Coffee Eyes and Little White Lies



CLAIRE SUMMERS

COFFEE EYES AND LITTLE WHITE LIES

A BLEND & BREW NOVEL

BOOK I

CLAIRE SUMMERS

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It takes a village. This book is for mine.

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I

CHARLOTTE

CHARLOTTE DAVENPORT HAD long since stopped believing in soulmates.

Not their existence in general. Perfect matches surrounded her in all directions. Just not in the cards for her. She made peace with it. Mostly. Though, it was becoming difficult not to feel the ache so close to her twin sister, Elizabeth's, engagement party.

"Oh. Oh yes," Lilah said, drawing her attention to where she pulled a slinky black dress off the rack.

Gears whirled behind Lilah's hazel eyes gleaming with conspiratorial delight. Though it would do wonders for her younger sister's figure, it remained vastly inappropriate for the engagement party. This event would surely be the talk of well-to-do circles for the next several months and not the moment for risks.

"No," Charlotte shook her head, though not at all shocked Lilah would lean toward something attention-grabbing. "You're not wearing something so provocative to Lizzie's engagement party."

Lilah smirked, raising her chin. Light wrapped around her jawline, highlighting her softly sculpted features. Her defined facial structure and petite frame were the only attributes Lilah inherited from their mother that provided any sort of resemblance to herself and Lizzie. Everything else came from Lilah's father.

"But think of it," Lilah continued, rubbing the satin between her thumb and forefinger. "Everyone wearing summer colors scattered across the lawn sipping their champagne. Then, I arrive... in this. It would be spectacular."

Lilah's hazel eyes glinted before she amended, "*I* would be spectacular."

"Yes," Charlotte mused, one smoothly arched eyebrow rising as her tone took on a sternness she so rarely gave her baby sister. By the time she turned three, Lilah had them all wrapped around her finger. "Then Sasha will never forgive you for outshining her and Lizzie."

"Well, can't have that," Lilah said, flipping the dress around and holding it to herself. "But I was *actually* considering this for the rehearsal dinner. I love our bridesmaid dresses, but I need at least one showstopper."

"Go get the bride's approval."

Charlotte's tone left little room for argument. Determined her twin's wedding would be perfect, Charlotte might already be guilty of policing everyone involved. But if anyone deserved the perfect day, it was Elizabeth Davenport.

"Lizzie!"

Lilah tossed her blonde curls over her shoulder and sauntered toward the dressing room, heels clicking against the floor. Charlotte trailed after her, settling into one of the chic armchairs outside the dressing room next to the alcove of floor-to-ceiling mirrors. This particular high-end boutique became a frequent stop during their shopping sprees, as it always revealed at least one piece one of them couldn't live without.

"Let's see your favorites," Lilah called.

The heavy curtain's rings slid across the bronze pole, announcing Lizzie's appearance in a dusty blue dress. The fitted bust dipped low enough to reveal a tasteful amount of cleavage. Delicate fabric accentuated her tall, willowy frame. Layers of sheer organza gathered around her waist before flowing down to flutter around her knees, providing a floating quality to the ensemble which softened the contrast of their shared sculpted bone structure, olive skin, and raven hair.

"Beautiful," Charlotte confirmed with an approving nod.

"I have found three that must come home with me," Lizzie stated, spinning this way and that as she studied her own reflection.

Her pale green eyes were the only difference in their otherwise shared appearance, subtle though it may be. Where Charlotte's eyes gleamed a startling ocean blue, Lizzie's shifted toward a shimmering sea foam green. A feature most people never noticed. What they picked up on were the distinct differences in personalities. Where Charlotte was reserved and often

kept to herself, Lizzie was outgoing and loved people. Charlotte gardened, collected rare books, and played the piano. Lizzie's cello sat untouched in the back of her closet, but she almost always took some kind of class to get her out of the house on her days off.

"It's your wedding, so I think if something makes you happy—get it!" Lilah encouraged, snapping a photo of Lizzie striking a pose in front of the array of mirrors. "Finally getting married. After all these years..."

"Listen here, you little whipper-snapper. One more comment about my age, and you're toast!"

Green eyes narrowed in a warning glare though her tone remained playful.

Lilah deadpanned.

"You make it really hard to avoid such comments when you say things like, 'whippersnapper.'"

All three of them burst into laughter. *True.* At thirty-six, Lizzie was considered late to married life. But she and Charlotte led fulfilling lives with successful careers. Lizzie was a talented pediatric surgeon while Charlotte created and ran her own successful software company, Compose. Success came with the Davenport name and excellence was expected.

"Of the three of us," Lilah mused. "I used to think Charlotte would get married first. But I guess you're the winner."

Lizzie ran her hands over her waist to rest on her hips, turning to appraise herself from another angle.

"There's still time. She's a lesbian. She could meet The One tomorrow and U-Haul." She threw Charlotte a wink over her shoulder as she reached for the dress draped over Lilah's arm.

Charlotte curled an eyebrow at her twin, resisting the urge to roll her eyes, one comment away from chewing the inside of her cheek. Lizzie still carried buckets of hope Charlotte would find someone. It didn't matter who either. Cute waitresses at dinner. The nurses who worked her floor. Attractive women they passed on the street. Actresses on TV. Or, even coffee shop baristas… At least one of them hadn't given up hope. Understandably, Lizzie wanted the same happiness she found for Charlotte as well.

"Are you bringing the boy to my engagement party, Lilah?" Lizzie asked.

Her mouth gaped at the cut of the dress, but passed it back to Lilah, shooing her toward the dressing room.

“No,” Lilah sighed, reaching for the velvet curtain. “I broke up with him. He was sweet but he wasn’t the one.”

The metal rings slid against the pole again as Lilah shrugged like it were just a small thing, but pride swelled in Charlotte’s chest. At twenty-four, Lilah had come a long way since graduating college when every soul who so much as looked her way could be *the one*. Her baby was growing up.

“Poor What-Was-His-Name,” Lizzie teased, giving a little triumphant fist pump while Charlotte put both her hands together and looked to the ceiling, sending a silent prayer of gratitude to whoever ran things upstairs.

The boy seemed about as smart as a box of rocks.

“His luscious locks will be missed.”

“What about you, Charlotte?” Lilah inquired from inside the dressing room.

“What about me?” Charlotte asked, fighting a frown, she knew exactly where this was going.

“Who are you bringing as a date?” Lilah clarified.

The question chafed more than it should.

Lizzie stifled a snicker.

“Yeah, *who* are you bringing?”

Charlotte flipped her twin the bird, leaning back in the armchair, fingers drumming against the leather.

“I hadn’t thought I needed to bring anyone.”

Lizzie raised an eyebrow, folding and unfolding her arms, running a hand through her hair. Fidgeting. Her sister didn’t fidget unless something weighed on her.

“You don’t *have* to bring anyone. But Victoria will be there as you well know.”

Charlotte grimaced at the mention of her former fiancée. Three years and Victoria’s name still landed like stone dropped into still water, creating ripples she couldn’t stop. Sasha’s maid of honor and a permanent fixture in the landscape of her life whether she wanted it or not, which she decidedly did not.

“All the aunties will be there too. You’ll be a sitting duck without a date!” Lilah squeaked, poking her head out from behind the curtain.

“And Victoria—that bitch—will be waiting to pounce,” Lizzie added under her breath.

As her twin, Lizzie remained privy to every detail. She knew how Victoria had needled at Charlotte’s need for control, picked at her desire for perfection, doing just about anything she could to provoke some reaction then shaming her for having any feelings at all. Charlotte hated her own temper. Her greatest flaw. And Victoria made sure she knew it.

“There isn’t—” Charlotte began.

“Don’t finish that sentence, you absolute ninny,” Lizzie cut her off, hands coming to rest on her hips, voice low.

“We’ve been over this, Beth. I’m not interested in pursuing anything serious.”

“I call bullshit.”

“I’m living my best single life. I’m thinking about getting a cat, maybe two.”

“You should take one of mama’s dogs. The number is getting excessive again,” Lizzie mumbled, shaking her head and refocusing her attention. “I’m not letting you become some dusty old spinster cat lady. No. Absolutely not.”

Charlotte’s glare was hot enough to melt a glacier, but Lizzie never balked.

“There is no *letting* me do anything. I’m not interested in going down that road again. That’s simply the reality.”

“But, Twinnie...”

“Elizabeth. Leave it.”

Lizzie gasped, one hand flying to her chest, the other wagging back and forth in disapproval.

“How dare you. Don’t full name me.”

“Beth. Drop it.”

“Can’t,” Lizzie crossed her arms over her chest. “Not everyone is going to be like Victoria—that skank.”

Charlotte exhaled slowly. Logically, she knew that. Had paid a perfectly good therapist a considerable sum to help her know that. It changed very little about the fact that her heart grew walls and she developed the good sense of a woman who had learned, at some cost, to stop gambling on her love life.

Lizzie softened, moving to perch on the arm of Charlotte's chair, close enough for their arms to touch.

"Just be open. You never know when lightning is going to strike."

A pair of warm eyes and a dimple on either side of a beaming smile moved through her mind unbidden, the way they had a habit of doing for the last few months. And the bruised part of her that was still, despite everything, foolishly and inconveniently hopeful… wondered if lightning had already done just that.

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2

ALI

ALI LOVED OPENING the coffee shop, even though she couldn't be considered a morning person. Leaving the cozy warmth of her bed seemed a daily tragedy. Ever since she could remember, her dreams manifested vividly and full of untold wonders; while the monotonous drudgery of her typical workday lacked the same luster. Waking up and seizing the day never seemed her strong suit... until recently. Every morning at 7:05AM, Charlotte Davenport would walk through the door of the Blend & Brew and give her a smile dazzling enough to make her insides fizz.

Boston was the fifth—no, sixth—city she'd lived in over the last ten years. Finding a place to call home existed as her own personal mission. Something always seemed to be missing in every city. Ever since her mother died, that is. Each new location seemed to hold a spark; but inevitably it would wink out, leaving her with a loneliness that never fully eased.

She made her arrival in Boston just after Christmas with her most cherished possessions: her cat, Willow, all her art supplies, and a new tattoo etched into her skin. A few days later, she landed a job at the perfect, quiet coffee shop.

Originally, she planned to focus on her art for the majority of the week and work a few closing or midday shifts. But everything changed when during her second week, she covered an opener's morning shifts. Halfway through the week, Charlotte Davenport glided through the door and ordered two extra shots of espresso in her latte, leaving Ali thunderstruck because the woman was breathtaking. Bone structure carved from the finest marble

featuring high cheekbones and a jawline most people would kill for. Ocean eyes churning with hidden emotion and shifting intelligence. The crypts and furrows in her irises creating a starburst pattern seemed to twinkle when a sensual smirk tugged at her full lips.

Seeing her striding through the door again the next day and the next became something to look forward to. And when the time came to switch back to evenings, Ali asked to open in the mornings instead. The CEO brightened her mornings Monday through Thursday for almost six months, modeling an endless presentation of professionally tailored suits and fashionable business attire. The first time she appeared with her hair down in its natural state, Ali forgot how to breathe. Disguised by an array of elegant updos, the sight of the inky cascade of sleek waves had Ali itching to run her fingers through it.

In the second week, playful banter and conversation ensued after overcoming her starstruck speechlessness. Something like an acquaintanceship sprouted between them after the third week.

So yes, Ali enjoyed mornings. But not because she was a morning person.

The gentle melodies of Wren's usual choice in playlist filtered through the air, blending with the ever-present aroma of ground coffee beans. Wren started the same week as Ali and the two hit it off as friends.

"What're you fixin' her today?" Wren asked, halfway through brewing the second batch of ice coffee.

Ali froze midway through her mixing.

"What do you mean?"

Looking up, she eyed the empty shop. Tucked into a row of small boutiques, they got a decent amount of foot traffic. Exposed brick, wooden beams, and hardwood floors created a very cozy atmosphere.

"Oh, I don't know, the knockout that comes in every morning. The *one* you *always* have coffee ready for."

Azure eyes studied her as Wren pulled her short platinum blonde hair into an adorable tiny ponytail, two strands not quite long enough to reach, tucked behind her ears.

"The one you smile oh-so-brightly for."

"I do not—"

She did.

A huff of frustration left her as she went back to mixing, steam wafted into the air in delicate wisps.

“Can you blame me? You’ve seen her.”

“I have. Talk about winnin’ the genetic lottery,” Wren sighed gazing off into space. “And judgin’ by her clothes and the size of her tips, she’s loaded.”

“You know Compose, the software you use to edit your videos and music?” Ali asked as she put a lid on a cup, double checking the seal.

“What about it?”

“She’s the CEO.”

Wren’s movements stuttered mid-stir, mouth falling open before she blinked.

“Seriously? The fuck is she doin’ getting her own coffee? In our tiny coffee shop, no less!”

“Your guess is as good as mine. But, I won’t be complaining any time soon.”

“‘Course not. She’s nice to look at. Good conversationalist, too,” Wren rambled in her usual southern inflection, hands gesticulating. “She and her tips are welcome any time.”

A pleasant chime echoed as the door opened and the woman herself strode in. The clock on the wall read 7:05AM, right on schedule. Ali couldn’t imagine having her days structured to the point she arrived on time down to the minute, never wavering.

“Speak and she shall appear,” Wren snickered.

Blue eyes twinkled back at her, a slow easy smile spreading across her face. Even after so many months, looking at her almost hurt. She was *that* kind of pretty.

“Good morning, Ali,” Charlotte greeted in a sultry tone, making Ali’s toes curl.

“Morning! Latte for you.”

Ali slid the beverage across the counter as she approached, swaying hips hugged just right by slate-gray trousers.

Charlotte picked it up and looked at her name scrawled in black across the cup, a perfectly manicured eyebrow arching.

“No flower? No heart? No smiley face? No adorable doodle of any kind? Have I fallen so far from favor?”

Her tone light and teasing, lips curving upward when Ali's laugh filled the air.

"Fear not. Someone has just been up to no good with her shenanigans this morning."

Ali nodded her head to Wren, but Charlotte's attention didn't shift away.

Fighting the urge to bite at her own lip, Ali reached for a narrow paper bag instead, moving to the case of fresh baked goods.

"Blueberry or strawberry?" Ali asked.

"Blueberry. I'm told your friend made it past the first round of interviews," Charlotte informed her, taking a careful sip of the hot beverage.

Ali had risked their tentative acquaintanceship to ask on behalf of one of her artist friends if Charlotte could get him through the door for possible consideration in the graphic design department. She agreed on the understanding he would have to make it through the process on his own merit.

"Really?! That's wonderful! He'll be so excited," Ali responded, bagging the blueberry bagel and handing it over.

"I hope so."

Charlotte lifted the bag to her nose inhaling the pleasant scent.

"Thank you."

"I think it's me who should be thanking you. I owe you one," Ali rambled, ringing up the items on the register, spinning the terminal toward Charlotte so she could complete the transaction. "Literally. Anything, and it's yours."

Ali noted Charlotte's head cocked just so, eyes bouncing back and forth, reading every micro expression.

"Actually, there is something..."

"Oh?"

Curiosity piqued. She ignored the quiet giggle from Wren, who shamelessly spectated the interaction.

"What can I do?"

"It's a much bigger ask than getting your friend an interview, I'm afraid."

"Well, now I'm curious."

"Me too," Wren whispered from almost right behind her.

Any closer and she would feel Wren breathing down her neck.

“My sister is getting married to a lovely woman, but her maid of honor is an ex of mine. I’m too busy right now to wade through a string of first dates. But, I do *need* a date to the growing list of events taking place over the next several months,” Charlotte explained, blue eyes holding Ali’s brown ones captive, her chin raised just so in challenge.

Ali considered herself a self-assured and intelligent woman. But here and now she wished for a scrap of the confidence Charlotte carried in her pinky finger alone.

Wren’s whisper was just discernible, “Oh my god. Say yes.”

Speechless and frozen in place, her brain ground to a halt in real time.

404 error, page not found.

Her jaw quivered, tongue knotted and refused to form words. She could only stare and blink until Wren realized the state of her and moved, throwing her arm over Ali’s shoulder.

“She’ll do it! Won’t you, Ali? I’ll even volunteer to cover any necessary shifts.” Wren’s fingers wrapped around her shoulder, nails digging in when squeezed a little too tight.

The situation had the potential to be disastrous. Her attraction to the CEO was undeniable. This would provide her the opportunity to spend more time with her, and she would get to see her in something other than business attire. She would meet new people she never would otherwise. The art world often came down to networking and who you knew… but how awkward would it be when the wedding came and went, and things went back to normal?

Eh, future-Ali’s problem.

“I do love weddings,” Ali murmured, cheeks damn near burning.

Charlotte’s piercing gaze at last fell on Wren but to her credit she didn’t crumble under the intensity. Instead, she barreled forward with zero signs of being intimidated.

“Is this situation like: I just need a date to the events; or more like a fake girlfriend to keep the relatives and concerned friends at bay?”

“The latter, I’m afraid,” she replied, her eyes flicking back to Ali.

Fake.

Somehow that made the entire thing easier to process. This was just a role that needed to be filled. A part Charlotte thought she’d be a good fit for. Ali could agree. She was presentable and personable enough.

“I understand if that would make you uncomfortable.” Charlotte continued. “You’re more than welcome to decline. I promise to still get my coffee here,” she added with a wink, further addling Ali’s brain.

Something settled in Ali. She wasn’t being chosen so much as selected for a specific purpose, which felt considerably more believable and considerably less terrifying.

Ali had never been good at walking away from an open door, even when she knew only pain waited… Occupational hazard of being the kind of person who felt everything just so she could put it down on paper and canvas.

“Honestly, it sounds like a lot of fun. I’ll do it.”

