And You Can Have This Heart to Break

by Chash

Summary

Clarke knows she's being a little over-dramatic in her complaining about having to move to Maine, but it does seem pretty unreasonable of her mother to drag her to a small town in the middle of nowhere for the three months between high-school graduation and her starting college.

As it turns out, the summer is great. It's just the summer ending that's the problem.

Notes

OKAY so this is part one of a Persuasion AU. If you know Persuasion, this is basically covering the period before the book starts! If you don't know Persuasion, well, this is part one of two.
"I know you're upset," Abby says. "But I don't do these things just to make you unhappy."

Clarke leans against the window of the car, closing her eyes, taking a few breaths. Her mother means well. Her mother always means well. It's one of her defining features: good intentions, poor execution. And in this case, Clarke does get it. She's being unreasonable and over-dramatic, and it really isn't a big deal.

But at the same time, it sucks, and she doesn't want her mother to forget that.

"I know," she says. "I'm collateral damage."

Abby huffs, drums her fingers on the steering wheel. "That's not what I meant. As you keep pointing out, it's only three months."

"And every break after this for the rest of my life," she points out. "I'm always going to be coming back here. Not going home."

"You couldn't expect me to live in the same place for the rest of your life."

"You could have let me stay with Dad for the summer," Clarke shoots back.

"We're not having this argument right now," her mother says, like she didn't start the argument. "I just want you to keep an open mind. You can still have a good summer, if you give Arcadia a chance."

Clarke still knows she's right. It's not like most of her summer wasn't going to be spent hanging out in her room working on art or something. She can get a part-time job in Arcadia as well as she could have gotten one in DC. She'll be able to talk to her friends online. It's not a huge deal.

But she's leaving her home--the place she's lived her entire life--the summer before she goes to college, and she's missing out on the three months she was supposed to have to say goodbye to her friends, because her mother got offered directorship of a hospital in the middle of nowhere and didn't bother to warn her until it was finalized, last month, right in the middle of AP exams, so she didn't even have much of a chance to wrap stuff up. The end of her school year was spent studying and packing, and now her summer is going to be spent in Maine, in some town where she knows no one and has no history.

And her dad was right there. He would have happily let her stay with him for the summer. As it is, it doesn't even feel like it's going to be worth it to unpack her room. She'll be gone again in a few months.

"Yeah," she tells Abby, without much feeling. "It's going to be great."

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The first few days, Clarke doesn't do much. She texts Wells a lot about how bored she is, and he points out that she could be doing things instead of just complaining about how she has nothing to do when she hasn't tried to find anything, which is exactly the kind of response she'd expect from Wells, so she starts texting Lexa instead. They're going to be at Harvard in the fall, and she'd been feeling
sort of--curious. About Lexa. She came out as a lesbian at the beginning of the school year, and
broke up with her girlfriend just after Christmas, so Clarke's been wondering if maybe something
could happen with them. If she wants something to happen. Her last boyfriend was in tenth grade,
and they lasted about two weeks before Clarke decided it wasn't worth the trouble.

Maybe girls would be better.

Lexa's a sporadic texter at best, so after three days of, per her mother, moping around the house,
Clarke finally decides it's probably time to give Arcadia a chance.

It's mid-June, bright and fairly warm, even if Maine is a lot cooler than DC was. The whole town
looks a little like a Norman Rockwell painting, all old-timey charm. But it's not the land that time
forgot or anything; the kids down the street are playing with Nerf guns, and she has decent cell
phone reception.

She takes a picture and texts it to Wells and Lexa with the caption: This is really weird, and Wells
replies, I'm just proud of you for leaving the house.

It's a ten-minute walk to the main street, and the lack of traffic is pretty stunning. Plus the main street
really is just a street, this single drag of shops and restaurants.

She is kind of hungry, at least. That's a good place to start.

There's a deli on the corner of main street, with a couple guys around her age behind the counter. It's
hard to tell if it's not that busy because it's still early for lunch or just because there's never any
business, but there's no one else in the place, and the guys look vaguely alarmed by the sound of the
bell over the door, like they were caught doing something wrong, even if from what she can tell, they
were just shit-talking each other.

The two of them exchange another look, and then one comes to the greet her and the other retreats to
the back. The one at the register is a good few inches taller than Clarke is, with messy black hair and
deep brown eyes. And freckles. He looks like he'd be great to sketch.

"Hi, what can I get you?" he asks.

"I hadn't really decided yet," she admits. "You were the first place I saw. I haven't even checked the
menu."

"Well, it's a deli," he says, slow. "So, you know. Standard sandwiches. And we've got some pretty
decent specials. Do you have a favorite meat?"

She has to smile. "Is that really how you phrase that? Favorite meat?"

"Jesus, how many favorite meats do you have?"

"A normal number." She checks the board. "I like roast beef. Bacon's good. I'm pretty flexible."

"And what's your favorite global meat?" he asks. "Just out of curiosity."

"Steak," she says, and he grins.

"Okay, so, I'm getting the impression you like beef."
"Are we still doing phrasing?"

He actually laughs at that, and he has a really nice laugh. She's not ready to give Maine a free pass or anything, but--he's really a very cute boy. Maybe she's not a lesbian after all. "How do you feel about horseradish?"

"Rad-ish."

He laughs again. "I don't know why I'm encouraging you," he adds, with a shake of his head. "You're not actually funny. How does the number three special look?"

Clarke checks the board and nods. "Can I get it on rye instead of whole wheat?"

"It completely destroys the sanctity of the entire meal," he deadpans. "But, yeah, sure. It's your lunch. I'm not the sandwich police. Chips? Drink? Cookie?"

"All of the above, probably," she says, and makes her selections while he drops off her order with the guy in the back.

He rings her up, and she's wondering if it would be weird if she tried to keep talking to him instead of waiting in a booth when he solves the dilemma for her. "So, what are you doing here? In town, I mean. I think I figured out why you're at a deli around lunch time."

"Just moved."

"Huh," he says, careful. "Why?"

"Why?"

He counts off on his fingers. "No college nearby, no jobs worth moving for, if you're even out of high school, no big tourist attractions. Did you throw a dart at a map?"

"My mom got a job. She's the new hospital director."

"Sorry," he says, kneejerk. and she laughs.

"So it's as bad as I think it is? Living here."

"I don't know if it's as bad as you think," he grants. "I can't read your mind. But it's pretty boring. Where are you from?"

"DC."

"Yeah, I'm guessing there's a lot less going on here." He leans on the counter, clucking his tongue. "How old are you?"

"Eighteen. I just finished high school."

"So, just here for the summer?"

"Yeah, I'm going to Harvard in the fall."

He whistles. "So, not doing too badly, then."

"No," she agrees, and finds she means it. "Not too bad."
The deli guy's name is Bellamy, he's twenty, and he's lived here his whole life. He's enrolled at the local community college part-time and taking care of his little sister, who's sixteen and apparently a handful.

"Like--taking care how?" she asks. She's been chatting with him off and on for an hour, when he's not busy with work, and she's feeling more broadly charitable towards Maine as a result. Not that it's really a surprise that there are people her age around, but, well--she likes Bellamy.

"Like I'm her legal guardian," he says, with a shrug. "They go with closest living relative if they can, when the parents aren't around."

"What happened to them? If you don't mind talking about it."

He shrugs. "It's less awkward to get it out of the way," he says, and Clarke feels a small, private thrill at the easy assumption that they'll be talking enough she'd be finding out about it sooner or later. "My dad died when I was two, my sister's dad has never been in the picture, and my mom died when I was eighteen."

Clarke lets that sink in for a minute and then asks, "Did you also have a beloved childhood pet that got hit by a car and died in your arms, or would that be too much?"

That surprises a laugh out of him, and he shakes his head. "We couldn't have pets. Too poor."

"That was my next guess." She pauses, but it feels worth adding, "So, you're not the person I should be asking about fun things to do in Arcadia, huh? Since you have no free time for fun."

"That's not why he's the wrong person to ask," says the other deli employee. His name--Clarke assumes his last--is Miller, and he's Bellamy's best friend. She likes him too, from what she's seen, just not as much as she likes Bellamy.

"Fuck you, Miller," says Bellamy.

"You wish."

"Desperately, but you keep turning me down." He gives Clarke a smile. "My lack of free time just means I'm more discriminating in the stuff I choose to do."

"Is that what we're calling it?" Miller mutters.

"Go clean something."

Miller flips him off, but disappears into the back, and Clarke props her elbows on the counter with a smile. "So, do you have something for me, or did you just not want to admit your friend was right in front of him?"

"There's a party tomorrow night," he says. "Miller's going because he's got a thing for the guy running it, and I'm going because my sister's going to a friend's house so I don't have anything else to do."

"So, when you say you're discriminating, you really just mean that your social life is based on when your sister is busy."

"And if I actually want to go to the party. Sometimes I just use her as an excuse to not do things that
sound boring." He pauses. "Shit, I should have let Miller stay. I'm not making myself sound cool, am I?"

"Not really at all," says Clarke, but she's smiling. "But I do trust your judgement. Is this the kind of party I could come to, or would it be weird?"

"I could use a date," he says. "Then it wouldn't be weird, right?"

"Holy fuck, that was actually smooth!" Miller yells from the kitchen, and Bellamy yells back, "Shut up!" without missing a beat.

"That was smooth, though," she says. "I was really impressed."

"Yeah?" he asks. "So, you want to come?"

"I'd love to."

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When she gets home, she texts Wells, *There might be some good things in Maine*, and Wells texts back, *I told you so.*

She can't pretend she doesn't deserve it.

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Her mother is, of course, thrilled that she's going to a party, which would almost be enough to make her reconsider, except she's not actually at the level of spiteful resentment where she wants to give up going to see a cute guy and meet some potentially cool new people just to prove to her mother that she hates Maine. It's not going to change her mother's mind and make her move back home, so she'd only be hurting herself.

And, honestly, she's kind of excited. She's known Wells for her whole life, and all her friends in high school for the whole time she's been in high school. Going to a party with a (mostly) stranger feels like a good test-run for college, without actually feeling dangerous at all. Which, maybe it *should*, but she trusts her instincts, and her instincts tell her she can trust Bellamy.

She meets him outside the deli, hangs out outside while he finishes locking up. He's not quite as tall as she expected him to be, once they're walking next to each other, but he carries himself like he's larger than he is, and she kind of likes it. He feels like he's just the right size.

"So, whose party am I going to?" Clarke asks, once they've finished the polite small talk portion of the walk. "Miller's crush?"

"Yeah, Bryan. Not to be a total small-town cliche, but his parents are out of town, so he's having a giant party."

"We do that in the city too, if it makes you feel better."

"Not at all," he teases. "I thought that was a perk, but apparently there really aren't any."

"You have way more cows than the city."

"Awesome, that totally makes up for it."

She worries her lip, considering, but--it's better to ask *now*, before she starts feeling more awkward.
"So, Miller is--" The longer she pauses, the less impressed he looks, until she finally squeaks, "Gay?"

"Yeah. If that's a problem, you probably want to take off before we get there."

It's maybe weird, that the coldness in his voice makes her feel better. But as far as Clarke's concerned, you're cute but if you're homophobic we're done is a completely positive personality trait. "No, that's not--" She makes a face. "Shit, I was about to make the I have gay friends argument, that's really not what I meant. I just--" This time, she stops herself because I've been wondering if I like girls maybe isn't the message she wants to send to a boy she knows she likes. "I think i might be bi," she settles on, because that's safe, right? And it's true. Given how she feels about him, it seems more likely than being exclusively into girls, but it always makes her feel squirmy. Lexa said bisexuality was mostly a placeholder for people who weren't ready to say they were gay, and while she's sure it's true for some people, it can't be true for all of them.

"Oh, cool," says Bellamy, relaxing. "Me too. Let me know if you want to talk about it."

She blinks. "You're bi?"

"Yeah. More into girls, but guys are good too. Maybe pansexual is better? I don't care much, but physically girls do more for me."

"How did you know?"

He smiles, huffs out a little laugh. "I was helping Miller work through it, and he would be like, okay, this guy is hot, right? And I had a lot of opinions about it. Apparently we don't have the same taste in guys at all."

"Really?"

"Miller doesn't care as much about muscle definition as I do." He glances at her. "So, do you want to talk about it?"

"What I like in guys?" she asks, too light, but they both know what he actually means. He doesn't bother responding, just keeps walking, and somehow, that makes it easy. "I don't know. I guess it's kind of like yours? One of my friends came out, and it kind of--got me thinking. And that's bad, right?"

"Which part?"

"I only started thinking I might like girls because I thought I might like her."

"How else were you going to figure it out?" asks Bellamy. "I'm pretty sure that's how it goes for everybody. You just assume you're straight until you want to make out with someone who isn't--whatever gender they would be if you were straight."

She has to smile. "You think?"

He shrugs. "Yeah. And it's probably harder when--Miller's never liked girls. We've been friends for years, and when I started going on dates, he didn't get it, but it still took him a while to start thinking he might like guys. But I didn't really have to think about it much, until he started asking."

"Did you guys ever--"

"Nothing serious. We made out, so he could see if he liked it."
"You didn't need to see if you liked it?"

"He's my best friend, but I really don't want to date him," he says. "Not because he's a guy, but--he's Miller. We're not like that. So it didn't do much for me. But I wouldn't mind doing it with someone else."

"And he wants to date the guy hosting this party?"

Bellamy rolls his eyes. "They're going to hook up. It's really obvious. But, yeah, they're not there yet. And it's probably not going to last."

"Wow. Harsh."

"Yeah, that sounded bad. But Miller's graduated last year. He's in school in Indiana, and Bryan's going to North Carolina in the fall. They've been flirting for years, but--" He shrugs. "People don't tend to stay close once they leave town. It's not--that's just how it is, I guess. You go to college, and you get your real life."

It makes something stick in Clarke's throat, the way he says it. Because he hasn't left, of course, and she gets the impression that even once he's done raising his sister, he might not. It's expensive, to move somewhere else, and Bellamy already seems like the kind of guy who would lay himself down to make a bridge to get everyone else off a sinking ship. Self-sacrificial, but not in a bad way. Just a pragmatic one.

If he can only give one person in his family a future, it's not going to be himself.

She slides her hand into his, hesitant until he squeezes back, and when he does, she leans in. "So, just something fun for the summer?" she prompts.

"Yeah," he says. "Nothing serious."

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The party is already in full swing by the time they get there, the fairly typical kind of house party Clarke never went to that often, even in DC. Parties of this sort were the sort of thing Clarke went to every few months, mostly to prove to herself that she could, and she approached them as she approached basically all other activities: she did everything she was supposed to and did well at it, which meant she got drunk, played beer pong, danced, and yelled a lot.

Bellamy seems a lot more laid back about the whole thing, though, and Clarke finds it easy to follow his lead. They grab beers and he introduces her to a few people, and then they just find a fairly quiet place to hang out and chat. Bellamy keeps his phone out and ready, in case his sister calls, but it doesn't make her feel like he's neglecting her or disinterested. Mostly, he seems like a good guy who wants to talk to her, but knows it can't be his top priority.

She likes him; it's so easy.

"So, what would you be doing if you weren't here?" he asks.

"Hm?"

"What kind of exciting stuff is happening in the city that we're missing out on?" She has to laugh, and he nudges her. "What?"

"No, it's just--I've been so mad that my mom made me come here, when all my friends are in DC.
But I don't think I'd really be doing anything much more exciting if I was there, if I'm honest. I might be out with Wells or Lily or Lexa, but--I might just be sitting at home on the couch watching TV."

"That actually sounds great," he says, a little wistfully, and Clarke laughs.

"Did you not want to be at this party?"

Out of the corner of her eye, she can see him mulling the question over, much more than she expected. "I wanted to hang out with you," he says, finally. "You were looking for something cool to do."

It really does feel like something out of a movie, the easy, certain attraction that Clarke always thought was, if not a complete fiction, then at least something that happened to other people. But here she is, in the simplest romance there is: boy meets girl.

"How far is your house?"

He pauses, and she can see him thinking it over, like he's looking for a catch. "Twenty minute walk," he says.

"That's not bad. We could finish our beers and go."

"Really?"

"I mostly wanted to come to hang out with you too," she admits. "So it seems kind of stupid for us to be here, when we could just be hanging out somewhere we both actually want to be."

He pauses again, finally says, "I told you I'm poor, right?"

"Yeah. Do you not have a TV? We could watch mine, but my mom's home, and I don't really want to have to tell her what I'm doing."

"No, I have a TV. Just--your mom moved here to be the director of the hospital. I'm guessing you have a pretty nice place."

"I don't want to hang out with your house, Bellamy."

He smiles. "Yeah, okay. Just--don't say I didn't warn you. And don't act like it's a surprise that it's a wreck."

"I won't. We don't have to go," she adds. "We can stay here. Or go to my house."

"Yeah, uh, no, I'd definitely rather you come home with me than go home with you. Where your mom is. Finish your beer and let's go."

She notes he only says goodbye to Miller and the host of the party before they go; some of the other guests nod at him in farewell, but he's clearly not among his people. She wonders if he feels left behind, or if he doesn't notice. Until her mother decided to move to Arcadia, Clarke never felt like she was stuck anywhere, and even this is temporary. It's an annoyance, but she'll be gone soon.

Bellamy's probably watched wealthier friends leave and wondered if he'll ever follow. Even Miller isn't really around; he's home for the summer. And once he's done with college, he won't be back.

But it seems stupid to bring it up; Bellamy probably doesn't want to think about it, and she hopes he has someone better to vent to than her if he does want to talk.
Still, she is a little curious. "You said you were talking classes at the community college, right? What are you taking?"

"Uh," he starts, clearly a little taken aback. "I try to do one a semester," he says. "Not really enough for--I'm never gonna turn it into much college credit, but--" His mouth twists in a strange smile. "This is going to sound sad, but it's a good way for me to do something for myself. If I just buy myself something, I feel bad, but this is educational, so--"

"Bellamy," she says, fond. "I'm not actually going to think you're a loser for being responsible and interested in learning."

"Really?" he asks, but he sounds more amused than offended. "Because that's basically the textbook definition of a loser."

She has to smile. "Yeah, but--I go to parties like that once every two months, and I have a mental checklist of tasks to complete so everyone will know I'm a fun, spontaneous person."

He doubles over laughing as they walk, and Clarke feels a little thrill of triumph, both for eliciting that reaction and because there's nothing mean in his laughter at all, just pure delight.

"So I'm not going to call anyone else a loser," she adds, when he's recovered.

"I don't know, that sounds like winning to me," he says. "What's on the list? Did you do it?"

"At this party? No. Like I said, I didn't go because I wanted to go to a party. I wanted to spend time with you."

"Okay, so what's on the list for normal parties?"

"Get drunk," she says, counting on her fingers. "Win at least two drinking games. Flirt with someone I wouldn't flirt with if I was sober. Dance. Miss my curfew."

"You plan on missing your curfew?"

"Yup."

"And does everyone think you're fun and spontaneous?"

"No, but they think I let loose at parties. Which is honestly about the best I'm going to do, I think."

"Yeah, set achievable goals," he agrees. "Can't get too ambitious."

"Anyway, I get why taking classes is a reward for you. It's cool. What are you doing now?"

Once he's sure that Clarke really isn't going to make fun of him, he relaxes, starting telling her about the education classes he's taking, with the hope that he might be able to cobble together enough of a degree to teach high school someday.

"Ideally history, I think? I like history and Latin, but I mostly just like Latin because my mom used to read us a lot of Greek and Roman mythology. I'm not great at the language part."

"That's really cool, though. I honestly don't know what I want to do with my life."

"No?"

"My mom wants me to go into medicine. And I know that's a good career, but I'm not really sure it's
me, you know? It's not--fuck, this is going to sound so bad."

He grins. "Hit me."

"Not to be all, you know, incredibly privileged rich girl, but I don't want my job to just make me money. I want to do something I'll like."

"So don't pay for twenty years of med school and donate the money to charity instead," he says, with an easy shrug. "Just make sure you've got enough to support yourself. It's not wrong to want to do something that'll make you happy, Clarke. Just don't be a dick about it. What do you like?"

"Art," she says. "Graphic design, maybe? Or--just an office job, and I draw on the side. I don't know. I'll probably take pre-med classes for at least a couple years at college but also do art for electives, and then hopefully I'll have enough saved that I can finish my degree even if my mom disowns me for switching my major."

"She wouldn't really do that, right?" he asks.

"I don't know." She worries her lip, hesitant, but--it's easy to talk to him, and she kind of needs to talk to someone. "It's been kind of hard with her, since the divorce. I said I wanted to live with my dad, and that made it weird." She smiles. "Apparently going on the record as liking one parent better is awkward. But--it wasn't like I didn't get along with him better before. That's why I wanted to live with him." She lets out a breath. "I was so pissed she didn't let me stay with him in DC this summer."

"That does seem like an asshole move," he agrees. "Moving for the summer before college must suck."

"Like I said," says Clarke, "I was really pissed about it, but I'm not sure how much of a difference it'll make. I had to say goodbye to people a few months earlier, but--I get to meet some new people."

"Yeah, Miller's great," he teases, and she laughs.

"Exactly."

His house is small and the paint job is chipping, but she likes it once she's inside. She can see the color creeping up his cheeks as he looks around, and she'll admit it's kind of messy and the stuff is old, but--well, it's not like she cares. She's looking forward to hanging out with him; she doesn't care how old his stuff is. It's nice. It feels lived in.

