when they entered and begun her exercise as Clarke fielded the praise from the women, so she is intently focused on her own work by the time Clarke gets onto the treadmill.

And despite everything in Clarke’s life that tells her not to, it’s dangerously tempting to stare at Lexa. Now that she and her campaign manager have fully acknowledged their attraction to one another and slept together in both senses of the term, it’s nearly impossible to use professional etiquette as a barrier to separate them. They’ve long since torn that wall down, and now the excuse is laughable. No, now they have to rely on the danger of being found out, caught, exposed—this fear is the only thing that prevents an accidental reveal of the scandal of the year. All it would take is one of the elderly women on a step machine to notice Clarke checking out Lexa’s ass as Lexa works through an impressive circuit, and... poof. Two careers, in their prime, gone up in smoke.

Therefore, Clarke is particularly careful to keep her glances at Lexa limited to when she knows no one else is paying attention to her.

It’s a risk, one that pays off handsomely. A stolen glance at Lexa gives her several minutes worth of mental footage to replay as she runs: carved body, sweaty shoulders, exposed skin, muscles taut and
coiling...the risk is worth it. It recalls shadowy memories of the times she’s peeled Lexa’s shirt off to
reveal that body, impossibly toned and taut and usually hidden beneath deceptively demure clothing.
Seeing Lexa in this environment feels like a rare sight, and she feels just as privileged now as she
does when she has Lexa in bed with her; so she watches as much as she possibly can.

And then comes the moment that Clarke looks over and catches sight of Lexa looking back at her
through the mirror on the wall. She’s smirking, as if she's known all along that Clarke's eyes wander,
and she enjoys it. The thought almost sends Clarke stumbling along the belt of the treadmill. The old
man beside Clarke asks if she's okay; she assures him that she's more than fine; and she keeps her
eyes firmly on the treadmill display as she continues to run, as much to keep herself from looking
over again as to hide her burning cheeks.

“Miss Griffin?” A smooth question on a smooth tone accompanied by Lexa’s smooth appearance at
the side of the treadmill; Clarke had been focusing so much on the last ten minutes ticking away that
she hadn’t realized Lexa was there until she spoke. She manages to keep her feet beneath her, but
that doesn’t mean she doesn’t stumble over her words when she sees Lexa’s face.

“Yes, L—Miss Ward?”

“May I speak to you outside?”

It’s a performance for the other gym-goers, who openly observe the two women with marked
interest; but with her show of professionalism, Lexa sets the tone and keeps Clarke from glancing
down at the sharp, glistening angles of Lexa’s body—she can see it only in her peripheral vision and
it’s pure torture not to look down. Clarke gives a small murmur of acquiescence and follows Lexa,
bidding goodbye to her well-wishers as anticipation starts to build in her veins. Lexa reaches the door
first, pulling it open and standing aside for Clarke to walk through, but her gallantry serves an ulterior
motive: Clarke watches Lexa’s green eyes travel up and down her body hungrily, under the guise of
watching her go through the door. Clarke grants herself the same luxury of checking out Lexa’s
body. She makes sure Lexa knows, too. Then they slip into the hallway, with Clarke’s heart in her
throat and her fingers itching to fist into Lexa’s shirt.

“We have a problem.”

The wind rushes from her lungs as her chest caves with the disappointment. “What is it?”

Lexa pulls her phone from her pocket and her sudden pivot around to straightforward business
eliminates any chances of a hallway rendezvous. Clarke tries not to let it sting; she rushes instead to
adopt the same stoic, tired professionalism that Lexa now wears. The work day has begun.

“Raven just sent me the links to Cage Wallace’s first two campaign commercials,” Lexa tells her,
handling her the phone. “I thought you should see them.”

“Two?” Clarke asks, dismayed. “Shit, Lexa, we really need to catch up to him.”

“We’ll work on it,” Lexa assures her.

Clarke presses play on the first video, a twenty second spot. Cage Wallace, with his slicked back hair
and expensive suit, struts across an assembly floor to shake hands with a group of politicians; then it
cuts to Cage, his hair the same but this time wearing dirty jeans and a construction vest as he surveys
a site alongside other blue collar workers. Blue and gold lettering flashes across the screen: Cage
Wallace. He has the experience to build a better California.

“Simple enough,” Clarke says. “Effective. Slimy.” Lexa hums agreement and switches to the next
video. This one is longer—it shows a series of women and children in schools, at home, and playing at the park, and these sweet images are overlaid by vague allusions to Clarke’s statements and policies that deal most closely with women and education. Naturally, Cage twists them to highlight the worst aspects, without referring specifically to Clarke, before reciting his own plans. This one ends with a photo of Cage at a round table with a group of women, and it leaves Clarke with a bad taste in her mouth.

“Definitely slimy,” Clarke says when the video is finished. “What I’ve come up with specifically for schools is objectively better; his is a rehash of what his father did in the 70s.”

“It’s still effective, though,” Lexa replies as she slips her phone away. “He doesn’t perform well with women, and you nearly overperform with them, so you can bet he’ll attack heavily on that front. We’ll have to prepare for that when we start putting out our own commercials.”

“We can’t match his funding,” Clarke says, with an angry sigh. “Those two spots probably cost more than a few million to run consistently and the production value says that they were expensive to make too.”

“We’ll call Raven today,” Lexa says, “And set-up a budgeting call with your accountants. In the meantime, we can start getting bids. I’ll come up with a list of ad agencies to contact, but we have a full day, it’s something we’ll have to squeeze in.”

Clarke nods. “I need to keep my focus on two radio interviews this morning, then there’s the press conference and the town hall and we still have to make the drive to San Francisco tonight—

“The LA and San Diego conference calls.”

“Fuck, the LA and San Diego conference calls. I had forgotten—” She sighs. “Okay. It’s fine. We can handle it. Hopefully we can save the calls for the drive to San Francisco. It would just be nice to actually shorten the list of things that need to be focused on.”

Lexa agrees. “Every time we finish one, it’s like two more get added, I know.”

Something about seeing the commercials has altered the course of Clarke’s morning; maybe it was Cage’s smarmy grin. Maybe it was the mention of their low campaign funds—which Raven should have already reported an increase in, but hasn’t yet. Maybe it was the sheer fact that Clarke would not only need to start planning new commercials, but set aside time in the upcoming weeks to film or record parts of them. Maybe it’s all three. Either way, she grinds her teeth for a moment, closing her eyes to get it all straight and steady herself. She’ll be forever thankful for Lexa’s ability to read her: the other girl knows when Clarke has had too much and that she needs the time to smooth herself out, so she waits patiently without forcing more advice on her.

Finally, Clarke does smooth herself out. She can handle it. This is what she signed up for. And her trust in Lexa will take off some of the burden as well. But just as she opens her mouth to confirm this, her cell phone vibrates in her pocket and she pulls it out immediately.

Clarke’s expression darkens as she reads the message. When she lets loose a sardonic laugh, Lexa grows concerned.

“What’s wrong?” she asks.

Clarke hands her the phone, shaking her head.

“I told my mother we’ll be heading to San Francisco tonight,” Clarke explains. “She’s flying in to meet us for tomorrow because she’s ready to start her work on the campaign.”
Lexa closes her eyes. Shit. She knows what that means. Abby Griffin was always too valuable to an asset to leave out of the campaign, so it was inevitable that she would get involved sooner or later. But now? Now the stress of having her mother on the campaign trail will only wind Clarke impossibly tighter, sending her stress levels through the roof. She doesn’t know Abby personally, but she knows Clarke, and she can only imagine what it will be like having two Griffin women in one conference room when they’re debating budget.

Clarke gives her a knowing look when Lexa opens her eyes again. Together, they take steadying breaths and nod.

“We can do this,” Clarke whispers. And if they weren’t in danger of being caught by some early morning hotel employee, she would push her back against the wall and kiss her right there. Lexa wants her to—her lips are parted, eyes half-lidded, enough want on her face to make Clarke groan. “I have to finish my run. I’ll be done in ten minutes.”

Lexa gives her a rueful half smile, borne of their shared knowledge that if they didn’t have so many responsibilities, they’d head back up to Clarke’s room and spend the entire day there. Instead, she pulls away, checking her watch.

“The car leaves in an hour,” Lexa tells her. “Sterling and Harper will be finicky about your appearance today because of all the press. You have eight minutes; run fast.”

They part, Lexa heading down the hallway and Clarke back into the gym, knowing that it will be only another hour until they’re back together and they spend the next twelve hours hard at work. But Lexa’s presence in Clarke’s plans for the day does little to brighten it. She increases the incline and speed far past what she had done before—eight minutes of mind-numbing running will be her only stress free time today, and she’s going to use every second.

*

The morning does not go well.

As predicted, Harper and Sterling get into a debate about what Clarke should wear for her day of press interviews. That debate escalates to a yelling match, which echoes down the hallway of open doors, every word distinct over the sound of aides going from room to room as they prepare for the day, because Harper believes that they should go casual and summery with a blue blouse and white skirt and Sterling believes that Clarke should look composed and professional with a full suit and the only thing Lexa can’t hear from her hotel room is the sound of Clarke’s input. At last, she pulls on her blazer and strides into Clarke’s hotel room, clocking her frustration with the situation immediately and picking the blue blouse and white skirt to end the argument. Clarke gives her a grateful smile just before she’s whisked away to have her makeup done.

And that’s just how the day starts.

They’re running late by the time they pile into the unofficial motorcade they use for traveling, and worse still, Clarke and Lexa don’t get their usual car to themselves: the SUV is packed with aides who each have their own need of Clarke, forcing Lexa into the front seat with Gustus and pushing Clarke to the seat behind her, where she’s surrounded and bombarded with questions.

“Miss Griffin, we need to schedule a dinner with your donors.”
“Uh, I’m free tomorrow night—”

“Representative Griffin, your financial advisor is on the line. We’re having serious issues with—”

“I’ll return his call after the first round of interviews, we’re already late.”

“Raven asked us to call her by noon.”

“Then she can get on the line after the financial advisor.”

“I have the numbers of the latest donor results in our two least popular counties, we need to make a decision.”

Clarke is trying her best. She keeps checking the road, as if hoping they’ve magically arrived at their destination on time instead of thirty minutes late. The strain is evident in her voice. She’s supposed to be reviewing comments for an upcoming string of interviews--Lexa has to prompt her twice, despite her reservations--but the bombardment and the way the aides ask the question with such urgency make it impossible for Clarke to stay focused when she feels like there are fires to put out everywhere. When she gets drawn into the conversation about the two republican counties and their lack of donations, Lexa almost reaches back to try to reassure Clarke and bring her focus back, but she can’t, not in a car full of people. She laces her fingers together and places them in her lap, her nails digging into her palms.

“Representative Griffin, I have to give answers to two different journalists about your stance on immigration.”

“Tell them--” Clarke begins.

“They want to know how it relates to your mother’s policies from the 90s.”

“Then just… tell them to do their own research,” she snaps. “I’m a politician, not an analyst, we’re not doing their fucking job for them.”

Lexa bites the inside of her cheek and the aides are cowed into a silence that lasts the rest of the ride. They seem a far cry from last night’s movie and this morning’s sleepy hand holding.

Once the group arrives at the downtown city hall where the interviews are being held, many in Clarke’s car disperse, only to be replaced by those from other cars who weren’t privy to her outburst. She handles it graciously, but evades them soon enough to seek out Lexa. There’s enough going on around them with checking in the journalists and preparing the room for Clarke to be able to steal a quiet word with her.

“I’m sorry for snapping in the car,” she says quietly. “Have you started getting bids for the commercials?”

Lexa has been calling agencies and getting bids all morning; they don’t look good, and she doesn’t want to lay that on Clarke right now. “I’ve given my number to several agencies, they’ll be calling back soon. But don’t worry about that,” she adds, when she sees Clarke’s forehead wrinkle. “You need to focus on the interviews. Great commercials and ads are useless if you’re giving out bad quotes and reflecting poorly in the papers.”

She had hoped the force behind her tone would jar Clarke out of her worry, but she grits her teeth when Clarke steps back with a frustrated sigh, visibly shutting down her emotions one by one. That’s never a good sign.
But before she can say anything, Clarke nods, stone-faced. “You’re right. One task at a time. Are you sitting in on the interviews, Miss Ward?”

“I’ll be there to support you,” Lexa promises, even if the use of her surname is a reflection of Clarke’s frustration with her. Lexa deserved that.

“Good.”

The first few go okay: local journalists from small papers who recognize the opportunity they’ve been given and have no desire to risk it. Lexa set the schedule up that way, almost like a dress rehearsal for Clarke. The questions are simple, the interactions blasé. The next interviews come in a roundtable format, with a group of journalists conversing with Clarke. For Lexa, watching from the side, this group is far more entertaining merely for the inclusion of a young woman from a local college who is interviewing Clarke for her school’s LGBT+ club. While Lexa’s call to put Clarke in the blue dress was a good choice for Clarke’s image, it’s certainly making things difficult for the poor student journalist, who seems to be putting so much effort into not glancing down at Clarke’s cleavage that she has to struggle to read questions off of her notepad. Clarke is blissfully oblivious to the girl’s attraction to her, nodding along encouragingly as the girl pauses and rereads questions.

“And so you—you advocate for LGBT+ youth,” she reads off, “Do you have any stories of, uh, personal interaction or anything that helped motivate you to be so supportive?”

There’s an odd hopeful lilt at the end of the question; Lexa hides a smirk.

“Of course, growing up in California, you develop a mindset of acceptance and openness,” Clarke says. Her silky smooth voice makes the girl gulp. “I have known plenty of individuals throughout my life who do benefit or have benefitted from programs like those that I advocate for, so they have helped me develop the desire to take these programs to the national stage.”

Another reporter chimes in. “So you yourself have had plenty of interaction with the LGBT+ community on a personal level then, correct?”

Clarke can’t see that the poor college girl is hopelessly in love with her but she can easily identify the motivation there. “I keep my personal life and my professional life as separate as possible. Unlike some, my campaign is not built on personal connections.”

“Except for your mother,” another points out.

“Excuse me?”

“Reports are circulating that your mother Abigail Griffin will be stumping for you on the campaign trail soon.”

Clarke gives that man a steely glare, but it gets worse when another adds: “Roan and Nia Azgeda are rumored to be joining you too.”

“Nia Azgeda will not be joining me on my campaign, she has her own business to attend to; as for Mr. Azgeda, I’m in a personal relationship with him.” The warm, suave tone with which she had addressed the young woman is gone now, because it’s hard to be warm through gritted teeth. “This is the very reason I endeavor to keep my personal and professional lives separate. I don’t want assumptions being made.”

“You’re in the wrong industry then,” the first man chuckles. “What about the assumptions that Cage Wallace is making, those that are true at least? Your inexperience, your past? Sexual history, drinking—”
Lexa is on her feet so quickly she nearly knocks her chair back. “All right, you’re done,” she tells him, gesturing toward the door. “Out.”

“You’re going to kick the press out?” he retorts.

“You knew what the tone of these interviews was supposed to be,” she fires back. “If you’re here simply to rile the candidate up to create a story, you’re not the press. Now, out.”

“Lexa,” Clarke presses, catching Lexa before she forcibly escorts the man out of the room--this morning’s workout certainly suggests she can. “It’s fine, I’m fine. Take a breath outside.”

She’s not anywhere near fine; she’s been close to snapping all day and this is just the added pressure that will push her to a breaking point. But right now, in the eyes of others, Lexa is a subordinate. It goes against everything she knows to excuse herself and slip out of the room as the journalist grins at her, but Clarke is, at least publicly, in charge here, and if she lies and says she’s fine with the line of questions, then Lexa has to submit. Pacing in the hallway outside under the confused watch of a few aides and waiting journalists, Lexa considers the mental picture of calling Gustus and Ryder in to carry the man out if he continues, but she decides that she’d enjoy it much more to do it herself. She has no idea when she got this protective. It’s an unwelcome feeling of unsteadiness, one she has little experience with.

Sometimes it surprises her, how far beyond political strategy and management she’s gone. She’s transformed to confidante and support system and…something else. She doesn’t want to name it, acknowledge it, for fear she’ll never be able to recover from it when it inevitably ends. But in any case, even without the sex and her growing feelings for Clarke, she knows that this is unlike any other campaign she has worked on or will ever work on.

Then again, Clarke is unlike any other politician. And that’s what makes the two of them so perfect.

After a moment, Lexa regains her infamous composure and re-enters the room, taking her seat without a word. The conversation has continued in her absence, and although Lexa can easily tell how uncomfortable Clarke is, the handful of journalists are entirely unaware.

“So back to your mother,” one says, with a sly glance at Lexa. “In addition to her assisting with your campaign, will you be attending events with your mother as well?”

“I will not,” Clarke says shortly. “My mother and I keep our political activities separate.”

“It’s mostly benefit events,” the young college student chirps up. “What about the upcoming fundraising gala for the LGBT+ Center of San Francisco?”

Clarke blinks. “I--I haven’t spoken to my mother about that, nor was I aware of it, so it will be something I consider, for sure.”

“It aligns with your trip to San Francisco so people assumed--”

“I have no plans as of now but that could change.”

“Even though you say you advocate for LGBT+ youth?” That comes from the man who Lexa nearly threw out. They’re fucking relentless, but Lexa stays in her seat and openly loathes the way Clarke looks ready to snap.

Nonetheless, Clarke handles the interviews, but just barely--she forces her way through them, her tone growing clipped and short, her face barely concealing contempt as she tries to navigate a storm.
of questions about Cage Wallace and her mother and the way she’s polling five points behind. She’s
giving monotone answers by the time one of the staffers finally comes in and tells the journalists that
their allotted 45 minutes are up and they have to get the next group in. As they file out, Clarke closes
her eyes, breathing like a weight has been lifted from her chest but left her exhausted. Lexa winces,
wanting nothing more to go to her and pull her into a hug. She wonders briefly if they would have
time before the next group comes in, but before she can even consider the thought, Clarke starts
shaking her head.

“Cancel the rest of the interviews,” she says with a shrug. “I can’t do it.”

“Clarke—”

“Lexa, I can’t do it,” she pleads. Her blue eyes alone are enough to gain Lexa’s acceptance, but she
persuades her anyway, spilling it all out with a tired, defeated tone: “We have a three hour drive to
San Francisco tonight, with the addition of traffic; my mom is joining us tomorrow; we’re thin on
funds and thin on time… I can’t take any more of those questions. Cancel the rest, let’s get on the
road to San Francisco early, and take one night where we don’t have anything to do and can get to
sleep early.”

Lexa just nods, stoic, so that she may act as Clarke’s anchor right now. Anything she needs.

“I’m just exhausted, Lex.”

Lexa’s heart fills. “Because you’re working harder than I’ve ever seen anyone work. I’ll let them
know now. Stay in the room.”

Unsurprisingly, the journalists do not take the news well, reacting with scorn and disdain after
waiting an hour only for Clarke to be late to the first interviews and then cancel the rest. Lexa knows
this won’t go over well, but she was about five seconds from physically kicking a man out of the
door earlier, so canceling the interviews for Clarke and taking the heat—both now and later—is well
within her comfort zone. The staffers are confused too: heads turn and whispers ripple through them
as they pack up what they had set out for the journalists and pile into the SUVs.

Clarke and Lexa again find themselves in a car packed with campaign staffers, though the cancelled
interviews mean that the mood is somber and Clarke feels no particular need to see to every issue and
complication that the staffers raise. It’s a three hour drive to San Francisco, and a quiet one, save for
the buzzing of phones as the alerts start to pour in:

*Griffin Storms Out of Interviews*

*Questions about Abigail Griffin Force Confrontation Between Campaign Aide and Journalist*

*Griffin Starting to Crack Under Pressure*

The headlines are cringeworthy. Lexa rolls her eyes, but it still stings to see them start to spread on
social media, because everyone loves a dent in an otherwise perfect façade. Only once does one of
the staffers start to mention the articles as they crop up—he’s silenced by a sharp look from Lexa,
and they go the rest of the ride pretending it’s not happening even as their phones continue to vibrate.
Lexa just watches the map and prays for the traffic to move faster, because there’s nothing they need
more than to get out of this car.

Finally, they round a bend and the city comes into sight, shimmering against the sunset. It’s then that
Clarke speaks for the first time: “I love San Francisco,” she says absently, gazing out at the city.

“I’ve never been,” Lexa replies, relieved that Clarke seems to be breathing easier. “I’ve always
wanted to.”

“I’ll show you the sights one day.”

For the rest of the ride, Clarke stares out the window, quiet as they make their way through stand-still rush hour traffic to get to their San Francisco hotel.

At long last, Lexa makes it into the isolation of her room and flops back onto her pristinely-made bed, glad to have the opportunity and quiet to think for a few moments. They’ll take the night to recover. Hopefully Clarke can sleep--Lexa will stay out of her bed this time. They’ll recover, and tomorrow they’ll start fresh with Clarke’s scheduled one-on-one interview with Wells, in his position as a San Francisco Times writer. He gave her the questions ahead of time, so it’s mostly just a coffee date penciled in as an interview so that no one questions it. Lexa has to call another ad agency, and then--

Her phone vibrates. One short message from Clarke, which has Lexa jumping off her feet and heading for Clarke’s room as soon as she reads it.

Clarke Griffin [5:54 PM]: Cage just put out two new ads.

* 

Clarke has left her door open; she gestures for Lexa to close it as soon as Lexa swings into the room, concern all over her face. She doesn’t have time to discern the look on Clarke’s face as she approaches where the girl sits on the edge of the bed, because Clarke wordlessly hands over her cell phone with the videos waiting. Lexa taps play, heart sinking.

She’s met with a picture of Clarke striding past a group of photographers outside a restaurant, an image that greys out to be replaced with the old leaked pictures from college—these things will haunt them to their grave apparently.

“Do you really want a Hollywood politician with no experience helping to run our country?”

The pictures resolve into an image of Cage Wallace, in a smart suit, with his hair slicked back and a wide smile on his face—the consummate professional. He’s shaking hands with reporters, laughing with a farmer over a tractor, making a speech in the middle of San Francisco. Words flash across the screen, accompanied by the smooth female voice: “Vote for experience. Vote for qualifications. Vote for a better California and a better country. Cage Wallace.”

Lexa releases an angry exhale, shaking her head. “That’s so low,” she says, “And it’s such an easy target. Of course he’d start a smear campaign with something like—”

Then she notices that Clarke’s blank face is just barely hiding true fury. “Watch the next one,” Clarke prompts. Lexa swallows and presses play on the next one.

California history is unlike any other. Our history shapes our future. “My father helped bring California through some of it’s darkest times,” comes Cage Wallace’s gravelly, unctuous voice. God, Lexa hates that voice. She watches as a series of pictures of Dante Wallace, former Governor, play out across the screen. “My father, Senator Dante Wallace, instilled in me a love of this state and this country and I seek to carry on his legacy of greatness.”
“My opponent can’t say the same.” The photos of Dante switch to far less flattering pictures of Abby Griffin, and Lexa nearly snaps the phone in half. “Abigail Griffin was responsible for some of the strictest tax codes and agricultural restrictions in California’s history. She ignored our rural farmers who provide lifeblood to this state and neglected to push for vital infrastructure improvements, opting instead for favoring special interest groups. Does anyone truly believe that her daughter will be any better?”

“Vote for me, Cage Wallace, and vote to bring the best of California’s history to the future.”

It ends there, the black screen reflecting Lexa’s look of outrage and disbelief back to her.

“He went after your mom?” Lexa demands.

“I’m going…to slaughter him.”

“Clarke—”

She’s on the edge. She’s let her emotions consume her and she’s not talking sense, she’s not talking like Clarke. Each small protest or attempt to reach her from Lexa goes ignored as Clarke passes in front of her again and again, disappearing into her own world, finally having snapped after the pressures of the day. Lexa’s heart breaks as she sees tears welling in Clarke’s eyes, her cheeks red, her knuckles white. This girl is crumbling, and Lexa can’t find a way to stop it.

“Clarke, breathe.”

Clarke’s struggling with that—it looks more as if she wants to pull in more air and scream to the heavens, but she forces a shaky breath out through gritted teeth, trying to remain under control.

“We’re going to kick his ass, I swear to god,” Clarke vows, pacing the room and ignoring all of Lexa’s attempts to placate her. “I’m going to Wells with it tomorrow. I want articles about him, I want the commercials to focus on him, I want to expose him for everything that he is. The debate next month is too far away—if he’s going to make this dirty, so am I.”

"Clarke! " Lexa at last lunges out and grabs her by the shoulders, trying to physically pull her from the downward spiral she’s stuck in. "You need to calm down."

"Calm me down then!" Clarke demands through gritted teeth. She says it like it’s a ludicrous demand, meant to highlight the audacity of such a suggestion in the face of the million different tasks and pressures that even Lexa, with all of her strength and brilliance, can’t hold off for her.

To Lexa, it’s just a challenge.

The roughness with which Lexa grabs Clarke and kisses her sends an electric shock through her body. It numbs every muscle and her racing heart, instantly--the sweetest, most potent drug available, relaxing her at last, as long as Lexa stays pressed against her lips.

The sigh Clarke releases announces all of this, and Lexa knows. It’s preternatural, the way she understands all of Clarke’s needs and desires at once, and what’s more, the way she caters to them with one effortless swoop. When Clarke sighs, Lexa’s hands go to either side of her head, fingers twisting into her hair just enough to lock Clarke in place, while her lips part to pull Clarke in deeper, in every sense of the word.

Lexa is steadfast. She’ll stand her ground and Clarke can drift into hazy nothingness, anchored only to Lexa. Lexa will give that to her.
Clarke pulls and Lexa pushes until they’ve walked back and Clarke is up against the wall. An hour ago, every issue felt like an arrow, razor sharp and piercing through her until she felt tattered and broken. Now, those razor sharp complications have dulled and lost their focus, disappeared into the fog, replaced instead with the sharp pressure of Lexa’s body holding her against the wall and the snap of her lips along Clarke’s jawline, the deft caress of Lexa’s hands at her breasts. Those are the things that are real.

The way Lexa begins to sink to her knees, that’s fucking surreal.

Clarke watches her, mouth suddenly dry.

They’ve been here before, moving quickly down this road: it was the first night together, in Clarke’s hotel room after the debate when Lexa again had her up against the wall. Even devoid of the capacity for clear thought, Clarke had stopped her then, because she didn’t want their first time to be so unequal, so she had pulled Lexa back up and walked them to the bed.

She doesn’t do that now.

Lexa hits her knees and tugs Clarke’s shirt out of the waistband of her skirt, before unbuttoning it from the bottom as Clarke scrambles to open it from the top. Lexa’s lips find a home on the skin of her stomach as soon as the shirt hits the floor. Clarke’s hands fly to the sides of Lexa’s head and the girl looks up at her, green eyes half-lidded.

It’s the strangest flash of familiarity; the sense of déjà vu strong enough to pull Clarke out of the trance she had dropped into when Lexa kneeled in front of her. She looks down at Lexa, and marvels at the way the woman kisses up her stomach, hands massaging the sides, nails scraping and drawing a shiver whenever Clarke seems too content. And all of it is exactly the same as the way she envisioned it that night so long ago when she had returned to her apartment, frustrated and tense in her own crawling skin, and slipped a hand between her legs at the thought of Lexa in this very position. The thought of it now, laid over the very real Lexa kneeling before her, pushes heat deep into her stomach.

Clarke can’t help the way she babbles.

“God, this is just like how I imagined—”

Lexa’s focus on making Clarke’s legs shake doesn’t preclude her from hearing whatever pleasure-laced words tumble from her boss’s lips; it takes Clarke a second to realize what she said, and that’s only when Lexa pauses, looking up at her, curiosity in her face.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Clarke says quickly, but she can’t exactly muster up her finest acting skills with Lexa between her legs and the other woman sees through it.

Lexa pulls back to sit on her heels, now completely absorbed with trying to read Clarke’s face. “Tell me,” she presses, with the shadow of a smirk growing on her face as she tries to wrest the secret from Clarke; it becomes all the more amusing to her as she watches Clarke’s neck and chest flush red.

“Clarke.”

“Lexa,” Clarke pleads, weakly. She tries to urge Lexa back to her previous focus, but to no avail. Lexa’s patient, placid face betrays no faltering of her willpower—it never does—and for a second Clarke envisions how that face will change when their roles are reversed, but for right now, she knows she won’t be able to outlast Lexa.
“I…” There’s a thump as Clarke lets her head loll back and hit the wall; she squeezes her eyes shut. “It was one night, I couldn’t sleep,” she says, panting. “My body ached, I was frustrated…lonely. I…”

Lexa knows by now; she’s that smart. But when Clarke pauses to let her speak, Lexa remains silent—a wordless plea for Clarke to continue.

“I really, really needed to get off and my thoughts went to you.” The words come out in a rush. “You were kneeling, it was dark, stripped down to nothing…I just…”

“You fucked yourself and thought of me.”

The brusqueness against Lexa’s usual eloquence, the rasp in her voice where it’s usually soft and warm, the way she clips *fucked* with the same sharpness she says Clarke’s name makes Clarke’s legs shake. Lexa’s tone is full of wonder, and when Clarke moans and nods a confirmation to her words, Lexa can only drop her forehead against Clarke’s thigh and release a steadying breath. “Jesus, Clarke…”

“Lexa, please…”

There’s no reservation or pretense about Lexa’s actions after that: she pushes Clarke’s skirt up to her stomach and kisses up her thighs until her lips hit lace and she brings her fingers up to tug Clarke’s panties down, desperate to free up more unclaimed skin for her to taste. She stares up at Clarke as the black lace slides down Clarke’s tan legs. Clarke doesn’t look away as they hit the floor and she kicks them off; she holds Lexa’s gaze the entire time, even as Lexa bends in and slides her tongue through Clarke.

The response is immediate: Clarke’s eyes fly shut and her mouth drops open, releasing a deep, low moan that heightens into a shaky gasp as Lexa licks into her again.

“Fuck, Lexa, oh my god.”

Lexa’s only response is to moan back against Clarke’s skin, because she’s lost herself too. She’s wanted this for so long, to sink into Clarke like this, that her mind has gone blank, filled instead with the sound of Clarke’s babbling and the taste of her. A buzzing sound fills her ears and muffles everything else as she starts to speed up, flicking her tongue faster, coaxing Clarke towards the edge…

Until she realizes it’s an actual buzzing. Clarke blinks several times in surprise like she’s being ripped out of a trance, but the Pavlovian response to her cell phone is too much to ignore even now. She shakes her head and tries to slip back into that lightheaded nothingness that Lexa’s mouth brings, but the phone continues to rattle on the nearby desk. It goes silent for a moment—Lexa breathes a sigh of relief into Clarke and makes her shudder—but then the ringing begins again.

“Hold on,” Clarke mumbles, reaching for it. She starts to turn the phone off, until: “Shit. It’s my mother. She won’t stop calling until I pick up.”

“Your mom?” Lexa asks. “Are you—”

“She won’t stop calling. Two seconds.”

As if Lexa is in any position to disagree—this is something she, too, has thought of for weeks during late nights…and maybe in the middle of conference room meetings. Nodding through her haze, she slows her hands and sits back on her heels, keeping her lips against Clarke’s leg but without the desperate, fever pitch pace. She just can’t give up the contact. Clarke answers the phone and lets her
mother know, with an immediate huff of displeasure, that now is not a good time.

“Mom, I’ll call you right back, I—”

“Clarke, wait. I took an earlier flight and the press reported you’re in San Francisco. I made dinner reservations for 6:30.”

Clarke sputters in disbelief. “I—I—Mom, this is not a good time—” She checks the hotel clock. “It’s 6:04!”

“These were the only reservations of the evening, Clarke!” Abby exclaims. “Let me know when you’re on your way and I’ll inform the host.”

“I’m…not dressed for dinner right now, Mom,” Clarke says, swallowing hard as she looks down at her body to see her skirt up around her stomach and her bra straps hanging from her shoulders. She’s telling the truth there, mostly.

She also makes the mistake of locking gazes with Lexa: the girl still stares up at her reverently, eyes half lidded, mouth open as she inhales Clarke, and at that, Clarke’s legs nearly give out and leave her sliding down the wall. Instead, she slides her hand into Lexa’s loose dark hair, giving her the permission she silently begs for.

“So, I’m working late, I’m with my campaign manager, we have to go over some things—”

Lexa leans forward and kisses the top of Clarke’s thigh…

"The one Kane recommended, right? Ward, something?"

Clarke nearly laughs at the absurdity. "Yes, her. Lexa Ward."

She has to rip the phone away from her head in the next moment, in fear that she won’t be able to silence the sudden gasp that comes when Lexa moves her lips inward and slides her tongue into Clarke’s wetness—she takes Clarke’s hand in her hair as permission and neither of them are able to resist anymore, even with Abby rattling off the evening’s plans from the phone Clarke holds in the air. They aren’t listening. Lexa works her tongue against Clarke with heavy, fast, unbridled desire, reveling in the way Clarke rocks her hips and tightens the hand knotted in Lexa’s hair each time Lexa pushes her closer. She nearly bites through her lip to keep from moaning.

“Clarke? Clarke are you listening? What’s going on?”

She tries valiantly but she can’t correctly operate her fingers to turn off the phone—she’s damn near about to throw it across the room and fist both hands in Lexa’s hair when suddenly Abby’s voice comes across, loud and clear and firm.

"Clarke, listen to me, I haven’t seen you in months. We’re finally in the same city. Bring Miss Ward, wear your work clothes, it’s fine. Dinner twenty minutes. I’ve already sent a car to pick you up, it should be there any minute. And if you don’t come to dinner, I’m coming to get you. No objections."

Click.

“Lexa…fuck.”

Lexa pulls away slowly, giving them both a chance to breathe.

"I can’t get out of this. We're going to dinner with my mom."
The way her lips and chin glisten with Clarke's arousal as she looks up in complete, utter disbelief is almost comical, if Clarke’s weren’t so close to crying with frustration.

“You’re kidding me.”

Five minutes later, they’re sitting in the back seat of the town car Abby sent, neither of them satisfied, both of them in shock, trying to hide all signs of the fact that Lexa had Abby’s daughter up against a wall when Abby called them just minutes before. They’d gone from smeared makeup and rumpled clothes and sex hair to smooth blazers and casually professional hairstyles, but the change was so hasty, they’re not sure they managed to fully cover their tracks.

Lexa’s heart pounds the entire ride.

Chapter End Notes

If this chapter seemed short, that's because it is; originally, it was 14k words and I still wasn't finished. So instead, I split the 14k word chapter in half and added to both sides, so this is essentially part 1 of 2. Since Part 2 is nearly finished pending some editing, it will be up very soon.

Thank you again for reading!! So much love <3
The ride to the restaurant isn’t nearly long enough for them to have any hope of composing themselves. Hell, Clarke still feels like her breathing is too fast and too loud—she keeps glancing at the driver Abby sent to see if he notices anything—and the way that Lexa continues to cross and uncross and shuffle her legs around is not helping. It’s a constant reminder in her peripheral vision of the burning need within her. *Legs that should be spread, legs she should be running her hands up, knees that should be on the ground*… Clarke knows her skin is still flushed and she can only pray that the cool night air can soothe that in the walk from the car to the restaurant. If not… hopefully Abby picked a place with poor lighting.

And then Lexa shifts her fucking legs again and Clarke knows there’s no chance of that happening. She instinctively moves to lay her hand on Lexa’s thigh, to calm her, the way Lexa had calmed her.

Her hand stops midway to its destination—this is a different driver. If Gustus or Ryder were in the front seat, they’d shrug off a casual touch or comment. Clarke can’t take that risk now. She pulls her hand back to her lap, but not before Lexa notices and looks to her, concerned.

“Are you okay?”

Clarke starts to answer when she realizes that they’ve pulled up in front of the restaurant. The valet is approaching the door. Time to go.

“Not at all,” she says. “You?”

“Me neither.”

“This should be great then.”

*  

Guilt is a funny thing. She knows she shouldn’t feel it. But Clarke is distinctly aware of her body—it’s heat and the ways her legs still shake ever so slightly—as well as the proximity of Lexa’s body behind her as they follow the host through the restaurant. But her mind is completely blank. It’s remarkable how she can be so mature and professional and in pursuit of one of the most powerful government positions in the nation, and yet still feel like a teenager caught with her lover when her parents came home early. She half expects her mother to give her a disapproving glare when they arrive at the table; it’s a shock when Abby rises from her seat with nothing but a warm smile on her face.

“I never thought I would have to fight to get into your schedule!” she exclaims jovially, pulling Clarke into a hug. “Ah, honey, I’m so happy to see you.”

“Hi, Mom.” Clarke’s voice is somewhat begrudging, but there’s still a bond between mother and daughter and it’s clear that a hug from her mother makes everything a little better—she’s smiling too when the two women pull apart. “You know better than anyone how difficult scheduling is. I’m working 12, 14 hour days right now. I had a skype conference scheduled tonight—”

“Oh, is that what you were doing when I called?”
Clarke freezes and stares, searching for a hint of accusation in the words; then Lexa leans in behind her.

“We rescheduled it, Mrs. Griffin. This is more important.”

Clarke nods wordlessly as Abby gives Lexa a gracious smile; in the silence that expands between the three of them, Abby waits, looking between Clarke and Lexa. Expectancy turns to confusion and a small wrinkle appears in her forehead before Clarke realizes what she’s waiting for.

“Oh! Mom, this is Lexa, my…my campaign manager. Lexa Ward.”

“Nice to meet you, Mrs. Griffin,” Lexa says. Abby returns the sentiment and they shake hands, giving everyone leave to take a seat at the table. Clarke has marveled at how cool and collected Lexa seems to be, up until the moment when she tries to move past Clarke in the crowded restaurant, inhales a deep breath of Clarke’s perfume, and nearly stumbles into her seat. Clarke’s throat runs dry but Abby is concerned with her napkin and thankfully doesn’t notice.

Clarke glances around: the small French restaurant might just be busy enough to make sure any small indiscretions such as that are covered. Patrons are happy and red-faced with wine, waiters bustle back and forth, and an open kitchen with flames exploding up out of the pan every few minutes for the sake of deep-pocketed onlookers all provide enough noise and distraction that will prevent Abby from studying either of the two women too closely. If this were a quieter spot, if they were at a secluded table, if they had only each other to focus on, then maybe it would be a risk. But as long as she can keep a straight face, everything should be okay.

Confidence building, she dives back into the conversation with Lexa and her mother.

“Marcus Kane, I believe you know him well?” Abby is asking Lexa. “He has told me many good things about you.”

Clarke can read it all over Lexa’s face: Did he tell you I was likely to sleep with your daughter?

Abby continues: “And as far as I can tell, you’re doing a great job with Clarke, so Marcus was absolutely right to recommend you. Thank you, for all your hard work.”

Clarke starts gulping water and she knows, from another glance at Lexa over the rim of her glass, that they’re both thinking the same thing yet again.

Lexa crosses her legs.

Clarke wishes they weren’t on the same side of the table, with Lexa’s legs in her peripheral vision again.

“Thank you, Mrs. Griffin,” Lexa says stiffly.

Maybe this won’t be as easy as Clarke thought.

Abby takes a sip of her wine and now directs her laser-focused attention to Clarke, with all of her former-senator seriousness. “I did have a few questions about the campaign, though. I don’t think you’ve been doing enough in rural areas. You need more—”

“Mom, please don’t—”

“Clarke, listen. A good ground game would do you good—remember when I went on that three state tour during the summer before your freshman year?”
“Distinctly,” Clarke says acidly, which Abby doesn’t pick up.

“You can do that here,” Abby presses “There are all sorts of small towns and events and locations of interest. You can start meeting more people. As far as I can tell, your biggest issue is your accessibility—”

“Mom—

“—which is easily fixed if—”

“Mom! We already have that planned!”

Abby stops short and Lexa experiences a helluva a déjà vu moment—Abby is the picture of her daughter in the midst of any of arguments that Clarke and Lexa have over this speech or that publicity event. She can only imagine what it must have been like. The shouting matches alone—if Clarke, the perfect student, ever actually had them—probably could have woken the neighbors.

“We already have that planned,” Clarke explains calmly once Abby stops talking. “It’s state fair season, everywhere from San Francisco to Los Angeles. We’re hitting a half dozen on the way home, with stops in between. We have a community clean up event next weekend along the coast. We recognize that my accessibility is a problem. We’re fixing it.”

Lexa looks between the two women like it’s a tennis match, trying to keep her movements as subtle as possible, because this isn’t something she should intrude in, even after all the times she has and will jump to Clarke’s defense. Clarke sits back in her chair and takes a sip of wine, just like her mother.

“I hear you’re working with Diana Sydney,” Abby says, switching tactics with a brighter voice. “What called for that decision?”

Now Lexa starts to speak up; Clarke beats her to it. “We are. She’s good for the image, that we’re working together with the party. I know you don’t like her but it’s necessary.” Those are the same words Lexa had said to Clarke.

Abby nods. “I see.”

Before the conversation can progress, a waiter arrives, eager to take drink orders. “Good evening everyone! Let’s get started with—”

“We’re ready to order,” Clarke interrupts.

“We are?” Lexa asks, bewildered.

Clarke forces their hand: Abby and Lexa quickly pick items from the menu and send them off, because to Clarke, the faster they can get through this dinner, the better. Once the waiter whisk away, Abby excuses herself to the bathroom, giving Clarke and Lexa a moment alone at the table.

“What’s impossible,” Clarke replies, but she takes another sip anyway. “I’m frustrated enough without her adding to it.” At this, she flicks a glance up and down Lexa’s body, the heat in her gaze making Lexa shift in her seat, as if she needs a reminder that just a half hour ago she was on her knees in front of future Senator Clarke Griffin. “We just need to get through this dinner and get home, okay?”
“Get home for what?” Lexa asks, half-suggestive, half-curious. She’s thinking two months ahead in the campaign, but she cannot for the life of her predict where this night will end up.

“Just…I don’t know.”

Any further waffling is cut short when Abby reappears, sliding back into her seat. The waiters come through with artful, tiny salads, and for a few minutes at least, the food keeps the conversation civil, mostly about Lexa’s education and her experience. They people watch, and chat about the surroundings, their secluded spot in the restaurant giving them the advantage to talk without being overheard as long as they keep their voices reasonable. But it’s not long until Abby is shifting the conversation again, and Clarke’s jaw is tightening.

Abby pokes at the last cherry tomato on her plate. “You know, Clarke, the fundraising gala for the LGBT+ Center of San Francisco is coming up. I’ll be helping on your campaign, by all means, but I expect you to be in attendance at my event.”

Lexa expects another argument, but instead, Abby looks at Clarke and begins to laugh. “There it is! Since you were a teenager, you hated the galas. You look like a trapped animal; that look on your face hasn’t changed.”

Clarke swallows a huge bite of her salad and tries to adjust the grimace on her face, but Abby just laughs even harder.

“Of course,” she continues once she recovers, “I figured that you would be attending this gala if nothing else.”

Lexa’s attention snaps to Clarke and the blonde gives her a small nod, which prompts the question: “You’re out to your mother?”

Abby sits straight up. “Clarke is out to you?”

The waiters, of course, pick the worst possible time to come in with the main course. As they swoop toward the table with hot plates of food, Abby looks from Clarke to Lexa to Clarke again, eyes narrowing as the two young women shift uncomfortably and wait for the opportunity to explain themselves. That crippling guilt comes rushing back to Clarke.

“Does she know? Did she figure it out? Abby studies Lexa with new intensity, and a terrifyingly judgmental gaze, one reserved almost exclusively for professional duties. Clarke’s heart beats in her throat and she’s convinced her mother can hear it.

“I, uh…” Lexa begins, once the waiters disappear. “I needed to know Clarke completely—” terrible choice of words; Clarke nudges her under the table, “—And I didn’t want any surprises to come during the campaign.”

Recovering graciously as Abby nods and seems to accept this explanation, Clarke turns to Lexa with a broad, polite smile. “I came out to my mother when I was sixteen. She based her equal rights program around it.”

“I built it because of you,” Abby corrects, fondly.

“She went to war for me.”

“Really?” Lexa asks. “I wrote a term paper about California’s equality politics in the early 2000s, but now, I never put together…”

Abby shrugs. “It was a secret. I wasn’t going to out my daughter for my political career, and even if
she was out, then I wasn’t going to exploit it. So we left Clarke’s name out of everything. But now that she’s a politician in her own right, shaping policies and rallying support…”

With a sigh, Clarke folds her arms over her chest and leans back in her chair. “You really want me to attend that gala, don’t you?” she asks.

“I expect it of you. It’s three days from now.”

“Fine. Anything that makes this dinner go smoother.”

And it does. Once Abby gets her way, she, like Clarke, becomes yielding and peaceable. That innate, apparently genetic talent is the reason Abby got so far in her career and the reason why Clarke will go so far: they are capable of arguing until the other side concedes, and then luring them into a false sense of security with a sudden affability that takes them by surprise. The rest of the night is pleasant, though. They approach politics only once more and avoid the subject of Cage Wallace altogether; instead, they sip wine and lean back and Clarke and Abby reminisce about adventures in the city when Clarke was young, stories Lexa listens to with rapt attention. A ninety minute dinner never dulls her senses or pulls her out of sync with Clarke. Her body never cools and her desire never goes away. As long as Clarke is in the room, looking like that—hair tossed back over her shoulder, tailored clothes showing off her curves, teeth sparkling as she talks and gestures with Abby and the waiters that pass by. The heat between her legs feels permanent, especially now.

Dessert is yet to be served. Lexa fidgets again. God, just let me get home sane.

*

A late night drive home. Silence in the back seat, quiet jazz playing from the front. Gustus humming along. Lexa shifting her legs again. Clarke gritting her teeth, tapping her fingers on the arm rest, attention flicking between the window and the woman beside her, looking for a sign. What now? Sits at the forefront of both their minds—pick up where they left off? Forget the indiscretion? Try again tomorrow?

Clarke’s always been bold.

As a test, she slides her hand across the seat and onto Lexa’s thigh. A small movement, invisible in the darkness of the car and if it were any other night, a gesture that could be interpreted in any number of ways. Her hand rest in Lexa’s lap could be a sign of reassurance, a show of faith or comfort, an accidental motion when Gustus takes a corner too hard and Clarke loses her balance. But tonight, in the context of what’s going through their minds and their veins, against a backdrop of a night where primal, passionate sex up against a wall was interrupted before it could truly begin, Clarke’s hand asks a grand question with a very insignificant touch.

Lexa had been staring straight ahead, jaw set.  At Clarke’s touch, she dares only to glance down, moving nothing but her eyes, giving nothing away so that Gustus won’t suspect. Clarke sees them lower and fix on her hand as the car passes beneath a streetlight; heat pours into her lower body at the sight.

And then Lexa answers Clarke’s question with a very insignificant shift of her own: she spreads her legs ever so slightly, allowing Clarke further access inches lower between her thighs.

Clarke breathes a shaky sigh of relief.
There’s no such gentleness or tentativeness or subtlety when they get back to Clarke’s hotel room. The moment they slip inside, Lexa slams the door shut by pushing Clarke up against it and following her in for a deep kiss—she’s only encouraged by the low moan that escapes Clarke’s throat to vibrate against her lips. Clarke grips her hips and pulls her tighter, forcing Lexa to press her more firmly against the door.

“You’re okay?” Lexa gasps when she pulls away, the words coming between kisses as she makes her way along Clarke’s jawline, ever courteous despite hearing the pleasure in Clarke’s moan.

“I’m—fuck, that’s great, don’t—don’t stop.”

They can’t. An hour and a half at dinner and the torture of knowing what they were missing out on, what the other was feeling; the torture of looking across the table and being unable to stop thinking about the other person stripped out and spreading her legs, aching and starving for the other’s touch. Clarke loves to tease and even that was cruel for her. So the idea of stopping now is beyond all comprehension. They’re so close to the pressure and release that they crave, Clarke wants Lexa hot and fast and relentless. Lexa holds Clarke against the door with all of this ferocity, kissing her as she palms and pulls at Clarke’s body—but it’s Clarke who lifts her thigh between Lexa’s legs to let her grind down on it, which only fuels Lexa more. Clarke is an oasis in a desert and Lexa drinks her eagerly, greedily, a lack of patience turning into dangerous, unchecked overindulgence, something Clarke never expected from her, something that’s making her dizzy and lightheaded as warm pressure starts to build, pulsing each time Lexa digs her nails in or rolls her hips to push Clarke up against the wall again.

“Lex…bed.”

Lexa complies as if she’s been granted a permission she was begging for. She pulls Clarke back with such force that they nearly go stumbling, but somehow Lexa’s athleticism catches them, as they move toward the bed and she’s able to spin them around so that Clarke lands first and Lexa ends up on top of her. Never missing a beat, Lexa’s straddling her before Clarke knows it. She frantically undoes the buttons of Clarke’s blouse as Clarke shimmies out of her skirt and kicks it to the floor. Lexa’s shirt disappears somehow too, and Clarke can’t figure out how Lexa got it off so quickly because a second later she has Lexa’s bare body pressing into her own and Lexa’s lips on hers and the logistics of how they got there stop mattering.

The position doesn’t last; the first time Lexa pulls away from the deep kiss, she doesn’t return, dipping down Clarke’s neck instead. Then her collarbones. Then the valley between her breasts. Leaving sloppy kisses all the way, but without the possession or insistence of past nights. Normally, Lexa lavishes attention on Clarke’s chest, with the same adoration that Clarke looks down at her with, but tonight, Lexa skips them completely, kissing down Clarke’s stomach as if the journey hardly matters compared to the destination. And Clarke couldn’t care less—she’s still stumbling through prayers for Lexa to move faster when Lexa yanks the fabric of her lingerie aside and presses her soft, full lips into Clarke’s wetness in an open kiss. Her lips alone feel amazing against her; it’s like Clarke’s world stops. And then Lexa’s tongue slides against her.

“Oh my god.”

Clarke’s hand flies to Lexa’s hair instantly because she almost goes over the edge the moment Lexa
first swipes her tongue upward in one slow movement; if anything, though, the tugging in Lexa’s loose brown waves only motivates her. She gives Clarke no chance to breathe as she begins to build a leisurely rhythm, with a callous disregard for the begging that tumbles past Clarke’s lips.

“Please, please, please, god, please…”

She never quite manages to enunciate what exactly she wants, she just wants. But the pleading forms a metronome to which she matches her breathing, clinging desperately to the building pressure in her stomach so that it doesn’t burst yet. The forcefulness of her endeavor sparks amusement in Lexa’s eyes, easily readable, and Clarke releases a loud obscenity when she looks down to see Lexa’s green eyes sparkling up at her from between her legs, full of mischief and amusement as she starts to move faster, flicking her tongue between the circles she makes, a relentless rhythm.

Clarke has always thought Lexa’s eyes are beautiful, but that sight is something else; she stares open-mouthed and Lexa matches her gaze, keeping her mouth moving without breaking even as Clarke’s hips begin to jolt in time with the twitches of Lexa’s tongue. She’s maddening, and glorious: she pushes Clarke higher into a dizzying frenzy, then slows again, dragging her tongue up and down and relishing in the taste of her, before she picks up the pace again and smiles at the pleasure of Clarke’s grip in her hair. She never breaks eye-contact, she never pulls away for a teasing comment, she never obeys Clarke’s begging. She’s everything Clarke needs.

Then, Lexa slides a hand up underneath her own body, pushing two fingers inside Clarke and curling.

The world spins away from her. Only Lexa’s mouth stays steady and Clarke has to break their eye contact and throw her head back, legs shaking and vision blurring. But even without that connection, Lexa keeps her anchored in the pleasure with her tongue and her fingers working relentlessly and in a synchronicity that Clarke can’t believe is real—and then Lexa folds her free hand into Clarke’s, interlacing their fingers and moaning when Clarke tightens her grip, trying to hold on to something.

It’s this, more than anything, that does it for Clarke. She’s been so tightly wound that it feels like it takes only seconds to unravel. When Lexa takes hold of her hand, all of the tension in Clarke’s abdomen suddenly snaps and warmth floods through her body in waves, bursting anew every time Lexa switches the speed of her tongue. She never falters, not once, just stares up at Clarke’s face and keeps their fingers entwined as Clarke shakes and writhes on her tongue. When Clarke’s gasps sharpen with her over-sensitivity, Lexa at last pulls away, planting a sloppy kiss on the inside of Clarke’s thigh instead.

When Clarke recovers, she puts all of her effort into lifting her head and opening her eyes to see Lexa, head pillowed on Clarke’s thigh and looking like she is the one who just had her lover’s mouth between her legs, not the other way around. She stares back at Clarke in awe, lips red and flushed and wet, and Clarke gets very near to saying something she shouldn’t before Lexa’s face turns much more smug.

“Well that was fast.”

Clarke half groans, half laughs, dropping her head back to the pillow.

"You were really stressed, weren’t you?" Lexa teases gently, as she idly strokes her fingertips up and down Clarke’s sensitive skin. Her touch makes Clarke twitch and tense, but Clarke seems determined to act as if it does nothing.

"And you weren’t?" she asks Lexa.
"I was, but I was also half-convinced you were playing it up in order to make my life more difficult."

"You're such a--" Clarke tries to sit up, half-laughing and half-snarling, to give Lexa what's coming to her, but Lexa throws out an arm and plants her hand into Clarke's chest in order to press her back down into the pillows. The remnants of pleasure have left Clarke shaking, weak, dizzy, and she's in no state to struggle up against Lexa's strong arms. Nor should she want to, if the mischievous grin on Lexa's face is anything to go by.

"Stay," Lexa commands. Then she softens, gives an inviting smile. "Relax."

"Not a chance," is Clarke's weak protest, as she tries to sit up again. Lexa chuckles at the complete lack of effort it takes to keep Clarke pinned down; Clarke's shaking muscles are no match for Lexa's determination, let alone her own lean strength. "Come on," Clarke whines in futility when she at last realizes Lexa's game. "Let me return the favor. Your turn."

Lexa replaces her fingertips on Clarke's thigh with her tongue, teasing the sensitive skin. "No. Relax. Let everything go." She mumbles the instructions between lazy kisses that chart a path higher and higher. "You deserve this...take it as my apology. I owe you...multiple apologies."

"Your mouth..." Clarke begs.

"Of course."

And when Clarke feels Lexa's warm mouth against her again, whatever protest she has dies in her throat, crumbling away to a choked gasp of ohmygod. She's still so sensitive that even soft swipes of Lexa's tongue and lips make her writhe, but soon she regains a second wind and melts like butter. Her hips rise in a rhythm with Lexa's tongue, up until the moment she glances down and sees hazy green eyes looking up at her, watching every open-mouthed gasp and contorted face--they lock gazes as Lexa goes down on her and Clarke nearly loses control right then, forcing Lexa to dig her fingers into Clarke's hips to keep her there. Clarke is hers. Irrevocably, Lexa's. Lexa's to tease, Lexa's to pleasure, Lexa's to scratch and mark and own. Her hands fly to Lexa's hair and tangle in the loose brown locks, silently begging for all of that and more, a need she can't put a voice to. Not yet.

Lexa knows, though. "I told you we weren't done," she breathes, pure satisfaction, and she can't even be sure that Clarke can comprehend her.

*

“This is beginning to become a common thing,” is the sleepy mumble Clarke wakes up to the next morning. Without opening her eyes, she rolls over and throws an arm around Lexa’s bare stomach, nuzzling into her neck. The other woman hums in contentment.

“I don’t mind it.”

“At least you’ve stopped dumping resignations on me,” Clarke teases against her skin.

Lexa groans. “Trying to be professional, imagine that.”

“You’re doing a great job.”
“So are you.”

If either of them had the energy, they’d adjust their positions and kiss, maybe nip playfully at the other for the sarcasm, but it’s just too damn early. The sky outside is still red, but as it rises, so too do the obligations of the day.

“We have to meet with Wells this morning,” Clarke murmurs, “but he won’t mind if we’re a few minutes late.”

“You, being late?” Lexa chuckles. “We’ll get there on time. Plus we don’t want the interview to run over and compress our time for the rest of our itinerary.”

Clarke groans. “Fine.”

“Then after your interview later, we’ll have to get on the phone with the ad agency and a member of your publicity team to start working out campaign commercials.”

“We can make that call on the way to the dinner with the chamber members.”

“Sounds good.”

Even in sleepy moments like this, the conversations are almost all business. Clarke shimmies over and props herself up on her elbows to study Lexa. She’s not sure if the talk is just an echo of their daily lives, invading even the bedroom, or if there’s a deeper gulf between them, hidden by their professional duties. She bites her lip and doesn’t bother to resolve her face as Lexa opens one eye.