Tension eased in Charlotte’s stance and she looked almost pleased, blue eyes shimmering over the rim of her coffee cup.

“Excellent. Rather short notice, so I’ll understand if you have plans. But the first event—her engagement party—is this Saturday at 5pm.”

“She’s available,” Wren chimed, giving her shoulder another squeeze.

Ali shrugged out of her hold, batting her away half a step. “I’m free,” Ali confirmed, shifting her attention back to Charlotte. “Dress code?”

“Smart casual.”

“Shall I meet you there?”

“I think we should arrive together.”

“Sounds good.”

“Indeed.”

“Do I need to bring anything?”

Wren sidled around to her other side, fingers clasping one by one around her opposite shoulder. Her persistence was legendary.

“You two should go to dinner. Iron out the details. You know, come up with a back story. Share relevant information.”

Charlotte eyed the arm slung across her shoulder but nodded in agreement.

“Are you free tomorrow night?”

Ali’s head bobbed. Holding out her hand, the shock wore off enough for her to find some of her own confidence.

“Let me see your drink.”

Charlotte slid her cup across the counter without question, the weight of her gaze heavy as Ali picked it up, warmth seeping through the paper into her fingertips as she quickly scribbled her number across the surface.

“Call or text me and we can set something up.”

Charlotte took the cup back and studied the number, expression softening at the little heart Ali added beside her name.

“Thank you for agreeing to do this.”

“No problem. Happy to help,” Ali replied, doing her darndest to resist the urge to fidget.

She was thankful for Wren’s tight hold grounding her in the best of ways, as nerves fluttered around in her stomach.

“I’ll be in touch,” Charlotte’s smokey tone promised.

She winked, causing Ali’s brain to stall again as she watched her stride from the shop.

The moment the door swung shut, panic struck.

“What just happened?!”

“I’ve totally seen this movie before!” Wren exclaimed, clasping both of Ali’s shoulders and shaking her. “This is your chance to get laid by the CEO of Sex on Legs!”

“What are you talking about?”

Ali flopped across the counter for support as she went weak at the knees, thumping her forehead against the smooth wooden surface.

“Come on, you’re livin’ in a Rom-Com right now! You’re going to go to all these events that serve alcohol and put people in romantic situations. Shoot your shot, my friend!”

“I don’t even know her,” Ali groaned into the counter.

“So?”

She popped her head up, scowling over her shoulder at Wren who sported a look of triumph. “I’m not into casual hookups.”

“Lies!” Wren barked. “What about that cute boy from last week?”

“I…” She stood back up, turning and leaning back against the counter, arms folded across her chest. “Had an itch.”

“Exactly. Go scratch your itch with the super successful sexy rich lady who just asked you to be her fake date!”

“I don’t think she’s interested in me like that,” Ali muttered, deciding everything within reach needed rearranging and unable to resist doing so.

Wren took a calming breath instead.

“Well, I don’t think that’s true. Let’s break it down. Typically, people ask people they’re attracted to or at least like as a friend to these kinds of things. So even if she doesn’t want to sleep with you right at this moment,

she’s open to being in the type of situations that could foster intimate connections.”

Wren gripped her shoulders, pulling her around until they were facing one another again.

“She’s classy and sophisticated. I’m a nobody currently wearing pastel blue eyeliner because I was feeling quirky this morning. She just wants someone to ward off her ex.”

“Yeah, someone hot,” Wren shot back, licking the tip of her finger and letting it hover over Ali’s chest, smirking as she made a hissing sizzling sound, pulling a snort from Ali. “Just promise me to be yourself, flirt a little bit, and if the opportunity presents itself… take it.”

Ali nodded her head, a lightness settling the nerves in her chest.

“I guess—I can do that.”

“That’s my girl!”

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3

CHARLOTTE

CHARLOTTE ENJOYED her morning caffeine fix from Blend & Brew, and not just because she worked it perfectly into her schedule. No, as much as Charlotte needed to keep her life in order to maintain her sanity, the little bit of sunshine who mixed her coffee made it something to love. Mornings were better when one of the first things she saw were dimples tunneling into peachy skin on either side of a beaming smile. Not to mention honey brown eyes warm enough to melt the ice existing around Charlotte's frosty professional persona.

Pulling away from the curb, she drove toward the nest of skyscrapers visible between the gaps in the buildings. The look on Ali's face when she asked her to be her fake girlfriend: priceless. Charlotte shook her head, taking a sip of the still steaming liquid, struggling to believe the opportunity to ask presented itself.

Not how she ever envisioned asking anyone out. But the look on Ali's face…

As if on cue, her phone rang. Lizzie's name appeared on the dash. Hearing from her twin sister before ten in the morning was a rarity. More so on a day Charlotte knew Lizzie wasn't scheduled or on call. Being Type A, she knew not only her own schedule like the back of her hand, but her sisters' as well.

Charlotte answered without hesitation, voice shifting to imitate an automated answering system, "Charlotte Davenport speaking, how may I direct your call?"

Lizzie's amusement was evident, even through the car speakers.

“Yes, thank you. I’d like to speak to Twinnie, please.”

“One moment.” Charlotte paused for effect, checking her manicure. “Lizzie, my soul. What can I do for you?”

“Well, I was sleeping peacefully when all of a sudden my eyes popped open.”

“You don’t say.”

“I do. The fabled twin-tuition at work no doubt.”

A long-drawn-out yawn filled the car, signifying her twin’s level of exhaustion.

“I felt a shift in our shared universe. I must know what life-altering decision you just made.”

Pulling up to a red light, Charlotte chuckled, looking around at the people moving up and down the sidewalks.

“What possible decision could I make before seven thirty in the morning?”

“You grew a pair and asked the cute barista to be your date?”

Charlotte knew Lizzie was guessing but as often happened, her guess was spot on.

“Her name is Ali.”

A gasp sounded on the other end of the line and Sasha could be heard in the background inquiring what was wrong.

“Charlotte is bringing a date Saturday!”

The level of exuberance in Lizzie’s voice further proved the threat of Charlotte going stag caused her twin some anxiety.

“Oh, really? Anyone we know?” Sasha asked, causing Charlotte to smirk as she imagined her future sister-in-law reworking every guest list in her head.

“Does Ali have a last name?”

“McCarthy,” Charlotte supplied, taking another sip just before the light turned green.

“No, we don’t know this one. This one is new.”

A giddy sigh echoed down the line.

“I can’t believe you asked someone.”

“Well, I did.”

Technically.

“Wow! You know, six months ago on… January eighteenth—I think it was—you called me in a tizzy going on about some barista with a smile like

sunlight, irresistible dimples, and hair kissed by fire. And if I recall, an ass worthy of devotion," Lizzie drawled. "That was the moment I knew you really needed to get laid," she added before a maniacal cackle echoed through the speakers. "Babe, I won our bet!"

Charlotte gaped. Had the state of her love life or lack thereof become so abysmal her family placed bets?

"Excuse me?"

"Sasha's money was on the head chef at Havre. Now, she owes me five bucks."

Sasha's voice came through much closer to the speaker than before.

"Will you accept five kisses instead?"

"Mmmm, I'll think about it."

Charlotte's heart felt rather full every time there was evidence Lizzie found someone who appreciated her for more than just her surgical skill and social standing. Sasha loved Lizzie for her heart more than anything. Often encouraging her playful spirit.

"Though, I do hope if someone else offered to pay you wouldn't value a kiss from those lush lips for less than a grand."

"Try ten."

Charlotte listened to them say their goodbyes before Sasha grabbed the phone. Her smooth voice coming through clear as she got right to business.

"Will this 'Ali' be attending the rest of the events?"

"That's the plan."

Charlotte hoped they would make a convincing couple.

"We'll need her contact information. I need to add her to the guest list and make certain she receives invitations for everything. Does she have any allergies?"

"Nothing extreme that she has told me, but I'll double check."

"Please do," Sasha ordered, the wedding stress seeping into her voice before she softened. "I'm looking forward to meeting her. If you like her, I'm sure she is wonderful."

"Yes, yes. Have a good day, lovely," Lizzie said, taking the phone back.

Silence followed before Lizzie added in a hushed tone.

"As long as she's better than Victoria—that bitch."

Charlotte cringed, remembering all three wasted years spent trying to make Victoria happy. Instead, Charlotte came out of it feeling incapable of

satisfying anyone for more than six months. Her long history of flings before Victoria offered further evidence of this.

“Ali is genuine,” Charlotte offered up.

“Good. I love my fiancée. You know I do. But she has no idea how terrible the two-faced cunt can be.”

Lizzie grumbled, long ago having accepted that her fiancée’s view of Victoria was skewed. A fact Charlotte liked Sasha enough to grin and bear.

“So, tell me about Ali.”

Charlotte sighed, forever unable to lie to Lizzie.

“There isn’t much to tell really. She thanked me for getting an acquaintance an interview. Said she owed me a favor. So, I asked her and now here we are.”

Her explanation was met with silence for a long moment as Lizzie unraveled any hidden meanings.

“Let me get this straight,” Charlotte could hear their mother in Lizzie’s tone. “This woman who you’re attracted to and whose personality you enjoy and doesn’t bore you after thirty seconds… who you have described as sunshine personified has no idea you’re into her?”

“Weeeell,” Charlotte grimaced, pressing the brake pedal and slowing the car to a stop.

“You’re a chicken!”

“You wanted me to ask someone. I asked her.”

Lizzie groaned. “Does she at least know you find her attractive?”

Charlotte’s silence was damning.

“Twinnie, why?”

She sighed, flipping on her blinker, waiting for the arrow.

“I don’t know much of anything about her. I thought maybe this would give us a chance to get to know each other, no pressure, no strings. If it goes somewhere, great. If not, that’s okay.”

It made sense in her mind.

She remained open to there being more, be it casual or serious or just friendship. The Victoria who Charlotte first met and fell in love with wasn’t real. Never again would she allow someone into her world, into her heart, without knowing she and the people she loved were safe. And with her company’s upcoming acquisition, no time existed for games or to be distracted by silly things like relationships and feelings.

“I understand,” Lizzie’s tone conveyed the honesty in those words. “I hope she’s actually sunshine. You could use a little of that in your life.”

“You think?”

“Victoria was like a black hole. I think you deserve someone who brightens your day… not someone that sucks everything good out of it until there’s nothing left.”

A horn honked behind her. She blinked, noting the green arrow she hit the gas.

“How’s the wedding planning going?”

Lizzie huffed at the obvious change of subject. But Lizzie understood there was only so long Charlotte could discuss her love life… or lack thereof.

Lizzie proceeded to vent about all the things gone wrong since they last spoke. Apparently, the original caterers for the engagement party canceled last-minute, sending her into a spiral to find a replacement before breaking the news to Sasha. The Pryce family was old money with an image to uphold. Lizzie was good at helping Sasha realize the unimportance of worrying if some old bat you never spoke to outside of fancy galas thought the hors d’oeuvres were dry.

Lizzie’s yawn stretched long as Charlotte pulled into the parking garage and they said their goodbyes. She knew her sister well enough to know she’d sleep for another three hours at least. Putting the car in park she took a moment to switch mental gears. The coffee’s strong taste hit her tongue, the familiar flavor grounded her in a way so few things could. And she couldn’t help but stare at the ten digits scribbled across the cup, her mind already clinging to their shape. The numbers played on repeat in her mind as she left her car parked in its usual spot and headed for the elevator, glancing at her watch. Right on schedule. Once, she counted the steps it took to make it to the elevator and her office after reaching the fifteenth floor. Not the top floor, but high enough that the view was still quite splendid.

Aurora Rivers, her executive assistant, was already waiting for her at her desk right outside of Charlotte’s office. They exchanged their typical morning banter before Charlotte rattled off the tasks to prioritize for the day. For her sanity to remain intact, the acquisition needed to go without a hitch.

“I handled all of that already,” Aurora said, performing her happy dance as her desk chair spun in a slow circle. “I wrote down all the things we did with the acquisition last year, made some improvements, and scheduled ahead.”

“So proactive. If only we could clone you, Rora.”

“The world couldn’t handle that much awesome,” Aurora chuckled, grinning and tossing her long strawberry blonde hair over her shoulder.

Not one to waste time, Charlotte made her way to her office, smiling at the large glass of ice water and her second cup of coffee already waiting. Aurora took everyone’s hydration seriously.

Light from the floor-to-ceiling windows along the outer wall streamed in. The gentle morning beams illuminated the wall behind her desk, catching on the shelves in the center and the pieces of pottery and photo frames she collected over the years. There were books too, each a treasured artifact from her collection of rare first editions. The warm light pulled the muddy yellows and reds from the two abstract paintings hung on the wall, one on each side of the shelves. She purchased them a decade ago from an unknown artist she found online. Right after she hung them up, she landed her first major deal, cementing their existence as good luck charms.



IMANI HILL SAT in her usual lunchtime spot, dark eyes fixed on her phone screen instead of the view out the window to her left. Her black hair braided back in neat tracks on one side, exploding in a beautiful array of springy coils around the rest of her head.

They met Charlotte’s senior year of college, though Imani was a freshman at the time. Despite being one of the few rigidly heterosexual people in her life and polite in most interactions with strangers, the first glimpse Charlotte got of her future best friend was of her verbally eviscerating some man for putting his hand on her ass. Charlotte decided then and there they would be friends. Not just a genius with numbers, but a whiz for business as well, it seemed rather obvious Charlotte should recruit her to help build an empire. Fourteen years later, it was still one of the best decisions she ever made.

“That smirk tells me your date last night went well.”

Imani’s warm eyes glanced up, pearly white smile stretching wider as her thumbs flew over the screen.

“Oh, it went very well. You should try dating again. You deserve to have sex as good as I just had.”

“I have a date tomorrow, actually.”

Charlotte slid into the seat opposite, watching as Imani’s fingers stilled and her attention snapped to Charlotte.

“Say what now?” Her eyes lit up, dark pools sparking with intrigue. “The barista?”

Charlotte nodded, opening her container and upending the dressing across the top of her salad, putting the top back on.

Of course, Imani would put it all together almost immediately. Three weeks after Charlotte stumbled into the out of the way coffee shop, Imani cornered her in her office, full of questions about the Blend & Brew’s distinctive logo. Imani managed to drag every detail out of Charlotte one after another. The woman was just too observant.

“You finally grew a pair?”

She swallowed thickly, snapping the lid back on. Charlotte lifted her container and shook it to spread the dressing over the contents of the salad, feeling a tightness forming in her throat.

“In a manner of speaking.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Opening the container, Charlotte grabbed her fork, stabbing a piece of chicken as she relayed the events of the morning.

Imani stared at her for a long moment trying to sort out what exactly Charlotte had done.

“You asked the attractive redhead with the nice ass who you have been flirting with for months to be your what—fake girlfriend?”

Charlotte glared at a piece of spinach and prepared herself for Imani’s no doubt subtle approach.

“That’s the gist of it, yes.”

“You’re—I can’t believe—Why? Why complicate this, Char? Why not ask her out and see where it goes?”

Imani’s rich complexion was flawless, even as the look of utter bewilderment took over.

“She’s given no indication she would be interested in anything serious,” Charlotte countered. “And frankly, while I find her attractive, I don’t have

the time.”

“Liar.” Imani looked heavenward and released a huff of frustration before opening her own container to reveal her sandwich. “You’re just scared of letting anyone close again.”

“So, what if I am?” Charlotte snapped, leaning back in her seat and crossing her arms over her chest.

Imani softened. “Char…”

More than anyone, Imani dealt with the wretched moods Victoria brought about. In some ways, Imani, not her family, picked up more of the pieces and helped Charlotte rebuild the image of herself after the relationship ended. Hiding her struggles from everyone else was easier when you didn’t see them five days a week.

“I just…” Charlotte sighed, leaning forward and picking up her fork again. “Lizzie was worried. I’d be a sitting duck for the relatives. I can’t keep avoiding Victoria. Ali is sunshine personified. I’ve enjoyed talking to her in the mornings. I thought—I thought she might make it easier to be in Victoria’s presence,” Charlotte finished, pushing wilting leaves around the container.

“Well, that’s a lot of romantic situations over several months. More than enough time to sweep her off her feet, as it were.”

“I doubt it. I’d be using a walker and she’d still be young and full of life.”

“I hear some people are into an age gap.”

Charlotte rolled her eyes, ignoring Imani’s teasing and dug back into her salad, her feelings sufficiently muddled. She couldn’t let herself imagine a future where Ali or anyone else wanted something real with her. Especially not after Victoria… but some small and quiet part of her hoped she was wrong. Maybe Ali would see her and want her, too.

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4

ALI

IT WASN'T until after her shift ended, feet aching as she made her way to her car that a gust of wind carried the scent of the pizzeria down the street. She changed directions, heading down the sidewalk, craving their perfect crust and the overabundance of melted cheese. Sunlight hit the damp street from the scattered shower earlier making it gleam. She dug her phone out of her pocket to take a photo only to find a notification with a text from an unknown number sitting in front of her most favorite recent photo of her cat, Willow.

It could only be from one person.

She opened the text thread without hesitation, photography endeavors quite forgotten as she continued down the street.

UNKNOWN NUMBER
TODAY 2:05PM

Hello, darling. :)

An excited squeak leapt past her lips, which was ignored by a passerby. But her fingers flew over the screen, typing her reply.

Miss Davenport, is this you?

I think Miss Davenport is too formal, don't you?

Warmth spread across her cheeks. If anyone had told her she would be texting with Charlotte today she would have laughed. A lightness fluttered in her chest as she saved the contact info and updated the name, opening their thread again.

I dunno, it has a ring to it.

Would you prefer honey, babe, or my moon?

CHARLOTTE DAVENPORT

My moon is a new one.