"You want anything to drink? Eat?" he offers.

"Just water, thanks." She pauses. "Unless you have booze."

He laughs. "Aren't you underage?"

"Aren't you?"

"Touche. Uh, I think I've got some rum and half a bottle of Coke. Do you want, um--there are two TVs. Couch or bed?"

"Is one better?" she asks.

"We don't have cable and the DVD player is hooked up to the TV in my room right now. But I can move the DVD player."

"Are you going to be embarrassed if I see your room?"
"Uh--" He seems to be really thinking about it. "Let me get your drink and then give me five minutes to check for laundry and trash."

"Deal."

Bellamy's room, when he lets her see it, is honestly fairly unexciting. His bed is sloppily made, like he did it just now and doesn't usually, and the thought of him frantically tidying to make her feel welcome is--sweet. He's got a bag of laundry shoveled into the corner, a few posters on the walls, a ton of books, and a small TV in the corner.

"I probably should have warned you the TV was here," he says. "Seriously, if you want me to bring the DVD player downstairs--"

She puts her drink on the windowsill next to his bed and flops down. The springs groan in protest, but it's not uncomfortable, just less comfortable than her bed. "This is fine."

"Cool. I'll get you my DVD binder."

He has *Ten Things I Hate About You*, which Clarke will always watch whenever she can, so they settle in with drinks and teen comedies, and she's pretty sure it should be awkward, but somehow it isn't, not even a little. Bellamy's seen the movie as many times as she has, so they keep quoting their favorite lines and highlighting their favorite parts and it's pretty easy to forget that she's in bed with a guy she's only known for a few days, and that it is, objectively, a really bad idea. He could be ten different kinds of asshole. He could do something terrible.

But he's nice and she likes him, and he's clearly just as aware as she is that this is kind of weird, so he leaves a good foot of space between them and makes sure she can watch him make everything she drinks. In case he keeps roofies in his house, where he didn't even think she was coming, she guesses.

He's cute.

"So, uh--when's curfew?" he asks, when the movie's over.

Clarke checks her phone. It's almost midnight, but she doesn't feel even a little tired. "One," she says. "If I don't have a ride or someone to walk me home, I'm supposed to call my mom to get me."

"I can give you a ride," he says. "Assuming I don't drink any more and you don't want to leave right now."

Clarke catches her lip in her teeth, watching him. He's wearing a black t-shirt and jeans, and he's all long, lean, firm muscle stretched out on the bed.

And they only have a couple months. It would be stupid to waste a bunch of time not getting what she wants.

"I can set an alarm for 12:45," she says. "Want to make out?"

He laughs. "Yeah, I could be persuaded."

She gets her phone out and sets the alarm, too aware of his eyes on her. "Um--just making out?" she asks, a little awkward. "Nothing, like--"

"Yeah," he says. "I'll keep my hands to myself."
The thought makes a wave of heat race through her, shocking in its intensity. "I didn't mean that," she says, sliding across the bed and right into his space. "Hands are good. Just--second base? Nothing below the hips."

"Got it," he says. "Same for you. Feel free to check out my upper body as much as you want."

She lets her fingers slide up his stomach to his neck, tangling in the short curls at the base of his skull and tugging him in. Clarke hasn't really kissed many people—her two week boyfriend, and then a couple games of spin the bottle—but she likes it, and she's just tipsy enough to feel like more practice is good, not intimidating. And Bellamy's mouth is so warm under hers, his lips curling into a smile as she presses closer. One of his big hands comes up to cradle her head, pushing her gently onto her back as he takes control of the kiss. It's nothing like making out with her ex, who mostly thought of kissing as an exercise in asserting his dominance by sticking his tongue down her throat. Bellamy seems much happier going slow, figuring out what she likes, which works out well, because apparently what she likes is this. She's pretty sure she could make out with Bellamy Blake for hours.

When she lets her hand slide under his shirt and onto his back, he does the same, fingers tracing the skin at her waist, making her shiver and press closer, and that seems to be the universal signal for more, because he groans and presses closer, hand sliding higher. She tugs on the hem of his shirt, and he pulls back to pull it off, leaving his hair impossibly messy and his chest bare.

"I can put it back on," he says, smirking, when she just stares.

"No, I just feel overdressed," she says, voice even, and pulls off her own shirt. She doesn't even have time to be nervous about it before his eyes flick down to her breasts, and then back up, a little sheepish. That's awesome.

"Okay," he says, and leans back in for another kiss. It's farther than she's ever gone with anyone, but she has trouble feeling nervous. Mostly she just wants more, and so she tugs him closer, moaning as he settles on top of her, one leg slotted between hers, mouth sliding down from hers so he can press it down her neck.

"Fuck," she breathes, laughing a little. "Wow."

"Good?" he asks. "Tell me if I should stop."

"No, don't stop." She lets her eyes slide shut, tangles her fingers in his curls. "You can--" She gasps again when he gently bites her collar bone, and gives up on telling him what she wants, just reaches back to unhook her bra and toss it aside. "Above the hips, right?"

It's his turn to swear under his breath, and the first press of his mouth against the swell of her breast is like electricity, like something bursting into light under her skin. When her hips jerk up, she presses against his leg, and it's suddenly very, very clear to her how people just have sex.

She could do this all night.

She doesn't actually manage to get off before her alarm goes off, but she's wetter than she thinks she's ever been in her life, her mouth is swollen from kisses, and she's almost positive he left a hickey on her breast. Bellamy's not much better off, hard and hot against her thigh even through his jeans and her skirt, but all he does is flop onto his back and close his eyes, like he's willing the arousal away.

"You're not going to--" she starts, surprised.

"Of course I'm going to," he says. "When I get home. You need a ride, right?"
She leans over and presses her mouth against his, soft, just a whisper of a kiss. "Thanks, Bellamy."

"Really not a hardship," he says, smiling. "Trust me." He finds his shirt and tugs it back on, and she gets her own clothes in order too. Once they're vertical, she can't help leaning up for another kiss, and he returns it. It's more like the first kiss, warm and slow, the start of something, and Clarke feels it down to her toes, the possibility of, well, him.

A boyfriend, maybe. She hopes.

"You have a curfew, right?" he asks.

"Yeah, but I like missing those."

"I want to make a good impression," he says. "So your mom lets you keep seeing me."

"Working the long game, huh?"

His smile is soft. "Yeah. That's the plan."

*

The problem with meeting someone like Bellamy in her first week in Maine is that it means she can't really complain any more. Which is nice, in that she never wants to be bored and miserable, but kind of annoying, because it means her mom and Wells were right, and she was overreacting. Maine isn't a the barren, joyless wasteland she thought it would be.

Which isn't to say it's perfect. For one thing, aside from Bellamy, she doesn't really know anyone, and for another, Bellamy is, as she knew, pretty busy. He works full-time at the deli and has a part-time job doing chores and running errands for some weird reclusive author, and even on his days off he's pretty aggressive about picking up extra shifts anywhere he can. Which at least means that when she says she wants a part-time job, he has about fifty suggestions lined up, but it does also mean it's going to be hard to actually schedule seeing him that often.

Which is fine, obviously. She doesn't have to see him all the time or anything. They aren't even officially dating.

There's a small art gallery in town, because Bellamy was exaggerating just a little about the lack of tourists, and Clarke gets a job there three days a week, which is pretty nice. It's on the same street as the deli, so she can stop by there on her breaks and hang out with Bellamy, even if she doesn't get to see him any other times.

Part of her feels pathetic, like she's in middle school again with her first crush, except he likes her too, and that's the real magic.

She meets his sister the next weekend, on one of his rare real days off, and the three of them hang out on the couch playing video games on their old N64. It somehow feels more serious than anything else up to that point, a declaration of friendship and affection a step beyond making out and flirting.

Octavia must think so too, because she corners Clarke in the kitchen. "Bell said you're going to college."

"Yeah. Harvard."

Her eyebrows shoot up, but all she says is, "But you're dating him now."
"Yeah. I'm not leaving until the fall," she adds, pointed, and Octavia nods without looking particularly enthused.

"Okay. Give me the orange juice."

She takes off to see a movie with friends just before dinner, and Bellamy cooks them some Filipino chicken dish that they eat on the couch while they watch some old Simpsons DVDs.

And then he offers to take her home.

"You want me to leave?" she asks. It's a little funny, honestly; he looks so nervous.

"If you want to go," he says. "You've been here a while."

She bites her lip. "You know I like you, right? That's why I keep coming to see you. I want to spend time with you." And then, because it seems stupid not to say it, "I have kind of this ridiculous crush on you. My best friend in DC says it's pathetic."

He laughs, but it's more an expulsion of relief than amusement. "I don't think it's a crush if I know."

"It seemed like you didn't," she counters, and shifts closer. "I'm supposed to be home by eleven, so I want to stay until then."

"Cool. Want to watch a movie?"

"No."

"Good," he says, and slides his hand into her hair to kiss her.

They haven't kissed in the last week, mostly due to scheduling conflicts, but Clarke melts into it like something familiar anyway, something she's been missing. It feels just as good as she remembered, his hands straying under her shirt almost instantly, rough fingers mapping her back, and she doesn't know how she didn't know. She didn't realize it could be like this.

He tugs her into his lap, settling her in, and when he tugs questioningly at her shirt, she pulls back to take it off. It's only then that she realizes where they are, exactly: she's already half naked, and he's gazing up at her with heat in his eyes, and the last thing she wants to do is disappoint him.

Or, well, the second to last.

"I've never really--" she starts, and has to drop her forehead onto his shoulder. "This is the farthest I've ever gone. With--"

"Okay," he says. He strokes his hand over her back. "Me too. Let me know if you want to go any farther."

She pulls back to stare at him. "You too?"

His throat bobs as he swallows. "Yeah. Sorry, what part of my life made you think I had tons of time to get laid? I've done a little more, but--yeah. Not much."

"But you're really good at kissing," she blurts out, making him laugh.

"I like kissing," he says, and leans in to press his mouth against hers again. "I've only known you for a week," he murmurs. "I'm not in a hurry."
"I've been misinformed about how horny guys are," she teases.

"I wouldn't say no. But this is good. Like I said, just tell me what you want."

"What do you want?"

He seems to be really thinking it over, and then he grins and nips her shoulder. "Take your bra off."

She laughs and complies, and then they're kissing again, and it's no big deal at all.

*

It wasn't like she wasn't telling her mother about Bellamy; in fact, she knows she did mention him. But apparently she just said, I'm going out with Bellamy, and when her mother asked if that was a new friend, she confirmed, and they never actually covered that Bellamy was a boy. Abby acts like this was a deliberate and purposeful omission, which seems a bit rich, coming from someone who named her daughter Clarke. It honestly hadn't occurred to her that Abby would assume Bellamy was a girl, or that the assumption would make a difference in curfews or anything else. Wells has been her best friend her whole life; hanging out with guys isn't some new thing for her.

And she very well might be bisexual; it's not like a girl named Bellamy couldn't have left the bruise Abby sees on her shoulder. Which, okay, she shouldn't have worn a tanktop, but she just woke up and the hickey is in an awkward position; she didn't notice it herself because it was too close to her neck, and she just went downstairs without thinking about it.

Rookie mistake.

"You have a boyfriend," Abby says, flat, and Clarke makes a face. She and Bellamy still haven't talked about labels or anything like that. In two weeks of knowing each other, they've mostly made out, talked about Bellamy's class and Clarke's weird gallery patrons, and watched movies or played video games. It's honestly great, much more fun and easy than the formal relationship she had in tenth grade, but she's not sure he'd really call himself her boyfriend.

"I didn't know you didn't know!" Clarke protests, which seems like her best tactic. "I wasn't trying not to tell you."

"And you're planning to go see him today."

"I'm planning to go to work first," she says, trying not to blush. "Am I not allowed to have a boyfriend? I'm eighteen, you had to see this coming."

"Don't take that tone with me," her mother snaps. Then she takes a breath, reining herself in with clear effort. "You should have told me. I want to meet him."

"Meet him?" Clarke asks. "It's not that serious, Mom."

"It's serious enough he's giving you hickeys."

It's on the tip of her tongue to protest that hickeys aren't some universally accepted measure of the seriousness of relationships, but it's not actually a good argument. We're making out but not really dating was already bad; she shouldn't double-down on it.

"I'm not even going to be here in September," she argues instead. "It's just--I like him, okay? I didn't think it was a big deal."
"Then I don't see why it should be a big deal for him to meet me."

"Really?" Clarke asks. "You have no idea why meeting my mother might spook a guy I've only known for two weeks."

"And you have no idea why finding out you're dating a guy you've only known for two weeks might spook me?" Abby counters.

That's unfortunately a little bit valid. Just a little. "I'll talk to him," she says. "But he might not want to."

"Then he's not worth your time," says Abby. "If all he wants from you is--"

"That's not what I'm worried about." She rubs her face. "I need to shower and get to work. I'll text you about--dinner? Do you want him to come to dinner?"

"I don't think that's too much to ask."

"Clearly not," she mutters, and texts Wells, fml I have a hickey so now my mom wants to meet this guy I've been making out with, on her way to work.

I can't believe you thought Maine would be boring, he shoots back, and that, at least, makes her feel better.

Her shift at the gallery is eight hours, 9:45 to 6:15, with a half hour break for lunch that she usually takes late, so Bellamy won't be too busy when she goes to say hi. It's Saturday, so both of them have more to do, and she doesn't make it over until nearly two-thirty, when her boss tells her in no uncertain terms to take lunch, and when she gets there, there's a line anyway. Bellamy catches her eye and jerks his head, scribbling something down, and Clarke grabs a table and waits for Miller to call her up to grab her sandwich.

There are a few perks to dating the guy who runs the cash register.

To her surprise, he sits down across from her fifteen minutes after she settles in, sliding her sandwich and drink over and opening up a bag of chips for himself.

"You haven't had break yet?" she asks, surprised.

"Huge lunch rush, it was so weird," he says. "A bus full of tourists stopped, like they thought there was something here for them to do. How was your day?"

She considers. "You gave me a hickey."

He grins. "Yeah? Where?"

It's hidden under her t-shirt right now, but she pokes the spot where she remembers seeing it. "My mom freaked out. Apparently I was tricking her without even knowing it?"

"How?"

"I never said you were a guy. She just thought I met a girl named Bellamy I was hanging out with, not a guy named Bellamy I was making out with."

"Nice parallel structure," he says. "We could have been making out if I was a girl."

"Yeah, if I was ready to come out I would have told her that."
"Sorry about the hickey," he offers. "I didn't know I gave you one."

"It's okay. I didn't either. I wish I'd noticed, I wouldn't have worn the tank top. But it's not like I was actually trying to hide anything!" she can't help adding. "I had no idea she thought you were a girl."

"How much trouble are you in?"

"None directly, but she wants you to come for dinner."

He choke a little. "What?"

"She thinks if it's serious enough for you to give me hickeys, it's serious enough for you to meet her, and I didn't really know how to start an argument about that without her giving me a lecture about how big a deal sex is."

That makes him laugh, which seems like a good sign. If nothing else, he's not so spooked that he's blind to the inherent ridiculousness of the conversation. It took her a lot longer to get there. "Yeah, don't blame you. I can't even imagine how that would go." He prods his straw at his soda. "You could have told her we aren't having sex."

"I didn't think it would help. Even if she believed me, that's not really the point."

"I guess not. So--when's dinner?"

When she jerks her head up, he's deliberately not looking at her, staring out the window instead, and Clarke watches his profile for a second. "You don't have to come," she says. "It's not--it's really weird. I don't know why she even wants you to."

"Probably because she's your mom and she's worried about some stranger giving you hickeys. Is it going to suck?"

"Absolutely."

"If you don't want me to, that's fine."

She has to smile. "Are we doing the thing where neither of us actually says what we want to do?"

"Apparently, yeah." He gives her a crooked smile. "I don't want to go, if it helps. But I assume if I don't, we don't get to hang out anymore. So I'd rather come."

"That's what I was worried about too." She ducks her head. "She thinks you're my boyfriend."

"I was kind of thinking I was too," he says, after what probably wasn't a very long pause.

When she looks back up, he's not looking at her again, so she reaches over and takes his hand. "Yeah. I was too."

*

Dinner is awkward. It starts off okay, but the more Bellamy talks about his family and his life, the more Abby's frown deepens. It's not really a surprise, in a way; she didn't expect her mother to be impressed by a guy working two jobs to support his sister and taking community college classes, but it's annoying, to be right about it. It's really impressive, even if her mother is too much of a snob to appreciate it.

But she doesn't object when Clarke says she's going to his place, just says she has to be home by
11:30 and tells Bellamy it was nice to meet him.

Clarke's pretty sure no one involved in the conversation believes her, but the effort is better than nothing. She'll take it.

"Thanks for coming to that," she tells Bellamy in the car, and he just shrugs and smiles.

"Like I said, I kind of like you."

And just like that, they fall into an easy summer routine. Bellamy's busy, but he doesn't mind Clarke coming to hang out when he's home, so she does that a lot, especially when her mother is working, and therefore doesn't have opinions. Abby remains aware of her relationship with Bellamy and clearly doesn't fully approve, but she doesn't do anything to try to stop it.

They hang out with Miller sometimes and Octavia others, but a lot of the time it's just the two of them, usually not even doing anything special. Clarke doesn't much like her new house, doesn't feel at home in her room or on her own couch, and it's easier to just go over to Bellamy's, especially once he realizes she doesn't care if he doesn't really pay attention to her at all. Clarke grabs her laptop and settles against his side while he reads or works on something else, and it's quiet and companionable and perfect.

They also make out a lot. She's still a virgin, in the sense that she hasn't yet had a penis inside her, but she doesn't exactly feel like a virgin. Bellamy gets her off with his fingers and his mouth, and she returns the favor, getting a feel for what he likes and how to touch him.

Part of her thinks she should just get it over with and actually fuck him. She thinks about it all the time, has been on the edge of telling him to do it more than once, but--

But, honestly, she thinks she's falling in love with him, and she doesn't know what she's supposed to do with that. Not that it's a surprise, really; he's her boyfriend. He's smart and funny and attractive, and more than all of that, he makes her happy. Clarke's never been as happy as she is just being with Bellamy, not even doing anything special, just sitting with him, talking to him, existing in the same world he exists in.

It's a lot, to be feeling, and she doesn't know what exactly she's planning to do, once she goes to school. They haven't talked about it, but--she thinks he likes her too. She thinks he might be falling for her, just like she's falling for him.

She wouldn't mind trying to make it work.

Bellamy's twenty-first birthday comes in the middle of July, and Miller insists on throwing him a party. Bellamy shares this news with all the enthusiasm of a man saying he has to have invasive surgery, and Clarke points out that, if nothing else, he can at least get legally drunk at his own party.

"I could also just get legally drunk at home with you and not put up with anyone. Miller's just using my birthday as an excuse to get himself laid."

"And you mind?"

"Not in theory," he grants. "But I'd rather he just had a party and got laid without me."

"We don't have to stay long. Are you sure you're only twenty-one? Because this is some serious grumpy old man shit."

"It's inescapable. I'm leaning into it." He leans in to kiss her. "Seriously, I'd rather just spend my
birthday with you."

He can't just say *this shit* if he's not in love with her too. It's not fair.

"It's not like I'm not going to be at the party," she points out. "We'll just leave when we get bored."

"I'm glad you're into grumpy and pre-maturely curmudgeonly," he says, dropping his head onto her shoulder. "Which I guess is just another way of saying I'm glad you're into me."

She kisses his hair, smiling. "Well, you're old at heart, but I'm shallow. As long as you're young and ripped, I'm happy."

"Awesome. I guess I better keep working out."

"What do you want for your birthday, by the way?"

He actually looks surprised. "I don't know. A book? You don't have to get me anything."

"You're seriously telling me I'm supposed to not get you anything for your birthday? It's your birthday, Bellamy. Of course I'm getting you a present."

"Well, uh, anything's fine." He smiles, a little unsteady, and looks down at his hands. "Seriously, anything else I get at this point is just a bonus. Just get me a book and I'm happy."

"You're so easy," she teases, and he laughs.

"Yeah, that's me. So easy."

* 

Miller is the kind of good friend who knows what Bellamy is looking for out of a party: not at his house so he can leave, alternate plans arranged for his sister, a decent amount of alcohol, and video games. It's a fairly small group too, people Clarke mostly knows, and it's fun, really.

But, like Bellamy, she's mostly looking forward to the two of them being able to leave.

At eleven, Miller stands and yells, "Okay, guys! You all know how Bellamy is: he's already thinking, *this is cool, but I could be drinking warm milk and going to sleep at an appropriate time right now*."

"I'm legal, thanks. I'll drink a white Russian and go to bed at a reasonable hour, dickface," Bellamy says.

"There we go. Anyway, everyone toast and tell Bellamy how cool he is and then act like you don't notice he's leaving to go fuck his girlfriend."

"You should just let me do my own inspirational speeches, jesus." But he's smiling. "Seriously, guys, thanks for coming. I'm not leaving because you guys aren't cool, I just want to get laid."

There's general cheering, and Clarke ducks her head to hide her expression. She knows Bellamy doesn't actually care about getting laid, but it is *weird*, the casual assumption everyone has that they're having tons of sex. She still feels like they *should* be having tons of sex.