“Do you have any ideas for your commercials? Anything you want to avoid or include?” Lexa asks.

“Not off the top of my head. Do you?”

“I figured we would keep the first one positive, and focus on your character. Something nice about your life, make you seem real. More personal.” Lexa pauses, considering. “I don’t know, your favorite things to do around LA.”

That’s an opportunity. Clarke edges closer to Lexa beneath the sheets, resting her chin on Lexa’s shoulder.

“You’ve been in Los Angeles for a while now. What do you think my favorite places are?”

The playful tease in her voice throws Lexa off. Lexa sits up a little straighter, jostling Clarke slightly, so that she can study her face with a furrowed brow, because who gets impish about planning campaign ads? Clarke elaborates once she realizes the source of Lexa’s confusion: “How well do you know me?”

*It’s a game,* Lexa realizes. And then she gets much more serious about playing.

“You strike me as a beach girl,” she says after some consideration. Clarke weighs the answer and then dips to press a deep kiss to Lexa’s neck.

“What else?” Clarke asks.

“You like…the little bars in the financial district. The ones that all the lawyers and bankers go to after work.”

Another kiss, this time lower, on Lexa’s collarbone.
“There’s a lot you don’t know about me, though,” Clarke tells her, as her blue eyes sparkle up at Lexa. “Those ones were easy.”

They weren’t, and she’s secretly delighted that Lexa could name one let alone two of her favorite places—she’s sure she’s never mentioned either—but to reveal her pleasure would end the game too early. So Clarke remains serious and Lexa grows even more competitive. Lexa raises a brow, lips quirking. “So give me a harder one.”

“What club was I president of in college?”

“The natural inclination would be to say debate, because of your incessant need to argue everything —” Clarke tenses, ready to prove her wrong, but Lexa continues: “But you instead used that ability to demand, and gain access to, the Young Business Leaders organization on campus, even though you were pre-law.”

Clarke groans. “You read that in an article.”

“Then you shouldn’t have asked the question!”

They’re laughing, but Clarke kisses her anyway, just below her collarbone. The bedsheets cover Lexa’s chest right up to the point where Clarke kisses her, but all it takes is a casual slip of Clarke’s hand to push them down lower. She’s tempted to just keep kissing, moving down slowly, and end all conversation between them, but this is about more than just her end goal: she’s in love with the way she and Lexa are grinning at each other, laughing and talking, for once, about something other than their political endeavors. Something tangible and electric grows between them as they play and as the room slowly lightens with the rising dawn. Clarke asks more questions. Her childhood pets, her favorite vacations, her dream job as a teenager; and every time, Lexa gets it right or gets close enough to call it a correct answer, and Clarke’s kisses get lower and lower. Collarbones, cleavage, just below her breasts, down the sides of her abs, right between her hipbones. Lexa’s affirming hum every time she feels Clarke’s lips, and the subtle movement in her hips with the feeling, keep urging Clarke on.

When Lexa correctly announces that Clarke’s favorite drink is a Negroni, Clarke takes the plunge—to the inside of Lexa’s thigh. She lays a deep, hard kiss on the sensitive skin, drawing out a shivering exhale. And then:

“W-wait, wait, Clarke. I have a question.”

Clarke pauses and looks up Lexa’s body.

"What happens if I get a question wrong?" Lexa asks.

Clarke smirks. "Quit worrying about rules."

“Never a great command to hear from a budding senator.”

Lexa is—quite literally—in no position to be sarcastic, given that she has Clarke between her legs and her head pressed back into the pillows in anticipation; Clarke reminds her of this by shooting a warning glare up Lexa’s body, keeping remarkably stoic even when faced with such a glorious view. This is serious. After a moment, Lexa acquiesces with a begrudging smile. She watches Clarke lay a tentative, suspicious kiss on the quivering muscle of her inner thigh, then glide a few inches higher and repeat. Back on track.

“What else do you know about me?” Clarke prompts her in a low voice.
Lexa swallows hard. “Your first direct taste of politics was a high school class president election…”

Correct. Clarke switches to Lexa’s other leg and rewards her with a kiss just above her knee. She doesn’t notice the way Lexa’s expression darkens to mischief.

“…which you lost.”

She spouts the wrong answer with confidence, not in its accuracy, but rather its error. She needs to know what happens when she breaks a rule, she has to test Clarke’s boundaries—

And before she can form another coherent thought, Clarke sinks her teeth into Lexa’s soft skin. It’s nothing more than a sharp nip but the 180 degree pivot away from heavenly kisses and caresses blows Lexa’s mind in the very best way: it feels like a half-second press of hot metal and it has her groaning in mixed pain and pleasure, her back arching up off the bed and her capacity for conversation and cleverness quickly spiraling down into pure need.

“Oh my god,” Lexa moans as Clarke, grinning, soothes the spot with a lazy kiss. “That’s not—fuck—that’s not a very good…incentive for me to keep getting them right.”

"Is this?"

The only sound in the room is the way Lexa’s low laugh turns into garbled swear words as Clarke licks a long stripe up Lexa’s thigh, stopping a heartbeat away from where Lexa needs her the most, in the most brutal, cruel form of teasing Lexa is sure anyone has ever experienced. Clarke looks up from her position, frozen just inches above Lexa’s skin, smirking and watching with darkened eyes as Lexa unravels, and Lexa just stares back in mingled awe and desperation, begging silently. The game is over. Please. Please. Please. The sting of the bite has her on edge and her hips twitch upward with the anticipation, but god, Clarke has always been too competitive and she stays just far away enough to make Lexa whine. The seconds of her motionlessness feel like hours, until Lexa finally understands Clarke’s arched eyebrow: this game absolutely isn’t over, and Lexa has to work.

“Clarke,” she begs anyway, futilely, to no reaction. “Fuck, okay…um, you were born and raised in Los Angeles, your favorite color is blue, you like chess, you have blonde hair—"

Clarke bursts out laughing, filling the room to the ceiling and filling Lexa’s heart until it feels like it’s going to burst. God. The lengths this woman drives Lexa to, the frustration, the adoration…she is maddening in all the best ways.

But Lexa is only half-aware of these truths, far more concerned with sputtering out any and all correct facts she can think of in order to get Clarke to grant her the release she craves. Clarke can’t stop laughing and Lexa can’t stop talking: “You went to UCLA and then to Harvard, you studied law, your legs looked fantastic in that blue dress the other day, you—”

Clarke sinks down with an open mouth kiss and Lexa’s final words for the rest of the morning end in a gasp.

The rest of her communication for the next half hour is through the tightening of her fingers in Clarke’s hair and the desperate rocking of her hips.

*
“We keep ending up in the car after we have sex,” Clarke breathes, as they sit in traffic on the way to her coffee date with Wells. Her voice is covered by the honking and shouting of the morning commute around them.

Lexa pulls away from her call and covers her cellphone with her hand. “It’s probably because we’re on a political roadtrip and we spend 80% of our time in cars.”

Clarke can’t exactly respond with any wit, because the bitterness of their reality of not being able to spend a full day in bed with Lexa, playing stupid games, has set in this morning; plus, they’re late and the traffic isn’t making things better. It has her on edge as they sit in traffic and she listens to Lexa negotiate with an ad agency, but once they make it to the Starbucks, Wells’s wide smile erases all of her worries.

“Griffin!” he exclaims, beaming as he wraps her in a bear hug that even makes other people in the coffee shop smile. “I can’t believe it’s been so long since the last time you were in the city.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re breaking some journalistic ethics codes right now,” Clarke says. Her voice is muffled by his shoulder but he simply squeezes tighter, and it reminds her of how long it really has been since they last saw each other, and how long it’s been since college. The simpler days.

“I’m not a journalist right now, so forget the ethics,” he says. “I’m buying your coffee, too.”

“Oh, great. We’ll break some obscure ethics code for me, instead.”

Lexa lingers outside, finishing up her call, and by the time she makes it inside the coffee shop, Clarke and Wells have already found their seats and are reminiscing about their days together at UCLA over their steaming cups of coffee. Clarke sits with her back to Lexa, but even across the coffee shop, Lexa can tell that Clarke feels lighter and more at peace already; she sits in the chair like a weight has been lifted from her shoulders, or like she’s set aside the burden of the world. Lexa knows the look from their late nights together, on the rare occasions that something turns light enough to share a laugh about, but seeing it from an outside perspective now roots Lexa in place for a moment. The sight of Clarke throwing her head back and laughing is something Lexa wants fixed in her memory forever.

She’s sorry that she’s going to have to be the one to ruin that.

Steeling herself with a smile of her own, at least to delay the news by a few minutes, Lexa crosses the coffee shop to join the pair at their small window table. Wells notices her first, sitting back in his chair with a welcoming smile, which causes Clarke to turn around.

“Miss Ward!” he says, standing to shake her hand. It’s somehow just as friendly as the greeting he gave Clarke. “It’s so nice to meet you in person and tell you what a great job you’re doing.”

“You as well,” Lexa replies warmly, easy East Coast etiquette coming out despite the problems.

Wells gets right to business. “Listen, before we start, I’m glad I’ve got you both here.” He leans in, conspiratorially. “Clarke, I know you hate smear campaigns. But Cage is already putting his cards on the table; he’s holding nothing back.”

Clarke’s face grows cloudy. As if she needs a reminder. “We haven’t given much thought to that,” she says carefully.

“Do you have any ideas?” Lexa adds, because it’s her position to do so when Clarke has to stay neutral, even with someone as close as Wells. Plus, there’s a glimmer of possibility in his eye, one that sparks Lexa’s interest. It just might be enough to take the edge off the news that she has to give
Wells nods, confirming Lexa’s guess. “The Wallace family has hundreds of millions. They’ve made it on all sorts of business deals, all over the world. They have connections. You know nobody with that much money, doing that much business, is squeaky clean. I bet we can do some digging and turn up some pretty damning info.”

Even Clarke can’t resist that.

“You think you can find something?”

“I might,” Wells says with a shrug. “If you want the info, I have people I can turn to. I just wouldn’t do it without your permission. And it’s all legal, of course. I’m not hacking the guy. Just following trails.”

“Nothing that could get Clarke or the campaign in trouble, then?” Lexa asks.

“Nothing.”

The two women look at each other—for a second, Clarke looks ready to disapprove, but her resolve caves in at a raise of Lexa’s brow. “Do it,” she tells Wells, defeated. “We need everything we can get. And if it’s not something we can use to get him arrested, hopefully it’s enough to turn voters against him.”

“I’ll get on it as soon as I get back to the office today.” He makes a note on his pad before reaching for his coffee, but as he lifts the cup to his mouth, he notices with a jolt that there are only two cups between the three people at the table. “Miss Ward, I’m so sorry; I should have ordered you a coffee as well. Stay put; I’ll go get one.”

Wells bounds up from the table and strides quickly across the shop, leaving the two girls by themselves. Lexa doesn’t protest or go with him to buy her own, which is the Clarke’s first clue that something is wrong. Her campaign manager looks down at the table, unable to face her, which gives her a chance to read the microexpressions she’s grown so used to.

“You have bad news,” she surmises quietly, sitting back in her seat.

Lexa doesn’t try to hide it. She sighs. “Look. I don’t want to take away from this meeting with Wells because I can see how happy it’s made you. But I won’t lie…even if we find dirt on Cage, between the numbers Raven gave us and the quotes for advertisements we’ve gotten…there’s no way we can afford to compete with him with ads. His level of access to media is unrivaled.”

It is essentially what Clarke already knew, and feared. She tries to keep her face even but her pursed lips give it away. “What can we do?”

“Right now, we can afford maybe one good ad. One good commercial and some prudent network choices for where to place it, and we should be okay.”

“Our one to his four, though. Four commercials, one against me, one against my mother, running all the time.”

“Maybe people will get sick of seeing his face,” Lexa offers, weakly.

Clarke heaves a heavy sigh, audible to Wells as he comes trotting back to the table with Lexa’s coffee. He clocks the shift in attitude immediately, his brow furrowing, and when Lexa’s gratitude is much more subdued than her greeting, he knows something is wrong.
“I was gone for thirty seconds, what happened?”

“We don’t have the money to compete with Cage Wallace,” Clarke says. She’s known Wells for years, not to mention he’s already helped her fuck over Cage Wallace once. There are no political secrets here.

Wells nods, huffing as he tries to figure out a fast solution. The impact of Clarke’s words are immediately understandable. The prospect of financial competition with Cage Wallace was always a reality they would have to face sooner or later, and the discrepancy in their ability to put out campaign commercials is just one facet of the issue, representative of the bigger uphill climb that Clarke faces. She can do all the interviews and events she wants. If Cage Wallace’s face is on every TV screen in the state, in the country? She can’t keep up.

“So let’s talk options,” Wells suggests after a moment of sipping their coffee. Lexa can tell why he and Clarke get along so well. “How much money are we talking?”

“We’d need to raise at least an extra two million right now for a basic advertising schedule,” Lexa says, “Cage Wallace is spending twice that, on par with what presidential candidates spend. We either have to find a way to gain more donors, make money, or start cutting programs.”

“Where could we cut though?” Clarke asks. “We’re running on the bare minimum as it is.”

“There’s always personnel,” Wells says.

“No. I’m not sacrificing any of my people in order to play his game.”

He nods. “My dad always said that you have to base your success on people, not money. What if you faked it? At least until you do have the funds. Just pretend you have the finances and contract as cheaply as you can. IOUs, favors...and then just make it look expensive.”

“Or...don’t,” Lexa says suddenly.

She is still working out her idea as the other two turn to stare at her, but Clarke can see the dawning on her face and starts to feel the first tendrils of hope curl into her chest; Lexa’s inner machinations are invaluable. Clarke and Wells sit frozen in anticipation as Lexa begins to detail out her thoughts, slowly at first but building up steam.

“Play up the disparity,” she says. “He has millions. We’re doing okay...but compared to him? It looks like nothing. So we promote that. We make our campaign look worse off than we are, and we paint him as the wealthy villain, disconnected from the people.” She pauses, waiting for them to catch up to her train of thought, then explains the subtle genius. “It not only hides our true resources for use later, and when it starts to damage his image, he’ll reduce his expenditures.”

“So you’re suggesting we put out a shitty commercial,” Clarke says, confused. Lexa’s simple nod doesn’t do much to clarify.

“Shitty, and—or—emphasizing the campaign’s lack of funding. Call it grassroots. A start-up movement. For the people. The buzzwords people use when there’s not much money involved.”

“It’s a wounded gazelle gambit,” Wells says, catching on. “Or a weak gazelle, in this case. People will sympathize, if it’s covered and spun correctly.”

Clarke nods, trying and failing to hide her smile at Lexa’s casual genius, and suddenly comes up with her own idea. “If we spin it correctly and make it go nationwide...donations start pouring in from everywhere. We can work with the state party leaders to make contact with other party leaders
elsewhere.” It’s all built on precedent: state elections that have a balance-tipping effect in the federal government are of great interest to the nation as a whole, all the way up to the president and the presidential candidates. Clarke knows this from her many late night internal debates about pursuing anything with Lexa and the risk of being caught, but somehow this is the first time she’s applied the principle to a fundraising drive.

Lexa looks to Wells. “If you write a few articles about it, do you think it would bring enough attention when coupled with the commercials?”

He shakes his head. “I’ll do what I can, but an article in the SF Times isn’t the same as something like NYT or the Washington Post. Maybe anything I write will get enough traction over the course of a few weeks if you make it your primary PR goal. But for an immediate effect, you’d need something bigger.”

With a sigh, Clarke sits back in her chair, cradling her coffee and chewing her lip. Something bigger. Something like the NYT or Washington Post. National. They have only three months until the election and they can’t waste one of those months waiting for the country to take notice of her little-engine-that-could campaign against Cage Wallace. But how?

Instinctively, she looks to Lexa, looking for that connection that always tells her Lexa has the same thoughts. Instead, she’s surprised to find that Lexa is dialing a number on her phone. She brings it to her ear and gives only one explanation: “I have an idea.” Her voice sounds strange, piquing Clarke’s curiosity. And concern.

It’s rare that Lexa bounds ahead of Clarke like this, making plans without her consent, because they’re usually on the same page. Though, Clarke realizes, when they’re not it’s usually because Clarke herself is the one bounding ahead and leaving Lexa to maintain order through the chaos Clarke wrecks, so a role reversal is perhaps fair here. Regardless, there is no room for trepidation when she is so full of trust and belief in her campaign manager. All she can do is sit at the table and watch as Lexa scratches at the peeling lip of her coffee cup, waiting for the person on the other end of the line to pick up. The ringing is faintly audible, and only when she hears the click of the phone being answered does Clarke realize she’s holding her breath. Lexa squeezes her eyes shut, shakes her head once, and then spills the words out like a confession.

“Hey, Anya. It’s me. I need that favor now.”
“Lexa, I hate all of these!”

Clarke’s loud groan carries to the other side of the hotel valet area, where Lexa stands in conversation with Sterling as they wait for the cars to arrive. Her campaign manager pulls out of her conversation with their PR lead and turns to Clarke with a raised eyebrow; Clarke’s reply is a frown as she holds up the iPad she’s been using to watch the commercial samples sent to the team by various ad agencies. She has to select an agency by the end of the day and so far, it’s not looking good, so she’s been reviewing them all morning in hopes of finding a single element that puts one above the rest.

Foreseeing the impending crisis, Lexa sends Sterling on his way with a few final instructions. The campaign team is scattered this morning, different teams in different parts of the city with different responsibilities, while Clarke and Lexa go to meet Abby and head to the site of the LGBT Center’s Gala to check on preparations for the event the following night. With a schedule like theirs, any misstep or mistake—or frustrating commercial selections—can turn a California summer day into hell in an instant, so Lexa moves to palliate the frustration as soon as possible.

“These are all terrible,” Clarke says, handing the iPad off to Lexa as if she wants her to throw the whole thing away.

“I know,” Lexa replies, “That’s the goal. That’s what we paid for.”

It stings Clarke’s pride to fake weakness or defeat like this, even if it is a political ploy that might pay off in the end. “But still...they look like PowerPoint slideshows,” she snaps bitterly, scoffing at the iPad and turning instead to scan the parking lot for Ryder’s approach with the car.

To Lexa, Clarke’s being a little dramatic. The commercial samples aren’t terrible--the concepts are basic but standard for low-level campaigns, a bit like slideshows with rudimentary effects. But next to Cage Wallace’s ads, they look like high school projects up against blockbuster movie trailers. But what else can they do?

“Maybe we should just save the money, shoot our own,” Lexa jokes, unable to contain a smile.

Clarke tries to glare but fucks it up when she looks at Lexa: she smiles instead. “I don’t even want to think about that. We can stick to speeches and debates.”

“Why? After the other morning in bed--” At that moment, Ryder rolls up with the car and forces Lexa to lower her playful tone as she opens the door for Clarke. “After the other morning in bed, I know enough about you for a good commercial.”

Clarke just rolls her eyes as she ducks into the SUV. “Oh yeah? You’re going to base a commercial around the fact that I’m blonde and like chess?”

“Absolutely. California loves that.”

“I think you should leave it to the professionals. Speaking of...when is your sister flying in?”

The amusement dancing in Lexa’s eyes dims by a few degrees, causing a tightening of concern in Clarke’s chest. “Tomorrow afternoon,” she says, returning to her usual guarded tone. “I’m picking her up before the gala. She had to take two days to arrange some things but she’ll be
starting interviews the day after tomorrow.”

“How long will she be staying?”

“For the pieces, she’ll probably be staying around a week, but she’s going to be doing freelance work for a while so that she can spend some extra time in L.A.”

Which sheds more light on the hints of apprehension in Lexa’s tone, but there’s more to her relationship with her sister that Clarke craves to know. When they had spoken of her previously, it had been open and admiring, and yet the prospect of Anya actually coming to visit seems to leave Lexa anxious for some reason. For all the closeness between Clarke and her campaign manager, Lexa still stands back at times, and it feels unnecessarily needy to reach out and pull her back in, to uncover the parts of her life that she’s not ready to share. When--if--their relationship is more than the covert nights they spend together, Clarke will seek out Lexa’s secrets then. Not before. She can wait. She can be patient.

Changing the subject, she reminds Lexa, “Roan is coming up this afternoon,” with a hint of dry amusement. “Your sister, my mom, my fake boyfriend...this should be interesting.”

“The car will be much more crowded, at least.” Ryder grunts, surprising both women. That’s eight more words than he has ever said at once--and after a moment, the surprise at his comment turns into the shocking realization that she just offhandedly referred to Roan as her fake boyfriend in front of Ryder, expanding the circle of people who know. Ryder doesn’t seem particularly interested in the information, but Clarke she still shoots a nervous glance at Lexa, who sets her jaw and gives Clarke a reassuring shake of her head. From then on, the ride to Abby’s hotel is silent.

Thankfully, Abby provides a welcome distraction and conversation to fill the silence. All it takes is Clarke mentioning the commercials and her task for the day, and Abby, with her twenty years of political experience, throws herself into the endeavor. Not a day of those twenty years is wasted as she spends the car ride pointing out the pros and cons of each of the samples, agreeing with the two women on some points and disagreeing on others, complicating Clarke’s decision all the more.

“I’m surprised this is the best you can afford, though.” Abby admits, swiping through video files. “You know you have plenty of untapped personal funds, family funds, that you are welcome to use.”

“I’d rather not, Mom,” Clarke replies.

“Why not?”

“Because one of my best public advantages over Cage Wallace is that he takes Daddy’s money; I can’t be guilty of the same thing when I use that against him.”

Abby blinks in surprise, her face twisting into a grimace. “You’ve always been so against that kind of engagement.”

Clarke’s answer of “I want to win” comes at the same moment Lexa sits forward with, “It was my idea, actually.”

The creases of concern on Abby’s face only deepen as she looks between Clarke and Lexa, back and forth, waiting for either one to elaborate.

Clarke is saved by the vibration of her cell phone; she busies herself with opening and reading the text as Lexa explains. “Cage Wallace’s wealth can be used as an alienating factor for many of the major groups that will support him, but so is Clarke’s and your family’s, Mrs. Griffin. If we don’t use--”
“Shit,” Clarke mutters.

“What’s wrong?” Abby demands.

Clarke hands the cell phone to Lexa so that her campaign manager can read the texts while Clarke readies herself to explain to her mother—a moment that is not lost on Abby, if the high arch of her brow is anything to go by. Lexa gets the firsthand evidence to review and Abby gets the secondhand retelling. The pecking order is clear, and instinctual.

“Octavia,” Clarke says. “She just texted me that she and Lincoln have been getting calls asking for info about me, about my past, about anything Octavia wants to give them, and they offered money. She’s not sure if they’re part of Cage’s camp, or journalists. They wouldn’t tell her.”

“Probably Cage’s camp then. You need to get ahead of that.”

“You should call Raven,” Lexa tells her, once she’s read the text for herself and handed the phone back.

“Already on it,” Clarke says, dialing quickly and putting the phone to her ear. “Can you draw up a--”

“Yes, I can do that right now. I’ll get it over to Sterling and--”

“Miller too, it should--”

“--be distributed internally as well, absolutely. I’ve already got him in the email chain.”

“Perfect, thank you.”

“Of course.”

Abby’s face has been locked in the same nonplussed frown for five minutes and Clarke and Lexa’s demonstration of the perfect, natural synchronicity between them does nothing to lessen it. If Clarke were paying attention to her, perhaps her nerves would rise at the way Abby watches the two of them, but she instead looks out the window as she waits for Raven to answer and Lexa’s focused on the email she’s typing up on her phone. They’re completely consumed by their own tasks, but Clarke’s fingers drum anxiously to the same beat that Lexa taps her foot to, the only sound in the car. Just as Clarke begins to feel Abby’s stare, Raven picks up the phone.

“What’s going on?” Raven asks immediately. Clarke’s daytime schedule never allows for casual calls.

“You busy?”

“Always. What’s up?”

“Octavia just texted me, she’s been getting calls from--”

“Journalists or enemies, wanting to know about you,” Raven interjects. “I know, I’ve been getting them too. I think it’s because of those commercials that Cage put out, about you and your mom.”

Clarke grits her teeth. “So you think they’re journalists?”

“I...some are, I think. But I wouldn’t be surprised if some are digging for dirt on you in order to help out Wallace. Those old college pictures did a lot for your democratic opponents.”

“Naturally.” And still, even knowing that this was bound to happen, Clarke releases an angry sigh. It
can never be simple. She checks the progress of Lexa’s email to find that she’s almost done. “What did you tell them?”

“That you were a coke dealer in college and ran brothels disguised as sororities, and when the school threatened to kick you out for it, you blackmailed the dean into not only kicking you out, but giving you a recommendation to law school. What do you think I told them, Clarke?”

“Raven.”

“Relax, I can joke. No one is making recordings of this--after I got the calls this morning, I figured they’ll probably start digging harder for information, so I locked down all of your personal devices. I even had Monty test my work; he tried hacking into them.”

That shoots a spike of panic through her, her thoughts wildly jumping to Lexa and if she has any incriminating pictures or texts that Monty or Raven might have been able to get into. With another nervous glance at the girl beside her, she tries to stead her voice enough to say, “And did he?”

“Of course not. You’re really on edge about this, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I am,” she says with a sigh. “I’m sorry. Can you do me a favor? Lexa is putting together a basic e-mail warning about this sort of thing; can you send it to anyone you can think of that they might contact? Old friends, neighbors, anyone. Monty can help with anyone he remembers.”

“Does her e-mail mention the brothel thing?”

“Raven!”

Raven just breaks off in laughter, a sound far too mirthful to be expected in a campaign headquarters heading into the final few months of such a monumental campaign, but welcome nonetheless; Clarke lets her get away with it because at least someone finds this all funny. But before she can say goodbye and hang up, Raven gets her attention one last time.

“But hey; I know Lexa mentioned something about Wells digging up dirt on Cage Wallace. Do you want me to get in on that? I’m still working on our donation systems but destroying a man is always more entertaining, especially when he’s trying to do the same to you.”

As much as it pains Clarke to admit it, she nearly says yes. Giving Raven free reign is always a dangerous and exhilarating course of action, one that might actually turn up results—but with questionable legality. “Not yet,” she says slowly. “I might ask you to work with Wells—legally—at some point.” But there’s a lot of wiggle room in that statement, and that’s good enough for Raven. She’ll wait, but she’ll be hungry to get out there and put her skills to use.

“Got it, Griffin,” she says dutifully. “I’ll talk to you later and update you about who I get in touch with.”

“Thank you, Raven.”

As soon as the call ends, Clarke’s dialing a new number. She looks up at Lexa and her mother as she taps the buttons. “We’re almost to the event center,” Abby advises her, but Lexa is still finishing up her e-mail and says nothing, so Clarke goes ahead and brings the phone to her ear. Luckily for all of them, Wells picks up on the first ring.

“I have five minutes--what’s up?”

“I have three. Have you found out any of Cage’s dealings yet?”
“Nothing yet,” Wells tells her. “I haven’t even had time to ask around, let alone start digging. After our meeting the other day, my boss demanded an article as soon as possible, because we have to add the extra step of going through the ethics committee due to my relationship with you.”

Clarke frowns. “Why does he want it ASAP?”

“Because you’re popular, Griffin,” Wells says with a laugh. “Those commercials have already started to heat things up...the public is paying attention and things are going to get bigger from here. My editor wants to get ahead of the curve. You’re a commodity, so just...be prepared.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” Clarke replies, staring out the window.

She doesn’t hear whatever question Wells asks in response; Clarke, Abby, and Lexa have arrived at the event center and discovered a throng of reporters and cameras--TV news cameras, not just photographers--waiting on the stone steps up to the building. When the car pulls to a stop, the reporters swarm the car, turning on recorders and microphones, readying their cameras. Clarke sighs.

“You don’t have to give a comment,” Lexa reminds her as everyone gears up for the opening of the doors.

“I know.”

“Do not give a comment,” Abby commands. At her sharp tone, Clarke narrows her eyes, but she still has Wells on the phone and has to return to him for a quick goodbye.

“Listen, I have to go. I’ll call you later Wells. Thanks again for digging up whatever you can.”

Thank me once I find it.”

The closing of the conversation gives her little time to prepare herself mentally before Ryder opens her door and the clamor from outside floods into the car. All she can do is ignore the shouted questions as she climbs out of the car and waits for Lexa and Abby to follow her out, even as the knot of reporters presses in around her with their mics shoved in her face, as if she’s committed a crime and she’s arrived at the courthouse for her trial. The tide of bodies isn’t quite overwhelming--yet. Wells is right, it’s truly begun.

After the initial surge, Ryder pushes the crowd back and Abby and Lexa press in tight on either side of Clarke as they make their way up the steps to the glass doors of the building. Questions about Clarke’s campaign and her meetings in Sacramento and the upcoming press gala abound, but she may as well be deaf to them. They’re almost up the stairs and the reporters are almost disappointed...until one calls out, “Representative Griffin, Mrs. Griffin, are you going to defend your family from Cage Wallace’s smear campaign?” and the question pierces Clarke’s armor like one single perfectly placed arrow, catching her when she’s already bristling from everything from her mother’s comment in the car to the noise around her. She freezes.

“Clarke...” Lexa warns under her breath. Too late.

Clarke whirls to face them. She doesn’t even know which one asked the question, and instead announces the answer to the crowd: “I have no need to defend my family from the attacks in Wallace’s ads, because they’re baseless. But if I were him, I wouldn’t be opening doors to a discussion about families, because Dante Wallace has a lot to answer for and Cage Wallace won’t like being the one who has to answer for it. He will have to be, if he continues like this.”
It’s like chumming shark-infested waters--of course they go insane, with an opening like that. The questions come streaming tenfold: has she spoken with Wallace? Will she speak to him before the next debate? What does she have to say about Dante Wallace? What kind of questions will be asked about the Wallace family? But she offers them nothing more, not even a smirk or a frown to add context to her single soundbite. Lexa and Abby urge her into the building and Ryder closes the door behind them, taking up a position in front of it.

“That was a poor move, Clarke,” Abby says almost immediately, striding ahead of the other two.

“It’s my campaign,” Clarke says, in a retort that would be dismissive if not for the way she follows Abby, forcing her mother to turn and engage her face to face.

“You are my daughter; I won’t let you lower yourself like that.”

Clarke matches her, every inch. “You are my mother. I won’t let Cage Wallace lower you like that.”

Lexa’s stomach flips, pride welling up in her chest and her attraction to Clarke leaving her a little dizzy. She has to turn her head to hide a smile from the two Griffins. Abby doesn’t share her amusement.

“You’ve never been a good diplomat,” she tells Clarke. “You’re too--”

“Good thing I’m trying to be elected senator, not diplomat, then.”

“Clarke.”

“Enough!” Lexa would never be stupid enough to step between two wolves, but her tone is forceful enough to reign both mother and daughter in--or at least, enough to give them pause. “This is getting us nowhere and we have a full schedule. Clarke, have a seat at the table and relax for a moment. Mrs. Griffin, it looks like you have a few vendors who need your attention.”

Lexa’s quiet observation makes both Griffin women blink and look around: their argument has carried up to the vaulted ceilings and across the tiled floors. All around the airy space, workers had been busily setting up tables and hanging banners and adjusting lights--except now, when every single one has stopped what they’re doing to stare wide-eyed at the three new arrivals. This includes the handful of LGBT Center employees who had approached Abby to greet her and had then frozen in fear when they saw the unfolding scene, uncertain of what to do.

Twenty years of experience see Abby turn and graciously apologize to the observers, with a sweep of her arm and a genial smile; Clarke, despite Abby’s accusation of not being a diplomat, would have done the same if her mother hadn’t beaten her to it. Instead, out of spite, she does the exact opposite, stomping away to a nearby table and falling into a chair with a huff. They both leave Lexa standing where she was and she hesitates. Going to Clarke is her instinct, second-nature. At the same time, she does not have to be particularly observant*** to recognize that the girl is simmering with frustration that would be well-served by a few minutes alone. This thought pushes her, however reluctantly, to join Abby and the event manager she has engaged.

She doesn’t offer advice to Abby, the way she does with Abby’s daughter. Instead, she trails along behind her, observing the workers hang huge banners of every color of the rainbow on the stark white walls, to Abby’s approval. Abby has hosted this event for many years and most of the conversations with different staff members and volunteers are well-trodden paths for her, effortlessly handled as they tour the airy event space, so Lexa acts more as a stand-in for Clarke. making note of any relevant information. Speeches, guests, timelines. She’s got the memory for it. She hazards a glance at the blonde whenever Abby isn’t looking, but Clarke never moves from the table near the
And then, Lexa studies her for just a half-second too long.

“You’re influencing my daughter.”

She jolts at the disapproving tone and looks at Abby to find that the woman had been watching her watch Clarke; Lexa isn’t sure if that is more or less dangerous than her words.

“You’re influencing my daughter,” she repeats, with more emphasis, “And I’m not sure I like it.”

Lexa sets her jaw. “You’ve raised a strong-willed and intelligent daughter,” she says coolly, but every word is selected with the utmost care. “Since I met her, I’ve stood no chance of influencing her. My life would probably be much easier if I could.”

“She wasn’t like this before. She was gracious and elegant and poised,” Abby shoots back.

“She’s all of those things.”

“She--”

“And more,” Lexa interrupts again. “Those are fine qualities for a person and a senator. And Clarke will be a fine senator, when she wins this campaign.”

Abby can barely keep her emotions contained--her face flicks between a snarl and a dismissive stare, a sharp contrast to Lexa’s impassive facade.

She would love to blame Lexa for what Clarke has become, she would love to shut her eyes to it...but when Lexa answers so smoothly and so admiringly of Clarke, how can Abby find the seam to tear apart and reveal the truth? But she sees what she wants to see, and if that means that she sees Lexa as a corrupting influence on her daughter, then so be it.

She’s right, anyway. Just not in the way she expects.

There seems to be no way for their standoff to continue since neither woman will back down, but they don’t have to--Clarke’s rapid approach draws their attention.

“Mom, you’ll have to excuse Miss Ward and I,” she declares. She waves her phone. “I just got a call from the dress store: they’ve moved my gown fitting up to 10:30.”

“But that’s a half hour from now!” Abby exclaims.

“I know; we have to get moving, Miss Ward. Mom, you can handle the gala. I’ll meet you for dinner later tonight.”

* 

It happens so quickly that both Abby and Lexa acquiesce to Clarke’s orders before they even really comprehend them. One minute Lexa is facing down with a career politician with a mother’s protective instinct; the next, her arm is looped with Clarke’s and they’re striding across the event space, toward the front doors, with Clarke quite nearly pulling Lexa along. She’s not even sure they bid Clarke’s mother goodbye before they’re heading through the doors and back into the crowd of
reporters they had left outside just ten minutes before.

Clarke navigates them expertly, her single-minded determination blinding her to anything but getting herself and Lexa to the car, and Ryder assists by intimidating the reporters back with his large frame and dark scowl. Clarke and Lexa simply put their heads down against the flashes, huddling closer together as they hurry toward the car, so close that Clarke can hear Lexa’s irritated muttering.

“Sterling is going to catch hell...shouldn’t have rearranged the schedule like this...”

She continues, louder, once Ryder closes the nearly soundproof SUV doors behind them: “It throws our entire schedule off if they’re trying to rush us through. And he should have called me first, not you. Damn it.” She has her phone out, scrolling through her contacts for Sterling’s number, ready to tear into him--then Clarke’s fingers on her hand finally get her attention.

“She...they didn’t reschedule my dress fitting,” she says, guilty.

“What?”

“I lied.”

“You lied?” Lexa repeats, bewildered. “To your mom?”

Clarke falls heavy into her seat, sighing. “You know I can’t put up with her! I needed to get us out of there. The dress fitting is still at one, but now we don’t have to deal with her and she won’t be at the fitting to disapprove of forty different pieces before finally agreeing with the first one I picked out at the start.”

It’s such a ridiculous complaint and course of action that Lexa can’t decide whether to laugh or admonish Clarke; she settles on a grin, in awe of the sheer audacity of Clarke Griffin. She’s never met anyone like her. “So what are you planning to do for the next...” she checks her watch. “God, the next three hours?”

They’ve never had so much free time, at least not in the daylight hours. It’s somewhat daunting.

Clarke, who had clearly planned this out as she sulked at the table she had been relegated to, raises her chin proudly.

“Lunch.”

“Lunch? Lunch where?”

“Pier 39,” she directs to Ryder instead, and it is the last of the information she provides either of them, despite Lexa’s repeated and exasperated questions. Clarke responds to all of them with the same smile, a self-satisfied twist of her lips, demonstrating her smugness at her escape from her mother and at whatever secret plan she has for Lexa that she refuses to reveal. But underneath the surface, there’s a sort of sparkle in it that surpasses her pride. A tense excitement that keeps Lexa curious.

Despite never having been to San Francisco, Lexa—like all sentient beings—has a dim grasp of the city gained from pop culture. ‘Pier 39’ stirs a recollection in her, and when they arrive at their destination and see a vibrantly colored wharf flooded without hundreds of tourists, she realizes why: it’s one of the most popular tourist traps in the city. She takes one glance at the technicolor buildings and tacky themed shops and restaurants, and turns to Clarke with one eyebrow raised dubiously.

“You what?”
“You said you’d never seen San Francisco; I promised to take you one day, remember?” Clarke replies airily. “Come on, it’s one of my favorite places.”

Even if she wanted to, Lexa can’t deny Clarke anything.

With Ryder trailing behind as the security detail, Clarke and Lexa immerse themselves in the crowd. At first, despite Clarke’s delight, Lexa can’t unlock her grimace--she and Clarke can’t even walk side by side, let alone have a conversation, forced to weave through the crowd with Clarke leading and Lexa trailing. They have to take circuitous routes around fanny-packed families pressed up against the windows of a chocolate shop, and Lexa has to politely decline vendors offering her hot dogs and pretzels and medical marijuana cards. She huffs with impatience when none of this deters Clarke; they drive father down the pier, the crowd showing no signs of thinning.

But gradually, with each time Clarke looks back to check that Lexa is still behind her, her smile luminescent, Lexa’s mood begins to lift. She starts to embrace this senseless foray. Clarke reaches back as they push through a particularly dense knot of tourists and Lexa instinctively reaches out to link their fingers together, ensuring they aren’t separated, and the little electric shock that jumps between them crackles in Lexa’s chest. A second later Clarke tugs them through the group and pulls Lexa into yet another souvenir shop and their contact breaks, but only once Lexa looks around does she recognize why Clarke is so delighted: no one noticed.

Not a soul, from among the hundreds around them, is looking their way. No one cares that Representative Clarke Griffin just reached back to hold hands with her campaign manager. No one even seems to know that Representative Clarke Griffin walks among them.

They’re completely anonymous, just bodies in the crowd.

Lexa beams and Clarke shares it, a knowing smile because she recognizes that their situation has finally dawned on Lexa. They split up among the souvenir shop and mosey along between shelves of shot glasses and miniature models of the Golden Gate Bridge. From across the shop, Clarke gets Lexa’s attention and points out an “I Love SF” t-shirt; Lexa rolls her eyes and refuses.

“I’ll convince you,” Clarke mouths to her.

They move on to the next shop, and the next, perusing the same tacky items in each without losing their enthusiasm. Clarke takes Lexa to the end of the pier and points out Alcatraz Island, with the famous prison looking like a fortress in the middle of the island; Treasure Island and Angel Island aren’t nearly as interesting, despite their nomenclature. For a half hour, the two women stand at the edge of the pier and watch the dozens of San Francisco sea lions sun themselves on floating docks near the pier.

“This is nice,” is all Lexa can say, taking it all in the way she absorbs the warmth of the summer sun and the sea breeze.

Clarke smiles softly at her. “It is. Thanks for playing hooky with me.”

“Always.”

A couple walking past catches their attention. The man and women wear matching outfits: khaki cargo shorts, hiking shoes, and the same “I Love SF” t-shirts that Clarke has been trying to sell Lexa on all afternoon. Clarke turns to Lexa to crack a joke--Lexa can already tell which one and she’s preparing her disapproving glare when she spots a camera lens aimed at them from twenty yards away. Instantly, her expression hardens.
“Hold on--there are cameras,” Lexa mutters from the corner of the mouth. Clarke steals a look in the direction she indicates as she turns her body away, putting daylight between them as casually as she can. A rainbow-colored dog collar in a window becomes uniquely fascinating and she stares at it instead.

Paparazzi. Even here now. She wonders how long they’ve been following them, how much they caught...

After a second of study, Clarke releases a breath. “It’s a family, parents and two kids,” she says, “Not journalists. They look like they’re from LA, that’s why they recognized me. Just snapping a few pictures for Facebook.”

And just like that, the father with the camera lowers it and moves off in pursuit of his kid, who has gone running for a candy shop, Representative Griffin having been just a momentary curiosity in their tour of the city. Clarke turns to Lexa with a smirk, shrugging. But despite her nonchalant dismissal, something about having a picture taken has pulled away their veil of anonymity and it has them both checking their shoulders as they move through the crowd.

Clarke still manages to affect a light tone. “Let’s get out of here,” she says. “My favorite Italian place is a few blocks away.”

And then they’re off through the city, strolling side by side. The crowds fade, by degrees, as they enter the old Italian quarter of the city, where red, white, and green awnings hang from every street corner to mark the dozens of different restaurants and pizzerias; instead of heading for any of these, Clarke pulls Lexa into an alleyway cafe barely noticeable from the streets. They have to squeeze into their seats --the space is tiny and the owners have tried to maximize profit by fitting six tables in a space that could fit maybe three--but it’s well-worth the sparkle in Lexa’s eyes when they discover they’re quite alone, no one to question them, not a care in the world. As they’re waited on by a little old Italian woman who looks as if she belongs on the label of a jar of pasta sauce, something about the intimacy of the tiny restaurant, the low lighting, and the perfume of hot, authentic food and cheap wine unlocks Clarke and Lexa. They skip the sensible grilled chicken and go for hearty plates of pasta; Clarke orders glasses of wine for both of them; and as they eat, Lexa sits enraptured as Clarke tells her stories of coming here as a child, of walking from the Pier to the restaurant, of riding the famous train cars up and down the hills of the city. Midway through a retelling of her first experience on ice skates at the city’s sparkling Christmastime ice rink, she sees the growing smile on Lexa’s face and blushes.

“And then we--what are you smiling about?” she snaps, grinning.

Caught. “Nothing,” Lexa replies quickly, trying to wipe the smile away and busying herself with her wine glass. She succeeds in covering her lips but her eyes still shine when she looks at Clarke. Clarke presses for an answer, Lexa deflects: “You know, I just realized I’ve never heard you talk about Los Angeles this way.”

“I love Los Angeles too,” Clarke says. “Venice, the old zoo, the observatory. But I’ve never shown you around, so you’ve never gotten the chance to experience it.”

“We should do that one day.”

It takes them both by surprise--Lexa rarely deals in such abstract plans, it’s not in her nature nor her station. But rather than either girl being discomfited, they find themselves fighting to hide smiles, and thankfully, a moment later, they are saved from continuing down that path when the woman arrives to whisk their empty plates away. When she’s gone, Clarke props her elbow up on the table and rests her chin in her hands.
“We should. In fact, we should really travel all over. I’ve always wanted to see Australia. Do you think we could work it into the campaign somehow?”

Lexa grins. Point taken.

They still have an hour before they have to report to the dress shop to find Clarke a gown for the gala, and with way too much heavy Italian food weighing them down, the only logical option is to try to walk off their lunch; Clarke leads Lexa back to the waterfront, but this time they move away from the pier, drifting along the water’s edge and looking out over the deep blue San Francisco Bay. They seem to be the only casual walkers here, with bikers and power-walking tourists weaving all around them to get to one destination or the next. But Clarke and Lexa are content to just be. Together.

Clarke pulls in a deep breath, inhaling the heavenly scent of the ocean, and lets her eyes drift closed.

“I needed this,” she says, then opens her eyes and looks to Lexa, who watches her. “You did, too.”

“What makes you say that?”

“You’re tense. You tense up whenever I mention your sister.”

And just like that, Lexa tenses up, but she shakes it within a few seconds and tries to walk taller, disregarding Clarke’s concern. “We love each other,” she says. But then she falters, and her gaze slides from Clarke out to the ocean—she knows she has to give some answers, finally. “Just...having Anya here, now...she’s a journalist, that’s all you need to know. She pulls on threads until things unravel. It’s in her nature. That’s why she’s good at what she does.”

“You’re worried she’ll find out about us?” Clarke asks.

Lexa shrugs. “Something along those lines. I was even reluctant to call in a favor: it shows I’m more connected to this than I have been to any job before. She’s interested.”

They fall silent, walking another dozen yards as Clarke considers Lexa’s worry. Any time her campaign manager hesitates, there is a legitimate concern for everyone else around them. Lexa’s confidence comes from having back-up plans for her back-up plans and choosing the elements of her first plan so well that she never has to turn to the back-up anyway, so she’s right: lowering her guard for something like this does mean that something is different. If Anya is half as smart as Lexa...maybe they should be worried.

But Clarke refuses to be.

“It’ll be okay,” she assures Lexa, dropping her voice to avoid eavesdropping passers-by. “We’ve never had any issue with the press, we’ve kept it hidden from co-workers, friends, media, everyone. Your sister won’t find anything. Even my mom hasn’t, and like Anya, she has a habit of pushing until something snaps.”

“Or someone,” Lexa points out. It’s not until Clarke sees the ghost of a smirk on her face that she realizes Lexa is teasing her. But before she can respond, Lexa gets serious, adding, “Do you think it’ll still be okay if we’re adding Roan as well?”

Clarke snorts, rolling her eyes. “Roan doesn’t care about anything, he’s just here for the food and for Nia to pay off his house. Speaking of...how are we going to get rid of him?”

“Get rid of him?” Lexa asks in surprise.
“I’m not keeping this fake relationship after the election is over,” she promises, deadly serious.

“You mean once you’re senator?”

Stupid mistake--Clarke’s breath catches in her throat and she finds herself unable to answer past it. She has to clear her throat and shake her head. “Of course.”

Lexa just nods. “We’ll figure something out.”

Instead of replying, Clarke directs her attention forward. Delight lighting up her face, she nudges the woman beside her. “Lexa, look.”

They’ve rounded a bend in the waterfront, and their path has brought them into full view of the mouth of the bay, across which spans the famous Golden Gate Bridge, tall and shimmering against the deep azure sky. All around them, tourists are snapping pictures and shooting videos and oohing and ahhing over the famous view. But Clarke is looking at Lexa looking at the bridge in wonder; then, just over Lexa’s shoulder, Clarke spots a couple taking a picture of themselves kissing against a backdrop of the panorama.

And Clarke finds herself...wanting.

A world where she is as normal and undistinguished as any of the people around her. In that world, she and Lexa would be the irritating couple kissing with the bridge in the background. They’d be holding hands for something other than navigation through a crowd. They’d be together, completely. She wants that.

*

But the moment can’t last forever. The slower she wills it to go, the faster time ticks toward the end of their adventure, and soon enough, Clarke and Lexa are returning to mundanity and on their way to the dress shop to pick out a gown for the following evening’s gala. But that feeling of want doesn’t go away.

Sterling has already laid out possible selections and color schemes when Clarke and Lexa arrive at the shop. With no Abby to gratify, Clarke automatically picks a flowing champagne-colored gown. Sterling argues; Lexa considers; Clarke simmers, because she wants this over with, wants another few minutes of peace like they had at the pier so she can compose herself. Wants Lexa, a desire made worse by the fact that with everyone else staring at the dresses, Clarke is free to stare at her. Drinking in her lithe body and the graceful swan curve of her collarbones, Clarke fantasizes about sliding her fingers behind Lexa’s neck, toying with the baby hairs at the nape where they had escaped her stylish bun, and pulling her in for a kiss.

And then she gets the idea.

Seizing the gold dress from the rack, she declares, “I’ll just try it on, and we can see.” She stomps into the dressing room, declines assistant from the attendant, and pulls the curtain closed behind her. When she has the dress halfway up her body, she calls out into the main room.

“Miss Ward, would you mind coming in to zip this up for me?”

Lexa’s face goes quite pale when she slips into the dressing room and her green eyes alight on
Clarke Griffin, topless, her dress pooled around her waist, the flattering light of such a high-scale dressing room sculpting the most delicious curves and lines of her body. But the blood that rushed from her cheeks only highlights the way her pupils go wide and darken her green eyes. The corner of Clarke’s mouth lifts in a tiny smirk, revealing intentions dark enough to match Lexa’s eyes.

“They’re right outside,” Lexa breathes, with an infinitesimal shake of her head, but a half-second later her concern is belied by the way her body doesn’t even hesitate to drive her forward to meet Clarke’s satin skin.

All of her concerns are no match for seeing this woman standing before her, inviting her in. She reaches for Clarke’s hips and guides their bodies together, sinking into the kiss with a shudder.

The force in Lexa’s kiss is every bit equal to the want and hunger storming within Clarke, but somehow, they cling on to the last vestiges of reason and keep it slow enough to be completely silent in the dressing room.

The kiss grows deeper and Lexa’s hands slide up Clarke’s spine—pulling goosebumps from her skin—while Clarke’s fingernails scratch at the waistband of Lexa’s skirt, dipping inside. But even if she were to take the time to strip Lexa bare, it wouldn’t be enough to satisfy her want. Her desire has gone past the pure, simple idea of sex or romance. She wants this freedom; the kind they only get in stolen moments where no one else can see. She wants this life. The lack of it burns with a heat that scalds her to the tips of her finger and toes, resulting in a particularly hard tug on Lexa’s skirt, enough to make the girl break away.

“I know, but we can’t,” Lexa whispers, breathing hard and struggling to keep it quiet. All of the blood has rushed back into her face now, swelling her lips and tinging her cheeks pink. “We have less than thirty seconds before they wonder why I’m taking so long to zip up your dress and...” she trails off, jaw hanging open, as that line of thought prompts her to look down at Clarke’s chest, swelling and collapsing as she desperately tries to even out her breathing as well. “Fuck.”

“Forget everyone outside,” Clarke groans.

“I want to.” She bends down and presses a kiss to Clarke’s sternum. “You have responsibilities.”

Clarke sighs under the press of Lexa’s lips between her breasts. Her hands come up to tangle in the hair on the back of Lexa’s head, urging her on. “I’ll take this dress!” she shouts to Sterling and whatever attendants stand waiting outside.

“We don’t get to see it?” comes the confused response.

“No!”

This buys Clarke and Lexa another minute, and they make the most of it, kissing more frantically as Lexa helps Clarke out of the dress. It’s even harder for Lexa to stay sane when she looks at Clarke’s completely naked body, but she forces herself to lean against one wall of the dressing room and simply watch as Clarke gets dressed again. They need the time to hide the evidence, let the natural color return to their faces.

Just before Clarke goes to part the curtain and step out of the small room, Lexa grabs her wrist and pulls her back, planting a kiss on the side of the head. Sweet, and chaste; it feels like a promise that maybe one day, Clarke won’t have to want anymore.

*
It’s only later, once the dress has been bought and they’ve returned to the reality of sitting in commute traffic, that Clarke and Lexa realize quite how dangerous their dressing room rendezvous really was. They weren’t sequestered away in a hotel room in the middle of the night. Instead, only a thin curtain separated them from the people beyond. Any of the attendants could have pulled it aside to offer assistance or suggest a new dress, and then, it would have been all over. The thought injects them with a strange sense of adrenaline, the kind one gets whenever they have a dark and delightful secret to keep.

But despite the danger, Lexa is glad she gave in to her attraction when she stepped into the fitting room, even if the resulting kiss hardly had time to develop into a languid make-out session. She can still taste Clarke’s lips on hers later that afternoon when Roan arrives, and she’s thankful for that, because had she not had it, she would probably snap after just an hour with him.

Of all of her decisions in the campaign, including sleeping with her boss, setting up Roan as Clarke’s fake relationship is the one she most regrets. When he arrives at the airport, he strolls up to Abby with a genial smile and introduces himself as her future son-in-law, even though she has been informed of the plot already. Dinner between the four of them just gets worse. Lexa stays quiet, partly because of her argument with Abby that morning and partly because her attention is focused on studying Roan and Clarke. He is smug and reckless, a smirking, long-haired classic playboy type who adheres only to the most basic rule of not revealing the plan, but beyond that, cares little for what they’re trying to accomplish. But between the fake dates and appearances and the couples’ interviews the two have given, Clarke and Roan have developed a rapport and even a grudging friendship based on their mutual ambition. Clarke’s ambition is obvious, but Roan’s ambition is apparently to irritate Lexa with the way he grins at Clarke and the way she rolls her eyes at his jokes. When dinner is over and they’ve returned to their hotel room, it’s a relief for all involved. Abby is tired after her long day; Roan is tired of the charade; Lexa is tired of Roan; and Clarke is just tired of everything.

The following day is as busy as ever, and Roan replaces Lexa as the third point of the trifecta completed by Clarke and Abby, for his “bonding time” with his fake girlfriend’s mother. Separation from Roan and the elder Griffin doesn’t much bother Lexa, though, as she stays busy with other tasks: meeting with the Bay Area volunteers, coordinating with Raven about the journalist inquiries, meeting her department heads and poring over expense reports before she sends them to the accountants. Every so often, their duties draw them back into each other’s orbits, when they have to share a call with Raven or when Clarke comes to check on one of the department heads, but always, she has Roan and Abby at her side, so she and Lexa never get a moment alone before they’re pulled apart again, and that’s how the day goes.

And hanging over all of it--for Lexa, at least, although she notices that Clarke regards her with more concern than usual as the hours pass--is Anya’s impending arrival that afternoon. No matter what she’s doing, she has one eye on the clock, marveling at the way time seems to move slower while she’s working and not thinking about it but faster when she has a moment of downtime and the threat of Anya finding out takes over her thoughts. But slow or fast, time marches on, and by late afternoon, Clarke’s support network is preparing for the gala while Lexa is preparing for the drive to the airport. She’ll be back in time to throw on a dress and join the procession to the gala, because she’s determined to be a part of that support network, even if Clarke had insisted she spend the evening with her sister instead.

Getting back to the hotel so that she can get ready is all she’s concerned with as she waits in the airport baggage claim, arms across her chest, tapping her foot impatiently.
Her older sister is easy to spot, thankfully, just by the way she moves like a runway model amid the shambling herd of cross-country travelers disembarking from their plane. Long legs, long hair, a leather jacket and a matching laptop bag slung over her shoulder as she strides up; it’s not until Lexa looks at Anya’s gait that she understands every whispered accusation of “intimidating” or “formidable” or “literal headhunter” thrown her way. It’s just genetic for the Ward sisters, apparently. As is their complete inability to care what people say.

Anya meets her with a grin and a bear hug--Lexa returns the latter but not the former, too anxious to get back to the hotel.

“I’ve missed you, Lexa,” her sister says into her shoulder. “It’s about time you let me come out to visit you.”

“I’ve missed you too.” And she has. Being able to hug her sister after not seeing her for nearly a year melts away some of Lexa’s worries of the future. Some. “Let’s get your bag, I have to get back to the hotel.”

Anya follows her dutifully, a shadow of amusement on her face going unnoticed as she trails behind her hard-set sister on their way to the luggage carousel. “By the way, I’m proud of you. I saw those articles.”

“What articles?” Lexa replies, only half-listening.

“I read them on my flight over, picked up hard copies as soon as I landed. I thought you didn’t like the spotlight?”

The teasing tone in her last question makes Lexa stop and face her, irritated. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

With a shrug, Anya just reaches into the bag hanging over her shoulder and withdraws two folded newspapers, spreading them in her hands so that Lexa can see her own image prominently displayed on both, standing beside Clarke.

Pictures of them taken at the pier the day before.

“A Look at Senate Hopeful Clarke Griffin’s Inner Circle,” reads one headline.

The other: “Representative Griffin takes in the city sights”

Clamping her mouth shut to stop a startled gasp, Lexa seizes the papers from Anya’s hand and holds them to closer examination, as if to find some indictment of their authenticity, some falsehood she could dismiss them with—they’re 100% real. How she missed this, she doesn’t know, and that stings just as much as the shock of seeing herself in the papers. At Clarke’s side. Glowing. Smiling. Nonchalantly looking in a shop window, while Clarke nonchalantly looks at her with a softness in her eyes that Lexa recognizes only from the mornings they’ve woken up in the same bed together. It’s stunning now, to see that look on her face given that Lexa hadn’t seen a hint of it yesterday. She’d been happy, sure, but she thought that was because of the environment, and the few hours off of work. Because they thought they had evaded the political world, even if just for the moment.