You can call me whatever you like, Sunshine.

Haha! My mom used to call me Sunshine all the time.

It suits you.

Dinner tomorrow at 7? Anywhere you want to go?

An entire evening with Charlotte Davenport? She was toast.

7 would be perfect!

There's a really cute Italian place I have been wanting to try. Send me your address and I will pick you up around 6:30.

Three dots appeared, disappeared, reappeared, and disappeared again before her screen lit up with an incoming call. Ali tried to contain the sudden swirl of nerves swimming in her stomach as she accepted the call, continuing down the sidewalk.

"Hi, babe!"

An amused hum resonated through the line.

"Hello, my dear."

The term of endearment was wrapped in velvet and sent a shiver down Ali's spine.

"You're just hitting the ground running with this, aren't you?" Charlotte asked.

"I am."

Ali shrugged as she stepped over a small puddle in her path.

"I've never had a fake girlfriend before. I have decided to have fun with this. I promise to behave appropriately in the presence of others."

"I had no doubts, but I'm glad you will be enjoying yourself. I hoped it wouldn't be too awkward. So, dinner tomorrow?"

"Yep! I'll pick you up around six-thirty," Ali confirmed, hand reaching up to toy with her necklace.

There was a short, heavy pause.

"Around?" Another pause. "Does that mean six-fifteen, six-forty-five, or some other time?"

Ali’s expression dimmed as her steps slowed. There was a disconnect somewhere…

“Around six-thirty…” she offered again.

“But what does that mean?” Charlotte groused.

Steps sped up as she connected the dots. Charlotte lived by a schedule as though it were law, featuring exact times to be everywhere. In the past six months only once was she close to being “late” to get her coffee. Ali never saw anyone look so stressed.

“I’ll pick you up *at* 6:30, honey bunny,” Ali promised, twirling the end of her ponytail around her index finger, watching as her feet continued down the street.

“Thank you,” Charlotte sighed, as if Ali lifted a weight off her shoulders. “Dress code?”

“Wear whatever makes you comfortable. But I think casual would be acceptable for this place. It’s a little hole-in-the-wall situation.”

“Hmmm, and we’re certain there are no health code violations?”

“It has very good reviews, and I have found sometimes it’s where you find the best food.”

She slowed, looking up at the little shops dotted along the street. Every street in Boston seemed packed with history and charm. For the first few months, she spent a fair amount of time exploring, searching for the hidden gems throughout the city.

“Wait—have you never been to a hole-in-the-wall restaurant?”

“A few. But not recently.” A playful note entered her tone, “Other than this one coffee shop I’ve come to enjoy… The coffee is good, and the staff is just lovely.”

“Well, this might be an adventure for you then,” Ali teased, ignoring the compliment and the heat creeping across her cheeks.

“As long as I’m with you, I don’t think I’ll mind.”

Ali’s silent intake of breath filled her lungs, a hand resting over the little ripple in her stomach. It was nice. To feel wanted, even if it wasn’t real.

“I see I’m not the only one taking to this faux relationship like a duck to water.”

“You make it easy.”

“Well,” Ali fanned her cheeks, cooling the subtle heat Charlotte and her smokey tone kept brewing. “I foresee a lot of blushing in my future.”

Ali kept the phone pressed against her ear, not wanting to miss a single word. A smug grin was apparent in Charlotte's next words.

"You're blushing right now, aren't you?"

Ali huffed a laugh, dropping her gaze back to the sidewalk.

For your next romance novel.

Visit Lokepub and find a story to read.

"Don't sound so smug."

"But you blush so prettily…" her voice trailed off and Ali heard a muffled voice in the background. "Thank you, ask him to wait a moment."

A weary sigh floated down the line.

"The work never ends, huh?"

Charlotte hummed, a wave of exhaustion hidden somewhere in the vibration.

"Typically, not on weekdays."

"Weekends?"

"What is a weekend?" Charlotte's monotone voice almost convinced Ali she was serious. "Actually, we just recently implemented a policy of no work on the weekends and holidays. And everyone must be out of the office by 6pm. I've lost too many good people to burn out. Eventually, I want to have it be a four-day work week, but that's harder to achieve than expected."

"Something to work toward," Ali commented, admiring how Charlotte cared about her employees' work life balance. Having worked in the corporate world, she knew it wasn't always the case.

"Indeed. But alas, I'm afraid I must say goodbye."

"Another meeting?"

"Always another meeting," Charlotte murmured. Ali recognized the halfhearted attempt to disguise the resignation in her tone. "I'll send my address later. I look forward to dinner tomorrow."

"Sounds good, babe! Go kick ass in your meeting."

"I always do," Charlotte boasted before softening. "Goodbye, darling."

“Bye, Charlotte.”

Pulling the phone away, Ali stared at the screen, trying to take it all in. Her heart fluttered as she added the date into her calendar. Even though it was pretend, the thrum of excitement remained. The last date she went on happened almost two years ago and couldn’t be described as pleasant. Ali cringed remembering the humiliation. Her ex chose to end things on the drive to the restaurant, insisting on going to dinner and proceeding to shame Ali for being too upset to eat. Ali spent the dinner all but non-verbal, scratching bits of paint that refused to wash off her hands instead of giving in to the need to straighten or rearrange every item on the table… Those packets of sweetener were likely still all mixed up to this day.

But Ali knew in her bones the experience she would have with Charlotte would be an adventure.

As an artist, she always welcomed whatever life decided to bring her way. In fact, her thirst for experience and inspiration was perhaps the main reason she moved so often. Or perhaps it was the final words her mother said to her before she died, her final instruction.

Ali’s thumb ran over the flared sun engraved on the face of the golden oval locket her mother left her. She never took it off.

Disoriented by her current surroundings, she spun around and laughed. Wrapped up in her conversation with Charlotte, she went right past the pizzeria a full two blocks. It shouldn’t surprise her, she couldn’t be the first woman to get so absorbed in Charlotte Davenport’s voice she lost track of the physical world entirely. She set off again, back the way she came, unable to shake the feeling something was just beginning.

Though adventure always excited her, it wasn’t what she craved most. No. She was tired of moving. Having no roots deep enough to keep her in one place for longer than a year was becoming exhausting. Making friends was easy enough. But letting the wind carry her meant there were few long-lasting connections.

No, adventure wasn’t what she craved. It was family and a place to call home.

She hadn’t had either of those in a long time.



ALI LET OUT a happy sigh as she opened her apartment door and heard the usual greeting. Looking into the living room, she smiled as the longhaired tortoiseshell cat arched her back dramatically as she rose, little feet digging into the plush throw draped over the ivory colored couch Ali resisted committing to for years. Willow hopped onto the cushions as Ali toed off her sneakers, placing them neatly below a row of coat hooks. Her mother took Ali to the nearest animal shelter after her diagnosis and told her to pick out a friend. Willow went everywhere with her and was by far her most trusted confidant.

“Good afternoon, Willow. Did you have a good day?” she asked, setting her bag down and bending to scoop up the opinionated furball. “Guess what!”

Willow meowed as though terribly interested and let herself be toted through the small two-bedroom apartment.

“You know the woman who comes in for her latte every morning? The stunning one with the blue eyes.”

The cat trilled in affirmation.

Ali rambled away about the events of the day. Willow purred in response, soaking up the attention as Ali busied herself with their usual routine.

She scooted the donut bed on the floor back into the path of the sun that streamed through the large windows in preparation for Willow’s evening nap. The light caught the grains in the wooden floor boards that creaked slightly beneath her feet as she moved into her kitchen. Sage green cabinets greeted her, pulling a full body exhale from her as she filled the kettle with water. Willow rested snugly in one arm, knowing her special daily treat was imminent.

In all honesty, her apartment was sparsely furnished. It made moving easier if she didn’t hold onto stuff.

Tea in hand and treat provided she made her way to her studio space. She spent most of her time in the cozy room. Her drawing desk sat pressed against the wall next to a squash armchair tucked into the corner near the window. Her easel stood where it could catch the light beaming through the glass and illuminate her work.

The rest of her day consisted of podcasts and audiobooks while she dabbled in various pigments. One of her many pairs of paint covered overalls received its fair share of new additions to the rainbow of smudges.

A thought crossed her mind. She opened her phone, pulling up the camera and moved to a sleeping Willow on the windowsill. Holding one of her multi-colored paws in her acrylic smudged hand, she snapped a photo and sent it off to Charlotte with no message. She smiled, shifting her hips back and forth in a tremor of excitement when dots appeared just before a reply came through.

CHARLOTTE DAVENPORT
TODAY 8:37PM

The artist and her muse?

Who can say which is which?

Will you show me your creation?

Perhaps you can come for a studio visit sometime.

You know… I always wanted to try modeling

After reading the confession, it was impossible to halt the mental image of Charlotte posing for a portrait. What artist wouldn't sell their soul to paint the sculpted lines of her form?

Oh? You do have the height and bone structure for it. ;)

Will you tell me about your art tomorrow?

Ali was unaccustomed to having anyone interested in her work. It was nice, though she bet Charlotte was just being polite.

Since you asked so nicely.

Dots wiggled on the screen before delivering the next response.

I'm looking forward to it.

As am I! Goodnight, my moon!

Goodnight, Sunshine. Sweet dreams.

Ali read over their texts again, chest expanding with each pass. She ran a hand through her hair, pleased with herself for not saying anything too embarrassing. She scooped Willow up into her arms and buried her nose into soft fur, inhaling her familiar scent.

"Tomorrow is going to be a good day, Willow. I can feel it."

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CHARLOTTE

CHARLOTTE'S FRIDAY began without coffee. Step one of a work day gone awry. Ali didn't work on Fridays, and normally she would make her own but failed to set her coffee maker the night before, as she'd been too absorbed in a good book.

Upon arrival at the office, the day soured further when the software experienced an outage. As her morning spiraled out of control, murder seemed an increasingly viable option. The events sent her into a rage only soothed when Imani used her superior people skills to motivate the developers. Charlotte despised her temper. Therapy helped improve her control over her stronger emotions and process and express them in healthier ways, but her anger still flared in times of chaos. Any time control slipped through her fingers, or her routine was disrupted without warning, her anger spiked white hot and ready to eviscerate.

Software up and running again with everything back under control, Charlotte sat behind her desk, working through the list of tasks. It wasn't until her phone chimed a specific sound she let herself fully relax.

LILAH
TODAY 12:23PM

I need your help!

What seems to be the situation, Bug?

Charlotte's favorite picture of the two of them together lit up the screen. Charlotte beaming at her pride and joy, arm wrapped snugly around her

waist. Lilah herself sported her cap and gown from her college graduation, diploma raised high above her head in triumph.

“Bug?”

A soft smile tugged at the corners of her lips any time she spoke to the youngest of the Carter-Davenports.

“It’s a travesty,” Lilah cried, tone vibrating with held back emotion.

“What’s happened?”

“It’s gone!”

“What is?”

“The proposal I spent the last two weeks of my life working on!” Lilah wailed. “Gone. Vanished. Lost in the depths of my laptop never to be found again.”

A thoughtful hum echoed in Charlotte’s throat, stifling the urge to laugh.

“Did you check recent?”

Mounting dread and panic marred Lilah’s usual bubbly tone.

“No. Listen, the document is open but all my work is gone! I’m toast.”

“Don’t lose heart. Just check your version history and revert back,” Charlotte encouraged, grinning despite her little sister’s impending breakdown.

“Okay. I really hate business. I just want you to know that. It’s so political and it’s all fake. People take credit for other people’s work. No one can make up their mind and there is always some crisis that could have been avoided. I’m not cutthroat enough for this!” Lilah whined before gasping and releasing a surprised squeak.

“It worked!”

Charlotte shook her head, settling back in her chair. On occasion, the twelve-year gap between them showed in unique ways. Charlotte always knew Lilah would hate business and tried to talk her out of it. But Lilah seemed determined to try and follow in Charlotte’s footsteps. Now, she worked in a field where she would never find enjoyment or purpose.

“Crisis averted.”

Not Lilah’s first crisis when it came to software, and Charlotte felt confident it wouldn’t be the last.

“You have no idea! It’s due by end of day.”

Lilah’s sigh of relief was telling.

“The engagement party is tomorrow.”

Charlotte hummed in acknowledgement, taking a long pull of ice water from her glass.

“Lizzie is wearing the dusty blue dress she got last weekend. Just so you know.”

“Oh...”

The outfit she planned for the day featured a similar dusty blue dress. They did that sometimes. Bought the same clothes or wore similar outfits without trying. For whatever reason, it never occurred to them to check with each other. It was Lilah that remembered.

“Mhm, that’s what I thought.”

“Thank you, Bug.”

Lilah released a forlorn sigh. “I must go. Thank you for holding my hand.”

“Always,” Charlotte said and meant it.

“I love you!”

“I love you more.”

She could imagine her blonde hair draped over one shoulder, hand over her chest, mouth open as she released a playful gasp. Just like she always did.

“I love you most.”

She hung up before Charlotte could retort that wasn’t the case.

Her mood much improved, she got back to work. There was no rest for the weary after all.



“It’s time for us to get out of here,” Imani drawled from where she waited, leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed and looking ever so pleased with herself. “You have a hot date. *I* have a hot date.”

Charlotte rose, gathering her things, and moved across the floor, following Imani toward the elevator.

“Know where you’re going yet?”

“She’s picking me up and taking me to a hole-in-the-wall restaurant,” Charlotte replied, checking her phone for any possible texts from Ali, frowning when there were none.

“Picking *you* up,” Imani commented in disbelief, nudging her with an elbow.

Imani had reason to be curious. Historically, Charlotte picked her dates up for the outings she planned and paid for. Not the other way around. But this wasn’t a real date, so it didn’t count. But she might allow herself the space to enjoy such treatment. At the very least she and Ali might end up good friends.

“Do the words ‘hole-in-the-wall’ frighten you?” Imani asked.

“They really shouldn’t, given the places my mother has dragged me into.”

“Diana’s taste is superb,” Imani mused. “Oh shit. We’re both missing family game night.”

Charlotte’s steps stuttered. She forgot all about her family’s sacred monthly get together. Imani often tagged along as her nearest immediate family member lived five hours away. After sixteen years of friendship, she was an honorary member of the family.



THE DRIVE HOME WAS EASY, and she pulled her black Audi into the drive and looked at the restored and updated multi-level Victorian house in contentment. It wasn’t much to look at before she bought it. But now, it stood picturesque: slate blue with white trim and shutters. The wrap-around porch was one of the features that first captured her attention, but it was the massive yard that sold her.

Her flower beds were flourishing in a colorful display of summer blooms. Charlotte loved gardening. Having the ability to grow things again was the driving factor for moving out of her apartment in the heart of Boston. She pulled into the garage and hurried to the back garden to check on her permaculture vegetable patches. Her cucumbers and squash plants looked a trifle thirsty through the kitchen window that morning. Kicking off her heels, she turned on the water spigot, enjoying the feel of the sun-warmed grass underneath her feet and between her toes.

As she watered the plants, she decided now was as good a time as any to video call her parents. It rang and rang until connecting. She stifled a laugh at the close-up shot of her stepfather’s nose, eyes, and forehead.

“Cricket!” he greeted before turning to call across the house. “Di, Cricket’s trapped inside the phone again!”

Charlotte smiled at his humor. The nickname was coined due to her quiet nature growing up. After her mother introduced them to James two years after their father’s passing, her silence grew until James found a way to make her laugh again.

“How’re you, Charlie?” he asked, affection warming his tone.

He was the *only* one allowed to call her that.

“Busy. I’m just watering the vegetables before I go upstairs and get ready.”

“For game night?”

Charlotte shook her head.

“I can’t make it tonight.”

“Why ever not?” she heard her mother ask from off camera in her faded southern inflection.

“Game night is sacred!”

“It is,” Charlotte nodded, wiggling her toes deeper into the grass and pursing her lips. “But I have a date.”

“A date? Di, can you believe this? She’s running out on game night for some woman she just met!”

Diana appeared on screen and eyed her with her matching piercing blue eyes.

“I reckon she’s known her a spell if she’s willingly missing game night. Who is it?”

“Her name is Ali and I’ve known her for about six months. She’ll be coming to the engagement party so you’ll both get to meet her,” Charlotte offered, moving further along the garden bed and checking to make certain everything was alright.

James barked a laugh while her mother tutted at the news.

“Charlie, what have I told you about keeping secrets from your mother?”

“It wasn’t a secret,” Charlotte was too quick to answer, leaving herself fumbling for some kind of justifiable reason for never mentioning Ali to them… ever. “It simply wasn’t the right time to reveal her existence.”

“We look forward to meeting her.”

Charlotte feigned unshakable interest in her sunflowers which were ready to begin blooming, avoiding her mother’s knowing gaze accompanied

by a sharp arc in her all too inquisitive brow.

“I think you’ll like her.”

Somehow, despite never having seen Ali outside of the coffee shop and knowing nothing deeply personal, she *knew* her parents would love her.

With one final pass of the garden, she showed her parents some of the best specimens before moving back to her house, flipping the camera toward herself.

“Where are y’all going on this date?” Diana probed, the extra twang she got when excited tinged her words.

Charlotte pursed her lips. Clearly, her entire family was thrilled to hear she was dating again. Of course they wanted her to be happy, but she hadn’t been single that long.

“I’m not sure.” Charlotte said, a subtle crack in her voice seemed to go unnoticed. She hated lying to her parents. “Some little hole-in-the-wall Italian place she wants to try.”

Both her parents glanced at each other.

“She’s convinced you to step foot in a hole-in-the-wall restaurant?” her mother inquired.

“And you’re going? *Willingly*?” James questioned.

Any remaining guilt gave way to irritation. Why did everyone seem to think she would have such a problem with it? She was barefoot and playing in her garden for fuck’s sake.