She'll probably regret it, if she leaves without fucking him. More than she'll regret it if she leaves after she does it.
They have a final round of drinks and then leave to general cheering, much to Clarke's relief. It's bad enough making one summer friend; she doesn't really want to get attached to anyone else.

"Sorry about the, uh," he says. "Miller."

"I don't mind." She slides closer, twines her fingers with his. "We haven't talked about that in a while."

"What, sex?"

"Yeah."

"It's still your call. Honestly, I wouldn't want to have sex if I were you."

She laughs. "You wouldn't?"

"I know your body is built for it, but having a dick in me still sounds kind of painful. And then there's the risk of pregnancy. I'm happy to do it any time you want, but it's up to you."

"I have very vivid fantasies about your dick in me," she says, deliberately casual, and grins when she hears him choke. "Not that I want to get pregnant, but I feel pretty good about condoms as protection."

"Oh," he says. "Well, uh, yeah. Just let me know if you, uh. Want that. Keep me posted."

"Sorry, that was kind of mean, right?"

"I assume you'll blow me later either way, so it's not like I'm complaining. Seriously, I'm really happy with my sex life, Clarke. It's never been better." He looks up at the sky. "I'm kinda drunk, right?"

"You would know better than I would," she teases.

"I just don't want to be held accountable for what I'm saying."

"Wow, good start."

"This is probably my best birthday ever," he says, ignoring her. "Not even close. And a lot of that--basically all of that--is because of you. I know we don't, uh--I know feelings aren't really our thing, but--I wanted to be sure you knew that. Fuck, Clarke. This has been the best summer of my life."

Her heart lodges in her throat, and she has to pull him down and kiss him, even though they're in the middle of the street. It's eleven; no one is around to be grossed out by their PDA.

"It's not over yet," she offers, with a smile. "Why aren't feelings our thing again?"

"Clarke--"

"I love you," she says, because that's what she'll regret most of all. If she doesn't tell him that. If she doesn't try. "Seriously, I'm crazy about you, I don't want to go off to college and just--"

"Jesus, why did I think this was a good idea here?" he asks, laughing so bright and delighted she can't feel embarrassed. "I should have waited until we got back." He rests his forehead on hers, still smiling. "Feelings can be our new thing. I love you too."

She kisses him again, not nearly as long as she wants to, and then takes his hand and tugs him.
"Come on. I want to give you your present."

"I can't tell if you're really excited about giving me a real present or if that's just code for sex."

"I have a real present for you. But I'll suck your dick after."

"Seriously, best birthday ever." He wraps his arm around her waist, kisses her hair, and she leans into him. The relief of it is like a physical weight off her body, having the words out there, knowing he feels the same. It's just so good. He loves her. He loves her. "We're going to need to talk about this eventually."

"Yeah," she says, breathing out. "I know."

They still don't have sex that night, mostly because Clarke's mom is going out of town next weekend, which means Clarke will have zero curfew, and she'd much rather have sex with him for the first time and not have to leave after. Instead, she gives him his actual present--a Nintendo DS and a Pokemon game, which he claims is way too much until she reminds him she's rich and it's mostly her mom's money, which seems to be enough for him--and they make out, and she does blow him, and they even have half an hour to cuddle after before he has to bring her home.

They make out in the car right up until curfew too, and he tells her he loves her again before she goes, so--yeah. Absolutely in contention for her best night ever, no question.

"Did Bellamy have a happy birthday?" her mother asks the next morning, voice brittle but polite enough. "A good party?"

"Yeah," she says. "It was perfect."

* 

The love thing isn't a huge shift in their relationship, which honestly makes Clarke feel a lot better about it. If everything was suddenly different, she'd probably be freaking out, because it's not like she wanted things to change. They get a little more physically affectionate, when they're alone, touching more, kissing more for no reason, but they're mostly the same as always.

Right up until Friday night, when Octavia's sleeping over at a friend's house again and she and Bellamy are alone, and it's time to have sex.

Which sounds awful, right? Like they scheduled it. And they kind of did, but not in a bad way. This is just the most appropriate time. For them to have sex. It's practical.

"Fuck," she mutters, and Bellamy raises his eyebrows.

"What?"

"Have you been thinking about how we're going to have sex all day?"

"Yeah. You say it like it's a bad thing."

"Not a bad thing," she protests. "But--are you really over-thinking it, or is that just me?"

"I'm pretty sure you overthink more things than I do," he says, and Clarke elbows him. It's not even true; they just overthink different things. It's one of the reasons they make such a good team. "Why don't you just tell me what's wrong, and we can go from there?"

"It just feels so--planned."
"As the product of an unplanned pregnancy, I'm going on the record in support of planning basically everything about sex."

"You know what I mean," she protests.

"Honestly, I don't. But I think I can help."

"You do?"

"We're going to eat dinner, and then we're going to make out, and then you're going to want to have sex."

"Just like that?"

He smirks. "Trust me, I've made out with you a lot. I know how it tends to go. If you can stay out of my lap for ten whole minutes, I'll give you ten bucks."

"Not worth it," she says, and he ducks down to kiss her.

"See? Nothing to worry about."

It makes her feel better, but not totally relaxed. She's mostly excited, but also a little bit nervous, and also just kind of--silly. About the whole thing. Because Bellamy's right: they're going to start making out, and she's going to stop thinking so hard, and then it'll just be awesome. Sex. With Bellamy. Finally.

So there's no reason to feel weird, and she should just stop.

"You know," he observes, as he finishes up the dishes, "I was going to say we could watch a movie or something, but I'm pretty sure you'll just die of thinking too hard if we don't have sex right now."

"And that has nothing to do with you wanting to have sex," she teases, even though she's pretty sure it doesn't.

"Like always, I'm pretty sure I'm going to get off tonight. I'm not that picky about how or when."

"So if we didn't have sex tonight--"

He kisses her again, soft. "I don't care. You want to go make out and see what happens?"

"Yeah," she says, and follows him down the hall to his room. He closes the door, even though no one else is home or going to be home, and that makes her smile. Privacy from the whole world.

"No pressure," he says.

"No pressure," she agrees, and tugs on the front of his shirt, pulling him down to her.

The kiss is the same as always, slow and easy, kissing just for the sake of kissing for a long moment, until she--and it's always her--gets impatient and presses closer, and Bellamy smiles into her mouth, and it's just--it's him. It's them.

"God, I want to have sex with you," she says, and he laughs and guides her toward the bed.

"Good news: you can."

"Cool. I think we should just be naked."
"Skipping the foreplay entirely?" he teases, but he's already tugging off his shirt.

"Naked foreplay," she says. "Getting myself used to it."

"I've been naked before," he says.

It's true, but seeing him push off his jeans and boxers this time is different. Clarke's pretty familiar with Bellamy's dick at this point, the feel of it in her hand and mouth, the size and shape, what he likes, but everything still feels different now.

She wants to believe it's not a big deal, not really a bigger deal than anything else they've done, but she can't stop feeling that way anyway. So she's going to lean into it.

If everything seems brand new, she just has to get used to it again.

Once she's undressed, Bellamy slides on top of her, kissing her long and sweet again, like he knows she's feeling nervous too. His fingers tangle in hers, all warm affection, and she feels herself melting into the bed, relaxing.

Then he moves his mouth down her neck to her shoulder, and she remembers where they're going with this. She frees her hand from his to skate her fingers over the smooth planes of his back and then pulls him closer, pushing up against him.

He laughs against her skin. "Told you," he teases. "How do you want to get off first?"

"I get off first?"

"I want you nice and wet for me," he says, which is honestly enough to get her most of the way there, even before he presses a not kiss to the underside of her breast. "Don't want to hurt you," he adds.

"Mouth," she says, instantly. "Get me off with your mouth."

"I can't tell if you ask for that because you like it or because I like it."

"Definitely both."

"Awesome."

He kisses down her stomach and pushes her up against the headboard once he gets between her legs, making sure she's comfortable before he leans down. She's been a little wet all day, despite her nervousness, and the kissing and touching has her the rest of the way. He still goes slow, swirling his tongue on her clit and teasing her entrance with his finger, not sliding in yet, just getting a feel for it. His mouth might be the single best thing she's ever felt, and he really does love eating her out, usually doesn't stop at just one orgasm and keeps going until she actually pushes him away.

This time, he's on a different mission. He slides two fingers inside her, like he's trying to get her ready, and sucks her clit hard enough that she cries out.

"Oh fuck, Bellamy," she gasps, and he just grins and pushes his fingers deeper.

"Glad you like this, or I'd be worried about fucking you," he murmurs.

"Fuck."

"That's the plan," he agrees, and goes back in.
He gets her off twice, and then she tugs him up for a hot, eager kiss. It's always strange, tasting herself in his mouth, but not in a bad way. Mostly, she thinks it must be strange how much she likes it. It feels like she's not supposed to.

"You don't want one more?" he murmurs.

"I want you to fuck me before you get off humping the bed."

"I'm not sure about my stamina, I want to make sure you get enough orgasms before I come embarrassing fast."

"I'm really not worried." She nips his lip. "Come on. I want you inside me."

He drops his forehead against her shoulder, breathing hard. "Fuck."

"Unless you changed your mind," she adds, all innocence.

He kisses her again. "Let me grab a condom."

Clarke watches as he rolls off her, grabs a condom and the familiar bottle of lube from his nightstand. He rolls the condom on fluidly enough to make her smile, and she leans in to kiss his shoulder.

"You practiced," she says.

"I'm really serious about unplanned pregnancies." He tilts her chin up to kiss her lips. "Sure?"

"Sure."

"Okay. How do you want to do it?"

She rolls onto her back and tugs him on top of her, and he smiles, wets his lips and lines himself up. Clarke doesn't have anyone else to judge by, but she still knows Bellamy is--large. Just because she has no practical experience doesn't mean she's clueless. She's seen pictures. Her boyfriend is hung.

She can't tell if he knows that too, or if he's just taking it slow because he's naturally cautious, but he takes his time, sliding into her by degrees, pausing every time she makes a noise like he's afraid he screwed up.

"You're okay," she manages, laughing a little. "It's new, not bad."

"Okay."

"Keep going. Just--all the way."

He lets out a breath. "Okay." The last slide is a little quicker and smoother and then she's just--full. It's too different to be arousing, at least at first, and then she shifts a little and he groans and jerks his hips and then all at once it's good.

"You can move," she says, and he lets out another breath, kisses her quickly, and starts to thrust.

It takes a few beats for them to get it right. He slides out once, which is a little funny, but he goes in easier when he lines himself up again, and then she figures out how to move her hips and he gets the rhythm down, and he hits her just right, and before she quite knows it, she's gasping and arching, desperate even though she's already come twice, wanting him deeper and harder and more.
She comes chanting his name under her breath, and he bites her shoulder hard enough she'll have a mark for weeks. She doesn't come again just from the feeling of him coming apart inside her, but it's good all by itself, knowing that it was good for him, knowing that they did this together. There's something about the unison, about getting each other off together, that she loves, and she can't wait to try it again, to get better at it.

He slumps against her for a second, but then he slides out and rolls onto his back, staring at the ceiling, breathing hard, hair a mess and eyes unfocused.

The best thing she's ever seen, honestly.

"So that was okay," he says, once he catches his breath.

She laughs and curls into his side. "Okay?"

"I didn't want to brag." He kisses her hair. "Fuck, that was amazing."

"That's more like it."

"This was a good idea."

"Sex? Yeah, I thought so."

He laughs. "No, not that. I'm glad you're not leaving. I'm glad we waited until you could stay the night."

Her whole body feels like it's made of light. "Yeah, me too." She kisses his shoulder. "I love you."

"I love you too." He finds her hand and squeezes. "I told you you were overthinking it."

"Shut up," she says, blissful. "You're ruining the moment."

*

They make it through to mid-August, not talking about fall, and then Miller is going back out to school a few weeks early because he's an RA, and suddenly it's something they have to discuss. Part of Clarke wants to believe it's not a big deal, but she knows that's stupid. It's not just that they're long distance, it's that they're long distance and she's going to be starting a new life, a new life that Bellamy doesn't have and is going to be mildly resentful about. Not toward her, not because of her, but--he wants to go to college. She's sure of that. He wants the kind of future you get from being educated, because he wants to be a teacher. Honestly, she's pretty sure he wants to go to college for no other reason than that he's a giant nerd and loves learning, but that's not a bad thing. He should be going to college. College was made for people like Bellamy Blake, and she hates that he doesn't get to go.

She doesn't want to break up, but she's not laboring under any misapprehensions. It's going to be hard, and weird, and she doesn't really know what she's supposed to do.

So, as she's done since she was small and didn't know what to do, she calls her father.

While Abby's advice tends to be fairly severe and pragmatic, Jake is better at taking into account things like what Clarke actually wants, which is a pro when the entire conversation is basically emotion-based. She doesn't have to ask what her mother thinks, because she already knows; if Abby had her way, Clarke never would have started dating Bellamy in the first place, and she absolutely thinks they should break up as soon as possible. The talk is redundant, at this point.
Jake picks up on the first ring. "Hey, Clarke. Haven't heard from you in a couple weeks. How's Maine?"

"Maine's still boring, my boyfriend's still picking up the slack."

"At least someone is. What's up?"

"I actually need advice. About the boyfriend."

"Yeah? I thought it was going well."

"It is. That's the problem. I'm leaving in a few weeks, and I don't--" She huffs. "He doesn't even have internet at his house. I know that's not a requirement for long-distance relationships, but I want to make it work, and I don't know how."

Her father doesn't say anything for a long time, and when he finally does, his voice is soft and a little sad. "I know this isn't what you want to hear, but you might not be able to."

It's as if someone dumped cold water on her. It's less the sentiment itself—it's nothing new—and more that it's coming from her father. He's not supposed to be the one who says things like that. He's supposed to tell her how it's worth trying.

"I know that," she says. If she was talking to her mother, it would come out harsh and sharp, but she sounds lost now, even to her own ears. "But I want to give it the best shot I can."

"Of course you do. And I think you should. Just--I know how big and important your first love feels, Clarke. And it is. It's exactly as amazing as it feels. Nothing will ever feel like this again. But something else will feel as good, if this doesn't work out."

"You think I should break up with him."

"No, I don't. But--if you ask my honest opinion, I think you're going to. All the things you're worrying about, they're going to make it hard. And I wouldn't tell you to break up with him now. But--I think you should be ready for how different your life is going to be, and how difficult it will be to hang on to something like that. You should until it's not worth it anymore, but--"

Coming from her mother, she could dismiss it. Coming from her father, she doesn't know how. He's always been the parent who understands her, the one knows how she feels. From him, it's not pessimism; it's prophesy.

"You think it won't be worth it."

Another long pause. "I hope it is, Clarke," he says, and there's nothing else to say to that.

* * *

It's not the end, but looking back, she'll know that was the beginning of the end. Maybe if he hadn't said anything, if she hadn't asked him, everything would have happened the same way. Maybe it didn't make a difference at all. But in her heart of hearts, she thinks it mattered more than anything else. Before she talked to her father, she believed that they could make it work, and her father was the only one who really had the power to shake that belief. Everyone else in the world, she can stubbornly ignore, but he's the one she trusts. The one who's supposed to be on her side. If he doesn't think they can make it, she doesn't know how to think that either.

The first mistake she makes, in retrospect, is not telling Bellamy about the call. At the time, it feels
stupid to bring it up, because her father didn't say anything either of them didn't already know. It's the same thing they've both known for longer than they've been together, ever since that first party, when Bellamy told her that Miller wasn't going to have anything serious with Bryan, because they'd both be in school in a few months. Bellamy knows better than she does how this works. So there's no reason to tell him her dad thinks the same thing. Everyone thinks that.

"It's three and a half hours," is what she tells him. She's leaving in a week. "Driving."

"Four, usually," he says. "With traffic and everything. At least to the city. Cambridge probably isn't any better. And you won't have a car, right?"

"Not my own. But I could get a Zipcar or something. You can sign up at eighteen if you're in school."

"You don't want to rent a car for and drive four hours just so you can hang out in the middle of nowhere in Maine," he says, fond. "You're going to have better things to do."

"Not every weekend."

"I will bet you money there's something better to do in Boston every single fucking weekend."

"You're in Maine," she points out. "There isn't always going to be something I'd rather do than see my boyfriend."

He smiles. "Yeah, fine. Still. You'll be home for Thanksgiving. That's not that long. And I could come down sometime."

"You're going to find someone to watch your sister all weekend?"

"She'd be happy if I did," he points out, but they both know it's not happening, even if Octavia's probably old enough to be left alone. Bellamy wouldn't know how to relax if she wasn't taken care of.

"She could come down with you, maybe. She'd like that."

"And all three of us crammed into your dorm room? With your roommate?"

She curls into his side. It doesn't hurt coming from him like it did from her dad, but--it still hurts a little. But at least she knows the two of them are on the same side. "Will you stop using logic on all my plans?"

He laughs and kisses her hair. "Shit, my bad. Seriously, it's, what, three months to Thanksgiving? That's not that long. And I do have a phone."

Three months is longer than they've been dating. That seems important too. But still not important enough to mention.

"Your phone is shitty," she says, instead of anything else.

"But functional," he says. "Do you--" he starts, and then stops. "Movie?" he asks instead, and she's pretty sure that wasn't how the sentence was supposed to end, but it's not a bad suggestion.

"Yeah," says Clarke, and settles closer. "Movie sounds nice."

*
They make it to New Year's, or just past then.

It's not bad in the fall, not for Clarke. It is a little weird, if she's honest, this feeling when she brings him up like she's saying she has a girlfriend who lives in Canada or something, someone who doesn't feel quite real. And it doesn't get better when she says more about him, because he still sounds fake, both too good to be true and not good enough. Bellamy's life bears almost no resemblance to anything anyone she meets at school has experienced. Lexa asks what he does again every time they talk about him, and her new friends range from confused to patronizing about the life he leads. Bellamy is the kind of person who's theoretical to Harvard kids; people like him obviously do exist, but just as examples or cautionary tales. Not as dating prospects.

"I'm a role model, thanks," says Bellamy, when she mentions it to him on the phone one day, and she smiles.

"Definitely who I want to be when I grow up."

"Please don't. I'm not quite stuck up enough to want to date myself."

Talking to him, that's the easy part. Being with him. He makes her just as happy as he always has, and when she goes back to Arcadia for Thanksgiving, she has an awesome few days with him. Everything feels so possible.

But then one of Octavia's friends invites her to New York for New Year's, which means that Bellamy is free, and can come to Lexa's New Year's party in Cambridge with Clarke. Which seems--important. She'd like to say it'll be fun or exciting, but there's still that lump in the pit of her stomach, this feeling that this can't last. So mostly, it feels like a test. Something they have to try, to see if they can do it.

It's worse because if Bellamy feels the same way, she can't tell, and she knows that's on her too. Having serious conversations about the state of their relationship over the phone always feels wrong, and when she's actually with him, she's too busy enjoying his company to want to talk about it. It just doesn't feel important, when they're together, because when they're together, things are good. At least, until he's actually in her life.

It's like when he has dinner with her mother, only multiplied by twenty. Her friends think he's hot (obviously) and funny, but he's awkward at parties at the best of times, and even more so with the people she actually knows, her peers. She was so sure that in person, he'd blend in, but, in retrospect, she has no idea why she thought that.

"You work at a deli, isn't that right?" Lexa asks, early on in the night, and Clarke's jaw clenches on the desire to defend him, even though he does, and it's not an offensive statement.

"For now," he says, and takes a sip of his drink. He's hitting them harder than he usually does. "I'm actually working on getting my certification to be a plumber."

"A plumber?" Lexa asks.

"I don't know if you've ever looked, but the pay is pretty decent," he says, his voice the most pointed kind of casual. "It's not a bad career, if you're not in school."

"When did that start?" Clarke asks, and she's mostly curious, but also a little--disappointed. Not about the plumbing, specifically, but--it's a career, and not the career he wants. He'd be such a good teacher.
"I started looking into it a few months ago," he says. "Like I said, the pay's pretty decent. And I like working with my hands."

"How exciting for you," says Lexa, and Clarke glares at her.

It's like that the whole night, and it's--well, if Clarke had to pick between all of her peers and Bellamy, she'd pick Bellamy, but it's not really that kind of choice. Because her peers are always going to be her peers, and Bellamy is always going to feel obliged to come to things with her, and it's always going to suck. And there's nothing either of them can do about that, so long as Clarke keeps on being rich and he keeps on being poor, and it's--

It's going to make him miserable.

Lexa's the one to bring it up again, in a roundabout way, when she and Clarke are refilling their drinks. "Has he met your mother?" she asks.

"Yeah, a few times."

"How bad is it?"

And that's the question, isn't it? How bad is it?

"Not quite apocalyptic." She pauses. "A lot like this, actually."

"Ah," says Lexa, and the word has more weight than Clarke's ever heard in it before. "Well. He seems very nice."

"He is," she says, but Lexa is already gone.

They crash on Lexa's couch that night, Clarke burrowed close to Bellamy so they'll both fit, and even though it already feels like it has to be over, she waits until just before she's going back to school to have the argument.

"You should be a teacher," she tells him.

He glances away from the TV to look at her. "Yeah, but it's not happening."

"Why not?"

"Time, money, lack of job opportunities. You want a list? It's not realistic."

"It wasn't realistic before either. Why are you giving up on it now?"