*God, when Clarke sees this...*

As she does best, Lexa starts rationalizing: they didn’t get caught. The pictures give away nothing, just that they spent the day together. She skims the attached articles, noting the prevalence of her name in the one about Clarke’s inner circle.
“Lexa Ward, little known campaign manager and adviser to Griffin...Ward hails from Virginia, with previous stints at Sharp and Vine Consulting and volunteer experience with various political campaigns dating back to her college years...Yale graduate...not much else is known...Requests for comment not returned...”

“God damn it,” she hisses; then, remembering her sister, glances up to see if Anya heard.

She did.

“Wait...” Anya says slowly. She cocks her head, narrows her eyes, and seems to look straight through her sister. “Did you...did you not know about this? You’re in it, your name is part of it.”

“I had no idea,” Lexa mutters, shaking her head and hiding any further tells by going back to the paper.

“This wasn’t a publicity stunt?”

“It was just...lunch.”

“You had lunch in a tourist trap?” Anya scoffs, like that’s the most egregious thing about all of this. If she knew the half of it. Her amused outrage jars Lexa back into action, with the realization that her blanched skin and distracted answers are giving away far too much to an older sister who is far too inquisitive. She has to shut this down and get back to Clarke.

She can already see the wheels churning behind Anya’s eyes when she looks up, with her jaw tight and chin raised. “Yes, lunch. Representative Griffin deserved a few hours off so we went to a public space, not as a publicity stunt, but to be in public, be seen. It worked, clearly.”

“Did it?” Anya asks, raising a brow.

“Yes.”

“So a casual day out, a professional day out, that was all you were going for? You didn’t realize that people would start looking you up, start searching into your history—”

“Yes, Anya,” Lexa hisses. “I’m the Chief Political Strategist for the campaign and I can do without you questioning me. Save that for C—Miss Griffin tomorrow.”

“I see. You’re right, I’m here to do a job,” she says airily, dismissive. And, as she always has, Lexa hates that she and her sister are so equal--long ago, Anya was her role model for keeping an even face and giving nothing away, and she’s demonstrating that right now. Lexa can search her face all she wants, but she can’t be sure if Anya’s haughtiness is just natural, or if she’s letting on more than she knows. And before she can reply, Anya steps forward and grabs her suitcases off of the luggage carousel. “You look like you have places to be and people to talk to, so let’s get going, Miss Chief Political Strategist.”

Lexa’s stomach tightens. It’s just one more twist in this increasingly complicated campaign she’s building. But Clarke’s right--if they’ve made it this far, they can handle Anya.

And Abby.

And Roan.

And the world.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Here we go! please excuse the wait...bouncing between several different stories means that I'm going to have more to publish, but also that it takes a little longer between updates. But the unfailing support is so appreciated, you have no idea. Thank you!!!! xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So, bad habits?”

“Overworking.”

“Really bad habits?”

“Really overworking.”

“No one is going to read this if the most salacious thing about her is a 14-hour work day, Lexa,” Anya gripes.

Salacious. If she only knew. Lexa wonders if “candidate fucks her campaign manager on her desk” counts--her lips twitch at the thought, and too late she remembers that Anya is sitting next to her. A furtive glance sideways reveals that Anya is more preoccupied with the San Francisco skyline, saving Lexa for the moment, but all the same, she weaves through traffic and accelerates smoothly into the fast lane, hoping that the quicker she can get back to the hotel, the quicker she can end this conversation. Without any more slip-ups.

“I wasn’t aware that bad habits were considered salacious at present. Journalism has declined, apparently,” Lexa says, rolling her eyes. Showing a little attitude will help.

“They’re salacious when the woman seems to be otherwise angelic,” Anya replies. “If the article is unbalanced and reads like the report of a day in the life of a 90 year old librarian, hard to make it enthralling enough to give you the coverage you need. I’m not even sure she can get elected without some skeletons in her closet. Have we ever had a candidate without them?"

“You tell me.”

She knows Anya’s tells and investigation techniques, having been the subject of them during her few, brief instances of youthful rebellion, so she has extensive experience counteracting them and steering the conversation away from the campaign. Other politicians, questions answered with a question, Lexa’s daily duties, stories of her more colorful coworkers, they’re all easy topics to pivot to.

“So, the college pictures,” Anya leads. “What’s the story there?”

“College friend leaking them,” Lexa answers--truthful, but not what she knows Anya wants. “It was a lot like the similarity you drew in your story about privacy last month, between friends showing private pictures casually versus social media.”

Any smiles. “You read my articles?”
“I kept my New Yorker subscription just for your freelance ones.”

Another truthful answer, and this time exactly what Anya wants to hear, leading her to fall into a pleased silence, surrendering to Lexa’s blatant evasiveness. Anya’s too smart to be easily dissuaded for long, so the edge of a battle unfinished hangs in the air all the way to the hotel.

* 

While Anya checks in, Lexa hovers behind her, tapping her foot and fighting the urge to dash up the stairs to the campaign team floor. For one, she’s late and needs to get ready for the gala, but far more important is the gnawing anxiety that Anya’s arrival has caused--something she wants to take to Clarke, because she knows Clarke is the only one who can palliate it. She needs to see her. As soon as Anya has her room key, Lexa sets off for the bank of elevators, leaving her sister to catch up. Anya lunges into the elevator at the last second--Lexa receives an irritated huff.

“California has really corroded your manners,” Anya snaps, tugging her bags across the threshold.

“No, it hasn’t.”

“It has.”

“It’s just made me faster.”

“And the East Coast didn’t?”

“No--Anya, I don’t have time to bicker with you.”

Lexa’s nothing if not efficient. The plan is to get her sister to her room, bid her goodnight, and find Clarke--and then at some point, get dressed and made up for an annual black-tie LGBT gala in a major city, but that’s low on the priority list.

Clarke, naturally, has a different plan.

The elevator doors slide open on a scene of the usual circus of staffers rushing in all directions, back and forth across the hallway between rooms with the doors thrown open, some in work clothes and some in varying states of dress for the gala, and in the middle of it all, there’s that telltale flash of blonde. Lexa groans: this is not what she wanted, not what she expected. Clarke appears to be half-ready for the gala--she’s still wearing the sensible skirt and blouse she wore for the meetings today, with her make-up done but her blonde hair piled up on her head, halfway styled--and has clearly just stormed out of one of the hotel rooms, trailed by the crowd of frenzied staffers, who wave brushes and lipstick shades. She’s entirely uninterested however, because somehow, from within the mess, she picks Lexa out and beams. With a sharp word, she parts the group of staffers between them, then heads down the aisle they’ve created with a relieved smile, right for the elevator.

Even under the best of circumstances, Lexa had no intentions of introducing her sister to the subject of her illicit love affair tonight--the state of the hotel right now is the furthest thing from the best of circumstances. And yet, here comes Clarke. Lexa scrambles to arrange her thoughts to prepare for this conversation.

“Lex, good, you’re back,” she says. This close, it’s easy to see that her relieved smile has become broad and overly cheery, which means that the state of the hotel has forced her into her most
efficient, professional, autopilot mode. Self-preservation. A stark contrast to Lexa’s unease.

Lexa just nods in response, casting a pointed glance over Clarke’s shoulder. “I see you’ve kept everything under control for the hour I’ve been gone.

“As always,” Clarke retorts, sharp in response to Lexa’s dryness. “You can be ready in a half hour?”

“Absolutely.”

“Great.” She then turns her attention to Anya, giving her a wider, warmer smile, pure politeness. “Anya? Nice to meet you.”

“Oh, yes—” And Lexa’s scrambling again, making introductions even as Clarke and Anya shake hands. “Anya, this is Representative Clarke Griffin. Clarke, this is my sister Anya, from the New York Times.”

“I’ve tried but I haven’t been able to get Lexa to tell me much about you,” Anya says. “She kept turning the conversation to San Francisco whenever I’d ask on the way here. But I’ve done my reading, at least, and I’m looking forward to working with you.”

“Lexa’s told me just as much about you,” Clarke replies slyly, and the two women share a delighted smile at the way they’ve thrown Lexa under the bus. Switching back to business, Clarke continues, “I would want to get to work right away, but clearly we have a lot on our plate tonight. So, first thing tomorrow?”

“At your leisure,” Anya intones, with a suave graciousness reminiscent of Lexa’s early days working alongside Clarke, back when Clarke was Miss Griffin only, before that Miss Griffin had so completely disarmed her and charmed her way past Lexa’s most obstinate defenses. The simple days. The similarity between the Ward sisters is not lost on Clarke, judging by the amused smile she shoots Lexa’s way before she bids the two goodbye and heads back to her handlers to continue getting ready.

“She’s charming,” muses Anya.

“She’s a politician. Come on, your room is this way and I don’t have a lot of time.”

But despite this assertion, Anya insists on taking up some of it anyway. Once they’ve gotten her bags into her room, Anya plants herself between Lexa and the door, forcing a conversation with a stony look on her face that makes Lexa wary.

“So.” She pauses, as if anticipating Lexa’s protest. “I presume you’re being cautious, right?”

She says it like a parent talking to her 16 year old caught making out in the car.

Lexa glares, hoping it covers up the way her heartbeat just doubled. “I’ve never needed to be, fortunately. My exclusive interest in women makes for excellent birth control—”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I.” Lexa sighs when she does not relent. “In which respect should I be cautious?”

“All of them.”

“Specifically.”

“With her. With Representative Griffin.”
Lexa swallows around the lump in her throat. Dangerous territory. “Of course I am. Clarke’s public image is pristine.”

“The public image you control,” Anya says. She grabs the newspapers from early and hands them to Lexa again. “But clearly, you had no control when these pictures were taken. People are going to be watching you, Lexa. This is already one of the top races in the country and people are taking notice-- Cage Wallace and Clarke Griffin battling it out in a race that has already turned bitter is going to make for a national ratings grab. They’re going to study every aspect of her life, including her inner circle of advisers. They’re going to look into your past, they’ll know about Costia, they’ll know that you’re out, as much as you’ve endeavored to keep that out of your professional life. How quickly will they spin pictures like this into a scandal that will have Middle America frothing at the mouth?”

“Anya, you’re overreacting--”

“We know she’s straight, we know she’s in a happy relationship with the son of that Congresswoman, Azgeda something, but that won’t stop the rumor mill from potentially damaging your race.”

Well. She got the second half right, Lexa thinks to herself.

Lexa keeps her voice as even as possible, but she can hear it dip into frustration. “I’m being perfectly cautious.”

“You’re getting sloppy. Don’t take unnecessary risks.”

“I’m the furthest thing from sloppy,” Lexa fires back. “Remember, I can still beat you in chess any day. I’m five moves ahead right now. You were a contingency plan if we needed one; you don’t think I have more? You don’t think I have this put together?”

Anya studies her, working her jaw back and forth. “I just want you to be protected.”

“I’m fine.”

Not protected. She’s risking everything. But she’s fine.

Before Anya can say anything else, Lexa slips past her. Anya doesn’t try to stop her. “Get some rest, you had a long flight,” she tells her sister as she leaves. “I have to get to this gala. We’ll talk in the morning when we start putting a plan together for Clarke’s media coverage.”

*

The cars to the gala are set to leave in thirty minutes; Lexa only needs twenty to arrange her hair and slip into a modest gown that will ensure she blends into the background. With those other ten minutes, she has a mission to accomplish. She pulls the newspapers Anya gave her out of her bag, and quickens her step to Clarke’s room.

Apparently Clarke hasn’t been cooperating. Her room is still crawling with campaign aides putting the finishing touches on her appearance. She’s close enough to finished that Lexa feels comfortable making her next request when Clarke glimpses her standing in the doorway.

“I need to talk to you,” she mouths.
“Everyone out!” Clarke demands without a moment’s hesitation. Frustrated protests rise around the room; she holds up a hand to quiet them. “It’s okay, I can finish the rest myself. I have to speak with Miss Ward. No, Sterling, just--”

“You heard her,” Lexa intones.

The low, dangerous growl in her voice is a Pavlovian warning to the campaign staffers—they know better than to argue against the combined force of Griffin and Ward. Lexa waits silently just inside the doorway and hastens their exit with her cold stare, but the moment the last one shuffles past her and shuts the door behind them, she drops the facade and strides toward Clarke, holding the two newspapers out.

“What have you seen these?”

Clarke’s eyebrows knit together with concern at the worry in Lexa’s voice; it deepens when she reads the headlines and sees the pictures of herself with Lexa. Lexa studies her face, watching it shift from disbelief to alarm to fear to a scrambling desperation to rationalize. It’s like looking in a mirror: all the same emotions Lexa cycled through when Anya had first shown her the pictures.

“It’s fine,” Clarke concludes after a moment, with brazen confidence, handing them back. Exactly the way Lexa had.

“It’s not fine,” Lexa insists. “Clarke, we have to be more careful. It’s not just about not getting caught in bed together; it’s about avoiding the little mistakes like this. Lapses in concentration can ruin everything.”

“And you’d call this a mistake or lapse in concentration?” Clarke asks, somewhat indignant when she gestures at the picture.

Lexa knows her: the sharpness in her tone covers hurt.

“Never,” she says, more softly. “I just don’t want anyone to get on a path that leads to us being found out.”

A logic even Clarke can’t argue. Instead, she takes a deep breath, slipping past Lexa and into the bathroom. She adapt a much heartier demeanor, dazzlingly bright and resolved, all the more showing how shaken she is. She couldn’t function in her world without her ability to compartmentalize. “Well, if you’re so worried about it, we probably shouldn’t be late, right?”

Lexa checks her watch. Nineteen minutes before the cars leave. “You’re right. I need to go get dres--”

“Wait!” Clarke calls from the bathroom. “Can you zip me up?”

She steps out of the bathroom with the bodice of her shimmery pale dress clasped around her chest, the back hanging open.

Just like the day before in the dressing room. The same beautiful girl in front of her, Marilyn Monroe blonde curls cascading down over her shoulders, the same nonchalant request that means so much more—but this time, Clarke doesn’t have that dark-eyed suggestive smile on her face. This time, she’s blank, neutral, innocent, and if Lexa didn’t know her better, she would think it was nothing more than a simple request for assistance, especially with the way Clarke has demurely covered her body with as much of the dress as she could. But Lexa does know her better: she can sense something beneath the surface of her smooth face. Something that’s asking Lexa to make a decision. Be cautious, and treat it as innocently as Clarke makes it sound? Better yet, just walk out of the room? Or give in yet again, trust that they can keep this secret, and indulge herself in Clarke’s body?
Clarke’s blue eyes watch carefully for Lexa’s choice.

There’s not a doubt in her mind.

Clarke smiles gently and turns as Lexa approaches.

The sight of bare skin revealed by the open back of Clarke’s chest makes Lexa weak, from her chest to her knees--she fights to pull in air as she stands on shaking legs, and cautiously presses her palms flat against the smooth flesh on either side of Clarke’s spine. Clarke leans back into the touch and a barely audible hum of pleasure vibrates in her throat. Lexa’s fingers, a shade darker than the skin beneath them, spread out over the silken expanse of her back: they move of their own accord along the length of her torso, up across the ridges of her toned shoulder blades, back down the long valley of her spine, coming to rest at her waist, her thumbs finding a home in the dimples in the small of her back and her long fingers wrapping around Clarke’s sides. Attuned as they are to one another, it takes little pressure from Lexa’s hands before Clarke steps back into her, bringing their bodies together. Lexa takes a deep inhale of Clarke’s hair, closing her eyes, and the two of them hold there like that, connected and grounded.

The mingling scents of Clarke’s perfume and shampoo and skin settle over Lexa’s mind, hazy and intoxicating, and her voice rises in her throat before she’s quite aware of it.

“Clarke,” she breathes, “I--”

Then her mind catches up with her: she plants a deep kiss to the nape of Clarke’s neck to silence herself.

“Lexa.” It’s nearly a moan.

A line of goosebumps erupts down Clarke’s spine at the caress of Lexa’s lips; Lexa, instead of replying, tasks herself with fixing that, and kisses down over the goosebumps, following the dip of her spine lower and lower with the type of methodical, romantic sloppiness that only she can pull off. But even if she achieves her goal of soothing the goosebumps, her touch makes Clarke writhe and shiver.

The girl’s breath quickens above her. “God, Lexa. We’re going to be late.”

Lexa stops, looks up with one eye; Clarke twists to look over her shoulder so that she can meet Lexa’s questioning gaze.

“I don’t care,” Clarke assures her quickly, as she realizes that Lexa has stopped kissing her lower back.

“You’re right though.”

“I don’t care.”

“We can’t be late.”

“They won’t notice.”

With a laugh, Lexa rises from her knees, leaving Clarke’s dress unzipped, and smiles softly as Clarke turns and folds into her, pressing their lips together.

Clarke releases a long sigh. “I hate galas.”
“Just wait until you’re the President.”

*

“Representative Griffin, I want to thank you!”

“You have our full support!”

“We appreciate what you’ve done so far and we can’t wait to see how much further you can go!”

Again and again and again. The most recent round of laudations make up only a small fraction of the gratitude the gala guests shower on Clarke, from the moment she walks through the front doors. Unlike her fundraising dinner several months ago, where she had been required to greet donors and politely beg for them to fund her campaign, she's merely a guest of her mother at the LGBT Gala, but that doesn't stop the waves of people clamoring to meet her. Some they recognize--local figureheads, social media leaders, journalists, small-time celebrities, wealthy donors--but most are anonymous. To Lexa’s amusement, the college journalist from several days before, the writer for her university’s LGBT+ club, elbows her way in, somehow having scored an invite, and manages to get in a quick hello to Clarke. The hearts in her eyes are not missed before she’s again swallowed up by the crowd. Clarke spends the entire first half of the evening greeting and thanking the gala attendees.

"You make us so proud, future Senator."

"I haven't voted in an election for several years, but I'm finally looking forward to getting involved again. Thank you Representative Griffin!"

Lexa hangs close by, just to oversee and ensure that everything goes smoothly, and within a half hour of arrival, she's bursting at the seams with pride in her girl. Clarke Griffin is golden, in the literal sense as much as the metaphorical sense: her shimmering pale gold dress stands out among the ultra-modern silver and white decor of the gala. Lexa isn't sure if it's Clarke or the dress, but something about her seems to shine and stand out, especially when she's surrounded by the latest wave of attendees, all in their own glorious dresses and tuxedos in every color of the rainbow. Lexa's dress is more muted--a conservative, low-profile black number--which allows her to blend into the background and stay close to Clarke without being obtrusive or attracting any attention to their proximity.

Roan plays a similar game of distance. He and Clarke enter together, pose for pictures together, and get their first drinks together, but as they settle into the event, they take leave of one another: Clarke has been practically swallowed up by the crowd, and Roan is simply enjoying meeting people--the community has taken a liking to Roan Azgeda, ever since his mother announced her support for Clarke's LGBT+ Initiative.

Every few minutes, Lexa throws a glance his way, just to ensure he's not doing any damage; as always, he's relaxed and steady. She shakes her head. He's getting the best deal of any of them. Free travel, great publicity, political cred, and a pretty girl on his arm, even if the extent of their relationship is snarking at one another in private.

"Lex?" comes Clarke's quiet voice, bringing her back to the present. Clarke is close, closer than she has been so far tonight. Lexa looks around and realizes that, for the moment, the crowd has left them, allowing the women to speak to one another in semi-privacy for the first time tonight. "Let's sit
Lexa finds them two chairs off to the side of the room. They have a view of everything, and no one is looking their way. As Clarke looks out at the room, all of the hopeful faces who have professed their support tonight, a small smile plays at her features.

"You're heroic," Lexa tells her.

The smile vanishes. "I'm not. I haven't done anything," she mutters back, rolling her eyes at Lexa's flattery. "Lip service doesn't count."

"No," she admits. "Not yet. But that doesn't matter. They know you'll act for them when you get the opportunity, and for that, they see you as a hero."

"But as long as I haven't come out, they still think I'm straight. And in that case, I shouldn't be their hero. I shouldn't be speaking for them the way they want me to." She huffs, running her fingers back through her hair. "It doesn't matter how much I push for equal rights politically. The world thinks I'm straight, and straight women shouldn't be leading the charge and making speeches and sitting on panels or giving soundbytes, and reaping the rewards for it, in place of LGBT people. I shouldn't be getting this reception if they think I'm straight. Someone else should. Someone out."

Lexa sighs; she can feel Clarke's frustration emanating out from beneath her plastered on smile.

"It's just necessary right now, Clarke. We can't sabotage the campaign. Victory stands on the back of sacrifice."

Clarke considers that for a long time.

"Does it...ever feel like we're sacrificing more than we're going to win?"

"That's up to you."

That answer plunges them into silence. They're both dissatisfied with it, but they're both smart enough to know that it's the only answer right now. Lexa searches the room for a better one, or an addendum, or anything to make Clarke feel better.

"Your mom did this," Lexa says. She nods at the room at large: the banners and posters hanging from the walls, the silver and white decor, the lights, the band, the laughing joyous crowd, the rainbow flags. "Your mom never used your sexuality for a platform. Never told personal stories. And still, she did this for you, quietly and steadily. She worked every day to make things better and she accepted the applause, but it was never to help her career. It was for you, and gradually she did it for them as well. You have to take the same approach. You're going to get the attention and the applause, but remember that you're doing this for a reason beyond that. You don't have to reveal your motivations or your secrets; that doesn't make you inauthentic and that doesn't make this self-serving. It doesn't make it harmful. You're going to help people, and you don't need to reveal every part of yourself to do it."

They let those words sink in for a moment. They don't give a better answer, but they do balm the dissatisfaction between them and the frown on Clarke’s face fades. “She was so good about it,” she admits. “She did so much, so quietly.”

“Because her motivation was a desire to help. And so is yours. So the rest doesn’t matter.”

“You’re right. And you know what...I'm going to go talk to her. Hold on."
"You--About what?" Lexa asks, even as Clarke jumps to her feet and hurries off. "Wait, Clarke! About what?"

No response. Even if the music wasn’t too loud, Clarke’s too determined to listen to Lexa and all Lexa can do is watch her leave; that shine that Clarke possessed earlier catches fire now, engulfing her, burning hot. It’s evident in every step of her high heels. Lexa runs her tongue over the back of her teeth, wary--whenever she senses that burn emanating from Clarke...trouble usually follows.

She’s not hard to track through the crowd. Between her dress and the faces constantly turning towards her, Clarke stays permanently in view. She talks animatedly to her mother for several moments, pausing only to thank another attendee who comes her way. Then Roan notices their conversation and makes his way over, joining the conversation. When all three seem to agree on something, Lexa realizes that she should have done the same, and quickly gets to her feet, striding across the room.

Abby and Roan have already slipped away by the time Lexa catches up with Clarke.

"Clarke, is everything okay?" she asks.

"Oh, there you are!" Clarke seems oddly breathless. "I was just coming to find you. I'm going to be making a short speech in a few minutes."

Lexa frowns. "A speech? I don't remember us discussing a speech."

"It was last minute."

"Wait--have you rehearsed it? Run it by anyone?"

"Lexa, I can speak off the cuff," Clarke says with a laugh. She's speaking faster now: "It's just a few words, mostly just thanking everyone for their support. It won't be political--I'm not here to promote the campaign."

Something's off. Lexa tries to read her, but Clarke won’t hold her gaze for more than a few seconds, making the task impossible. She swallows and bites the inside of her cheek--she's just going to have to trust her.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Lexa tries.

Clarke waves a hand. "It's fine! Look, you deserve some time off your feet. Have a drink, sit down."

She gestures at a nearby empty chair and beckons for a server. When Lexa doesn't move, Clarke goes so far as to put a gentle hand on her shoulder and steer her toward the chair.

"Clarke...?"

"Lexa. Don't worry about me. I'll thank them, show my support, tell a story about my mom, and tell them to enjoy the night. Simple."

And with that, Lexa takes a seat. As Clarke hurries off in the pursuit of some new plan for the second time in less than twenty minutes, Lexa accepts the glass that’s handed to her, takes a long drink, and sighs. She learned a long time ago that sometimes, all she can do is give up the reins and hold on.

*
The evening’s speeches begin with this year’s host—a local journalist—greeting and welcoming the guests. But while the room watches the woman tell stories of galas long past, Lexa watches Clarke, standing off to the side of the stage. She’s drawn herself up tall—she’s always trying to pull herself over her 5’5”, just as she’s always trying to pull herself even with Lexa’s eye level despite the few inches of difference in their heights—and she’s mouthing the words of whatever she’s planning to say. It’s useless for Lexa to try to read her lips from the back corner of the room, but she tries valiantly anyway, needing to either confirm or deny her fears. The only result is that the uncertainty makes the already long moments pass even more slowly.

She’s only half-listening to the announcer, but she feels as if she knows the entire history of the gala by the time the woman wraps it up.

“And now, I’d normally kick things off by introducing one of our biggest benefactors, but we’ve had a change of plans: allow me to introduce her daughter, State Representative and future US Senator, Clarke Griffin!”

They’ve applauded her all night, so it’s no surprise that the roar of greeting that she receives fills the room to its cavernous, bannered ceilings. Everyone jumps to their feet—everyone, that is, except Lexa. She stays seated, fingernail drumming a staccato on her empty champagne flute, a beat matched only by her pounding heart.

Please don’t do what I think you’re going to...

The torturous wait extends as Clarke crosses the stage and steps to the podium, waiting for the applause to die down before she can speak. The sight of her up there, golden and blazing, for a moment blankets Lexa’s nagging fear with pride: Clarke stands like she was meant to speak from podiums. Like she’s destined to have red, white, and blue banners hanging behind her; like she’s designed to be speaking to a crowd of thousands, not millions. On a cold January day...

“I just want to begin by saying how lucky I am to stand up here tonight, and how appreciative I am for the welcome you’ve given me,” Clarke tells the crowd. “Thanks to my mother and her tireless work for the community, I have been lucky enough to attend this gala for many years. I’ve grown up in this room, year after year. Some of the people I’ve met tonight I’ve met for the first time, and some I’ve known since I was sixteen years old. I wasn’t planning on giving a speech when I came here tonight. But after all of the conversations I’ve had, the people I’ve met, the thought I’ve given it, I just...I wanted to say something.”

Lexa holds her breath as Clarke pauses. Please, please...

“As I’ve grown, I have realized that you are the people who have so powerfully shaped my sense of community, and my desire to give back,” Clarke continues. “The kindness, the creativity, the courage, the power, the resilience, the warmth in this room and in the community has been a constant source of inspiration to me in everything that I’ve done and have driven me through a rough and unforgiving landscape of politics, allowed me to maintain a sanctity within myself, as inspired by everyday heroes like the people in this room. The journalists, the activistists, the donors, the leaders, the organizers, the believers. I am so lucky to count myself among you and to be here tonight.”

Her blood turns to ice in her veins.

“And all of the inspiration and the courage that you’ve given me is something I’m going to take with me all the way to Washington D.C!”
The last of the words ring in the silence for a moment before the audience rises in more adoration and cheering, and the finality of that sound signals the return of Lexa’s breathing. She didn’t come out. Lexa more than half-expected it. Clarke’s stubbornness, her inability to be inauthentic, her distaste for hiding herself here, tonight of all nights...and the shine in her eyes when she looks at Lexa--maybe. Lexa doesn’t want to consider that factor. But the rest, those are the things that normally coalesce into grand, show-stopping speeches Clarke lives for. But for once, she kept it simple. Unobtrusive. Honest, but safe.

These aren’t usually Clarke’s descriptors, so Lexa warily watches her leave the stage, expecting her to storm back to the podium and announce her bisexuality in an encore performance. Those fears are unfounded, however, as she sinks into the embrace of a very visibly relieved Abby Griffin--Lexa and Abby had apparently had the same worries. Lexa gets to her feet and heads to the side of the stage as Clarke ducks demurely down the steps and Abby begins her speech.

“That was great,” Lexa says, at a loss for anything else in her relief.

“Thank you,” Clarke replies. She spots Lexa’s empty champagne glass. “You look like you could use more.”

“So do you. Let’s go get some.”

*

If Clarke’s constant stream of well-wishers had kept her busy before her speech, afterwards, she doesn’t get another free moment. She can’t refill her glass, let alone steal some alone time with Lexa at an out-of-the-way table. Lexa solves the champagne problem by getting some for her and deliver it as Clarke talks to a journalist, but the crowd around her is so great that Lexa is forced to wait on the outskirts once she hands off the alcohol. And she doesn’t mind. She follows Clarke from circle to circle, conversation to conversation, never close enough to overhear but close enough to ensure nothing goes wrong, and all along she’s beaming with all the praise heaped on Clarke.

And planning for the moment back at the hotel when they’re finally alone together again.

It’s during one of these rather explicit daydreams that Roan sidles up to her. She never saw him coming: she was attempting to order another drink while keeping one eye on the blonde, who sits in conversation with some journalists several tables away. And then suddenly Roan is at her side and she’s scrambling to hide any evidence of her thoughts on her face.

“She made a great speech,” he admits, genuinely impressed.

“I know.” After a pause, she dares say it: “She’s going to win this.”

Roan nods, studying Clarke. Now she’s seated at a table with only one other journalist: the college girl, the one who writes for her school’s LGBT+ club, the one hopelessly in love with her. Lexa grins--what a moment for that girl--but her amusement sours when she turns to Roan and sees a look of trepidation on his face.

“Mr. Azgeda?” she asks coldly.

“How far do you think she’ll go?” he asks.
“I’m sorry?”

“In politics. How far will she go?”

“Beyond the senate?” Lexa considers it. “How many years do you have?”

“I didn’t sign up for years,” he growls. “I support her, but I need a long-term exit plan here.”

“Why, no desire to be the first husband?”

He gives her a heated glare. “Spare the sarcasm. I already have a girlfriend, a life. A fiancé, if I can get my mother’s blessing once this is over.”

“I’m aware,” Lexa hisses back. “I’m also aware you deigned not to inform us of her until after we arranged this deal.”

“This is beneficial for all of us, why would I screw it up for myself.”

Anger blisters through her. Roan has never shown any desire to take advantage of his station, and he’s adamantly uninterested in pursuing Clarke. It’s those two virtues, and those alone, that have kept him here and prevented Lexa from firing him, despite his cavalier attitude.

And the fact that he can rest his hand on the small of Clarke’s back in public. Lexa’s just going to have to grin and bear it. Victory on the back of sacrifice.

“Just grin and bear it,” she commands, voice icy. “Surely there are worse situations than having Clarke Griffin on your arm.”

“Surely, but--”

“But you don’t want to do it forever. Believe me, Mr. Azgeda, I’m happy to engineer a separation once Clarke has secured the Senate seat.”

The forceful, wicked tone, the poisoned sweetness, stuns him into silence long enough for her to look back to Clarke and find that she’s bidding the college journalist goodbye and reading for the next rush. Before Roan can recover himself, Lexa continues:

“And now you’ll have to excuse me, because I have actual concerns and responsibilities. Enjoy your whiskey. The chauffeur will be here soon enough to take you back to your private hotel suite.”

She doesn’t look back as she strides away--Lexa Ward is masterminding a history-making campaign against a billionaire candidate with a political legacy, positioning an unpredictable firework of a young woman with a huge secret for a US Senate seat--she has no time for the whining of that woman’s playboy fake boyfriend.

By divine grace, the rest of the night goes smoothly. And not just smoothly compared to their usual chaos--the night is actually smooth, with Clarke and Lexa and Abby and the entire attending campaign team enjoying the hell out of themselves, because little compares to a party thrown by the LGBT+ community in San Francisco. At the end of the night--1 AM--they’re dozing off in the SUVs back to the hotel and Lexa’s plans for getting Clarke alone have been lost in the haze of their exhaustion. Everyone bids each other goodnight and retires to their private rooms. Lexa strips out of her dress, uses the last of her energy to hang it up, and climbs gratefully into bed.

But the moments tick by without the promise of sleep.
And then her phone rings.

[1:42 AM] Clarke: Are you awake?


Suddenly electrified, she watches the dots as Clarke types.

[1:45 AM] Clarke: I’m starving.

*

Clarke finds Lexa waiting for her in the lobby, wearing a skirt and loose button-down clearly grabbed from the top of her suitcase, just like Clarke had done. It’s a cardinal sin the other twenty-three hours of the day, but right now, the only thing that matters is getting food and ensuring that no one sees them doing it. With a sidelong glance at the front desk attendant to ensure he’s not paying too much attention, Clarke quickly crosses the lobby to Lexa’s side.

“Where’s Gustus?” she mutters, craning her neck to look through the automatic doors in hopes of spotting him waiting with the car.

Lexa jingles the keys in her hand to get Clarke’s attention. “I just had him give me the keys, provided I promise him we stay in the car. It’s you and I tonight, Clarke. Let’s go.”

Clarke swears she falls a little more in love each day.

*

There is a sweet, inimitable satisfaction that comes with junk food on an empty stomach at two in the morning.

Clarke sinks her teeth into her second McDonald’s Quarter Pounder, tears off a chunk almost bigger than she can handle and moans, the sound muffled by the food. She practically inhaled the first one, but this one, she’s taking her time to enjoy.

“You have no idea how much I’ve been craving this,” she tells Lexa once she’s swallowed it.

“I do,” Lexa says with a laugh, “this is the third time you’ve told me, plus I watched you scarf the first one down like a starving woman.” But for all her impish teasing and sparkling eyes, Lexa too is worshipping her large box of fries, closing her eyes as she pops several into her mouth. “It’s been far too long.”

It didn’t take much convincing for Clarke to get Lexa to drive them to the nearest McDonald’s and rush through the drive-thru: they made off with double orders of everything, large sodas, and McFlurries to top it off. Lexa had just wanted a small apple pie for dessert, but Clarke convinced her to think bigger--so Lexa got both. Then she’d driven them through the nighttime streets toward the hills on the outskirts of the city, up and up and up through the winding drives, until at last coming to park along the edge of the road. The city unfolds beneath them, glowing silver and gold in the
darkness and reflecting onto the rippled surface of the San Francisco Bay beyond, and it is to that resplendent view that they had torn into their fast food. French fries and greasy burgers and thick, cold ice cream; a million-dollar view; and a beautiful girl to share it with. Clarke stares at her, admiring the way the glow of the city lights up her features in the darkness of the car. After a moment, Lexa catches her looking; halfway through her last bite of her burger, she swallows it quickly.

“Are you hungry again?” she asks, hiding a smile.

“Shut up,” Clarke laughs. She thinks of Octavia, weeks ago, when Lincoln rushed in with a bag of fast food for dinner to take care of her pregnancy cravings. Sometimes you just crave it. “No, I’ve just...I’ve needed this.”

“You always say that.”

She shrugs. “I always need it. I always need you.”

“I’m always here,” Lexa answers, more seriously, her amusement replaced by the deeper contentment Clarke shares. She reaches out; their fingers tangle together.

“I know you are, I trust that more than anything,” Clarke says quietly. “I don’t know how to explain it. You’re the first person I turn towards, the first person I think of. You’re the first person I’ve ever needed. And the first person I’ve ever truly wanted.”

Faces are hard to read in semi-darkness; Lexa’s is always hard to read, period. But Lexa’s hand in Clarke doesn’t slip away, doesn’t flinch at her words. She holds steadfast, and something about it becomes warmer.

“I know what you mean,” Lexa says quietly. “After Anya showed me the newspapers at the airport, when I was coming back to the hotel, all I could think about was getting back to you. Not to discuss them, but just--”

And then Lexa’s phone dings, jarring both of them and cutting off Lexa’s story in the midst of one of those rare moments when she disrobes from her armor and lets Clarke feel the tender, vulnerable soul beneath. Clarke would love to turn off the phone and throw it into the backseat, and she suspects Lexa would as well, but Lexa’s instincts are too strong. Clarke takes a deep breath to recover herself and reaches for her drink as Lexa glances down at the notification on the screen.

It’s silent for a moment. And then:

“What?!’”

Clarke whips around to find Lexa looking frantically between her and the phone, eyes up and down in disbelief. When Clarke provides no recourse and Lexa gapes soundlessly for several seconds before she finds her voice.

“You--where the hell did this come from?”

“What?” Clarke demands.

Lexus holds up her cell phone so that Clarke can read the article headline: Representative Clarke Griffin Comes Out as Bisexual

Lexa isn’t one to stumble over her words, but she’s damn close to it now. Each word comes out like she’s forcing them from her lungs. “You...You came out? When was this?”
Clarke squeezes her eyes shut. Shit. Of all the things to ruin the moment...“I didn’t realize she was going to get it out so quickly. I only told her five hours ago.”

“Told who what five hours ago?”

“The girl from the university,” Clarke explains. “The one who showed up at the gala tonight. She was at the interview last week, remember? Before we came to San Francisco?”

Lexa stares at her like she’s talking in riddles, like she’s suggesting they rob a bank. “Of course I remember her, Clarke, but what I’m not understanding is why you came out to her, why you--”

“I decided it was time to stop hiding,” Clarke says, with a shake of her head. “I don’t know what else to say.”

That cuts Lexa’s budding panic off. She falls back into her seat, suddenly shocked, suddenly wordless, but a new sort of softness enters her eyes. Her fingers twitch in Clarke’s hand and they both look down, realizing that they’re still touching, still connected.

“I’m sorry,” Lexa says quietly. “Your feelings about this are far more important than any potential fall out.”

Clarke purses her lips. “I should have talked to you first. But I just went with it.”

Lexa thinks for a long time before she next speaks: “You made that girl’s career, you know.”

“She’s loyal,” Clarke says with a small smile. “She deserved it. I liked her. She reminded me of you,” she adds with a nudge.

“What, the blatant crush on you?”

“What crush?”

“What crush?” Lexa repeats, and laughs. “It was painfully obvious. She had hearts in her eyes when she looked at you.”

“Are you saying you do too, then?” Clarke asks, raising a brow. “Otherwise, why else would you think I thought you were similar?”

Lexa scoffs. “You’re well aware that I have a fantastic poker face.”

“Whatever you say.”

Lexa narrows her eyes in a mock snarl, ready to toy with her and prove Clarke wrong, but as quickly as the moment had turned to levity, it switches back to seriousness at the thought of getting caught as Clarke had suggested. Lexa sighs.

“I support you, Clarke. But do you realize what you’ve just done?”

“Stopped pretending to be a straight ally and admitted to the world that my desire to change things runs deeper than just sympathy.”

That’s hard to argue.

For a moment they stare out at the world like it’s a map of all their enemies, all of the people against them. Lexa shakes her head at the horizon, at a loss. “So we have my investigative journalist sister,” she says, then ticks them off on her fingers: “your career politician mother, your dim-witted fake
boyfriend, an entire campaign team, surrounding us at all times. And now, we have the mainstream media following you with even more interest—and the queer community. You have to realize how deep they’ll dive to find out more about you. Have they ever left a stone unturned?”

Judging by the look on her face, that is apparently not an angle Clarke had considered.

“Think of the message boards,” Lexa says, and she nearly smiles. “We might as well start posting our flight times because they’ll know them anyway.”

“Photographers would find that out anyway,” Clarke says, with a wave of her hand.

“But seriously, Clarke...we cannot afford mistakes now.”

Clarke shakes her head, and the tone shifts yet again as she pulls herself up in her seat and squares her shoulders to Lexa, her jaw set, her eyes hard as ice. “I’m not going to stop hiding something about me for the sake of my political career,” she says, every word edged. Not against Lexa, just with determination. “This is important.”

“What’s more worth it to you?” Lexa murmurs, trying to take her edge away with softness.

“What do you mean?”

A pause. “Your personal life, or your political one? If one affects the other…”

“I can have both,” she snaps.

And suddenly, there is a distinct understanding between them that this has strayed far beyond the discussion of Clarke’s coming out. And how far do they want to continue down that path of delineating what is public and what is private? What is personal and what is political? What’s worth the risk, and what they can cast aside in pursuit of a greater goal?

Clarke, feeling a stone slip into her stomach, closes her mouth and bites the inside of her cheek; Lexa looks away. Neither wants to continue that thread.

Lexa sighs again. “It’s going to take plenty of explanations,” she says, sounding tired. “but I will admit, you’ll gain plenty of attention. Good and bad.”

“I can handle it,” Clarke assures her.

“We can handle it,” Lexa breathes.

Her heart skips. “You’re still with me on this?”

The smile that spreads over Lexa’s face, sly and dark and impish, is one she shares only with Clarke, and only on nights like this, where they’ve escaped the rest of the world and they can be themselves, together. “Of course,” she says, a hint of amusement in her voice. “Just not against my sister—you’re on your own with Anya. She will be livid that she flew all the way out here and you gave away the best scoop of the race so far.”

Anya. Clarke nearly laughs. If she can handle enigmatic and infuriating Lexa Ward, surely Anya will be effortless.

“There are better scoops to come, I’m sure.”

That mischievous charm in Lexa’s eyes doesn’t fade. “Like our expense reports.”
“What?”

Lexa nods at the food and the empty containers before them, fighting a grin. “How are you going to explain this when we file the campaign expense reports? You know they’re all publicly available, by law. People are going to love that you’re blowing campaign donations on fast food.”

Clarke takes a second to reply, reeling slightly from Lexa’s forced tone shift from tense to teasing. “Well, with all that money we saved by commissioning that heinous commercial, I think we could afford it,” she mutters, rolling her eyes as Lexa laughs. “But I’m not spending the campaign money, I’m spending my own. So no public records. Same with lunch yesterday.”

“You spent your own money on the Italian place yesterday?” Lexa asks in surprise. Clarke nods. “Well then, I’ll pay for this one,” Lexa says, with a faux-swagger, as if she’s picked up the tab for a $300 dinner, not a dinner of dollar menu items. And in fact, she pulls five crisp dollar bills out of her pocket and throws them down on the center console to the sound of Clarke’s laughter—the sound making a smile blossom over Lexa’s face as well.

“A great first date, isn’t it?” she teases.

“Second date,” Clarke corrects, popping fries into her mouth.

“We had a first?”

She gasps with mock outrage. “Yesterday afternoon! The pier, lunch, the Golden Gate Bridge? I just said I paid for it!”

“Oh, that doesn’t count,” Lexa scoffs, with a grin.

“It does!”

“If it was our first, I should have worn something better.”

That stops Clarke’s teasing. She doesn’t know if it’s the sound “our first” or the hint of confession in Lexa’s voice, or the fact that she looked just fine in her white button-down with the sleeves rolled to her elbows—but she stops, the breath rushing from her lungs faster than usual.

“What would you have worn?”

A simple question that opens up a world of fantasy: a world where they can date, for one, without their responsibilities getting in the way. A world where fights the swooping feeling in her stomach and asks her to have dinner, or maybe Lexa surprises her with two tickets somewhere. Lexa looks down at her skirt, a pained look on her face when she realizes she’s wearing it even now, at one in the morning, as she munches on fast food with Clarke beside her. “Jeans.”

“Jeans?” Clarke considers the image. “I’ve only seen you wear jeans once...that night you came over with tacos, when I found out about Diana Sydney, remember?”

Lexa gives her a quiet smile. “I know.”

I know, because that was supposed to be a first date, even if they never consciously considered it so. I know, because she’d let her guard down for Clarke. I know, said with a tinge of sadness, because it was a night for them and it had been obliterated in the face of their responsibilities to Clarke’s ambitions.

So maybe their fantasy doesn’t even go as far as a world where they’re out, an average couple
enjoying all that life has to offer them. Maybe it’s just a world where Lexa can drive over to Clarke’s apartment late at night, street tacos in hand, and they can fall asleep curled together on the couch. After Clarke gets Lexa out of her jeans, of course.

It would be enough. If only she could have it. Being so close to something and not being able to taste it is what will drive Clarke mad, in the end.

With that thought in mind, she locks gazes with Lexa, drops her food, leans across the center of the car, and kisses her. Out of the corner of her eye, as Lexa smiles into the kiss, Clarke swears the lights of the city shine a little brighter.

Victory stands on the back of sacrifice. But at least they’ll always have these moments.

*

“So. Bisexual.”

Anya’s low, irritated drawl makes the hair on the back of Lexa’s neck stand up. She stares into the depths of her coffee, willing the caffeine to hit faster, because Anya has been awake since four on jet-lag and espresso and it will be several minutes until Lexa, on two hours of sleep, can match wits with her and protect Clarke.

“That’s the kind of scoop worth flying cross-country for,” Anya continues, “But if I’m being relieved of my duties in favor of a college journalist—”

“Anya,” Lexa snaps, glaring.

Clarke’s equal to it, though. She touches Lexa’s thigh beneath the table to calm her, then settles back in her chair, matching Anya’s insolent glare from across the table in the small hotel coffee shop.

“You should have been the one to report it,” Clarke admits, “you’re absolutely right. A story that big...”

“I know I am,” Anya says through gritted teeth.

“Let me ask you something,” Clarke retorts. “If you had known in advance that the biggest story of the year was my bisexuality, would you have flown all the way out here just for that?”

That stops Anya short--she pulls back slightly, brow furrowed, and glances to Lexa, as if asking for an explanation. She clearly did not expect Clarke to play this game with her, to challenge her. And Lexa, groggy, doesn’t know where it’s coming from either: she and Clarke had returned to the hotel at 3:30 and spent almost an hour lazily making out in Clarke’s suite, before Lexa had slipped back down the hall to catch a few minutes of sleep before the day began. Anya had awoken them both sharply at 6am, demanding to know why and how this story had broken overnight, and why she wasn’t involved. And now, as they sit in the little cafe, Clarke’s matching Anya beat for beat and Lexa’s just watching the fireworks.

“No,” Anya admits, covering her shock with the Ward-patented brand of aloofness. “I wouldn’t have flown out for a story about you being bisexual.”

“So, you must think there’s more to happen in the race,” Clarke says. “Bigger stories you can
“I--of course.” She snorts, as if Clarke had asked her what color the sky is. “There’s just over two months left before the election. You have a debate coming up next month. You’ve just come out as bisexual—I woke to notifications from all over the country about it. Cage Wallace’s side and all of his supporters are already formulating their attacks, not to mention the fact that he’s already gone personal in his campaign ads. As of yesterday afternoon, I figured you were flawless, unable for anyone to come up with a valid reason not to vote for you, and then you drop a bombshell that will divide voters between secular and religious, so now I’m wondering what else you have in your closet—so to speak. And there’s sure to be skeleton’s in Cage’s closet as well. Then, you’re about to get a massive influx of money from around the country. Not enough to rival his bank account but enough to make things interesting. And—” she pauses, eyes flicking to Lexa, “—you have my brilliant, chessmaster of a sister running your campaign, and I can’t even imagine what hell she’s going to unleash on Cage when the time is right. So yes, to put it simply, I think there’s more to happen in this race and that’s what I expect to be writing stories about.”

“That’s what I thought,” Clarke says simply. She nods at Anya’s notepad. “So let’s get started.”

Chapter End Notes

If I were to guess...I’d say 5-6 chapters left? We’ll see! As always, you can come talk to me on tumblr @ centuriesofexistence.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

‘‘Representative Clarke Griffin, I would like to commend you on your recent public acts and invite you to an evening with other like-minded dignitaries...’’ This one is from the Governor of Oregon,” Abby says. “Oh, sweetheart, I’m so proud of you.”

Clarke takes an incredible interest at the cheap wood paneling of the hotel conference room where she has gathered with Abby, Lexa, Anya, and the pile of letters from admirers that the former two have printed out. Lexa leans forward and plucks one from the pile.

“Representative Griffin, you are an inspiration to all...” Then she grabs another. “Representative Clarke Griffin, you are a remarkable young woman, and I take heart in the fact that our country has leaders as eloquent, courageous, and honest as you.”

“Oh, wow,” Anya chimes in, reading the letter over Lexa’s shoulder. “That’s from Indra Harlow, our Virginia Senator, Lexa. I interviewed her last year, a huge spread. She’s a hard woman to impress, Clarke.” She gives Clarke an approving nod.

“She’s up for re-election too, I believe,” Lexa muses. “We should thank her, publicly.”

“Already handling it,” Clarke mutters, tapping away at her phone. She looks up at Lexa reaches for another letter. “I--come on, can we focus on what we need to be thinking about?”

Clarke has never felt particularly comfortable with effusive praise from colleagues, especially ones as decorated as these and especially not when they’re praising her integrity when she falls asleep with her campaign manager in her thoughts or in her bed. But in the week since she has come out, messages of support have been rolling in--private and public, from citizens and officials alike--all similar in their admiration and commendation. And when they pile up in the campaign inbox or headquarters, Lexa has Raven fax them over and Lexa and Abby force Clarke to sit through ear-burning read-alouds. She tries to get out of it every time, but their combined pride--not to mention Anya’s voyeuristic amusement at their group dynamics--outweighs all of Clarke’s protests.

“Most of these are invitations to speak at events and campuses,” Clarke says, sifting through the pile with a careless shrug. “We don’t need to read every letter. Can we schedule whatever we can and move on?”

Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Lexa hide an amused smirk--it’s almost identical to Anya’s--but Abby takes some pity on her, checking her watch.

“If we didn’t already have lunch plans with Roan, we’d go through all of these, but I suppose you should probably get ready.”

It sounds as if she’s fifteen again, being dismissed from the dinner table, but an escape is an escape and she won’t question this one. Lexa quietly promises to schedule the speaking events as Clarke and Abby exit the room, heading for the elevator.

“Roan should be here in about ten minutes,” Abby says. “Go up and change, we’ll meet you in the lobby in exactly ten minutes.”
After so many years of her mother’s political career, Clarke is nothing if not accustomed to Abby’s choke hold on her schedule. But she’s punctual herself, so she plans to get changed in five minutes and be back down before Roan even arrives. Once she gets to her room, she slips out of her clothes in just a few smooth motions, going over water-cooler topics to talk about at lunch and dressing so quickly and efficiently that she doesn’t recognize the blouse she’s wearing until she checks her reflection in the mirror one last time before leaving.

It’s the same blouse that Lexa pulled off of her the first night they slept together.

And the moment that memory replays in her head, she resigns herself to the inexorable necessity of seeing Lexa right that instant, before she leaves for lunch.

She hurries down the empty hallway, heels in hand. For this last leg of the road trip, they’ve been in a different hotel every three days, so it’s never quite the same path to Lexa’s door. But these excursions, whether undertaken late at night or early in the morning, have become so normal, so ingrained, that she feels as if she’s walked the steps along this hallway a hundred times. It’s the most natural thing in the world.

She only needs to knock once—the door swings open, like she was waiting, like she felt it too. As soon as Clarke sees the flash of Lexa’s eyes, she puts a hand on her chest, pushing her out of view of the hallway and following in with a kiss. It’s hard, pressing, urgent, as she intends to milk pleasure from every second before she has to leave again for lunch, but Lexa knows her. Lexa is forever pliant and giving, and the way she absorbs all the rush of Clarke’s kiss without breaking her usual calm, flowing rhythm slows Clarke as well. They know each other so well now: Lexa’s hand comes up to stroke the wispy hair at the nape of Clarke’s neck, her most sensitive spot, the one that always sends her into a hazy, shivery sort of trance. Clarke releases a breathy sigh into Lexa’s mouth, relaxing under her touch. Feeling the tension leave her body, Lexa pulls away just enough for Clarke to see green eyes and the glint of white teeth behind her swollen lips.

“To what do I owe this pleasure?” Lexa whispers.

“Just because.” Clarke leans in again, eager to silence her.

“I can accept that.”

They lose themselves in each other again. Lexa makes her heart flutter in all the cliché, love poetry ways. Everything about her--the way she arches her brow, her sly smiles, the way she kisses back--it has all sent Clarke spiraling towards cardiac arrest on an almost daily basis.

But none of that compares to the way her heart stops and drops out of her chest when they hear a knock at the door--and then Roan’s clear voice.

“Anyone home?”

And she realizes, with horror, that she never closed the door completely behind her.

Her whole body swings around to face the door and her vision narrows to the crack of light between the door and the door frame, narrow now but growing wider as Roan pushes in. Behind her, Lexa silently falls away from Clarke, but it’s over, it’s all over and Clarke’s body turns to ice as Roan announces himself one more time and pokes his head into the room.

“Lexa, is Clarke--oh.”

They stare at each other, Clarke unable to force words past her bone-dry throat. Roan almost always looks as if he’s trying to solve a difficult math equation, and Clarke has never paid enough attention
to learn to read that face--so she has no idea where this is going to go, what he’s going to do.

“There you are,” he says brightly--of all things, she didn’t anticipate that tone. “You weren’t in your room, Anya said you’d probably be here. Your mom is on my nerves about reservations, can we go?”

Her words feel automatic: “Uh, yeah, of course.” But it still feels like a trap, somehow.

Roan frowns. “Are you okay?”

Is it really possible he didn’t discover them? That he couldn’t tell? Nodding, Clarke looks back to Lexa, who has somehow crossed to the far side of the room and engrossed herself in a file. She feels Clarke’s eyes on her and glances up.

“No need to wait for me,” Lexa says smoothly. “I can handle this while you’re at lunch. I’ll call Raven about the donations and let you know how it goes.”

“Ugh, please don’t do it while we’re at lunch,” Roan groans. “I’ve been on the campaign trail two weeks and I already never want to get into politics, you’re all exhausting.”

“Of course,” Lexa says, poison-sweet. She looks to Clarke. “And yes, those shoes are fine,” she adds, with a nod to the heels Clarke’s still holding, long since forgotten. And there it is, a perfect cover.

Turning back to Roan, who seems to have solved his math problem and now simply looks bored, Clarke starts to recover. “We shouldn’t keep my mom waiting, let’s go.”

She doesn’t look back at Lexa as she leaves. Maybe Roan’s an idiot or maybe the sudden ice in Clarke’s veins had erased her flushed skin, but they haven’t been caught, by some miracle. It doesn’t erase the fact that this is the closest they’ve ever come to it.

The thought haunts her through lunch--she engages in her practiced water-cooler talk only out of habit, so automatic that even Roan notices that something is off, but she dismisses his and her mother’s questions. The feeling of shock, the residual fear from coming so close to being caught, turns her thoughts inward, leaving her to consider what a risk they’ve really been running. It’s as if her relationship has been another world, a separate plane of existence from the real, grueling world; only now, the curtain has been pulled back and she’s discovered that her two worlds were separated by nothing more than one door left ajar. Lexa was right when she said one false move in a lust-blind or exhausted moment could ruin it all for them. It makes Clarke suddenly cautious, something she never expected.

And that feeling persists long after that lunch. For the rest of the trip, by unspoken agreement, Clarke and Lexa resist the pull toward each other at every turn. They sit on opposite sides of the table at meetings, angled so that they’re never looking each other in the eye. They take different cars to and from events and between stops on the trip. When they’re both idle, waiting between meetings or interviews, they discover calls that need to be made or lunches that need to be scheduled. Anything to keep their gazes from connecting and the heat from burning them both.

But they are not infallible. They love the fire too much to extinguish it.

It takes just one difficult day, and then it starts again with a single text: Open your door at 2:30 tonight.

And then it happens only in the dead of night. Two in the morning, three in the morning, no knocking, not a sound, just texts to silenced cell phones and doors that crack open at a predetermined
time. It’s furtive, breathless touching in the pitch blackness, it’s moving by intuition and muscle memory, it’s shaking orgasms with hands clasped over mouths to keep their secrets between them. It’s separations long before the sun rises and it’s double shots of espresso once it does.

It’s exhausting and it’s not enough, but it’s theirs. There is pressure all around her, within her, and between them, and if she doesn’t release it in small gasps and bursts, she doesn’t know what will happen.

But she’s doing something right. Somewhere amid the blinding mix of pleasure and torturous self-deprivation that has become her road trip with Lexa, she soars during the final ten days of speaking engagements and appearances and luncheons, and she returns to the Los Angeles Campaign Headquarters to a hero’s welcome. The first morning back--after they had gotten into the city at 11pm the night before--begins at 6:30am sharp, when Clarke strides through the lobby of the office building and Murphy, the night shift guard, rises to meet her.

“Glad to see you in person again, Representative Griffin,” he says. “It was getting boring around here without having to hustle the paparazzi away at 2am because you’re working late.”

His drawling voice makes it sound like an insult, but Clarke has worked with him long enough. “I’ll be sure to keep plenty of them around for you, then. Good to see you too, Murphy.”