“Why is that a surprise? You’ve forced me into many such establishments.”

“Notice your use of the word ‘forced,’” James teased. “Let us know how it goes. Hope you don’t get food poisoning!”

“Yes, goodbye,” Charlotte huffed, her frustration yielding to the warmth spreading through her chest as she looked at them. “Love you both. See you tomorrow.”

“Love you, Cricket,” they said in perfect unison.

Her parents struggled to find the correct button to hang up before Charlotte took pity on them and ended the call. Grabbing her shoes, she made her way inside and up the stairs to her bedroom. There was a fake date to prepare for.

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6

ALI

“WHAT IF I forget how to speak?” Ali groaned into the car the moment Wren picked up.

She told Charlotte 6:30. Had that stopped her from losing all sense of time in her studio? Not even a little. In a flurry of movement, she rushed to get ready, slipping into a pair of boots before charging toward the door. Her departure further delayed by her need to sprint back in and give Willow her customary goodbye and promise to return.

Stomach churning, she wove in and out of traffic, doing her best to shave off a couple of minutes to make it on time.

“Doubtful. When have you ever run out of things to talk about?”

“Ha. Ha. Very funny. You know what I mean!”

Ali could imagine the amusement clearly in Wren’s voice, plastered across her face.

“I do, but it’s not a date, right? So, no need to get your panties in a twist.”

The sarcasm was so clear in her friend’s voice.

“You aren’t helping.”

“I’m sorry.” Wren said, tone shifting to something sincere. “Just be yourself. She already likes you as a person. You talk to her every morning Monday through Thursday. This is just an upgrade to sharing a meal to get your stories straight.”

She was right. It was just dinner and things had been so easy between them so far. There was no use getting in her own head.

“Thank you. I needed that.” Her rattling nerves calmed and her body began to relax.

“You’re welcome. Honestly, if you weren’t like my sister, I’d have tried to woo you myself. You’re one of the best and brightest people I’ve ever met. Anyone would be lucky to have dinner with you, fake or real date.”

The honesty in Wren’s voice flooded Ali’s heart with warm affection. Since they met, Wren always seemed to know the right thing to say. Wren gained her trust so fast it surprised her. Letting people in was a struggle. People had a propensity to never stick around (not that she stayed anywhere long enough to confirm or deny such beliefs).

“You’re the best, Birdy.” Excitement began fizzing in her guts accompanied by the rhythmic drumming of her thumbs against the steering wheel.

“Nah, that’s you, but I *am* pretty great.”

Wren paused.

“You know she doesn’t come in on Fridays, Saturdays, or Sundays. Just the days you work.”

Ali rolled her eyes.

“Means nothing.”

Even so her chest began to swell.

“Keep telling yourself that, compadre.”

“We’re just friends!”

“Right, right. Well, enjoy your date!”

“It’s not a date!”

“Uh-huh. Enjoy your *fake* date with your *fake* girlfriend.”

Ali narrowed her eyes, glaring at the road ahead.

“I hate you.”

“Lies. You love me. Have fun!”

To her great relief, she pulled into the driveway just as the clock on her dashboard struck 6:30PM. The house looked like it was cut out of one of her mother’s old gardening magazines. Though large with a massive, manicured lawn and lush flower beds, it wasn’t the mansion her mind conjured when she first imagined Charlotte’s house. The three-story Victorian-style home emitted classy witch vibes. Ali squealed as she parked in the circular driveway wrapped around a fountain surrounded by an explosion of summer blooms.

Hopping out, she ran up the walkway to the set of steps. Reaching the door, she bypassed the doorbell in favor of the octopus shaped brass door knocker. She waited, enjoying the sound of the wind chimes and bells as she rocked back and forth on her heels until the door opened. Her breath caught. Charlotte's hair tumbled in a river of dark curls around her. Makeup done to perfection, as usual. She looked enticing dressed in dark wash high waisted jeans, a loose fitting silky maroon top, and dark brown booties. Something about seeing Charlotte in more relaxed clothing had her heart skipping a beat.

"You look great!" Ali exclaimed, thankful she retained her ability to speak.

Charlotte took her in, smiling at the sight of Ali's paint covered overalls.

"Thank you. You look rather adorable. Am I overdressed?"

Devastating blue eyes lingered for a moment where the visible elegant vine inked around Ali's upper arm. It swirled around her shoulder before reaching beneath her clothes toward her collarbone. Ali had a habit of forgetting all about her tattoos until other people noticed them.

"Absolutely not, don't you dare change a thing. I'm just not used to doing anything on Fridays and I usually spend the whole day in my little studio. I ate breakfast, started painting, and before I knew it, I looked at the clock and it was 5:55PM and I bolted out the door," Ali rambled, shrugging because it was an unavoidable hazard of being an artist.

Peering over Charlotte's shoulder, Ali caught a glimpse of the long narrow hallway, the elegant staircase, and walls lined with artwork.

"I'm gonna need a tour eventually. But first, we feast! You ready?"

"Lead the way," Charlotte said.

As she stepped out and closed the door, Charlotte hit a button on the keypad under the handle, initiating the sound of the lock sliding into place.

"Tell me, is your house filled with all the techy things?"

"A few. I'll show you all my gadgets someday."

Ali opened the passenger door, ushering Charlotte in. "Madam."

Ali could hear the amusement in Charlotte's voice clear as day.

"How dashing of you."

"Just treating my lady as she deserves."

Ali drawled, shutting the door behind her. Wondering where her nerves got off to as she hurried around her car to the driver's side, sliding into her own seat.

“What music do you like?”

“A little bit of everything.”

“Excellent, Wren and I have been working on the perfect playlist,” Ali responded, hitting the play button and filling the car with music.

“The little blonde from the B&B?”

“The B&B. I like that,” Ali mused, wondering how she never thought of it before. “And yes, that’s the one.”

“Are you two…?” Charlotte asked, voice trailing off in question.

“What, like together?”

Charlotte nodded and Ali gagged before bursting into laughter as she put the car in drive, heading back down the driveway.

“Oh—oh no! I love her very much and she’s the closest thing I have to a best friend. But nope. No, we’re not together. Though she has vowed if we weren’t like sisters, she would shoot her shot.”

Ali’s stomach performed a little somersault at the slight upturn of Charlotte’s lips. As she studied the contours of her face, she imagined—not for the first time—what it would be like to play with light and shadow and put it all on paper or canvas.

Charlotte must have spied the tiny field guide sketchbook tucked in the cubby above the glove compartment because she reached out, giving Ali a questioning look. Her gaze bounced back and forth between the road and Charlotte who flipped through the pages. They were nothing more than half-assed sketches, gesture drawings, or the occasional thumbnail if she happened to get an idea for a piece.

“What made you become an artist?” Charlotte asked.

Ali hummed, rubbing a smudge of dried paint from her forearm. “I don’t know if anyone *becomes* an artist. I think a need to create is in all humans. It just manifests differently. I like the different processes. I like how freeing it can be. I love that I can be messy and not feel bad about it. But most of all I love how my brain goes all quiet.”

“That’s how gardening and piano is for me.”

They shared a look of understanding. Perfect landscaping flashed through her mind. It was easier than expected to imagine sophisticated Charlotte, sun kissed skin glistening with sweat as she got up to her elbows in dirt. Ali hoped to see that version of Charlotte for herself someday, but she doubted she would.

They chatted until Ali pulled up outside the restaurant, Bella Amore. Quaint flower arrangements burst from the window boxes and a happy font scrawled across the windows in white.

Ali bounced out of her car and was hit with the smell of fresh bread. Her stomach growled in response, mouth watering. Charlotte beat her to the restaurant door and held it open.

“How charming of you,” she teased, stepping inside only to be greeted by twinkling lights sprinkled throughout.

“I’ll admit, my imagination generated a far more unsavory environment,” Charlotte murmured as they both scanned the room.

Ali gave a little fist pump. “Off to a good start.”

She rubbed her hands together watching as a kind looking woman approached, her welcoming smile causing the lines around her dark eyes to crinkle.

“Ladies! Table for two?”

Serene, the metal name tag read.

“Yes, please,” Ali replied, stomach rumbling at the smell of food.

“We just opened the rooftop garden and dining area, if I can tempt you to try it out and give us your feedback.”

“Sure!”

Ali turned her attention to Charlotte who nodded in agreement.

“To the roof, signora!”

Serene grabbed two menus before leading the way to worn wooden stairs that creaked beneath their feet as they climbed. She could feel a piercing gaze fixed on her ass. And she may have added just a little more swing to her hips in response.

Serene opened the door to the roof. Warm evening light streamed into the stairway. She made it up the last few steps, squinting as her eyes adjusted revealing the rooftop. A narrow stage sat in one corner with a small dance floor in front of it. Ali could already imagine Wren’s voice blending into the atmosphere created by the potted and boxed plants that lined the edges in a lush assortment of colors. Twinkling lights adorned the space, adding to the romance of it all. Serene led them to a secluded corner overlooking the city and the river in the distance before leaving with their orders. A glass of Chardonnay and Chef’s special for Charlotte; Dr Pepper, Calamari, and Alfredo for Ali as she continued her quest to find the best Alfredo Boston offered. Ali took in her surroundings, appreciating the

ambiance and how tucked between two taller buildings it felt like some kind of sequestered secret garden.

Charlotte was enchanting as she leaned forward to rest her elbows on the table. The golden light of evening cast her in a brilliant hue, the strands of lighter brown jumping out of dark curls.

“So,” Charlotte prompted, fathomless gaze fixed on Ali, irises shifting like blue flame in the light. “Paint me a picture of who you are, Ali McCarthy.”

As often happened when asked to introduce herself all thoughts vanished from her mind. Charlotte’s boldness did her no favors and there wasn’t a single interesting thing rattling around in her head.

She cleared her throat. This was the entire reason they were sitting across from each other.

“It’s an adventurous tale,” Ali began, leg beginning to bounce beneath the table as she grasped for something tangible to offer up. “I’ve always loved making art. It’s always been a part of my life. Each place I lived, I’ve found an artist or two to learn from.”

The rest came easy as she pulled from and embellished her bio on her artist website. She explained her numerous business degrees and how after working in the corporate world, she realized it wasn’t for her. A neater version of the messy reality it had been to live.

“I’ve been moving from city to city working in coffee shops or bookstores, joining artist collectives, serving underprivileged communities, teaching here and there, selling pieces, and painting murals ever since. Whatever tickles my fancy and feels right, really.”

Charlotte listened, her attention fixed on Ali once again, seeming rather fascinated by Ali’s chosen path. How different and chaotic it must seem to Charlotte’s own.

“Oh! I have a cat, Willow.” Ali’s phone rested face down on the outermost edge of the table and she flipped it, tapping the screen and holding it up. “She goes everywhere with me. A well-traveled little thing.”

“Clearly, she knows exactly how cute she is,” Charlotte said, giving the appropriate adoring smile to the screen as Ali nodded her confirmation. “Where have you lived?”

“Monterey, until I was nineteen. Stanford for college. Moved to Portland, Seattle, Baltimore, then hopped up here to Boston.”

Ali set her phone back down, tapping the back as she tried to remember any short stints in between, but she supposed those didn't count anyway.

"Any specific reason for so many moves in such a short time?"

"Just trying to find my place in the world. A place where I can take root."

"Most people would say their family is where their roots are."

Fair point.

Something heavy pressed down in Ali's chest. Her long list of dead relatives wasn't something she talked about until she developed a deeper level of trust. Trust Charlotte likely wasn't interested in building.

"I guess you could say my roots got ripped up and I'm looking for a place to replant them."

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7

CHARLOTTE

My roots got ripped up…

Those words pinballed around Charlotte's mind before settling like heavy stones in her stomach, weighed down with the reality they carried. Ali didn't have a family.

It seemed a great injustice. Someone as bright and joyful as Ali should have somewhere to call home. Life often lacked justice.

Drinks appeared in front of them thanks to the waitress who was already scurrying away.

Ali grabbed hers, lifting it to her mouth, the tips of her ears flushing red, hand jumping to her locket.

It's rude to stare, Charlotte reminded herself, looking down at the table and reaching for her wine glass, the coolness against her fingers grounding in a way.

"Are you enjoying Boston so far?"

Ali exhaled, brightening again as her chin bobbed.

"It's been my favorite so far. The energy itself is one thing. It's rich with history and culture. The food is great as are the artist communities. I've really bonded with Wren too." Ali said, looking thoughtful. "I haven't decided if it's enough to keep me here yet, though. But I guess my possible move might be a good cover for our fake breakup."

"That it would."

Charlotte agreed, grateful to know they were on the same page. Neither was looking for this to become anything serious. Their mutual attraction

opened the door for something casual. But with the easy way their conversation flowed it seemed a friendship might blossom.

“Have you lived here your whole life?” Ali asked, propping her chin in her hand as she gazed at Charlotte with those soft, honey-brown eyes, warm and glinting where the setting sun caught them.

“Other than college, yes. But I’ve traveled extensively.”

“What’s your most favorite place you’ve ever been?”

Charlotte hummed. “For food, Italy. History, the UK. Art and fashion, France. But for the great outdoors and variety, I’d have to say here in the US.”

“They say variety is the spice of life,” Ali added, those damn dimples peeking out.

“What about you?”

“I got my passport years ago but it’s hard enough for me to leave Willow for a weekend sometimes. I can’t imagine leaving her for longer and being so far away.”

Brown eyes shifted. Ali moved her other hand to idly run her nails across her upper forearm, picking at her skin and drawing Charlotte’s attention back to her vine tattoo. It suited her. She wondered if there were more. Her mouth watered at the thought.

“Understandable. Is she your baby?”

“Oh yes.”

“You’ll like my mother. She loves all animals and spends her retirement volunteering at the local animal shelter.”

“She already sounds like a saint.” Ali’s lips curled further, deepening the dimples in her cheeks. She made a circle motion in the air around her own face. “You soften when you talk about your family.”

It shouldn’t have surprised Charlotte. Her family was everything to her, but most people took ages to catch the subtle way her shoulders eased, the quiet glow in her eyes when she mentioned them. Victoria certainly never had.

“Do I?” Charlotte asked, a faint warmth rising in her chest.

“Yep,” Ali said with a nod.

The waitress appeared, scooting the centerpiece to the side and setting their appetizer in front of them before vanishing again.

Ali rubbed her hands together, planning her attack on the steaming dish of calamari.

Charlotte eyed her overalls covered in an array of paint blots. The speckled rainbow added to her overall sunny disposition. Imagining her humming to her music as she added layers of paint to a canvas came easy. Dainty hands covered in colorful smears she would inevitably get everywhere. The proof was in the current smudge of lavender just behind her ear.

Everything about Ali was a breath of fresh air. An artist with a carefree spirit. Never acting a certain way to try and impress or force herself into some mold others might approve of.

Ali dunked a piece of calamari in sauce and popped it into her mouth, eyes rolling back as she groaned at the taste.

“Did you forget to eat?” Charlotte asked, wondering if anyone ever enjoyed calamari so much.

“Shamefully common occurrence. I often forget to feed and water myself, especially if I have a deadline coming up,” she admitted, dipping another piece. “Tell me about your family.”

Charlotte gave her usual spiel about her family, offering up all the anecdotal details. Ali listened and when Charlotte hadn’t tried any calamari, she nudged the plate closer again and again, honeyed eyes looking rather conspiratorial. It wasn’t that Charlotte didn’t like fried food. By thirty-six, her metabolism had slowed and now she rarely indulged. But those eyes and those damn dimples left her with no choice but to partake.

“Is Lilah *your* baby?”

“Is it that obvious?”

Ali nodded, making another loop around her face in explanation.

“She’s the little darling of our family. She could…”

Ali cocked her head, humor dancing in her eyes as she supplied. “Get away with murder?”

“Exactly. But murder would be unlikely as she’s too sweet,” Charlotte chuckled, spinning the stem of her wine glass between thumb and forefinger. “She was just the cutest thing growing up with her soft blonde curls and big hazel eyes. She has a great sense of humor. Lizzie and I, we both always knew what we wanted and we worked for it. Lilah works hard too, but…”

Charlotte hesitated, eyes lingering on the wine swirling in her glass.

“I didn’t really notice how much she has tried to be like Lizzie and me until recently. I think the age gap made her feel like she was chasing after

us, trying to catch up. Being someone other than yourself never works out well for anyone. She's still figuring out who she is. I imagine she will find you fascinating because of how sure of yourself and charismatic you are."

The waitress appeared again, clearing away their empty appetizer dish, refilling their drinks and promising to bring their entrées soon.

Silence fell for a moment. Charlotte took another sip of her wine as Ali began straightening the items near her on the table before glancing back up.

"So, this ex of yours?"

"Victoria."

Her name was acrid on Charlotte's tongue as she spoke. Loath to tarnish the evening with talk of her.

"She's actually my ex-fiancée."

Ali's eyebrows rose, lips forming an "O."

"We were together for about three years. She proposed. I said yes. Two years ago, right before our engagement party, she broke it off."

Ali blew out a low whistle. "I see the need for a fake girlfriend now."

Charlotte nodded.

"I do *not* want her back. I've made this very clear to her, but she is…"

"Not very respectful of your boundaries?"

"Exactly. In hindsight, I can see the multitude of reasons we were never right for each other. I'm not trying to make her jealous, though I do believe she will be. I have made no attempts to reach out. I have successfully avoided seeing her for almost all of the last two years. She, however, finds her ways. On several occasions, she's made it clear she would like to get back together or hook up. I'm not interested. Nor will I ever be."

Her grip tightened around the stem of her glass.

"How did you meet?" Ali asked carefully, the tip of her tongue darting out to swipe across her upper lip.