"Who says I'm giving up?" he asks. His voice is far too gruff to be even a little convincing, and Clarke feels her jaw tighten. "I can do it later. College is so fucking expensive, I need to--"

"Does this have anything to do with me?"

"With you?"

"Do you--do you feel like you need more money? To be--"

"Jesus, what?" He scrubs his hand over his face. "Why would it be about you? Fuck, I know you've never been poor, but it sucks, Clarke. You have no idea how much it sucks. And it's just going to get worse."
"I know," she says, feeling herself deflate. "But--something changed, right?"

"Just because me not fitting in with your friends was news to you doesn't mean it was news to me," he says. "And trust me, if that's what this was about, I wouldn't be a plumber. I wasn't expecting that to go over well."

"Is that why you didn't tell me? Because you thought I'd be--a snob?"

"No. But you're being one, so--"

"I wouldn't care if I thought you liked it!"

"Not everyone gets to decide what they're going to do with their life based on what they fucking like," he snaps. "Some of us need to worry about our finances and our families." She flinches, and he rubs his face, deflating. "I didn't mean that."

"You did," she says. Her throat is closing, and she thinks she might cry. But she doesn't want to, not yet. Not until they're done. "Dad was right. This--it's not going to last."

"Your dad?" he asks. "So, what, even family members I haven't met don't like me now?"

"That's not what I meant."

For a second, she thinks he's going to ask what she did mean, but instead he says, "But you are breaking up with me." His doesn't sound angry or surprised, and that makes it even worse.

But if the words hurt this much now, Clarke can't even imagine how bad it could get. If her father is right, and it's inevitable, then she should do it now. Before it gets worse. It's not going to get easier, doing this.

Her eyes close without her even realizing it; she just doesn't know how to look at him. "Yes."

She doesn't realize she's waiting for him to object until the objection doesn't come.

Instead, the next time she opens her eyes, he's gone, and that's it.

It's over.
That's If the Choice Were Mine to Make

December 2016

The upside of having an ex-boyfriend named Bellamy is that Clarke very rarely experiences The Lurch. It's a phenomenon she recognizes in friends, easily: someone says their ex's name and she sees that moment of confusion, of uncertainty. The queasy lurch in their stomach when someone could be talking about a person they used to love.

When she was in Arcadia, she was always ready for the lurch. Every time she left her mother's house, she'd be on high alert, every nerve aware. Every deep, rough voice, every chuckle with the right cadence, every mess of dark hair, and she'd think, maybe. Even though he'd been out of Arcadia for almost as long as she had. Even though his house was sold, she'd still hope.

It's just as well she isn't reminded of him often. Her heart couldn't take it.

So when Monty says, "Bellamy," Clarke's completely unprepared for the flood of feelings.

The conversation had been pretty unremarkable, up until that point. Monty's trying to convince her and Niylah to come to a party at his new boyfriend's place for New Year's, and Clarke has no interest, on the grounds that she still hates New Year's, so she didn't really care about any of his arguments.

"What?" she manages.

Monty and Niylah both turn to her, confused, which she probably deserves. It's not like she was really participating in this conversation in any way. There's no reason for her to be interested now.

"What?" asks Monty.

"Sorry, I zoned out. What were you saying?"

"You guys can finally meet Nate," he says, like he's repeating it. "It's a combination New Year's and welcome party. His best friend Bellamy just moved in. He hates parties too," he adds to Clarke, "so you guys should get along."

That's the other thing about having an ex named Bellamy; if this was some guy named Tom who hated parties, Clarke would think it was probably a coincidence. But--how many guys their age named Bellamy can there even be in the world? It would be more of a coincidence if it was someone else.

"Why would you have a party for someone who hates parties?" Niylah asks.

"Apparently it's their thing. He just left the navy a few weeks ago, so I haven't met him yet, but Nate says it's a tradition. Bellamy hates parties, so Nate throws them in his honor and he's a grumpy dick about it. It sounded cute, the way he told it."

It's like being frozen, remembering. Miller had a first name, of course; she wouldn't have come up with Nate, but it sounds plausible. The last time she saw him, it was the summer after her sophomore year of college. She hadn't been able to find Bellamy when she was back for Christmas, and she hadn't actually seen him since they broke up. But she wanted to, so she found Miller, and Miller told her he'd joined the navy.
She remembers the unimpressed way his eyes flicked over her before he asked, "Why, do you have a message for him?"

"Just--hi," she managed, and he'd shrugged, like he hadn't thought she'd do any better.

She hadn't expected to ever see either of them again.

"Nate Miller?" she asks. "That's your boyfriend?"

Monty frowns, and Clarke can't blame him. "Yeah. Why?"

The sound she lets out isn't quite a laugh, but it's probably close enough to fool them. "We actually know each other. I dated his roommate for a few months when I was eighteen."

The weirdest thing is that it's true. It feels like evasion and understatement, but it's accurate. She and Bellamy were together for about six months, all told, seven years ago. As relationships go, it's supposed to be a blip in her life. He was her first serious boyfriend, the first person she had all kinds of sex with, the first person she ever loved.

It's not a big deal. It shouldn't be a big deal.

"You mean this roommate? Bellamy?"

Just hearing his name is still way too much. She hasn't in years.

"Yeah," she says. "Bellamy."

Monty doesn't seem to realize the weight the name has with her, probably because she's trying to make sure he doesn't with every fiber of her being. She's cool. Casual.

"I can't tell if this is something I can use to get you to come to the party or the excuse you're going to use to skip it," he says.

"I'll come," she finds herself saying. "If they don't mind. It's his party, I don't want it to be weird."

"I'm sure it won't be weird," says Monty, with all the confidence of someone who has not heard the whole story. "The more the merrier, right?"

Her smile is wry, but no one calls her on it. "Yeah. Definitely."

*

Suddenly, DC is like Arcadia all over again, post-Bellamy. She has no idea what Miller and Bellamy told Monty about the situation, but he texted her that she should come to the party and the address, which isn't even that far from hers. Clarke is living in a cheap, shitty studio in Foggy Bottom, and their apartment is just a few stops up the blue line, in Virginia. And even if he has no reason to ever come here, it makes the whole city feel tinged with possibility, with the chance that she might see him.

She can't actually survive, being on as high alert as she is for the first week, so it fades into a background thing, something that crops up when she spots curly black hair or hears the right kind of voice. Just like Arcadia: tough, but liveable.

She spends Christmas with her dad and doesn't mention her New Year's plans to him. She hasn't mentioned them to anyone, Monty and Niylah aside, because she honestly doesn't know what to say. She's never really had to explain Bellamy to anyone; everyone who knew about them at the time just
assumed they had an expiration date, and she didn't need to say anything further to justify herself. Not even Wells had pressed her.

And it's been almost exactly seven years. She really should be over it.

But Niylah lives in the same neighborhood she does, so there's no reason they can't go over to the party together. It's even Niylah's idea, as a bonus. She doesn't know either of the hosts, so she doesn't want to go alone.

"So, your ex?" she prompts.

Clarke came back to DC last year to start her Master's at GWU, and she's got a small but strong friend group by now. Niylah's a relatively new addition, a grad student herself who joined the same LGBT student group where Clarke met Monty when she started school in fall. Clarke thinks she was hoping something might happen between them at first, but she's gotten pretty good at casually deflecting interest in the last few years. They settled into friendship without much trouble, but not the kind of friendship where Clarke's ready to share the whole story. Or even most of it.

"Yeah. Kind of an amazing coincidence, I knew them for the one summer I lived in Maine before college."

"That's cool, though," she says. "Kind of romantic."

Clarke forces a laugh. "You think?"

"I don't know. That's what everyone thinks about, right? Meeting up with one of those people you just drifted away from? I feel like that's got to be a romcom trope."

"Maybe, yeah. I feel like that's usually for people who didn't actually date, though." She lets herself smile, and finds she really, really wants to. "But it'll be nice to see him again."

If she's honest, she has no idea what to expect. She doesn't have any romantic delusions, like Niylah seems to want her to, but--she's so curious. She has no real idea what he's done, in the intervening years, aside from apparently serving in the navy. When Miller first told her that, she went online and tried to figure out how dangerous that was, if he was likely to be in combat, how long he would have to be in service.

She still feels like she's not allowed to care. But she didn't ask for this opportunity. She gave him the chance to say no.

Miller is the one who opens the door, instantly recognizable. The perpetual stubble she remembers from his college days has evolved into a tidy beard, and he's broadened a little at the shoulders. It's been strange, slotting the Miller she knew into Monty's stories about his new boyfriend. Monty is on the record as being bad at dating, and he'd met Nate without trying to, through Hearthstone, of all things. Clarke listened with fond amusement to his disbelief that randomly accepting the friend request from the guy he just beat had turned into a good conversation instead of a string of expletives and accusations of cuckoldry, and coached him through his freakout when he found out they both were queer and living in the DC Metro area and could meet, the frantic no one who plays Hearthstone can be this hot texts, all the bizarre steps of modern nerd courtship.

All of those things were about Miller. It makes Clarke approve all the more, honestly.

His eyes flick over her, and she assumes they're both remembering the last time they saw each other. But he gives her a small quirk of his mouth, which is a lot more encouragement than she got six years ago.
"Hey, Miller," she says.

"Hey, Clarke."

"This is Niylah. She's getting her masters in economics at GW."

"Nice to meet you," he says, offering his hand. "Monty and Jasper are at the video games, obviously. Drinks and pizza in the kitchen, snacks scattered around the apartment. You guys can put your coats in here."

"Thanks. How have you been?"

He shrugs his shoulders, holds the closet door open for them to shed all their layers. "Can't complain. Got a decent tech job, nice apartment. Great new boyfriend."

She grins at that. "Damn straight."

"Monty said you were doing museum stuff in school?"

"Studying collections management, yeah."

"Cool." He nods once. "Nice to see you again. I've gotta do host stuff, but I'll catch you later."

"Good to see you too."

Bellamy can't be Miller's only roommate, given the size of the place and the number of people at the party, but Clarke assumes they rent one floor of the house or something similar. She really hopes Bellamy has a bedroom he can flee to, once he gets tired of being here. Something on the second floor, that no one else will find.

"Drinks?" Niylah asks, while Clarke is still scanning the crowded living room. She should have just asked Miller where Bellamy was, but--well, if he didn't offer, she wasn't going to ask.

It would be nice, if at some point in the future, she stopped making bad decisions because of Bellamy Blake.

"Drinks," she agrees. "And finding Monty."

"Not the ex?" Niylah teases.

"It's a zoo in there. We can find Monty first."

The kitchen is a lot quieter; there are boxes of pizza piled on the table and a few people raiding those, a keg of beer being manned by a white dude with beady eyes and greasy hair, and bottles of hard liquor and mixers crowded on the counter top. Niylah grabs a rum and coke for herself and gets Clarke a gin and tonic, which she has to resist the urge to drain immediately. Her whole body is thrumming, and it's a minor miracle no one has noticed.

He's here. He's somewhere in this house. She could find him, if she just looked.

"Hey, do you know where the video games are?" Niylah asks the guy at the keg.

"Upstairs, first door on the right," he says.

"Thanks. Do you want to try to find your guy first?" she adds, over her shoulder.
"Not my guy," says Clarke, but it comes out kind of amused and not defensive. "And he lives with Monty's boyfriend. I'll see him sooner or later." She pauses. "Besides, knowing him, there's a pretty good chance he's with the video games already."

Niylah laughs. "Okay, cool. Let's go find them."

She's never felt as conspicuous as she does crossing the living room, even though she really can't be that noticeable. She's not tall, and there are people all over. Unless she pushes past Bellamy, he probably won't see her, and she'd definitely see if she did that. The people they weave through are all strangers.

They hear Jasper yelling as soon as they get upstairs, and the two of them exchange a smile. He's always fairly loud and profane, but never as much as when Monty is beating him at Mario Kart.

Monty's the first one to spot them, and he grins and shoves closer into Jasper's side on the couch to make room. Clarke sits next to him and Niylah wedges herself in too. It's all guys, but none of them are Bellamy, and Clarke exhales softly, as relieved as she is disappointed.

Then Monty says, "Can we high five on how hot your ex is? Holy shit."

Her laugh is more a release of tension than amusement, but it does make her feel better, and she gives Monty the high five. "I haven't seen him yet, but I'm glad he's still hot. I'd be sad if he grew out of it."

"Definitely not. You want in?"

"Yeah, I'll take next game."

She's not a particularly talented video-game player, but she's good enough to bring everyone down with her out of spite, and tends to think of herself as less of a real competitor and more as a kind of obstacle for the other drivers to overcome. If she can't win, she can at least be an asshole, which is the next best thing.

And it gives her something to do with her hands.

Miller shows up right after she finishes a round, and her drink is almost done, so she vacates the couch for him with a smile. "I need a refill anyway, sit with Monty."

"You're a good friend," says Monty, raising his own empty cup. "Get me one too, okay?"

"What are you drinking?"

"Surprise me."

"Lush," says Miller, fond, and Monty bumps his shoulder against his boyfriend's.

Clarke has to smile; Monty deserves a nice guy. She wouldn't have thought of Miller, but--they're really cute together, so far. "I'll see what I can find," she says. "Get pumped. It's going to be really gross."

Going down the stairs gives her a pretty decent view of the living room, but she doesn't let herself linger on it too much. There are groups of people chatting and drinking, a low background noise of voices, and it's impossible to pick out just one voice in the crowd.

But somehow there it is.
She can't make out the words yet, but she's so sure. Bellamy's voice, coming from the kitchen, and when she steps in, she sees him right away, unavoidably.

At twenty-eight, Bellamy Blake is familiar without looking the same. His hair is a little shorter than it used to be, less wild, and Clarke assumes he had to cut it while he was in service. It's just starting to curl at the edges, and she has a sharp, sweet flash of how it felt under her fingers, the way she loved to play with the thick, soft strands while he read with his head in her lap.

Like Miller, he looks even broader at the shoulders than he was at twenty-one, like he's intensified his workout routine, and the whole look is topped off with a teasing smile and a pair of black glasses. The t-shirt he's wearing is just tight enough to emphasize the size of his arms, and the solo cup he's holding makes his hands look even larger than she remembered.

No wonder Monty wanted a high five.

"Yeah, that sounds disgusting," he's saying. "But you're the expert. I'm still sticking with beer."

"Your loss," Clarke hears, and she belatedly realizes he's smiling at a girl, a cute brunette. Clarke can't help noticing her wavy hair and curvy figure, but it doesn't make her feel better about the way the girl is leaning into him, the way all his focus is on her.

She's got two options, at this point: she can go somewhere else and hope he's gone when she comes back, or she can go to the drink table and interrupt them.

Someone bumps into the girl coming into the keg, and Bellamy's hand comes up to catch her shoulder. His attention turns to the guy, throwing an apology over his shoulder, and then catches on Clarke behind him, still frozen in the doorway with her two empty cups.

Fuck.

The smile drops off his face, but it's not replaced with anger, or even annoyance. Honestly, she doesn't have a clue what he's thinking, so she just lets her mouth tug up at one corner, just a little, and raises Monty's cup in greeting.

He raises his own cup in response, and the girl he's with turns to look at Clarke, so there's really nothing to do but go over to join them.

"Hey," she says.

"Hey. Gina, this is Clarke. Clarke, Gina. She works at Miller's favorite dive bar, I think he's trying to turn this party into free drinks."

His voice is pleasant, but without any warmth, or maybe just without the warmth she's used to, and that's--fine. He's being civil, and she can follow his lead.

"Cool, maybe you can help me," says Clarke, giving Gina the best smile she can muster. "Monty told me to get him a surprise drink, any ideas that would make him regret that?"

Gina's eyes light up. "So many," she says. "Which one's his?"

Clarke hands over the cup and Gina turns her attention to the counter. Bellamy follows suit, angling his body away from Clarke, which is a good data point. Polite, but not friendly. She can work with that.

"How does he feel about licorice?" Gina asks.
"Not positive."

"Awesome."

Clarke mixes her own gin and tonic so she won't look at Bellamy, but she's still far too aware of him. He's not so close she can feel the warmth of him, or smell whatever cologne he's wearing now, but every sensation feels like it must be related to him.

It's not supposed to be like this. It's supposed to be better now.

Gina hands her the drink with a smile. "Where is he? Can I watch him drink it?"

Clarke takes a sniff and coughs. "Wow. That's--impressive." Her eyes flick up to Bellamy's, and she finds he's already watching her. "We're playing video games upstairs. How are you at Mario Kart?"

"Terrible."

"Good, you can play next round with me. I'm terrible too. Got your beer?" she asks Bellamy.

"All set."

She leads the two of them upstairs, tries to ignore the way Miller's eyebrows shoot up at the three of them together. But Monty's grinning and reaching for his drink, so Clarke takes the place on the floor in front of his feet and hands it over.

"The bartender made it," she says. "So you know it's going to be good."

"Wow, I don't trust you at all," he says, and Clarke watches him take a healthy gulp and splutter. Miller thumps him on the back, but when he recovers, he's still smiling. "This is amazing. Who made it?" Gina raises her hand, and Monty toasts her. "Good job. Truly disgusting. Jasper, try this."

"I can't believe your response to that is to try it," Clarke says, shaking her head, as Jasper chokes and splutters too.

"So, you're in?" he asks, and passes her the cup to try.

"I really don't get you guys." Her own gulp is as bad as she expected it would be, and she finds herself turning to Bellamy without even realizing she knew where he was, on the other side of the room, leaning against the wall. She makes herself keep going until she hits Niylah, and it's her she offers the cup.

Niylah knows better. "Not if you paid me."

Monty reclaims it and takes another drink. "I'll finish it. Who's playing?"

"Bellamy?" Miller asks, and Clarke doesn't let herself look again. She can be cool about this. It doesn't have to be a big deal.

"Sure," he says. "I'm in."

Clarke wouldn't say it gets easy after that, but it is easier. Clarke would always rather know something than not, and even if she and Bellamy aren't interacting, she feels better knowing where he is, hearing his occasional trash-talk, than she did wondering when she'd see him, or if she just wouldn't.

It feels survivable, hanging out with Bellamy Blake. Even if she might never get fully used to it, she
thinks she won't have to bow out of social situations he's involved in, and he doesn't seem inclined to ask her to.

And then Jasper's phone starts beeping, and he says, "Okay, pause, switch to the countdown," and Clarke abruptly realizes which part of coexisting with Bellamy she won't be able to handle: watching him kiss Gina.

She drains her cup and gives it until two minutes to midnight before she says, "Shit, I need another round. Anyone else?"

"You'll miss the ball!" Jasper protests.

"I'll catch it downstairs," she says, picking her way through the people sitting on the floor. "Don't worry, it's still going to be midnight if I don't see it."

There's a TV on in the living room too, but the kitchen is quiet except for greasy keg guy, who's on his phone.

"Did you do anything but give out beer tonight?"

"Made like a hundred bucks selling weed," he says, with a shrug. "You want some?"

"I'm good, thanks." She grabs some water and takes it out the back door into the house's small yard. She's drunk enough that the cold feels bracing and refreshing, which is a good sign she shouldn't stay out here too long for risk of catching hypothermia.

But for a minute, it's nice. She can hear everyone else counting down the new year inside, a mass of voices ringing in 2017, and she just closes her eyes and Breathes.

A new year, and Bellamy Blake is upstairs, alive and healthy and maybe even happy. Maybe kissing another girl, but--here.

"Happy New Year," she murmurs, when everyone else yells it, and gives it another minute before she goes back inside.

*"

"How do you feel about trivia nights?" Monty asks.

It's the first Thursday of 2017, and they're in their favorite campus coffee shop to do some of the work they've been neglecting over the break. Clarke takes a deliberate sip of her drink before she asks, "What about them?"

"Nate's starting a team," he says. "That girl Gina from New Year's? Her bar has Thursday-night trivia, and Nate thinks it would be fun. You're basically the most competitive person I know, so I said I'd ask you."

"Wow, it's already trivia-team serious?" she teases, and Monty grins.

"We met playing Hearthstone, obviously gaming is a thing for us. And I think he's still trying to manage Bellamy's social life for him." He gives her a thoughtful look. "Is that weird? I couldn't really get a read on you guys."

"Not bad weird," she decides. "I haven't seen him for like seven years. It's always weird seeing someone again after that long, you know? It's almost like meeting a new person."
"Yeah, that's what he said."

Clarke's breath catches, which doesn't even make sense. Of course Monty would have asked Bellamy about her. It's not a surprise. But she wants to know every word he said, and that's pathetic.

"I can't tell if you're making a weird that's-what-she-said joke or gossiping."

"Not gossiping," says Monty. "I just asked what you were like when you were eighteen, and he said you were different."

It's not a controversial statement; of course Clarke is different than she was from eighteen. Unless Monty said a lot about her personal life, Bellamy has no idea how different she is. But it still stings, for some strange reason. She doesn't want to be the person she was when she knew him, but--she still wants to be someone he'd like.

It's so fucking stupid.

"He doesn't know the half of it," she says. "Are you going tonight? To the trivia."

"If you're in. We need four people."

"I do like trivia," she says. "Just tell me when."

When is, apparently, seven-thirty, so they can grab food before the game starts at eight, and by the time she's leaving, Clarke is already regretting agreeing to go. She wasn't lying about the trivia thing, but spending time with Bellamy, who'd shown no interest in spending time with her at New Year's, feels like playing with fire.

On the other hand, Monty really does seem into Miller, which means that he's going to be a fact of life for a while. And Bellamy probably comes with that. It would be good, if she could figure out how to interact with him.