When the doors of the elevator slide open on her office, the staffers who had stayed behind rise in applause as Clarke steps out. The evidence of her success is everywhere: TV’s on the wall play news reports covering her trip and appearances; her face beams out from the front pages of newspapers scattered across every desk; campaign signs and banners, the same ones along the roadways and up on billboards, hang from the walls. What once was a respectable, wood-paneled office with modern artwork has been taken over by the fervor of the campaign. Her name is everywhere, looming over her from all angles--Griffin, Griffin, Griffin--and it fills the air in their voices as well.

“Great to have you back, Miss Griffin.”

“We’ve missed you, Representative Griffin!”

“Miss Griffin, we’ve been getting phone calls constantly about your coming out…”

“Miss Griffin, we have some local journalists who’d like to set up interviews…”

“That was so fantastic, Representative Griffin, I can’t wait for the next road trip!”

It takes an hour to greet everyone and catch up on the business--and fun--that she missed while she was away, but she can’t help but feel invincible when gifted their enthusiasm for the last leg of the campaign, the last battle for the election. Their shining faces, full of praise, have so much faith in Representative Clarke Griffin. This praise, she can accept. The support of her team will never fail to lift her and there is no better balm for the leftover tension from the road trip. When she at last makes her way over to her personal office, she finds Lexa and Raven waiting, watching the proceedings with amusement. The three of them have plenty to cover, but Clarke can’t help but grin broadly.

“What did you do to them while I was gone?” she asks Raven, uncharacteristically playful. “Why are they so happy I’m back?”

Raven puts on a mock scowl. “I have no idea. I am the perfect boss. I feel betrayed.”

“She made us work sixteen-hour days,” Monty calls from his cubicle.

“It was one twelve-hour day! And it included an hour lunch!”
“They should get used to twelve hour days,” Lexa points out. “We all should. The last two months of the campaign will require endless amounts of work.”

They hear Monty’s sigh of resignation. “We know.”

“And on that note, we should get to work too,” Clarke says, looking to Raven. “Ready?”

“Eight in the morning on your first day after the road trip, and you’re back to work already, huh?”

“You heard Miss Ward. Two months to go. We can’t waste any time.”

Their jests die quickly once the three of them settle into the conference room beside Clarke’s office. Raven has prepped a summary of everything that happened while they were gone, and the current state of affairs. It’s time to plan their next moves.

“I don’t know what drove you to do it, but coming out was one of the best things you could have done for your campaign,” Raven says, as she pulls up the slideshow she created. “Did you two come up with it together?”

“Actually, I was requested to sit down and have a drink,” Lexa replies dryly. “I had no more say than you did.”

“Predictably. Representative Griffin here obeys no one.”

Clarke shoots Lexa a small smirk, which widens when Lexa responds with an arched brow. Raven isn’t exactly right. Clarke is more than amenable when Lexa whispers commands in her ear late at night; she’ll do pretty much anything that low voice tells her to, in the right state of pleasure. Raven, focused on her PowerPoint, doesn’t notice their exchange and the two women compose themselves before she turns back, a chart on the screen behind her.

“In any case, regardless of why, the donations are up,” Raven begins. “Way up. Between our intentionally pathetic campaign commercials and your coming out, they’re rolling in from across the country. Everyone knows Clarke Griffin, the poor bisexual underdog fighting a rich, entrenched political dynasty. The wealthy progressives are salivating over your story. And that means we’re on track to bring in over five million in these next two months before election day.”

She clicks the button in her hand, and the green bar surges upward across the timeline. The sight forces Clarke’s breath out of her chest in a single sharp rush.

“That’s...more than we’ve managed to raise in the entire campaign so far.”

“A lot more,” Raven agrees. “And these are just preliminary projections. Every day you get more and more celebrities and officials endorsing you--they’ll raise your profile and your donation base.”

Clarke still stares at the number, disbeliefing. They’re still miles behind Cage Wallace’s spending--he’s on track to spend twenty-five million, while they’re projecting to raise around ten--but it’s more than she ever expected. If she’d known that the results would boom like this, she would have come out ages ago...and almost as soon as that thought forms in her mind, she sours at the notion of selling her private life for political gain. The end result is a reluctant, simmering approval of the money raised, which Lexa can read from the look on her face.

“You did the right thing,” she reminds Clarke. “All the letters we got proved that.”

Raven scoffs. “If you think the emails you printed out prove that, wait until you see the actual mail we got. We’re starting to stack the boxes against the walls of our mail room. It’s ridiculous.”
“We don’t...have a mail room,” Clarke says, frowning.

“We didn’t, before you left. We do now, and Miller is pissed that he had to give up his private office, but the amount of support and hate mail you’ve gotten demanded it.”

“Why not just throw out the bad?”

“Someone suggested it, but they don’t know you like I do. You thrive on that adversity.”

Can’t argue there. “The bad mail is a good sign,” Lexa muses, “and it explains the surge in donations. You cut a polarizing figure, Miss Griffin. The more who gather to tear you down, the more ardently your supporters will defend you.”

“Any press is good press,” Clarke asks, sarcastic.

“More or less.”

Caught in the smug way Lexa turns back to the screen, Clarke stares at her for a second too long--Raven has to clear her throat to regain Clarke’s attention. “Which brings us to the polls...”

These results, Clarke already has an idea about, but watching her name rise above Cage Wallace’s is still a beautiful sight, affirming all of the celebrations from out in the main office, and Raven’s next words sound like music: “They’ll update again tomorrow, but right now, you’ve finally taken the lead by five points. It’s significant, but still unusually tight for California--which gives Cage a fighting chance.”

“And an impetus to come in harder,” Lexa says. “He will be much more brutal--”

“And he’ll spend more.”

“And he’ll spend more to make up that gap. It’s going to get ugly.”

Clarke certainly didn’t expect the final months to be easy, but she reigns in the sarcasm this time. “What do the polling demographics look like?”

“My next point.” Raven clicks the button and new rows of numbers light up the screen. “You’re ridiculously far ahead with all young women,” she announces, with pride. “You have the sorority and activist sets locked in, Cage can’t come close to even threatening that. You’re ahead with older women of color as well, but even on older white women. Younger men tend toward Cage, and you have a slight lead with older white men--I can’t explain that, because I’m an engineer, not a wizard--but you’re even again when it comes to men of color.”

“He’ll work to appeal to the older white men first, in that case,” Lexa surmises. “Initially. He’ll have to silence the current conversation around Clarke first, then he’ll take aim at the demographics in which she only has a slight lead, in hopes that the split demographics will come with them.”

“So he’ll go for economic issues first,” Clarke says, picking up the thread.

“Probably go after your mom as well, pull up issues from when they were young voters,” Raven adds. Clarke grits her teeth.

“Should we beat him to it, then?” Clarke asks. “We have the momentum and money in the bank. We can start putting out more expensive ads.”

Lexa studies her notepad, deep in thought; only when Clarke notices her eyes aren’t reading the lines
does she realize Lexa is envisioning future moves, not re-reading her shorthand notes. The chess moves play out behind her eyes and eventually, having picked through each of the scenarios, she shakes her head.

“We have the momentum and the upper hand, but that arises from the execution of our own plan, rather than adjusting our plan to beat Cage Wallace to his planned attacks. It’s easier to counter his moves than trying to predict what he will do and stumbling in our attempt to do it first. We’ll continue as we are and play defense, shore up our resources and our leads, until the debate a few weeks before the election. Following the debate, we’ll push onto the offensive and increase our power and momentum through Election Day.”

As she watches Lexa speak, the strangest sense of nostalgia overwhelms Clarke, as if they’ve had this conversation hundreds of times before, before the campaign and before they ever knew each other. It feels at once familiar and ancient, a thread stretching far beyond this life; Clarke can see it happening over and over again. Candle-lit tables covered in hand drawn maps; on the balconies at the tops of towers; in smoky back rooms; places she’s never seen before, but never has she felt more whole and connected to Lexa than in that moment. They’ve done this before and they’ll do it again and she can’t figure out quite why she’s so confident in that, but it’s comforting nonetheless.

They don’t get much more planning done before Sarah, Clarke’s sorely-missed secretary, appears in the doorway. “Representative Griffin, Miss Ward, Anya Ward has arrived.”

With a glance at Clarke for her permission, Lexa tells Sarah, “Send her in, please.”

“This is the sister?” Raven mutters to Clarke, who doesn’t reply. Raven gets her answer a moment later when Anya strides into the room. With her hair tied back neatly, her sleeves rolled to her elbows, and her powerful high-heeled walk, she needs no introduction, but she locks eyes with Raven and provides it anyway:

“I’m Anya Ward, freelance journalist. And Lexa’s older sister.”

Raven nods as they shake hands, looking a little shell-shocked. “Yes, you definitely are.” *Miracle genetics, Jesus Christ*, she mouths to Clarke as soon as the other two aren’t looking.

“So, what have I missed?” Anya asks. “I recognize how unprofessional it is to show up late and ask that question, but even after traveling with Clarke both for two weeks and knowing Lexa for more than two decades, I still didn’t expect an 8am start.”

“We just wrapped up,” Lexa replies coolly. “We didn’t feel it necessary to wait on you given that you’re covering the campaign, not assisting in its facilitation.”

Clarke snorts. “We thought the same about my mother, and yet she’ll be here in an hour.”

Her tone draws a wince from Raven. “Yikes. On a scale of one to ten...?”

“You know her. There is no scale. There’s only ten.”

Raven knows Abby all too well after having Clarke from a roommate. “I’m not letting her take my job running this office.”

“We’ll find you another one.”

“It took me so long to win their respect.”

“Through fear, no doubt,” Clarke says, countering her with a smile.
Raven smirks. “Still counts.”

Anyaa ignores all of them, turning around to lean against the conference table and review the last slide of Raven’s presentation, the polling demographics. “Not bad,” she muses. “About what you’d expect given the media coverage and the moves you’d make, but rather pedestrian, Lexa. I expect you’re saving your best for last?”

“You’ve played me in chess enough times to know that answer,” Lexa shoots back, leaning back in her chair with a cool arrogance that spikes heat through Clarke.

“I have. I can help, though. I have contacts in press all over the country. A few articles here and there—”

“Anyaa,” Lexa says, to no avail.

“—a little bit of pressure in different markets and all of the outlets will fall in line with the same message. I could conduct these numbers like—”

“Anyaa.”

“—a symphony orchestra,” she finishes, then finally meets Lexa’s eye and gives a rueful smile. “Perhaps not in keeping with journalistic ethics, though.”

Lexa works her jaw, better composed than any classic symphony Anya could dream up. “Are you done?”

“Definitely sisters,” Raven mutters.

“Anyaa, the best thing for you right now would be to get a grasp on the office and speak to different members of the campaign,” Lexa says, organizing her papers as a signal to wrap up the meeting. “You can talk to them about what’s going on, how they feel about Miss Griffin, how they feel about the polls—it’s endless fluff to include in what you send to the journalists who will actually be writing the pieces, and it’ll give you a foundation for more interviews later. Raven, would you mind taking Anya around the office and introducing her?”

“Of course,” Raven says, getting to her feet with a sly smile. “They’re going to love it when I introduce your sister.”

When Lexa walks through the office, her lean figure inspires a mix of fear, adoration, and respect—Clarke would know, given that she’s just another victim alongside all of her staffers—so the prospect of watching her staffers be introduced to yet another Ward woman they have to contend with would be an appealing one, if Clarke already didn’t have a full schedule. Raven leads Anya from the room and when the door at last closes behind them, Clarke closes her eyes, pinching the bridge of her nose to relieve the sudden headache.

She hears Lexa’s long sigh. Opening her eyes, she sees the girl has tipped her head back in her chair, fingers massaging her temples with the same uselessness attempt to palliate a headache as Clarke had tried. The sight draws a tiny chuckle out of Clarke, and Lexa looks at her with weary amusement.

“Well, that will keep them busy and give us a few moments of relaxation,” she says.

“Just in time to recoup before my mother arrives.” But Clarke smiles, because it has become so tiresome to repeat that they’ve turned it into a joke.

“She’ll be helpful,” Lexa reminds her. “It’s only two more months; we need all hands on deck for the
last of this.”

Because though the road trip ended, the campaign is still a race and the pace only quickens as they head into the final turns. On the road trip, their focus had been wrangling interns and getting from one event to another as quickly as possible, and deadening their senses to the taste of hotel coffee so that they could work past midnight on the next day’s speeches. It had been hurried in the sense that they constantly had somewhere to be; being back in Los Angeles is hurried in the sense that they constantly have something to be doing. A day at the office becomes a Herculean myth: push aside one paper and an intern slaps down three more files in its place.

It all becomes background noise when the proxy war with Cage Wallace begins, as predicted, about a week later. The early press of the paper circulates around the office like a wicked virus, staffers hurrying from desk to desk in outrage to flash the latest headline at each other:

Wallace: Small businesses are our spine; Griffin wants to snap our necks.

“I heard, I heard,” Lexa declares, waving away an aide who rushes her with a paper when she next steps out of her office. She doesn’t have to call for attention; the sound of her voice is Pavlovian, snapping the office to focus on her as soon as they hear it. The orders come thick and fast: “Monty, I want Nia Azgeda on the phone. Have her rally several of her old moderate colleagues to Clarke’s side--no, believe me, she’ll do whatever I tell her to. Harper, collect the past statements of endorsement from small business groups, spread them to various outlets. Sterling, get me the contact info of the journalist who ran this story.”

Clarke, watching silently with her arms across her chest, raises a brow as Lexa draws closer. “You’re going to threaten her?”

“That would be immoral,” Lexa mutters, already composing a message on her phone. “I’m going to remind her that she’s contributing to a losing side and ask her if she thinks parroting a candidate’s mudslinging passes for real journalism.”

“So, you’re going to threaten her,” Clarke concludes. Because only a fool would take all of that, said with Lexa’s particular brand of force and word choice, as anything less than a threat. Lexa doesn’t argue the point.

Their response runs the next day: Griffin Beloved by Business Big and Small. One paper Lexa had contacted refuses to run what she asks; they’re blacklisted throughout the office before noon.

Cage returns fire the next week. Clarke had long since struggled with him over Silicon Valley and the lucrative tech sector, both revenue-rich and popular with key demographics. She thought she had won that battle, until one afternoon when she receives a call informing her that the tech companies had withdrawn a planned donation, putting it towards Wallace instead. When she hangs up the phone, her teeth are clenched so hard she feels the pain in her temples.

“He snaked my donation,” she tells Lexa, trying to keep her voice even.

Lexa nods slowly. “We’ll use the commercial this time.”

The following weekend, Clarke, Abby, and Raven crack open a bottle of wine and toast to Clarke’s newest commercial, brutally maligning Cage Wallace for his elitism, wealth, and consequential disconnect from the public--how can anyone cater to Silicon Valley’s megarich and still understand the plight of the common wage worker?

The result is a one-two punch of a poll jump and a donation increase from around the country, thanks
to Clarke alienating Wallace’s base from him.

On top of that, she earns his wrath. Sarah barges into a meeting with the accountants the next morning.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but Cage Wallace just released a statement saying that Representative Griffin is just “an air-headed party girl who would besmirch the Senate seat.” He’s running the college pictures from a few months ago.”

Clarke rolls her eyes. “Besmirch? Really?” She wants to sit back in her seat and groan, but fears it would be unbecoming in front of the people who handle her money.

Ready for war, Sarah looks eagerly between Clarke and Lexa. “I already called up the best newspapers, Miss Ward,” she says. “What should we tell them?”

Lexa shrugs. “Nothing. We’re comfortable allowing him to smile for cameras and shake the hands of millionaires and spout slander; we don’t need to dignify it with a response.”

“So, I should just tell them no comment?” Sarah asks, face falling.

“No,” Lexa says smoothly. “I want you to tell them exactly what I just said, verbatim.”

Clarke looks at Lexa like she puts the stars in the sky.

The quote circulates modestly in the paper media--and raucously on social media, where irreverent, sharp-tongued bloggers and self-styled political analysts take a sudden liking to the smart-ass, gorgeous campaign manager in charge of openly bisexual Clarke Griffin’s senate run. It does little in the way of poll points, but Clarke’s Google alert notifications ring so constantly that she has to mute the feature. Dozens of new articles and blogs pop up in celebration of “two badass women challenging and changing the game.”

The group of photographers camped out in front of the office building grows. They work themselves into a frenzy every morning, afternoon, and evening when Clarke or Lexa leave or arrive at the building. Murphy, the evening security guard, takes particular delight in joining forces with Gustus and Ryder to chase them away at the end of the night, clearing a path for Clarke to make it to her car.

“You’re a lifesaver, Murphy,” she tells him one night.

“Just doing what they pay me for,” he replies. “Is Miss Ward still inside or am I done for the night?”

“She left early. You’re done. Thanks again.”

He inclines his head seriously, but there’s a little smile on his face as he heads back into the lobby. Clarke has always liked Murphy, though she’s never quite known why.

As Gustus drives her home, Clarke’s thoughts turn instead toward the fact that Lexa had left early that Thursday afternoon--a rare occurrence, but understandable given the circumstances. Between dealing with her sister, the photographers, the newfound focus on her, fielding interviews for Clarke, and marshaling the media in her war with Cage Wallace, Lexa had often stayed at campaign headquarters until 8pm, 9pm, or even 10pm.

And they haven’t had sex since the road trip. Had Clarke known that the last time she would taste Lexa would have been in a hotel room somewhere outside of Santa Barbara, she would have hesitated before coming back to Los Angeles. They exist now in a state of awkward nonchalance, both acknowledging what they’re missing whenever they can spare a glance the other’s way, but
since they don’t know what to do about the situation, they must pretend it doesn’t exist and focus on
the task at hand.

To be fair, being exhausted at the end of every day helps lessen some of the sexual frustration
building in Clarke, but not by much. Lexa seems to be even worse off than Clarke, pushing herself to
the limit of exhaustion with all the work she’s been taking on, so Clarke decides not to bring up sex--
or anything else. When Lexa leaves early on that Thursday, at Clarke’s suggestion, Clarke just gives
her the necessary space for the evening.

The next day, thankfully, is slow. They have separate duties for most of the morning, but when she
sees Lexa pass her office on the way back from lunch, Clarke makes her move, hurrying out of her
office and following Lexa into hers. Lexa, who has just sat down at her desk and is scribbling a note
on a legal pad, looks up in surprise.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Clarke leans against the door frame, crossing her arms. “Is everything all right?” she asks.

“How do you mean?” Lexa replies.

“I know things have been hard lately,” Clarke says. “We haven’t even had the opportunity to have a
real conversation for a while. You’re always checking on me; I want to do the same for you.”

Lexa pauses, chewing her lip as she considers the question; and then she drops her pencil, leans back
in her chair, and tucks her hands behind her head as she releases a heavy sigh. The transition from
wound-tight campaign manager to languid, exhausted young woman is almost instantaneous.

“It hasn’t been ideal, no,” Lexa says. She closes her eyes. “There’s just been so much going on.”

“I know. We don’t even get weekends anymore, I’ll be busy both days. We need a break. After the
campaign is over...”

Lexa opens her eyes. “I’ve missed you.”

That catches her off guard; all of her worries melt away, reduced to a need to be in Lexa’s arms
again. “I’ve missed you too,” Clarke says quietly.

“We have a month until the end of the campaign, until that break you’re talking about, and it still
feels like a lifetime.”

Lexa rarely talks like this. She’s the steadfast one, the steely gaze and unbreakable willpower. But
hearing her speak so softly, Clarke feels her armor fall away as she imagines the blissful time
off...and after a moment, under the weight of Lexa’s gaze, she starts to feel like something else is
falling away—or being pulled off. Lexa feels it too: her voice is low when she next speaks.

“Can you come over tonight? I need you, Clarke.”

It’s a quite plea, full of want. And it’s hard for Clarke not to come over and straddle Lexa right now--
the mental image of Lexa leaning back in her chair, with Clarke on her lap and unbuttoning her shirt,
is almost too much to bear. She develops a full fantasy of office chair sex in that instant. This is the
result of all the stress. This is the result of going weeks without sex--the result of not even having the
energy to get herself off at night. All of that flashes through her mind far before logic kicks in, but
when it does, it’s brutal.

“I can’t,” Clarke murmurs back, squeezing her eyes because she knows that Lexa’s green ones can
get her to do anything, even if Lexa isn’t trying. “I’d love to...but my mom is staying with me. I can’t just disappear for a booty call.”

“Booty call?” Lexa asks, teasing. “Is that what this is?”

“That’s what it feels like, when we’re talking about sneaking around my mother.”

Lexa smiles softly. “We’ve been sneaking around everyone, for months.”

“And if it were anyone else, I’d just stay late and lay you back on your desk,” Clarke says, raising an eyebrow. Lexa’s lips part in surprise and Clarke can practically see her throat run dry at the thought. “But once I start making up lies and excuses to my mother...”

“I know, I know,” she groans. She sits up in her chair again, regaining her professional posture and keeping the arousal at bay. “You’re right. I’ll see if I can come up with something.”

“Come up with something?”

Lexa’s eyes dance. “I believe you have work to do, Miss Griffin. As do I?”

“So you’re not going to tell me?”

“Tell you what?”

Clarke glares despite the smirk tugging at her lips as she leaves the room. “I’ll remember this.”

*

The email comes across later that evening, while Clarke sits in her living room reviewing the campaign finances and Abby reads the newspaper at the kitchen table. Both of their phones vibrate at once; they open them to reveal an email addressed to them both, from one Lexa Ward.

“Mrs. Griffin,

The poll numbers are showing a slight downward trend in San Diego and the surrounding counties. You have a remarkable following and rapport with the citizens of San Diego, who remember your policies fondly; we have a number of talented interns, but none of them have your eloquence or ability to connect with people on an individual basis, something this campaign sorely needs. Would you be willing to take a ten-day campaign trip to San Diego to attend a series of meetings and events and speak on Clarke’s behalf? It could provide the boost that Clarke needs to get us across the line.

Please let me know of your decision as soon as possible so that travel arrangements can be made. We aspire to schedule you for events beginning as early as Monday.

-LW”

Clarke, hiding a smile, finishes reading the email and immediately ticks her phone to silent in advance of the smug text she knows Lexa will soon send. Abby takes a second longer to read the
email, then looks up at Clarke with her brow furrowed.

“San Diego?” she asks. “Did you know about this?”

“We talked about it,” Clarke lies, easily. “Lexa was really struggling. Our polls are starting to dip, and as much as she didn’t want to inconvenience you, the more she read about all of your past events and town halls there, the more she knew you’d be the best option. There’s just no one as effective we can send.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she sees her phone screen light up, but she doesn’t check it, not yet; she has to be sincere with her mother. In response, Abby sighs and re-reads the email. She says nothing, but Clarke can tell from the softening on her face that the flattery from both sides has won her over.

“Fine,” she says with a sigh, “I guess if the campaign needs me, I can go. Are you sure you’ll be all right here without me, Clarke?”

Clarke fights her smile. “I’m sure, Mom.”

As Abby formulates her reply to Lexa, Clarke slyly checks her phone to see the message waiting on the screen.

*Lexa [9:57 PM]: Did it work?*

*Clarke [9:59 PM]: Beautifully.*

*Lexa [10:00 PM]: I’ll see you Monday morning, then.*

Clarke is the first one to the office. Not intentionally; she had spent most of the night tossing and turning, never able to fall into a deep sleep for more than fifteen minutes before she’d wake up again, and finally at 4am, she got up for good and headed to the gym. After her workout, she skipped her usual coffee shop and headed straight to campaign HQ. She walks along the rows of empty desks and cubicles and smiles slightly, remembering the old days: back before she had a campaign manager to help her, back before she had donations or endorsements, back when it was just her and staffers from her previous campaign working for as little as she could legally afford to pay them. She would show up at dawn, make terrible coffee in the cramped office kitchen, and refill her cup throughout the day until she would at last force herself to leave long after the sun had set.

Her hand is on the handle of her office door when she decides, just for the hell of it, to go make another pot of terrible coffee. It’s a good idea, until she swings into the small kitchen: her eyes alight on Lexa, bent over as she peers into the fridge. Clarke comprehends the high heels, black pencil skirt, and sleeveless white blouse, and nothing else. That’s when this becomes a great idea.

At the sound of her arrival, Lexa jumps and straightens up, smoothing her face into an amicable mask of greeting; when she sees that it’s only Clarke standing in the doorway, that falls away, revealing a true smile of relief.

“Good morning, Miss Griffin,” Lexa says, lilting amusement in her voice.

Clarke’s still just staring--which prompts Lexa to let her eyes drift down too, drinking Clarke in. She’s wearing high heels like Lexa, and a navy blue dress that clings tight to her chest and hips. They catch in that moment of mutual admiration and attraction, and they revel in it.
“...Is anyone else here?”

“Just me.”

Good. The small smiles disappear as they close the space between them with the force they’ve held back for the past month, chest to chest and waist to waist and hands reaching desperately for something solid to hang onto. Lexa’s mouth tastes like heaven—mint and sweetness that Clarke licks into hungrily, all of her restraint forgotten. Lexa pivots them and pushes Clarke up onto the counter, giving her a better angle to kiss down her neck. Needing her closer, Clarke spreads her legs and pulls Lexa in, pressing their bodies together in search of the pressure and friction that’s been missing.

“Fuck, you feel good,” she whispers into Lexa’s hair.

Lexa runs her hands up Clarke’s thighs and laughs softly. “I haven’t even done anything yet.”

“I don’t care, you feel good.” She can’t articulate it any better than that. Lexa hands could stay on Clarke’s thighs and her lips against Clarke’s collarbone and she’d still think it’s the best sensation in the world, because Lexa is back in her arms.

“I can make you feel better,” Lexa says against her skin. Her hands push farther up Clarke’s thighs, pushing her dress up to her waist.

Of course, Clarke won’t turn down that sensation either.

The low rumble of a moan, in anticipation of pleasure, escapes Clarke’s throat and Lexa responds by dropping her forehead against Clarke’s shoulder, losing control for just a moment.

Her heartbeat pounds in her ears, and the sound of her breathing seems to fill the room, which has narrowed to just the two of them. It’s all so loud that it’s a small wonder Clarke hears it: the swish of the door of the office and the sound of footsteps as a staffer strides in for work.

“Lexa, Lex, hold on—” Clarke gasps, freezing. Lexa wrenches back in fear, her eyes widening when she hears the sound as well. Clarke tilts her head to listen; she has been working in this office for so long that she’s attuned to the sound of the door opening and she can map footsteps through the cubicles. They hurry to straighten their clothes and put some separation between them, praying that those footsteps don’t tread their way.

Clarke picks up a voice after a moment. “Yeah, I’m the first one here...on my computer, just one moment...turning it on now.”

“We’re okay,” she murmurs to Lexa. “They’re at their desk.”

So not heading directly to the kitchen first thing in the morning. Lexa closes her eyes in relief and says a silent prayer of thanks, and turns to step away.

Clarke reaches out and catches the edge of her shirt. “Wait.” She tugs.

Lexa resists, but only so that Clarke can have the pleasure of reeling her in: her eyes soften and twinkle, red-kissed lips twitching in amusement as Clarke pulls her close and kisses her. She won’t have the pleasure of feeling Lexa inside her and biting back moans as she’s fucked on the kitchen counter, but somehow, this tiny stolen kiss warms her with more pleasure than that ever could. Lexa feels good. She always will.
“I’m going to go get coffee from a real coffee shop,” Clarke tells her when they pull apart. She doesn’t need the caffeine, not after this, but she could use some air. “Do you want anything?”

“I’m fine,” Lexa says. “It’s a smart move though, we can act like we never saw each other this morning.”

“You’re not the only strategist here,” she teases.

“Just go get your coffee.” Lexa kisses her one more time before she lets her go.

*

Clarke takes her time in the coffee shop, relishing the long Monday morning lines and enjoying a newspaper as she sits in an armchair and drinks her first cup, because the longer she takes in the coffee shop, the better she hides what happened in the kitchen. She knows it’s an irrational fear—no one is going to see Clarke and Lexa together early in the morning and assume they nearly had sex in the kitchen—but it’s a fear nonetheless so she takes great care to hide everything. But once she has her second latte and the clock ticks toward 8am, she knows she can’t delay anymore.

A group of middle-aged men in suits carrying clipboards are standing around Sarah’s desk when Clarke gets off the elevator. She groans internally—at this stage, anything out of the ordinary is a bad sign, let alone men with clipboards. Something official is happening and it’s going to result in a headache.

Sarah spots her coming and skirts around her desk, hurrying over. “Miss Griffin, representatives from the capital are here, they want to inspect the office and give a presentation on campaign regulations and proper behavior.”

The guilty chord the last five words strike within Clarke almost makes her lose her grip on her coffee. “Are we in trouble?” she asks, lightly, like it’s a joke.

Sarah shrugs. “Apparently it’s standard. Cage Wallace has to undergo one as well, I asked.”

“Forward notice would have been nice,” Clarke mutters, glaring at the huddle of aging white men going over notes and checklists near the front of the office. “What do I have scheduled today?”

“A meeting with Nia Az-“

“Thank god, cancel that. Cancel everything, I have a feeling they’ll need my attention.” Scanning the office and not finding a familiar figure, she adds, “Where’s Miss Ward?”

Already tapping away at her phone, Sarah doesn’t look up to notice Clarke’s concern. “I believe she’s with her sister, they’re interviewing Raven currently.”

“Conference room?”

“Yes.”

As Sarah cancels Clarke’s plans for the day, Clarke strides quickly away from her and the clutch of officials from the state capital, hoping to grab Lexa for backup before she has to meet them. Without knocking, she cracks the conference room door open and peers inside: Anya and Raven sit across
from each other, Raven leaning back as she talks and Anya scribbling notes. Lexa sits slightly behind her sister; she’s entirely unnecessary for the interview, but after this morning, Clarke understands the need to get away and distract oneself with something meaningless.

“Good morning, Anya, Raven, Miss Ward,” Clarke says, announcing her presence.

“Good morning Miss Ward?” Raven says with a laugh, turning to see Clarke. You mean you two weren’t here together before everyone else for once?”

Lexa’s eyes widen and flick towards the back of Anya’s head, but she stays bent over the notepad, finishing a sentence.

“Coffee shop line was long this morning,” Clarke mumbles. Then, more officially: “Lexa, I wanted to let you know, some officials from the capital just arrived, they’re going to be in the office all day and they have some sort of presentation later. What’s your schedule like?”

“Clear, now,” Lexa says. “I’ll entertain them—“

“I can handle it,” Clarke assures her, giving Lexa a nod that makes her sink back into her seat. “But I would like you to attend the meeting later. How’s the interview going?”

“My most interesting one yet,” Anya says brightly, but with a sarcastic tinge that worries Clarke.

“Raven...”

“I haven’t said anything bad!” Raven says, indignant.

“She’s been fine,” Anya says with a small laugh. “I mean, the opportunity to interview a close friend who has also been overseeing the campaign has provided me with plenty of material. I would also like to get some professional pictures done for features about the different people in your life, but I don’t have any equipment with me.”

“Octavia and Lincoln do,” Raven says after a moment. “Old friends. They’re professional wildlife photographers but they’re in town for a while because Octavia is pregnant and about to blow. They’ll interview shots for free, they’d like to help.”

Another intersection of personal and professional makes Clarke purse her lips, but Anya accepts immediately and this one seems so benign that there’s not much she can say. “Just ensure that any interview shoots don’t get in the way of any campaign duties for anyone who is working.”

They agree simply to placate her, as even Anya now knows that her obstinacy is just a product of her irritation at the arrival of the inspectors. With nothing else keeping her in the conference room, Clarke puts on a smile and goes out to greet the new arrivals.

The men from the state capital are just as dull as their ill-fitting suits promise. “We won’t impose, Representative Griffin,” one says, except they do. She spends most of the morning tending to them, following them around, introducing them to staffers, showing them books and reports and records. It’s a job that, logically, anyone in the office can do, but when Clarke tries to pass the job off to a volunteer, she gets less than five minutes of peace before the inspectors are asking for her again. Granted, showing them around the office is better than spending lunchtime meetings with Roan and Nia Azgeda, but such a tedious, time-consuming task after her electrifying start to the morning with Lexa is a bit of an unwelcome tone shift.

At least Lexa isn’t there to distract her—for most of the day. She stays at Anya’s side and out of the way, until the early afternoon, when the men return from lunch and declare that it’s time for the
presentation on campaign finance ethics and regulations. Clarke, following them into the conference room, sees Lexa waiting by the door and stops to create some distance between herself and the inspectors. Lexa moves closer as the rest file into the room.

“How has the day been?” she asks, in quiet greeting. Clarke wants to pull her in for a hug, but goes with attitude, instead.

“Besides this morning...” She jerks her head at the men. “Take a guess.”

Lexa averts her eyes, trying to remain serious. The beat gives Clarke a chance to look down at Lexa’s body in this private stolen moment, and the memory of the morning comes rushing back. Her senses recall all of it: the scent of perfume, the mint taste of her mouth, the silk blouse under her hands. Clarke swallows and teases, “At least I’ve been able to focus on my own.”

Eyebrow quirking up, Lexa catches her meaning. “Should I not sit in on this presentation then? They’re expecting both of us.”

“I’ll be fine,” Clarke snaps.

That pride doesn’t stop her from selecting a seat on the opposite side of the room, as far away as possible from Lexa. She sets her laptop up and readies herself, like a college freshman, to give the presenter her upmost attention.

He does her no favors, however. With a voice that drones like a bee stuck in a jar and a subject matter that could help put young children to sleep, he quickly loses Clarke’s interest. She tries her best, following the discussion and nodding along with the examples he gives of historical missteps from candidates. She convinces herself that it’s all far more interesting than the girl on the other side of the room, who, when Clarke looks closely, may still have a few wisps of hair loose from her bun, as a result of Clarke’s fingers earlier.

Clarke shakes her head. Focus on something else, come on.

With the presentation no longer an option and Lexa a dangerous one, she shifts her attention to her laptop, instead. She pulls it closer so that no one around her can see the screen and pulls up her email; with half a dozen outreach messages to type and two nagging journalists, she might as well make use of this time.

She’s halfway through a reply to the first journalist when a small box appears in the bottom corner of her screen.

New message from L Ward.

Patting herself on the back for remembering to mute the computer before this meeting, Clarke surreptitiously scans the room: all eyes are on the presentation, even Lexa’s. There’s no indication she sent anything. Frowning, Clarke opens it.

LW: You could at least try to look interested. Don't make my job even more difficult.

Clarke hides a smile.

CG: Meanwhile, you're trying a bit too hard.

She presses send and watches Lexa receive the message: the other woman casually glances at her screen, then back to the presentation as she types, her face never changing--like she’s simply taking notes. She’s good. But as she presses send, her gaze flicks toward Clarke for a half-second, a furtive
glance that makes Clarke’s mouth run dry.

LW: Are you telling me Clarke Griffin, future US Senator, isn't interested in campaign finance regulations and ethics?

CG: And Alexandria Ward, brilliant political science graduate, isn't either?

LW: I'm a behind the scenes girl, you're the one running for office.

CG: Everyone knows you’re in charge.

Clarke fights back a smile. They go back and forth, maintaining perfect composure and consummate professionalism, perhaps a skill honed by the months of sneaking around. Lexa even manages to look bored, for anyone who doesn’t know her--but Clarke can see the light dancing in her eyes as they message back and forth. There’s an illicit thrill to it, the same feeling she got when they snuck out of the hotel for fast food on the road trip weeks ago.

LW: Wait until the press gets wind of your lack of interest in these things. They’ll go crazy.

CG: You could give far more damaging things to the press, I trust you with this little secret.

There’s a pause before the next message.

LW: What's my silence worth to you?

CG: I don't know, but I'll definitely give you a bonus if you can figure out a way to get us out of here.

LW: A bonus what?

The slip into dangerous territory is so enticing and yet imperceptible; the illicit thrill is no longer about the fear of getting caught not paying attention, but the dark, suggestive feel of Lexa’s message. With heat curling low in her stomach, Clarke responds without hesitating.

CG: I was thinking of the monetary type, but if you want something else...

LW: I do.

CG: Tell me.

The three blinking dots pulsate, tantalizing.

It seems like ages. The wait is torture itself; Clarke tries to steady her heartbeat--she’s certain the person next to her will be able to hear it if it gets much louder--as she shifts between watching the dots and watching Lexa. Lexa, on the other hand, is perfectly relaxed as she takes in the presentation and jots down the occasional note. By the time the notification comes, Clarke’s so tense she jolts.

LW: Tell me what your lingerie looks like.

It takes everything in her not to swear. She grasps for the humor instead.

CG: Oh please, you can do better than a slightly fancier "so what are you wearing" line

LW: I'm just trying to imagine what you’re going to look like in twenty minutes.

CG: Twenty minutes? It’s two in the afternoon.
LW: You have a private office. I’m locking the door and closing the blinds.

CG: To do what?

God this would be so much better if they could be whispering in each other's ears in a dimly lit hotel room in a nameless city, with the whole night ahead of them, but something in the nature of doing it in a room full of people while trying to maintain a straight face already has Clarke's thighs quivering. Lexa hasn't looked her way once but she can see the way her face has changed: her eyes watch the presentation without seeing it; her fingers, normally drumming on the table, are motionless. She’s holding herself perfectly still, forcing herself not to move.

LW: I want you in your office

LW: biting down on your hand to stay quiet

LW: while I hold you down on the desk

Each message, a minute apart. Intentionally. Clarke nearly loses her composure in the wait between and she swears she can see Lexa smirk.

LW: and sink my fingers into you.

CG: It’s been too fucking long. You know how much I need you. I’m already wet.

CG: You also know that I’m not using my hand to stay quiet. I’ll stay quiet with my lips on your neck.

For the first time, Lexa reacts: she reads the message and closes her eyes in an effort to keep control.

LW: when this is over, you’re mine.

A promise Clarke will demand Lexa keep, regardless of everything around them.

L Ward has logged out.

Twenty minutes pass. Then thirty. They go over the use of PACs and tax brackets and donation limits like it’s a high school civics class, and Clarke hears none of it for the buzzing in her ears and the ache between her thighs.

Watching Lexa shift uncomfortably should give her some sort of satisfaction, but knowing that she’s just as turned on only makes the ache worse, to the point where she’s shocked she hasn’t given the game away yet. But it seems, in her favor, that everyone including the presenter has lost interest by the time they’re finished with the presentation; no one notices the pink flush that has risen through her chest and face. She thanks God for that.

When they're finally done, Clarke stands at the door and bids every man an individual goodbye as they file out. She accepts their praise with a bright smile and nod-- “Excellent environment, Representative Griffin!” “Good luck in the election!”--but she hears none of it. Lexa has stepped away and ensured that Clarke was watching when she slipped unnoticed through the door into Clarke’s office, and that’s where all of Clarke’s attention is now.

Once they’re gone, she walks to her office as quickly as possible without arousing more suspicion.

“I have a conference call with my mother and some of her colleagues,” she tells Sarah, heart pounding. “Please don’t let anyone disturb me for about...a half hour.”
Sarah frowns. “Miss Ward said you had a Skype meeting with Nia Azgeda after the canceled lunch meeting.”

That sends her into a fake coughing fit to cover her sudden embarrassment. “Of course,” Clarke says once she recovers. “I completely forgot about that. Miss Ward will be thrilled I’m double booked.”

“Good luck!” Sarah says brightly.

*

Lexa stands waiting, leaning back against Clarke’s desk, her arms crossed over her chest. Clarke slows as she enters, waiting for some sort of sign, some movement; Lexa just fixes her with a hungry stare that travels up and down Clarke’s body, intention written all over her face. Her lips curl upward in a sly smile. She doesn’t move. She waits.

Clarke locks the door behind her.

Lexa’s lips curl higher, but she still doesn’t move, languid and relaxed in her tight skirt and high heels—she’s going to make Clarke come to her. On any other day, Clarke would battle with her pride, try to play Lexa’s game, try to assert her own power, but not on a day when she’s been desperate for this since dawn. She rushes across the room and meets Lexa in a hard kiss, thanking God for the seal of their lips because she lets loose a moan that would rouse the whole office if they could hear it.

They don’t have time for foreplay—that was during the meeting. As promised, Lexa turns Clarke around with a surprising strength, clearing a space on the desk and laying her back. Clarke’s legs spread for her; she runs her hands up them anyway, relearning the skin she hasn’t been able to touch for weeks, making it a part of her again. Clarke focuses on her face, watches the way that her eyes close and her lips part with the force of her need as she explores the soft skin of Clarke’s inner thighs. That face is everything; her pleasure comes not from Lexa’s touch, but from the way Lexa looks at her, the way Lexa looks when she touches her. Clarke knows, deep down, that she was undone far before they ever were ever able to meet skin to skin.

With this thought, she surges up from the desk and loops an arm around Lexa’s shoulders, capturing her lips in another kiss. They need to be close to each other, forget the aesthetic of being laid back on a desk.

Lexa pushes Clarke’s dress up around her waist, allowing her legs to spread wider and circle her waist. She thumbs the edge of the lace underwear just once, her eyes dark and heavy as she looks down between their bodies, and then she pushes the underwear aside, sinking two fingers into Clarke.

Clarke has to bite her lip to silence the cry that comes with the sudden wave of pleasure. “F-fuck,” she forces out, breath shaking under the pressure of staying quiet. “You’re so perfect.”

But at the same time Lexa’s fingers begin to move in a slow grind, they realize it: there’s no way Lexa can get Clarke off in the office. There’s no way they can have sex so quietly that no one around them hears it. Hotel walls were made to silence noise from neighbors; office walls aren’t quite the same, and besides—neither woman is satisfied with quiet, furtive sex anymore.

“This isn’t enough,” Clarke whispers, rolling her hips against Lexa. “We’ll have to wait until later, if
I come...they’ll know.”

“I know.” Lexa kisses down her neck. “Come over tonight. I’ll make you dinner. A real date.”

“You’re asking me on a date when you have your fingers inside me?” Clarke asks, breathless and incredulous.

“Is there a better time?”

Can’t argue that, even if she weren’t mindless with pleasure. “What about Anya?”

“Set her up in a Venice hotel for a few days.”

“A few days, huh?”

Goosebumps rise on her skin when Lexa laughs softly in her ear. They squeeze every second out of the short time they have, kissing and grabbing and Clarke riding Lexa’s fingers as if she’ll somehow get the release she needs, knowing the entire time that it won’t be enough, not right now. They know it’s an inevitability that someone knocks on the door--when it happens, Lexa groans against her shoulder and pulls away, reluctance emanating from every inch of her body.

Clarke should be more disappointed--turned up and let down--but seeing Lexa’s dismay, she feels the need to reassure her first: “We’ll have all night at your apartment later.” She re-adjusts her dress for the second time today, then heads around her desk and falls into her chair, her legs weak. “Can you let in whoever is out there?”

Lexa nods, steeling herself. “Leave early...around seven. I’ll text you the address.”

“I’ll be there by eight,” Clarke promises. “Wine?”

“On a Monday night?”

They share a small smile.

*

She checks the address Lexa sent her, even as she stands in the elevator on the way up to her floor. All this time, and she’s never been to Lexa’s apartment. One finger taps at the neck of the wine bottle she’s holding; when she notices what she’s doing, she grimaces.

She’s a politician. Clarke Griffin. Leading the race for US Senator. She makes speeches and argues with people well above her station and shakes hands for a living. And she’s known Lexa for months now. They’ve started to learn the deepest parts of one another, and neither has flinched. She shouldn’t be nervous.

But she is.

As she walks down the hallway, she has a fleeting thought that her nerves might not stem from meeting Lexa...but the depth of her feelings for her.

Then Lexa answers the door, and Clarke knows it’s true. The way her heart leaps at the sight of Lexa—hair down, in a soft, breezy t-shirt and jeans—has only one true meaning.
“You wore jeans,” Lexa says, smiling at the sight.

“Didn’t we decide on jeans for a date?” Clarke replies.

“I wasn’t sure if you remembered.”

“Oh of course.” As if I could forget any of that conversation, she thinks, as Lexa steps aside to invite her in.

Her apartment is smaller than Clarke’s, but made more spacious by smart lighting choices and wide windows, their shades thrown open to the dim glow of downtown Los Angeles in the nighttime. The arrangement is simple, modern: a dark couch and a comfortable looking arm-chair; a wall-mounted TV that looks like it’s never been turned on, and knowing Lexa, it probably hasn’t been; no dining table but a long counter with bar stools separating the living room from the kitchen, out of which wafts the intoxicating scent of dinner.

“You’re cooking?” Clarke asks, grinning at her as she follows the scent.

“I have talents outside of politics, Clarke.” Lexa trails behind her with a small smile.

“I’m well aware, just not that cooking was one of them. Cook often?”

“Naturally.”

“Oh really?” She skips ahead of her, stepping to the fridge before Lexa can call her back and swinging it open to reveal rows of takeout containers, a mirror image of Clarke’s fridge on her best day. “Didn’t know you had a second job at a restaurant, Miss Ward.”

But Lexa has seen the completely unused state of Clarke’s kitchen, and that’s her downfall. “Look who’s talking, Miss Griffin.” In one swift motion, Lexa glides forward and shuts the door, stepping into its place in front of Clarke, close enough to steal a kiss.

“What’s for dinner?” Clarke asks her, done teasing.

“Just salad, pasta, and salmon. I had grander plans...but not enough time.” She smiles ruefully. “Maybe after the election. But it won’t be done for a while, so we can sit down. Bring the wine,” she adds over her shoulder as she strides back out to the living room.

As Clarke sinks onto the couch, letting herself relax for the first time today, Lexa opens the wine and pours it into two waiting glasses on the coffee.

As Clarke sinks onto the couch, letting herself relax for the first time today, Lexa opens the wine and pours it into two waiting glasses on the coffee. It’s then that Clarke notices the unlit candles on different surfaces around the room--waiting. She hides a soft smile. She’s known Lexa is amazing; she didn’t know she was such a romantic. But as she accepts a full glass from Lexa, she notices the worried lines in the girl’s forehead.

“Is everything okay?”

“I’m...sorry about this afternoon,” Lexa says slowly.

“This afternoon?”

“The messages, in the meeting. It was unprofessional. We have been so focused on work, that I didn’t realize how much I missed you—talking to you, being around you, being close to you—until this morning. And when I did...I lost some of my restraint.”

Clarke can’t help quirking her eyebrow in amusement. “Some?”

“Most,” Lexa admits.”
“Not all?”

She picks up Clarke’s teasing tone and realizes she never needed to apologize in the first place. The lines disappear, replaced by a raised eyebrow. “If I’d lost all of it, I would have excused us and pulled you into your office during the meeting.”

“Well you didn’t seem to have much restraint left in the kitchen this morning...”

“Me?” she asks, outraged. “You jumped me, if I recall correctly.”

“Did I? Like this?”

Smoothly and so quickly that Lexa can’t react, Clarke swings a leg over her, sliding into Lexa’s lap and straddling her; they don’t spill a drop of wine. Lexa leans back and tilts her chin up to accept Clarke’s soft kiss, then hums happily when she deepens it, her free hand coming up to rest on Clarke’s hip. They kiss like that until they lose track of time, all velvet and warmth, moving like the slow ebbing and rolling of a gentle tide on the sand. When they pull apart, they rest their foreheads together.

“I’m so weak for you, Clarke.”

“Just be mine. That’s all I want.”

“I am yours. I don’t want to be anything else.”

The words are on the tip of her tongue; she wills herself to say them, despite the hammering in her chest. Instead, she says, “I’m yours too,” and cuts herself off by kissing Lexa again.

Soon.

* 

Dinner is ready far before they start reaching for hemlines and bare skin; in that moment, simply kissing is worth everything, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t reluctant to pull apart when timers start buzzing. Once Clarke tastes Lexa’s dinner, she regrets teasing her about the take-out, making up for it with such effusive praise that Lexa’s cheeks turns pink and she begs Clarke to stop, but they’ve finished the bottle of wine between them and Lexa doesn’t quite exude the same level of control she did in Clarke’s office this afternoon.

“So...” Clarke leads, once they’ve finished dinner. “I noticed the candles you’ve set up.”

The blush rises in Lexa’s cheeks again. “I have my moments.”

Clarke cocks her head onto her shoulder. Her mind buzzes pleasantly, foggy from the wine. “Do you have any in the bedroom?”

Lexa’s eyes darken.

They strip away their clothes as they go--a slow march down the hallway to Lexa’s bedroom, savoring every moment, open and languid in a way they haven’t been able to be in months, if ever. This feels different, somehow. The way Lexa lays Clarke back on the bed like she’s a precious thing, cradling her in Egyptian cotton sheets and soothing her hot skin with the trailing touch of her
fingertips. They lose track of time as they kiss, bodies rolling against each other; they lose track of all thought as Lexa works her way down Clarke’s body, tasting every inch of skin with sloppy, open-mouthed kisses. Clarke’s fingers tangle in Lexa’s hair as Lexa settles between her legs and looks up.

All thought, except one.

I love you, I love you, I love you.

It plays on repeat in Clarke’s head; she resigns herself to gasps and sighs and moans to prevent the words from slipping out before she knows they’re both ready. It’s easy to hold them back as Lexa works her up with her tongue; it’s harder when they’re tangled together, face to face and chest to chest and breathing in each other’s sighs. No matter how sleepy she becomes, how desperate, how mindless, she never breathes the words...but they reverberate in her soul.

She would give up the entire world for this. She’d give up the entire world for this girl. She wants Lexa, and nothing else.

*

“Clarke.”

“Hmm.”

“Clarke, we overslept.”

Clarke opens one eye. The room is still dark; she could half believe that it’s still the middle of the night, that she’d just dozed off after yet another orgasm. “No we didn’t.” Blindly, she reaches out for Lexa’s hand, catching the fingers and tangling hers in them, trying to reassure her.

“Yes, we did. I have blackout curtains; the sun is already up.”

Then she remembers where she is and jolts up, looking with horror to the girl lying beside her. “God, I’m used to the lighting in my apartment,” she says. “How much time do we have?”

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” Lexa says. She puts a hand on Clarke’s back to calm her. “We have time. Not a lot, but enough. You’ll have to shower here though, okay?”

“Will you have time?” Clarke asks, scrambling out of bed and heading for the bathroom.

Lexa gets caught staring at Clarke’s nude body--there’s something even more beautiful about seeing her here, in her bedroom, that doesn’t compare to the past--before she realizes that was a question. “I should have time. Anya is coming over soon but she can wait if I’m still in the shower.”

“Just join me,” Clarke says, poking her head back out of the bathroom with a smirk.

That’s too good of an opportunity to turn down.

By the time she finishes laying out her clothes and grabs towels for both of them, Clarke is already in the shower, under the water. Lexa watches her through the rippled glass, marveling at the abstract display of her body distorted by the water and somehow even more beautiful. She wants mornings like this: oversleeping and showering together, sometimes with breakfast and sometimes with a mad rush for coffee before running out the door. It amazes her how everything becomes so much brighter
with the prospect of Clarke in her life, coloring every facet--it also alarms her.

But before she pontificates too much and freezes herself into a philosophical statue, she strips down and steps into the shower, and the sight of Clarke’s bare skin and smile wipes all thought from her mind.

Silently, Clarke steps back and invites her under the water. Lexa doesn’t hesitate--and then then moment she steps under the stream, she wrenches back.

“Christ, Clarke, what circle of hell do you pipe your water in from?”

Completely unbothered, as if the scalding water is merely lukewarm, Clarke considers. “If I remember Dante right, either the second, sixth, or eighth.” In response to Lexa’s raised brow, she adds: “The eighth is for treachery and hypocrisy, and corrupt politicians--”

“None of which you’re guilty of.”

Clarke’s turn to look skeptical. She gives the space between their naked bodies a pointed glance.

Lexa rolls her eyes. “Sleeping with me doesn’t make you corrupt.”

“It toes the line,” she replies, with a small smile. “The sixth is for heresy, which needs no explanation.”

“And the second?”

“Lust.”

Lexa’s eyes go dark; she looks Clarke up and down. When faced with the picture of Clarke Griffin, rivulets of hot water streaming down over her bare body, beckoning her closer with the parting of her lips as she talks about 13th century Italian poetry...lust seems like too soft a word for the amount of attraction Lexa feels. She steps forward into the stream of hot water and presses her lips against Clarke’s. She runs her hands over the slick skin, delighting in this new sensation.

“Mmmm...have you ever had shower sex?” Clarke breathes.

Lexa laughs, because that’s all she can do to prevent the buildup of frustration. “God, don’t tell me that. We don’t have time...”

“But we do have tonight.”

She opens her eyes. “That, we do. Another date?”

“My place this time,” Clarke says. “My shower is bigger...and the shower head is removable.”

This sets Lexa laughing again, a genuine laugh this time, made worse by Clarke’s devilish grin.

After a bit more teasing, Clarke takes pity on her and finishes her shower without slowing them down anymore, allowing Lexa to turn down the water and quickly finish up as well. When she gets out, Clarke is wearing a borrowed hoodie and sweats, last night’s clothes bundled up in her arms. “I just checked the traffic,” she explains, “I have to get home if I’m going to make it to work on time.”

Lexa nods, crossing the room for a kiss. “I’ll see you soon, then; drive safe.”

Once she’s gone, the entire apartment feels bigger, emptier. Since moving to Los Angeles, she had done little with the apartment beyond filling it with a basic package of furniture. Having Clarke here,
on the couch and in the kitchen and in her bed, has made the space feel more human and full of life than it has in months. Her heart aches too, similarly empty, reminding Lexa again of just how alarming the intensity of this attachment has become. But it’s a fear she’s more than willing to deal with, because the warmth Clarke brings to her life is worth every risk.

She’s nearly finished getting ready when Anya arrives, coffee in hand.

“Venice is full of hipsters and tourists,” is her dry summation.

“It’s free, don’t complain,” Lexa shoots back, accepting the coffee.

“I’m not; it’s fascinating. Once I’m done being a journalistic lapdog for the campaign, I’m going to go a full report on the place.”

“Sounds great,” Lexa says, sipping her coffee as she hurries to collect the rest of her supplies for the day. Anya follows her into the bedroom, talking about the people-watching she did and the restaurants she plans to attend in the next two days. Lexa tunes her out quickly; after a few minutes, Anya has to say her name twice to get her attention.

“Lexa. Lexa! Where did this come from?”

She has no time to play twenty questions about her apartment and possessions; indignant, she turns to tell Anya as much and her breath turns to lead in her throat when she sees the jewel blue bra Anya is holding up—not Lexa’s color and a cup size too large. Clarke’s.

“Is this yours?” she asks curiously.

“Ah...not that I recall,” Lexa says slowly, pretending to examine it, her brow furrowed in confusion. “Must have been from a one night stand I had.”

“Last night?” Anya demands.

“Months ago,” Lexa says, with a shake of her head. “I remember her but didn’t realize she’d left her bra; it must have been in an endless laundry cycle.”

As far as she knows, Anya is too straight to pick up on Clarke’s cup size and make the connection from a single piece of lingerie, but the lack of commitment in Lexa’s answers puzzles her for a moment. In that breath of silence, Lexa holds her breath and sends prayers to every god she doesn’t believe in, and finds herself thinking of Dante’s Inferno again.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” Anya says, shaking her head.

“I do.” Lexa promises herself as much as Anya. “Now hurry, please. I should have left ten minutes ago.”

“Okay, okay, fine.” Anya grabs her bag and slings it over her shoulder, then strides out of the apartment ahead of Lexa. “I have a full day too, you know. Those photoshoots for people I’m interviewing should take all day.”

“Sounds busy,” Lexa muses idly as she locks her door.

“It is. Raven, Roan, some staffers...it should take a while. When should I schedule yours?”

Lexa stops short. “What?”

“The photoshoot for your interview,” Anya says, furrowing her brow.
“I’m not being interviewed.”

“Of course you are.”

“Why would I be interviewed?” she demands.

“Because,” Anya says. She raises her chin. “The interview series is about people close to Clarke, the people who know her best. The people most important to her.”

“And?”

“I figured the woman who is sleeping with her is included in that list. First question: how long?”

Chapter End Notes

Three chapters to go! It has been a hell of a journey so far. Thank you, a million times over, for all the support. You guys have no idea how much it means xx
thought I'd left for good, huh?

How long.
The question punches through her and all the warmth in her body drains from the gaping wound it leaves behind.

How long have you been sleeping with her?
Since the first debate.