Charlotte sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Well, we move in similar circles. Her father worked with Sasha's father, so they grew up together. It was a charity gala I didn't feel like going to. She approached me and we talked the entire night. She has a way of making people feel like they are the center of her universe." She grazed a thumb over her own lower lip, instead of reaching up further to pluck at her eyebrow. "At least, when she wants them to."

She couldn’t remember the last time she felt that important to anyone besides her family and Imani.

“How does your family feel about her?”

Charlotte found brown eyes ringed with amber waiting without judgement, just open interest. It washed away some of the sourness coating her tongue.

“I don’t think my mother ever really liked her. Everyone else liked her in the beginning. But now, they all hate her. Lizzie holds a grudge and insists she was never good enough for me. Lilah and Victoria used to get along well. But now, she refuses to even make eye contact with Victoria at events.”

“So everyone pretty much can’t stand her?”

“Pretty much,” Charlotte agreed, leaning forward, forearms resting along the edge of the table. “I’m hoping your presence will help solidify I moved on. Staving off the sympathetic glances and intrusive questions of extended family would merely be a bonus.”

At the time, Charlotte wanted Victoria to be happy... but she never was. Nothing was ever good enough. *Charlotte* was never good enough, no matter how hard she tried. It seemed like getting married would appease her. But Victoria left her, out of the blue without any real kind of explanation other than to throw all the blame at Charlotte’s feet.

Now, Charlotte thanked her lucky stars Victoria ended things.

“Well,” Ali began, reaching up and toying with the golden locket around her neck again. “Relationships end and sometimes breakups are messy or just downright heartbreaking. I could’ve given her the benefit of the doubt, you know. Maybe she realized you weren’t right? Or maybe she was afraid of commitment? Clearly, she was crazy to let someone like you go. Like, my gods.”

Ali gestured in Charlotte’s direction.

Charlotte wanted to argue and inform Ali she was no good in relationships. Her insecurities on the matter curled around her spine, a bitter note coating her tongue. But something about the way Ali took a steadying breath as she thumbed the face of her locket kept her silent.

“My point is. I could’ve tried to look past her poor decision making. But I can’t look past her disrespect of your boundaries and her seeming inability to understand consent.”

Charlotte couldn’t seem to find a response in the face of the validation Ali offered with her words.

Luckily, the waitress spared her by delivering the entrées. Charlotte thought Ali might vibrate out of her seat if forced to wait much longer. Ali popped a fork full of cream covered noodles into her mouth before the waitress even made it three paces away.

“Okay, I’ve done it,” she sighed, melting back into her seat and waving her fork around in triumph. She touched her lips before her hand pulled away, fingers expanding in a chef’s kiss. “I’ve found the best fucking Alfredo in this city.”

Ali twirled a few noodles onto her fork.

“Try it.” Ali motioned to Charlotte’s idle fork while prepping her next bite. “It’s going to change your life.”

Charlotte bit back on the amused laugh at Ali’s unbridled enjoyment of food. Picking up her utensil, she stretched across the table, spinning a noodle or two onto her fork, cupping her free hand beneath in case they fell as she brought the fork to her mouth, groaning in appreciation as flavor exploded across her tongue.

“Fuck, that’s exceptional, and dangerous.”

Ali’s dimples peeked out. “How’s yours?”

“Let’s see.”

Charlotte dug into her own pasta. The savory fragrance hit her nose just before her taste buds were sent to another dimension.

“My gods, this is heavenly. I definitely win.”

Ali’s brows knit together, head tilting in question.

“How can anything be better than this?”

Ali readied her fork to steal her own bite.

“Because it’s a black truffle sauce,” Charlotte sighed.

Her eyes squinted at the sight of Ali’s incoming fork and she pulled her plate out of reach of her shorter arms.

“Excuse me, this is all for me.”

Ali gasped, placing a hand over her chest.

“I offered you some of mine out of the goodness of my heart!”

But Charlotte was already holding her loaded fork out to Ali.

“Prepare yourself.”

Ali shook her head, grinning as she leaned forward, lips wrapping around the fork. Brown eyes widened before fluttering closed, and she

groaned. Want sparked in Charlotte.

“I have no words,” Ali sighed, body going slack as she sank back in her seat. “None. I have died.”

“We can share,” Charlotte offered. “Then, we’ll both be winners.”

Ali’s eyes widened, shimmering with something Charlotte couldn’t place. They glowed like amber with it. Like she couldn’t believe Charlotte would offer such a thing. Or perhaps receiving the same kindness she gave so freely was unexpected.

“This seems like something your girlfriend should know. Where did you get the idea for Compose?” Ali asked, artfully twirling more noodles onto her fork, freckles popping out as her blush faded.

Charlotte’s wine glass paused halfway to her lips.

“Lilah, actually.” She set it down, fingers resting against the glass as the memory of what an awkward thing Lilah had been surfaced. “She went through a phase. It only lasted about two weeks but she was completely obsessed with sound and video editing. She kept complaining there was nothing robust enough for what she wanted to do creatively.” Her fingers spun her own fork round and round. “I spotted the gap.”

“Just like that?”

“More or less. I wrote some of the early code myself.” Charlotte shrugged. “It’s all deprecated now of course.”

“You said you play piano?”

“Correct.”

Ali’s eyebrows shot up. She reached across and flipped Charlotte’s hand over without hesitation, studying the length of her fingers.

“I know professional pianists who would kill for these.”

Part of her wanted to pull away and tuck the why of it away. But it *was* something a girlfriend would know.

“I’ve played since I was seven. My father taught me.” She turned her hand back over, unhurried, drawing it back toward herself. “He died when I was nine. Some of my clearest memories of him are at the piano.”

Charlotte took a bite, savoring the flavor and creamy texture. It was damn good pasta. Her dad would have loved it… he would have liked Ali, too. Her inquisitive questions and willingness to live outside the box. He might have loved her even.

“I didn’t want to make music work,” She heard herself say, tone gravelly. “I didn’t want to risk losing it.”

“So, you built an empire instead,” Ali said softly.

Charlotte’s mouth curved.

“Something like that.”

Ali’s thumb found her locket.

Neither of them said anything for a moment. But Charlotte felt like Ali understood exactly why Charlotte stopped performing more than most…



ALI SAT up straight in the driver’s seat, looking stricken. Time passed in a blur after their food arrived. Their conversation flowed with such ease they sat there for hours, until the restaurant began closing. The conversation continued in the car.

“Wait! I have a very important question. When is your birthday?”

A laugh bubbled out of Charlotte.

“I was expecting something far more serious. It’s December twenty-second. When’s yours?”

All the light winked out of Ali’s eyes.

“October sixteenth.”

Charlotte cocked her head. “Do you not like your birthday?”

“It’s... complicated. And not fake first date material. Ask me again in a few weeks.”

Ali avoided eye contact as she pulled up to the front of the house, her thumb tapping a little rhythmic beat against the shift.

Tap, tap, tap, tap. Pause…

Charlotte thought about what she said about her roots and all the moves in the last decade. Birthdays were made special by those around you. By family and friends. Something Charlotte began to understand Ali didn’t have.

Charlotte changed the subject as Ali put the car in park.

“The wedding is October twenty-second. Remind me to send you the schedule of the events tomorrow.”

“I can do that,” Ali murmured.

She hopped out, rounding the car to open Charlotte’s door. That spark of loneliness was back in her warm brown eyes.

Charlotte couldn’t stand it.

Unfolding herself from the passenger seat a rare moment of impulse took over and she swept Ali into a hug before she could step back. Ali stiffened for a moment, a soft surprise gasp escaping as her chin came to rest on Charlotte's taller shoulder.

For a fraction of a second, Charlotte thought she overstepped. But then Ali melted. Her arms shot around Charlotte's waist with lightning speed, holding on so tight, as if she was afraid Charlotte might vanish if she let go.

Charlotte hardly ever touched anyone outside of her family for more than a handshake or a pat on the back. She braced for the discomfort she always felt having someone pressed so close. But it never came. Instead, Ali's warmth seeped in, her cheek nestled naturally along Charlotte's jaw, her body snug against Charlotte's like they were made to fit.

The faint smell of paint lingered on Ali's skin, clinging to her overalls beneath the fresh herbal blend of whatever hair products she used. It made Charlotte's chest swell.

"I had a wonderful time. Thank you for agreeing to do this."

Ali clung to her in a way Charlotte hadn't expected. Her reply was soft. So soft Charlotte would have missed it had they not been wound so tight, warmth threading between them.

"I had a great time too. This whole thing really might be fun."

Charlotte held on for a little longer, wondering when Ali was last hugged like this. A few hushed moments passed before Charlotte pulled back. She pressed an affectionate kiss to her cheek and felt Ali melt a little more.

"I'll text you tomorrow to arrange the day."

"Sounds good," Ali said, her smile returning, bright and warm. "Goodnight, my moon! Have pleasant dreams."

Humor tugged at her lips as she brushed some hair behind her ear. Their playful use of the pet names was becoming quite the amusing little game. "Goodnight, Sunflower. I'll see you tomorrow."

She made her way up the walkway, to her porch where she looked back to find red taillights growing smaller as the car reached the end of the driveway.

The day went better than Charlotte expected. Ali was exactly as genuine as she hoped, her spirit intact despite everything that should have worn it

down. Charlotte learned more than she anticipated, and still found herself wanting more. Tomorrow, perhaps, would offer it.

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8

ALI

THE FOLLOWING afternoon Ali barely had a chance to lift the brass octopus-shaped knocker before the door flew open.

She hadn't even finished the nervous inhale meant to steady herself before Charlotte was there, beautiful and barefoot, in sweatpants and a white tank top that rode up just enough to reveal a sliver of olive skin. It was effortless and unbothered in a way that had Ali's stomach flip-flopping.

Leave it to Charlotte to somehow make lounge wear look like a runway moment.

"I need help," Charlotte said, voice tight, pulling Ali inside before they even exchanged hellos.

Charlotte's usual confidence and perfect poise were gone. Replaced by a frazzled energy that clung to her like static. On some level, Ali expected anxiety; but the absolute dread rolling off her spoke to how deep some of Charlotte's wounds went.

Ali's head swiveled this way and that, taking in every inch. It was clear Charlotte remodeled the house but managed to hold onto its Victorian soul. Restored crown molding lined the walls, contrasting with the dark relaxing blue-green paint that might have been oppressive were it not for the light streaming in from all directions. Hardwood floors glowed under warm afternoon light, complementing the scent of lavender and spices that drifted down the hall from what Ali assumed was the kitchen. Tasteful art lined the walls with wooden and gilded frames, each one carefully chosen to complement the architecture, leading the eye up the elegant staircase.

Through a pair of open french doors a grand piano sat beneath a tasteful, leaflike chandelier. Teetering heaps of sheet music sprawled across the piano's lid, a tiny bit of chaos in otherwise curated and organized perfection. The walls were made up of bookshelves packed with ancient-looking spines made of cracked leather and faded cloth.

Before she could take in any more, Charlotte was already pulling her up the stairs. Their footsteps were muffled by a runner that did nothing to hide the creak of certain steps. But then she was surrounded by a room painted in the most soothing blue-gray that brought a hush to Ali's whirring thoughts.

A massive bed covered in pristine white bedding and enough pillows to build an epic fort. Her breath caught… She was in Charlotte's bedroom.

Oh boy.

Not exactly how she imagined winding up in this particular room, but she could work with it.

But Charlotte tugged her right along, releasing her in the doorway of a closet that would be the envy of many a woman. It was large enough to be considered a small boutique, with rows of clothes, shelves of shoes. A station where accessories were arranged in neat, precise displays of drawers and hooks. It was perfect, almost intimidating in its organization. And amongst the order was a Charlotte who seemed achingly human in her disarray.

She flipped through articles of clothing, each movement sharp and aggressive.

Tightness gripped Ali's chest as she tried to sort out what Charlotte needed. She said she needed help, but standing in the face of Charlotte's chaos… Ali felt ill-equipped to provide it as a pit opened up in her stomach.

Not knowing what else to do or say, she went with the obvious.

"Wow, I know so many women who would kill for a closet like this."

"It's excessive, I know," Charlotte snapped, continuing to flip through piece after piece. Barreling ahead, providing little time for Ali to flinch at the harshness in her tone. "What does one wear to your twin's engagement party where you're going to be forced to play nice with your ex in public for the first time in two years?"

The tightness in her chest loosened, understanding Charlotte's struggle.

Careful steps drew her closer.

"You've managed to avoid this for two years? Impressive."

Charlotte's aggressive yanking slowed, self-deprecation clear in her tone. "Not cowardly?"

Ali considered for a moment, knowing Victoria disrespected Charlotte's boundaries.

"I don't think so. She doesn't deserve your time and you don't owe her anything. You have every right to protect your own peace."

Approaching from behind, Ali gripped Charlotte's elbow, pulling her around and into a hug. She froze in Ali's arms, spine going ramrod straight.

Had she overstepped? Just because Charlotte hugged her one time didn't mean they were friends who hugged. But her concerns fell quiet as Charlotte sank into the embrace, arms slipping around her waist.

"It's okay to be anxious. The first time will be the hardest. But just know, you aren't going in there alone. I have your back." She patted Charlotte's back for emphasis. "You can hold my hand as much as you need."

Tension drained from Charlotte's form. Hurricane bright eyes seemed calmer when she pulled back, flitting back and forth. Ali felt as though she'd passed through the eye of whatever storm raged only moments ago.

Charlotte's voice fell soft as snow as it passed her lips. "You're an incredibly kind person, aren't you?"

Charlotte made her feel seen. Understood in a way not many took the time to. But she supposed not many were given enough time to get close anymore.

Ali cleared her throat, attempting to banish the lump forming.

"I do try to be," Ali rasped, beginning to clam up. Pivoting to the racks of clothes, her hands rose to form a steeple, fingertips tapping rhythmically together. "Let's find your outfit."

IN SOCIETY, it was a known fact that the Davenports were—putting it mildly—well off. Further, it was known that their wealth—though vast—paled to the hard-fought fortune of the Pryce family. Not until standing before a *literal* mansion did Ali begin to comprehend the breadth of their wealth.

Being the sole survivor of two family trees meant Ali financially wanted for very little in life. But the expensive art, decor, and furniture coupled

with opulent architecture suggested Ali's wealth was but a tiny drop in the sea of riches around her.

Prickles of unease spread across her skin, sinking in, adding fuel to her already frantically thumping heart. Her palms went clammy at the sight of the Kandinsky hanging above an outrageous fireplace.

Surely this was some kind of museum, not a home.

Her stomach dropped.

What was she doing here?

"Does your family know you're bringing a nomadic hermit from off the streets?" Ali asked, voice pitching too high as she rubbed her sweaty palms against her black pants.

Charlotte caught the shift in tone immediately. Her bemused expression softened as she took a step closer, slipping her hand over where Ali rubbed at the pins and needles creeping across her chest.

Warm fingers laced through her own.

"I told them I was bringing you and that you're a rare jewel," Charlotte hummed, thumb running over the back of Ali's, quieting the little voice in the back of her mind vowing she was too much… or not enough. "There will be people who very much fall into the stuffy stereotype expected. But anyone important to me won't care where I found you. My mother grew up dirt-poor. All they'll see is the magic of your smile. You'll have them wrapped around your finger in no time."

Ali tucked her hair behind her ear, wishing it was just as easy to brush away her insecurities. But, alas. *Get a grip!* Inhaling a cleansing breath she blew it out, offering Charlotte a gentle upturn to her lips.

"There," Charlotte murmured, giving Ali's hand a reassuring squeeze. "Just like that, Sunshine." Charlotte leaned closer, blue eyes twinkling. "You can hold my hand as much as you want."

Her free hand shot out, covering the back of Charlotte's, holding on for dear life.

"Thanks."

She ran her thumb round and round the center of Ali's palm and she stood there breathing with her, letting her take the time she needed to slow the sprinting in her chest to a walk.

Dead weight.

But there was no judgement in Charlotte's gaze, just understanding and a quiet strength Ali wanted to soak up and use to bolster her own fortitude.

A call came from across the room, breaking the quiet moment shared between them and drawing their attention. Ali took half a step back, eyes widening as she gazed twenty or so years into the future. She was shorter, but no less elegant, the mallen streak running through her raven hair was the only significant sign of her age.

“There’s my Cricket,” she greeted, eyes swimming with affection as she pulled Charlotte into a hug.

Her attention shifted to Ali, familiar ocean blue peered straight into her soul. Without warning or hesitation, she let go of Charlotte and tan arms engulfed Ali in a hug, holding her in a way only a mother could.

Thoughts stuttered, fixating on the warmth seeping into her skin, straight to the bone deep grief that never left, soothing and making it ache in equal measure. It had been too long since she received any kind of motherly affection. Her arms moved without conscious thought, snapping around a slender waist to return the hug full force.

How long had it been since she received a mom hug?

Ali clung to her and Diana Carter-Davenport didn’t let go, like she sensed Ali needed the hug and was more than happy to go on holding her for as long as she needed.

“I like this one, Charlotte.”

Ali caught the southern accent faded by time and distance but still thick enough to color her words and make them stand out. There was something so soothing about the cadence of it.

Diana pulled back, eyes lined with soft wrinkles crinkling as she twirled a curl around her finger.

“Aren’t you as pretty as a peach? And just look at this gorgeous head of hair!”

“Just wait until she smiles,” Charlotte quipped, giving Ali a wink.

On cue, a smile broke across her face and Diana cooed in delight at the sight of Ali’s dimples. A soft laugh so similar to Charlotte’s filled the space between them.

“Those are what gotcha weren’t they?”

“Indeed, they were,” Charlotte replied, eyes fixed on Ali’s wide smile.