It would be nice if they could be friends.

She gets to the bar at seven-twenty, greets Gina and orders a drink, chats a little until Gina warns her she should grab a booth before they're all taken. That's where she is when Bellamy and Miller arrive together, shaking snow off their coats. She's got a good view of them before they see her, and she watches Bellamy again, the easy way he teases Miller, just like he always has, the way the corners of his eyes are starting to wrinkle when he smiles.

She really needs to look at him now, so she won't embarrass herself later, when it counts.

They go over to the bar and she turns her attention to her phone, and she doesn't get caught staring when Gina points her out.

She wonders what Bellamy told Gina about her. If he said she's his ex or his old friend or just a girl Monty knows. Maybe he didn't tell her anything at all.

Miller slides in across from her alone, and she gives him a smile. "Hey, thanks for inviting me."

"Thanks for coming. I like regular social activities so I can pretend I have friends who aren't Bellamy. He's getting drinks," he adds, jerking his head to the bar. "Gina said you were set."

"My first step is always acquiring alcohol," she says. She taps the side of her glass. "So, if I tell you to treat Monty right, you're going to laugh in my face, right?"
He lets the question stand for just long enough to make her think it was a bad idea, and then he snorts and shakes his head. "So hard, yeah."

"He really likes you, though. I honestly didn't think the whole Hearthstone-dating thing was going to work out."

"Yeah, you really can't tell who's going to make it," he says, in a deliberate tone that suggests to Clarke he doesn't want her thinking they're friends just because she made him laugh a little.

"It's a mystery," she agrees. "Have you done trivia here before?"

"No, but Gina says it's pretty good."

"Not that she's biased."

"We already drink here, so it's not like she needs to convince us."

"And she gives us free drinks sometimes," says Bellamy, sliding in next to Miller and passing him his beer.

"So the party worked?" Clarke asks.

"Definitely tricking her into being friends with us," Miller agrees.

"Like you get friends any other way," Bellamy says. He hasn't really looked at her yet, and Clarke wishes she knew why he didn't want to. There are a thousand reasons it could be, and she'd feel so much better about her life if she knew which it was. Just so she could adjust her behavior accordingly.

"I prefer bribery," she says, and immediately regrets it.

"Whatever works," says Bellamy, and they lapse into silence for what probably feels like a much longer time than it is.

"I don't actually know what you're doing in DC," she finally says, and he chokes on his beer.

"Oh, uh. I'm actually--I'm working on my teaching certification," he admits, ducking his head. "In Virginia, not DC."

She's too delighted to remember to be reserved. "Really? That's so awesome! What are you teaching? Do you have a job lined up yet?"

He lets out a surprised bark of laughter. "Uh, not yet. I might have to sub first, I don't know. But history, ideally."

"I'm so happy for you," she says. "Did you get your degree in the navy? I read about--" she starts, and corrects herself. "I remember hearing they do tuition assistance."

"Yeah. BA in history."

"That's great."

"I'm pretty excited, yeah."

She's trying to figure out a safe follow-up when Monty slumps in next to her, stealing a sip of her cider. "Hey, trivia team. Do we have a name yet? I have some ideas."
Monty is apparently the signal for everyone to back off any mention of the past, and Clarke's mostly grateful for it. She's aware that she fucked up, and she'd like to make it better, but the best way to do that feels like doing better going forward. If Bellamy doesn't want to talk about it, the most respectful thing is to honor his wishes.

But it's hard.

It's not that she wants to hash things out or fight with him, it's that his preference for interaction lands in some bizarre social no man's land, where they act sort of like estranged relatives, aware of each other, connected, but neither close nor very friendly. And it's fine, obviously. It's his prerogative, and she doesn't think she'd want to be friends with herself either, in his place.

It's just that she selfishly still wants to be friends with him. She's practically bursting with questions about the last seven years, his sister, his education, his time in the navy, how his certification is going, how he likes DC, if he has favorite restaurants. All of which is way too much, but--even normal things like she asks Miller or Gina seem like too much for Bellamy.

And she sees him at least twice a week, so it's really noticeable, how awkward it is, at least to her. Trivia nights are the worst, because it's just the two of them and Monty and Miller, and Bellamy always makes sure he shows up with Miller, so that there's no slight chance he might be alone with Clarke, and usually spends a few minutes chatting with Gina, presumably to remind her that he has other prospects.

Which is great, obviously. Gina's awesome. She and Bellamy are going to be really cute together. But Clarke is about ninety percent sure that if she and Bellamy ever, by some horrible coincidence, ended up alone together in a room at this point, he'd fake his own death to get out of the situation. And she can't even tease him about it. Because they're so awkward.

And then, as if things weren't weird enough, Octavia joins their friend group.

Or, more accurately, she comes back from her extended winter vacation with her giant, muscle-bound boyfriend and spends a entire Friday night pointedly ignoring Clarke, to the extent that she won't even look her direction. Which, again, is fair. Clarke recognizes that she is far from the most aggrieved party in this situation. But it's so fucking awkward.

"So, is this when I get to ask you about you and Bellamy?" Monty asks, settling in next to Clarke at the bar. She's been hitting the cider pretty hard, but she's still aware enough to startle and look for Gina automatically. But she's helping a couple at the other end of the bar, so there's nothing to be worried about except, well, Monty asking about Bellamy. "Because you guys are pretty awkward for we dated seven years ago, and his sister seems to hate you."

"It went badly seven years ago," she says. "But it was, you know, seven years ago, so we're working on forgiving and forgetting. Which has never been Octavia's strong suit, so--" She shrugs.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

It's an interesting question. She hasn't talked to anyone yet, not really. She told Wells that Bellamy was living nearby, and he'd asked how it was, but she never told him that much about the breakup either. Like everyone else, he just figured it was a relationship that couldn't last.

"Not tonight," she says. "But I'll let you know if I change my mind."

"Okay." He claps her shoulder. "If you don't want to hang out with him, we don't have to. I know I've been doing a lot of Nate time, but I thought you guys liked him. If you don't, we can come up
"I do! I like Bellamy too. I like both of them. They're great. It's fine." She nods at her cider. "We're definitely going to get less awkward. Any day now."

"Anything could happen," he says, dubious, and she drains her cider and grabs another one.

By the--something--cider, she's feeling pretty good about her life, not caring about Octavia or Bellamy or anything, really, not even a little. She's hanging out with Jasper, and it's fine.

Or, so she thinks, but then he interrupts her story about the guy in her grad program she hates to say, "Oh thank god, please be good at dealing with drunk people, because I'm not."

"Yeah, pretty good," says Bellamy, because who else could it possibly be? It has to be him. He's looking really good tonight too, because of course he is, wearing this soft gray sweater and his stupid glasses, and his head is cocked like he's worried.

"Jesus, how many have you had?" he adds, sliding onto the stool next to hers and taking her glass. "I'm finishing this."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want to order another. You should get water."

"You know you're getting cooties now, right?"

He chokes on his laugh and sprays a little cider onto his face. "I think I'm immunized," he says. "Seriously, you look wasted."

"I'm at a bar. I'm supposed to be wasted."

"Let me guess, get wasted and pass out on the bar was on your fun and spontaneous list for tonight."

It's one of the first references he's made to the past, and Clarke jerks up to look at him. He's close enough she can see his freckles, the stubble on his jaw, the way his throat moves when he swallows.

Maybe he's right. She probably shouldn't drink any more.

"I don't need a list anymore," she says. "I've gotten really good at faking it."

"Congratulations. Can she get a water?" he asks Gina, and Clarke manages a smile for her. She's pretty. She and Bellamy are going to have pretty babies. It's going to be nice for them.

"Sure. You want anything?"

"I'll just take the rest of hers. Thanks."

"You can hang out with your sister," she tells him. "I don't mind."

"She's being an asshole to me too."

"Because of me?"

He pauses, looking straight ahead, like some fucking romantic hero, and then sighs and shakes his head. "No, not because of you. I was kind of a dick about Lincoln."
"Really?"

"He's a lot older than she is. I didn't think it was a good idea for her to go out with him, and I was pretty upset when she told me she was going home with him for Christmas." Another pause, and then he says, "I went back up to Maine with Miller. I was sort of wondering if you were there, or if I wouldn't see you until New Year's."

"Yeah, I do Christmas with my dad now."

"Ah."

"I just want you to be okay, you know?" she finds herself saying, into the awkward silence. "Everything else is just--bonus. You don't have to be my friend, but I wish I could just--ask how you're doing."

"I think you could come up with a more exciting goal," he says. "I'm fine, Clarke."

"Okay, yeah, you're right. I lied. I want you to be--I want you to be happy, Bellamy. You should be so fucking happy. You should be the happiest."

"The happiest, huh?" He looks down at her, his mouth quirking up in a smile that looks almost fond. "I'm pretty sure that's a hotly contested position."

"I know it's none of my business," she says. "I get it. But--I wish I could just talk to you. Fuck," she says, and puts her head down on the bar. "I wasn't going to tell you. Why did you come over?"

"I was worried you were going to die of alcohol poisoning," he says, dry. "You should go home."

"Or you could just stop talking to me."

"I'm not telling you to go home because I don't want to talk to you. I'm telling you to go home because you're wasted and you're going to regret this conversation. Seriously, face off the counter, drink your water, okay? I'll be back in a second."

"It's really okay if you're not."

"Water, now," he says, and there's the brief squeeze of his hand on her shoulder before he goes.

It's enough to get her up, at least, and she drains the water mostly because this is the most they've spoken in seven years, and she doesn't want to fuck it up any worse than she already has. And when he comes back, he'll see that she's doing what she said. That she's trying.

But he doesn't come back, after all. Instead, Octavia's giant boyfriend comes over and says, "You live in Foggy Bottom?"

"Mostly," she says.

That gives him pause. "I'm not sure if you're trying to tell me you don't live there all the time or not."

"No, all the time. But near Foggy Bottom."

"Ah. Well, I'm out that way too, so I thought we could go together."

She frowns. "Where's Octavia?"

"She lives on the green line," he says. "I have an early day tomorrow, so I'm leaving first. I thought
you might want to come."

It's the least convincing lie she's ever heard, but when she looks around for Bellamy, he's chatting with Miller and Monty, looking completely disinterested, so--

"Is this going to make your girlfriend hate me more?" she asks.

To his credit, he really thinks it over. "No, I think she'll just keep hating you as much as she already does."

"Then, yeah. Thanks."

Being outside sobers her up a little, like it always does, and she takes a few deep breaths of cool air before she asks, "So, do you really have an early morning, or are you just trying to get on Bellamy's good side?"

He laughs. "Both. I'm going to a convention tomorrow, I have to leave early to get in. But the brownie points from Bellamy are a bonus. He hates letting his friends go home alone."

*Friends,* Clarke thinks, and smiles all the way home.

*Once she starts thinking about her new relationship with Bellamy as friendship, everything really does make a lot more sense. Because they've never been friends, have they? Clarke has no idea how to be friends with Bellamy Blake, because they were making out within two days of meeting each other. He was her friend, but he wasn't primarily her friend. And then she broke the entire relationship, so the first step should be friendship, again. Take two. Which doesn't mean she knows how to make that happen, but it feels like a good place to start. Despite what Lincoln said, she doesn't really believe he's there yet, but--she does think he wouldn't object, if she could figure out the right way to do it. He doesn't hate her. If nothing else, she's convinced of that."

On Sunday, Jasper and Monty have everyone over for board games, and Clarke sits down next to Bellamy. He glances at her, eyebrows raised, and she says, "Thanks for using me as an excuse to cockblock your sister. I really appreciate that. She definitely didn't hate me enough already."

For a second, he looks completely blindsided, and then he ducks his head on a laugh. "Sorry. It seemed better than getting her pissed at me. Thanks for being my scapegoat."

"No problem. Here to help."

He glances at her, thoughtful, and she tries out a smile. He looks away again, but she thinks it's in a good way. "Appreciated. I can use all the help I can get."

It doesn't feel like a big deal, but that, even more than her drunken ramblings about his happiness, that's what causes the first shift in their relationship. Bellamy is, as she's always known, a natural caretaker, someone who likes to express affection with fretting, and Clarke is too. And it's easy to fret over their friends, because Clarke is actually the least likely of their friends to get drunk and need caring for; she can usually hold her liquor. But Jasper is always a mess, Monty and Nate are either adorable and lovey dovey or horribly enabling each other to make bad decisions, Octavia has never outgrown teenage rebellion, and Niylah and Lincoln mostly seem to like pretending they don't know anyone else in the group in public.
So she and Bellamy tend to be the ones taking care of everyone else, and once they figure that out, the dynamic falls into place. They don't talk much more than they did before, not until it's late, and it's time to pack people into taxis or onto trains, but then it's effortless, the two of them working together to make sure everyone's fine, allies in a common goal.

It feels like the kind of thing she could get used to; even if it's not exactly what she wants, it could be enough. She can be an adult who has a friendly relationship with the first boy she ever loved. It sounds kind of nice.

He even starts coming to trivia without Miller, and sometimes they sit in the booth together for stretches of almost five minutes without anyone else there, usually in semi-companionable silence on their respective phones, showing each other weird memes they find on the internet.

And then the cold snap hits.

It's been a fairly mild winter so far, a few flurries of snow and temperatures dipping down to the teens, but overall, Clarke doesn't think any of the winters she's spent in DC rival her worst ones in Massachusetts, which occasionally just turns into a frozen death tundra with no warning. It's just as well she doesn't go to Maine much anymore; she was never meant to live so far north. But February brings freezing weather without even any snow for comfort, and Clarke is miserable.

"This is what happens when you don't have heat in your apartment."

"It usually doesn't matter!" Clarke protests.

Miller holds up his hand. "Wait a second. Do you actually not have heat in your apartment? Like, this isn't just Monty exaggerating?"

Monty looks positively gleeful. "Wait, do you two not know how Clarke lives? Do I get to be the one to tell you? Did all the stuff with your mom happen after?" he adds, to Clarke.

"Stuff with your mom?" Bellamy asks. When Clarke glances at him, he's watching her, eyes alert and interested, and she still can't quite deal with all his focus like that.

She keeps her voice casual. "I told you she was going to disown me when I decided not to go to med school."

"Fuck, she actually did it?"

"Not entirely. But she told me I was throwing my future away and she wasn't going to help me do it." She shrugs, plays with her straw and doesn't let herself look at him or Miller. "My dad helped me get the rest of the way through college, but he's never been as well off as my mom, and he lost his job a couple years ago, so I try not to ask him for help."

"Jesus," says Miller. "Seriously?"

"He's got a new one now, but unemployment really ate into his savings. I'm still doing fine," she can't help adding. "And I'm sure if my mom knew I needed money, she'd pitch in."

"But Clarke doesn't want to tell her, so she lives in a freezing death pit."

"It's really fine! It's not that cold most of the winter, and I've got a space heater. I just wear layers."

"I went over last winter to borrow a book and I could see my breath," says Monty. He's always weirdly proud of her shitty apartment, which is nice. Most people are horrified.
She risks another glance at Bellamy; to her surprise, he looks more thoughtful than worried, and when she raises her eyebrows at him, he just says, "Isn't that the kind of thing your super's supposed to handle?"

"Her super is even worse than her apartment," says Monty.

"Just because he told you he owned a gun one time!" Clarke protests, and then regrets it. "Not that he's not an asshole," she adds. "He is. But Monty doesn't know the half of it."

"Do you have a copy of your lease?"

"Bellamy is the expert on getting leases honored," says Miller. "That's how I convinced my housemates to let him move in."

"Probably somewhere? Seriously, it's not a big deal," she adds, but it's more of a token protest at this point. Bellamy has become aware that a person he knows is being mistreated, and he's not just going to let it go. "The weather's going to warm up in no time."

"You wear a hat inside in winter," Monty points out, not unreasonably. "And gloves."

"Your lease probably covers what your super is responsible for," Bellamy says. "Miller, you still know how to fix a heater, right?"

"Sure," says Miller, deadpan. "I know how to fix every heater that exists. That's my useless super power."

"That would be a really useful superpower," Bellamy shoots back. "Seriously, that's pretty good money. If you get someone in to do it, the landlord will definitely pay," he adds. "But Miller could probably handle it."

Miller rolls his eyes. "Do you know what kind of heat you have?"

"Radiators. They just don't radiate."

He glances at Bellamy, and Clarke's heart lurches. There's no way they aren't going to spend a few hours figuring out how this works, researching everything that can go wrong with radiators.

There's no way he wouldn't just do it himself, for anyone but her. Apparently that's the exact level of his comfort with her: he can't come over and fix her radiators himself, but he cares enough he's not going to let her freeze to death, so he'll make sure someone else takes care of it.

Which is really not saying much, given it's Bellamy. He'd have to hate her a lot, to not care about this.

So she's not reading into it.

"You free on Sunday?" Miller asks, on their way out. "For me to come try to kick your radiators into gear?"

"You really don't have to," she says, just to be polite. "But I'd appreciate it, yeah."

"Cool. I'll text you on my way over."

And it's actually kind of nice, hanging out with Miller. Not as nice as it would be with--well, okay. It would be a thousand times more awkward with Bellamy, but she's still prefer to be hanging out with him. And not even with the Bellamy she used to know, she realizes suddenly. Not that she wouldn't
take that too, but--she doesn't want the Bellamy she knew when they were kids back.

He's gotten better. Even prickly and awkward, even with all the baggage, the Bellamy she wants isn't the guy she broke up with seven years ago.

She wants--

"Fuck," she breathes, so soft Miller apparently doesn't even hear it.

"Can you give me the socket wrench?" he asks, and she hands it over gratefully. She's just as glad he's not noticing her minor crisis. It's bad enough she noticed.

Still, she can't help asking, "How long did you guys spend watching YouTube tutorials on this?"

Miller snorts. "He thinks he's so fucking sneaky," he says, fond, and Clarke smiles too. Bellamy's always been the thing the two of them have in common. "But he knew a lot about it already. And we had to fix the heat in Octavia's place once, so it's not like I didn't have some experience too," he adds. "And it's always good to learn something new."

"I really appreciate it."

"Seriously, I can't believe you live like this. I thought you were at least good of taking care of yourself."

"Yeah, I try to make people think that."

"At least I got a new skill. If Monty's heat goes out, I can impress him with my awesome skills." He pauses. "Actually, if Monty's heat went out, he'd just call a fucking repairman, like a normal person."

Clarke snorts. "Are you kidding? He lives with Jasper. They'd make blanket forts and pretend they were living on Hoth. You wouldn't even see him for a week."

Miller smiles too. "Fuck, you're right. But if that happened and he didn't call me, I'd be pissed."

"I feel like I don't tell you guys how happy I am for you enough," she says, and it comes out wistful. "Monty was having such a bad time on okcupid before he met you."

"Yeah, he told me." For a second, she thinks he's going to say more, but he just thumps the radiator, and it starts hissing, spluttering, and, miracle-of-miracles, heating. "Okay, that wasn't even that hard. You could do it too, with a YouTube tutorial and a toolkit."

"Thanks anyway," she says. "I really appreciate it. Just let me know what bottle of alcohol you want me to buy you."

"No charge," he says. "I don't like thinking about you freezing to death either."

Her heart skips on the either, but he probably means Monty. "Really? I sort of figured that was one of your go-to fantasies."

"Not for a few years."

His voice is teasing, so she smiles. "I figured maybe for a couple weeks."

"Brief resurgence." He pauses. "You were a kid, Clarke. He gets that."

"Yeah," she says, because she was, and she gets it too.
But she's not a kid anymore, and it's possible to forgive without forgetting. And she's not even convinced she's forgiven. They're just doing their best.

Their best just used to feel a lot better, as she's reminded, horribly, when checks her email on Tuesday afternoon and her heart leaps at the sight of a new email. Sender: Bellamy Blake, subject: FYI.

She knew he had her email; Monty and Jasper prefer to organize things via email, she's on like three different active email chains with him. But he never replies to them and she does only rarely. And of course they used to email a lot, her freshman year of college, and her address hasn't changed. But this message is a far cry from the long updates she'd get about his life before. There isn't even any body text, just two attachments: the first an invoice he clearly wrote himself, outlining the labor Miller performed and a fair pay rate for it, and the second a document about how to get uncooperative landlords to pay for maintenance charges.

Thanks, she replies, and saves the email to the Bellamy folder of her gmail despite its total lack of content, and then finds herself clicking into the folder, spends a while just looking at the dates: December 19, 2009, December 21, 2009, February 21, 2017.

It would be nice, if she started adding to it again regularly. But she's not going to get carried away.

This is fine.

* * *

By March, Clarke feels largely comfortable in her own friend group, which is the kind of thing that should be a matter of course, but given her friend group involves her ex, her ex's best friend, and her ex's sister, some level of awkwardness is basically inevitable, and it's going pretty well in spite of that.

So, obviously, they hit a stumbling block in the second week of the month, right when she's starting to feel vaguely comfortable. Octavia is trying to figure out what to do for her birthday, which is already both uncomfortable for Clarke and something she can't really contribute to, and the conversation naturally turns to everyone's favorite parties and celebrations. Clarke's birthday is in November, right around Thanksgiving, and while she doesn't have any great party memories, her favorite birthday is still the one she spent with Bellamy, which would be bad enough without remembering his twenty-first on top of that, when she told him she loved him for the first time, when he said he loved her back.