But sleeping with her is too shallow a term, too banal to cover the scope of it.

How long have you had feelings for Clarke Griffin? Since the first moment we got too close. How long have you believed in her so strongly you’d go to war for her? Since the moment I met her. How long have you even known her?

It feels like forever.

And forever is crashing down now, with Anya’s very simple question. Everything in Lexa seizes up, revolts against the inescapable fate of being found out, so that the only emotion she can muster through the icy numbness is pure indignation.

“Are you serious?” she scoffs, far loudly than intended. Anya meets her with a blank, questioning look. “You’re accusing me of sleeping with my boss because you found a bra in my room?”

Denial. To the last.

Anya cocks her head and draws closer, so that she can speak in the hallway without the fear of being overheard. “You can talk to me, Lex--”

“Don’t call me that,” Lexa huffs. Fuming, she pushes past her sister and strides down the hallway, heading for the elevator, with all the poise she can manage on her shaking legs. She has to perform strength now, even if she has none. To show weakness would invite Anya in for the kill.

“What’s wrong with Lex?” Anya asks her.

“You know how much I hate it.”

“I know. Aden is the only person in the world who can get away with calling you that.”

Lexa has to resist the urge to hammer away at the elevator call button, like the final girl of a horror movie, running from a killer stalking her calmly down the hall. But as she pleads for the doors to open, she imagines that that sensation is not dissimilar to what she feels now: bloodless, cold, numb to the tips of her fingers and the bass drum pounding of her heart in her ears drowning out all else.

As Anya approaches with a casual step and a metaphorical knife that could end life as Lexa knows
"Aden’s always called you that,” Anya continues when she reaches Lexa’s side. “He always had you wrapped around his finger.”

“He did,” Lexa says, sounding bored. “Baby brothers are like that. Now, can we stop with the non-sequiturs and weird conspiracy theories, please? It’s far too early and I have too much to think about for me to play games this morning.”

“Non-sequitur means ‘Does Not Follow,’” Anya points out.

“I appreciate the Latin lesson, but I am very much aware of the meaning, hence my utilization of the term. I want you to stop saying things that do not follow, because we have to get to Octavia and Lincoln’s so that we can get these shoots out of the way and I can get back to work."

They’re due to meet Roan, Raven, and a handful of staffers at Lincoln and Octavia’s rented photography studio, to take portraits for Anya’s articles. Clarke will meet them there later; Lexa needs that time to figure out how to break the news that her journalist sister has one of the stories of the year.

Anya, meanwhile, has none of Lexa’s urgency. She sighs, shrugging. “Aden is the only person in the world who could call you Lexa...until now. The night I flew in and you introduced me to Clarke, she called you by his nickname and you lit up like the Fourth of July.”

In the reflection of the silver elevator doors, Lexa watches the blood drain from her face. Then, with a ding, the doors slide open and Anya steps in. She’s played her hand and she can smell victory.

“So...it follows,” she finishes, gleeful.

She knows. Somehow, she knows, and suddenly the edge of the cliff that Clarke and Lexa have been hurtling towards is in sight. The fight drains out of Lexa almost as fast as the blood drained from her face, but she has nothing else to cling to but denial.

“You’re ridiculous,” she says weakly. “You’re going to base something like that on the fact that my boss shortened my name in the middle of a frenzied situation?”

“I’m sure she’s done it more than once in other frenzied situations.” Her eyebrow kicks just high enough to suggest something illicit, deepening Lexa’s glare. “But more importantly, I found her bra in your apartment, Lexa. Now will you please get on the elevator?”

If Lexa had the time, she wouldn’t. She’d take to the stairs, or maybe even go back to her apartment and back to sleep, hoping to wake up from this nightmare. But she doesn’t. The pressure of the day ahead pushes Lexa, still simmering, still pretending Anya doesn’t have her completely read, into the elevator. She moves to press the button for the ground floor—only to be stopped by Anya stepping between her and the panel.

“We’re not going down until you tell me how long you have been on Clarke.”

“Anya, enough,” Lexa hisses. “I told you the bra came from a one night stand months ago. Drop this.”

“It was clearly Clarke’s. Perfect fit.”

“It’s too small.”
“So you’re aware of her cup size? Pay close attention?”

Heat shoots into her cheeks. “Of course not—”

“Because that would be unprofessional, of course, and my Yale grad sister came out of the womb in a power suit. Clarke does have great boobs, though.”

“No she doesn’t.”

Anya raises a brow. “You’re going to lie about this too?”

“I—of course she does. Objectively. But I meant that I haven’t—paid attention, not enough to reply to what you said.”

With a laugh, Anya folds her arms over her chest and leans against the wall of the elevator, smug and satisfied; and it’s then that Lexa realizes she’s been had. All her life, she’s known about Anya’s particular skill for extracting information, running a gambit based on intuition and reading emotions and prodding with just the right questions, and all her life, Lexa has been constructing safeguards and escape hatches to prevent Anya from turning those tricks on her. But now, in a moment of early morning adrenaline and fear, her emotions got the better of her and she gave herself away with a bare minimum effort from her accuser. If Anya was bluffing before, she knows now. It’s all over her face. The momentary flame in Lexa’s chest dies out, leaving her cold, empty, and feeling like she’s breathing smoke. Her shoulders sag in defeat.

Anya studies the change in Lexa’s face and body and relents, reaching behind herself to press the ground floor button.

“So how long?” she asks quietly.

Lexa studies the opposite wall, jaw working back and forth. “Six months or so. Since the first debate.”

Wincing, Anya hisses, “Jesus, Lexa. You’re the smartest woman I know and you can be an idiot, you know that? Sleeping with your boss, a future Senator. You’re risking everything.”

“Believe me...” She glances up at the camera in the elevator, as if it’s recording their conversation. “I’m smart enough to tell myself that almost every night.”

“Then why are you still with her?”

That makes her falter, raises a lump in her throat that chokes off her words. “I don’t--I don’t know.”

She knows. But she’s not ready to admit it yet. Not even to herself, let alone Anya.

Her older sister poises herself for more questions, now that the hunt is on and she’s broken through Lexa’s outer shell; Lexa provides a veritable feast of angles to take, avenues to explore, curiosities to satisfy, and emotions to mine. Anya has a double-edged interest, as a journalist and a sister. Lexa braces for the barrage of questions coming from both personalities, but as Anya takes a breath, Lexa’s phone vibrates in her hand.

“Shit,” she hisses, flooded with relief. “I have a conference call, I have to take this.”

She has the phone to her ear before Anya can argue. It’s a straightforward call, allowing Lexa to sit in on a meeting involving a handful of department heads so that she can keep up-to-date with their progress and responsibilities. It’s only a summary meeting, something she would simply listen to as
she waits in traffic, but with a bevy of mundane questions and thoughtful comments, Lexa manages to stretch the conversation for the entirety of the elevator ride, through the parking garage, all the way to her car. Anya’s rental is parked beside her, which means that Anya follows at Lexa’s heels, listening impatiently to discussion of budgets and mailers.

But she won’t get off so easily: as she moves to open her car door, phone still to her ear, Anya reaches out to push it closed again. She gives Lexa a pointed look and taps her watch.

No option. “That’s enough on the agenda right now,” Lexa tells the staffers on the call. “We can discuss the rest when I get in later this morning. Mbege, see what Miss Griffin has for you to take care of. She’s...” She glances at Anya. “She may be running a few minutes late.”

Anya cocks an eyebrow.

Once Lexa hangs up, she tries again to open her door, knowing full well that Anya won’t budge; it’s more a show of defiance than anything. She heaves an angry sigh and snaps: “If you’re going to prevent me from doing the most basic tasks for the whole day, we’re both going to have a problem.”

“You’re just going to go back to normal?” Anya demands. “You’re going to tell me you’ve been sleeping—”

“And then we’re talking about this at dinner. No distractions, no excuses, everything on...”

“The way she offers the gentle support of shared blood and a shared childhood makes Lexa feel like a small child again, wrapping her skinny arms around her big sister for comfort after losing a soccer game. She has to gird herself against the sudden sentimentality that rises in her and almost pushes her into Anya’s arms now, or at least into a full confession. Being able to get her thoughts out, crystallize them, would maybe give a name to some of the emotions that have been overpowering her lately. But she’s not ready for that.

She pushes a hand back through her hair. “I can’t really think straight right now, Anya,” she mutters. “Between everything I’m handling at work, while trying to keep it all a secret...you can forgive me for having that fear.”

On cue, her cell phone vibrates again. Sterling--no doubt calling about an interview Clarke has tomorrow. Fantastic. Lexa releases a frustrated groan, but Anya lays a calming hand on her forearm.

“Listen to me. I’d never tell anyone. I promise this won’t get out. Take care of everything you were going to do today as if I never questioned you. Put it in the back of your mind.”

Lexa snorts. Easier said than done. Anya discovering her biggest ever secret feels like a door has been opened and it has escaped out into the world, for all to see. Seeing Lexa doubt her, Anya adds, more firmly: “And then we’re talking about this at dinner. No distractions, no excuses, everything on
She’ll take that ten hour reprieve to prepare herself any day. Especially when offered with such a rare display of tenderness from her sister. She nods, finding it hard to swallow with a dry throat. She reaches for her car door again, but the next thing she knows, Anya has wrapped her in a tight hug.

“You’ll be okay, Lexa. I promise.”

Thanks to a few last-minute lane changes of questionable legality and speeds of less-than-questionable safety, Ryder manages to get Clarke to Griffin Campaign Headquarters with just enough time to make it into the office, shoot a quick coffee order at Sarah, and rush into her first of several meetings scheduled for the morning. The near-death experience of the commute keeps Clarke active and awake for the first half of their financial review, but once the adrenaline begins to wane, her mostly sleepless night begins to set in--with the heavy-lidded haziness comes memories of the night, of grinding against Lexa’s hips and feeling long fingers splay across her back. She may not as well not even be in this conference room, for all the material she’s actually absorbing from the presentations; her saving grace is that Lexa is with her sister this morning. She can’t afford a repeat of yesterday’s meeting, despite how much she’d enjoy a repeat of the dinner-date of the evening after.

“Hey!”

A half hour later, it’s Raven swinging into her office, jarring Clarke out of her latest reverie.

“Do I really have to go to this thing?” she whines. “I could be spending the day running through donors who haven’t given in a while, or helping Wells track down some sweet Wallace tax fraud, or--”

“I thought I said we weren’t doing that?” Clarke asks, advising caution with the warning tone in her voice.

“I could be spending the day running through donors who haven’t given in a while,” Raven corrects with a shrug. “Instead, I have to--”

“Interrupt our work to do some glamour shoot with my fake boyfriend, I know,” Clarke says. Her bitterness matches Raven’s. “I don’t really want to, and I told them that any shoots shouldn’t interrupt the work hours, but here we are. Lexa insisted, because Anya insisted.”

Not to mention...her office seems oddly empty without Lexa’s long-legged stride when she’s pacing. God, she actually misses her--what a feeling.

Raven snorts. “I never expected she’d be running this show.”

“You and me both,” Clarke mutters. There’s a lot she didn’t expect that first day that Lexa walked into the interview room.

“Anyway, I came here because I want you to get me out of this,” Raven says. “Fix it.”

“You don’t want a half-page spread about one of the technical geniuses behind the underdog
campaign of the year?"

"Shut up."

Clarke smirks and resumes reading the file in front of her. She’d read the same line three times before Raven barged in, and she doesn’t expect to finish much more of it, but she has to at least look like she’s doing something, especially having just admitted how much sway Lexa has. “How long before we have to leave to make it to the shoot?” she asks, idly.

"Uh, now."

"What?” The file drops to the desk.

“If we’re going to make it across downtown to get there by noon, we should have left five minutes ago. I thought that’s why you’d let me out of this. You okay?”

“Just perpetually fucking late.” Clarke is on her feet and storming past Raven as she says it, leaving the other woman to catch up. Ryder, lingering near the door, spots her purposeful stride and jumps to attention. She doesn’t know if she wants to risk another harrowing drive like the one this morning, but at this point, she doesn’t have much of a choice.

“Jesus, hold on,” Raven says, catching up to them as they step inside the elevator. But in her haste, her foot clips the inch gap between the floor and the elevator, sending her stumbling directly into Ryder’s brick wall of a chest with a sharp “Shit!”

It’s so absurd and out of place in their high-octane, cool corporate environment, Raven in in her heels and power-suit, that Clarke can’t help but let loose a bark of laughter, which in turn prompts a surprising timbre chuckle from Ryder—they don’t get many opportunities to laugh, which probably makes it more amusing than it is, but Clarke welcomes the feeling regardless. Even Raven starts to smile as she straightens herself up and smooths out her suit.

“Great,” she groans, trying to hide her amusement. “I’m going to have to talk the security team into erasing that. Monty will probably find a way to pull it up as revenge for me making them work so much while you were gone.”

Clarke’s still grinning, but the suggestion confuses her. “What do you mean?”

"While you were on your road trip, there was a lot to do, so--"

"No, I understand that. What do you mean about the security team erasing it? Erasing what?"

“The cameras in the elevator,” Raven says, nonchalant and already recovered as she pulls out her cell phone. "Recorded me tripping."

“There aren’t any cameras in here,” Clarke replies, frown growing deeper.

“Uh, yeah there are.” Raven scoffs and points at a spot above Clarke’s head. “Do you really think a building like this wouldn’t have a basic security system? Monty or I could hack into it, obviously, it’s not that advanced, but it still exists. It’s not 1950.”

Clarke looks up, and sure enough, behind a dark glass ceiling panel, she can faintly make out a lens and a blinking red light. She would never have seen it if she didn’t know it was there.

_Hmm._ That’s interesting. And, for some reason, terrifying.
The sudden surge of instinctual panic within her piques her curiosity, for a moment. She can’t place the reason why her heart suddenly beats so much faster—until the moment she remembers, vividly remembers, Lexa pushing her back against the opposite wall of the elevator, kissing her, grinding their bodies together, all under the watchful eye of the camera with the blinking red RECORDING light.

“Oh my god.”

“What?” Raven looks up from her phone with alarm.

Every move, every look, every kiss of their frantic hook-up in the elevator had been recorded—months ago. That footage could be anywhere. Anyone could have it. Anyone could be waiting for the opportune moment to drop it, blackmail her, or extort her. She’s entered the halls of disgraced politicians, and she hasn’t even been fucking elected yet. It crumbles away like sand.

And now Raven is studying the apparent panic on her face with increasing suspicion the longer Clarke takes to answer. Something about the upcoming debate jumps to her lips.

“I just—I’m thinking about a point I’ve been struggling to remember for the debate.”

“Then how are you thinking about it?”

She feels as if all the air has escaped the elevator. “W...what?”

“Yes, you know what, never mind.” Raven waves a hand and returns to her text message. “I’m just here for the tech and the illegal shit, the opportunity to burn Cage Wallace to the ground.”

“Are we being recorded?” Ryder asks, disapproving.

Raven shrugs. “No sound, video only. I can say whatever I want in here, they can only see it.”

Clarke squeezes her eyes shut. She can’t imagine she’d managed to stay quiet all those months ago, but at least they can’t hear her moaning on the tape.

She snorts. Small comforts.

When the elevator reaches the lobby, she hardly hears the confused objections of Raven and Ryder when she charges out of the elevator and away from the front door, heading instead for the security desk. She knows them all by name, but that doesn’t mean that the guard on shift looks any more relaxed when he sees her coming.

“Mr. O’Connell, hello. I need to talk to you,” she announces, her clear voice ringing off of the glittering tile and all-glass facade of the building.

The guard, an aging man who still carries himself with the force of a younger and more powerful police officer, sits up straight in his chair at her approach. “Representative Griffin, good afternoon,” he replies, then drops the courtesy when he sees her determination. “Is everything okay?”

“The cameras in the elevator to my floor, are the operational?” she demands.

“I—Of course.”

Fuck. She moves to her next hope. “And what happens to the tapes? Overwritten or stored?”

“Very few buildings of this size use tapes anymore, Miss Griffin, and we are a platinum-certified
security company. We store all security images in digital form on a cloud-based server for a minimum of one year.” He frowns when he sees that this does not alleviate her flashing eyes, try as she might to calm herself and smooth her face. “Is something wrong? Would you like to review any footage?”

“No! God, no,” Clarke stammers with an urgency that only deepens his concern. She’s fully aware that her scramble to come up with a plausible story is sinking her deeper into a hole she will soon not be able to climb out of, not to mention the feelings of curiosity and impatience emanating from Ryder and Raven, who wait behind her where she left them. She throws caution to the wind and wonders if her he can hear the way her voice shakes. “I do, however, have a few questions for whoever was on shift on a certain night a few months ago. Would it be possible to look up whoever was working on the evening of June 8th?”

It’s not much of a plan, but she at least has to know who she’s up against.

As O’Connell searches his desk for old calendars, Clarke looks back to Raven and Ryder, who frown at her, with Raven mouthing a silent question: What’s going on? Clarke merely shakes her head, waving a reassuring hand with the best fake smile she can muster.

“Ah, here it is,” O’Connell says, saving Clarke from having to see Raven’s reaction. “Back in June...John Murphy was on the night shift rotation. He’ll be on tonight’s night shift, if you’d like to talk to him.”

Murphy. Slightly grungy, slightly sarcastic, with an attitude that slides from shifty to supportive depending on his mood and the way you approach him. Clarke fights off a grimace.

O’Connell, she could see hiding the tape, approaching her and not letting anyone else know.

John Murphy? She doesn’t know, and that’s what scares her. She’d like to think the best, but she thought the same of Jasper while he was selling college photos of her to her competitors...

“Miss Griffin?” the guard prods, making Clarke realize she hasn’t responded. “Are you sure there’s nothing I can help you with?”

And for a second, she wonders--has he seen it? She calculates every angle of every crease on his face, wondering if there’s something insidious or snide about his question, wondering if he’s hiding that he knows the truth; then she shakes the thought from her head. Anxiety ridden as she may be, she cannot allow herself to plummet into paranoia like this.

“I’m fine, thank you,” she says, with a deep breath and wide smile. “Just remembered a conversation Murphy and I had on that night and wanted to talk to him about it again. Thank you for your help!” And before she can respond, she turns on her heel and moves across the lobby to rejoin Ryder and Raven as quickly as she can without appearing suspicious. She doesn’t really succeed.

“What was that?” Raven asks.

“Deleting your little spill,” Clarke replies smoothly. Finally, a lie that comes easy.

“Yeah right,” Raven smirks. “How many embarrassing things have you been doing in that elevator?”

Clarke balks, white-faced, until she hears Raven laugh and stride ahead of her into the parking garage. Raven doesn’t know. She doesn’t know. Keep it together.

But until ten minutes ago, she thought no one knew, only to find out that not only has the nonchalant night security guard possibly known about their relationship since Clarke and Lexa began it...there’s
footage. It drives through her thoughts like a railroad spike: if Murphy knows, who else knows? How many will come forward at the worst time, how many tracks does she have to cover? Can she do this? She sees the pictures in her head: the disgraced politician, the public apologies, the news reports, the headlines, the paparazzi photos of her covering her face with her hand. And most of all, she sees her staffers, staring at her silently, crestfallen. They’ve come this far, only to see their hard work amount to nothing because they have a joke for a leader.

She sees Lexa, pulling away too late, her own career in the double grave beside Clarke’s. The thought makes her sick.

She stares silently out of the window as the car glides out of the parking garage and onto the main street. A gaggle of photographers rush from the front of the building to the curb, trying to catch a shot of her through the back window; a few even hop on motorcycles, but Gustus easily loses them in the snarl of Los Angeles traffic. They’ve been more persistent in these final weeks of the campaign; Gustus, Ryder, and security guards in her hotel and her office building have been working hard to keep them at bay, and Clarke has employed her own hypervigilance to ensure nothing unflattering comes out in the press. She had always anticipated that to be her downfall, if it were to happen--a secret captured by an intrepid photographer, a leaked picture, a nosy journalist. She has to laugh at the irony: her downfall will be her own damn building security guard.

Despite the silent concern emanating from Raven beside her, Clarke doesn’t say a word for the ride to the photoshoot, gearing herself up for the smile she’ll have to fake for the next two hours.

* 

The photoshoot is the kind of organized chaos that Lexa thrives in. With a fake boyfriend, two local journalists, five campaign aides, one smug older sister, one very pregnant photographer and her nervous, hovering boyfriend crowding a tiny rented photography studio, Lexa has to be at her best to keep everything operating smoothly.

“John, I need you to do this interview in the corner,” she tells one of the journalists, who’s interviewing Miller, part of Clarke’s HR team. They’re chatting so close to the gray backdrop of the photos that they can consider themselves part of the portraits. The other journalist is calling for Harper, who stands at a laughably small snack table, listening to Roan tell a joke. Roan has been underfoot most of the morning, making his presence a bother with the apparent plan of being excused earlier.

“Roan! Stop distracting the people with actual jobs,” Lexa chirps across the room. “Harper, let’s go.”

Octavia waddles about in the midst of it, her swollen pregnant stomach waving about in front of her and making people back away, like she’s wielding a sword. Her boyfriend Lincoln trails behind her, distraught with the fierceness with which she directs the staffers she’s photographing.

“I need better lighting from above, he’s taller than I thought--Linc, can you--”

And Lincoln dives around Anya to reach for one of the standing lights, as Octavia has taken it upon herself to move the stand even as she was asking him.

“Please, O, please just relax, you’re due in two weeks...”

“I’m fine!”
“We need to hurry this up,” Lexa tells them both, trying not to grit her teeth. “We only have the studio until two, and we still have Clarke’s photos, Roan and Clarke’s couple photos, and Raven as major subjects.”

“You focus on your job, I’ll focus on mine,” Octavia snaps, to Anya’s great amusement.

“Never dealt with pregnant women, have you?” she asks quietly once Lexa retreats.

“Shut up.”

Nonetheless, she can’t fight every battle here, so Lexa avoids Octavia and shifts her attention to cycling the campaign aides through their interviews as quickly as possible and clearing a path for Octavia’s rampage. With her mind going a mile a minute, she has everything operating smoothly, a choreographed mayhem. Even with Lincoln, Anya, and Roan towering over her, Lexa, her voice clear and direct and powerful, is the tallest person in that room.

And then when Clarke walks in, all of her grace and power collapses.

Usually, Clarke’s presence provides both a steadying effect and a surge of smooth confidence, but with Anya stalking through the room with the slyness of a predator on the hunt, Clarke’s arrival just signals the return of Lexa’s worry from this morning. She drops what she’s doing and leaves the two journalists to fend for themselves, hurrying to Clarke.

“Lexa--”

“Clarke, listen, we need to--”

She stops mid sentence. Something’s wrong. Clarke presses her lips together so hard they’ve turned white. She tries a smile; it looks like a grimace.

“What happened?” Lexa demands, voice low.

“I have to talk to you,” Clarke whispers back, “But now is not a good time. Can you come over later?”

Lexa nods quickly. “Of course, I’ll be there. Anya has dinner reservations but I can get out of them; we can take my car from work. Is everything all right?”

“No, no, don’t do that,” Clarke says, shaking her head. “Just come over after. What do you need to talk about?”

Her face creases with concern, but out of the corner of her eye, Lexa sees Anya: she stands bends over a journalist to read over his shoulder, but her eyes are fixed on the pair of women.

“Nothing,” Lexa mutters. “We’ll talk later. I’ll bring over dinner; we can work on debate prep.” This isn’t exactly news she can drop right now.

Fixing her face, Clarke steps past her to greet the team assembled in the studio. Whatever haunts her, she keeps locked behind an iron mask so that it can only invade her thoughts. The looming threat of Clarke being so shaken sets Lexa on edge, but there’s nothing she can do if Clarke isn’t ready to let her in.

Regardless, Clarke slips into the bustle and chaos of the room with an ease that Lexa could never manage. Where Lexa orchestrates, Clarke envelops herself, drawing energy from the room instead of directing it to the proper channels. The aides snap to attention and hurry to finish whatever they’re
doing, be it interviews or set-up; Octavia clears the floor; the journalists, turn over new pages in their notebooks. Everyone clamors for her, needing a piece of her for this or for that, and it takes Lexa a moment of spectating from the sidelines—a little lovestruck and a little tense—before she realizes she has a responsibility too.

“Anya!” Her call is clear and sharp, ringing off the walls. “Now that the future senator has decided to grace us with her presence, what do you need to get this over with?”

Anya’s up for it as Lexa strides to her side. “I want a full shoot with Clarke alone; some with Roan and Clarke a handful with Raven—to highlight your personal history as friends before politics—and we still need to do Roan’s solo shoot.”

“Great. Meanwhile, Monty, I want you to finish up your interview and run through the copy the journalists have. Flag anything I’ll need to see.”

The two have never looked more like sisters, and their combined effect has everyone in the room scurrying to their places. Clarke, meanwhile, rushes to Octavia and wraps her in a tight hug, gingerly angling her body around Octavia’s pregnant stomach.

“I should have taken a leaf out of Raven’s book ages ago,” Octavia gripes, “and just gotten some work through your campaign if I wanted to see you.”

“You shouldn’t be working at all,” Clarke groans, looking down at her belly. Octavia starts to wave her off, but Lincoln steps in.

“She’s not supposed to be,” he mutters. “I was going to do the shoot today, but she refuses to stay on the couch like she’s supposed to. We’re due in like...two weeks.”

“I’ve been on the couch forever! Besides, I know Clarke better than you. I know how to make her look good, you’re don’t have that unique talent.”

“Two weeks?” Clarke says, jaw dropping. “I thought it was still over two months?”

Octavia shrugs. “Date hasn’t changed, Clarke. You’ve just been running ragged. How long was the last road trip?”

They joke, and Octavia follows up with something teasing to Lincoln that draws from him a deep laugh, but Clarke’s face stays creased with dismay as if Octavia and Lincoln are miles away in this moment; she stares at the ground, eyes shifting back and forth as if she’s trying to put together the timeline in which she missed most of her friend’s pregnancy.

“Clarke,” Lexa prompts softly. “We need to get the shoot done.”

“Oh course,” she says briskly, recovering instantly. And, as Clarke always does, she smooths herself and hides her thoughts and puts on a mask for the camera. It’s easy at this point; she’s a great fucking politician. With the rapport between them, Octavia guides Clarke through one of the easiest shoots she’s ever been in, just a half hour of different poses and angles. Raven and Clarke takes half that time, with all three women perfectly in tune with each other.

Roan and Clarke, on the other hand, clash as if they’ve just met. They stand awkwardly, uncomfortably trying to adjust to one another’s positions without communicating. When they finally seem to settle a yard apart from each other, staring straight ahead, Anya gets involved.

“Closer,” she urges. “This is more of a fluff piece, we need it to be relationship shots, not your future President and First Husband portraits.”
Lexa blanches, but not as much as Roan does. Nonetheless, as Lexa stalks away, toward the side of the room where a few chairs sit empty, Roan steps up and steps closer to Clarke, putting an arm around her, flashing a winning smile.

“More affectionate,” Anya calls. “Try to enjoy this. Roan, angle your head....Clarke, turn a quarter to your left...hand on his chest...”

Lexa finds it hard to swallow against her dry throat.

“There, that’s better, these are the kind they’ll need.” Anya pauses as Octavia snaps a few shots from different angles, Lincoln trailing behind her with the lighting. “Okay, Clarke, look up into his face; either one of you can fake a laugh, just make it—”

The words burst forth from Lexa unbidden: “It’s not an engagement photoshoot, can we hurry it up?”

There’s a bitterness in her tone caught by only two people in the room: her sister and her lover. Clarke steps away from Roan with burning cheeks—she knows why Lexa’s jealous. Anya, on the other hand, turns with a smirk and that’s when Lexa’s mood shifts from bitterness to outright anger that her sister is taking amusement in this.

“That’s fine,” Octavia says, totally unaware of the sudden swing in emotions between the three women. “We have plenty of shots. Anya, if you’re satisfied...?”


“Good. Can I have my shoot back now? Clarke, I’d like a few more.”

She all but elbows Anya out of the way, which gives Lexa a flash of satisfaction. But unlike her sister, Lexa can withhold her snide comments—she settles on a withering glare instead, rebuking Anya for her childishness.

When Anya finally turns to see it, she slinks over with a look of apology mixed with amusement. Without being invited, she takes a place at her sister’s side, reclining in the chair for a moment before she speaks.

“I’m sorry for the smirk,” Anya mutters. “That was uncalled for. I just...wasn’t expecting your reaction.”

Lexa snorts. Taking that as an acceptance of her apology, Anya continues on, in a lower voice: “You know, I just realized...the Roan thing. Is it fake? Or is she...”

“Cheating?” Lexa hisses. “She wouldn’t. It’s fake. He’s not good enough for someone like her.”

“Don’t sound outraged,” Anya scoffs. “It was a legitimate question. I wasn’t sure where her morals fell. It seems they cover not cheating, but don’t quite reach the ‘don’t sleep with your employees’ level.”

“She was against this plan.” Lexa watches Roan slouch toward the snack table while Clarke chats with Lincoln nearby. “I pushed for it, because it gave us some positive Hollywood press, and access to his mother.”

“Not a bad plan. Who knows?”

“You, Raven, Octavia, Lincoln, Abby, and Clarke’s secretary.”
“What about all the interviews he and Clarke have done, the appearances...?”

“All planned. I saw to it personally.”

“Well, then.” She pauses long enough to convince Lexa that that’s the end of it, and then: “Let’s see how good your preparations are, Lexa.”

“What? Wait, Anya--Anya, I swear—” But her words, hissed through clenched teeth, don’t work on the girl who practically raised her the way they work on everyone else. Anya glides away, tall and airy with confidence, as if Lexa encouraged her to do this.

She gets everyone’s attention with a clap and plants herself in a seat in front of the couple. “So! Clarke, Roan. If you don’t mind, I had a friend suggest a bit more color in the interview.” Clarke looks to Lexa, who feels her face burn. “Journalist friend,” Anya clarifies, then continues briskly: “We want more of a human interest angle, so I thought we’d discuss your relationship a bit more, and the sometimes heavily trafficked intersection of the personal and political.”

Roan rolls his eyes as he takes his place at Clarke’s side; Clarke too scowls, but after a quick glance around the room of campaign assistants and local journalists, she shifts into a brighter smile--she still has a sham relationship to keep up. “Of course, that sounds great, Anya,” she says, affable as always and doing her best to avoid looking to Lexa, who has taken a seat off to the side of the room.

As Anya sets up her recorder and notepad, Lexa’s attention drifts to Roan, who does not share his fake partner’s fake enthusiasm for the task ahead of them. He’s tired of this, in recent weeks. The all-expenses paid travel and attention must have been entertaining for him, to be sure, but the campaign and all the press Lexa has been putting him through would wear on anyone, especially someone who has no real dog in this fight beyond his mother’s approval. Roan has, Lexa often considers, been her biggest mistake. She’s made moves that have led to worse outcomes, but she’s always made them confidently and with a stroke of finality. None have left her with this sort of lingering discomfort and grating sense of jealousy that she can’t make sense of.

Not to mention, his growing disinterest with the campaign, and his outright disdain for the possibility of being with Clarke after she wins the election.

She watches him closely, scanning for the little tics in his body languages as Anya readies herself. “Why don’t we start with you two telling me how you’re feeling about everything: your relationship, the campaign, the press.”

“So great,” Roan says, flatly. He looks around the room like he might scan a dull bar, uninterested with his prospects, until his lazy scan brings him into eye-contact with Lexa’s icy glare. He clears his throat suddenly. “It’s great,” he repeats, straightening his shoulders. “Very enjoyable to have both worlds.”

Luckily it’s not a video interview, because his face sells more alarm than adoration for Clarke, who smirks and furrows her brow at his sudden change in demeanor before she follows his gaze and spots Lexa’s face. She makes the connection; a sly grin plays at her lips at the thought of Lexa scaring Roan into submission. When Lexa softens her face for Clarke, laughter threatens to bubble through the smile. Lexa has to break their eye contact or else she’ll start laughing too.

Anya, oblivious with her back to Lexa, presses on. “Clarke, what about you? How is it having both worlds intersect like this?”

“It’s great,” Clarke says, with the plainness of a rehearsed answer. “Roan is part of a great support system and his and his mother’s advice has been invaluable.”
Anya pauses, waiting for more. More that Clarke doesn’t have, or at least seems to blank on. Lexa wracks her brain; when did they go over these answers? It feels like months ago.

“Yeah, it’s been nice,” Clarke concludes.

“So lovestruck you’re at a loss for words, huh?” Anya asks.

One of the other journalists glances up, momentarily pausing his typing to observe the exchange.

“Something like that,” Clarke mutters, through a gritted-teeth smile.

“All right then…what is an average date like, for the two of you? How much do you talk about the campaign, the decisions; or does Clarke leave it all at the office, Roan?”

That, the definitely haven’t rehearsed. Roan and Clarke haven’t been on a “date” in months; they’ve hardly been alone in the same room for more than five minutes since they met. Anya’s using the finest of her razor-sharp perception to chip away at Clarke and Roan, and for what? Her own satisfaction? As Roan considers the question—and tries to come up with an answer that he never thought about—the other two journalists pay closer attention. The one who was typing has stopped completely to watch; the other has grabbed a notepad and started to scribble shorthand.

Just as Lexa stands to cut the interview short, Clarke’s gaze falls on her. “Often,” Clarke announces, then shifts to Anya. “We’re constantly talking about the campaign, strategizing, bouncing ideas off of one another. It’s become a point of bonding between us. We think in different ways, so the more we communicate, the better the approach we develop to different problems.”

Anya pulls back in surprise at the depth and breadth of the answer. “And...does that affect your relationship?”

“It improves it,” Clarke replies. “Having someone understand me, get what I’m thinking? It lifts a weight off of my shoulders. And that communication translates so naturally to non-political life.”

Lexa cocks her head. This doesn’t make sense; Clarke never spins bullshit like this so effortlessly and with so much conviction. She eschews the notion, in company like this at least.

“Are you happy?” Anya asks.

Clarke smiles softly; she sends the briefest of glances to Lexa. “Unbelievably.

Realization dawns slowly. Lexa sinks back into her seat. She’s not talking about Roan…

Anya has not picked it up just yet, however, and the interview continues in safe territory. “So tell me, Clarke. What’s something no one knows about Roan Azgeda?”

“He...when we’re flying, during takeoff and landing, Roan plays chess on his phone, because he’s afraid of flying.”

“I am not,” Roan protests, while Lexa’s skin flushes pink.

“And Roan--wait, chess, really?” Anya asks, pausing in her notes. Lexa’s stomach sinks.

She can see the moment it clicks for Anya: the way her head pulls back, the way she tips it toward her shoulder, like she’s thinking. It’s a slow realization, leaving Roan and Clarke shifting uncomfortably. Chess. Of all the things to give it away, it had to be the game her sister taught her. When Anya turns to look back at Lexa with her brow furrowed, it’s to ask silently if her hunch is
Lexa responds with a warning glare, her jaw locked and throat dry, and that’s all the confirmation Anya needs. She turns back to Clarke and Roan with delight.

“Well that’s interesting.”

The journalists are writing in earnest now; there’s a performance to put on and Anya will direct it, to the score of Lexa’s pounding heart. “Let’s get more personal. When you and Roan encounter obstacles, how do you approach them together? You’ve talked about your differences, your different thought processes. Does that get in the way?”

“Not at all,” Clarke tells her. The words come easy now, like she’s excited to say them. “Like I said, there’s an energy between us. Everything is like a debate, back and forth, but instead of positioning ourselves against each other, it’s like we’re building to something together. Sometimes there’s compromise, but most of the time, we’re both adding to the discussion from different perspectives, until we have a complete solution we can agree on.”

Lexa smiles. She’ll never forget all the nights they’d gone back and forth, near shouting, until finally something just clicked, just as Clarke described. But she’ll remember the much more common occurrence of those impassioned debates ending in either sex or one of them coming up with a solution and just doing it regardless of what the other would say. Lexa is a patient person, but sometimes Clarke’s stubbornness demanded action whether Clarke liked it or not. Then again...she can’t really criticize, because Clarke is the only person she’s ever met with a force of willpower that matches her own.

Anya sets her notepad aside, sitting forward with curiosity now that Clarke is really selling this. “What do you love most about Roan Azgeda?”

Clarke considers for a long time, her eyes glowing, her lips curled softly. “Compassion,” she decides. “L—Roan keeps it hidden, but there’s a real, genuine, compassionate soul there, that I—.”

“Is that what you connect with most? You’ve been called compassionate by many in the past.”

“It’s what I need most. Someone to remind me of the good in the world, while also telling me that I have to face the bad with my head held high. I’ve really...” She hesitates. “I’ve really found a home in that. I never expected it.”

She can’t help another glance at Lexa, and Lexa wishes she hadn’t, because Clarke’s words alone—poetic and eloquent in a way Clarke tries to avoid as often as she can—are breaking something within Lexa’s chest, crumbling her resolve like it’s little more than dry sand in the wind. Her heart beats against ribcage for Clarke, and those shining blue eyes flood her veins with a lightness that she knows must radiate out of her. Were anyone to look at her now, as she stares at Clarke, they’d know instantly.

“Speaking of home...” Anya says slowly. “If you win the election, how do you think your relationship will change?”

“What do you mean?” Clarke asks.

“Do you think it’ll be easy to stay together? If Roan lives here, if you’re constantly traveling, working long hours...”

It’s a strange question for an interview, evidenced by Clarke’s bemusement. She struggles for an answer. “I...I’d hope so. It would be difficult but this has become so central to my life.”
“What if you lose the election? What then? Are you the kind of person to try to make the relationship work?”

The sudden edge to Anya’s tone isn’t making the questions any easier. “Of course,” Clarke sputters. “I—I don’t know that I’d be able to give this up. It’s more than politics. My parents went through their ups and downs in and out of campaigns and they stayed together. I think...I know that’s what I want.” She shrugs. “Someday.”

That’s as final an answer as any. Clarke, suddenly demur, looks down at her feet; Anya lapses into a thoughtful silence, sitting back in her chair and tapping her fingers on her notepad; the two journalists type more slowly; and Lexa fades into herself, overcome.

That’s what she wants. And the reason she’s never considered that, is because the moment she does, she realizes she wants it so badly it scares her.

“Are you going to ask me anything?” Roan demands.

Anya doesn’t even look up. “No thanks, we’re done.”

Dismissed. Roan ambles off with a shrug, mingled annoyance and relief, not unlike what weighs down on Lexa when she sinks into her chair once and for all, now that Anya’s little game is over. Whether she was trying to make Clarke slip, or just taunting Lexa, or both, it’s not clear, but Lexa knows damn well that dinner tonight will not be a civil affair.

She can’t stay in her chair for long, though, much as she would like to. While her staffers wander following their photos and Roan chats idly at the snack table again, Lexa still has to ensure Octavia has all of her needed shots, Anya is satisfied with the shoot, and the journalists have wrapped up their interviews—naturally, they want more from Clarke, which forces Lexa into negotiations for interviews in the next few weeks. She’s knee-deep in discussions when she spots Raven out of the corner of her eye, lingering near the table, clearly watching her. Clearly with something to say—privately.

Lexa excuses herself from the two journalists abruptly, telling them someone will reach out, then joins Raven at the table.

“Do you have something on him yet?” she murmurs.

Raven shakes her head, concentrating on the platter of finger sandwiches. “Not yet. But I could, soon. Clarke is still so resistant though...” She trails off, waiting for further instruction.

Instructions Lexa has grappled with for the past several weeks, and today is no easier. Thanks to Wells, the small upper echelon of Clarke’s campaign is well aware that Cage Wallace, and the Wallace Dynasty in general, may have some deep secrets hidden away among their business dealings and financial history, a silver bullet for his campaign. And after seeing some of the things that Raven has done with a computer, Lexa has no doubt that when given free reign, the girl can dig up anything. But with the reigns free, there’s no telling where they might all end up, and the moral and legal implications of that have long since settled in the back of her mind, keeping her firmly on Clarke’s side.

“Just wait,” Lexa decides, yet again. Raven releases a quiet sigh of impatience. “There are still other routes we can take; if we can beat him with what we have now, that’s where we should focus our efforts. Keep up your project with streamlining the volunteer’s work for the run in.”

“So it’s a last resort?” Raven mutters.
“It appears so.”

“You know it’ll come down to that in the end.”

“I do,” Lexa replies, and there’s nothing more to be said. They’re delaying the inevitable in the hopes luck will strike and keep them honorable—a slim chance, historically speaking, but they have few possible choices. The two women turn back to the room, nonchalant to hide their subterfuge, and Lexa finds only one pair of eyes on them: Anya’s.

Her sister will be the death of her.

* 

Clarke watches the clock through her conference call with the San Francisco office. 5 P.M. 6 P.M. Everyone is working late, and everyone is energized about it—except her. She can blame it on a “strenuous” photoshoot, but privately, she spends her time watching the clock tick towards the security guard shift change, which leaves her with a growing sense of guilt, and little room for paying attention to the task at hand.

“And, Miss Griffin, once you sign off on the 125 volunteers for the telethon event, we can go ahead and schedule everything. Which day would you prefer?”

Clarke hesitates, having only listened to the last few words when they picked up into a question. She looks down at her notes: nothing about dates. Then Sarah, with the grace of an angel, notices her confusion from across the desk and quickly scribbles on her notepad.

125. Yes. Sept. 30th.

“Oh, of course, 125 volunteers is just fine,” Clarke reads from the pad. “And September 30th would be ideal.”

“I also wanted to discuss—”

Sarah leans forward again, this time to the phone. “That’s plenty for today, everyone,” she announces, watching Clarke with some consternation. “Any further date, time, or number confirmations can go through me. Representative Griffin has an important arrival she has to meet.”

Clarke nearly drops her head to the desk in relief. Thank you, she mouths.

Once Sarah successfully steers the call to a close, Clarke’s day is officially done. But the wave of relief that washed over her vanishes as quickly as it comes when she sees Sarah still watching her with the same concern even after everyone hangs up.

“I’m fine,” Clarke says preemptively, at the same moment Sarah asks, “Is everything all right, Miss Griffin?”

Clarke gives her a placid smile and feigns a yawn. “Of course,” she assures the girl. “Just a lot on my mind and not enough sleep.”

In a surprising move, Sarah reaches across the desk and wraps a comforting hand around Clarke’s forearm. “I understand, Representative Griffin. You’re my role model—I’m always so impressed by how much work you do for all of us, how powerful and honest and strong you are. You’re one of the good guys. We’re doing this for you, because our country needs you.”
The best and worst thing she could possibly say. Tingling with the guilt of it all, Clarke glances out to the main office, where her indefatigable team of campaign workers buzzes back and forth to motivate each other and celebrate every little victory, anything to get over the mountain that is the final month of the campaign. She focuses on Monty: he doesn’t engage with the rest of his coworkers, and instead sits bent over his computer, hard at work collecting all salient info on John Murphy, one of three people on the planet who knows of a political scandal that would render pointless all of the work her staffers are currently doing.

The world is cruel like that, sometimes.

Still, she hides it with a smile. “I don’t know what I’d do without you, Sarah. Thank you.”

Once she’s alone in her office, she gives herself a minute to recover in the wood-paneled solitude. Eyes closed, she thinks of a river—rushing, powerful, unable to be restrained by any man-made contrivance, but smooth and unending and calming at the same time. The thought centers her, relaxes her. And when she opens her eyes and realizes that the guard shifts have changed, she rises from her seat with a hard-beating heart, but she feels just as unstoppable as the river.

She only wishes Lexa were beside her as she arrives at Monty’s desk.

“What about me and Lexa Ward?” she asks, failing to keep her voice steady. Unstoppable doesn’t mean not anxious.

Monty, with noticeable alarm, holds up a folder. “It was pretty easy,” he says slowly. “But…”

“Thank you, Monty,” is all she says.

He wants to know why, obviously. Why his boss rushed his desk this afternoon when she returned from her photoshoot and requested a full profile of one of the building’s security guards. She didn’t have an answer then; she doesn’t have one now. Clarke knows it’s a dangerous game, to drive forward like this, all offense, no protection, no planning moves ahead, no having cover stories ready, but there’s no other choice. Desperation begets panic like this, and now her only hope is that she’s skilled enough and lucky enough to make these decisions at breakneck speed and still come out on top. The time for contemplation has passed.

She scrutinizes the file and memorizes what she can during the elevator ride to the lobby. She feels like a lawyer again: preparing for court, except this time she’s the one on trial.

In the empty lobby, Murphy is at his post at the front desk, freshly settled in. The sight sends new anxiety through her chest, but she quells it with a determined anger and strides forward. Unstoppable, unrelenting.

“Murphy, I need to talk to you.”

He swivels in his chair, jovial but bemused. “Senator Griffin, hi.” He gesticulates vague toward the window. “I chased off a herd of photographers waiting for you outside earlier, but they’ll be back.”

“I need to speak with you,” she repeats. “Privately.”

He looks around the empty lobby. “I can’t really leave the desk, but this is pretty private.” Then and a strange realization seems to dawn as the amusement and confusion both fade from his face. “Is...Is this about you and Lexa Ward?”

The confirmation she knew was coming, but still prayed she could avoid. Her stomach crashes through the floor. “What about me and Lexa Ward?” She can barely manage to raise her voice about a horrified, hoarse whisper.
He shrugs, busying himself with the organization of papers on the desk so that he doesn’t have to look up at her. “I figured you’d eventually ask. The elevator, a few months ago...I was on shift that night.”

The window slams shut on her last shred of hope, thrusting Clarke into a nightmarish dark space between blind panic and shrewd, measured decision-making. She has to be cold here, and kill the threat as soon as she can, but she can’t read his intentions in his voice or the divot between his raised eyebrows. She can’t tell how bad this is beyond her heart thudding in her chest or her foggy vision. This is her worst nightmare.

“How much did you...” she trails off weakly. She can’t say it.

“Voyeurism isn’t really my thing, actually, if that’s what you’re so freaked about,” he tells her, voice dry. “I wasn’t watching--I didn’t even spot it until I was reviewing the tapes later.”

The tapes. That snaps inside her. There are tapes.

“John Murphy,” she barks, her voice shaky but gaining power as she recites the file. “You live in Sherman Oaks, California; you have a girlfriend who works in an electronics store; you share a one bedroom apartment with a cat, drive an 2005 Acura, and you pay for it all with a thirty-seven thousand dollar annual salary from the security firm you’ve worked at for four years.”

Murphy wrinkles his face in mild confusion and alarm. “Apparently voyeurism is your thing, though.”

She owes Monty, one for the right info and two for not asking questions when she tasked him with obtaining it. With all the force she can muster, she slams the file on the security desk.

“I know that and more. So: where’s the tape?”

“What tape?”

“The recording. I want it and every copy back.”

When he realizes just why she’s spouting off all of his personal information, the alarm fades, but the confusion remains as he he studies her, brow knitting together, trying to read her face.

Clarke isn’t sure what part of that isn’t clear; she switches to bargaining. “I’ve poured a lot of my own finances into the campaign, but I have enough to double your salary, just not in one lump sum. I can--”

“I deleted it,” Murphy says blankly.

“--pay in...What?”

“The tape, of...that night? I deleted the footage as soon as I realized what was happening.”

“You--deleted it? Why?”

He shrugs. “It’s your personal business. Extortion and blackmail aren’t really my things anymore than voyeurism, I’m not the kind of fucking--sorry, not the kind of freak who makes copies of that shit. You and Lexa Ward always greeted me whenever you came or left, so I didn’t feel like fucking you over.”

Clarke stares at him.
“Plus...my girlfriend is a big fan of you, and Cage Wallace seems like a prick. I don’t help out guys like that.”

He’s lying. He has to be. Worse still, he’s toying with her. A security guard, taunting her with good intentions while he holds the item of her destruction over her head. But she protests with the best of her abilities, gained from a lifetime of politics and law school and arguing for fun, and Murphy rebuts every argument, defending himself in half a dozen ways: he likes his job, he likes his girlfriend, he doesn’t want to lose either one, he’s a feminist, he’s not that guy, that would be weird, what would he even get out of it?

“Look at them!” Clarke shouts, gesturing behind her to the gaggle of photographers waiting across the street. “They’re getting plenty out of following me around, trying to exploit any slip-up. And you’re going to expect me to believe that you wouldn’t do the same?”

“Yeah, exactly!” he exclaims, getting angry. “I told you, one of the reasons I didn’t was because I see you and Ward every day, and that would be a shitty thing to do. But maybe I should have if you see me every day and still think I would. I’d get what, a few thousand bucks? That’s not worth it, I’m not some creep.”

Clarke’s continued disbelief in his honesty has finally struck a personal chord in him—and his reaction is honest.

“Are you serious?” she asks weakly.

“Are you?” he spits back, still irate. He’s abandoned professionalism now.

If there were a chair anywhere in the vicinity, Clarke would sink into it. Her shaking legs threaten to drop her to the floor as it is. She imagines this is what it must feel like to be shot at, and for the bullet to miss: soul-crushing relief, paradoxically contrasted with the fear of being shot at in the first place. Being close enough to danger to taste it, and yet escaping.

Murphy can see her resolve weakening. “If you want to see the tape of that night, I can show you,” he offers, jerking a thumb back over his shoulder at the security room. “I deleted the hour that you’re in the elevator and office. It just blinks from like midnight to 2 AM. No one would ever know you were here.”

“It’s…” Clarke can’t believe she’s saying this. “It’s fine. I believe you. I’ll have to have you sign an NDA, just boilerplate language, I can draw it up…”

“Whatever,” Murphy says with a shrug. “I haven’t told anyone, I’m not going to tell anyone, and a piece of paper won’t change that. I’m even still gonna vote for you.”

*

Clarke doesn’t exhale a full breath until the silver doors of the elevator close smoothly behind her, sealing her into her isolation. She doesn’t press the button for her floor yet; she stays on the ground floor, leaning against the wall, and breathes.

And then she grabs her phone to call Lexa.

Her mind races through her courses of action, instinctual remnants from her law career. She’d had Murphy sign a scrap of paper promising that he’d sign an NDA. She’s going to draw one up; it
won’t need to be notarized or witnessed, but she’ll have Lexa serve as a witness anyway, just for the extra layer of assurance. On top of that, she thinks about privacy lawsuits, defamation, misdemeanor charges, felony charges, anything to keep him from talking.

The click of the answered call interrupts her frantic line of thought. Lexa’s voice floods over the line like cool, clear water, soothing all.

“Clarke? Is everything all right?”

Clarke frowns; relief though Lexa’s voice may be--it always is--Lexa sounds harried and stressed, the strain of an engine audible in the background.

“I just--is everything all right with you?”

“I’m on my way to dinner with my sister,” Lexa mutters, which is enough of an explanation. “It’s been a long day. What’s going on?”

She can’t dump this on Lexa now. Even if Lexa didn’t suddenly crash her car on the freeway in an attempt to turn around, she doesn’t need to add to the other woman’s stress before a dinner with her sister.

“Nothing. You’re still coming over later, right?”

“I’ll be there.”

“We’ll talk then.”
*DJ Khaled voice* another one!

With an angelic patience and skill, Lexa had navigated the rocky waters of the rest of the shoot, paying as little attention to both Anya and Clarke as possible--any more tension might snap her in half. The rest of the day had demanded they all be in different places handling different responsibilities, which, although it does nothing to lessen the tension through her chest and heart, had at least allowed Lexa to focus on her work instead of her lover and her sister. She loses herself in event planning for volunteers. But by the end of the day, she’s back in her car and on the freeway, heading to the Venice Beach restaurant Anya had selected after she declared they’d meet for dinner when she found out about Clarke.

The rush hour commute from Clarke’s downtown campaign headquarters gives Lexa ample time to play through the potential arguments she’s about to hash out with her sister. It’s not difficult--she’s had every one of them with herself, so it’s not a far leap to imagine how they’ll go with the woman more similar to her than anyone else in the world. If Anya questions the risk, Lexa will detail very precaution they’ve taken. If she questions the wisdom, she can point to the success of the campaign. If Anya criticizes her decision-making, Lexa has an arsenal of memories of her sister’s dubious decisions from which she can draw.

She arrives to dinner thusly armed. Anya has arrived first and been seated before her, picking a spot near the back, so Lexa has the length of the crowded restaurant to perfect her scowl and stiff-backed stride; halfway to the table, her eyes meet Anya’s, and she gives her the full heat of it until she arrives in front of her and stops, waiting for whatever Anya is going to try first. Only the soft, golden candle light and the hum of nearby patrons on dates keep her from shouting. So she waits, instead, because she doesn’t trust herself to open her mouth just yet.

“I’m sorry,” Anya says in simple greeting.

Lexa hadn’t prepared for that.

“You’re…” Her lips part. “You’re what?”

“I’m sorry,” Anya repeats. “I said it at the photoshoot today, but I genuinely regret the way I reacted and behaved. The duress I put you under.”

It’s not enough to lower Lexa’s defenses--or arsenal of offenses--but it’s enough to lower her into her seat, hesitantly. Once she’s down, a waiter comes by to take her drink order. Though she had planned on keeping all sense razor sharp, the shifting ground beneath her feet inspires her to send him scurrying off for a glass of expensive wine; she needs it. When the two women are alone again, in this quiet corner of a bustling, tourist-filled Italian restaurant, Lexa finds her voice.

“After all of it, you’re going to have to do a bit better than that.”

“After all of it? You mean how I reacted when I found out you’re fucking--” She cuts herself off before Lexa can, and lowers her voice. “Well, shit, Lexa, wouldn’t you react that way? You’re my
sister, I care about you.” Anya shrugs, softens. “And now I’m apologizing, for the same reason.”

The sincerity in her eyes is plain to see, even if Lexa couldn’t already read her like a book. Anya’s no child: she is capable of expressing real regret and owning up to her mistakes like she’s doing now, but after the argument Lexa had geared up for on the way over, and the tension she’s been carrying in her shoulders since the moment Anya asked her this morning, she can’t immediately relinquish the white-knuckle grip she has on her frustration.

Right on time, the waiter arrives with her glass of wine--and when he sees Lexa take a long draught, he runs off for a second. Feeling the alcohol on her tongue at last, Lexa sits back in her chair, cradles the glass against her shoulder, and fixes Anya with a hard stare.

“At which point today did you start to regret what you were doing?” she asks icily. “Directing their engagement photos or giving the two journalists romance novels to write?”

“Directing the photos,” Anya shoots back, catching Lexa off guard.

“So you felt guilty but interrogated them after anyway? What’s wrong with you?”

“It was a mistake. And one that I hope you can indulge me, given my surprise. I was still dealing with the news...but I was curious. Got ahead of myself. But once I realized she was talking about you…”

“Couldn’t help yourself?” Lexa asks.

“I wanted to know more about it from her perspective,” Anya replies. “You’ve been cagey; she was a journalist’s dream, an open book.”

“But why?”

Why does Anya need to do this? Lexa knows they share an unbreakable, steel fortitude, both personally and professionally; she understands that once they set their minds to something, hell itself won’t stop them. But Lexa can’t understand, through the aching in her chest and the bitter taste on her tongue, why Anya has set her sights on this particular course, when she must know what it will mean--for Lexa--if she continues this hunt. She’s digging into Lexa’s most vulnerable inner life, exposing the raw and painful truths. It feels as close to betrayal as her sister has ever gotten, and the sting of it tastes like blood, so she spits again: “Why, Anya? Why do you have to do it like this?”

She heaves an impatient huff. “Because I need to know that you’re safe, Lexa!” No more clever wordplay. “I’m not talking about your career: I need to know that you’re safe. That your heart is safe.”

Lexa’s wine glass nearly slips from her fingers, and all of the bitterness washes down her throat again, drowning the anger that was rising.

“What?”

“Do you think the bra this morning was the first time I realized?” Anya whispers. “You think I grew up with you, met every girl you ever dated, coached you through first dates and held you after break-ups, and don’t know when your heart beats for someone?”

My heart beats for Clarke.

Lexa can’t even manage another dumbstruck, “What?” this time. She doesn’t have to. Anya builds momentum.
“You’re lucky she’s the only one on the west coast who knows you like I do, otherwise you’d have never kept this secret.” Lexa tries a weak protest, but Anya shuts her down. “Listen to me. I always knew you’d end up happy. But I didn’t realize there was another... match for you out there. Someone who can meet you on your level, wherever that is, eye to eye. Someone who can challenge you when you need it, and give way when you need it, support you instead of pushing back. Clarke has your stubbornness, but also your compassion—and she’s fucking good at hiding it, just like you are. I’ve been with you both nearly every day for the past month, I’ve seen the way you communicate, the way you turn to each other, the way you say something and you already know what the other will reply with.