Ali held out her hand. “My dimples and I are pleased to meet you, ma’am.”

“Your manners are appreciated, my dear,” Diana said, patting Ali’s cheek. “But please call me Diana or Di, even Ana. Ma’am is far too formal

and makes me feel ancient. With these joints I already feel old enough." Diana bypassed Ali's hand altogether, sliding an arm around her waist. "Let's get you introduced, shall we?"

Plastering on her brightest smile Ali met a kaleidoscope of people, their faces blending together. She was out of breath by the time she met James, Charlotte's step-father, who was perhaps the nicest man to ever walk the earth. A thick head of hair, all white, with hazel eyes enlarged by the lenses of thick-rimmed glasses.

"Cricket, you didn't say she was an artist!" Diana exclaimed the moment Ali answered James' questions about her profession. "What medium?"

An onslaught of questions came next, everything from concepts to favorite techniques which she was more than happy to answer.

After thirty minutes, Charlotte made her apologies, pulling Ali away, pressing a cup of water into her hand. The liquid was downed, leaving her smacking her lips, sighing in gratitude.

"I thought you might need this before the final hurdles of the evening."

Charlotte offered her a flute of champagne next and held out her arm.

"How am I doing?"

"Perfectly. I told you they would all fall victim to that smile of yours."

Ali sighed in relief, looking ahead to where Charlotte was taking them. A near carbon copy of Charlotte stood tall, presumably hand in hand with Sasha Pryce, nothing welcoming in the steep arch of her brow as she tracked their approach.

"Good god, everyone here won the genetic lottery," Ali whispered.

Refusing to let the appraising stare fill her with fear, Ali bounded forward, holding her hand out to Lizzie.

"I feel safe assuming you must be Elizabeth Davenport." Ali greeted. Lizzie took Ali's hand, her grip verging on viselike. "Charlotte has told me so much about you. It's good to meet you. I'm Ali."

Ali continued shaking Lizzie's hand with far too much enthusiasm. Arresting eyes that shifted toward green instead of Charlotte's blue considered her. Ali held her gaze, keeping dimples on full display. Elizabeth smiled back.

"Thank you for coming and keeping my sister out of trouble this evening."

"Of course, thank you for having me."

At last, she dropped Lizzie's hand, thrusting her own out to another stunning woman with curves for days, flawless warm chestnut skin, eyes the color of burnt sienna, and black hair that fell just past her shoulders in an impressive array of curls.

"Hi, I'm Ali."

"Sasha Pryce."

It was disorienting how she managed to sound both warm and welcoming, yet cool and aloof all at once. Everything from her clothing to the softness of her features was inviting. Only for the rigidity in her spine to contradict what was observed at a glance.

"Congratulations on the engagement and may I just say, this place is amazing." Ali gestured to the mansion and surrounding grounds.

"Thank you," Sasha replied. "We are rather proud of it."

Ali caught the purse in Lizzie's lips and wondered if perhaps the *rather* in Sasha's statement was an exaggeration.

Fascinating.

But Ali thought back to the opulence she walked through and wondered if perhaps it was a gilded cage, not a home.

A pretty petite blonde with hazel eyes appeared, throwing her arms around Charlotte. Dressed in a chartreuse suit, with high-waisted slacks, jacket hung open revealing the matching crop top and exposed skin. A bold color she pulled off well.

"Sister, who is this?" she asked, a warm effervescent sort of smile lighting up her expression.

"Delilah, this is my girlfriend, Ali."

Lizzie, who was mid-sip of her champagne, choked.

"Ali, this is my baby sister, Lilah," Charlotte introduced, slipping her arm around Ali's waist as the two shook hands.

Lizzie spluttered in the background, Sasha lifting a hand to pat her back.

"It's nice to meet you, Lilah," Ali said.

Lilah nodded. "It's so good to meet you." She turned to Charlotte, shoulders drooping and looking crestfallen. "You didn't tell me you were seeing someone."

Sensing tension, Ali jumped right in with her prefabricated story.

"It's my fault. I wasn't ready for anyone to know about my existence until Charlotte mentioned the engagement party. I thought it would be a

good time to make an appearance."

Huh, no lies detected… technically.

"Oh really?" Lilah's countenance warmed as she perked back up. "That makes sense. We *can* be a lot at first. I'm glad you could make it to help us celebrate!"

Ali nodded, releasing a mental exhale at the dodged awkward situation.

Lilah pressed a kiss to Elizabeth and Sasha's cheeks, wrapped Charlotte in another fierce hug, waved goodbye and floated away down the steps.

A silent conversation transpired between Charlotte and Lizzie as they exchanged an array of facial expressions and occasional gestures.

"You'll have to forgive them," Sasha interjected, shaking her head at the twins.

"Do they do this often?" Ali asked, watching with fascination.

"Oh, they moved beyond the need for speech in the womb."

"Honestly, that's fascinating and kinda beautiful."

"So it is!" Charlotte butted in, waving goodbye to the engaged couple, and sweeping Ali away and down the steps onto the lawn.

"I take it Lizzie knows we aren't actually together?" Ali whispered.

"Clever girl," Charlotte murmured, winking again and making Ali's stomach flutter.

They made it two steps onto the lawn when their attention was again diverted. Who could possibly be left to meet at this point? But all thoughts of being overwhelmed or tired vanished when Ali's eyes landed on the figure.

"Good evening, Miss Davenport."

Her voice was smooth. So, so smooth.

"Miss Hill," Charlotte drawled, offering the newcomer a lopsided smile of greeting. "So good of you to come."

The warmest, kindest eyes shimmered beneath thick lashes lined in gold. They took each other in and Ali struggled not to let her jaw fall open. It wasn't so much her looks, which *were* striking, but the magnetic energy surrounding her. A yellow jumpsuit contrasted against sable skin. Hair smoothed up on both sides before springy coil curls exploded into a mohawk.

Who is this heavenly creature? Am I gawking? No, no, no, be cool McCarthy. Be cool!

"It's good to *finally* meet you, Ali."

“God, you are a vision. Who are you?” Ali babbled, heat climbing up her cheeks.

Uncool, McCarthy. Uncool.

Charlotte shook her head, lips curling at the edges. “This is Imani Hill, my CFO and best friend.”

“Oh! It’s wonderful to meet you.” Ali said, a searing flush spreading across her chest, creeping toward her neck. “Charlotte has mentioned you a lot!”

Imani’s lush lips painted a bold deep red pulled back into a grin.

“You mustn’t tell her such things, darling. It will go straight to her head,” Charlotte teased, hand moving to rest against her lower back.

Imani rolled her eyes.

“Are all your friends this attractive?” Ali blurted out.

Shoot me.

If it wouldn’t have made things more awkward, she would have clapped her hand over her mouth. Could the ground swallow her whole?

It was clear Imani identified as straight. Ali’s gaydar didn’t even budge. But confidence seeped from every pore, making Ali’s mouth go dry.

“Aren’t you a charmer?” Delight twinkled in her eyes as she reached out to smooth the collar of Ali’s viridian green blazer, expression a little too smug. Only the weight of Charlotte’s touch kept her brain from turning to mush. “But I’m her only friend.”

“So, technically yes?” Ali returned without missing a beat, finding her footing at last.

“I like you,” Imani admitted, warm eyes dancing with amusement.

“As do I,” Charlotte said leaning in to press an affectionate kiss to Ali’s cheek.

“Cute.” Imani gave them both a knowing look before walking away with long confident strides without so much as another word.

Ali blew out her cheeks, letting the air whoosh out before she asked, “What just happened?”

“Revenge,” Charlotte replied, fanning Ali’s cheeks in a vain attempt to help them cool. “Almost all her boy toys have hit on me.”

“So, justice really?”

“Oh yes, she will revel in this for some time. You’ve just made her entire year.”

Charlotte chuckled as she craned her neck in search of a waiter. But the sound of her amusement evaporated into nothing and her grip tightened.

Ali followed her gaze.

She was around Ali's height in stilettos, golden blonde hair pinned up, accentuating her prominent cheekbones, and piercing eyes. This had to be Victoria. Her eyes swept the grounds. Ali knew she needed to act. Charlotte couldn't get caught staring! Everyone knew about the unspoken post break up game and Ali intended for Charlotte to be the ultimate victor.

Leaning up on her tiptoes, she whispered in Charlotte's ear. "Hey, I have a very important question."

She didn't.

Charlotte's attention shifted and she tilted her head to better hear.

"What is your favorite color?" Ali whispered, dropping back down to her heels, toes wiggling inside black booties.

Charlotte snorted, blue eyes flitted across her face for a moment. Leaning down she murmured against Ali's ear, breath brushing against her skin, sending a shiver down her spine. Her pleasant perfume invaded her senses. Notes of honeysuckle, gardenia, jasmine… cedar-wood… caramel, and something citrusy. A rush of air expanded her lungs, filling Ali with sunbeams, warming her from the inside out. All cares and worries faded away when wrapped in such a heady scent.

"I've always been partial to blues, but at this moment I find umber quite appealing."

Ali blinked, clearing her head, puzzled by the response. "That is an unusual choice… why umber?"

Charlotte took half a step closer. A good four inches taller in her heels at least.

"I find it under-appreciated. In the sun, it catches the light and often flecks of orange and specks of gold are illuminated. I find myself unable to look away, enraptured… completely captivated," Charlotte explained, a smug expression forming as she held Ali's stare.

A bewildering and befuddling description for a pigment Ali knew well.

"What are you talking about?"

Charlotte's free hand came up to trace a line across Ali's brow before swooping down and across her cheek.

Ali spluttered, struggling to find words, cheeks heating all over again.

This woman!

“Oh—my god, are you—You’re talking about my eyes?”

Charlotte nodded, tongue darting out to sweep across painted lips, half a breath away from laughing.

Ali fanned super heated cheeks.

“Smooth. Very smooth.”

Looking rather pleased with herself, Charlotte teased, “You’re adorable when you’re all flustered.”

“Don’t you dare! You’ll make it worse,” Ali cried, burying her face in her hands, grumbling into them. “There’s nothing adorable about turning into a tomato.”

Charlotte laughed then, a bright and clear sound. Like music. She tugged Ali’s hands away from her face, lacing both their hands together. “But it’s so entertaining for me.”

But, of course, the playful moment was shattered when a sultry voice called out. “Charlotte, *my* dear.”

Ali bristled not appreciating the implied ownership in Victoria’s greeting.

“Victoria. How are you?” Charlotte responded, no sign of nerves.

She stood tall, like a regal goddess, face set in a mask of genteel etiquette. She dropped Ali’s hands. Arms snapping back to her sides, fingers curling in on themselves until they were balled tight.

“Wonderful, now that you’re here.” Victoria stepped closer, her voice was lined in a gentleness that could set anyone at ease, convince them to do or believe anything.

Her hand slid over Charlotte’s upper arm and curled around it. The snapping rigidity in Charlotte’s skeleton paired with muscles pulled taut like bow strings was instant.

Briefly, Ali wondered if she developed powers of invisibility as Victoria ignored Ali altogether, despite their shared proximity.

Jade green slithered over Charlotte’s form. “You look sensational as always.”

Ali frowned, taking a moment to assess. The expensive suit she wore… Well, Charlotte would have worn it better. But, she *did* look good. There was no way to deny her attractive features. Nice face… *Fine*. A *very* nice face. She must be around Sasha’s age, maybe eight or so years older than Charlotte, though her clear skin barely showed it.

“Thank you,” Charlotte replied, offering nothing else, giving a stellar impression of a woman made of stone.

“How are you? I’ve missed—”

Oh, hell no!

Ali stepped into Charlotte, wedging herself partially between them, forcing Victoria to take half a step back and release Charlotte, cutting off her next words as Ali demanded to be acknowledged.

Victoria’s gaze—warm and a touch greedy when looking at Charlotte—went cold at the sight of Ali. “Who is this?”

Ali felt her spine straighten as something protective and stubborn filled her chest. Because she didn’t need more than ten seconds to know with bone deep certainty that Victoria was one of the worst kinds of women there was.

She flashed Victoria a sunny and unbothered smile as she extended her hand.

“I’m Ali,” she said, her voice easy though her eyes never wavered as she proudly proclaimed the words that weren’t *technically* true. “Charlotte’s girlfriend.”

And sure it wasn’t true in the implied context. But from the first time she witnessed the cold greed in Victoria’s eyes, Ali was in this. She was going to sell this charade or die trying, because ten seconds was all it took for Ali to know she fucking hated this bitch.

Once again, Charlotte reanimated, winding an arm around her waist, tugging her close.

Victoria gingerly shook her hand, eyes sweeping over her form, narrowing into sharp points where Charlotte’s hand rested over her hip. She let go of Ali’s hand like she was carrying something contagious.

Victoria’s face curved into a barely contained sneer. “I didn’t know you were dating anyone.”

“And why would she tell you?” Ali asked in faux confusion, looking up at Charlotte with wide eyes. “Who is this—” *don’t say bitch. Definitely don’t say cunt.* “—la-dy?”

“Ex-girlfriend,” Charlotte replied, affection blossomed, softening the harsh chiseled lines of her face, a look in her eye implying Ali hung the moon.

“*fiancée*, actually.”

Ali pretended not to hear that bit.

“Well then, definitely why would she tell you?” she asked, splaying her hand over Charlotte’s chest like a shield. “Would be a little weird.”

“We’re still *quite* close.”

“Other than letting me know she was engaged *years* ago, she has literally never mentioned you,” Ali shot back with zero hesitation, earning a stifled snort from Charlotte. “And I know where she spends her *free* time. So, definitely not *that* close.”

Victoria’s attention shifted back to Charlotte. “Are you going to let her talk to me like this?”

“Oh, I’m so sorry if I hurt your feelings,” Ali gushed, the picture of repentant innocence as she cupped her own cheeks. “It’s the red hair. I just say the things everyone is thinking out loud sometimes. It gets me into trouble.”

Charlotte pressed a kiss to her temple before murmuring just loud enough for Victoria to hear, “Just the good kind, darling.”

Victoria’s jaw clenched, looking between them, hatred burning in her gaze. Her pointed chin lifted high into the air as she stormed away.

Round one, to me!

She was definitely… *probably* planning Ali’s untimely demise.

Ali watched her go, releasing a maniacal little giggle and lifting her fist, holding it out to Charlotte, who bumped it with her own.

Ali made an exploding motion with her hand.

“Boom.”

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9

CHARLOTTE

CHAMPAGNE CONTINUED FLOWING and dinner was served out on the terrace beneath flickering candlelight. Charlotte intentionally sat them at a particular table, placing Ali right next to Natasha Pryce, Sasha's daughter. All the Pryces carried an unmistakable family stamp; flawless chestnut skin, features that landed somewhere between sharp and soft, and auras that filled any room. They were all tall, except Natasha, who was tiny but mighty for twenty-seven and the kind of woman who made others break eye contact first.

Satisfaction sparked in Charlotte's chest when Ali and Natasha hit it off like old friends. Natasha's real laugh—not the one deemed acceptable for polite society—rang through the warm evening air.

"Did you know that my grandmother collected art like Charlotte collects plants?" Natasha asked, her tone unapologetic, edged with playful bite, a smirk dancing at the corner of her mouth.

Ali's eyes lit up. "I can't say I was aware of your grandmother's… hobby until this very moment."

Natasha let out a delighted laugh, clearly thrilled that Ali wasn't pandering. "I have a feeling an artist like you would lose your mind in her gallery."

And so, Natasha, goddess braids draped elegantly over one shoulder, swept Ali off on a tour of the mansion, a task that—given the estate's size—took a fair amount of time.

But when Natasha reappeared, arm in arm with Lilah and no Ali in sight, Charlotte's concern churned in her gut. There was no immediate sign

of Victoria, but Charlotte had been glued to Lizzie, too busy dodging Victoria's pointed smiles and lingering stares to notice her slipping away.

Muttering a curse under her breath, Charlotte wound her way through the crowd, making a beeline for Natasha.

"Hey, Ali just ran off to the bathroom," Natasha said, her tone casual but alert. "She mentioned wanting to get a closer look at one of Grandmother's paintings. A Turner, I think."

Lilah, who had definitely surpassed her champagne quota for the night, let out a giggle and dropped her head onto Natasha's shoulder.

"You don't even know what priceless paintings hang on your own walls?"

Natasha rolled her eyes. The spitting image of her mother but looser in the way she moved, freer in ways Sasha Pryce rarely allowed herself to be.

"I know most of them," Natasha replied with a smirk, tucking an arm around Lilah's shoulders. "But there are rooms in this place I haven't been inside for years. It's a maze."

"Got any by Sargent?" Lilah asked, half-teasing.

"I think so," Natasha said, glancing down at Lilah with fond exasperation as she shook her head, her braids spilling over her shoulder. "But that's off the record, so don't quote me."

Since Lizzie and Sasha began dating, two years ago, Natasha and Lilah had grown into easy friends. Natasha was the opposite of Lilah in almost every way. No one doubted Natasha was built to follow in her mother's footsteps. She graduated high school at fifteen, top of her class, then breezed through college and all the way through Harvard Law, finishing early and again, top of her class.

"Mama likes him," Lilah yawned.

Charlotte slipped away, back into the mansion, confident she once spotted a Turner in one of the small sitting rooms in the eastern side of the mansion. Most guests were out on the terrace but a few milled about in the inner sitting rooms. The hall she made her way down was deserted, most doors were closed, but light streamed into the dimly lit hall up ahead.

"Charlotte isn't usually so affectionate with her girlfriends in public."

Victoria's snide tone filtered out, the odd echo adding an omnipotence to the disembodied voice. Memories of the games often accompanying that particular voice slid across her skin like oil slick, making her shudder.