"Nineteen," she says, when Monty looks at her, and doesn't elaborate.

"I don't care much about birthdays," is Bellamy's answer, and Jasper boos him. "Fine. I was pretty psyched when I could legally drink," he adds, and Clarke smiles down at her hands.

"Bell never does anything fun for his birthday. Or any other time," Octavia adds. She's definitely still the least comfortable part of Clarke's social circle, but they seem to have settled on basically pretending the other doesn't exist, which largely works out, aside from the way Clarke and Lincoln actually get along really well. There's something uniquely bizarre about being ignored by someone who's sitting in your conversational partner's lap.

But they're all just going with it.

"Yeah, O, my life is a joyless void of suffering," Bellamy agrees. "Thanks."

"Any time."
Still, when she settles on a birthday camping trip, she does invite Clarke along too, so at least she's not actively being excluded. She still spends a while staring at the email, trying to figure it out. It might just be politeness; she could definitely say she's busy or can't make it, if Octavia doesn't really want her to come. The last thing she wants to do is ruin someone's birthday with her presence.

Then again, this is Octavia, she's not really one to care about social niceties.

So she opens up a reply and puts in Bellamy's email and types: *Should I come to this or pretend I have plans? Be honest.*

Her finger hovers over the send button, for a good few minutes, but she just can't do it. It's not his job to reassure her about this stuff. She switches Bellamy's email for Lincoln's and sends that instead, and lets herself be relieved when he tells her almost immediately that she should come.

Then again, the prospect of a three-day camping trip in Octavia's honor is actually mildly terrifying, so she's just as glad when she gets a distraction, and even gladder that the distraction is Raven Reyes.

Before she reconnected with Bellamy, Raven was her friend she met in most awkward circumstances, the summer after she graduated from college. Some guy started hitting on Clarke, and it had been long enough since she'd dated anyone that she thought she should give it a try. They'd gone on one date, and Clarke had been unenthused enough about going on another before, one, the guy decided to try a grand gesture to win her over, and, two, she found out he already had another girlfriend. She'd dumped Finn and kept Raven, and they were roommates up until Clarke moved to DC for grad school.

Now Raven is done at MIT and apparently planning to work at NASA, and Clarke spends the rest of the month getting ready for her arrival. She finds a new apartment, in the same neighborhood, but way less sketchy than her last one, with a roommate to pay some of the bills, and Bellamy sends her a few more bodyless emails, this time with information about subletting, getting out of leases earlier, and what steps she can take if her landlord doesn't let her leave the lease early, especially if he's already failed to honor the contract with the heating thing.

They don't talk about it, of course; she never even told him directly that Raven was moving in with her. He must have heard her telling Monty and Niylah about it. But Bellamy's always like that: he listens much more than he speaks.

Raven's arrival feels like the kind of shift in the friend group that should be good. For all she can deal with everyone, the only person in her regular social circle who feels entirely hers is Niylah, and Niylah's new girlfriend means she's coming to hang out less and less. With everyone else, she can't help feeling as if, were Bellamy to decide he couldn't hang out with her anymore, they'd side with him. Miller, Octavia, and Gina certainly would, and Lincoln and Monty would still like her, but still would probably ultimately side with their significant others, and Jasper always goes along with Monty. And it's not like she thinks it's going to happen, but--

But there's Gina, and she and Bellamy are still close, and even if Bellamy doesn't make an issue of Clarke hanging out, it seems inevitable that they'll start dating, if they haven't already, and she's not sure what she's going to do, when that happens. It's not like Bellamy is hugely fond of public displays of affection, but she remembers being at parties with his arm around her, tucked warm and safe into his side, and the thought of seeing Gina in the same position is something Clarke can't get out of her head.

So it'll be nice to have Raven. Maybe they can start a backup group, if she has to bail.

But, of course, Raven slots into her social life flawlessly. She's into video games, she's smart and
sarcastic and funny and gorgeous, and she can drink and shit-talk with the best of them. Which is great, obviously. It feels like—well, it feels like the kind of life you're supposed to have at twenty-six: a group of friends, regular social engagements, group chats and in-jokes and weird romantic entanglements.

But it still feels like it's only a matter of time before it blows up. It's going to go wrong, because every time she sees Bellamy, her whole body feels like it's waking up after a long sleep. She knows where he is every second they're in the same room, aware of him even when they're not talking, not looking at each other, not doing anything. And that's unsustainable, because she was the one who screwed up, and he's the one who moved on.

Now all she has to do is move on too, and they'll be fine. But first, she has to make it through Octavia's birthday.

In all honesty, she wouldn't have minded if Lincoln had just told her she shouldn't go, because she doesn't like camping much to begin with, and the prospect of an entire weekend with her friends is simultaneously exciting and vaguely terrifying. Plus, if Bellamy and Gina have finally started dating, this is when she'll find out. They'll be sharing a tent or whatever. Snuggling by the fire. Whatever other romantic things people do on camping trips.

But there's something good about that too. At least if they're dating, she'll find out for sure. She'll appreciate having a definitive answer. And if they're not dating, there's a chance Bellamy will want to talk to her instead of Gina. Not a good one, but she can't quash the small spark of hope.

"I can't believe you're going to this," Raven says on the train, to her surprise. She was a last-minute addition to the trip, and necessitated a change in plans. She can't walk for more than a couple hours on her leg, so they switched from hiking a short trail to staying at a central location with a lot of trails nearby instead.

"Why wouldn't I go?"

"You hate hiking. And Octavia doesn't even like you."

"I just like feeling included," says Clarke. It's a little disheartening that even Raven knows Octavia doesn't like her. Clarke hasn't filled her in on any part of the Bellamy backstory yet; it's just that obvious.

"Uh huh. That sounds real."

"You're coming, you don't like hiking either."

"Yeah, but I need to establish myself in the group." There's a deliberate pause, and then she adds, "And Gina is cute."

Clarke remembers Raven's drunken googling of sexuality a few years ago, and her conclusion that she was pansexual, but it's still a little surprising to hear her expressing interest in Gina.

"What about Bellamy?" she asks, wary.

She shrugs. "He's cute too. You think I should go for him instead?"

"No!" It comes out far too sharp, and Raven's eyebrows shoot up. "Bellamy and Gina. I thought they were a thing. Or going to be a thing."

"Oh, yeah, that. Gina said she was into him for a while, but they kind of fizzled out." She shrugs,
like she hadn't found out, in two weeks, what Clarke's been wondering about for four months.

It's amazing how many problems you can solve if you just talk to people.

"Huh," she says. It's not hard to smile; it's just hard to smile in the right way, wry and amused instead of ecstatic. But she thinks she pulls it off. "I was going to say that was too bad, but I guess it's good for you. You could use a cute girlfriend."

"I don't have one yet," Raven says. "But thanks for the support."

They're meeting at Bellamy and Miller's, and she and Raven are almost the last to arrive. Niylah had a test she couldn't miss, so she's not coming, but everyone else is, and it's going to be a tight fit for the drive down. Clarke is in Miller's car, along with Monty, Bellamy, and Jasper, with Lincoln taking himself, Octavia, Raven, and Gina, as well as most of the supplies.

Clarke had nothing to do with the arrangements, so she doesn't have to feel guilty about them, and it's even Jasper who says, "Clarke gets the middle."

She raises her eyebrows at him. "Since when?"

"Monty's the boyfriend, he gets shotgun."

"Yeah, that's a rule," Monty agrees.

"That leaves you, me, and Bellamy in the back, and you're the shortest. Shortest gets the middle seat."

Clarke glances at Bellamy, but he's helping Lincoln strap something to the roof of the car, and her eye gets caught, just for a second, on the strip of skin between his shirt and his jeans.

"That's also a rule," Monty agrees, and Clarke drags her attention back to them. "Sorry, Clarke, he's got you on this one." They do their weird self high-five thing, and she shakes her head.

"I'm going to elbow you in the kidney the whole time," she tells him, and Jasper inclines his head.

"Yeah, cool. Worth it."

The park Octavia picked is an hour and a half away, and Miller's car isn't tiny, but it's hard to cram three adults into the backseat without some amount of physical contact, especially for that long.

Then again, they're three adults. Clarke can sit next to Bellamy for an hour and a half. It is the polar opposite of a big deal.

"Jasper says I'm taking the middle," she tells him anyway, just in case he can come up with an argument.

"Sucks to be you," he says, easy, and gestures her into the car before him.

It's the closest she's been to him since they broke up, she realizes. He never sits in booths next to her, and when they watch movies or play games, they always manage to be in different parts of the room. Before this, the closest they've been was probably him sitting next to her at the bar, when she was too drunk to really worry about anything except the way she didn't know how to talk to him, and even that, it wasn't this close.

The first fifteen minutes are the worst. Monty is navigating them onto the highway so both his and Miller's full attention is on that, and the rest of them don't have any reason to be involved. Clarke's
aware of every place she's touching him, all her usual sensitivity overloaded by his actual proximity. It's bad enough when she just knows he's *around*, in the same room as her, but this is--

Stupid. It's stupid. It's *nothing*. But that doesn't mean she can turn the feelings off.

Once they're on the highway, she at least has things to focus on that aren't where her hands are in relation to his body and how every minute shift either of them makes gets them closer together or farther apart. Jasper and Monty bicker about music choices for a while, until Monty finally puts on his *Songs Jasper Hates* playlist, which gives them a lot to talk about, given the rich and varied history of why Jasper hates things and how Monty knows. Even Bellamy gets sucked into the argument, when it turns out Jasper hates "We Are the Champions" and, overall, thinks Queen is overrated as a band, which is the kind of statement that counts as fighting words for Bellamy. Clarke's on his side for that one, and Jasper finally yells, "Fine! I will go home and donate to AIDS research and also make a shrine to Freddie Mercury."

"Half the problem is that you don't already have a shrine to Freddie Mercury," Bellamy teases, and Clarke grins at him without thinking about it, for once without fretting herself to death over how she's supposed to act.

He blinks, clearly taken off guard, but then his own expression softens, and he smiles back, and then all the stupid awareness is back and stronger than ever. It would be so easy to lean into his side, and maybe he'd put his arm around her, and she could just--

It'll be late, when they're coming back. Unless he switches cars, she'll probably be able to fall asleep on him. Just to see what happens.

"Okay," says Jasper, after a brief pause, "but we can all agree that Coldplay sucks, right?"

"Dude, I'll fight you over *A Rush of Blood to the Head*, that's a solid album," says Miller, just as Monty pulls up, "*The Scientist,*" and the two of them high five.

Clarke smiles, but then she hears Bellamy next to her, singing softly under his breath, and her stomach twists at his murmured, *oh, take me back to the start*.

"Yeah, I'm with Jasper," she lies. "Skip this one."

* As soon as they get to a campsite, Octavia wants to go out on the trail, and since Bellamy says he'll go with her, Clarke volunteers to stay and help set up the tents. They've got four, and Clarke's in the largest one with Raven and Gina, which made total sense and sounded fine, until she found out Raven had a thing for Gina. Now she's worried about being the awkward third wheel.

Then again, it still probably won't be as awkward as the car ride down, so she's got that going for her. It's nice, having such a high baseline level of awkward in her life. Everything else seems much more survivable.

Monty brought a ton of board games that they can play on picnic tables, so they break out one of those, and that's maybe not what you're *supposed* to do when you go camping, but Clarke's a lot more into than than she's into walking around the woods, generally. Not that there's anything *wrong* with the woods, but after a few hours, she starts wishing she were just sitting somewhere sketching instead of walking.

Luckily, she brought her sketchbook and there are plenty of places she can just hang out and draw, if she wants to. And she *is* looking forward to unplugging, to being away from everyone and
everything. She's in the last few weeks of her masters', and after this she's going to be buried in finals hell for a while. Having one weekend to decompress before all that happens feels like a blessing. Even once the rest of the group gets back, it's not too bad. Bellamy positions himself on the other side of the table with a book once he gets back, and there's a nice, companionable silence. And, as always, the comfort of knowing exactly where he is outweighs the tense awareness of his being around her in the first place.

Lincoln cooks dinner, and is somehow actually good at camp cooking, by some miracle, and after they make a fire and pass some gin around, Clarke actually feels happy and uncomplicated, for what feels like the first time in a long time. She falls asleep while everyone else is talking, and Raven's the one to nudge her and drag her into the tent.

Saturday is nice too. They all go on two hikes, and Clarke starts a third but stops half an hour in because she really wants to draw the view from one of the hills. Raven stays with her, ostensibly because she's afraid Clarke won't make it back to camp without help, but probably because her leg's aching.

"You have some really cool friends here," she observes, and Clarke smiles.

"Yeah. I'm really lucky."

That night, the campfire talk turns to romance, as is tradition at campfires. Jasper is flirting with a cute girl at work, but it's not going anywhere, and everyone else makes consoling noises.

"At least I'm not the only single person. Just because Monty found someone doesn't mean everyone did. Bellamy, you're single, right?"

"Yup," says Bellamy, easy.

"And Raven and Gina. And Clarke's always single."

"Why am I the only one who's always single?" she asks, and immediately regrets it. The last thing she needs is a conversation about her dating life.

"Let's see, I've known you for, what, two-and-a-half years? And you've never been on a single date. And Niyalah totally wanted to go out with you."

"That's true," says Monty. "When's the last time you had a significant other, Clarke?"

She's still on her back, which is nice. No eye contact with anyone. "Raven, does Finn count?"

Raven snorts. "Fuck no."

"Who's Finn?" asks Jasper.

"My ex-boyfriend," says Raven. "It was so fucking dumb. This was--it was right after Clarke and I finished college. Finn and I were engaged, but he had cold feet. He met Clarke and was convinced they were, I don't know. Soulmates?"

"Or something," Clarke agrees.

"Yeah, so she went out on one date with him, finally, and then found out about me, and dumped him. But Finn wasn't great at taking no for an answer, so he kept trying for way too long. And then--and this was the stupidest part--she was with me and he comes in and starts telling her he loves her and she just shut him down. Honestly, it was great, because, god, it sucked for me, but she was just
like—trust me, I've been in love before and this isn't it, you just have cold feet. In the middle of a coffee shop. I think people actually applauded."

"Just because I added dickhead at the end," says Clarke. She pushes herself up; Bellamy's sitting right across from her, like she knew, and his eyes are steady on her even in the dark. "Okay, so, not Finn." They're not going to let it go, so she just holds up her fingers. "One, Alex, sophomore year of high school. Two, Bellamy, summer after high school. Three, Lexa, junior year of college. End of list."

There's a short silence, as she expected, while everyone processes this information, and she idly wonders if Bellamy ever actually told Gina they used to go out, or if this is news to both her and Raven. It's going to be an awkward night in the tent either way.

Finally, Monty asks, "Wait, you dated someone named Alex and someone named Lexa? Are you sure they weren't the same person and they just reinvented themselves after you broke up in high school?"

Clarke laughs. "Lexa and I went to the same high school, so I've seen them both together. Sorry to disappoint."

"It was a good theory, though."

"Really plausible," she agrees. "Can we talk about someone else? Raven's single and ready to mingle."

"I don't approve that descriptor," Raven says. "But it's basically true."

The conversation moves on from there, and Clarke feels her heart rate even out slowly as they get farther and farther from her and the total lack of romance in her life.

It's not like she's against dating. She always assumed she'd do it again, eventually. Like her dad said, someday, she'd fall in love again, and she's never been opposed to the idea.

But it hasn't happened yet. She was supposed to meet someone who made her feel as strongly as Bellamy did, and so far, no one else in her life has ever come close.

So far, it's just him.

Raven doesn't say anything until they're back in the tent, eyes close and lights out, and then it's just a simple, "Bellamy, huh?"

Clarke closes her eyes and lets herself say it, for the first time. "Yeah. Bellamy."

*

In the morning, she wakes up way too early and can't get back to sleep, probably because she's sleeping on the ground in a bag, but whatever. Camping. It's cool.

She makes her way out of the tent, carefully picking her way over Gina and Raven. She knew they stayed up talking after she crashed, but it makes her smile to see the way their sleeping bags have migrated together.

That would be nice for them, and Raven deserves something good. It's easy to forget how fucked up the Finn thing really was, because it's funny now, but it was hard for Raven for a long time.
Stuff like that really does linger, no matter how much you don’t want it to.

She’s not even surprised when she sees Bellamy sitting by the remains of the campfire, reading a book; it’s just that kind of trip. He looks unfairly good in this light (like he doesn’t look unfairly good all the time), with the wind making a tangle of his hair and a tin cup of coffee in his hand.

As always, she has two choices: pretend she didn't see him, or tell him she's here. And she hasn't figured out how to resist him.

"Morning," she says, sitting down across from him.

He jerks up, eyes lost for a second, but then his features relax into a smile. "Morning. Couldn't sleep?"

She hesitates, but it seems worth saying, at this point. "I think my tentmates want to hook up, so I'm trying not to be a third wheel." He doesn't look upset or surprised, and she feels a little more tension drain out of her shoulders. "You?"

"Jasper snores."

"Somehow, that doesn't surprise me."

"No, it really made a lot of sense. You want coffee?"

"That would be great, thanks."

He goes over and pours her a cup, offers it to her with a small smile. His glasses are falling down his nose, and when he pushes them up, she can't help asking, "When did you get those? The glasses."

He looks a little surprised. "Oh, uh. When I joined the navy." He smiles. "Required eye exam. Apparently I just sort of assumed the world was sort of blurry and no one else wanted to bring it up."

"Yeah, that's super impolite."

He takes a sip of coffee, and she can see him debating saying something himself, recognizes the set of his jaw and the way he's looking resolutely at the ground. Finally, he asks, "You dated Lexa, huh?"

It's not really what she expected him to take from what she said last night, but it maybe should have been. "Yeah. Just for a couple weeks. Nothing serious."

"Really?" He worries his lip. "I always sort of figured something would--it seemed like the sort of thing that would happen, you know?"

She does, of course. "It did happen," she says. "But the timing was wrong." Her mouth twists. "That's a real problem for me."

"Yeah?" he asks, and she's going to say more, because that was the fall after she found out he was in the navy, when she was upset and hurt and sure she'd never see him again, when she regretted breaking up with him more than ever, and how it had doomed everything.

But then there's Octavia, coming out of her tent, watching them with narrowed eyes, and there's no way she can say it with Octavia listening. Not even with Octavia nearby.

Bellamy turns his attention to her too. "Morning, birthday girl."
"Hey, Bell. Come help me cook, okay? You're way better with the camp stove than I am."

"Literally everyone in the world is better with the camp stove than you are," he says, with a roll of his eyes, but he pushes up off the bench. "What are we having?" he asks, and the moment's gone.

Raven opts out of the morning hike, apparently having over-exerted herself yesterday, and since Gina volunteers to stay with her, Clarke doesn't feel any guilt about going along. Part of her is actually a little excited about it, thinking about falling into step with Bellamy, chatting with him again, actually trying to talk about this. Because it really feels like there's something to talk to, and that's kind of amazing.

It might not be the conversation she wants it to be, but they should really get everything out in the open. That would be nice.

But Octavia is in full-on birthday mode, and possibly in full on I-hate-you-and-don't-trust-you-Clarke mode, because she drags Bellamy to the front of the group with her, and they spend the whole time cheerfully bickering about whether or not Octavia should try to do some amateur rock-climbing if the opportunity presents itself.

Which, of course, it does, and she does, and Clarke's heart actually stops for a second when she falls.

"O!" Bellamy screams, but Clarke reaches her first, not as paralyzed with panic as Octavia's brother and her boyfriend, her head clearer.

"Breathe," she tells Bellamy, when he gets to the two of them. "Do you know the way back?"

"What?" he asks. He's staring, but his eyes don't really look focused.

"No cell phone reception," she says. "Lincoln's bigger than you are, so he should stay to carry Octavia. I can patch her up, okay?" He's still frozen, so she shoves his arm, gentle. "Pre-med, remember? I know what to do with a concussion. And it's probably just a concussion." She traces her fingers over Octavia's skull, testing it. "You guys should go back, figure out where the nearest hospital is, and if it makes more sense to call an ambulance or just take her ourselves. Lincoln and I can handle your sister, Bellamy. I promise."

She can see the bob of his throat as he swallows. "Okay. You know the way back too?" he asks.

"Yeah, we've got it. We'll follow you as soon as we can, I just want to be careful about how we move her." She glances at Lincoln. "You can carry her, right?"

"Of course."

She squeezes Bellamy's hand, quick, and then says, "She'll be fine. Go."

"See you at camp."

"You didn't tell him that just to get him to leave, did you?" Lincoln asks. He sounds worried, but not like he really thinks Clarke might have lied to Bellamy just to get him out of her hair.

"It wasn't that far. She's breathing, and I don't see any signs of injury to her neck or spine." She worries her lip. "Ideally, we wouldn't be moving her, but I think we have to. I'm just hoping she'll be awake when we do it."

Right on cue, Octavia stirs, and Lincoln squeezes her hand. She blinks a few times, eyes coming into focus, and then she glares. "What are you doing here?" she asks Clarke, and Clarke can't help
"Providing medical assistance. How many fingers am I holding up?"

They get Octavia conscious and relatively comfortably settled on Lincoln's back, and part of Clarke wants to run ahead, to let Bellamy know what's happening, but she doesn't actually have any news, and she doesn't want to leave Lincoln alone in case something goes wrong. Bellamy will feel better knowing Clarke's with Octavia than he will if she tells him what he already knows: that Lincoln has her and they're on their way.