“Clarke’s it, Lexa.” Anya says, shrugging and sitting back in her chair. “I have never believed that each person only has one single person who can make them truly happy. I don’t really believe in soulmates, either, but whatever you and Clarke have...it’s damn close.”

The blood is rushing in her ears, a pounding, thunderous sound that drowns out everything except for the shallow breaths her lungs manage.

She feels...defeated right now. It’s a strange sensation, one she has avoided to the best of her ability and not one that she’s used to experience. And then, with a jolt, she realizes that it’s not defeat—she’s being laid bare. Anya has broken through every obstinate defense without Lexa’s permission. She hasn’t coaxed them down, or worked her way in gradually, like Clarke has. She’s barreled through them, ripped into the darkest, most secret desires Lexa holds dear and pulled them into the light of this tacky, tourist trap of an Italian restaurant.

And she’s fucking right.

Lexa has nothing else. No refuge from the truth; she reverts to autopilot as she scrambles to pick up the pieces of her walls.

“I didn’t know you were such a romantic,” she says, voice dry as her throat.

Anya snorts. “I didn’t know you were eighteen again, but here you are, like you’re in love for the first time. That’s why you two are on such a high wire right now. The rush, the electricity of the connection, the faith in each other, the feelings you have, the world far below you...and the risk of putting a single foot wrong and losing it all. Are you prepared for that to happen?”

“I’m prepared to win,” Lexa snarls. “Cage Wallace is behind, we’re not giving up any ground—”

Despite the edge in her voice, it’s a weak and useless, drawing Anya’s ire deservedly. “God, Lexa, I’m not talking about the race, for once,” she scoffs. “I couldn’t care less if she’s a senator or not. I don’t live here and the party is probably going to take the majority. Her job does not affect me.”

“Then what’s your problem?”

“You affect me. You could lose everything you built. You could both end up broken. You could lose her.”

Lexa sighs. “Anya, I’ve told myself this a million times already.”

But before elaborating, she takes a sip of her wine to save herself from having to talk anymore, letting the liquid roll down her throat with the hope that it’ll provide some relief from a slowly growing headache. She’s told Anya a half-truth: she’s played through the possible results of the election a million times, envisioning what happens when they win, what happens if they lose, all outcomes affected by variables like Roan and Abby and Washington DC and the media. She knows
every scenario. But the one in which she loses Clarke...stirs something in her. She has never envisioned her place in the outcomes; she’s been too focused on everything else, so she has watched from the sidelines, a spectator in Clarke’s future, unwilling to acknowledge her own inextricable link to Clarke Griffin’s fate.

“I’ve gone through it a million times,” she starts again. “I’m prepared for every outcome.”

Anya reads her, hears the roughness in her voice.

“How many times have you come up with an ending where you’re happy, together?”

“I’m her campaign manager--” Lexa says, swallowing hard.

“You’re more than that.”

“--so the campaign is my only priority.”

“You’re using that as an excuse, Lexa.”

“I have a responsibility to her and everyone else. My feelings are secondary.”

“You can have both,” Anya presses, nearly shouting. She doesn’t care about the other patrons sitting around them. “You don’t have to separate feelings and responsibility.”

Lexa wants so badly to believe her. She’s been resisting with everything she has, a modern architectural marvel of a dam holding back her emotions, but the force behind it is too great. Cracks have appeared in the wall, and Anya seems intent on driving a wedge into them and chipping away. Lexa wants to let it happen--but she worries for what’s downstream.

“Five minutes ago you were warning me against it,” she says quietly, shaking her head. “Now you’re encouraging me?”

“That’s how sororal advice works,” Anya replies, nonchalant in the face of the impending disaster. “If you want a solution to be handed to you, call a hotline. I just don’t want to see you hurt--and most outcomes point to pain. If that’s what’s going to happen, pull back. But if it’s not? If there are any outcomes that don’t lead to pain and humiliation? I want you to seize even the slimmest chance of happiness. You deserve it, Lexa.”

Her wine glass is empty now. She needs more--she needs a whole bottle, really--but she shakes her head when the waiter appears with the bottle in hand.

She still needs to drive to Clarke after this. Even more than before.

“I wouldn’t even know where to start,” Lexa says, defeated. She and Clarke have been running this race like they’re running for their lives; she can’t just grab Clarke’s arm and wrench her onto a new path, or put the hurdle of her feelings in their way.

Anya scoffs as she opens her menu to order at last.

“Yes you do.”
There’s something about tonight--when she arrives at Clarke’s apartment, she doesn’t bother knocking, but rather blows through the unlocked door and into the apartment like a summer thunderstorm, lightning flashing from her clouded eyes, all fire and fury with no promise of reprieve of cool rain. Anya’s words ring in her ears.

“Lexa--”

She hears Clarke’s worry before she sees her; she knows that Clarke can feel the electricity in the air as she hurries out of her kitchen, brow furrowed, but Lexa isn’t going to quell the roiling inside her right now. She avoids Clarke’s questioning glance, her extended hand, and steps past her to the kitchen table, throwing down her bag.

“I need to know what we’re going to do when we win,” Lexa demands.

Clarke, following her, stops short. “When we win?”

“You think we’re not going to?” she challenges, brusquely.

“Of course I do!” Clarke sputters. “What I mean is--” For as accustomed as she is to countering and matching the best of Lexa’s ferocity, she isn’t prepared for it here, in the softness of her living room. She was clearly expecting tacos and wine and soft conversation. “Lexa, we need to talk--”

“What we need to do is start working on the debate and ensure we win this, because I’m not losing--”

“Lexa, Murphy knows about us. He saw the tape, from the elevator. But I took care of it.”

--not losing you.

And then comes the rain. A sudden, freezing downpour.

“He...what?” she asks, all of the breath whooshing out of her.

She tries to process what Clarke said, and realizes that the only three words she understood were “knows about us.” It doesn’t matter who, it doesn’t matter how, it doesn’t matter when. Just that someone else knows.

Under Lexa’s terrified and stunned gaze, Clarke’s lips move soundlessly for a moment before she can find the words. “Murphy, one of the security guards at our building. Usually works nights...like the night we won the primaries. In the elevator...”

“He has the tape of us having sex,” Lexa finishes. She steps sideways, sinks against the wall, rubbing a hand over her face as if to clear the fear-induced haze that had settled over her--she tries, and fails. Clarke’s words play over and over again in her head. He saw the tape, from the elevator...but I took care of it.

“How did you take care of it?” she asks. “You didn’t confront him, did you?”

“Yes, I asked him--”

“Fuck, Clarke,” Lexa groans, pushing a hand back through her hair. If the tape isn’t out yet, it’s because he’s been waiting for something--either the highest bid or the most devastating moment before the election--and a confrontation with future Senator and unwitting adult film star Clarke
Griffin just pushed up his timeline. So on top of Anya...they have a new national scandal.

“Fuck, Clarke?” Clarke repeats, with a snarl to her voice that makes Lexa look up in surprise. “Let me remind you that you’re not the only one with political experience, Lexa. When I said I handled it, I handled it. He deleted the tape, that same night.”

Lexa gapes at her. “He deleted the tape? He told you that? And you believed him?”

“I grilled him for twenty minutes,” Clarke snaps. “He was distraught I’d even think he’d sell it. I’m a lawyer, a politician, and I’ve lived in Los Angeles long enough to tell when someone is a shitty actor. He was telling the truth.”

“Why?” Lexa demands. “Why have something like that and just delete it? He’s either lying or we have an idiot guarding the building at night.”

Clarke shrugs. “Apparently...he likes us.” To Lexa’s disbelief, she says simply: “He’s voting for me, and he said you always make sure to say hello and goodbye when you see him. So maybe he’s not a liar or a moron; maybe we’re just so deep in the political game that we’ve forgotten there’s a real world with decent people out there. We’re not part of it anymore.”

There’s a harsh bitterness to her tone as she turns and walks out of the room, heading down the hallway toward her bedroom. Lexa stays where she is, pressed against the wall almost down to the floor, and lets the words sink in, feeling the relief and the regret all at once. Mix all of that together, and it’s no wonder she was so brusque with Clarke, so unforgiving. The feeling of regret soaks through her, deeper than the relief, and it moves her to her feet.

“Clarke?” Lexa murmurs, stepping quietly down the hall toward her bedroom. “Clarke, I’m sorry.”

She eases into Clarke’s bedroom, to find the other woman sitting on the foot of her bed, heels kicked off, eyebrow raised in one question: Sorry for what?

“For speaking to you like that,” Lexa confesses. “You deserve my utmost respect, attentions, and…” she hesitates on the word, tasting the rare delicacy of her emotions, as she draws closer to the bed, “…and affections. More than that, you’re beyond capable of everything you set your mind to, including instances of potential blackmail. I’ve known that since the day I met you, when I first interviewed for this. Any implication otherwise is a mistake on my part. I’ve been on edge; today has been long and I lashed out, unfairly. I’m sorry.”

Clarke considers her for a long time, studying her, and Lexa accepts it without question, as her penance.

Finally, Clarke speaks: “Let your hair down. All the way.”

Lexa cocks her head in surprise. She must have misheard. But Clarke regards her with absolute seriousness, silently repeating the command with an upward twitch of her eyebrow. Unaccustomed to taking such pointed commands, and half-expecting Clarke to reveal some joke, Lexa nonetheless raises her hands and slowly unwinds the intricate bun that her hair had been tied in all day. Clarke watches every movement of her fingers as she pulls each wavy lock down into position, shaking it out, running her hand back through her hair until it cascades down over her shoulders naturally. After a long day tied up, she imagines how messy it must look, like she’s been in bed for hours with someone else’s hands tangled in it, but Clarke is still just as serious as before.

“Better?” she asks.
Lexa breathes in and out, for what feels like the first time tonight. “Surprisingly, yes.”

Clarke gives a small smile. Anyone else would make Lexa work for her atonement, hold her mistake over her head for a bit longer, but Clarke has granted reprieve and absolution all at once. Gratitude washes over Lexa, making the spot on the bed beside Clarke all the more appealing: she’d love to sink onto the mattress and forget about the day. They haven’t spent many nights in Clarke’s room, with it’s warm golden light and overabundance of feather pillows, but it’s somehow so much more familiar that hundreds of anonymous hotels, and Lexa can think of no better place to stay for the night. She wants leave the rest of the world outside while she passes time in the arms of her girl. She needs this.

Clarke sees her desire written on her face and nods, allowing Lexa’s approach into the room, over the plush grey carpet and onto the queen mattress. All is soft, all is forgiven.

“So...are you going to tell me why you’re so on edge?” Clarke asks, as Lexa sinks onto the bed beside her. “Talk to me.”

So maybe the day won’t stay outside this room. Lexa closes her eyes, realizing that through all this, she still hasn’t told Clarke. She takes a deep breath.

“Anya knows.”

Silence.

She opens one eye. Clarke frowns at her, confused.

“Anya knows...what?”

“About us,” Lexa says with a sigh.

Silence, again, but this time of a different color. Just as Lexa had felt, there’s a rising fear, an outrage, that bleeds heavily into Clarke’s next question:

“You told her?”

“Of course not,” Lexa says quickly, scowling with revulsion at the thought. “She found your bra in my bedroom, this morning. She said she’s had an idea for a while”

Clarke struggles for words. “Jesus. Have we been that obvious?”

“She knows me better than most,” Lexa concedes. “But maybe...maybe we should pull back.”

“Pull back on what part?” Clarke’s at a loss; so is Lexa. Everything they do feels natural. At this point, pulling back would feel stilted, forced. Are they supposed to communicate with less efficiency? Argue in front of the office? Betray each other? Should Lexa leave the campaign? The notion of pulling back seems logical—it’s implementation, impossible. Lexa is committed to this, and by Clarke’s dismay, so is she. A manufactured show of pulling back would only make their connection more apparent to everyone else.

“I don’t want to,” admits Lexa. “If you are confident in this, so am I.”

Clarke nods slowly, like she’s convincing herself. “I am. So...she knew this afternoon when she was interrogating me?”

“I didn’t know how to tell you.” She doesn’t know how to comfort her, either. Clarke sits frozen, no
longer the image of soft comfort she was when she offered redemption for Lexa snapping at her.
“That’s what my dinner was about tonight, too.”

“What did she say?” Clarke asks, stiff.

“That she wouldn’t tell anyone, or say anything. That she was looking out for me. And that I should…” *And that I should seize any chance at happiness with you. “Be careful.”*

“Like we’re not?” Clarke demands.

“We are. You just don’t know my sister very well yet.”

Lexa’s calmness begins to seep into Clarke and the defenses, hastily thrown up, come down piece by piece. Lexa relaxes as Clarke does. There. The truth—or most of it—is on the table, and they’re on the same page. Now they can face it together. As she searches for a way to break the silence, she focuses much more of her attention on Clarke’s face, which suddenly shifts as if she’s realized something.

“Don’t know your sister very well yet?” she asks, and it takes a moment before Lexa notices the hint of amusement in her eye. Teasing her. “Are you planning on having us spend a lot more time together?”

The joking tone is all Lexa can read; she can’t tell if Clarke’s teasing her about the disastrous interrogation today or the place that Lexa’s mind immediately flashes to, which is the thought of family dinners and Thanksgiving at their parents’ house in Virginia and weekend trips to New York to see her sister.

It’s too much. Lexa drops back on the bed with a laugh to cover the way her heart twists at the thought. The laugh is enough of an answer for Clarke, who drops back too, laying beside her.

“So John Murphy the security guard, and Anya,” Clarke says, heaving a sigh. “I never thought about anyone finding out; but if I had, I wouldn’t have picked them. And not the way it happened. A bra and an elevator camera.”

“Or the way they reacted,” Lexa points out. It’s like they’ve gotten away with murder: she doesn’t know whether to feel guilty for their actions and the lack of consequences, or relieved.

“Or the way they reacted…” Clarke repeats, with a soft laugh, but her tone turns somber as she trails off. “Lexa?”

“Yes?”

“If we do get caught...or if they had caught us and it hadn’t worked out this way, what would we do?”

That would be the tightrope fall that Anya talked about. Lexa clenches her jaw.

“Let’s just not talk about this.”

Being in Clarke’s presence has the same palliative effect it always does—Lexa comes down from the edge, her muscles unwinding, her heart slowing—but she’s not yet at a point where she can shake off the trials of the day, and she doesn’t want to risk snapping at Clarke again. Even worse, when she turns her head to look at Clarke laying beside her, drink in those blue eyes, that half-smile, the risk of spilling her heart out becomes much greater. The way Clarke reclines on her white down comforter casts a silver haze over her and lowers inhibitions better than any alcohol. The truth is on the tip of her tongue, terrifying and sweet all at once.
She’s given it away once already tonight. She can’t do it again. So she does the only other thing she can think of.

She rolls over, straddles Clarke, presses their lips together, and replaces the taste with that of Clarke’s mouth. There’s something soothing about it tonight. The twists and turns and tension of the day have been so overwhelming that her sense of normalcy is only found in Clarke’s arms; this is not a state of existence she would have imagined for herself six months ago, but the thought of how her life has changed and how far she’s come only pushes her deeper into Clarke’s embrace. They may be on a tightrope, but continuing to walk it just proves how centered Lexa is, how centered they both are. On each other. With each other. More than she ever has been.

Clarke’s grateful, satisfied sigh against Lexa’s lips quietly confirms she feels the same. Her hands slide into their natural position just below Lexa’s shoulderblades, holding her close as the gentle undulations of their bodies--the rise and fall of chests, the shift of their shoulders and hips as they angle between kisses, the slow grind--create a warming, dark friction on their skin and deep within their chests.

It’s natural. It’s as familiar as breathing. Lexa doesn’t even notice her hand running up Clarke’s thigh until she feels Clarke’s legs spreading beneath her, for her. She glides her lips from the kiss and up Clarke’s jaw, exhaling a sigh into her ear, before charting a path down the column of her neck. It’s as familiar as breathing and Lexa inhales like she hasn’t tasted oxygen in weeks.

And then, as she lowers her hips in a slow roll against Clarke’s, a new sound: ringing. So absorbed in the girl, she doesn’t realize that it’s a cell phone, coming from somewhere above them on the bed.

Clarke seems to deflate, with a quiet groan, and then an even softer laugh.

Of course. Lexa shakes her head, simultaneously dismayed and amused. “No.”

“Just let me check it.”

“No.”

She playfully struggles against Lexa’s teasing hold on her biceps, but eventually, the girl on top of her gives in and Clarke wriggles out of her grasp, twisting around on the mattress to search for her phone.

“Why does this always happen?” Lexa’s groan is muffled in the crook of Clarke’s neck.

“Well, at least you’re not going down on me this time,” Clarke replies coolly.

“I could be.”

The suggestion, more teasing than anything, is met with a suggestively raised eyebrow, but Clarke finds her phone before Lexa can so much as slip her fingers beneath the bottom of Clarke’s shirt to trace the skin, so Lexa settles for gently kissing Clarke’s collarbone as she answers the phone with affected annoyance.

“I need a good reason you’re calling at--yeah, yeah she’s here with me. We’re going over debate topics. What’s going on?”

Her plans of making Clarke squirm while she talked vanishing, Lexa’s concern and confusion deepens at the worried tone in Clarke’s voice, but she doesn’t have time to ask who it is before Clarke hands her the phone. “Raven wants to talk to you.”
“Raven?” Lexa asks, half to Clarke and half into the phone as she brings it to her ear. She sits up, but doesn’t climb off of Clarke.

“I got it,” is the first thing Raven says.

“Got what?”

“Everything we need on Cage Wallace. This piece of shit is going down.”

Lexa’s jaw falls open. Everything she wanted, and everything she was afraid of. She looks down to Clarke on the mattress beneath her, trying to imagine how her face will look ten seconds from now. She decides to take that chance.

“Raven...I’m going to put you on speakerphone.”

*

“So 1.2 million.” Clarke runs a hand back through her hair, shaking her head. No matter how many times she says it, she’ll never believe that number.

“And that’s just the last ten years,” Raven says over the speakerphone. “It’s super sophisticated; there’s no telling how far back it goes through the generations of this family.”

“1.2 million, over ten years. A hundred and twenty thousand dollars a year, about ten thousand a month.” Lexa shrugs, taking a deep breath. “It’s easy to hide in the grand scheme of political spending, which explains how he got away with it for so long.”

“And the picture of his personal fortune covers it as well,” Raven points out.

Clarke and Lexa have moved to the living room; the enormity of this revelation felt like too much for the intimacy of the bedroom, and when it became clear they wouldn’t be able to go back to each other’s bodies any time soon, there was no further reason to stay on the bed. They sat in silence on Clarke’s couch as Raven told the story on what she and Wells had at last found on Cage Wallace: 1.2 million dollars, in what federal law would categorize as “misuse of campaign funds.”

“But not your average misuse of campaign funds,” Raven had told them. “Some idiots do things like get dental work, pay for it illegally with campaign funds, and write it off as a donation to the dentist. Not Wallace. He makes payments, makes donations, and the money goes through three or four channels before it ends up in the pocket of someone who can benefit him. I’m not even sure whether to call it a bribe, misuse of campaign funds, or insider trading. It’s probably all three.”

“So how do you know?” Lexa asks.

“Wells and I started with publicly available campaign info, where he spends his money. That’s all online. And then we just started talking to people, asking them. We pulled business records, did interviews, Wells called and emailed and visited, and gradually we figured out the pattern.”

Taking all of it in, Lexa scribbles notes on a napkin she had grabbed from Clarke’s kitchen, but Clarke can’t do anything but stare at her. She’s hardly listening to Raven’s long-winded explanation; she’s still trying to process the fact that not only did Raven and Wells actually dig something up, but they did so without letting her know of their process, and with Lexa’s full enthusiasm. She had agreed with Wells at the beginning, so long as they stayed within the bounds of ethics, but when Raven got involved, she got nervous. Wells is steady, predictable, reliable.
Raven, on the other hand, is the reason hurricanes are named after women.

“This was all legal, right?” Clarke asks Raven suddenly. “You’re a little too enthusiastic for me to believe you followed the rules.”

Raven hesitates. “What we’ve done so far...is legal,” she says, as if she’s not quite sure of the definition of the word. “I know we could be a lot more solid and know a lot more if we were to get closer to the line.”

“No,” Clarke says firmly.

“I know, I know.”

“It’s enough to get him investigated though,” Lexa points out.

“I’d rather it not come from our campaign, though,” Clarke murmurs, pinching the bridge of her nose. Exhaustion has enveloped her in the last five minutes; this is the last thing she wants to deal with. “The optics on that aren’t good. A contract worker and a journalist friend of the candidate tracking down financial info of questionable legality on the opposition?”

“I know, it’s not great,” Lexa replies. “Raven?”

“I can handle it, they won’t know it’s from us,” she says. “I have plenty of hard copies of stuff, we can go over it tomorrow and then I can get it to the people it needs to get to without them knowing it’s from me.”

Lexa nods. “Good. We’re going to finish the debate prep, including this new info, just in case. We’ll meet up first thing tomorrow morning.”

Raven bids the two of them goodnight and hangs up, and Clarke at last allows herself to lean back onto the couch with a heavy sigh. She should be excited. Ecstatic, even. To have this level of information on her political opponent, enough to get him investigated if not arrested, is the rough equivalent of a royal flush—but as she watches Lexa finish up her notes, biting her lip in concentration, her loose hair hanging down over her shoulder and framing her face, her attention to the news just falls away. This sort of diversion of attention and focus is becoming alarmingly commonplace: throughout her meetings with Lexa in the room, throughout her conference calls today when Lexa wasn’t even there, even in light of devastating news about an opponent... her mind never stays on the task at hand. She spends sleepless nights in Lexa’s bed and fakes her way through the next day on will power and triple espresso shots.

She’s letting herself get distracted. She’s been enjoying the distraction. Despite all her ability and her determination, her consistent lack of focus has been mitigated only by the workrate of the campaign team around her.

Fresh guilt beats through her veins.

“Let’s work on the debate,” she says suddenly. Lexa looks up from her notes in surprise. “It’s what we should have been doing in the first place.”

“Clarke,” Lexa says, frowning, “We don’t even need to debate at this point. This goes out and we win.”

Clarke shakes her head. “I want to win because of me,” she replies. “I set out to do this with my strength and the support of the people around me. I didn’t even want to hire a campaign manager—I was going to do it on my own.”
“I remember. I could sense your hostility to the idea as soon as I walked in for my first interview.”

“I don’t want to win because he was arrested, or because Raven pulled out some deus ex machina, or because you and everyone else dragged the campaign across the finish line. I need everyone’s support, but I have to be leading this, the only way I know how. We debate him. We win. After the election, we release what we’ve found. That way no one—including me--can question what we did.”

Lexa stares at her, eyebrows slightly raised, lips parted, a resounding softness in her gray-green eyes. Clarke feels at home under that gaze; she’s become accustomed to being studied and observed, but when Lexa does it, she knows it’s because Lexa has found something familiar in her, something worth exploring as they draw closer.

“Lexa?” she prompts quietly, when the woman does not reply.

As if woken out of a reverie, Lexa blinks and shakes her head. “You’re right” she murmurs, still staring at Clarke. “And that’s why I--”

Clarke’s breath catches.

“That’s why I support you, always.” Lexa’s words tumble out of her mouth. “That’s what makes you, you. That’s why you’ll win.”

“Then...let’s get to the debate,” Clarke replies. A strange disappointment curls around her heart, but she grits her teeth, determined. She can’t allow this into her head right now. For the next month of the election, she will fight with everything she has to ensure that Lexa and all of her looks and her long hair and unfinished confessions don’t distract her from that goal.

*

Clarke’s warpath begins with four and a half straight hours of debate preparation.

They forget about the damning evidence they have against Cage Wallace and start with memorization. She needs to know her facts and her policies better than she knows her birthday and home address; she needs to be beyond reproach, given that the debate will be broadcast statewide and be available across the nation. The final weeks of the campaign are shaping up to be the biggest in the country, and on that stage, a stumble could mean complete collapse. She knows her plans for immigration, infrastructure, civil rights, gun control; she knows the money that the state of California has spent, she knows the money that the senate has funnelled to and from programs she supports, she knows the voting record of her predecessors and potential allies and certain enemies. She knows it all, until she can rattle it off like a phone number.

But Lexa, rising to Clarke’s fiery conviction, doesn’t let her settle for knowing her own side inside and out. They spend two hours memorizing everything they can find on Cage Wallace, from his campaign spending to his voting record to his statements on politics far before his time. They brainstorm potential questions and craft answers that spins all of this information into eloquent, destructive speeches, meant to burn Cage Wallace and illuminate Clarke’s ability.

Midnight. 1am. 2am.

The ever-ticking of the clock does nothing to deter them. “Your plans for policies are a fantasy,” Lexa challenges, tossing a notepad to the table in front of her, ensuring a resounding slap. “What
“little makes budgetary sense or even falls within the realm of possibility would never pass in the Senate. You’re espousing policy just for the sake of popularity--”

“That’s according to the tired tradition of the senate--”

“And a thirty year old Junior Senator is going to be the one to change two hundred years of tradition?” Lexa says with a scoff.

Clarke bristles; Lexa is playing Cage Wallace better than Wallace himself could. She reclines coolly on Clarke’s couch, feet kicked up on the coffee table, array of notes on her lap like she’s reading the morning paper. Meanwhile, Clarke paces back and forth across the room in stark contrast to Lexa’s nonchalance.

“Griffin, I admit that sticking to your guns is an admirable endeavor,” Lexa continues, “But you’re serving your own pride here, not the American people. You have no concept of how to work within established bounds, due to your lack of experience.”

“Well, Mr. Wallace, this debate could get long if we get into the topic of serving one’s self over the American people,” Clarke snaps. For a moment, Lexa drops her Cage Wallace mask, a haughty smirk, and gives Clarke a grin instead. She’s straying towards the territory of Cage Wallace’s business dealings, something she promised she wouldn’t do. Lexa steered her right to it.

“Don’t let your emotions get the better of you,” Lexa mutters. “You know how that’ll play. The optics of a pissed off woman against a man as put together as him...he’ll carry that all the way to election day.”

“You should be running for office,” Clarke snaps. “No one would want to debate you.”

“Maybe I will one day,” Lexa says with a shrug, with the nonchalance of considering a new coffee shop to try. “Back to the debate. How do you expect to change things?”

Clarke steels herself. “With a consistent message,” she says, as rehearsed. She paces away, out of the ring of heat she feels whenever she’s too close to Lexa. “A consistent message, engagement with the people, and a network of alliances--”

“Alliances? You’re trying to turn the Senate floor into more of a warzone than it already is, Miss Griffin?”

“With a network of friendships, partnerships, with my fellow Senators. We may have profound ideological differences, but there are politicians on all sides that have a hope for the betterment of the American people, and I have the determination and the belief that I can appeal to that in order to get something accomplished.

Lexa rolls her eyes. “Youth’s naivety.”

“It’s better than cynicism; shouldn’t we have hope to make things better?”

“I have hope, and beyond that, I have a concrete plan besides making friends. Since you’ve asked, allow me to detail a plan that has been universally praised by my supporters and Washington politicians alike.”

“I wasn’t done--” Clarke protests.

“Clarke,” Lexa hisses as Clarke’s emotions threaten again. She pulls her feet off of Clarke’s coffee table and sits up, planting them firmly and staring into Clarke’s face with renewed vigor. She hasn’t
risen yet, but she could; the threat is all Lexa needs to demonstrate her power. “Focus.”

But it’s nearly impossible. Lexa’s words are one thing--Clarke can ignore those. But it’s the spark in her eye as she says them, the hypnotizing way her lips curl in a snarl of conviction, the heat in her tone and the coolness in her face: she’s entrancing. Clarke remembers the early days of their working relationships and how their fights and arguments about whether to take the low road or the high road would ignite something in her. She used to think it was anger; she knows now that it was--and is--attraction, arousal, desire, the kind of heart-quickening adrenaline that comes with pressing her back against a wall. For Clarke and Lexa, their verbal sparring matches are nearly as good as sex. They always have been. It was only once they started having sex that they realized how close they had come to it while arguing.

And now, this late at night, in the low golden glow of light inside Clarke’s apartment and the silver light of the city shining through her window, when they’re this exhausted, when they’re running on adrenaline...Clarke falls into the same habits she’s been trying to break out of. The parallels between sex and debate narrow. Her gaze falls from Lexa’s fiery eyes to the graceful slope of her neck, the tangles of her hair, the undone buttons at the top of her collared shirt. The heat that had flared in her stomach earlier, in her bedroom, returns as she thinks of silencing Lexa’s smart mouth with a kiss, pulling at the buttons with her clumsy tired fingers until she can taste her skin again.

“Miss Griffin?” Lexa demands, almost mocking, to jar Clarke from her state of distraction. It does the opposite; she imagines Lexa whispering her last name in her ear, an eager, reverent campaign manager seducing her boss as she bends her over the grand mahogany desk in her office, files and reports and speeches spilling onto the floor, because none of it matters...

But it does.

Clarke blinks. “You’ve detailed your plans before,” she says, monotone at first as she tries to shake the wild images from her mind, “And so has every politician before you. You want to join the ranks of career politicians for the status, for the power, for the ability to help yourself and the cadre of people in your circle. That’s why you have no desire to break with tradition: tradition serves you. Tradition does not serve the American people, or people in general. What I’m doing is trying to create positive change, to break out of the pattern that has limited the progression of the people we want to serve, and to create change, to break out, we must change the actions of a system that doesn’t allow change. If you want to call that naivety, that’s okay. But I hope the American people can look at what needs to change, and can look to who is attempting to create that change, when they go to the ballot boxes.”

Lexa gives her a hard glare, as if she’s about to abandon their sparring and her Cage Wallace facade and engage Clarke fully in a debate just between them, but only for a second, until all of it falls away and her glare turns to a gentle smile.

“You’re amazing,” she breathes, a hint of disbelief on her words. “I never thought you’d be so special.”

And with that, Clarke is released. The weight lifts from around her shoulders, her fire turns to warm and pleasant heat, and cool oxygen fills her veins. The adrenaline that had kept the burnout at bay fades from her body. The thick blanket of exhaustion descends quickly--and so does she.

As if Lexa’s words are an invitation, she climbs into her lap and straddles her, pushing her back onto the couch and following to kiss her. She feels the warm weight of Lexa’s hands settling on her waist, the pressure of her fingertips just enough to keep Clarke from moving, as if anything could get her to pull back. On their month-long road trip, so many nights in hotels had ended like this, in lazy open-mouthed kissing and grinding of hips and quiet moans. But there’s something special about ending a
night like this in her own apartment. Something about it feels permanent--like they are meant to be here, or they’ll always end up here.

Tonight, content with this idea, they don’t go further than kissing. They simply delight in the taste of each other, the warmth, the scent. Gradually, Lexa applies enough pressure to shift Clarke until she’s laying down with Lexa above her; they drift in and out of sleep as they make-out, until it’s more sleep than kissing.

Sometime later, it’s only when Clarke feels the cool air on her skin that she realizes that Lexa is climbing off of her, to her feet.

“Don’t go,” Clarke says, sleepy.

“I’m not. I just want to straighten up, turn the lights off.”

Clarke dozes on the couch, half-awake, listening to Lexa re-organize the disaster of papers that had been left around Clarke’s apartment in the wake of her rampage. She wants Lexa to come back to the couch, pour her lean body and slight weight over her, but in her haziness, she can’t find the words to ask.

“Clarke, did you RSVP to Octavia’s baby shower?” Lexa asks her.

Ah. She found the invitation. Clarke got it sometime last week, and it’s been in a pile of newspapers ever since. She hasn’t had time.

“I haven’t yet,” Clarke mumbles. “Do you want to come with me?”

“You’re going to bring your campaign manager to a baby shower?”

She opens her eyes. “I didn’t mean...I meant, as a...date.”

Lexa’s voice is much quieter when she finally answers. “I’d like to.” And before Clarke has to spend any more time trying to put the words together, Lexa lowers herself onto the couch, curling into Clarke’s arms, adding the sweet, floral, sandalwood scent of her perfume to the scrambling of Clarke’s senses. Clarke strokes lazy fingers up and down Lexa’s back. Lexa groans when she presses into knots in the muscle; there are more than Clarke expected, more than there should be.

“You need a vacation,” Clarke mumbles, slowly massaging the tight ribbons of muscle up and down Lexa’s spine.

“So let’s go on one.”

“We will.”

The massage continues, as Lexa reciprocates by dropping sloppy kisses on the part of Clarke’s neck that she can reach. They don’t know how much time passes; when Lexa next speaks, it feels like it’s been hours.

“I’d give up a vacation for some food, though,” she mutters. “Do you have anything here?”

“When was the last time you ate?” Clarke asks.

Lexa has to think back. “Lunch, I think. At the shoot. I couldn’t eat anything at dinner with my sister.”

Clarke has a sudden idea.
“There’s an all-night diner not far from here…”

Lexa’s lips curl in a smile as she looks at her. “Where are your keys?”

*

Clarke orders sausages, eggs, bacon, and a stack of pancakes; Lexa opts for a mile-high burger and a plate of fries, then watches with dismay and amusement as Clarke tries to steal them from her plate when she’s not looking. Revealing a particularly wide revenge streak, Lexa responds by snaking a piece of Clarke’s bacon, and then a bite of a pancake when Clarke protests. This is only the second time they’ve shared a greasy, unhealthy feast in the early hours of the morning, but Clarke makes Lexa promise that it has become a new late-night tradition. Whether it’s the lack of sleep, or the food, or the company, she’s not sure, but she spends their meal smiling so hard her cheeks hurt, and one unsuspecting waitress asks if they’d like a milkshake to share. 50s romance style, for this 50s diner.

“No, thank you,” Lexa mutters quickly, face turning red, before her eyes flash to Clarke. “Unless you’d like one?”

“I couldn’t, I’m so full,” Clarke groans, sitting back against the shiny red plastic seat of the booth.

* 

She feels like a high school kid again. Lexa gives her a small, hidden smile. This love is special.

* 

4:13 glows blue out of the dark dashboard of her car. They haven’t left the diner parking lot. They haven’t even started the car. Sufficiently stuffed and nearing the point of deliriously tired, Clarke and Lexa recline in the front seats of Clarke’s BMW, both content with their choices and alarmed at the fact that they need to be at work in a matter of hours. This late in the year, dawn is still some way off, giving the illusion of time to sleep before they have to greet the day, but Clarke knows that if she and Lexa allow themselves to drift off, they won’t wake until the evening.

She wonders, idly, how it would look, if the candidate and her campaign manager didn’t turn up to work, only to be found fast asleep in her car in the parking lot of an all-night diner.

“Clarke?”

“Mmm.”

“Earlier, when you asked what we’d do if we got caught…” Lexa’s voice is lower, graver than it was in the diner. She’s been deep in thought; Clarke swallows, suddenly worried.

“You want to talk about it now?” she says, with a quiet laugh.

Lexa shakes her head. “Not at all. I don’t even particularly want to consider the possibility; we’ll worry if it happens. But if it doesn’t happen, and you win…I want to talk about that.”
There’s a current to her words, a magnetic undertow that picks Clarke’s heart rate up. “Yes?” she says, losing her breath. Before answering, Lexa turns in her seat so that she can face Clarke fully.

“Whatever happens...I want you,” she breathes, and before Clarke can reply, Lexa rushes into a speech with the practiced tone of someone who has been rehearsing this. “If we lose, and we won’t, I would want to go somewhere on the other side of the world with you. Just us. I want to go for as long as we can afford, before we come back and start building your next campaign. You’re destined for great things, Clarke. But first, I want us to get away from it all.”

“Australia,” Clarke breathes. Lexa raises an eyebrow. “I’ve always wanted to go. Octavia went recently, and it sounds amazing...”

“Australia, then,” Lexa promises. “For as long as we can.”

“And if we win?”

Somehow, it promises to be better than an escape with just the two of them. Lexa takes a deep breath.

“If we win...if you win, you’ll have to get a place in Washington, obviously. And when you do...there are places I’d like to take you. Restaurants, theaters. There’s a national park a few hours outside of where I grew up--

“Are you preemptively asking me on future dates?” Clarke says, with a sly smile.

Lexa looks down at her lap. “Yes...and I’m asking you to be with me.”

Clarke’s heart stutters, first with hope, and then with the kind of fear reserved for getting everything you’ve ever wanted.

“Lexa...”

“I would give everything for this campaign, Clarke. I want you to know that. You are my first priority, and by extension, so is the campaign. I promise you. But I’m driven to this for you, because of who you are and who you are to me. I would do anything for you, anything to give you the life that you deserve.”

She takes a deep breath.

“I love you,” she says, with the firmness of finality and the gentleness of a caress all at once. “For who you are, and for who you are to me, and to the rest of the world. And I’ll love you for who you are in the future, regardless of how or why or if things change. It feels strange to look back on the past several months and realize they are only months--it feels like I’ve known this for a lifetime, and I’ve never been more assured of a truth, Clarke. I want to keep experiencing the world with you and leave a lasting mark on it, whether it be in Washington DC or in Australia or anywhere else. Just us, together. If you’ll have me.”

Lexa has long since pulled the air from her lungs, leaving her with nothing left to breathe out every word of affirmation she wants to give in response. So Clarke does the only thing she can do: she leans forward across the car to kiss her.

Yes. Yes. Yes. It’s sweet, open-mouthed and full of promise, and when she breathes, “I love you too,” against Lexa’s lips, it’s a confirmation and a vow and confession all at once.

And, just like they have before, the lights around them seem to shine a little brighter.
Too bright. Flashing. And again. And again. Clarke frowns into the kiss as she realizes that the glow of the light outside their car isn’t that of streetlights and apartment windows, but more like flashes of lightning. It doesn’t make sense in her hazy mind, but when she instinctively breaks away from the kiss and peers outside, she feels as if she’s been struck by that lightning.

“Lexa...fuck.”

There’s a man with a camera, yards from their car, snapping away. Black jacket, black jeans, and a white, white-toothed grin. They can see him smiling from behind the camera, even from here.

Not for the first time that day, Clarke’s world crumbles away beneath her.

_God, no._

What happens next is little more than a series of still images, not unlike the photographs, set to the hammering of her sinking heart. Lexa swears. Clarke crumbles into her seat. The photographer turns and starts a jog in the opposite direction. Lexa throws the car into drive and slams on the gas. Nausea rises up in Clarke’s throat, mixed with shame and embarrassment and fear, filling the vacuum in her chest. She drops her head into her hands.

It’s over. Everything they’ve worked for, over.

Her and Lexa...over. Because of a single mistake. Clarke wants to cling desperately to hope, but something inside of her knows.

Lexa, apparently, does not know. She drives ahead of the photographer and pulls the emergency brake, whipping the car around so that it blocks his route of escape and her driver’s window faces him.

“I’ll give you two hundred and fifty thousand dollars for those photos,” she commands, voice deep and booming from the driver’s side window.

Clarke’s numb. She can’t even react to the amount.

The photographer shrugs, grinning. If he didn’t already know the gold he has, Lexa’s reaction has confirmed it. “They’re worth more.”

“No they aren’t,” Lexa snaps. “There’s not a publication anywhere in the country that’ll give you a quarter million dollars. You’d be lucky to get a fifth of that.”

“They’re not going to a publication,” he replies, smirk growing wider. “They’re going to my boss, and he’s paying me with a lifetime career where I’ll make your quarter million ten times over. Mr. Wallace never thought he’d get something as good as this. I might as well become a Wallace Industries partner now.”

He’s an intern for Cage Wallace. The only way it could possibly get worse.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

since it's been...six goddamn months? since I last posted, this chapter is obviously best read after a re-read of the last.

love you all. Happy "Lexa is immortal" day!

It’s not a sound she’s used to, but Clarke knows Lexa’s voice well enough to hear fear in it, beneath the layers of fury and force that she’s poured on to hide it.

“Don’t do this.”

As if the command could stop those pictures from reaching Cage Wallace.

“Love a good fucking scandal!” The intern snaps a few more pictures of Lexa leaning from the car window before he pops the memory card out of the camera and slides it into his pocket. “Thank you, ladies. I had a feeling I’d get something good.”

For a half second, Clarke can see it: Lexa, with all of the energy coiled in her tense muscles, springing from the car and ripping the memory card from the Wallace intern. A fleeting, ridiculous image.

When she realizes it’s the most hopeful one she has, the despair descends again, colder and heavier. She slumps back against the seat. If she had a voice, she’d tell Lexa to leave it, to give in, but she can’t even take a breath right now, let alone exhale to speak.

“Call Gustus and Ryder,” Lexa mutters to her. “If they can’t be here in ten minutes, call the police.”

Clarke gapes at her. Lexa has never said something so desperate, so inane. Will Gustus and Ryder assault him? Intimidate him? Will the police demand he turn over his camera? Then again, Clarke has never seen Lexa so scared, so caught. Her green eyes are wide, dark, flashing out of a pale face. A vein beats like hummingbird wings in her neck. She knows what a lost cause this is, but unlike Clarke, Lexa is going to go down fighting.

The intern, meanwhile, has spotted his chance to wriggle out from under Lexa’s threatening gaze as she looks to Clarke, and he’s turned on a heel to hurry back across the parking lot. Spotting this, Lexa shifts back into fight mode. She guns the engine again, surging across the parking lot to swing around him. And this time, she does jump from the car, right into direct confrontation, face to face with the man about to destroy them.

“Listen--it would be monumentally fucking stupid for you to do this,” Lexa snarls, and her ferocity has him rooted to the spot. “Do you think we don’t have anything on Cage Wallace? Do you want to turn this into a scorched earth battle?”

“You’re going to try to bluff out of this?” he says with a scoff.

“Not to mention the fact that it’ll be so easy to paint him as a homophobe.” She’s building up power; Clarke sees a flicker of hope. “Having his interns stalk women? Trying to use these pictures as part
of a smear campaign? We have the majority of the press behind us and Representative Griffin is being lauded for her courage in coming out; do you know how easy that will be to spin?"

He pauses; Lexa has just secured the slimmest possible toe-hold on the sheer cliff face she and Clarke just went over. She grits her teeth and clings tight, determined beyond all measure not to lose her grip.

“Mutually assured destruction,” she warns him. “Or call my bluff, and be responsible for the greatest capitulation in US Senate history. You’ve been underestimating the Griffin campaign for months now; do you really want to try it on this?”

“Whatever you have on him, there’s no way it’ll top Clarke Griffin fucking her campaign manager,” he says, trying to keep his voice strong, his tone casual. “Thirty year old Senator hopeful, party girl past, unreliable, and fucking an employee on top of it. A female employee.”

Lexa stares him down, a hundred times stronger than he could ever aspire to be. “Tell your boss we’re willing to make a deal.”

“He won’t take it.” His pale face and clenched jaw hint otherwise.

“He will, because he’s smarter than you are, and he’s behind in the polls. What he won’t take is the risk of these pictures backfiring.”

“Tell me what you have and maybe these pictures don’t reach him.”

“The pictures are reaching him regardless,” Lexa says coldly. “When you give them to him, just be sure to tell him he can get in contact with us if he would like to avoid self-immolation. Tell him they’re worth less than 1.2 million.”

And then, to Clarke’s surprise, Lexa is the one to turn tail first; she gets into the car, slams the door shut, and presses the gas until Clarke’s BMW screeches out of the parking lot.

*

The groan of the engine---Lexa never once lets up on the gas--as they bear down the freeway provides the only noise in the car for several minutes. They’ve been struck dumb: such a catastrophic derailment of a career inspires nothing but muted, numb, shock. Clarke shifts between hope that Lexa had frightened the intern into submission, fear that she hadn’t, and a deep, stifling, sickening guilt.

In the end, she settles on guilt.

“It’s my fault.”

Lexa shakes her head once, eyes fixed on the road. “Don’t.”

“They’ve been following me for weeks. I should have checked when we left.”

“It’s four in the morning. You can’t have expected him to be camped outside your apartment all night.”

But Clarke’s angry, bitter. Her initial shock has faded, with fury slowly seeping into the vacuum left
behind. She wants to fight. And if that means she’s her own target of her frustration, so be it. Just hours ago, she was vowing to take more responsibility for herself and her career.

“It’s a little more than a month until the election,” she sighs. “I should have known. Fuck, at this point we should just call it. Resign, get jobs as strategists for someone else.”

Lexa doesn’t answer. Her eyes scan the freeway as if she’s weaving through heavy traffic, but there are few cars on the road at this hour. Her mind is far away.

“We need to call someone,” Clarke presses. Lexa can’t be far away right now.

Lexa gives a humorless half laugh. “Like who?”

“I don’t know. Raven. My Mom. Anya.” She’s desperate.

“There’s not a chance in hell we’re calling my sister,” Lexa says flatly. “Or your Mom.”

Clarke scoffs. “So we can call the police, but not your journalist sister? Or my career politician mother?”

A muscle bulges in Lexa’s jaw, giving Clarke a modicum of twisted satisfaction, but the other woman won’t rise to Clarke’s bait. They both know that the frustration is misdirected. Nonetheless, Lexa’s tone is suitably acerbic: “We’ve done enough in this car, I believe,” she drawls, voice hoarse. “I need to think. We’ll figure it out when we get to the apartment.”

It’s a darkly amusing thought that if nothing else, the fact that they’ve been caught jolts Clarke’s nervous system better than a dozen shots of espresso possibly could. It’s five in the morning, she’s been up all night, and she feels like she won’t sleep for the next week because she and Lexa have just been caught.

Caught. Caught. She repeats the word in her head for the rest of the ride home, and with Lexa refusing to air it out with her, Clarke sees the word in headlines, in email subject lines, in the garbled shouts of paparazzi as they chase her from home to work and back again, in crowds three times the size they were before.

First, they’ll pull her name from the headlines. Depersonalize. Dehumanize. She’s a scandal now. Senator Hopeful Caught in Affair.

CAUGHT: CA Representative Sex Scandal.

Lesbian Romance Rocks California Race

Then, her party leaders will start reaching out. With no sense of concern or desire to hear Clarke’s story, they’ll write emails varying in tone from harsh denunciation from the most severe politicians and frigid, frank instructions from the most compassionate of her peers.

The photographers and journalists will be the worst. They’ll seek to get a rise out of her at every public appearance; she won’t be able to go to the grocery store or a nearby coffee shop without hearing shouted questions about her love life, rumors about her depravity, her thoughts about past political affairs and what she plans to do with her now ruined political career. Journalists will beg for interviews, promising to handle her with kid gloves, and newly-hired crisis management professionals will push her into them so that she can demonstrate her chagrin and ask for forgiveness. From whom, she does not know. But she’ll beg for it.
She glances to Lexa again, searching for some reassurance, some light in the darkness that she’s constructed for herself. Nothing. Lexa is lost in her machinations. Clarke lives in the darkness of her imagination, berated by faceless peers, shamed by the public, helpless among her friends and their pity as it all slips out of her grasp just as she was closing her fingers. And alone.

By the time they arrive back at her apartment, her imagination has taken too deep a root for her to stop the vitriol that forms on her tongue as she strides into her living room.

“Have you thought enough and come up with a solution on your own, or are you going to talk this out with me?”

Lexa doesn’t answer as she carefully closes the door. Clarke tries to wait it out, but impatience gets the best of her and Lexa’s silence forces her to turn around and face her.

“Don’t make me the enemy,” Lexa says quietly, when they’ve locked eyes across the room.

“Then work with me as an ally,” Clarke demands, gritting her teeth.

Lexa’s tone doesn’t change. “I am.”

“You’re not acting like it!”

“Because I’m more than that. Of course we’re together on this.”

And that’s terrifying. The more Lexa is, the more Clarke has to lose. Not just her career, her aspirations, the respect she’s worked so hard to win, but Lexa now, as well. With her heart hammering, she gathers herself and her strength to ask: “Together as my campaign manager, or together as the woman who just told me she loved me?”

When she hears the waver in Clarke’s tone—imperceptible to anyone else—Lexa’s face falls. She understands the acidic edge in Clarke’s words.

“I love you, Clarke,” she says softly, taking a few, tentative steps forward. “Whatever happens, that won’t change.”

That’s enough. It’s all she can ask for. She ignores “whatever happens” and lets her shoulders drop like she’s releasing the weight of the day, giving in, and closes the gap to pull Lexa into an embrace.

“I love you too,” she promises, and then, “I don’t want to lose this.”

“Lose what?” Lexa’s hands snake up Clarke’s back, pulling her closer. With her ear to Lexa’s chest, Clarke can hear her heart hammering, still shot through with adrenaline and fear, but showing none of it. She inhales a heavenly breath of Lexa’s perfume.

“Any of it.”

“Then trust me,” Lexa urges. “We won’t lose this.”

Trust is a hard ask—not because she distrusts Lexa, but because she dropped her guard just an hour ago and it destroyed everything. As much as she wants to lower her defenses, as much as she wants to believe Lexa can fix this, she recoils at the thought of relaxing and trusting that this will be ok.

“I trust you—but Lexa, this isn’t going to go away.”

She has enough experience to understand how she’ll be seen from now on: they don’t yet live in a world, much less work in a political arena, where she could ever be seen as anyone other than the
Senator hopeful who slept with an employee and got caught making out with her in her car at 4 in the morning. She’s had to fight and struggle and work harder than anyone else to be taken seriously, enduring names like honey and love and doll until she proved herself so tough that everyone else no longer even dared to call her Clarke, and now? Now she’ll be seen as nothing more than the girl who couldn’t keep herself from fucking a female staffer.

“There isn’t a way this ends happily,” Clarke says, with a humorless laugh. “Even if I win, this is going to follow me. Opposing politicians will try to end debates and arguments by bringing it up; news reports will mention it;

“It’s not the end of the world,” Lexa mutters. “You’ve worked and you’ve forced people to take you seriously. Your supporters in California love you for your policies and ideas. You can prove that on a national stage.”

“It took me years to get to that point,” Clarke replies. “And now I’d be starting over. But that’s a moot point if Cage Wallace uses the pictures to win, which he easily could. Just like the intern said, I’m thirty years old, I’m new, I’m unreliable, I’m--”

Lexa grimaces. “Dating Roan Azgeda.”

Hissing in a breath as if she’s been hit, Clarke squeezes her eyes shut. “And I just gave an interview about him--it was about you, but the journalists--”

“I know,” Lexa says. “We have Anya and her endless journalistic curiosity to thank for that. She won’t run an article about you and Roan, but the other two journalists will.”

“We need to call her,” Clarke presses again, helpless. “And my mom.”

Lexa sighs. “We need to call more than her.”

*

They compromise: Lexa calls Anya, but holds fast on not calling Abby, a condition which Clarke eventually accedes to. She doesn’t particularly want to face her mother about an affair with Lexa while Lexa is at her side and the campaign is on the verge of collapse. Clarke paces in her living room, sick to her stomach, as Lexa sends out emails, texts, and finally calls through the early pre-dawn hours. She makes a pot of coffee, tries and fails to drink a cup, paces until it gets cold, pours it out, only to make another pot a few minutes later.

Just to have something to do with her hands. She can’t stay still.

“We should call the party leaders in Sacramento,” Clarke suggests, a little past 6 a.m.

Lexa, in stark contrast to Clarke’s unending activity, reclines on the couch, brow wrinkled, eyes closed not in sleep, but in deep thought. She hasn’t moved.

“We should wait for everyone to arrive,” she replies simply. “The two of us are in no state to plan this right now. We haven’t slept.”

Clarke’s frustration simmers beneath her skin, but she has to agree.
They start arriving around 6:30, just as the sun rises. Anya knocks on the door of Clarke’s apartment first. Having known about Clarke and Lexa, Anya’s face is dark when the door opens—when she meets her sister’s eyes, it darkens further. Her fears confirmed.

“You have to be kidding,” is all she says, and there’s no reply from the two women. The guilty looks confirm everything. She plies them with questions, but they refuse to answer.

“I’m not going through this more than I have to,” Lexa says quietly.

Raven arrives not long after that, after Anya gives up trying to get the story from them. Early morning exhaustion prevents Raven from being too confused by the request that she come over, and when she sits down at Clarke’s kitchen table, the look on Anya’s face stops her from asking anything.

They bring Wells in on Skype. Like Anya, he’s suspicious of the situation; he just doesn’t know why.

And finally, one more knock at the door. Clarke casts Lexa a dark look before opening it.

“When the campaign is over, so is this fake relationship,” Roan grunts.

Clarke rolls her eyes as she stands aside to let him in. “I don’t think we’ll be waiting that long, believe me.”

Roan had been Lexa’s demand. Clarke had objected, not having any desire to stand in her living room and tell her irreverent, sarcastic, pain-in-the-ass fake media boyfriend of the grand mistake she has just made; admitting to herself that they’ve been caught and are about to be outed is one thing, but admitting it to everyone else, especially someone like him, is quite another. But she had insisted, and Clarke found it a battle not worth fighting in the end.

Raven has made a fresh pot of coffee, the third one this morning, while they’ve waited; she pours Roan a cup and slides it across the table when he sits down.

“So, are we planning Cage Wallace’s takedown already?” she asks. “I feel like we could have done this at the office.”

“And not at 6am,” Wells chimes in.

Clarke, standing at the head of the table, sees all eyes turn to her expectantly, except Lexa’s. The other woman stares at a spot on the ground, far away from this moment—the longer Clarke looks at her, the harder it is to speak. In the ensuing silence, Lexa’s eyes lift to Clarke as well, providing the slightest injection of courage. She takes a deep breath and allows everything to spill out.

“Miss Ward–Lexa and I have been sleeping together for the last six months or so. A few hours, a photographer from Cage Wallace’s campaign caught us kissing in the front seat of my car in a parking lot.”

They turn to stone. Faces frozen in shock and disbelief, mouths hanging open, unable to do so much as inhale as they try to process what she just said. They stare back at Clarke, but it’s as if she’s not there: all they can see is the implications of a political candidate getting caught fucking her right-hand woman.

The first to move is Anya: she drops her head into her hands.

Lexa lowers her gaze to the floor again.
Raven is the first to react: “Uh, what? You’ve been...”

“Sleeping together. And Cage Wallace has irrefutable photo evidence now.”

“You’ve been...sleeping together? Like cliche political movie?” Clarke’s blank face confirms it, and she presses on: “And now...”

“And now the campaign is in danger,” Clarke says, her hoarse voice barely above a whisper. Like sandpaper.

“We can fix this,” Wells says instantly. Raven, with her genius mind and computer brain, is still trying to work through the equations, but Wells bursts forth with intuition and optimism. “We can start crisis management now, and--”

He’s cut off by the laughter erupting out of Roan’s chest, quiet and rolling at first, but getting louder until he has his head tipped back to the ceiling.

“Are you serious?” he says once everyone’s eyes are on him, still laughing uproariously. “Does this count as fake cheating or real cheating? Do I get a TMZ interview if it’s fake cheating? Fuck that’s funny.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you look the guy on the cover of trashy romance novels?” Anya asks him, her polite tone and demurely cocked head hiding an icy undercurrent.

Roan picks it up, as he was supposed to. “Well, that’s appropriate for right now, then.”

“And the guy in the butter commercials. I Can’t Believe It’s Not Butter.”

“Bubble Boy, too. The movie,” Wells offers helpfully. Anya nods her gratitude at the computer screen.

“Can we focus?” Lexa snaps. “Listen. We bought ourselves some time, but--”

“Oh my god...” Raven breathes. “You fucked in the elevator at work.”

Anya chokes on her coffee; it spews across the table, splattering onto Roan, who jolts back in revulsion.

“You what?!”

“You told her?” Lexa demands, turning on Clarke.

“No!” Clarke shouts. “I only told you!”

“That’s why you were so scared when I told you there was a camera!” Raven exclaims, triumphant.

“There’s a camera?” Anya says, with fear in her voice. She starts to work out the calculations, what she’ll have to do to get the tape.

“You two had sex in an elevator?” Wells asks, disgusted at their lack of decency.

“No!” exclaims Clarke. “I mean, we--it doesn’t matter, I took care of it. And we didn’t--christ, I can’t believe this is happening.”

Roan perks up like a dog who hears the word ‘food.’ “Is there a tape of the elevator sex?”
“Shut the fuck up, Fabio,” Anya groans.

Raven leans forward, morbidly intrigued, eyes flashing above her smirk like a teenage girl at a slumber party. “Have you had sex in the office?”