Ali's brighter voice floated out next, trickling through Charlotte like lemonade after hours spent working in her garden on a hot day.

"Guess she hadn't found the right person yet."

"And you think you are? She's never even mentioned you."

"Hey. That's my line," Ali quipped, not at all intimidated by Victoria's demeanor. "But by my logic from earlier. Why would she mention me to you?" Ali shot back, all warmth leaving her voice. "She's not yours to keep tabs on anymore. When she tells people about me is up to her. I'm a private person and I wanted to keep it quiet. Charlotte was respecting my wishes. You know, consent? No? Consent is the new sexy—Guess you missed that memo?"

Victoria scoffed, the click of stiletto heels echoed from deeper in the room. Charlotte crept closer, from her position Ali's profile was visible where she sat on a sofa placed in the center of the room. No sign of Victoria but her voice came from somewhere behind Ali.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say you aren't even dating. You're not even her type. I think this is some ploy to—"

"To what?"

Ali cut her off, flaring temper just noticeable in her tone if you knew her well enough. Which Charlotte realized, she did.

"Make you jealous? Why the fuck would she waste anymore time and energy on you? You wasted enough of hers. Isn't it more likely she moved on and wants nothing to do with you?" Ali's hackles rose, her limited experience with Victoria enough to already elicit some form of response.

Which was exactly what Victoria wanted.

Victoria's heels rapped against marble, continuing her search for Ali's weak points. But Ali gave very little away. Perhaps working in the service industry provided the necessary skills to hold her own?

"There's no way she'd be interested in someone as young and inexperienced as you."

"Interesting assumption to make when you don't know a thing about me. Do you even actually know how old I am?"

Victoria was silent for half a beat, never a good sign in Charlotte's experience.

"She's going to drop you once she gets tired of you."

This fucking bitch!

Her jaw tightened, teeth gritting together as a glimmer of hurt flashed across Ali's face. There one second, gone the next. Her stomach dropped before protectiveness filled the empty space. She dug her phone out of her deep pocket.

"Thank you for the advice. But don't worry, I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself," Ali replied. "My advice for you is to worry more about yourself and less about *my* girlfriend."

"No, it was due on my desk yesterday," Charlotte stated, moving into the room to settle herself on the couch, close enough the press of their thighs together had her skin buzzing. "No, I was very clear."

Victoria remained out of sight and Charlotte looked at Ali, winking as she brushed vibrant hair behind her ear, following the strand down to the curled ends.

Ali smirked, aware of what Victoria wasn't. Charlotte no longer worked on the weekends.

"Have it on my desk before noon Monday," another pause, a flaming curl wound round and round her finger, sliding like silk against her skin. She pretended to hang up, slipping the phone into her pocket. "Hello, my darling."

Ali's cheeks tinted pink.

"I was thinking tomorrow we could have brunch before we check out the new exhibit you were telling me about."

"I'd love that."

Charlotte hummed, letting her gaze linger where the impression of a dimple formed.

Victoria's gaze bored into the back of her skull. Charlotte ignored her and scoffed internally because Ali *was* her type. Her features were delicate in all the places Charlotte was defined. Charlotte only had one freckle. Ali's freckles were innumerable and Charlotte often searched for constellations hidden among them. Ali was warmth itself and when she smiled, the big one where dimples tunneled and little lines crinkled around her coffee eyes, Charlotte's chest swelled with want and warmth.

One hand smoothed along Ali's jaw, speckled skin soft beneath her touch. Her eyes tracked the motion, thumb gliding over Ali's bottom lip, drinking in the way her lips parted just so.

"I thought you might," Charlotte mused. "Someday, we'll be going to a solo show of yours."

Ali melted into her touch, just on the verge of going completely pliant in her hands. A wanting so deep sparked, spreading through her to settle in her core. A sensation becoming all too familiar whenever Ali was near.

“You think so?”

“I do,” Charlotte confirmed, eyes darting down to Ali’s mouth and back up. Heart aching because Ali looked at her like she was the only good thing in the world. “Can I steal a kiss before we go back out there?”

Ali’s breath caught and she nodded, tongue darting out to wet her lips.

Charlotte shifted, guiding Ali’s head up on the hook of her finger. A soft intake of breath could just be heard as she leaned in, brushing their noses together affectionately, like they’d done this a thousand times.

For long months they flirted and enjoyed endless playful banter. And over the past couple of days they built something resembling a natural easy friendship. Charlotte fully intended to remain friends… Right up until their lips pressed together.

Charlotte had more than her fair share of first kisses. This topped every single one, leaving any kiss she ever had in the dust as sparks she believed to be myth erupted behind her lids, sending a shock through her system.

Ali raised her hand, tangling powder blue painted nails deep into the forest of onyx curls atop her head, tugging at the roots and pulling her closer. The sense of vulnerability that usually made her skin feel two sizes too small any time someone played with or pulled her hair never came. Instead, an airy whimper rushed out of her to hum into their kiss.

Heels clacked as Victoria stomped away. Charlotte all but grinned against plush lips in triumph.

Ali nipped at Charlotte’s bottom lip and heat sparked, pooling between her thighs. All thoughts of Victoria disappeared like vapor in her mind.

In response, Charlotte ran her tongue along the seam of Ali’s lips. The lingering hint of champagne and a taste unmistakably Ali hit her. Both of them groaned. Hearing the sounds Ali made… She wanted more, *needed* more.

It took every last shred of willpower not to push Ali down on the couch and make her see stars. To hear what she sounded like when she came. To feel her flutter and tighten and go slack. Discover if she would flush even more brilliantly or pale as orgasmic bliss washed through her.

But Ali deserved more than a rushed muffled romp on some priceless sofa in the Pryce mansion. And if they were caught? The scandal.

Sasha might not kill her but her sister Jasmine on the other hand…

Besides, she and Ali were just friends.

Charlotte broke the kiss, much to her own sorrow. Her eyes fluttered open. Darkened umber pools gazed back in shock and wanting. Charlotte's lids dropped to parted lips, so soft; she was desperate to get lost in her and bury herself between pale thighs. She ached with it.

But they were just friends.

Charlotte sucked in a shaky breath and snatched up what remained of Ali's champagne, downing it in one go, like it might steady her. It didn't. She tried to summon the memory of the last kiss that lit her up down to her toes. But none existed because the connection between them was singular. Which further complicated their already complicated friendship… situationship?

Shit.

One kiss and already fuzzy lines between them blurred beyond recognition.

Ali straightened her blazer, rosy cheeks desaturating. "How much did you hear?"

"Enough to know you could've handled her on your own. But I was tired of hearing her voice."

Charlotte replied, squeezing her thighs together just so. Mere inches existed between them. She could close the distance in half a heartbeat. But she wouldn't.

"So, the whole thing?"

"Pretty much."

"Was she always like this?"

Charlotte cringed, swallowing the bitter taste spreading across her tongue.

"I wish I could say no, but looking back I know she was. She's just very skilled at hiding it when she wants or needs to." Charlotte shook her head at her own naivety. "She seemed kind and giving… In the beginning."

Ali smoothed Charlotte's hair back into place, nodding in approval before rising to her feet, offering Charlotte a hand.

Charlotte's skin tingled where their hands met. Ali wove their fingers together and Charlotte found she didn't mind. She followed the trail Ali's perfume left in her wake. The floral fragrance reminded her of the sunbathed herb garden out on the family farm in late spring when all the

flowers were in full bloom, their scent heavy in the air, honey bees buzzing from blossom to blossom.

Charlotte’s hands itched to reach out and pull her back in but Ali kept leading them back out into the hall. All Charlotte could do was follow, desire still smoldering low in her belly.

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10

ALI

STEPPING out of the shower the following morning, Ali wrapped herself in a towel, wisps of her hair fell from the messy bun piled atop her head to form damp ringlets.

With a soft trill, Willow slipped out from between the shower curtains. Ever since she was a kitten, the weirdo loved watching her shower. Ali just made it into her bedroom when she heard the knock.

Trotting forward she poked her head around the corner, peering down the narrow hall to the front door, gasping when she spotted the unexpected visitor through the narrow glass pane.

Without hesitation she scurried out into the hall, Willow's soft footsteps padding behind her. The locks popped back, chain slid loose and the door flung wide. She waved with one hand, the other tasked with keeping the towel secure.

"Hi! What are you doing here?"

Surprise painted Charlotte's face, eyes skating Ali's dewy frame, catching on her hip pieces large enough the bottoms peeked out from beneath the hem of her towel.

It occurred to Ali, Charlotte only knew about the delicate vine tattoo etched into her arm and shoulder. But her hip pieces were on partial display. A cluster of Japanese magnolias on one. Two sparrows on the other, one in flight, the other perched amongst an arrangement of poppies and sprigs of lavender reaching all the way up to one of her love handles. A vine-like sprig under each breast, one curved up, the other down, with a geometric design in between. Last, a blacked out fern leaf wrapped around her other

love handle before arcing down, accentuating her waist. One of its thicker leaves covering up the evidence of one of the biggest mistakes of her life.

The urge to laugh bubbled in her gut as Charlotte lurched, blinking, cheeks tinting as she dragged her eyes back up. Ali reveled in the effect she was having on the goddess of a woman, standing tall, dressed in tailored slacks and a scoop neck navy blouse. Tiered gold chains draped over her elegant collarbones, each with its own small medallion and charm.

Always a bit stiff in her chic business attire. But with her weight on one sandaled foot, thermos in either hand, sleek hair pulled back into a severe braid… She almost looked at ease.

“Our brunch reservation is at ten thirty. I came to pick you up and bring you coffee,” Charlotte blurted, thrusting her hand outward.

“Brunch?” Ali asked, chest tightening as her thoughts began to race.

Did I forget? Obviously but—Oh!

The memory of Charlotte’s offer sprung to the forefront of her mind.

“I’m so sorry. I definitely didn’t think you were serious.”

Charlotte hummed as Ali took the cup, slurping some of the sweetened beverage. She peered at the thermos in her hand and put together Charlotte made it herself. Taking another sip, she smacked her lips together, assessing the blend.

Well done.

No one ever made *her* coffee.

“I’d never tempt an artist with such an enticing offer and not deliver,” Charlotte cleared her throat as her spine grew rigid. “It’s alright if you don’t want to. I thought it might be nice to do something fun together. Yesterday wasn’t exactly stress-free. I understand if—”

“I want to!” Ali rushed to say, standing aside and motioning Charlotte into her apartment with her head. “I had a dance class this morning. I usually go later, but Wren has a gig tonight and I want to go support her. You should come! If you don’t have plans or… I’ll just throw some clothes on and we can head out.”

“Sounds good—”

A soft cry sounded from below where Willow rubbed against Charlotte’s legs.

“Good morning, Willow.”

Ali gawked, dumbstruck as Willow chirped back and wound herself in a confusion against Charlotte’s legs.

“Aren’t you cute,” Charlotte cooed, stooping down and holding out her hand.

Willow rubbed her face against it, letting Charlotte scratch behind her ears and under her chin. Charlotte set her things on the floor by the door and scooped Willow up, holding her like a baby and running her fingers through her thick fur to scratch under her chin. Willow emitted her loudest purr.

Everything ground to a halt in Ali’s head as she struggled to process the scene. Her body went still, air freezing in her lungs as her world narrowed to what was taking place before her.

“I’ve never seen her take to anyone so quickly.”

Her voice came out thick and strained. Then her body began to hum, little hairs floated off her arm.

“Wren has been bribing her with treats for months and she just got a cheek rub. She’ll be so offended when I tell her about this.”

Charlotte smiled at the ball of fluff in her arms. Willow reached up a paw, resting it against Charlotte’s cheek. Warmth erupted, spilling through her chest as Charlotte dropped her head, rubbing her nose against Willow’s.

Ali thought her heart might burst as it thundered in her chest, the roar of it clear in her ears.

So much for fake dating. So much for not catching feelings.

Dammit, Willow!

Her own smile grew soft across her mouth at the look of adoration in Willow’s gaze, as delicate as a fresh spring bud waiting to bloom.

Leaving the two to get further acquainted, she fled into the sanctity of her bedroom. But the butterflies in her stomach coupled with her racing pulse told her what she should have already deduced after their life-altering kiss… She was going to fall in love with Charlotte Davenport.



THEIR MORNING FEATURED DELICIOUS FOOD, easy conversation, and a patient Charlotte who allowed Ali to drag her around the museum, listening to her ramblings about different artists, art periods, and techniques. Ali trailed off once, mistaking Charlotte’s quiet demeanor for lack of interest,

remembering not everyone enjoyed art. But Charlotte told her to keep going before she could change the subject.

“I love how passionate you are about it,” Charlotte assured her, doing nothing to ease Ali’s mounting crush.

Charlotte intertwined their fingers as a weightless feeling spread wide in her chest, the touch kept her grounded, feet firmly planted on the museum floor.

After, Charlotte walked her to the front door and when Ali asked if she wanted to come in and see her studio she nodded. No sooner had Charlotte stepped over the threshold than Willow came running, meowing at the sight of Charlotte. Again, she allowed herself to be cradled like a baby, her purring louder than ever.

“What am I? Chopped liver?”

With eyes for only one person, Willow paid Ali no mind.

“I think she might just like me a little bit,” Charlotte teased, following Ali further into the apartment.

“Understatement of the year. At least she has good taste.”

A novel for your next quiet moment.

Find something to read on Lokepub.

“You think so?”

Ali looked over her shoulder, letting one corner of her perfect mouth tilt upward.

“The best.”

Ali’s studio felt much more cramped with two people standing in the epicenter, surrounded by canvases and other supplies crawling out of the small closet or stacked one after another against the wall.

“Well, this is it,” Ali murmured, gesturing around the room and moving to sit on the windowsill out of the way.

Charlotte shifted Willow to one arm as she approached the easel to study the layers of paint.

A scene of a little spot down the street loosely painted to look as though it was glitching. The colors and lighting and weather of the scene changed throughout each glitch. Charlotte stared at it for a long time, moving closer and further away to take in the full effect.

The urge to sketch Charlotte overwhelmed her. Fingers itching, now or never.

If you don't do it now, you'll never get the chance.

Charlotte could wake up any day and realize what a waste spending time with her was.

Grabbing her sketchbook and a mug stuffed with pens and pencils, she began with a few warm up sketches.

The shape of her profile was pleasure itself to draw, just as she knew it would be. The way Willow looked up at her like she hung the moon was too precious. Charlotte wandered around the room, flipping through the paintings stacked against the wall, humming when one spoke to her.

Ali was lost in a more detailed sketch when Charlotte approached.

"It's not ready yet," Ali whispered, tilting the sketchbook up, putting down some finishing touches.

"Show me anyway," Charlotte commanded.

Shyly, Ali peered up through thick lashes, breath catching at the desire churning in those perfect tempests. She yielded, holding up the sketchbook in offering. Cloudbursts widened, beholding her likeness rendered in graphite, her lips parted just so.

"You're so talented," Charlotte murmured, fingertips tracing over the depiction of Willow's furry face. "How much for this?"

Ali laughed, carefree and joyful, ripping the page from her book.

"You can have this unfinished sketch for free."

"I insist on some form of payment."

She set Willow down in the armchair before taking the page, handling it as though it were a priceless artifact.

"Hmmm, it'll cost you one kiss," Ali teased without thought, shifting her hips in the face of her own boldness.

Ocean eyes darkened and Charlotte set the page down on Ali's desk, eyes hooded as she stepped in between her parted thighs.

"How many kisses for that landscape tucked away in the corner?"

Heart in her throat, Ali didn't miss a beat.

"Oh, that would be a lot more than a kiss."

Her skin buzzed, aching at the proximity. Charlotte's fragrant perfume embellished the air surrounding them, clouding her senses until there was nothing else.

One hand slid along her jaw, tipping her chin upward. Ali wondered if it was possible to drown in Charlotte's aura, her thumb traced her bottom lip, finding her deepest dimple, pressing in like a button.

Ali couldn't have stopped the dazed smile if she tried.

"How much more exactly?" Charlotte rasped, her breath ghosting across Ali's cheek before pressing a kiss just over her yet untouched dimple.

A shudder went through Ali and her hands found their way to Charlotte's hips, dipping around pulling her closer by the backs of her thighs, thumbs brushing the farthest outer edge of her ass. Desire was a live wire between them. Noses and foreheads brushing together as anticipation trembled beneath skin.

"At least a full night of pleasure, maybe two."

Their lips were a breath away. A whisper of a touch and they would have kissed too if not for the ringing emanating from Charlotte's pocket. Ali's hands dropped as the moment fractured.

Charlotte huffed as she stepped away with an apologetic expression. Ali kicked her legs, like it could ease the energy zapping beneath her skin. She squeezed her thighs together, eyes fixed on swaying hips as she left.

Fuck.

"Elizabeth," Charlotte greeted, tone rather clipped.

Ali struggled to collect her warring emotion, unsurprised by the wetness gathered between her thighs.

I'm so screwed.

There would be no getting out of this unscathed. But as bits and pieces of Charlotte's conversation floated back to her, Ali knew she wouldn't walk away. She couldn't. She would let Charlotte consume her whole if it meant five more minutes with her. It would be a lie to say she wasn't terrified. In her short years, she loved and lost more than most.

Previous relationships? Her single existence was a testament to her success, or lack thereof. The last one left her broken and piecing herself into some sort of strange mosaic.

In the beginning, everything felt like a dream. *She* seemed like a dream and the best thing since sliced bread. But over time she changed, morphing into something insidious. That was the problem with narcissists. All too

well she recalled being worn down, manipulated, and gaslit. So much damage was done, Ali hardly recognized herself.

Charlotte seemed good and perfect in many ways. But Ali was always waiting for the other shoe to drop. Besides, Charlotte would never be interested in something serious with her. Things were scheduled to end, one way or another. And that was… fine.