"Aren't you supposed to be asking me questions?" Octavia asks, sounding a little bleary.

"Your eyes were open," she says. "Are you conscious?"

"Yeah."

"Sorry, did you want to talk to me?"

"I don't get it," Octavia says. "I don't get why you broke up with my brother."

Clarke thinks it over. "Because I was nineteen and he lived four hours away and everyone in the world told me it couldn't work," she says. "And they were probably right. It wasn't--he's the best person I've ever met, okay? I was so lucky. But the timing was wrong."

"Does he know that?"

"I don't know," she admits. "I didn't think he wanted to talk about it. I'm just--I'm trying to do what he wants. I know I'm the one who fucked this up. It's my fault."

"Yeah," says Octavia, still vague. "So you should be fixing it. It's my birthday," she adds.

"I'm glad you still know what day it is," says Lincoln, dry. "That's important."

"It actually is," says Clarke. "And it's probably good she remembers the full range of my fucked up history with him. Short- and long-term memory."

"How much of what you're saying right now is bullshit?" Octavia asks.

"Just the medical part. And it's not bullshit, it's just been a while. I'm pretty sure that was all true. But I didn't read up on concussions before I went camping."

"Bell's totally going to," Octavia moans. "He's never going to let me forget this. He's going to bring this up forever."

"You're arguing with Clarke about decisions she made when she was eighteen," Lincoln points out. "I'm not sure you should be talking about refusing to let anyone live things down."

"It was a big deal," say Octavia and Clarke, at the same time, and Lincoln lets out a soft laugh and repositions Octavia on his back.

"Yes," he says. "I've noticed."

It's slow progress getting back to camp with Lincoln carrying Octavia, more because he doesn't want to jostle her than because she seems like a huge burden. They spend a while keeping Octavia laughing.
conscious discussing how much he can bench press, and by the time they're back, Clarke actually thinks Octavia might be okay with her. Or, at least, more okay with her. Maybe she really thought Clarke dumped Bellamy because she didn't like him.

Maybe *Bellamy* thinks that.

It's another thing they should talk about, probably.

But they have other things to do, when they get back to camp. Bellamy's alternating between supervising everyone else packing up the camp and cars and glancing back to the path, alert for their return, and his face breaks wide open with relief at the sight of them.

She's never seen anything better.

"She's awake. How far is the hospital?"

"Half an hour drive."

"I think we should probably just take her. Ambulances are expensive and she said her insurance was shitty."

"O--" he starts.

"It is," says Octavia. "Seriously, we don't need an ambulance ride on top of everything. I don't care if we can afford it."

"She's probably going to have to stay overnight for monitoring," Clarke points out. "The car should be fine."

"I can drive us over," Lincoln says. "You can stay in the hospital with her, and I'll come back here to bring everyone else back to the city."

"You sure you're good to drive that much?" Bellamy asks.

"It won't be a problem. Just help me get her in the car."

Once they're on the road, the rest of them finish packing up, and Monty breaks out another board game to kill the time until Lincoln gets back. Clarke leaves her phone on the table, even though the reception is still pretty spotty, and breathes a sigh of relief when Bellamy starts texting updates, just short, quick things to the group: filling out paperwork, waiting for a doctor, Lincoln's on his way back.

It's not until they're well on their way to the city that Bellamy sends a text to just her: *Thanks for today. I don't know what I would have done.*

*Jostled your sister's head and destroyed her brain,* she texts back. *Let me know what the doctor tells you.*

*Will do.* The ellipses show up again, like he's going to say something else, but they disappear again, and she falls asleep with the text message open on her lap, waiting for another reply.

*

Octavia's fine, out of the hospital the next day as long as she promises to take it easy, but Clarke doesn't have a chance to do much more than respond to the group chat with celebratory emoji at the news, because she's back to the finals grind. She sends Raven to Thursday-night trivia in her place,
and Raven reports that everyone is doing fine, and that Bellamy is really hot and she should hit that.

"I already did," she points out, and Raven pauses.

"You should hit that again."

"Thanks, good feedback," says Clarke. "I'm studying."

She does know she needs to talk to him, but she's genuinely busy, and he misses the next week at trivia because he's finishing up his teaching certification program and has his own finals to deal with, so she should definitely wait until their lives clear up. It's not like she's never going to see him again. She just hasn't had a chance to talk to him.

It's not just that she doesn't know what to say.

Lexa texts her the day before she's done with school to say that she hasn't seen her for months and that, according to the GW academic calendar, Clarke is free soon, so they're going to hang out, which at least makes her smile. It's definitely true--she and Lexa are the kind of friends who don't actually talk that often, but it's mostly because their friend groups have zero overlap and they're almost always on totally different schedules. And, honestly, Clarke's been kind of avoiding her, since New Year's; she doesn't have a fucking clue what to say to Lexa about the reappearance of Bellamy in her life. But it's probably about time to mention it. Since it seems like he'll be sticking around, and ideally getting even more involved.

They figure out a movie they're both willing to see, and Clarke goes downtown early to hang out at her favorite coffee shop and force herself to get some work in on her official job application for the Portrait Gallery. She interned there this semester and they've already hired her for an interim position, she just needs to get the final application in this week so they can process the paperwork, and there's no reason for her to drag her feet except that she's exhausted from her finals.

She spots him when she's waiting in line: Bellamy's hanging out at a table by himself, fully absorbed in--a Nintendo DS. The one she got him for his twenty-first birthday. Clarke's kind of shocked it still functions, but she recognizes it instantly, the same color, the same size, the same R2-D2 sticker on it, even if half the image has rubbed away.

She watches him as she waits in line, which is only mildly creepy, because she doesn't want to lose her spot, and he's not quite close enough she can call for his attention. If he looks up, she'll wave, but his full focus is on his game, so all she can do is watch him and wonder if he doesn't want a new DS--there are definitely giant 3D ones now, she's seen them--because he's kind of a grumpy old man, or if he's too cheap to buy one, or if he just likes that one.

If, maybe, he likes that one because she gave it to him.

There's only one way to find out.

She gets her coffee and a scone and goes over to his table. He's got headphones in and is completely oblivious to the world, so she knocks on the table, which is enough to make him jump and stare at her in blank confusion for a second.

And then he grins.

"Hey."

"Hi," she says. "Can I sit here?"
"Sure." He pauses his music and takes out his headphones, shuts the DS. His full attention is on her, and it's just the two of them, and that hasn't actually happened in the last five months. They've always been part of a bigger group; someone else has been around, or at least coming soon.

Her own smile is probably a little ridiculous.

"How'd finals go?" he asks.

"Good. I'm going to graduate, so that's the important thing, right?"

"I assume so."

"How about you? Are you going to be allowed to teach in the state of Virginia?"

"Somehow."

"That's so cool," she tells him. "I'm really excited for you."

He ducks his head. "Honestly, it might kill me. Fuck, teaching is a lot of work."

"Yeah, but you're going to be great at it. How's Octavia doing?"

"Pissed that she's still not allowed to do a few things." He rolls his eyes, fond. "God forbid a serious head injury have any impact on her life."

"I'm always pissed when my actions have consequences, yeah," she says, and doesn't let herself wince. It would be nice if she could someday talk to him without feeling like she's picking her way through a minefield.

But he just laughs. "Yeah, it's the worst."

"I'm glad she's okay."

"Me too." He clears his throat. "I seriously can't thank you enough. I'm usually pretty good in a crisis, but--"

"It's your sister. I get it. I'm glad I could help."

"Yeah."

The silence doesn't feel awkward, but she really doesn't want to waste time she could be talking to Bellamy sitting in silence, so she taps the DS. "What are you playing?"

"Oh, uh--Pokemon Conquest?"

"I don't know that one."

"It's really weird. It's--there's this really popular series, Nobunaga's Ambition? It's all these turn-based strategy games about the Japanese Civil War and unification. So obviously someone decided it made sense to cross that over with Pokemon."

Clarke chokes on her drink. "Wait, what?"

He grins. "Yeah, seriously." He pulls his chair over so he's sitting next to her and opens up the DS again. "Japanese feudal warlords fighting over city states. With Pokemon."
"Holy shit," she says, laughing at the screen, which really is showing a guy in full armor accompanied by some unidentifiable Pokemon.

"Yeah, I have no idea how this got made."

"But you bought it."

"Can you blame me? It's actually really fun. It's pretty old now, but I felt like starting it over once I finished up with my teaching stuff. I never found everyone's perfect partner. That's the stuff that haunts you."

"Perfect partner?"

"See this percentage here? That's their current link with the partner Pokemon, and that one's the highest possible link. Every character has a one-hundred-percent link."

It's absolutely the silliest thing in the world to be excited about. He's talking to her about Japanese warlords who have bonded with cartoon monsters. But he's leaning in close so she can see the game, and he's smiling at her, and he seems so happy just being with her. For the first time since they broke up, she feels like they're on the same page.

"Okay, so, can you conquer a city state? I want to see how this works."

"Yeah, I just need to finish giving my vassals orders."

"Wow, it seems really complicated being a Pokemon warlord."

"Yeah, I've got a lot going on."

He starts up a battle and they lean over it together, Clarke giving uninformed advice about what she thinks would be a good move while Bellamy patiently explains all the complicated tactics behind whatever is happening, and it's--

It's like before. It's fun and it's easy, and she's so stupidly happy just being with him. Nothing she's ever felt in her entire life compares to the pure, simple joy of being close to Bellamy Blake.

And then Lexa shows up.

Which is, obviously, what was supposed to happen; Clarke was waiting for her. They were going to meet here and head to the movie together. But Clarke had no idea how an entire hour passed without her even noticing.

But Bellamy's doing really well taking over feudal Japan.

"Clarke?" Lexa asks, and they both jump.

"Oh, hey, sorry." She checks her phone; no messages, but it is five. "I totally lost track of time. Lexa, you remember Bellamy, right?"

"Vaguely," says Lexa, cool. "The electrician."

"Plumber," says Clarke, at the same time he says, "Pre-teacher."

"Of course. How have you been, Bellamy?"

"Fine." He glances at Clarke. "Am I interrupting something?"
"Of course not, you were here first. We're just going to the movies," she adds. "Apparently I haven't seen her in months and I'm letting our friendship die." All the tension that left his body is back, instantly, and it sucks, but it's also just a little bit encouraging. He and Lexa are spitting at each other like they're trying to mark their territory, and while she doesn't really approve of that as a general practice, she can't help being pleased that Bellamy seems to want to keep her. "You want to come?" she offers.

He actually looks confused. "What?"

"To the movie."

"Oh, uh--no, I'm supposed to meet O for dinner soon," he says. "That's why I was--" He gestures. "Anyway, yeah, uh--you guys have fun? I'll see you later?"

"Trivia tomorrow, right?" she offers, and he does smile at that.

"Trivia tomorrow. Have fun at the movie." He pauses. "Good to see you again, Lexa."

"You too," says Lexa. She waits until they're in private, and then asks, "So, how long has that been going on?"

Clarke gives the question some real consideration. "Eight years in June," she decides.

Lexa opens her mouth to protest, and then looks behind her shoulder at the coffee shop, like she's expecting Bellamy to be following them. Clarke glances back herself, just in case.

"I guess that sounds right," Lexa finally says, and Clarke lets herself smile.

*

He doesn't ask about Lexa on Thursday, but at this point, it's not really a surprise. Not asking about things is par for the course for them. He sits on the same side of the booth as she does and she lets herself brush up against his side a lot, which makes it feel like their relationship has regressed from its previous level of high-school romance to something more like middle school, but she'll take whatever she can get, at this point.

On Friday, she sets up dinner with her dad, the other person she's been avoiding since New Year's. It feels like she'd better get it over with now, in case he completely shatters her confidence again. She'd like to deal with that without hurting Bellamy, if at all possible.

In a lot of ways, the last eight years have been more trying for her relationship with her father than her mother. Clarke and Abby are both awkward and stubborn, and they've always butted heads. Realizing that her father wasn't infallible, seeing him have a tough time and make bad choices, having him not know how to be there for her--it's not bad, it hasn't destroyed their bond, but she's aware all the time now that both her parents are human and imperfect. It wasn't news, finding that out about her mother, but it was harder with her father.

But she's still missed him, and she still smiles as he folds her in his arms and asks, "So, when's graduation?"

"Sunday, but I'm not going."

He raises his eyebrows. "No?"

"No, I don't really care. I got the diploma, I'm not interested in the ceremony. My friends are doing
board gaming, so I'd rather do that."

"That sounds like a good way to celebrate." He pauses. "Is that what we're doing now? Is this a celebratory dinner, or is there another reason you wanted to see me?"

"You make it sound so sinister," Clarke protests. "But I did want to talk to you about something."

"There it is," says Jake. "What's up?"

"Do you remember what you told me when I was going to college and worried about my boyfriend?"

"That takes me back." He clucks his tongue. "I hope it was something wildly insightful that solved all your problems. But it was probably about using protection."

Clarke hides her smile. "You said you thought it wouldn't last."

"In my defense, it didn't. What's this about, Clarke?"

"You told me I wouldn't ever feel the same way about anyone else, but I'd love someone else as much someday. And--I never have."

"I know," he says. "And I'm sorry for that. But please don't tell me this is about being single. You're twenty-six, Clarke. You have plenty of time to meet someone. Did something happen?"

"Monty's dating Bellamy's best friend Miller, so I've been hanging out with him since New Year's. And--" She closes her eyes. "And I still--"

She feels her father's hand on hers, warm and rough, just a quick squeeze. "Do you think I'm going to be upset about this?" he asks, gentle. "You're reconnecting with someone you used to love. That's not a bad thing. I'm thrilled for you. Are the two of you dating again?"

"No, we're not. I thought maybe--I thought I screwed it up. That maybe I hurt him so much he'd never be interested again. But I really think he might be."

"That's great." He pauses. "Have you really been thinking about what I told you for this long? If I knew it was going to make so much of an impact, I would have tried to say something better. You should have let me rehearse it."

"It wasn't really you," Clarke admits. "I think it couldn't have lasted no matter what. But--I really wish it had, sometimes. It doesn't feel like a waste of time or anything, but--I had him when I was eighteen, you know? It would have been nice if I could have just held onto him."

"And maybe if you had, you two would have grown apart and gotten divorced by now."

His tone is so cheerful Clarke has to laugh. "You sound really excited about that."

"I'm just saying, maybe you could have made it work. But you didn't. So you should stop thinking about what you could have done differently then, and just figure out how to make it happen now."

"Okay, that was really good," she says. "Did you rehearse that one? Be honest."

"Maybe now I'm better at the advice thing, and you're better at the relationship thing. We've all grown and made ourselves better."

"I hope so," Clarke says.
"So, tell me about him. I don't remember much. But I hope I'm going to get to meet him soon."

For the first time, she lets herself think about that too. Bellamy meeting her father, seeing her mother again. Bellamy in her life, her whole life, in a way he's never been before, now that they're both independent adults.

It's a nice thought.

"Yeah," she says. "I hope so too."

*  

Clarke is the one who sends out the *gaming tomorrow??* group text the next day, and she gets three affirmative responses before Bellamy says, *Drill weekend.*

It's not the first time this has happened--he's in the reserves for a couple more years, and has drills one weekend a month--but it's the first time it's happened since her campaign to just talk to him like a normal person. So she opens up a text message just between the two of him and asks, *What do you do on drills?* and that turns into on-and-off texting when he has free time, which means she knows exactly when he gets back, and she still doesn't know what to do with it.

*Did you know I'm still in love with you?* doesn't seem like an appropriate thing to text someone.

She doesn't have a chance to really talk to him at trivia either, because he's running late, and he's a little distant at first, until she asks him about his job search and his Pokemon warlording, and his face clears into a smile, and they're friendly for the rest of the night, a team again.

They have no concrete plans to see each other over the weekend, but on Friday, before Clarke can worry about it too much, Jasper texts everyone: *SOS I need to get WASTED tonight,* which is one of those messages that's like a bat-signal for Bellamy. Whenever one of his friends is wasted, Bellamy will be there, making sure they drink enough water and make it home okay.

*You had me at WASTED,* Clarke replies, and Monty immediately counters, *That's the second to last word of the text, so that's not really saying much.*

Bellamy adds, *You had me at "to." That word really does it for me.*

Clarke switches to her text chain with him. *We all know it's the word "need."*

There's a brief pause, and then he replies, *Shut up, Clarke.*

She takes a screenshot of the conversation and hopes it's not going to hurt soon.

Gina's behind the bar when Clarke gets there, and Jasper and Raven are already seated across from her. Clarke orders a cider and puts a ten in the tip jar, which is her current way of dealing with her mild guilt about the whole thing with Bellamy, and then settles in to hear about how the girl Jasper likes doesn't like him back, and now he's worried about how awkward work will be and also thinks he's going to die alone.

*I think dying alone gets a bad rap,* says Raven, and Jasper glares at her. *That's how basically all of us are going to die. You should just lean into it.*

*Of course you'd say that. You're going to hook up with Gina.* He makes a face. *Oh, sorry, spoilers, Gina.*
"No, I got that one," she says. "You're fine."

"Clarke's my buddy here," Jasper continues. "Clarke's also going to die alone."

"That's not actually my plan."

"If Clarke dies alone, she has no one to blame but herself," Raven adds, which is absolutely true.

"So, what happened?" Clarke prompts him, and that's all he needs to go for the next ten minutes.

Bellamy shows up about half an hour after, when Clarke is tipsy but not drunk, and Monty vacates the seat next to her so he can take it.

"What's the problem?" he asks, low.

"Jasper's office crush turned him down, so now he thinks no one will ever love him."

"Yeah, that's how it works." He smiles at Gina and gets a drink for himself, but then he's got his phone out and his fingers are flying over the keyboard. "Sorry, O's having a crisis too."

"Is her head okay?"

The question feels weird once she's said it, given it's been over a month, but Bellamy smiles. "Yeah, totally unrelated. Her boss is a dick, so she's at work rage-texting me and Lincoln."

"That sucks."

"Yeah. So I'm tagging you in for primary Jasper duty," he says. "Just let me know if you need me."

Monty is actually the expert on Jasper care, so he takes point, and Clarke goes along with whatever he suggests. They play darts and yell at the TV, and Jasper seems pretty well distracted until he drops his head onto the bar and says, "You know what happened? I waited too long."

Clarke glances at Monty, who raises one shoulder. "What do you mean?" she asks.

"I should have said something sooner. But I waited too long, so now I'm in the friend zone, and I'll never get out."

On the one hand, Clarke knows that Jasper is sad and hurting, and that's why he's complaining about this, but--god, she hates that entire concept. "Okay," she says. "No. The friend zone isn't a thing. That's not real."

He frowns. "Yes it is."

"No, it's not. It's sexist and stupid and it's based on this idea that--relationships are tests, and if you haven't told a girl you're into her by a certain date, you fail and lose access to her magical vagina. That's not how it works. I guess sometimes, you can miss the opportunity to date someone, but it doesn't work like that. The timing can be wrong, but I've never wanted to date someone and then stopped because they took too long to make a move."

"You don't want to date people anyway," he says. "So you don't count."

"I don't want to date everyone, that's different from not wanting to date anyone." Her voice catches, and she's suddenly aware that Bellamy is sitting two stools down from her, and his fingers have stopped moving on his phone.
It's maybe not the bravest way to do this, but it's at least a good opportunity.

"Look, there's no time limit on feelings," she goes on, making her voice a little gentle. "If she said she just wants to be friends, it's probably not because she liked you at first and then stopped."

"Unless your personality is just that shitty," Monty adds. "Sorry, bro. The hard truths."

Clarke smiles a little, taps her finger against her cider. "When I'm in love with someone, I want to be friends with them too," she says. "I can't fall in love with someone I don't want to be friends with, not really. But--I don't stop being in love with them either. It doesn't matter how long it takes. And, okay, maybe the other person doesn't feel the same. You can miss a chance, I get that. But that's not the same. If I was interested in someone, and I thought they weren't, then, yeah, I'd try to stop being interested. But if a year or two years or three years later, we still knew each other, and they said something? I wouldn't say, no, we're friends now. I'd go for it."

"So she was never interested," Jasper says.

"Probably not. Sorry." She sighs. "Look, it's--I hate the way people complain about that, because it sucks when you're in love with someone and they don't want anything to do with you. Friendship isn't the consolation prize, it's so much better. And she might change her mind someday. I'm not saying to get your hopes up," she adds. "But if you like her, why don't you want to be friends with her? That's great."

"Because I want to get laid," Jasper says, crashing back down onto the counter top with enough force that they all jump.

"Okay," says Monty. "I think that's our cue to take him home." He looks at Miller. "He can crash on your couch, right?"

"See? You're going to get laid," Jasper mutters, and Miller rolls his eyes.

"Yeah. Bellamy, you coming or staying?"

"Coming, one sec," says Bellamy. He stands and stretches. "Clarke, you got everyone else?"

"It's just Raven," she says. "I think I can handle Raven."

He looks at her for a second, like he wants to say something more, but he just shakes his head. "Cool. Talk to you later."

Once they're gone, Raven says, "Are you ever going to tell me what's up with you guys?"

"We were in love, but I went to college and we lived four hours apart and everyone said we weren't going to last, so I broke up with him," says Clarke. "We probably wouldn't have."