Clarke wants to sink into the floor. Or, more plausibly, hop the first flight to a foreign country, never to return. Only now is hot, blistering humiliation beginning to pile onto her fear and panic. Sleeping with her campaign manager. Kept close to her chest, it’s dark, furtive, even appealing in its lasciviousness. Out in the open, it’s dirty, vulgar, tasteless. She can hardly face the people closest to her and Lexa, she doesn’t even want to think about facing her mother—how will she face the world with this? This sort of thing only ever ends in press conferences and walks of shame.

The first of which is now.

It would be poor form to decide to take more responsibility and then slink away from the consequences of her actions.

She clings to that thought, as the one solid handhold in a tornado that threatens to tear everything apart.

“Enough,” Clarke intones, steel edge to her voice. She has to use the last of her determination before it escapes her again. “We didn’t call you all here to tell you, we called you because we need to work out a strategy to save the campaign and we need everyone on this.”

Silence, for a beat. Then the amused look slides off of Raven’s face, everyone leans in, and even Roan soberes up.

“So where do we start?” Wells asks, and the slightest pinprick of light pierces Clarke’s darkness.

“We start with who knows,” Anya replies. She ticks them off of her fingers. “Cage, the photographer, everyone in this room...anyone else?”

Clarke hesitates. “Murphy, one of the security guards at my office.”

Wells groans and throws his head back as Anya exclaims, “A security guard? Like a privately contracted security guard for the building?”

“Yes.”

“Why are we even talking about Cage Wallace then?” Raven demands. “You should have told me, I could have gotten into our system. I--”

“I took care of it,” Clarke interrupts.

“How?” Anya says. “And you’re going to believe some outside security guy who barely makes enough to afford LA rent?”

“She really did,” Lexa chimes in forcefully, “but you’re forgiven for thinking otherwise.”

She exchanges a small glance with Clarke, and shrugs off Clarke’s glare. Just because everyone else doubts her, doesn’t mean that Lexa is allowed to.

“He said he deleted the tape,” she explains. “I believe him.”

“So there is a tape!” Roan exclaims.
“Roan, shut up.” The snarl is from Raven this time, before Anya can lunge across the table and deck him.

“I swear to god…” Anya glares at him, but allows her threat to trail off. There are more important matters to attend to. “Listen. It’s great that you believe that the working class security guard that he’s nonchalantly and willfully deleted his meal ticket for the next three years and he won’t say anything about it, but there are already too many people who know. It’s going to spread. At this point, trying to stop it is like trying to stick your fingers in a broken dike, it’s just going to keep coming.”

Clarke flashes a warning glare at Raven too late, because she has already descended into a coughing fit that sounds suspiciously like laughter.

Anya, luckily, ignores it, too focused on the strategy. “But nonetheless, right now we have to focus on the biggest threat, which is Cage and his lackey. You said you bought time, Lexa?”

This is directed to Lexa, pulling her into the conversation from the other side of the room where she has been looking out of the window in deep contemplation and frustration. She steps softly back to the table, nodding as she goes, still deep in thought—deep in planning.

“We did-- we threatened him with a scandal of his own,” she murmurs. “We hinted at money he’s misused, just enough of a hint for him to understand but not enough to let them know what we know. But I’ll let Raven and Wells take over this one, it’s their research.”

Everyone shifts their attention to Wells, even Raven, and he shifts uncomfortably. “Apparently embezzled,” he corrects Lexa, giving her a regretful wince. “We don’t have anything solid, just patterns heretofore unnoticed because he’s only participating in smaller races. I was going to dig in to his father’s finances from his old races today, to see if it’s a family business.”

“And I was going to start chasing down the patterns, talking to people,” Raven adds.

“It’s essentially a conclusion we’ve drawn,” Wells continues. “For example, imagine the Wallace campaign buys fifty thousand dollars worth of office supplies from a certain company. A week later, the owner of that company donates five thousand dollars to ten different politicians and officials. The next month, all of those officials vote for something that Cage Wallace supports. It could be totally above board and legal, or it could be something along the lines of a money-laundered bribe from Wallace.”

Anya nods slowly. “Regardless, something like that would cause a huge hit for his election chances.”

“And that’s a conservative example,” Raven says. “There are others: A donation from Wallace’s campaign to another, local candidate. Someone running for the state senate, for example. Someone who won’t attract attention. One hundred thousand dollars to his campaign. Then the next month, that candidate donates eighty-thousand to some guy running for school board in the next town over. Then that candidate, some dad running for the school board who would be lucky to raise seventy five dollars for his campaign, purchases seventy-five thousand dollars worth of consulting from a firm owned by Cage Wallace the next month, and the money disappears into Cage Wallace’s pocket. Originally from his campaign.”

The picture is growing clearer. “It’s a shell game,” Clarke says simply, to sum it up. It’s a shell game, and it’s their one chance at ensuring that a possible reveal of Clarke and Lexa’s secret doesn’t dismantle their chance of winning. Everyone’s skin prickles at the electricity in the air, the desperate feeling of a grasping at a slim chance amid the darkness of the moment. Everyone, that is, except Wells.
“I just want to remind you…” he begins, tentative. “We don’t have anything solid yet. We could, in a few days, but he’s going to start covering his tracks now, however he can.”

“We’ll have to bluff it, then, until we have something absolute,” Lexa decides.

“How?” Anya asks.

Clarke wants to know as well; Lexa looks to her, meeting her curious gaze, and then to Roan. And then it clicks. Clarke closes her eyes in defeat.

“Roan,” Clarke says, resigned, and Anya sighs. She’s realized it too. “I need you to call your mom.”

With all eyes suddenly on him, Roan pulls back in surprise and adamant refusal. “What? Why? I figured we were going to have to break up, not call my mother.”

“Because,” Lexa says, through thinly-veiled irritation. “Your mother has worked with Cage in the past. They have the same network, the same allies, they work together on certain bipartisan issues. Your mother is progressive by only the slimmest of margins, most likely because it’s always been required for success in California, and she is our best connection to Cage Wallace.”

“I’m not involving my mom in some ridiculous sex thing—”

Lexa sits forward. “Roan, you have an actual girlfriend living on the other side of the country. Allowing you to keep her was part of this arrangement. Call your mother now, or your girlfriend’s face will be plastered on cable TV this afternoon as I reveal that you’ve been cheating on Clarke for months now.”

Roan rolls his eyes and pulls out his phone.

*

Clarke and Roan’s meeting with Nia is set for 10am. The group weighs whether Lexa should attend as well, before deciding, after approximately six seconds of deliberation, that the woman Clarke is pseudo-cheating on Nia’s son with should not be present at a meeting in which they plan to reveal the extent of the situation.

They sketch out the rest of the strategy over the next hour and another three pots of coffee. Raven and Wells will double their effort on searching up Cage Wallace’s financial information, going so far as to recruit trusted conspirators like Monty to assist in the hunt. Anya will catch and kill the Clarke and Roan love stories written by the journalists that attended yesterday’s shoot. And Lexa will go into the office, proceed as if everything is normal, and cajole the staffers into doubling their efforts.

“I’m going to add more people to the debate team to advance the preparations,” Lexa mutters to Clarke later, as the group prepares to depart Clarke’s apartment. “Building as big a lead as possible will be integral to getting through this in case Cage reneges on the deal.”

“I’ll keep the meeting with Nia short,” Clarke promises with a nod.

They pause and meet gazes when they both realize they have nothing else to talk about, no reason to stand so close. It’s where Clarke wants to be, but without a purpose…the awkwardness grows as they struggle for some reason to stay like this, especially when they feel eyes on them.
It’s Raven who comes to the rescue. “Clarke, can I talk to you?”

“I have to go with Anya to meet the journalists,” Lexa mutters, like she’s giving Clarke permission to stand back. “We have to start engineering your breakup.”

Sheepishly, Clarke nods her goodbye and slinks over to Raven. She meets her friend’s eyes defiantly, but it’s a false sort of defiance--she looks right through Raven, trying to avoid seeing the pity or judgement or whatever else in her eyes.

“Hey...are you okay?” Raven asks softly, catching Clarke by surprise. “I was shocked at the table, so I didn’t react all that well but I want you to know...I’m happy for you, first of all.”

Clarke frowns. Although the sentiment is sweet, something she’d usually pull Raven into a hug for, there was a nervous uptick in her tone at the end. “...but?”

“I just...” Raven hesitates, pained. “There are a lot of people’s jobs on the line here, Clarke. If this all goes wrong--it’s about more than just you two.”

Anya appears suddenly. “Well, we won’t let it go wrong then,” she says crisply. “Clarke, you should get to that meeting. Downtown traffic will be hell.”

A rescue that doesn’t feel like one: she sweeps an arm around Raven and pulls her away with some request about emails, but the damage--however innocuous on Raven’s part--has already been done. The hot spike of guilt that Clarke had been holding at an arm’s length has finally sunk through her chest at the thought of all of her people losing their jobs. She’s been so selfish. So many people are relying on her.

She gets the text on the way to the meeting with Nia. Surprisingly, it’s not the Ward sister she was expecting.

[9:53 AM] Anya: We can’t let this go wrong. Don’t fuck it up with Azgeda.

*

Clarke is a product of everyone else’s efforts. Lexa has picked out the smart gray suit she wears; Raven has compiled the file folder of likely transactions she carries; Anya gave her certain talking points; and Roan has provided a litany of advice for her to persuade Nia to turn against Cage.

“Make her think you’re working with her,” he reminds her on the elevator ride up. “She’s stubborn.”

Stubborn feels like the kind of understatement made by a son entirely uninterested in his mother’s career or personality. They’re waiting outside Nia’s office when he remembers another one.

“Oh, and go into it politely. Start with a discussion of something else, lead into Cage. She should bring him up before you do.”

Good advice. Except, Clarke decides as the door swings open, she refuses to be everyone else’s collective project. She strides in, faced fixed in a determined scowl.

“Good morning,” Nia drawls, velvet smooth and sardonically amused. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”
“Hi, Mom,” Roan says. “Clarke and I--”

Clarke tosses the file on her desk and cuts him off.

“Cage Wallace has been embezzling and bribing his way to the top for years. I want you to stand against him, or go down with him.”

Nia stares at her.

“For fuck’s sake,” Roan mutters from the doorway where she’d left him.

He stomps in and drops into one of the chairs in front of his mother’s desk with the sullen glare of a child at a parent-teacher conference, while Nia regards Clarke with contempt and disbelief; she tries to make Clarke wait, icing her out, making her nervous, but after the night Clarke has just had, she is in no mood for Nia’s games any more than she feels like being someone’s puppet.

“I believe we have been over this before,” Nia says, when she realizes this. “I have far too much influence to need to bend to the whims of someone like you.”

“You have been quietly handing me influence for quite a while,” Clarke replies, matching her cool tone, mocking it. She leans forward and plants her hands on the desk. “I’ve been in a very public relationship with your son, who is in an actual relationship with a secret woman across the country. You agreed to lend your support to my causes because it would help your image. You lent me your public support, burning bridges with my political enemies. And, you have a political career that has run right alongside Cage Wallace, often overlapping, and now I have a file folder of information about his financial dealings that will damn him--do you want to run the risk of what will happen if we find you tied to any of it?”

She’s walking the knife’s edge of this bluff; if Nia calls it, she has nothing to back it up. And Roan, though he seems loyal, could very easily undo it all by mentioning that Clarke has been fucking her campaign manager. She waits for the sound of his voice and she stares into the ice chips of Nia’s eyes, hoping.

“All threats is no way to go through a political career, Representative,” Nia says.

“It’s not all threats,” Clarke says with a shrug. It’s working. “In fact, I’m offering you an opportunity. Roan and I are going to break up--”

“Absolutely not.”

“--and I’m going to offer him an actual political position in my staff. He can build his own connections, and his political credence; in a few years, he’ll be able to run for office on that. Not to mention, it takes my threat of a reveal off of the table.”

Nia’s adamant stance softens, but she remains wary. Clarke knows she has Roan hooked, too. This plan was something they discussed and decided on in the car ride over.

“But that doesn’t directly benefit you, I know,” Clarke continues. She taps the folder. “So here’s your opportunity. You’re free to peruse just a bit of what we have on Cage Wallace, with the knowledge that we have so much more. We’re casting bigger nets, too. Nets that could catch you, like I said--and nets that could catch your enemies.”

“You’re bluffing,” Nia spits. “I’m not falling for this.”

“You don’t have to believe me,” Clarke says coolly. “Go through the folder. Explore it. Call Cage
Wallace if you want--have him verify it for you. You’re savvy enough to know if he lies to you, right?"

“You’re leaving now.”

Clarke straightens up, adjusts her jacket, smoothes her blouse. “Absolutely. But just remember...keep me as your ally, Nia, because you don’t want me for an enemy. And think about the opportunity. Go through the folder. Think about anything you may have been involved in, even inadvertently. Think about some political enemies who may have been involved--consider how it would feel to see them trapped on the sinking ship of Cage Wallace’s career, and let me know if you’d like a spot on land or if you’ll be underwater with him.”

She’s on her way out when she stops in the doorway for one more thought: “Also, Roan: don’t forget about dinner tonight. Nia, that’ll be where our breakup will be staged. Try to make your decision by tonight, because tomorrow’s paper will have the breakup reason.”

She leaves the office, knowing damn well that Nia’s decision is already made. It was all over her face.

She pauses in the elevator, holding down the “door open button.” After a minute, she gets her confirmation, in the form of Nia’s faint voice calling out to her secretary: “Get me Cage Wallace on the phone.”

Six months ago, this would have had her bursting at the seams with satisfaction at such a political move. Now, it’s just cold relief that she’s accomplished one step of the convoluted plan to save her career; and there’s a growing, nagging feeling of guilt at the way she’s doing it, and who she’s dragging down with her as she does.

*

Roan texts her in the car less than 20 minutes later.

[10:51 AM] Roan: It worked. She called him as soon as you left, told him everything. And to go fuck himself if he drags her down.

[10:51 AM] Clarke: Good. So he knows the info is real

[10:52 AM] Roan: and you have my mom on your side.


[10:55 AM] Roan: and she threatened to cut me off if I don’t take the job you offer me, but at least I have a few months of freedom before that.

Rolling her eyes, Clarke switches to a group chat with Lexa, Raven, and Anya.


[11:01 AM] Anya: she told him what we have?

[11:03 AM] Anya: he won’t release the pictures then.


[11:08 AM] Clarke: we wait for him to contact us. He will.

[11:10 AM] Anya: and you and Lexa should get some sleep. She just told me you’ve been up all night.

[11:10 AM] Clarke: there’s too much to do.

[11:14 AM] Anya: you have nothing to do. And anything you try to do, you’ll probably fuck up, because you’re exhausted. Just sleep. We have plenty to worry about without the possibility of you two dropping. Raven and I can run things for a few hours.

She wants to argue, but after a moment of considering what to type in reply, she realizes that her eyes had slipped out of focus, lids heavy with sleep, as the quiet drone of the car engine replaced the thoughts in her head.

“If you could just head to my apartment, that would be great,” she mumbles to Ryder. “You and Gustus can have the rest of the day off after that. Until this evening for dinner, I’ll need one of you just for the photographers at the restaurant.”

“Is everything all right, Miss Griffin?” he asks, concerned.

She laughs bitterly. “No. But I need to sleep.”

*

She needs twelve hours--at least--in her expansive bed, curled in her down comforter, basking in the dim afternoon light shining around the edges of her dark curtains.

She gets four. When she hears the sharp ringing of her phone, she has to force herself up, because even in the grogginess of her half-asleep state, she knows that there is only one number she doesn’t have on silent.

“Lena,” she mumbles against her pillow when she’s finally located and answered the phone. “What’s wrong?”

“Sad state of affairs when that’s how we have to answer phones now,” Lexa says in greeting. A mess of voices blur together in the background, but Lexa’s voice comes through clear. “Where are you?”

“I’m...at home. I just woke up.” Telling Lexa she’s in bed doesn’t exactly seem appropriate, given the circumstances.

Out of the background jumble of voices springs Raven’s, to Clarke’s surprise: “I knew Lexa would be the one to get through to you. The rest of us have been calling, no answer.”

“Where are you?” Clarke asks urgently, sitting up.
“At the office,” Lexa replies. The background clamor dies down suddenly. “More specifically, in your office, now that we’ve got through to you. We need to talk.”

Clarke presses her free hand over her face. “Okay, just hold on, I’m coming in. I thought Anya told you to go home and sleep?”

“Anya thinks I’m at home, that’s all that matters. She’s out tracking journalists down. But this is all beside the point, Clarke...Cage Wallace called.”

She sucks in a breath. “What did he say?”

“He wants to talk to you. I told him he can talk to us,” she adds, before Clarke can reply, “on a conference call.”

Raven chimes in: “Which we should record.”

“That’s illegal, Raven,” Clarke sighs.

“Right. I’ll get back to my ethically ambiguous digging through financial records and not-so-subtle blackmailing of potential donors or beneficiaries,” Raven says.

God, somewhere like Australia sounds nice right now. Clarke takes a minute to compose herself and chase away the thought.

“When does Wallace want to talk?”

“Now,” Lexa says. “He’s on hold.”

Of course he is. Gritting her teeth and trying to fix her posture so that she can carry some weight in her voice and hopefully cover the fatigue in it, Clarke takes a deep breath. They don’t have time to plan for this and she doesn’t have Lexa at her shoulder, whispering advice; she’s on her own.

“Fine, put him through,” she says.

A pause, a click, and then the low buzz of another line on the call. Clarke waits; he can speak first.

“Miss Griffin?”

Just hearing Cage Wallace’s voice ruins the bit of composure that she has gathered for herself. Cage Wallace, the potential architect of her fall; and even if he weren’t in possession of those photos, everything about him from his politics to his money to the fact that he sent a photographer stalking an opponent in a dark parking lot at four in the morning makes him her enemy, politically and personally. And that anger seeps into her voice.

“Yes, this is Representative Griffin,” she says coldly. “Who’s calling?”

He gives the smallest grunt of annoyance. “Cage Wallace.”

“I wasn’t expecting a call,” she says.

“And I wasn’t expecting to hear the alertness in your voice,” Cage fires back. “I had assumed that working such late nights and long hours would have taken its toll.”

“Dedication to my cause helps counter that,” Clarke says, refusing to sink to his level. “I suppose you use coffee instead. How can I help you?”
“Not any more than you already have.” The smirk is evident in his voice. “However, I’d like to commend you. You’ve run a fantastic race so far, Miss Griffin. Despite your obvious shortcomings, private mishaps, and lack of judgement, you and your team have managed to keep it effective, inspiring, and clean.”

“Hm.” She waits, unimpressed, for his point. His threat. His bargain. Whatever he’s going to use to keep his financial dealings quiet.

“And I’d like to help you keep it that way,” Cage continues. “Consider it a charity project, or a show of admiration for your clean campaign, whatever you’d like, but either way, trust that so long as you keep the campaign focused solely on the political issues at hand, so will I.”

However oily and unctuous Cage Wallace may be, Clarke Griffin is matching him step for step, above and beyond her negotiations with Nia Azgeda this morning. He’s offering exactly what she and Lexa wanted, the pictures for her silence, but that doesn’t mean she feels dirty for agreeing with him, and she doesn’t have to fake irritation when she next speaks.

“Magnanimous of you now after the race we’ve had so far,” she says, sarcastic, before growing serious. “But if you want to keep the race clean, Wallace, we’ll keep it clean.”

“May be more difficult for some than others, but it is best for the state of California and the country at large,” Cage concludes. “Now that that’s cleared up, I look forward to seeing you at the upcoming debate, Miss Griffin.”

With that, he hangs up. That’s it: curt, emotionless, transactional, a job done now that he has successfully negotiated the protection of his potentially criminal activity using Clarke’s blossoming and now collapsing new relationship as leverage.

And she agreed to it, with no opposition.

A heavy sigh on the other end of the line reminds her that Lexa and Raven are still on the call.

“Clarke, are you coming into the office today?” Raven asks her presently.

“I should—”

“But she won’t,” Lexa says. Before Clarke can protest, Lexa overrides her: “There’s nothing more you can do today, we’ve covered our bases. I’m going home too.”

“In that case, I’ll finish up everything here and keep everyone in line,” Raven says. “We just needed to know if we should save any major decisions until tomorrow.”

Clarke has already dropped back onto her pillows and now, getting up seems like a gargantuan task, so she allows herself a half-smile of appreciation for Raven. “Thank you. I’ll be there first thing in the morning.”

“After all this, coffee’s on you too, Griffin. Call me if you need me.”

Silence fills the other end of the line as Raven trots out of the room—Clarke doesn’t hear the even sound of Lexa’s breathing, the release of her held breath, until she hears the office door open and close. Alone with Lexa, at least on the phone, she closes her eyes.

“How do you feel?” Lexa asks softly.

“Like I need a shower,” Clarke sighs, and then after a moment of contemplation, adds: “And yes,
that’s an invitation.”

“Don’t you have a date tonight?

By the tone of her voice, Clarke knows it’s not with her; it takes her a moment to remember that she has to stage her breakup with Roan tonight, a realization that ends with her hand pressed over her face again.

“Fine,” Clarke sighs. “A shower and then a date, neither of which are with you. You’re welcome to come over after.” Which is more of a request than an offer.

Lexa hesitates. “Anything you want.”

*

Between his eagerness and her cynicism, the breakup with Roan turns out to be the simplest part of the day. They arrive in separate cars; Roan arrives twenty minutes after her, as planned; Clarke doesn’t bother to fake a smile and allows her true feelings to show through. They’re cold at dinner—Clarke doesn’t mind staying silent, there’s little to talk about in public anyway—and Roan declines to help her through the field of photographers on the way out to the car. Done and dusted in a little under an hour. Clarke lets Raven know, she sends an “insider tip” to a few magazines, and the night is over.

Speculation articles filter through over the next two hours, news and social media alerts pinging as they cross her phone screen, but she pays little attention. Instead, Clarke waits for Lexa, trapped in her own thoughts, pacing the length of her apartment with the kind of purpose she usually reserves for heated arguments and late-night strategy sessions in an attempt to conjure up the sort of focus that will allow her to block everything else. But when the girl doesn’t appear after that first thirty minutes, Clarke gives into crawling sensation of her skin leftover from the Wallace negotiation of the afternoon and the Azgeda negotiation of the morning, and slips into her bathroom. She can’t wait any longer.

Silver steam begins to fill the room as Clarke strips bare. It always takes a moment to get to her preferred temperature—seventh level of Hell hot, as Lexa likes to call it. But before it can reach that level, there is at last a knock at her apartment door.

Relief soaking into her like the steam in the air, Clarke grabs her towel and heads out into her apartment. Quickly checking the peephole, she throws the door open, shamelessly.

“Traffic was terrible and I had to go to my apartment to get clo--,” Lexa begins, in the half-second before her gaze falls from Clarke’s face and wet hair to her towel-clad body and she loses the ability to breathe. “Really?” she chokes out.

Clarke smiles for the first time today. “Still need a shower?”

“Absolutely.” It comes out in a whoosh of breath.

Clarke was wrong. She needed Lexa more than anything. And Lexa needed her. They stand under the stream of scalding water, lost in each other, until their fingers wrinkle and the bathroom is so thick with steam that they can’t see across it.
As Clarke turns the water off, Lexa circles her arms around Clarke’s waist from behind and presses her forehead against the base of Clarke’s neck. A comforting feeling, having her so completely and openly, until she feels the vibration of Lexa’s laugh against her skin.

“What?” Clarke asks.

“The fact that we can’t stop doing this. We haven’t even seriously considered it.”

“Lexa, this is only the second or third shower we’ve taken together. It’s not that serious.”

Lexa’s low laugh grows louder and she plants a kiss on the back of Clarke’s neck.

Lexa gets the same treatment Clarke gave herself: exfoliation, lotion, a massage. After a half hour, they tumble into Clarke’s bed, smooth and clean with limbs and eyelids already heavy with exhaustion. Clarke curls into Lexa’s arms.

“Do you want to talk about today?” Lexa mumbles.

“Sure. I had a great nap and two fantastic showers. What about you?”

“Just one fantastic shower. But I want to know how you’re feeling about the fact that we’re blackmailing an opposing politician into keep scandalous photos of our relationship secret.”

Clarke sours at her deadpan. “I don’t want to talk about that.”

“Clarke.”

Clarke sits up, fixing Lexa with a glare to let her know her displeasure. “You know exactly how I feel about it. I don’t care that we succeeded, for the time being. I’ve said since the beginning that I wanted this to be clean, and now it’s hard to be proud of the campaign when we’ve dirtied it with this.”

Lexa eases Clarke back into her arms with a soothing hum. “I understand how you feel; but you’ve run a great campaign and what you’ve done is something to be proud of. We still have a ways to go--the upcoming debate could decide everything--but you should be proud, Clarke. I’m proud of you. We won’t lose.”

Clarke is more concerned with losing this, but she keeps her mouth shut for the sake of fast-approaching sleep. “We start official debate prep tomorrow,” she murmurs against Lexa’s chest. She hopes it doesn’t sound half-hearted, but at this point, she’s too tired to know.

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Raven snaps at her to get her attention. “Griffin. What would you say in response to the criticism that you’ve run a luxury campaign based on your huge amount of campaign funds? It separates you from the people.”

Clarke doesn’t look up from the report she’s reading, leaning back in her chair in the conference room. “I have a number of amazing, supportive, everyday people who have donated anywhere from $5 to $50 dollars. Hoarding that money for political moves later or my own benefit would be a disservice to those people who hope to see me elected.” Her tone is practiced, robotic.
“Try not to dig at him,” Lexa advises. “Leave it at appreciating the support of your donors.”

“Clarke, do you have a plan if you lose?” Anya asks.

Clarke furrows her brow. “Why would that come up in the debate?”

“It’s an interview question,” Anya replies, gesturing at her laptop screen. “The journalists from the other day sent a replacement list so that they can remove the section about your love life.”

“We shouldn’t be doing interviews during debate prep,” Clarke mutters, then, more loudly, “I’m going to take a vacation, and then come back and support the elected politicians who need it.”

“Not as alluring as the relationship, but sure,” Anya sighs.

Clarke’s “break-up” with Roan Azgeda had gone over successfully, meaning it had caused hardly a ripple in the political arena and generally favorable responses in the social arena. They haven’t heard from Nia, which is also a good sign, but more importantly, Cage Wallace has also held fast to his stay of execution, keeping the axe well above their exposed necks. They watch it carefully—keeping an eye on social media and the rumor mill, to possible hints from journalists waiting to break a big story. But there’s nothing. So long as Cage is confident that Lexa and Clarke will not release info on his financial misdeeds, the pictures don’t exist.

Nonetheless, the presence of the axe is enough to unnerve them all. Clarke braces herself every time Raven comes swinging into her office unannounced.

One of the few positives that arises in the final weeks of a Senate campaign like this is that the absolute chaos of every waking moment tends to eclipse rational thought and prevent any rumination on flaws, missteps, and faults. She’s answering interview questions as she practices her debate answers, she’s calling donors to thank them personally between meetings with her financial managers, she’s being fitted for new wardrobes and going on PR outings rather than eating lunch.

As the days pass and the deadline gets closer, she and Lexa practice the sort of secrecy they should have been experts at long before this. They’ve long since given up trying to stay apart from one another and the promise of each other’s company is one of the few things that keeps them going through the long afternoon hours, but they approach it with a practiced professionalism now: separate cars, staggered departure and arrival times to and from their respective apartments, different schedules, cryptic text messages.

Her lead in the polls vacillates within the standard error range—one day she’s five points ahead, another day her lead has shrunk to three, but Clarke Griffin never falls behind Cage Wallace in the run up to the debate.

When she goes to sleep at night, the debate questions ring in her head until they turn to nightmares. *Are you willing to compromise on your vision for healthcare in order to achieve less difficult victories? What should Congress do about illegal immigration? What is your position on LGBT+ education in schools? In your experience as an LGBT+ politician...do you enjoy it? Who are you, really? Was Lexa Ward worth causing a scandal? How much would you give up for her?*

*On the day of the debate, Clarke Griffin sees her last name everywhere.*
UCLA, hosting the debate on campus, has gone to great lengths to capitalize on the attention that will be bestowed upon their theater during the televised action. “Griffin” is displayed on one side of the stage in bold blue letters on white; stylized signs for “Wallace and Griffin” hang everywhere she looks; her staffers have special “Griffin Campaign” ID tags; and calls of “Griffin!” echo constantly through the halls in the final hours of debate prep as her team rushes around the theater.

Even on her coffee–black, straight, more a caffeine crutch than an indulgence at this point--the barista has elected to write “Rep. Griffin” with a little heart beside her name.

Clarke sighs, staring at it as a hired makeup artist brushes blush across her cheeks in her dressing room mirror. Those ringing late-night thoughts, debate questions turned into deep philosophical examinations of her choices and existence, have whittled away her sleep until caffeine is the only thing getting her through the day.

She wishes they’d use her first name on the cups at least, though. Just one small concession.

Beside her, Lexa’s thumb swipes over her phone screen, scrolling through emails and notes, but her eyes are on Clarke studying her paper coffee cup.

“Clarke.”

Clarke hides her relief with a frown as she faces Lexa. “Yes, Miss Ward?”

The make-up artist looks between them hesitantly--Clarke reminds herself that not everyone knows, that it’s not obvious, that the girl just isn’t sure whether or not to continue the make-up.

“Your...collar, needs to be fixed,” Lexa says haltingly, before reaching out and smoothing it. Her collar was fine. It’s been fixed more than once tonight, adjusted and re-adjusted and adjusted again. Lexa just needed a reason to say her name, but Clarke still doesn’t take the brush of her fingers against her neck for granted.

“Griffin,” comes Raven’s call as she pushes into the dressing room. Lexa backs off immediately, almost too quickly. “Sterling is throwing a fit out there, they want to do camera tests. Are you ready?”

Lexa nods in reassurance that Clarke doesn’t quite feel, and Clarke, in turn, nods to Raven.

Standing, Clarke smoothes out her white blazer and blue top--bright, sharp, millennial, Sterling and Lexa had decided when they picked it for her--and heads into the mixed zone backstage, where Sterling, Raven, Anya, and a detachment of production assistants await her.

And so does Cage Wallace, stepping out of his dressing room at the same moment.

She hasn’t seen him in person since the last debate, and she hasn’t spoken to him since the phone call in which they agreed to avoid their mutually assured destruction, but he hasn’t changed from the image in her mind’s eye. His hair is slicked back, his black suit perfectly tailored; sharp gold cufflinks flash at his wrists, and his tie is a clean slash of red across his chest, bright and glaring.

“Do you think he dresses like the Antichrist intentionally, or is it just a coincidence?” Raven asks.

Wallace is too far away to hear. The smirk he gives Clarke from the distance smacks of conceit, his security in his power play political move; his eyes flash brighter as his gaze slides past Clarke, over her shoulder. She follows it—Lexa is stepping out of the dressing room behind her, clocking Cage Wallace’s eyes on her and looking between him and Clarke with an uncharacteristic hesitation, a deer caught in headlights. She recovers smoothly after a heartbeat’s pause, rolling her shoulders and
averting an angry gaze, but the damage has been done.

“Miss Ward, Miss Griffin,” Wallace says, with nods to each. “Good to see you again.”

Clarke is spared any more of his smugness when his own contingent of servants pulls him away for camera tests and preparation, but that doesn’t stop the anger rising.

“I want to beat him so badly,” she mutters to Raven and Lexa.

“You will, right now,” Raven tells her.

Lexa, on the other hand, demurs. “Don’t let him get under your skin,” she says. “You need to keep a cool head going into this.”

Clarke nods and takes a deep breath, making every effort to hide the feverish, nauseated tide swelling in her chest at the thought of Cage Wallace. Seeing him in person makes it all so much worse: now she can imagine his face when he found out about the pictures, imagine his smile as he looked at them for the first time. Her skin crawls and for a terrifying moment, her fury eclipses all of her rehearsed answers and plans for the debate.

“Are you going to be okay?” Lexa asks, suspiciously.

“Fine,” Clarke says with a shake of her head and hard swallow.

Smart enough to doubt this, Lexa keeps her distance for the next several minutes, allowing Clarke the time and space to clear her head and refocus herself among the steady stream of last-minute preparation. Clarke loses herself in it, becoming as robotic as possible, spouting answers and nodding confirmation to just about everything. Before she knows it, she’s being ushered toward the side of the stage and the lights are coming up.

“Just stay calm.” Lexa’s in her ear, looking to all the world like a strategist giving last second advice; no one knows that Lexa’s presence is there to reach Clarke personally, to reassure, to soothe. “No matter what happens, I’m here. I’m yours. I love you.”

“I love you too,” Clarke murmurs, so quietly she can barely hear herself. But Lexa hears. She knows.

*

Cage Wallace is announced and presented first. When her name is announced, the audience applause and support is louder for her than it was for him, to be expected at a university but also reassuring, given her opening statement. She looks around at the theater she once sat in to watch other political debates, and takes a deep breath.

"I would like to thank the University for hosting us here tonight. Los Angeles is my home, I was born and raised here, and right now, here at UCLA, I feel like I have a home field advantage. My experience at UCLA has shaped the woman I am today, and more importantly, the leader I strive to be for the state of California and the United States of America. I went to a public university deeply involved in one of the most diverse, innovative, creative communities in the world; it is this Californian spirit, our innovation, our uniqueness, our compassion and our forward thinking that is so desperately needed in Washington DC. With the help of the people of California, I was to inject our
identity into an enclave of the elite and wealthy and Ivy League graduates. We need more women, we need more people of color."

She pauses—this is the most contentious point of her opening statements, opposed by Sterling and Anya and supported by Clarke, Raven, and Lexa—“And more LGBT+ people to assist with the crafting of policies that will shape our society. My candidacy for US Senator is just one step toward this ultimate destination, and I am immensely proud to represent California on this journey. Tonight, with the City of Los Angeles behind me, I welcome all questions, all comments, all arguments of my opponent, so that I can better share my vision for our country and unite our people together toward this common goal. Thank you.”

The audience cheer is again warm and supportive, scattered chants of “Griffin!” rising across the theater. She flashes a winning smile and gives a wave. This is where she’s best, centered on politics, nothing else.

The local news anchor moderating the debate then allows Cage his opening statement. Just as Clarke had, Cage gives a politician’s smile.

“Thank you, everyone. I’m so happy to be here tonight, and I’d like to begin by praising my opponent: I absolutely believe Miss Griffin will have a long and storied political career. On both a personal and professional level, I admire her idealism, her plans, her charisma, her future view of a better world, and I’m sure there are many people who feel the same.”

This was one of the strategies they anticipated: a sycophantic approach, softening his image from the start to lure the last-minute undecided voters to his side, presumably with a one-two punch of compassion followed by a hard-nosed shift.

And as expected, he continues: “But what Miss Griffin has not mentioned is efficiency. She has described the new American dream as it should be, and glossed over the American work it will required to get there—as your Senator, I bring decades of political experience and work to navigate these rocky waters, but more importantly, I am doing so under the guidance and with the support of a wildly diverse group of supporters, writers, planners, creators, and activists. I want to bring that to Washington DC in combination with my strong political network, a business mindset, and a real efficiency that will enable us to accomplish Miss Griffin’s lofty goals. I know I’m a long shot in this, but with your support, we can accomplish this and make it real. Thank you.”

This time, the applause that goes up for Cage Wallace is louder than it was for his introduction. Stronger in particular sectors—likely campus political groups that support him—but there’s a surprised respect from the general audience.

Clarke sets her jaw. This will be a battle.

The opening statements set the tone for the rest of the debate. Clarke stays firm with what has worked, with her dedicated goals: staunch positions on education, taxes, the environment, healthcare. Winning positions, endearing her to the crowd as planned. Cage Wallace, on the other hand, works fluidly, slipping past hard questions with a clear smile and a cloudy answer—he attaches himself to Clarke’s popular positions by praising both them and her, then smoothly denounces her riskier or more controversial stances, with a nonchalant comment about her idealism, lack of experience, her softness, her weakness.

At the first break, Lexa confirms it the moment Clarke steps offstage. “His whole goal is to paint himself as the reasonable one,” she says urgently, gripping Clarke’s shoulders. “None of this is about policy or positions. This is his hail mary to cast doubt on you, so you need to keep your head clear and stay the course.”
It’s been a long time since she and Lexa have been so close with so many people around them. Clarke, brimming with frustration, want to grab at her, shout back, relieve a little tension with passion or fury or a mix of both. But showing any emotion would just be opening the floodgates and reveal far more than Clarke is willing to show, at least with this many people watching them.

“I got it,” she says instead, shrugging Lexa off and turning to Monty. “Monty, can you pull some quotes from some supporters? If he’s going to keep acting like this, trying to make himself look good without any evidence, I want some facts to fall back on for myself.”

“Stick to the plan, Clarke--” Lexa presses, but Clarke waves her off.

“It’s just in case.”

Monty, copying from his phone, scribbles quotes across a few blank notecards. Lexa’s displeasure is clear and palpable as she takes a step back and allows the rest of the team--stylists, advisers, strategists--to crowd around Clarke and ply her with touch-ups and advice and lines and ideas. Clarke, however, is attuned only to Lexa and most everything else falls on deaf ears, but with everything already so on edge, she can’t risk looking at her.

Cage doesn’t change tactics when the debate resumes. Clarke’s supporters in the crowd don’t budge, but he has engaged the neutrals and enthralled his own supporters.

Minimum wage? “Balance,” Cage says. “We can’t come out of the gate at twenty dollars an hour, but with slow and steady growth that follows the growth of companies, it’s an achievable goal.”

Immigration? “Immigrants help our country; we need safeguards to ensure immigration happens in the most efficient, beneficial way for our country and the people who want to help us.”

Small business? “The backbone of our country. But a backbone needs a support system to stand, and to move forward, it needs even more. Small businesses need support from large corporations and politicians, and even from the employees themselves. I’m a businessman as well. I understand these things especially well and they are very near and dear to my heart. Small business owners all over support me.”

“And Representative Griffin, your response?”

Clarke bristles. Every time she has been prompted for her rebuttal to Cage’s statements, her attempt to unravel his cleverly spun web of words loses the interest of the audience. Each time she has her own opportunity to speak, he undoes her work with a disingenuous, obfuscating reply. And the audience cheers. She’s holding herself together as best he can, but nothing so far has managed to ease her frustration and it has been building since the first break.

Clarke glances at the notecards in her white-knuckled grip. The first one is a quote scrawled by Monty, from a family winery on the central coast of California, praising Clarke and her proposals for their benefit for people like them.

But, she reasons, Cage Wallace would simply call it fake. And with that thought, she shrugs and drops her notecards to the podium.

“Well,” she says with a light laugh. “It would be easier for me to respond to Mr. Wallace if he actually said anything of substance. Mr. Wallace is giving fantastic answers that satisfy all parties, but for someone with a goal of efficiency, he’d do well to actually get to the root of the questions and problems.”

A wave of surprise rolls across the auditorium; even Cage Wallace’s eyebrows go up. Clarke can
imagine Lexa putting her head in her hands offstage.

The moderator, instantly in over his head and not sharp enough to actually moderate something like that, offers only silence, which allows Cage to reply.

“Miss Griffin,” he chuckles, “If I were to delineate my record in the business sector, you’d never get the opportunity to speak. I want this to be a fair debate.”

“If that’s your goal, maybe we should talk about your business record,” Clarke fires back.

Cage pauses; it flies over the heads of the audience, but it hits him in a weak point. She’s talking about what she has on him. His face darkens and after a moment of consideration, he smiles.

“I’m not sure what you’ve been doing with your campaign manager... or other strategists, but allowing me to list out my triumphs is dangerous territory,” he jokes. “But then again, your record shows you’re something of a risk taker.”

Clarke grits her teeth. “Just concerned with integrity--”

“Well, can’t say your record shows that. But if you’d like me to review both of ours--”

“Okay, okay!” the moderator at last interrupts, leaving Cage Wallace’s subtle threat hanging in the air. It’s all genial enough that the bewildered audience can manage a few nervous laughs as they look between the two candidates like they’re watching a tennis match. Clarke, however, feels her veins pound with hot molten shame and anger. He walked her right into and for the first time in her political career, and what feels like her life, she’s helpless to defend herself.

Worse still is the realization as the moderator announces the second break and the audience applauds the two candidates off the stage--he’s winning.

She steps offstage and into her circle of staff, most of whom are just as confused as the crowd outside.

“Why did you go off script?” Monty asks.

Clarke looks to the few who do understand. Lexa, Raven, and Anya stand back from the rest, arms crossed, looking grim. They know, they empathize, and lie her, they can’t do anything about it.

*

Seven points.

Clarke stares at the number--part of a headline that has sent her office into a spiral this morning--and tries to comprehend how one debate performance can result in a seven point polling loss, putting her behind Cage Wallace going into the final two weeks of the campaign.

“Unreal,” she mutters, sitting back in her chair and pressing her hands over her eyes. Her head has been pounding since she woke up this morning.

“It’s in the final weeks,” Harper offers. “Probably last minute voters, still haven’t made up their minds, just being influenced by the debate.”
“And they can still be swayed to us,” Monty agrees.

John adds, “We can do a publicity blitz over this weekend. Lots of travel, lots of appearances, put you back on everyone’s radars.”

Clarke tries a smile to reward their optimism, but sliding into a four point deficit after leading by three points, less than two weeks before the election, is never a good sign. She has gathered a dozen advisers and staffers in her office, but their best suggestions do little to disperse the growing dark cloud above her that is made worse by Lexa, leaning against a wall, examining the floor with her arms crossed over her chest. She takes no part in the flurry of ideas from the staffers, but Clarke keeps an eye on her.

“What we need to do is go on an all-out offensive.”

“That will be too obvious at this point.”

“It didn’t hurt him when he did it.”

“It would work if it were targeted specifically.”

“We could push for more last minute celebrity endorsements, especially on social media.”

Raven, uncharacteristically silent for all of this, finally shifts in her seat.

“You know what we need to do,” she tells Clarke, darkly.

“Raven,” Clarke snaps. *Not in this company.*

Raven stares Clarke down; for support, Clarke turns to Lexa, but her campaign manager is staring at the floor, arms across her chest.

“Can Miss Reyes, Miss Ward, and I have the room please?” Clarke announces.

All three women, knowing exactly what the next conversation will be, avoid eye contact until the room empties.

“Raven, I--” Clarke begins.

Lexa interrupts: “Clarke, did you throw the debate?”

She’s so taken aback that it takes her a moment to even comprehend the question. “Did I--what?”

“Throw the debate,” Lexa repeats, evenly.

“...intentionally?”

“That is what *throw* implies.”

It’s not cruel, or cutting; Lexa’s eyes don’t flash with the malice that she can and has turned against everyone except Clarke. But the audacity of the question unsettles Clarke so much that Lexa might as well have snarled at her.

“No,” she says, flat and truthful. And then she lies: “The thought never would have crossed my mind.”

A lie, because it had, in some form—if only because she wondered what the fallout would be,
whether it would be worth it.

Raven’s eyes flash between the two of them. Lexa studies Clarke, consternation on her face, and finally nods.

“Fine.”

Whether or not Lexa believes her, she doesn’t argue and Clarke doesn’t press her case—not when Raven thinks she has a solution and her trigger finger is beginning to itch.

“Clarke, I understand your reasoning for not releasing the financials,” Raven begins.

“I don’t know that you do,” Clarke snaps.

“I do. But at this point, what we need is our own last ditch effort, and this is all I got.”

Logically, Clarke understands her position, but when Raven admits she’s out of ideas, any situation becomes even more dire than it already appears. Clarke rebels against that, out of desperation.

“If we release the financials, there is a possibility I win the race. But even that possibility would result in more long-term implications that are damaging—”

“I agree with Raven,” Lexa says suddenly.

Clarke turns on her in abject disbelief. “You...what?”

“I agree with Raven,” Lexa repeats flatly. “At this point, it’s the only way we’re going to win. There is too much riding on this not to take the opportunity.”

Clarke searches Lexa’s face for some hint that this betrayal has a cause, and to her surprise, she finds Lexa searching her right back; staring her down; testing her. If it’s a fight she’s looking for, Clarke rises to it, instantly.

“You’re right, there is a lot riding on his,” she says, through gritted teeth. “My reputation, for one. My character—”

Lexa fires right back: “Thousands of dollars in donations, the Senate majority in DC—”

“My career, your career—”

“--everyone else’s careers!”

“Everyone else’s careers?” Clarke demands. She rises and draws closer to Lexa. “Everyone else is going to be fine—whether I win or lose, I have always promised to find them jobs and they know this. I am the only one on the line here, me and you, and that’s who I’m concerned about. I have said since the beginning that I wanted this to be clean; you know that.”

Lexa doesn’t flinch as Clarke gets closer, but she doesn’t welcome it with the warmth she usually shows.

“I also know that you want to win. You have said that since the beginning too.”

“What good is winning if I’m just as bad as whatever career politician I replace?” she asks. “My staff works for me because they believe in me; what good is it if I’m the same soulless smirking personality I promised them I wouldn’t be?”
“I don’t know,” Lexa says with a shrug. “Have you asked them?” Clarke scoffs. Pressing forward now, Lexa’s veil of nonchalance vanishes to reveal her true ferocity. “Stop centering yourself in everything, Clarke; stop playing the martyr, stop with the idealism! You can’t be the good person you think you are and find any sort of success here; you can’t stay clean in a world like this!”

That hits home. As commanded, Clarke stops. Everything falls away and for a fraction of a second, staring at Lexa’s bitter, gritted teeth and her stormcloud eyes, Clarke sees her path forward. Her future. She knows exactly what she has to do--and then the emotions of the moment obscure it once more and she reverts back to blankly staring at Lexa, hurt gathering in her chest.

Lexa realizes the line she has crossed. Her own face suddenly clouds with an automatic apology that she is far too proud to voice, and Clarke is too hurt to acknowledge. Even Raven’s shoulder’s sink at her sudden understanding of the personal shift between the two women.

“Look,” she says softly, gaining their attention. “This isn’t getting us anywhere.”

Clarke nods. Raven herself is a representative of the rest of the staffers, waiting outside in the office for their leader’s instruction on how to stop the bleeding of their campaign.

“You’re right,” Clarke tells her. She sits back down at her desk and rubs the bridge of her nose. Lexa opens her mouth and she cuts her off quickly. “Go with Monty and Mbege’s plan for now,” she adds. “Have Sterling schedule whatever public appearances he and his team think would be best. I’ll be available.”

Grateful for the dismissal, Raven quickly hurries out of the room, leaving Clarke and Lexa alone.

“Clarke--”

Her name burns with regret in Lexa’s mouth. “I have to take care of this,” Clarke says, without looking up--because her eyes are burning too. She can’t see any of the papers she’s staring at. “Work with Sterling and Harper on whatever they have planned.”

Like Raven, Lexa understands her dismissal; unlike Raven, she isn’t grateful for it. Clarke won’t look at her, but Lexa’s half step toward her desk and then away--the tentative, soft click of her heel--tells Clarke everything she needs to know, and it breaks her heart.

“I know you need time right now,” comes Lexa’s low voice before she leaves. “Take the weekend. Work from home, if you need to, but lay low and try to relax. Sterling won’t be scheduling any appearances.”

“Then how--” Clarke at last looks up, but Lexa has already turned for the door. She doesn’t turn back.

“I’ll handle it.”

* 

Mostly as a result of Lexa’s interference, she suspects, Clarke is indeed not scheduled for any public appearances or engagements. In fact, that Friday night, Sterling sends Clarke a strongly worded email advising her to stay in her apartment and not risk any negative press were she to be asked a question by some rogue or errant journalist.
This, presumably, is also a result of Lexa’s interference.

But Abby, freshly returned from her conveniently planned mission in San Diego, is not acting on Lexa’s behalf when she meets Clarke at her apartment Saturday morning and agrees with Sterling’s email.

“You’re going to accomplish next to nothing and risk falling further in the polls if you flaunt yourself in meaningless appearances,” Abby presses, as Clarke sulks in her living room. “Try to relax for this weekend, work from home, get some fuel and plenty of rest. You’re going to need it for the last few weeks before Election Day.”

And even if she wanted to disobey her mother’s advice, Abby makes it impossible for Clarke to try--she spends the entire day hovering in Clarke’s apartment, organizing things that have already been organizing and lamenting Clarke’s lack of healthy food. As Clarke types at her laptop, Abby plies her with questions about what she’s working on, asks for thoughts about other senate hopefuls in other states, and brainstorms unnecessary strategies to problems that are nothing compared to the very large secret Clarke harbors.

At her mother’s suggestion that Clarke gather supportive celebrities together for an all-night telethon, Clarke damn near quits her entire political career.

“Mom,” she sighs, exasperated, before recognizing her tone and shifting it instantly to one of pain. “Oh, Mom...I have a brutal headache. I think I’ll take your advice--head to bed early.”

Abby glances at the clock on the wall--it’s only seven. “Of course, sweetheart. I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“No!” Too sharp--she winces and pulls back. “I need you sharp as much as I need rest. You should sleep at your hotel so that you’re well-rested for tomorrow and the rest of the week.”

Raising her eyebrows, Abby regards her daughter with that strange mix of motherly care and political acumen that only Abby possesses. “Clarke, I’m experienced enough to be able to read when I’m not wanted in a meeting or conversation; I know you want the night to yourself. And you deserve that,” she adds, to Clarke’s relief. “You sleep well, sweetheart. I’ll come back in the morning.”

The kiss Abby plants on Clarke’s forehead fills Clarke with a rare warmth; she smiles wanly at her mother as Abby collects her things and heads out. But once Abby is gone, that warmth and that weakness vanish. Without the focus required to ignore her mother’s conversation for most of the day, Clarke finds her mind wandering, cabin fever kicking in. The sudden emptiness and silence of her apartment only makes her ruminations worse--she begins to pace.

And then a headache truly does kick in. She lays back on her couch, feet up, hands over her eyes. She doesn’t sleep that night. She doesn’t even try. There are bigger things afoot.

For the entire day, her mind has been circulating around a single idea, molding the first vestiges of what it would look like, and she spends the next several hours working at it, looking at all sides, until she at last understood the shape of it. Clarke paces her living room, sits down at her laptop and types, deletes it all, paces some more. Her heart races and she feels sick to her stomach, as if the pacing is sprinting and she has a marathon in front of her. Hours pass like this.

Sunday morning dawns with the grey surreality that comes at the end of a sleepless night. It’s not her first this month or even this week, but, not unlike the night she and Lexa were caught by Cage’s
intern, the nighttime hours have brought with them a sense of labor and struggle. The emotional toll of what she’s been doing weighs down her limbs with physical exhaustion. She stares at the blinking cursor in the body of the email; it’s been blinking for hours. She has re-written the email a dozen times; she’s edited it thrice that.

It’s not that the words haven’t come easy, it’s that pressing send might be the most momentous, terrifying thing she has done all year--including kissing Lexa Ward for the first time.

One last edit: instead of signing the message “Sincerely, Representative Griffin,” she pulls her title from the e-mail.

Sincerely,

Clarke Griffin

She closes her eyes and presses the button, at last. As soon as the email sends, the weight lifts from her shoulders.

She closes her laptop and sits for several seconds, basking in that feeling.

In the background, a Sunday morning cable news program drones on. Clarke doesn’t pay attention to it, but she likes the white noise of arguments and debates and reports on all manner of Washington DC news. It provides a fitting background distraction as she works, allowing her to focus completely on whatever task is at hand.

That is, until she hears the words “Cage Wallace” “embezzlement claims” and “campaign funds.”

Then she snaps to attention.

The ticker at the bottom of the news report jumps ahead of the anchor telling the story to the camera; Clarke’s eyes widen as she reads it. “Judge Grants Warrant for Cage Wallace Investigation” it reads, above a line of smaller text that says “Wallace Suspected of Misusing More Than One Million in Campaign Funds.”

It’s out. The anchor tells the camera about an anonymous tip, information received from an unnamed source, detailing out years of questionable transactions that paint a dire picture of Cage Wallace’s trustworthiness and legal ability to be an elected official. In light of Cage Wallace’s performance at the recent debate, he has surged in the polls; these accusations threaten to undo that, even before the investigation turns up anything.

Every news channel Clarke flips to has run with the story about Cage Wallace--every channel announces it as breaking news. Released just this morning.

With shaking hands, she texts a question she already knows the answer to.

[7:30 AM] Clarke Griffin: Was this you?

Lexa’s response comes almost instantly.

[7:30 AM] Lexa Ward: Yes.

Clarke closes her eyes, willing it to stop, before she types the next question.

[7:33 AM] Clarke Griffin: You know what will happen?

[7:34 AM] Lexa Ward: I know.
She drops her phone on the couch beside her and jumps up, crossing the room as if she could leave this all behind—she can’t go farther than the front door, and the first ding of her notifications reminds her that she won’t ever leave it behind. It starts slowly at first, but picks up speed. Ding. Ding. Ding. The Google alerts and tweets and emails appear at the top of her phone screen, only to be pushed down a half second later by the next one. Ding ding ding.


Even more numerous than the headlines are the quick shots of the photos taken that night, visible only for a second before they slip away beneath the rush of notifications. She and Lexa had launched their scandal at the newswaves, and Cage Wallace has returned fire, and this is the resulting war.

She can’t deal with it right now. Clarke silences her phone and sends one final, despairing text message.

[8:09 AM] Clarke Griffin: What are you doing, Lexa?

It’s a long time before Lexa replies. She stares at the screen. A reply to her email pops up, but beyond a bitter laugh, she ignores it.

Finally, Lexa’s final damning text appears.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

So here we are…three years and 22 chapters later. Hopefully, I’ve earned a bit of trust somewhere in those 3 years and 22 chapters. Thank you all for your endless support and look to the end for notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Clarke’s not really sure whether she’s ever believed in God; her most vocal proclamations of faith have come under the ministrations of Lexa’s tongue.

But if there is a god, she has a sick sense of humor.

She opens her laptop and looks at her most recent email; it’s been read by the Democrat party leaders in the State Capital.

She re-reads the subject line:

**Official Resignation from the Senate Race**

Clarke Griffin resigned from the Senate Race.

She can only imagine the responses she’s going to get after the news of her illicit affair. They’ll be furious, with all of it; they would have called for her resignation anyway. At least this way resigning before the news broke, she avoids the fight and maybe placates them enough that they’ll allow her some low-level job in a rural district.

Back to her phone, and that burning, damning message from Lexa on the screen, Clarke presses “call” under Lexa’s contact information. She thinks better of it on the first ring and hangs up. She tries again a minute later--and hangs up a second time. Her temperature has hit feverish levels, heart pumping adrenaline-laced blood to prepare her for fight or flight in a situation in which she can do neither.

When she hangs up on a call for the third time, Lexa fires a quick text:

Lexa: I’ll come over.

And that spurs Clarke to let the phone ring at last. Lexa picks up immediately.

“Hear me out--”

“Lexa.” Her throat is so tight she can barely speak. “I tendered my official resignation from the race fifteen minutes before the news broke.”

Lexa is silent for so long Clarke thinks she might have hung up. When she speaks, voice comes over the line empty and disbelieving:

“You...what?”
“I informed the party leaders that I’d be withdrawing from the race and offering my full support to any replacement nominees.”

The more she says it out loud, the more real it is, and the more confidence fills her voice.

“I’m coming over,” Lexa says weakly, a clattering in the background indicating she’s already moving, heading for the door.

Clarke sighs. “Lexa, don’t--”

“No, Clarke,” Lexa snaps, with a force and ferocity that shocks Clarke into silence. “I’m not doing this over the phone, we need to talk face to face. My statement is going to come out, and--”

“Your statement?”

Unbelievably, even more than the release of Cage Wallace’s financials and subsequently the photos, the suggestion of a statement from Lexa strikes Clarke as true betrayal. How long has this been in the works? How cynical can she be, how calculating?

Lexa says something else, but Clare’s phone is already out of her hand, flung across the room.

*

In the time it takes Lexa to drive to Clarke’s apartment, Clarke has spun through a kaleidoscope of emotions and settled on anger--she stews on those questions and more, turning over everything in her mind until it’s all just a blank, hot fury. Lexa’s footsteps sound like gunshots in the hallway and Clarke throws open the door before she can knock, inhaling a deep breath to yell.


Clarke seethes, barely contained. “How dare you.”

“How dare I?”

“You--” she sputters in disbelief. “You betrayed me! You lied to me! I told you that if you did it again, we were done!”