"He said you guys came from really different backgrounds," Gina offers. Clarke jerks, and Gina gives her a sheepish smile. "Sorry. He's hot, I thought it was going somewhere! And you totally spooked him. So I figured I should ask what was up. He said you guys went out for a few months before you started college, and then you figured out you were too different and broke up with him."

She rubs her face. "I screwed up that breakup more than I thought."

"Who's good at breaking up when they're nineteen?" Raven asks, all pragmatism. "That was a nice speech tonight, though."
"Thanks. I hope Jasper appreciated it."

"Yeah, Jasper," she says. "Home?"

She lets out a long breath. It's out there now, right? Bellamy's smart, he can read between the lines. She still loves him, she'd still say yes if he asked her out, but if he's not interested, she wants to be his friend, and she hated pretending he didn't exist.

The ball's not really in his court now, and she still needs to talk to him. But it feels like a good baseline to have established.

"Home," she agrees.

*

Clarke didn't really get very drunk last night, so she wakes up feeling largely fine, drags herself into the kitchen and makes a truly staggering amount of coffee, since she and Raven are both caffeine addicts, and pulls up her email to see if she's got anything about the new traveling exhibit they want to put in at work. The email chain about it is getting increasingly hilariously passive aggressive, and she's enjoying it hugely.

She has three updates on that, but she barely notices them, because there's also a message from Bellamy, sent just after midnight. He hasn't put in a subject, but she can see the preview: *I'm assuming you guys made it home okay, you didn't seem that drunk, but maybe don't read this until you're alone. Shit, that sounds ominous,* and her hand flies up to her mouth, covering a nervous bubble of laughter even though there's no one around to hear it.

With some effort, she makes herself wait for her coffee to be done, and then takes the phone into her room and closes the door. It's not even ten a.m., Raven won't be up for an hour, but better safe than sorry.

She pulls up her email on her computer, and it *still* takes another minute before her hands stop shaking enough to open it and read:

*I'm assuming you guys made it home okay, you didn't seem that drunk, but maybe don't read this until you're alone.*

*Shit, that sounds ominous. I'm just guessing you don't want Raven reading over your shoulder. And I wrote most of this at the bar, so I'm blaming alcohol if I misinterpreted things. And now I'm sending this before I get any more sober and change my mind.*

*This is just getting worse. Here's bar Bellamy:*  

*If you're not talking about me right now, you can stop reading this. If you're talking about Lexa or some person I've never met, that's cool, and I hope it works out for you. I really do.*

*You know what I think about a lot? Back in January, when I still didn't know how to look at you, when you got drunk and told me you wanted me to be okay and happy. Because that's what I want for you too. I wanted it even then, and I was still so fucked up about you that I thought I'd never be able to talk to you like a normal person again. So seriously, if you're talking about someone else, I hope you tell them and they feel the same way, and they're an idiot if they don't.*

*But what I really want is for you to be talking about me, because I'm so fucking in love with you. I*
don’t think I ever stopped being in love with you. I wanted to, because I didn’t think I’d ever see you again. Miller told me you asked about me right after I enlisted, and the next time I was home on a Harvard break I tried to find you, but you didn’t come back. So I thought you just wanted to say goodbye to me, and you didn’t really care.

Fuck, this doesn’t matter. What matters is that everything you said about how you felt, I feel the same way about you. I missed you so much, and if you aren't interested in anything more than friendship, I’m still so fucking grateful we can be friends again. But I still love you, and if you figure out in a year, or two years, or three years, that you love me too, I’m going to say yes.

I’ll always say yes.

For a second, she can't breathe, and then she has to read it again, and again, her eyes darting between every time he says it, every time he tells her how he feels, every precious word.

She stars it, and saves it to her Bellamy folder, and reads it again, and then she downs her coffee, throws on some clothes, and doesn't even remember to leave a note for Raven before she's out the door.

*

Murphy opens the door, because of course he does. Bellamy and Miller have three other housemates: Roan, the owner, who is some kind of rich lobbyist who owns a bunch of property and drinks like a frat boy, Echo, Roan's cousin who lives in the basement and only emerges to glare at them when they’re making too much noise, and Murphy, the pot dealer/keg guy from the New Year's party, who from what Clarke can tell spends most of his time wasted on a bizarre cocktail of illicit substances.

No epic romance has ever involved interaction with John Murphy, she's pretty sure, but at least someone was home and conscious enough to open the door.

"Which one are you looking for?" he asks, flat. "There's one dead on the couch, if you're into that."

She gives the question due consideration. "How dead?"

Murphy shrugs. "You can check if you want."

"I'll get him some water," she says. "But I'm actually looking for Bellamy."

"Probably in his room," says Murphy. "Knock yourself out."

Jasper's passed out but breathing, so Clarke leaves a glass of water on the table next to him and then makes her way upstairs. She knows which room is Bellamy's only because she's passed it on the way to the bathroom, seen the picture of Octavia on his desk and the quilt his mother made him when he was a kid on his bed.

The door's closed, and he might not even be awake. She should have brought coffee. Anything. She should have texted him.

But she's already here, so she gives the door one sharp knock; if he doesn't respond, she can always go downstairs and dick around on her phone until he wakes up. Which isn't weird at all.

And, really, it shouldn't be, because he's the one who sent her an email in the middle of the night about how he's in love with her, so he's not going to be upset that she dropped everything to run over
and tell him she feels the same. That's got to be the opposite of a problem.

He opens the door with his hair a mess, his glasses crooked on his face, wearing a pair of plaid pajama pants and a tight white t-shirt. The look of confusion melts at the sight of her, and he has to swallow to find his voice. "Hi."

"Hi," she says. "Can I come in?"

He clears his throat. "Yeah. Of course."

The room is cozy, decorated in blues and greens, with a thick carpet and a ton of books. There's laundry piled on a chair, and it makes her smile, remembering that first night, when he made her wait in the kitchen while he frantically tidied.

The click of the door makes her jump, and then it's just the two of them, alone, and she realizes she didn't actually plan out what to say. She just spent the train ride out staring at his email, reading it over and over, and now that she's here, she finds she doesn't know how her voice works either.

Finally, she manages, "I don't think I've really been in love with you for eight years."

His mouth quirks up in a small smile. "Okay."

"I mean, I never got over you, but it wasn't--I don't know what you were like. I don't know what you were doing. So I don't think I could have been in love with you. But I loved you before, and I love you now, and I've never--no one else has ever even come close. You're it. You're all I want."

The smile bursts into a grin, and then he's laughing, relieved and happy all at once. "Thank fucking god," he says, and Clarke just throws herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck and burying her face there, trying not to cry. But he's holding on to her too, just as tight, with his own face pressed against her hair, so she thinks he'd understand.

"Sorry," she manages, and he laughs again.

"I honestly have no idea what you're apologizing for. This is the best possible way this morning could have gone for me." His hand rubs warm circles against her back. "The last five months have sucked, right?"

"No. Definitely not. I wouldn't give up a second. Just--I missed you so much."

"Yeah. I know exactly what you mean."

She lets herself take a second to breathe him in, the still-familiar sent of him. The same shampoo, the same soap. The same Bellamy, eight years older, familiar without being the same. Everything she's been missing. "Did I wake you up?" she asks.

"Not really. I was lying in bed, freaking out that I actually sent that email."

"I'm really glad you did." She exhales, pulls back so she can look at him. He's still smiling, and it's so much, being this close to him again, being in his arms. It's still kind of unbelievable, that she spent all those months not touching him, that she actually resisted him. "I didn't get much sleep either. Do you want to take a nap?"

"A nap?" he teases. But he must actually think about it, because he follows it up with, "Yeah, that actually sounds great."
Clarke toes off her shoes and then, after a second of hesitation, loses her jeans too. It's not like he hasn't seen her in less, and she's pretty sure they're going to have sex as soon as they wake up, so there's not much point in modesty.

Bellamy's watching, eyes dark, and she offers him a small smile. "Sleeping in jeans sucks."

"I wasn't objecting." His tongue darts out to wet his lips, and then he's leaning down, pressing his mouth against hers, soft and sweet, like he's not expecting anything more. Just like he wants to check.

It's just as good as she remembered.

He smiles again when he pulls back, tugs her toward the bed, and they settle in on their sides, Clarke still snuggled against his chest, his arms still around her. Her eyes slide closed of their own accord, and she falls asleep with his lips pressed against the top of her head, his fingers gently carding through her hair.

*

When she wakes up, her phone is buzzing in her jeans, and she groans and fumbles to grab it without leaving Bellamy's embrace. He groans himself, irritable, but does shift with her, obliging, just as unwilling to give her up.

"Raven," she says, checking the display. "She was asleep when I left."

"Huh." He presses his lips against her shoulder. "You should pick up. Or at least text her."

"Yeah." She swipes to answer the call. "Hi, sorry."

"Where the fuck are you? I wasn't going to call, but you were ignoring all my texts."

She considers, but it's not like Raven doesn't know. Or isn't going to find out. "I'm with Bellamy."

There's no response for so long that Clarke checks the connection, only to see that she hung up.

It's about what she deserves, honestly.

She checks the texts while she's at it, which start with, If you're at the store get me some OJ and progress to On a scale from one to ten, how dead are you right now?, which was about what she expected. She sends a quick sorry! and puts the phone back on Bellamy's nightstand, twisting around in his arms so she can look at him. His eyes are soft and warm and steady on her, and she's not sure when she'll stop smiling. It feels like it's going to take a while.

"I really should have left a note."

"Bellamy sent me a really over-dramatic email, I need to deal with that," he teases.

She lets her fingers trail up his chest, an old, familiar feeling, and smiles when he shivers a little. "It's a good thing I didn't see it last night, I would have gotten a taxi and woken you up." She smiles. "I've been trying to figure out how to tell you since the camping trip."

He groans. "Jesus. I was about ready to ask you out to dinner at the coffee shop when Lexa showed up."

"I never lost touch with Lexa," Clarke says, fond. "If I wanted to be dating her, I would be. She's got a girlfriend right now, Costia. They're pretty serious."
He tucks a few strands of hair behind her ear, expression wistful. "I was so fucking jealous of her. When we were dating. She knew all your friends and all your Harvard stuff. I was sure your parents loved her. She fit into your life and I knew I was never going to."

"Bellamy," she says, helpless. "It didn't matter. Not like that. I thought—I hated seeing how awkward it was for you, I felt so shitty putting you through all that judgement and pretension. It was never about you. But I was nineteen, I didn't know how to navigate that."

"I know," he says. "I didn't either." He gives her a wry smile "Honestly, it probably would have fucking sucked, if we stayed together back then. Four years of that would have been so hard. Four months was bad enough."

"Yeah." She lets out a breath. "But you're here, and I'm here, and I love you, so do you want to get dinner?"

He laughs. "Fuck, dinner's not for hours. I don't want to wait that long."

She grins, and that's all he encouragement he needs. His hand slides into her hair and he's kissing her again, firm this time, purposeful, and Clarke whimpers and rolls onto her back, tugging him on top of her, opening her mouth for him. It's sensory overload, after so long, and she wants to touch everywhere, to feel everything, barely knows where to start. It's the best kind of overwhelming, it's perfect.

"Not that we have to--" he starts, against her mouth, and she wraps one leg around his and bites his bottom lip.

"Were you listening to all those conversations about how I'm single and never get laid?"

He grins. "Intently."

"Good," she says, and tugs his shirt over his head.

She knew he'd filled out since they dated, but it's still a lot to process, all those miles of firm, lean skin and muscle, and her fingers dance over his chest again.

"I was really pissed when Miller told me you joined the navy," she says. "Like--I couldn't figure out why, and I spent so long googling to see if you were going to be in active war zones or whatever. But I have to say, I really appreciate the bonus muscle."

"I know the only reason you're into me is that I work out, yeah," he teases, and presses his mouth under her jaw, right where it meets her neck. "I joined because of you. Not like--you were right. I wanted to go to school, and that was the way I could do it."

"Yeah. I'm glad you did." She smirks. "This is good background, but you know you could be getting me naked right now, right?"

He slides his mouth down her throat. "Sorry, I thought you were still admiring my seamen body."

"Don't call yourself a seamen when we're about to have sex, it makes me want to make bad jokes. When, again, we could be getting naked and having actual sex."

"I don't stock condoms," he says. "Did you bring any?"

"No." She pauses. "Are you clean?"
"Yeah, but I'm really not ready to be a father."

"I've got the implant," she says. "And I'm clean too, so--"

He pulls back to stare at her, eyes searching her face for something. Apparently he finds it, because he leans back in, kisses her soft and slow, and slides his hands under her shirt to pull it off. "So, I love you," he tells her, almost casual. "I'm pretty sure you're it for me."

"Yeah," she says. "Me too."

"Just getting that on the record."

She laughs as he reaches behind her to get her bra. "It's on the record. I've got the email. Do you need me to reply so you've got documentation or--"

"I'm going to eat you out now," he declares. "So you can just shut up."

Her laugh turns into a moan as his mouth finds her breast, the feel of his lips and the slight scrape of his stubble still familiar after all these years, still just as good as it ever was. Her hand finds his and she tangles their fingers together, wanting to be close in all the ways they can be. She can't get enough of being able to touch him.

"Fuck, I missed you," he murmurs into her skin. "You're all I've been able to think about for months."

"Me too," she says, "I was so scared I--"

He presses a kiss to her breast. "I know." And then he's sliding down, trailing more wet kisses down her stomach as he tugs her underwear down. "I'm probably pretty rusty," he says, with a quirk of his mouth. "But I hear you're pretty hard up."

"Please," she says, which makes him stop, for some unfathomable reason. But then he leans back up and kisses her lips, face gone serious.

"I've got you," he says, kisses her one more time, and then he's back between her legs, pressing kisses against her thighs until she's writhing again, and he finally presses his mouth to her clit, teasing it with his tongue, getting a feel for her again.

"Fuck," she gasps. "Bellamy, yeah, just--"

He lets out a soft laugh and squeezes her knee, and then his fingers are sliding inside her, a little hesitant, as he remembers how to move and what she likes. Which is at least easy, because she likes him, and nothing else has ever been as good for her as he is.

She lets him get her off once and then pulls him up, kissing him wet and dirty until he laughs into her mouth. "You know we can kiss any time, right?"

"I know. But that's not what I want right now." She pushes him onto his back and takes a second to appreciate his tousled hair, the bright, disbelieving smile on his face, and then lets her gaze slide down, taking in all the bare skin, his dick hard between his legs, everything. "Lube?"

He rolls over to grab it out of a drawer, and his eyes slide shut on a moan as she slicks him up. It's an effort to not let her fingers linger, to not relearn the feel of him in her hand, but they have plenty of time for that later, and right now she wants him in her, wants to feel like he's hers.
Because he is. He always has been.

"Ready?" she asks.

He laughs. "You have no idea."

She bites her lip as she takes him in. She's got toys, gets herself off with some approximation of a
dick whenever she's in the mood, but it's different like this, his hands flying up to her hips, his mouth
parting on a gasp. It's so, so much better.

She takes a second to catch her breath, once he's all the way in, and then she leans down, presses a
kiss to his lips, and starts to move. It takes them a few tries to find the rhythm again, but then
suddenly it clicks, and its perfect, and she gets the angle just right, so every time he thrusts in, she's
gasping and shaking, the orgasm building from her toes, warming her whole body, building until she
comes with a sharp cry buried against his throat, and he fucks her through it, flips them over so he
can get a better angle, and she somehow manages to get off one more time when he does, either
because she's been really, really sexually frustrated or because his dick is magic.

Or true love, maybe. Definitely some combination of the three.

He collapses on top of her with a breathless laugh, presses his lips under her ear.

"I remember we took a lot longer to have sex last time," he teases.

"Yeah, but this time I knew how good it was." She turns her head so she can kiss him again, and
they lose the thread of conversation for a while as they trade long, lazy kisses, relearning the feel of
each other's mouths.

This time, it's his phone that buzzes, and he drags himself away to check it. Then he hands it to her,
flopping down on his back with a huff of a laugh.

Miller has texted: I assume Clarke is in there because you usually keep the volume down on your
porn. We're getting pancakes if you want to rub your relationship status in Jasper's face. I want to
see if he cries.

Clarke buries her face against his neck to laugh again. "I should have thought of that."

"What, keeping quiet, or Jasper's relationship angst? Because if you tell me we can't date because of
him, I'm going to cry."

"Yeah, that's not what I was saying." She pokes his ribs. "But we maybe didn't have to hook up in
the house where he's sleeping off his heartbreak hangover."

"I've been heartbroken for way longer than he has," Bellamy says, and gives her one more quick kiss
before he rolls off the bed. "I can give him some pointers."

"I'm sure he'd love that." She hooks her bra back on and catches her shirt when he tosses it to her.
Her underwear are a little harder to find, but they're both dressed and presentable in no time, and
Bellamy ducks his head for one more kiss.

"So, pancakes?" he asks. "That's like buying you dinner."

She slides her hand into his and squeezes. "Pancakes sound great, yeah. I'm starving."

*
Bellamy's twenty-ninth birthday falls on a Friday, and Miller, of course, insists on having a party.

"Haven't we moved past this as a group?" Bellamy asks. He's got his head in Clarke's lap and his arm over his eyes, and Clarke leans down to press her lips against his forehead. "Can't we just not?"

"It's not even much of a party, asshole," says Miller. "I'm sorry we love you and want to celebrate the fact that you were born."

"You should be," he mutters. "I'm not going to have any fun."

"You know, this time last year, I would have believed you, but getting back together with Clarke really put a dent in your grumpy-old-man persona. You smile, like, all the time now. It's disgusting. It's like I don't even know anymore. If I didn't know how much sex does for your mood, I'd assume you were a pod person."

"I promise I will glare through the whole party."

"I bet you fifty bucks I get a picture of you smiling."

"Deal," says Bellamy, and they shake on it. "Hey, Clarke, don't come to this party and I'll spend the fifty bucks on a dinner date."

"I'm not going to skip out on my boyfriend's birthday party just so you can win a bet about being miserable," she says, fond. "Sorry."

"It's like you don't even love me."

"It's just like that."

But the party itself really isn't that bad, even Bellamy has to admit. It's possible he just has a grudge against the word party, because it actually is basically indistinguishable from any other Friday night, aside from being ostensibly in his honor. All the regular crew shows up--Miller and Monty, Lincoln and Octavia, Raven and Gina, Niyah with her girlfriend, whom they've met a few times, and Jasper with his, who is new to the group and clearly a bit terrified--and they drink and play games and trash-talk each other a lot. Monty got some new game he's excited to try out, Clarke creates endless chaos in Mario Kart, and Jasper's girlfriend Maya turns out to be a total shark at basically everything. It's great.

At eleven, as is traditional, Miller stands, clinks his glass, and says, "Okay, we're going to say nice things about Bellamy!"

"No we're not!" Bellamy calls back. "Everyone can just shut up!"

"Dude, you've been my best friend for twenty years. You were nine when we met. Some assholes were playing keep-away with my backpack and you helped me get it back, and I've been stuck with you ever since. It was pretty rough in there for a few years, and I was worried you were just going to mope yourself to death. So I'm really glad your life is finally where you wanted it to be. I'm really happy for you."

There's a pause, and then Bellamy wraps his arm around Miller's neck and presses a sloppy kiss to his temple. "Yeah, I love you too. Can I leave yet, or do you guys have to toast me first?"

"You literally live here."

"Raven's birthday present to me is sleeping over at Gina's tonight, so I'm getting the fuck out of
"Yeah, that sounds right. Okay, Bellamy's leaving his own birthday party to go get laid. We're two-for-two on him doing this when he dates Clarke, so I'm pretty sure he's never going to stay at one of his own birthday parties until the end for the rest of his life."

"That's the plan."

"Fuck, I have no idea why we're friends," Miller says, and holds his glass high. "To Bellamy!"

Everyone toasts and cheers, and Bellamy rolls his eyes, thanks them, and cocks his head at Clarke.

"You know I'm not going to say no to going home and getting laid."

"One of the many reasons I love you."

They grab the train back, and Clarke twines their fingers together, rests her head on his shoulder. "I like your birthday parties."

"Yeah? That makes one of us."

"You know you're not fooling anyone, right?"

"I'm aware." He clears his throat. "Miller's not wrong. The last few have been pretty shitty. All my best birthdays are with still with you."

She has to smile. "Yeah, I'm looking forward to mine a lot more this year. And New Year's Eve. I had such a grudge against New Year's Eve."

He lets out a soft huff of laughter. "Yeah, me too. But I'm trying to say something sappy, so just let me get through it, okay?"

"I do like when you're sappy on your birthday."

He squeezes her fingers. "Yeah, I was pretty pathetic last time. But--it's still true. My life's so much better with you in it."

"I know. Mine too."

"I really don't want to have another birthday without you. Never again."

She leans up to peck him on the mouth, even though they're on the train. It's basically deserted, and kissing in public is a birthday tradition, at this point. "I don't either. I'm not planning to."

"Good." He rests his cheek against her hair. "Just--wanted to put that out there."

"I'm pretty sure we're on the same page with that one, Bellamy. I'm not losing you again."

"Cool. Can't wait for thirty, then."

Her eyes drift shut, and she cuddles a little closer. He squeezes her fingers and she thinks that this is it. This is the feeling she never found with anyone else, that nothing else ever compared to.

This is what she wants, and she's going to keep it this time.

"Yeah," she says. "I bet it's going to be a really good year."
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