“You resigned!” Lexa fires back, getting in her face. “You turned your back on everyone!”

Clarke turns on her heel and stomps back across the room, getting out of range of Lexa--in tight jeans and a rumpled, untucked button down, Lexa’s body is unholy and Clarke will not even allow the physical reaction to it right now.

“Everyone was not running for Senator,” she shouts, turning back at a safe distance. “Everyone was not losing sight of why they’re doing this. That was me--everyone else was believing in someone who didn’t exist anymore. I’m not Clarke Griffin, I’m Representative Griffin. Senator Griffin. Cage was right: I have no integrity.”

“Come on, Clarke,” Lexa scoffs. “You think you’re the only one sacrificing something?”

With that, she seizes the remote from Clarke’s couch and unmutes the TV, still playing the news
reports of this morning’s events. Lexa cranks up the volume as Clarke spins—her face falls when she sees what’s on screen.

“...bring you this exclusive statement from Lexa Ward, Campaign Manager for the Griffin Campaign,” reads the news anchor. Lexa’s statement comes up. Clarke reads along with the reporter.

“I would like to apologize and take full responsibility for the current perception of Representative Clarke Griffin and her campaign,” the statement reads. Clarke blanches. “The images now circulating, taken by an intern working for Mr. Wallace, depict a moment of personal weakness in an advance on Representative Griffin, which was rebuffed. I can state with absolute certainty that what happened was one-sided and unrequited. My behavior is wholly my own and should not reflect poorly on the Griffin campaign and in particular, Representative Griffin’s immaculate personal integrity. I have removed myself from the campaign, and I am deeply sorry for my actions.”

The news anchors reappear and continue with their assessment of the situation, but Clarke, staring blankly, doesn’t hear them. Bitterness spreads over her tongue and down her throat, sharp and biting. Part of her can’t deny that this is an impressive, powerful political stroke against Cage Wallace—but a much larger part of her is far too focused on the woman in front of her to care about anything outside of this apartment.

“So you think that a statement is going to make this all okay?” Clarke asks, voice icy cold.

“No,” Lexa replies. “It’s just crisis management. Cage gets arrested. I take the blame for the photos. We’re both removed, and you win the election.”

She threw away her own career. Being known as a lecherous campaign manager who makes unrequited advances on her female bosses would ruin Lexa—and clear Clarke for an easy win, a victim. And that kills Clarke. They were supposed to be together in this.

“But why, Lexa? Why go this far? Why not talk to me about it?”

“I tried, Clarke.” Now her voice is cold. “But I know you. I knew the minute you broke in that debate that you were going to bow out of this race to protect this relationship.”

“I--”

“You can’t argue that, you’ve already resigned! I was right! My only regret is that I didn’t do it sooner.” Seeing the way Clarke shuts down, the way she shakes her head and turns, Lexa storms forward, voice changing to a plea. “Clarke—you could be an amazing Senator. You’re already a great leader. You are an amazing woman. And I love you too much to be in the way of that future.”

Tears welling in her eyes, Clarke tries to pull back, but the sight of desperation in Lexa’s face is too much and it roots her to the spot. “We should have done this together--”

“In an ideal world, yes,” Lexa sighs. “I would be by your side through anything. But we’ve been forced into a position of choosing between us and your career and I—rightfully—didn’t trust you to choose your career.”

That’s damning. The words crash over her, and something inside Clarke seals up, freezing Lexa out and her emotions in.

“It’s not worth it without you.”

Lexa’s face breaks. “Clarke--”
The apartment is too small. Before, she was a safe distance away, but she could have her back against the wall and still not be far enough to resist the temptation of Lexa’s soft, despairing eyes—she has no right to look so beautiful and so devastated as she breaks Clarke’s heart like this. She cannot stay here, taking up all of the air, or things will get far worse for them both.

“Get out,” Clarke rasps past the lump in her throat. “We’ll speak to the office tomorrow. Until then, don’t contact me.”

“There is more to this than politics—”

“There was. Not anymore.”

Lexa stiffens. “I’m not leaving you before we talk through it.”

“You don’t get to dictate that anymore.” Clarke blows past Lexa and opens the door. “Out.”

“I’ll wait outside in your hallway if I have to. I’m not going anywhere.” All resolute, stubborn defiance. As always.

“Fine,” Clarke says with a shrug. “My mom should be here any minute. When she arrives, you’re free to tell her how you were fucking her daughter and then announced it to the world to win a race.”

“Clarke.”

She doesn’t have any right to look that good, and she doesn’t have any right to say Clarke’s name with so much adoration and grief. It’s Lexa’s one last attempt to appeal to the part of Clarke that she is trying desperately to lock away, and fuck, it almost works.

“Lexa, please,” Clarke breathes, barely more than a whisper. She doesn’t want to break and the look she gives Lexa says that—Lexa understands, closing her eyes. It’s over. “Just go.”

“I’m sorry, Clarke,” she murmurs, looking down and stepping out into the hallway.

Clarke slams the door on her.

As the click of Lexa’s heels fade down the long hallway to the elevator, Clarke presses her pounding forehead against the cool wood of the door as the tears well up yet again. Before the sound of her footsteps grows too distant, Clarke almost reaches for the doorknob—a moment of weakness. But she holds back. She won’t be that person.

*  

As expected, Abby arrives just moments after Lexa leaves. Clarke opens the door at her knock expecting frantic bewilderment, but instead, she is greeted by her mother’s soft, uncomprehending eyes. Abby opens her arms and Clarke folds into them, trying not to cry.

“Sweetheart...are you okay?”

And Clarke, previously nothing more than a ball of fury and hurt, gives in and releases a single choked sob.

Abby doesn’t ask questions: the basic facts are laid out. Clarke had a pseudo-affair with her
campaign manager and now it has derailed the race. The minute that Clarke allows herself to break
down in her mother’s arms, she sufficiently conveys the depth of her pain, and Abby sets to work
mitigating that. Clarke’s phone—now cracked from hitting the wall during her call with Lexa—
vibrates incessantly and her computer is dinging repeatedly as the emails flood in.

“A bit of crisis management,” Abby says, grabbing her computer. Clarke winces at the phrase. “But
first, you need to clear your head. I’ll handle these.”

She handles them by deleting every journalist request that pops up in her inbox; nearly one per
minute. Old personal friends asking for details get deleted too. Abby sits wordlessly beside her red-
eyed daughter on the couch, clutching her hand and deleting the emails almost as quickly as they
come in.

Suddenly, Clarke stays her hand on a new one, titled “RE: Official Resignation from Senate Race”

With Abby reading over her shoulder, Clarke opens it.

“Miss Griffin,

Though this is not the most orthodox of channels in which to submit your resignation, given the
circumstances, we recognize your withdrawal from the race. Over the coming hours and days, we
will take the requisite steps to end your candidacy and identify a suitable replacement, at which time
you will be requested to issue certain public statements of support.

Within two weeks, we will also request an in person meeting in Sacramento so that we may discuss
the campaign and your future in depth.”

And it’s signed by the party leaders. Short, terse, and brimming with a subtle fury beneath the polite
tone. With a sudden resignation, Clarke has screwed over the party leader just as badly as Lexa has
her—and she knows she is in for one hell of a reprimand when she goes to meet them.

It can’t, however, be any worse than the blank, stunned look on her mother’s face.

“You resigned?” Abby asks, brutal disappointment creeping in. First question.

Clarke nods.

Second question. There are clearly hundreds. But Abby settles on, “So...this was planned? The
resignation, the financial information, the photos? To give you an out?”

Clarke shakes her head. “No.” Just one painful coincidence. “I drafted the letter before any of this
came out. I didn’t put it out. I just wanted to resign. I…” she can’t find the words. “It wasn’t right for
me. I don’t know who I am anymore. I don’t know who I am or where I want to go, and I can’t lead
people if I don’t know where I’m going.”

Tears threaten again and she blunts them with anger. This is Lexa’s fault, not hers.

“Clarke…” Abby says hoarsely. Clarke grimaces in expectation of admonishment. “I’m so sorry.”
But Abby is a mother right now, and only a mother. She pulls Clarke in for another hug. “We’ll
figure it out, okay?”

“There’s nothing to figure out. It’s over.”

“Just do whatever you need to do to feel better, honey.”
She doesn’t even know what that is anymore. Even her mother’s sympathy and embrace provides only the smallest modicum of comfort. Clarke had believed, whole-heartedly, that tendering her resignation would have freed her, and for a time, it did. But her dreams of traveling with Lexa and then starting a political career clean and with Lexa at her side, in a relationship, ended the moment that news report hit the air. Over Abby’s shoulder, Clarke opens her eyes and glances at the TV to see that they’re still replaying it: Lexa’s statement is onscreen yet again. The words are burned into her mind now, Lexa’s self-sacrifice of her own career prospects, her attempt to save the campaign and Clarke’s career at the expense of her own. All to make herself feel better about the betrayal, Clarke reminds herself.

And again, for better or for worse, an idea starts to form...something that would make her feel better.

Before it takes shape, a new hurried stomping down the hallway outside reaches Clarke and Abby and suddenly, Raven bursts into Clarke’s apartment, waving a cellphone. If Abby matched and comforted Clarke’s sadness, Raven storms into the apartment to rival and personify her rage.

“I’ve been calling you and Lexa for the last hours and nothing,” she exclaims. “What. The. Fuck. Have you seen the news?”

“Raven,” Abby warns, but Clarke rises instantly to Raven’s level, grateful for someone who can empathize with her anger.

“I had no idea this was going to happen,” she tells Raven. “Guess who pulled this on her own.”

Raven stops dead. “You’re kidding. She didn’t.”

“She did.”

“I never thought she would release anything. That traitorous b—”

“Raven knew?” Abby asks incredulously.

Realizing how much she has spilled with her outrage, Raven goes full deer in headlights, looking to Clarke for help. “Uh…”

“Raven knew,” Clarke says with a nod. “When...those photos--Lexa and I had been..” She falters. For all the thought that has gone into the situation since the photos were taken, explaining it to her mother while trying not to cry in front of both her and Raven proves nearly impossible. Clarke sucks in a deep breath and lets it all spill out: “Lexa and I had been together for a while. It’s exactly what it looks like. No one knew. One night...we got caught. By a Wallace intern, like Lexa’s statement said. We put together a team to figure out how to handle it. Raven, Anya, Wells, and Roan knew. Know. I don’t know.”

Abby’s face alternates between surprise and offense and sympathy and disappointment: Clarke doesn’t have the mental energy to discern her mother’s moods and appeal to any specific one. She wants to fall asleep and wake up from this nightmare, while also wanting to stay up for the next three days and work.

“How long?” Abby asks. One of a hundred questions.

“Seven months,” Clarke answers blankly.

That tells Abby enough. This wasn’t just sex. “So what will you do now?”

She shrugs. “I don’t have any idea. Raven?”
Raven’s anger has ebbed in watching Clarke struggle to explain the last several months to her mother. She pulls Clarke into a hug. “Nothing legal,” she mutters, with a wry laugh. “I’m here for you.”

Clarke shares a humorless laugh too. “We have to figure out what to tell the office. And then...let’s call Wells. I just thought of one thing that’ll make me feel better.”

Two hours later, Clarke texts Lexa.

[11:33 AM] Clarke: My statement comes out at 7am tomorrow. We’ll address the staff tomorrow at 8.

[11:33 AM] Lexa: Your statement? What does that mean?

Clarke doesn’t reply, satisfaction spreading within her.

[11:39 AM] Lexa: Clarke, what did you do?

*

“I would like to set the record straight about the photos that have surfaced over the weekend. Contrary to any previous claims, suggestions, or rumors, Lexa Ward and I did engage in a relationship for much of the campaign, as evidenced by the photos released by Mr. Wallace’s campaign. I sincerely apologize for my behavior and to anyone and everyone that I have hurt, and will be taking steps to address the public in the coming days to account for my actions. Additionally, irrespective of the information about this relationship, I have decided to withdraw from the Senate race. I will be putting my full energy and support behind a new democratic candidate. Thank you.”

*

“We can’t wait any longer,” Clarke mutters, heart sinking. She checks her office clock again, and compares it to the time on her cellphone, but she has never allowed her clock to fall behind. Lexa is late--another thing that has never happened before.

“Should’ve guessed she wouldn’t show up,” Raven snarls.

“It doesn’t matter.” It does. She pushes open her office door. “I won’t keep them waiting.”

Raven collected the staffers in the office as they arrived this morning, calming fears and quieting concerns until everyone was assembled in front of Clarke’s office. They’ve been waiting there, restless, for a half hour, and when Clarke steps out, she makes sure to connect with every face: the wide eyes, parted lips, the angry faces, the palpable disappointment. She owes it to them.

She starts her speech in a breaking voice. “Obviously, everyone has seen the news reports, and the...” the word is bitter in her mouth “...the statements. A lot has happened over the weekend and I want to ensure that you hear the truth from me, and have time to ask questions. I will always be here for you and any and all concerns.”
Her eyes flicker to movement at the side of the room as a woman with a profile Clarke would recognize from a mile away steps in and locks eyes with her, gray-green on bright blue.

“And Miss Ward, as well,” she says, tongue dry but a strange relief flooding through her. She nods at the side of the room and heads turn as Lexa steps forward.

Freshly arrived, Lexa Ward walks to the front of the room to join Clarke like she’s walking to a guillotine—unafraid. Her slow steps give Clarke and everyone else the time to examine every inch of her. Perhaps intentionally. Be it for modesty or mourning, she’s in all black, with a high collared shirt that clasps at the base of her neck with gold buttons; her hair is smooth, immaculately coiled; her eyes down. Lexa is gorgeous when she’s undone—sleeves rolled to her elbows, hair down, top few buttons of her shirt open to reveal a hint of lace. She is none of that now, and yet somehow even more beautiful: untouchable, austere, cold. Clarke thinks of sweeping arctic landscapes, glittering ice visible only from sea and untouched by human hands; she thinks of a widow at a funeral, beautiful and withdrawn, avoiding every eye that looks to her with both pity and awe.

Lexa is timeless and ethereal, and Clarke wishes, just for a moment, that she could still reach out and touch her. Comfort her. Seek comfort. But they can’t do that now.

And the terrifying thing is—even more terrifying than this moment of public confession—that she doesn’t think they will ever be able to again.

Lexa finally reaches Clarke’s side, taking up a position slightly behind her, indicative of her decision not to speak, just take the public flogging alongside Clarke in a show of support and penance.

Returning her attention to the office, clears her throat, and fights the desire to swallow the words back down.

Clarke apologizes. Again and again. To everyone. She informs both her staffers and then the press of her relationship with Lexa and tries to downplay it, tries to highlight instead how lost she has felt, how adrift from her ideals and how unmoored she has become in her own self-identity; how they all deserve better than that. Her staffers look back at her with the same variety of emotions that she has found herself cycling through over the past twenty-four hours since everything fell apart: surprise, disappointment, frustration, numbness, anger, and maybe even a little hope.

The press, on the other hand, looks up at her like starving predators discovering a fresh carcass. Even in liberal California, the prospect of a grand old sex scandal—a secret relationship—will have traction in the media in a race as big as this, and a relationship between two women? An employer and employee? A bright young candidate who swore she was different from all the rest? It’s a feast, and they eat her alive. Lexa hasn’t joined her for this one; she’s forced to lay herself bare for them alone.

And yet...she comes out of the press conference feeling like she has shed her skin—she has endured the worst of it, and survived. She expected this. It doesn’t lessen the guilt of disappointing her staffers, but it does give her a strange sense of freedom. How much worse could it get?

“This will cycle through the media for a while,” Abby tells her on the elevator ride back up to her office, where Clarke is to meet with Human Resources and then Finance to establish processes for shutting the campaign down. “It’s a good scandal in a race otherwise devoid of them; that’s a testament to your character, Clarke. Just keep your head down.”

That’s the plan. Head down, no waves. Clarke has been flogged raw and left vulnerable and wants nothing more than to avoid any more pain, which naturally means it’s the only thing she can expect, and therefore, when she returns to her office, she is sickeningly unsurprised to find Lexa standing at the door, hands behind her back.
“Clarke,” she announces herself. As always.

After all of this, Clarke has no emotion to spare. She nods as she steps into her office. “Lexa.”

It’s not an invitation to follow, but it’s not a denial of an audience either, so Lexa follows her in anyway. Abby and Raven stop just outside the door, leaving them alone--but the door stays open. Clarke retreats behind her desk and leaves Lexa in the center of the room, like she’s appealing to a queen. To her credit, Lexa stands straight and tall and she regards Clarke boldly, but the muscle pulsing in her clenched jaw reveals her struggle to keep control of her emotions.

“You really had to undermine my statement with yours, didn’t you?” Lexa asks, raising an eyebrow. Something between amusement and exasperation. “I was trying to save your campaign and career.”

“I told you...integrity.” Clarke shrugs. “I’m trying to regain it.”

“You never lost it,” Lexa replies simply.

That dangerously unsteadies Clarke, who grips the edge of her desk to maintain control. “The press I just faced would disagree.”

“They don’t matter.”

Clarke can’t do this. The sneaking feeling of Lexa’s existence being wildly unfair begins to creep in. Clarke has to be furious at her--Lexa is not allowed to slip the noose with her characteristic fierce kindness, devotion, adoration. But Clarke’s resolve is starting to waver and she clings tight to the razor sharp shards of their relationship, letting them slice her palms so that she can feel the pain and anger again. She grabs her binder for the HR meeting and tries to storm out of the office.

“You always have had and always will have integrity,” Lexa tells her in a low voice, stopping her. “And I have always admired it. And despite all appearances, I have integrity as well--I promised you that you would win this race. And I committed to what I did to accomplish that. I accept that cost--even though it cost me you. I won’t put anything else on you. You can make your own choices on how to deal with this. But the same offer you have extended to your staff applies to me: I promise I will always be here for you.”

To promise she wouldn’t put anything on Clarke is asinine, as the moment she swears to always be there for her, Clarke wants nothing more in the world than to lean in and kiss her--right in front of the open door, right in front of their entire office, watching breathlessly.

And she hates herself for that. She wants to hate Lexa, but Lexa is determined to make this even harder, stepping forward and lowering her voice:

“Clarke, I still lo--”

“Please don’t,” Clarke breathes, cutting her off. Lexa falls back instantly. “I have to go to meet with HR, I need to be thinking straight.”

She pushes past her, the words Lexa nearly said and the words she should have replied with ringing in her head. She fights the tears in her eyes.

It’s the last time she sees Lexa Ward in California.

*
Clarke doesn’t stay in the office until 9pm that night, as she had been doing for what feels like every day since the very start of the race. She works with HR on how to end the services of her staffers, and then meets with finance on what to do with donations and campaign funds. Both meetings are fruitful--many staffers have plans in place and Raven has set up an intricate donor system that will allow donations to easily be returned or sent on to a new candidate, per the donor’s choice--but by the end of the day, the emotional toll has Clarke feeling like it’s nearly midnight. It’s only 5pm when she gets down to her car.

Gustus and Ryder both wait for her there, both on duty to ensure there are no extra risks with the increase in media around Clarke. She sinks low in the backseat to avoid being recognized on the surface streets, and then stays low with her eyes closed as they wait out rush hour commute traffic on the freeway.

“Miss Griffin?” comes the low, gruff murmur of Gustus from the front seat after several minutes.

Clarke looks up, blinking away tears and adopting a calm face, to meet his eyes in the rear view mirror. Sympathy shines out of them; somehow, that makes it worse. She would give almost anything to suffer in private, away from the sympathetic eyes of the world.

Still, she tries to put on a professional face anyway. “Yes, Gustus?”

“For what it’s worth...Miss Ward loved you. A lot.”

“She told you that?”

Ryder, in the passenger seat, shakes his head. “No, but we spent enough time in the car with both of you to know.”

“It was obvious,” Gustus adds softly. “Sometimes we do stupid things for the people we love. I understood that she loved you more than the I understood politics that you talked about, but I think I know enough to say that she didn’t do a stupid thing. Maybe a weird thing.”

“It was a stupid thing,” Clarke assures him, a hard edge to her voice.

“Politically?”

“Yes, politically.”

Gustus nods. “Well, like I said. I don’t understand much about politics. I hope it wasn’t a stupid thing personally. Driving the two of you...it has been a really good assignment. And I hope everything will be okay.”

“I don’t know that it will, Gustus,” Clarke sighs, while some small part of her desperately hopes the same. She tries to silence that part.

* 

Two weeks pass, and Clarke focuses on healing. In the same way a shark has to swim forward relentlessly to survive, Clarke immerses herself in work of any kind to keep her broken heart going.
She spends the hours in her apartment, writing emails and making calls and searching old contacts: she secures jobs for every single one of her staffers and aides and even paid opportunities for some of her volunteers. She even gets Raven offers from three different engineering firms. She gives phone interviews, works with Wells on his stories, contacts donors personally to speak with them about concerns and hopes and to promote the new Democratic candidate. Thankfully, the hours pass quickly--it’s often dark outside before she realizes that she hasn’t had breakfast or lunch, but her mother and Raven show themselves to be perfect angels by constantly bringing over dinner and trying to engage Clarke with anything other than work.

Raven knocks on Clarke’s door on a Tuesday, earlier than normal; when she answers the door, Clarke is still in sweats with her hair piled on top of her head, but Raven has seen her in worse states.

“I brought wine; get some glasses,” Raven says, holding up a bottle in Clarke’s doorway.

“Do we have to?”

“You’re going to watch the election results sober?”

She blinks several times as the realization hits her: it’s Election Day. The first Tuesday in November. A day she has looked forward to for almost two years at this point, has now mostly passed her by without her recognizing it. How things change.

As Raven pours two glasses of wine, she tries to surreptitiously check Clarke’s face--she’s studying her for her mood, Clarke realizes, and so she watches her right back. There’s a fine line above Raven’s brow that usually never shows there, and her lips are pursed.

She’s hiding something.

“What’s going on?” Clarke asks her suspiciously.

Raven knows when she’s caught. “I...talked to Lexa today. You still haven’t seen her?”

Clarke sours, sudden fresh pain knifing through her chest, but tries to play it off airily. “Too busy.” Swimming forward, trying to survive. She wants to ask what they talked about, in a scathing voice meant to pick at Raven’s perceived betrayal, but she stays quiet.

Raven can tell anyway. “She...moved back home today. She left California.”

That drives the knife deeper. Clarke’s breath catches like she’s been hit in the stomach.

It’s harder to play that off, but she tries. “Good for her. I don’t want to see her.”

Nodding, Raven steers them to Clarke’s couch. When she hands a glass to Clarke, Clarke takes a huge swig to dry to dull the ache. “I understand,” Raven says slowly. “I just....you love each other. I don’t want you to lose that.”

Clarke stares at Raven, trying to reply, and decides to take another deep drink.

“I don’t love her,” she rasps as it slides down her throat.

Raven’s face turns to pity, which hurts even more. “Clarke...”

“I don’t.”

“I think everyone knew you did when your way of getting back at Lexa for releasing her statement was releasing your own...in which your best revenge was sacrificing your own reputation so that she
couldn’t sacrifice her career for you. It’s almost poetic.”

“It was just revenge,” Clarke replies sharply, and now she gives Raven a look: *that’s far enough.* It was revenge. She has told herself that a million times. She undermined Lexa’s attempt to save her, her attempt to be noble. Just revenge. No guilt. No love. It was easy.

Raven reads all of this, then gets up to grab the bottle. “Whatever you say,” she says. “Let’s just have another glass.”

This, Clarke can agree with.

Her mother arrives not long after; against Clarke’s better judgement, they turn on the live election results.

There’s not much point, though: Cage Wallace was indicted for fraud two days before the election, following the fastest and easiest campaign finance violation investigation ever. He’s facing decades in prison, which is some consolation. His poll ratings had taken a nosedive anyway, but in light of the indictment, there was only ever going to be one outcome in this race.

After Clarke’s resignation, the California party leaders had put forth Vincent Vie for candidacy, Clarke’s opponent in the primaries, whom she had defeated following the release of questionable quotations from interviews he had done years before.

Her campaign had released those quotes, which had torpedoed his chances of beating her to the primary nomination. It’s fitting, now that Clarke and Cage Wallace have both been removed from the race, that he would have his chance.

Clarke, Raven, and Abby drink wine and watch in silence as Vincent Vie wins the California Senate race in a landslide victory over the challenger, a backwoods redneck conservative named Jason something. A democratic president is elected. The US House of Representatives has a democratic majority, and with the election of Democrat Vincent Vie, so does the Senate.

All is well.

Except Clarke, mind hazy with red wine, watches the results with tears welling her in eyes. She leans onto her mother’s shoulder--and breaks down, sobbing for the first time. Abby shushes and soothes her, whispers into her hair as she hugs her, but Clarke can’t bear it anymore.

The weight of missing Lexa is too much.

“I loved her, Mom,” she cries.

“I know, Clarke.”

*  

Clarke has never been a patient person. She understands, logically, that the concept of healing takes time. One must let go of anger, make a conscious choice to move forward, and let the passing days close the wound and build up scar tissue to protect it, because nothing else can. But some days, it feels like she’s just idling--she can distract herself with walks through the parks and trips up the coast and healthy dinners and nights with her friends, but the smallest slip will undo the sutures and the
pain will rush out again, along with all of the emotions.

But Clarke tries. Two months pass. Her mother, formerly a doctor before her career in politics, hovers and nurses Clarke like a long-term sick patient, going on walks with her in the morning, nudging her to finish her eggs and drink more water. Clarke visits Octavia and Lincoln, in their post-baby bliss, and falls asleep with their gorgeous baby girl in her arms. She catches up on The Walking Dead with Raven and laments how terrible it has become, but they still click to the next episode, because at least it fills the time as Clarke begins to feel more and more human.

They stay away from the wine, though, because of the night early on when Clarke had half a glass too much and before she realized it, Lexa’s name was on her phone screen and her finger was hovering over the call button and only Raven’s quick hands saved her from embarrassment and a reopening of the wound.

Over the course of those two months, the ache in Clarke’s chest doesn’t subside; she simply builds up a life around it, as if she’s walling off a garden that she can no longer enter for fear of losing herself within its vines and flowers again. The pain becomes less about Lexa’s betrayal and more about the vacant crater she has left behind in Clarke’s life, a crater she is constantly looking to fill. She thinks of Lexa in idle moments, and even though she knows Lexa has left California and moved back to Washington, DC, when she’s wandering the city or headed out to some small cafe, part of her always hopes she’ll catch a glimpse of Lexa Ward through a restaurant window or ducking into a car.

She’s lovelorn, broken-hearted, and lost. But she keeps moving, because maybe one day she’ll figure out a new destination.

And then one day, the wound opens again, because she taps a notification on her email and sees Lexa’s name in the address bar.

Breathless, she opens it.

Clarke,

I won’t contact you again after this, but I am breaking my own rule to let you know that I’ve written a small piece to be published soon. It’s more catharsis than anything. It is my first and last version of a press release concerning everything that happened. I don’t want you to feel blindsided and I will cancel its publication if you feel even the slightest notion of discomfort with the idea. I hold true to my promise to accept all consequences for what I’ve done.

Forever yours,

Lexa

Her first reaction is that of denial. She wants to reply—in fact, she begins to, before realizing that her words aren’t making any sense—and demand the cancellation of the peace, but enough time has passed since last she saw Lexa that she can recognize the instinctual anger that is driving that feeling.

She instead indulgers in a quiet curiosity. She deletes the email, she breathes a word of this to no one, and she waits, for three days, until one morning a sudden barrage of notifications tells her that the piece has been posted.

She steels herself, and clicks on the first link she finds.
There is no strong reason for me to write this. I haven’t sold rights to a story; I’m seeking neither a job nor redemption; I’m not profiting from this piece. The consequences have been faced, the outcome cemented, the interview requests have slowed to a stop—thankfully—and the zeitgeist has moved on to the next media frenzy.

I am, by all measures, simply a young woman living in Washington DC, trying to pick up the pieces.

And yet, each day I find the preponderance of my thoughts centered on, in some way, the eight months I shared with Clarke Griffin, serving as her campaign manager. I have decided to organize these thoughts by putting pen to paper, and in the process, clearing any lingering doubts about those eight months or Clarke Griffin herself—and perhaps find healing among these lines.

Clarke Griffin is a wonderful woman. I did not know her at first; I was connected to her campaign via a colleague and joined it with a reserved, professional respect for the marked achievements of an impressive young woman. But I quickly found that Clarke Griffin is more than her resume and record.

We butted heads almost immediately. We found ourselves in a constant adversarial relationship the likes of which I had never experienced in my profession, and it persisted throughout the campaign. Clarke is extraordinarily, infuriatingly loyal to her ideals. She would forgo advantages that required a bending of ethics. She would take the harder, higher road, without fail, much to my dismay—and soon, inspiration. I wanted to win the campaign not because it was my job, but because I came to firmly believe that Clarke Griffin has the potential to inspire the American people to be better than what we are. She can—and she will—bring out the light in all of us. She brought it out in me.

Clarke’s relentless light and commitment to her values awoke something in me that I had believed long lost. By reflecting upon me the light that shined out of her, she made me better, stronger, kinder, and truer. Though, as I said, we found ourselves constantly in stubborn, infuriating opposition, in the time we spent together, we rose, and grew, and thrived.

To be so bold and yet prosaic as to quote Fitzgerald...we slipped briskly into an intimacy from which we never recovered. My soul relaxed with the familiarity it found in Clarke Griffin. I found peace in a place that seemed devoid of it. The rest of the world seemed darker, duller, when she was not with me, in sharp contrast to the brightness and richness of life alongside her. She is brilliant, and bold, and beautiful. And we resisted with everything in us, but what drew us together was stronger. Our love developed amid exhausting road trips, and endless nights writing and rewriting speeches, and arguments over finances, and the thrill of meeting starry-eyed constituents and voters and believers. I found my happiness had become centered on Clarke Griffin’s happiness; my smile only ever reflected hers; and at last I understood the great notions of faith and love and beauty as the poets wrote about them. They wrote about her.

And despite the circumstances that have driven us apart, it persists. That is the essence of love, persistence. Against all odds.

As I’m sure many are aware, especially at this point in this piece, my initial released statement concerning the nature of my relations with Clarke was not altogether accurate. To correct the
inaccuracy: I do not regret my relationship with Clarke Griffin. I do not apologize for loving her. Love is not fault; love is not weakness. I only regret that my selfishness in loving Clarke and simultaneously wanting to see her elected so that the American people to understand her worth resulted in the downfall of her campaign. My selfishness in loving Clarke has marred her promising political career and tarnished her image in the eyes of the public, and that is wrong. The public deserves to experience Clarke’s leadership, her light; Clarke deserves the opportunity to share it with the world. No political tricks, overzealous paparazzi, morality-deficient politicians, or homophobic detractors should have a right to limit that.

I hope those willing to read these words can also find grace enough within themselves to forgive a young Senate hopeful for the error of loving when she shouldn’t have, and exercise the compassion to understand how love can obscure reason. I hope that those people can not only forgive Clarke Griffin, but continue to support her with the ardency deserved by someone so amazing.

Because I always will.

Sincerely,

Lexa Ward

Clarke’s phone rings beside her--Abby’s calling. She ignores it. She couldn’t pick it up if she wanted to. Instead, she sits motionless, reading Lexa’s words over and over again, hearing them in Lexa’s voice, trying and failing to stem the flood of emotions that cascades down upon her.

She’s never been written a love letter before. She wouldn’t want anything other than this: raw, pure, full of Lexa’s quiet adoration and honesty and heart.

Lexa deserves to have love letters written to her. That much Clarke knows.

Suddenly, she finds herself able to move again; heart racing, she blocks her mother’s call and searches her contact list. As if she doesn’t know Lexa’s number. Her fingers are moving faster than her mind but scrolling through the list is deliberate, intentioned, a subconscious attempt to give herself more time and let reason catch up with emotion.

Her finger finds Lexa’s name at last, and she pauses. She could hear her voice in seconds.

And then she clicks off the phone and tosses it away.

That thought--of hearing Lexa at long last--is paralyzing, and she can’t do it. She presses her hands over her face and hates the tears that leak out of her eyes.

If she thought her yearning for Lexa was strong before, it’s omnipresent and overpowering in the days following the small essay. Lexa has become a ghost that haunts her. Abby can tell, Clarke thinks, and does her best to distract her daughter, but Clarke finds herself aching for Lexa’s smile, searching for her, finding her name so often in her phone that it becomes second nature: she will attempt to do something and surprise herself when she discovers that she has pulled up Lexa’s contact information yet again.

Making matters worse is the mild media ripple that Lexa’s letter has caused. Public opinion has shifted in support of Clarke; growing voices online and in print triumph her cause and drown out the occasional brutal commentary from her detractors. Let people love who they love, they echo, simple and pedestrian but effective. And now, the starving press, sensing an audience for that, is hungry for Clarke’s scrambled thoughts on Lexa’s poetic expression of her feelings.
Feelings that Clarke can’t decipher, except for the single, sinking notion that she has made a mistake.

But...as Lexa said, she’s nothing if not stubborn. There is a part of her that holds onto grudges like a lifeline in the ocean. That part of her kept her going when nothing else could have, and it’s that part of her that says if she can’t escape the memory of Lexa in Los Angeles...perhaps she can’t be here anymore.

Which is how she finds herself on an airline website, dates picked and flights on the screen.

* 

A one-way ticket to Australia. No return date selected.

Clarke hovers over the button. A click wouldn’t be a whim: it would be a conscious first step to healing. First, you must cut away the infection—in her case, you must escape it, heal in isolation, and return to heal everyone else. Two weeks in Australia could turn into another week in New Zealand, a visit to Thailand, a stopover in Mumbai, a tour of Europe...an experience of the world, free from everything that has been orbiting her in the past few months, creating opposite gravitational pulls on her heart. She could be self-reliant again, self-sustaining, needing to trust no one but herself.

She would be free.

She hesitates.

As Clarke considers the “Confirm Reservation” button and all of the implications of a single click, an email notification pops up in the bottom corner. “Miss Griffin, I am writing to you personally to...” reads the preview. Clarke nearly ignores it—the constant repetition of her last name is one of the reasons she’s considering running. If it weren’t for the name on the sender line and the recollection it spurs, she would have just deleted it.

*Sen. Indra Harlow*

Indra Harlow, the Senator from Virginia, sent her a letter back when she came out on the road trip; Clarke only remembers Anya’s offhand comment about Indra’s ability. Cautiously, she slides from the Reservation Confirmation button on the airline website and to the email, opening it.

*Miss Griffin,*

*I am writing to you personally to extend my condolences for the outcome of a well-run race. I do not pre-suppose to know what happened, but at this stage I do stand by earlier comments concerning your character and honesty.*

*In light of this, I would like to speak with you personally in Washington DC, at your earliest convenience. Should you be interested in and available for a meeting, please reply to my secretary, included on this email, with the dates you would be willing to visit our nation’s capital so that we can arrange flights, accommodations, and meeting dates. Please allot 2-3 days for the visit.*

*If you are not interested, I wish you luck on your next endeavor.*
She reads the contents of the email six times—not because she doesn’t believe it, but because she gets lost in the idea of DC, for so long a dream destination. But her first reaction is an instinctive revulsion. Washington DC is too close to a lot of things now.

But before she can delete the email, Abby pushes open the door to her bedroom.

“Clarke?” Abby asks. “It’s good to see you’re up. I thought we could go for a walk, maybe stop by a nonprofit downtown, ask for an application—“

Then again, it’s far away from some other things.

Clarke closes the flight booking screen and begins a new search.

*

When she lands at Ronald Reagan International, her first need is for coffee. Over the course of just three emails, she had opted for the soonest possible date Senator Harlow could meet, and even found an optimal flight: cheap, convenient, and landing in at 10am. Of course, the price and convenience also came with the inconvenience of it being a red-eye with a three-hour layover in Dallas-Fort Worth, but Clarke doesn’t mind: the activity makes her feel alive again, gives her a direction. An opportunity.

She’ll be meeting Indra Harlow for dinner that night, sharply at 6pm. Given that she just flew a red-eye, she should probably get into her hotel and sleep, and she does try; but her mind is far too active running through aspects of Indra Harlow’s campaign and career, so that they can have something to discuss at this dinner meeting.

She runs out of facts before she runs out of caffeine, so she stands from her bed and paces the room, planning outfits and examining the map of the area the restaurant is in. Not far from Capitol Hill, likely because Indra is working late and doesn’t want to commute. Maybe Clarke can take in some sights before she goes to the restaurant...she begins searching the internet for suggestions.

It’s all survival, really. At long last, Clarke is in the same city as Lexa Ward, and if she allows herself to dwell on that fact for too long...she doesn’t know what she’ll do.

She keeps pacing.

*

Washington DC feels...strange. It has for the past three months.

Lexa has lived here for much of her adult life. And for much of her childhood, she was so close that weekend visits were her favorite activity. She became accustomed to the parades, the weather, the traffic, the backstreets--she knows this city like she knows the veins that lead to her beating heart.
Except, she doesn’t know her heart so well anymore. The beats are out of sync, and the most mundane of sights and smells will make it ache in unexpected ways when she least expects it. And maybe that’s the reason why she wishes Washington DC were more like Los Angeles.

Her family has helped, somewhat. Not her parents, with their appearances to maintain and their stern, upright moral consciences. They looked down upon Lexa in disappointment and pity and they have done little to make her feel like she has returned home; likewise, she has done little to win back their respect or affections. She doesn’t care. But she does care about Aden, and Anya. Aden, a little golden ball of love and affection for his big sister, who could never be tarnished in his eyes no matter what happens; and Anya, her protector and mentor who has been with her through almost all of it. They have made constant trips to Lexa’s new apartment, taking her out to dinner, helping her shop for furniture, making her smile on the days she felt least like it.

And now, Aden sits on the edge of Lexa’s brand new bed, kicking his feet and watching her twist her hair into a simple up do, the kind she hasn’t worn for several weeks.

“Are you still coming to see me at the matinee this weekend?” he asks her.

“Of course,” she promises. “I’m sorry I’m missing opening night for this meeting, but Anya and I have tickets for every single showing. I promise to embarrass you as much as I can.”

“No!” he cries, laughing.

She smiles a genuine smile--they’re few and far between these days, but it’s as if she’s relearning how to move her muscles that way, and it feels good.

Anya appears in her doorway. “You’re going to be late,” she chides.

“I’m fine,” Lexa replies, shaking her head. She adjusts a silver necklace in the mirror. It feels strange to be wearing business casual again after so long: heels, black pants, a loose red silk button down, and a blazer. She’s existed in jeans and sweats for so long that she feels like an entirely different person. “Do I look okay?”

“Fine,” Anya says. “Now hurry. This is a big chance. Do you need a ride?”

“I’ll take my car, get Aden to his show. Good luck, buddy,” she says, ruffling her younger brother’s hair after he meticulously styled it for his show tonight. Aden groans and throws himself back on the mattress.

“Go get ‘em,” Anya tells her sister as Lexa strides past her, and adds, “Good luck, buddy!” as she reaches for Lexa’s hair as she did for Aden’s. Lexa just barely manages to dodge her, laughing.

She doesn’t know where she would be without them--like the night Anya took her phone to prevent her calling Clarke; and the Aden’s quiet doe eyes when he asked Lexa what happened and she had to explain, in a halting voice, how she had fallen in love with someone who couldn’t love her back. As painful as it had all been, it helped her form the scar she needed to get through each day.

It’s not a far drive to her destination, but she still needs to use her GPS to travel roads she used to know like the back of her hand. Everything looks different in the dark than how she remembered it, and DC feels different--even the monuments, the White House, the tourists. It’s not her home anymore. But neither is Los Angeles…

Her home is a person who doesn’t want her back. And that is the hardest truth she has ever had to face.
With luck, however, her dinner tonight will go well. She pulls up to the restaurant and hands her car off to the valet, then pulls out her phone and reviews the email once again, a final nervous tic before a very important meeting.

Miss Ward,

I am writing to you personally to extend my condolences for the outcome of a well-run race. I do not pre-suppose to know what happened, but at this stage I can recognize the mark of a brilliant strategist and a strong character.

In light of this, I would like to speak with you personally. I understand you have recently returned to Washington DC. At your earliest convenience, should you be interested in and available for a meeting, please reply to my secretary, included on this email, with your availability for a meeting next week so that we may speak in more depth about your experiences and future.

If you are not interested, I wish you luck on your next endeavor.

Thank you,

Sen. Indra Harlow

Lexa had voted for Indra in every election since she was old enough to vote, and campaigned for her even before that, but she never expected to interact with her--and she definitely did not expect that her immediate reaction to a meeting would be to decline the offer. She’s not in the head space for it right now, she had decided. Only Anya’s poking and prodding and half-serious promise to embarrass Lexa with an unflattering profile in the paper had cajoled Lexa into accepting the invitation, and she had eventually agreed upon a 6:15 dinner with Senator Indra Harlow, not far from Capitol Hill.

She heads into the restaurant with a confident stride that hides her uncertainty about all of this. After coming out of Clarke’s campaign, a long vacation from politics would have served her heart well, but now she’s diving headlong back into her career, now in the nation’s capital. She empathizes with Clarke’s reasons for resigning, even if it undid all of her hard working and planning: her life has changed so drastically since meeting Clarke, it had reached a point where the future she had once imagined for herself no longer seemed complete without Clarke in it. Suddenly, they were both thrust into positions where they had to choose between their old worlds and their new world...and they made different choices.

But Lexa had panicked when confronted with the choice. Panicked, and sacrificed, and tried to give the girl she loved what she thought she wanted most, and she had misjudged Clarke for the final time.

Which is why, when she follows the maître d’ to the table, she stops short at the sight of Clarke Griffin sitting across from Senator Indra Harlow.

Her new word, colliding with her old.

Lexa’s heart fills and bursts; she forgets how to breathe.

The frequency with which this happens when she looks at Clarke has always alarmed her--there is no way to describe the way her chest contract at the sight of the most beautiful woman in the world walking towards her in a black ball gown, or falling asleep on Lexa’s chest with her blonde hair a
mess—but this time is different. The kaleidoscope explosion of hope and fear and sadness and love threatens to level her, leaving her dizzy and swaying in her high heels.

She never thought she’d see Clarke again.

The maître d’, only now realizing Lexa has stalled out behind him, turns to her with a look of confusion; this is enough to spur Lexa to drift forward on unsteady feet, disbelieving as she reaches the table.

“Clarke?”

*

Small talk with Indra is pleasant, though shallow. Clarke goes into the dinner not entirely sure why Indra has called her all the way out to DC, and as they chat about the city and her trip and Indra’s first few days in office while they order drinks, Indra provides her no real answers.

But when Clarke hears her own name fall from the lips she knows so well, none of that matters.

Heart in throat and jaw on the floor, Clarke turns to see the spirit that has possessed her senses for months now, standing before her, real and alive and healthy and beautiful—and just as shocked as Clarke is.

She can’t speak but for her name: “Lexa.”

“Lexa Ward,” Indra repeats, far more briskly as she rises to shake Lexa’s hand. Lexa moves as if controlled by puppets, still staring at Clarke. “Right on time, thank you for joining us. Please, sit.”

Lexa doesn’t move; Clarke doesn’t blame her. “What is this?” she asks weakly.

“Sit,” Indra presses.

A waiter arrives with their drinks and pours a glass of wine for Lexa at Indra’s request, finally prompting Lexa to sink into the chair so that she can drink it.

Clarke, meanwhile, drains half her glass. She’s still in disbelief, and she doesn’t trust her self-control in light of the crush of emotions that spring forth. To combat them, she fixes her gaze on Indra, focusing intently on avoiding Lexa’s eyes at all costs.

Now that Lexa has arrived, Indra’s warm and casual demeanor turns all business, with the narrowed eyes and strength of voice befitting such a respected career Senator.

“I don’t actually like small talk, and I don’t have time for it,” she declares, cutting to the point. “In fact, it’s unlikely I’ll even be able to stay for the duration of this dinner. I wanted to meet with you tonight, together, to get the measure of you. The Griffin campaign in California was something to marvel at—extremely impressive.”

Clarke disagrees, but she still hasn’t found her voice and she doesn’t trust herself to talk, so she nods with Indra in passive silence, watching Lexa out of the corner of her eye.

“Clarke, as you said in many of your speeches,” Indra continues, “the government needs change, needs fresh blood, needs new ideas. And Lexa wrote a very compelling case for your political career
and what you can do for the American people.”

She sees Lexa sink slightly in her chair, and Clarke feels her own face redden at the thought of Indra reading Lexa’s open love letter to her.

“It was flattering,” Clarke says stiffly, refusing to look anywhere but at Indra.

“It was. I suspect it was also true,” Indra says. “I have a nose for these things, and your success speaks for itself. Which is why I’d like to offer you a job: come and work for me, on my staff. Lead my staffers, help plan my political moves, strategize with my team here in DC.”

Clarke stares blankly, not understanding such simple words. “What? You want me to come and work for you?”

It’s the last thing she expected--advice, endorsements, donation requests, or even flying across the country to receive criticism for her actions would have been more likely.

“No,” Indra says simply, then glances at Lexa. “I want you both to come and work for me.”

In her surprise, Clarke forgets her resolve to avoid looking at Lexa and turns to her, eyes widening. Lexa stares right back, lips parted--she gives a small nod but Clarke turns back to Indra with a furrowed brow.

“I don’t understand.”

“What are you finding difficult to understand?”

“Why do you want us?” Lexa asks.

“I think I’ve made my position very clear,” Indra says plainly. “You put together an excellent campaign. You showed great character and strength of will. If you had simply lost the race, Clarke, both of you would be top commodities for politicians looking to round out their staff. All things considered--”

“What happened...is a big thing to consider,” Clarke points out.

“Which is why you’ll be starting simply in policy strategy for me--if you want the job. Keep you away from the limelight. But let me make myself clear: you both need to accept the position. I won’t take one without the other.”

Numb to the tips of her fingers, Clarke abandons her perfect posture and sinks in her chair, trying to comprehend. In light of Lexa’s sudden re-emergence into her life at this dinner, and in light of the impossibly slim possibility of working with her again...the idea of accepting a job with Indra Harlow seems relatively mundane. It’s everything else she’s going to have to consider

“Why?” Lexa asks her again.

Indra frowns. “I told you--”

“No, I understand your reasoning; I mean, why think to ask us? This is too out of the blue.”

For a moment, it looks as if Indra might snap at Lexa and the whole opportunity will be ripped off the table--until she breaks into a smile. “Honestly? I spoke to your sister Anya. She interviewed me a few years back, and we keep in touch. She convinced me to look into your case.”

Lexe’s eyes shut and she releases a deep breath, hint of a smile on her lips. When she opens her eyes,
it’s too look to Clarke, and suddenly Clarke can read her face as if nothing has changed between them.

It’s your choice. I’m here for you. Forever yours.

Clarke swallows. Three days ago, she nearly bought a plane ticket to the other side of the world just to avoid the memory of Lexa in Los Angeles, and now, she has less than the space of a single dinner to decide if she wants to work with her again—all while Lexa is sitting across the table from her, looking unfairly beautiful in dark red and black. She hesitates; Indra catches it.

“I understand your trepidation,” Indra says, checking her cell phone. “This is a very big decision. Take the evening to think about it. However, I was correct when I said I would not be able to enjoy an entire dinner with you.” She stands from the table, much to Clarke’s surprise. “There’s a small emergency back at my office, so I’m afraid I have to leave. Order what you’d like for dinner, it’s on my bill.”

“Thank you for the opportunity,” Clarke professes, before Indra can leave. “I really appreciate you even being willing to take a chance on me--and Lexa. It means a lot.”

Indra sours slightly at Clarke’s emotion. “I admire the work you’ve done, but recognize that Lexa was right. You’re political poison right now. And if you have any involvement in my staff, campaign, or business...remember, you will be on very thin ice. Both of you.”

Clarke nods. “I appreciate the risk you’re taking.”

“Don’t. You’re not worth the risk, and at her first sign of trouble, you’re both gone. Careers over.”

“Why take the risk then?” Lexa asks curiously. At this, Indra pauses--and then smirks, eyes sparkling.

“I’m a black woman in a traditional red state,” she drawls. “I’m not exactly averse to or unfamiliar with risk.”

Understanding, Lexa presses her lips shut, sitting back in a show of deference to such an impressive woman. She glances to Clarke, and the two women suddenly realize that with Indra leaving, they’ll be left to face each other without distractions and without pretenses—over a quiet, expensive dinner and wine. It suddenly turns personal, tense, close, with Lexa inhaling a shallow breath and Clarke trying to swallow against her dry throat.

Indra runs an eye over both of them, noting the exchange, and turns to leave with a small smile. Then she thinks better of it and turns back.

“And in addition...my daughter is a lesbian,” Indra says, with a far greater softness than her previous gruff demeanor. “She greatly admires you both, and I think we could use a few more voices that represent her and her girlfriend. So please...consider the opportunity. Please get back to me or my assistant by Monday.”

She leaves them with that sobering, weighty admission, throwing the importance of Clarke and Lexa’s work into sharp relief and pulling them out of their heads and outside of this single moment together.

In light of everything that has happened in the months since Lexa and Clarke’s picture was taken that night...it has often been difficult for Clarke to remember the profound effect her position has on others. The possibility of losing Lexa--and actually losing her--coupled with the crumbling of her worldview and self-image as an honest, morally upright young woman, had distorted Clarke’s
perception until all she could focus on was herself and her personal life.

She stands by resigning from the race. She stands by stepping back in order to recenter herself, because Clarke refuses to lose herself or give up on who she is in pursuit of some external goal. And if she’s trying to recenter herself...the prospect of working alongside Lexa seems dangerous if Lexa is so easily unbalancing Clarke right now, just by sitting across from her. But there is a grander picture, one that Clarke has a responsibility and commitment to, and Indra has offered her a path back.

Lexa, watching her with gentle eyes, reads her indecision.

“Do you...want to get another drink?” she offers unsteadily. “Talk it over?”

She would not mind something strong right now. Champagne’s for celebrating, Bloody Marys for hangovers, but is there a particular type of drink for the moment when you’re standing on the precipice of something new, head and heart pounding, deciding whether or not to jump? Clarke considers the menu but before she can make a selection, she glances around her: heads are turned her way, more faces every moment. They’ve recognized her and Lexa; whispers begin to float through the air. Clarke shakes her head, takes a deep breath.

“Can we take a walk, instead?”

*

“I was that child on field trips who always loved to come to the museums here, even though we did it every year,” Lexa tells her quietly.

Clarke pushes her hands deeper into her pocket and ducks her chin into her coat, shivering against the cold evening air. It’s only natural, she thinks, that Lexa has guided them to the National Mall, the long strip of gardens and museums and memorials stretching between the Capitol building and the Lincoln Memorial. Even though the sun has long since set, groups of tourists migrate between the monuments, but they are few enough that Clarke and Lexa are able to speak and move freely without worrying about someone listening in.

“I used to visit with my mom on her trips,” Clarke replies. “But I never spent enough time here to appreciate it.”

It’s beautiful here, especially at night, with bright light reflecting off the white marble memorials and architecture, casting a dim blue glow over the perfectly manicured park. “I’d like to see more of it,” Clarke lets slip.

“More of DC?” Lexa asks, cautiously.

Clarke nods, equally cautious. The precipice she is worried about is not the possibility of a new life, a new job, a new direction--it’s Lexa. It always is. They’re walking too close in the heart of Washington DC and Clarke’s regrets and remorse for their distance before this is beginning to pull on her heart. Rushing into--or away from--anything too quickly could prove disastrous, and permanent. Step by step.

“Indra’s offer is a good one,” Lexa says. “You should take it.”
“Just me?” Clarke asks, raising a quietly amused eyebrow.

Lexa gives a small smile. “If you wanted the position, I would, of course, agree to take a job as well. I do think it’s perfect for you though.”

Always so kind, so stoic. Clarke’s heart fills and spills over, and she rushes just a bit. “It’s perfect for you too,” she blurts out. “You’ve always been the strategist, the pragmatist. I wouldn’t have gotten anywhere without you. I wouldn’t be here today without you.”

“You would have. But I think it’s perfect for you in more than one way... there’s always the element of Indra’s extreme popularity on the national stage.”

Clarke frowns. “Meaning?”

She pauses as they reach the edge of Reflecting Pool, dark glittering water alight with the reflections of the monuments. Lexa chooses her words carefully, speaking slowly and watching for Clarke’s reaction. “She’s a strong frontrunner for the Vice President nod in a few years--if she doesn’t run herself. Whatever the case is, someone will need to fill her vacant seat when that time comes.”

It takes a moment for Clarke to catch her meaning. “You’re suggesting another Senate run in a few years?”

“Just considering the possibility. You were made for this, Clarke.”

It’s the first Lexa has said her name since they saw each other in the restaurant, and god damn, it sounds so good on Lexa’s tongue. Clarke closes her eyes and basks in the sound for just a moment, replaying it. Not Griffin, not Senator, not Representative, just...Clarke. Lexa understands her in a way that no one else has, providing safe harbor from the storm when Clarke needs it, and walking hand in hand with her, unfaltering, when safe harbor is impossible. They know each other deeply, intimately, in a way that feels beyond time.

She loves Lexa. She always will. Over the past few months, amid all of the hurt and pain and fear, beneath the media fervor and the firestorm of her career and the three thousand miles that separated them...she always has. Her love has persisted, and that is the essence of love.

She throws caution to the wind, and her lips curl upward.

“I’d need a campaign manager.”

Lexa stares at her blankly for a moment, before it clicks and she smiles too.

“Don’t look at me. I failed rather spectacularly in my most recent attempt.”

“At least you didn’t resign,” Clarke says dryly.

“I tried,” Lexa points out. “You didn’t let me.”

It seems impossible, the way they’ve so easily slipped back into this rapport, this harmony. Being in Lexa’s presence is suddenly easy again, no longer unfair or difficult or clashing with Clarke’s emotions. All feels right in the world, she realizes. Maybe Lexa was right: they had slipped briskly into an intimacy from which they had never recovered--and never would.

Her decision made, Clarke draws to a stop in front of the Washington Monument. Lexa pauses alongside her, giving her a questioning look.
“After I resigned, that morning in my apartment...I said that I wanted to do this together,” Clarke begins, quietly. “You said that we could have, in an ideal world.”

Lexa swallows and nods.

“I still think we can make it an ideal world,” she finishes.

Lexa studies her, inscrutable stormy gray-green eyes drinking in Clarke’s face like she’s seeing her for the first time. Then, to her surprise, Lexa looks out to the distance.

Clarke follows her gaze to the White House.

“I think we can make it an ideal world too,” Lexa says softly. “And I promise to be with you through it all.”

Clarke remembers the moment they confessed it to her staff, remembers her desperation for Lexa’s touch, her comfort. Her whole-hearted belief that she would never be able to seek it out again, or provide Lexa any in return. Now here they stand, side by side at the base of the Washington Monument, looking towards the White House far in the distance.

She does something brave.

She reaches across the space between them, and slips her hand into Lexa’s. Squeezes.

Lexa’s fingers are frozen.

Then, just as Clarke starts to withdraw, Lexa tightens them, ever so slightly, keeping her there.

A flash of warmth sparks between their hands, spreads up Clarke’s arm and through her body like fast-moving flames over paper. It shines out of Lexa’s face despite her attempts to hide a small smile. She hasn’t felt this heat for a long time--and she doesn’t want to let it go.

Clarke smiles. They’ll be okay.

Chapter End Notes

I really don’t know what to write here, beyond my immense gratitude for everyone who has read this and supported me the whole (long ass) way through. I hope that it has lived up to expectations. You have no idea how much the support and love has meant to me and how it kept me writing. This story has been so enjoyable to live in, and even more enjoyable to share with a fandom that has been so engaged and done so much. I appreciate everyone who has read, supported, commented, shared, questioned, and chatted with me on tumblr about it! It’s been a special experience for me and hopefully so for everyone else too. Thank you so much.

I’m sure a lot of people will have questions and comments and things they want to talk about. In previous chapters I haven’t replied in the comments because it’s damn near impossible to keep up with everyone, but I’ll be chatting with everyone this time around, here and on my tumblr, so feel free to air out anything you’d like!
Thank you again for everything, and for helping me keep a little bit of Clarke and Lexa alive this way. It's been a total blast, and I’m not done writing Clexa yet, so if you haven’t checked out my other stories or my tumblr, feel free to do so!

I love you all xx

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!