Terrifying, but fine.

She needed a plan. Perhaps she should apply for a few artist residencies. Just to be safe. Let fate decide where she wound up next, just like always.

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II

CHARLOTTE

"I DON'T EVEN UNDERSTAND how she's managed to do it!" Lizzie's panicked voice trumpeted down the line.

Charlotte jerked the phone away, glaring at it before bringing it back to her ear and pinching the bridge of her nose, preparing for the worst.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't even know and I was fucking there," Lizzie groused. "Web of LIES!"

Charlotte could make out the sound of cabinets banging and glass clinking.

"Queen of manipulations. Driving me to drink. I hate bourbon. Why is it the only thing my fiancée has stocked here?"

"I'm not certain. It's *her* favorite?"

A coughing gagging sound came through the line next.

"Oh, it's awful," Lizzie spluttered. "So bad."

"Why *are* you drinking?" Charlotte asked, hearing the clink of fine crystal no doubt containing whatever priceless bourbon meant to be sipped *slowly.*

"Gotta take the edge off, otherwise I'm going to fucking *strangle* her. And I just know she'd find a way to resurrect herself and spin it so it's my fault."

"Technically—"

"She would deserve it! But I'm a doctor. I could definitely make it look like an accident."

A shadow of a chuckle tumbled off her lips as she leaned against the kitchen counter, looking through the window on the far living room wall. It never failed to be amusing when Lizzie got a bit murdery.

“Just to be clear, who are we unaliving?”

Charlotte already knew.

“Fucking *Vicki*—that bitch!”

Dread trickled down her spine to settle in her stomach, banishing the warmth from being wrapped up in Ali moments ago.

“What’s she done?”

Lizzie sighed, voice cracking, revealing just how upset her twin was. She so rarely cried.

“You remember how she volunteered to plan the bridal shower and bachelorette weekend? Went on and on about how she loved planning and she wanted everything to be perfect so we didn’t have to worry about it.”

Charlotte’s stomach churned. She knew this was coming. The irony that Victoria volunteered Sasha and Lizzie to plan their engagement party that never happened was not lost on her.

“Well, now with her ‘new’ job, she’s simply ‘much too stressed’ and doesn’t know ‘how she will manage everything.’” Lizzie spluttered and coughed again. “So since you’re my maid of honor, guess who she requested help from? And who it will help bring closure with so there is no drama at the wedding.”

“Let me think,” Charlotte feigned amusement, knowing Lizzie would destroy herself from the inside out for days if Charlotte was affected negatively. “Me. Good thing I’ve already planned everything since I foresaw this coming. Don’t worry, I’ll handle it as long as you promise to listen to me vent about her bullshit.”

“Are you sure?” Lizzie sniffed.

“How many shots have you taken?”

“Dunno, it’s too disgusting to get plastered off of.” Her voice cracked again. “I’m sorry, Charlotte.”

“Why? Now I get to unleash myself and plan to my heart’s content. And I don’t have to worry about her ruining everything. Honestly, I’m saved.”

Lizzie hummed. “I just don’t know how Sasha doesn’t see it.”

“Well, technically, Sasha is her longest victim. Considering some of her family members, Victoria probably seems saint-like.”

When she and Victoria were together, Sasha was something close to a friend by default. Her presence brought about good conversation and a more relaxed version of Victoria. Back then they'd gotten along with relative ease. But the break up had certainly made things tense. And it took her longer than it should have to accept that Sasha and Lizzie salvaged something just for them out of the wreckage of Charlotte's failed relationship.

"That's certainly how she presents herself," Lizzie snapped. "I have been trying to point out when things she says or does aren't okay or weird. It seems more effective than when I've told her outright."

"She will see eventually, I'm sure. But until then, we'll make the best of it. I can always call for reinforcements. But I'll likely have everything all planned out by the end of the month. So, it shouldn't be a big deal."

"I'm upset," Lizzie admitted, voice cracking.

"You don't need to be. I know what she is and how she operates. I can handle it."

For the most part, Charlotte believed her own words to be true. But Victoria knew all of her weaknesses and wouldn't be afraid to use them against her.

Lizzie stifled a small hiccup, "Thanks, Twinnie."

"Of course," Charlotte took a quiet breath, rolling her shoulders back as she started the mental gymnastics of planning all the logistics. "I'll take care of everything. Don't worry."

Lizzie hung up, the phone screen going dark. The coming months leading up to the wedding seemed more daunting than ever. No part of her wanted to be in a room alone with Victoria… but not just that, Victoria had a reason to blow up her phone and Charlotte would have to answer.

The sound of feet thundering in the hall sounded right before Ali popped around the corner and bounded toward her, looking determined.

"Hear me out," she began, eyes shining with something a lot like glee. "I didn't mean to eavesdrop but this apartment is…" her hands hovered in front of her, inches apart. "Not large. But I have a plan."

"You, have a plan?" Charlotte asked, setting her phone face down on the counter, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Yes, here's the thing. What do we know about narcissists?"

Charlotte cocked her head. "How do you know she's a narcissist? You were only around her for one evening."

Ali leveled her with a look that could only say, *"Really?"*

"I dated a narcissist once. Did some research afterward. Wanted to know what to look for." She reached up to toy with her locket. "I never wanted to make the mistake of dating one again. Dearest Vicki is very good at camouflaging. But I see her."

Charlotte hung her head. As a perfectionist, she rarely gave anyone specifics about the relationship. It remained one giant failure she cursed herself for allowing to happen.

"I think, between the two of us, we can make sure she doesn't have free rein to manipulate all of this for her own sick satisfaction or personal gain." Ali went on brightening again.

"Why do you want to help me with this?"

Ali froze, turning to look at Charlotte, brow curving, struggling to find reasoning. "One," she said, holding up a finger. "It would give me great joy to thwart her schemes."

"Relatable."

A second finger lifted.

"Two! Imagine the look on her face when she realizes you aren't playing her game."

"Glorious."

A third finger rose, but no words came, her other hand brought her locket to her mouth, tapping polished metal against her teeth.

"Three?" Charlotte prompted.

"We are…" Ali's eyes lingered on the floor before flitting up. "Friends?"

The soft questioning doe eyes, edged in purple eyeliner, plucked at the strings around Charlotte's heart, making it ache. The label felt simultaneously accurate and insufficient.

"I don't go to brunch and art museums with just anyone. I hope we're at *least* friends."

"Perfect. We are friends…" she peered over her shoulder to the studio where Charlotte came so close to claiming those lips in another kiss. "We're friends first and foremost… with the potential for a side of spice should the moment ever feel right and we are both consenting?"

Not a usual description she heard for friends-with-benefits but it was such an Ali-ish thing to say.

"I like that. Whatever feels right. But no expectations?"

“Exactly,” Ali said, all signs of her previous nerves vanished as her feet tapped out a little beat, like her body was all at once full of too much energy. “So, as your friend and fake girlfriend I feel that it’s my duty, dare I say privilege to have your back and help you fuck up Vicki’s day.”

Charlotte huffed a quiet laugh under her breath. Ali’s light never dimmed for long and Charlotte felt like she would never grow tired of basking in her glow.

Russet eyebrows wiggled as she bounced on her toes.

And for the first time, facing Victoria didn’t seem daunting. Not even a little bit. Not even at all.

“Alright. What did you have in mind?”

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12

ALI

IT WAS a grave misfortune due to the nature of cell phones and text threads that most of Victoria's potential array of expressions went unwitnessed. Though some were relayed by Natasha or Lizzie. As such, Ali looked forward to seeing one for herself.

Victoria thought Charlotte would finally unblock her number and fall right back into her web.

As if!

One morning, after plotting with Charlotte, Natasha picked her up from the B&B and took her to brunch. Ali had to bite back a smile when she realized Charlotte's nickname for the Blend & Brew had worn off on her… was she spending too much time with Charlotte?

Nah.

As luck would have it, Natasha wasn't a fan of her Aunt Tori.

And so, a group chat came to be, achieving two things. Keeping Victoria from cornering Charlotte in one-on-one conversations and ensuring there were always witnesses to her foolery.

Eventually, Victoria did throw a tantrum and demanded an in-person meeting with Charlotte to "finalize details" since they were the maids of honor. Ali didn't hesitate as she popped into a different group chat, proposing her plan before Charlotte even had a chance to respond.

The chat blew up with gifs, snark, and commentary that only takes place in group chats. In the end, Charlotte agreed to meet Victoria at a cafe downtown at 3:30PM two weeks after Victoria demanded the meeting.

A cafe where Ali now sat, waiting patiently for Victoria to arrive.

“Remember, she’s a horrible person,” Natasha instructed through the speaker.

“It is known.”

Over the past several weeks, they got to know each other over brunches never far from the family law firm.

“She will try to take control. Don’t let her.”

“Roger, roger!”

Ali chirped back, a robotic edge to her words. She and Wren binge watched Star Wars the day before after their shift and it was infecting her life.

“I wish I could have gotten out of court today. Spying on her from a few tables over would have been much more fun.”

“Just one case closer to getting out of that cubicle and into your own office,” Ali encouraged, aware of Natasha’s quest to climb the ladder of the family business.

Natasha groaned, and Ali couldn’t help but grin. “I’m happy to pay my dues, truly I am. But did they really have to put me next to Sticky Pete?”

“Why do they call him Sticky Pete?”

“*They* don’t. *I* do—in my head—mostly. Every time he hands me something, it’s covered in any number of sticky substances. Jelly. Syrup. Glue. And I wouldn’t mind, but he once handed me my purse and you’ll never guess.”

“Unidentified sticky substance?”

“Yes!”

“The horror!”

“I’ve never forgiven him. Was a Birkin 20 in Matte Alligator for fuck’s sake.”

“I have no idea what that means but I’m sorry he got the stickies on it.”

Natasha sighed. “I shouldn’t complain. He was really helpful when I first started. It was overwhelming in the beginning.”

“A lot to match up to?”

“Yeah.”

Silence lingered for a moment. They hadn’t spoken of it much, but Ali could tell half the reason Natasha tried so hard was to make her family—her mother—proud. But in the face of so much familial success, Ali feared Natasha might never feel she measured up.

“I should go. But I’ll see you for brunch next week? I’ll be swamped the rest of the day but I’ll check the group for your report tonight.”

“Sounds good. Later, alligator!”

Natasha hesitated for a moment. “Hold on, I think I know this one. Something with crocodiles?”

There were moments Ali noticed members of the Pryce family lived in a *different* world than most people. They faced challenges of course. Micro-aggressions from people who didn’t recognize them. Pandering from people who did. Trapped in a strange limbo where they were too black to fit in with white society yet too “white” to fit in with black society. Thanks to Sasha’s grandparents, half of them seemed to suffer from a superiority complex that could rival the most entitled white man on the planet. Natasha tried to be in touch with reality, but it was difficult to achieve. Ali would never judge her for it, but she took pleasure in educating Natasha on all the things she missed while busy graduating high school, then college, and law school years ahead of schedule.

“Yep. It rhymes,” Ali hinted.

“Oh! After a while, crocodile.”

Laughter echoed both ways down the line before they hung up. Ali fixed her eyes on the door, preparing to burn Victoria’s facial expressions into her mind and sketch them for the group.

She arrived, hair done to perfection, in a burgundy dress hugging every curve and revealing a little too much cleavage for a casual mid-afternoon catch up. Ali couldn’t blame her for trying to use it to her advantage. All things considered, her looks were her *only* appeal. It couldn’t be more different from the look Ali had thrown together that morning on a whim.

Soft black overalls (miraculously not paint smudged) over a white long sleeved crop. One side held up by a single strap, the other hung low, revealing a stretch of abdomen and the fern leaf tattoo over her love handle. Scuffed mustard converses matched the mustard in her printed silk scarf holding her long waves back. The crown jewel of her look was a slash of yellow drawn in a sharp little lightning bolt arched from the corner of each eye. A second smaller stroke mirrored beneath the lower lash line. It was graphic and too crisp to be there by mistake… Really, she and Victoria couldn’t be more different.

When her eyes fell on Ali’s ultra sunny customer service persona her shifting expressions didn’t disappoint. Victoria’s steps stuttered. The

brandished laser white smile most people probably found charming—none more so than Victoria—dimmed and winked out. Her eyes turned hard, nostrils flaring, jaw clenching, neck cording.

It *was* glorious.

Ali waved and Victoria sauntered over, stopping right in front of her, planting her feet as far apart as possible in the dress squeezing her hips and ass like a vise. For forty something, her body was indeed rocking.

With a clipped tone she asked, “What are you doing here?”

Ali rose to her feet, moving around the small table and pulling a chair out, gesturing for Victoria to sit.

“Charlotte had an emergency at work. Something about an outage. The binder was already at my apartment, so she asked if I wouldn’t mind meeting with you. I had nothing better to do, so I happily agreed.”

For the most part, none of it was true. She should actually be home preparing for a group show. An artist backed out leaving Ali scrambling to complete a new body of work to fill in. But she would worry about that later.

Victoria hesitated but took the offered seat.

“She was always a work-a-holic.”

By now, Ali had discerned Charlotte suffered from a need for perfection. She took the wellbeing of her company and her employees’ livelihoods very seriously. She cared about even the ones she never met in person. That care added an endless amount of fuel to her need for everything to be just right.

Ali knew *that* need well.

“She never made time for me,” Victoria murmured, expression and body language shifting again.

Ali took her seat, biting back the urge to defend Charlotte. She wanted Victoria to know that Charlotte wasn’t alone and that Ali was willing to back her up even when she wasn’t there. But that wasn’t the mission at hand.

Victoria’s shoulders sagged, gaze dropping to her hands.

“I tried so many times to get her to make time for me but…”

Ali opened the binder, flipping to the list awaiting approval.

“She didn’t leave things in a good place between us. I was hoping we would have a chance to find closure today.”

Victoria’s following sigh was drawn out and *so* dramatic.

Her bottom lip actually wobbled…

"I'm sure she would be open to it when and if she's ever ready," Ali offered, eyes scanning the pages.

"What about me? What about what I want and need?"

Ali looked up, meeting pleading jade eyes. Such a beautiful job of playing the victim.

"Just because you need or want something doesn't mean that what Charlotte needs or wants matters less. You're no longer together, by your own decision I'm told. She doesn't owe you anything."

"She told you I ended things?"

Ali laced her fingers together, resting them atop the binder, realizing they weren't getting anywhere until Victoria felt some level of control. She needed to decide if she would give it to her or ignore her entirely.

Inner peace…

"Are you saying you didn't break it off right before your engagement party?"

Victoria's voice thickened, eyes seeming to water. "I suppose it depends on how you look at it. Yes, I told her we needed to take a step back but it was her choices that led us there. And she didn't want to put in the work to fix things between us."

Ali nodded, pretending to consider her response. "I guess there are two sides to every story."

Victoria's lips pinched but Ali had decided she had no intention of letting her run things. Natasha would never forgive her.

"But we aren't here to talk about your relationship with my girlfriend. That was years ago and I'm sure you have both grown into different people. Let's focus on the bridal shower first. I can't stay too much longer and I want to make sure Lizzie and Sasha have the best."

"You don't even know them," Victoria snapped.

Remain calm.

"Not terribly well," she admitted, offering up her dimple-popping smile. "But Charlotte loves them both and she's the one who did all the work here. As her girlfriend, I'm here to support her. Just because we aren't attached at the hip doesn't mean I don't want this season of their lives to be perfect."

"That's sickeningly sweet of you. I'm having a hard time imagining Charlotte not becoming annoyed by your overzealous sunshine and daisies persona."

“Tone down the bubbliness. It’s too much for me today.”

Ali blinked rapidly, jolting as a voice which once brought her joy echoed from some dark corner of her mind. Now it slid through, bone chilling, draining the color from her world, sending needle points skittering across her skin.

“We seem to be getting along just fine but thanks for your concern,” Ali said, refusing to let her expression fall into a frown, shoving *her* voice back into the depths from whence it came. She turned the binder to face Victoria. “Now, here are the samples you wanted to see.”

Victoria tried to derail the conversation a few more times but Ali continued bringing it right back around. In the end, Victoria offered no real input. *Shocking.* Almost like she didn’t really care, only how it affected her appearance, seeking participation to later take the credit.

Ali shut the binder and looked up, shaken at the sight of an affectionate smile on Victoria’s face. Care looked unnatural paired with Victoria’s pointed features. Unease prickled across her skin, standing the hairs on the back of her neck on end.

“Thank you for meeting with me. You’ve done great work here,” Victoria said, reaching out and resting her hand over the top of Ali’s.

Whiplash much?

“Uh…” Ali floundered, pulling her hand out of Victoria’s reach, rising to her feet and collecting her things. “Thanks but it was mostly Charlotte.”

“If you say so. Have you considered a career in event planning?” Victoria moved around the table slipping her arm through Ali’s.

“Never, not once.”

Victoria burst into laughter. An unwarranted response in Ali’s opinion.

“You should think about it. I’m always looking to invest in talented young women.”

“You’re a talented young woman, Miss McCarthy.”

Ali’s blood ran cold. That voice moved around her mind, rubbing like sandpaper. The memories accompanying it already chafing. It hadn’t been true then. It wasn’t true now. She possessed no real talent.

“Think about it and let me know,” Victoria instructed, thumb rubbing back and forth over her bicep, guiding her out of the cafe.

The light touch made Ali’s skin crawl and she fought every instinct to yank her arm away. An action sure to alert Victoria of a potential weakness.

“You’re a slave to your emotions, Ali.”

“What am I thinking about exactly?”

Ali asked, shoving the memory to the farthest corner of her mind. Desperate to lock it away and throw away the key.

“Starting an event planning business,” Victoria said as they stepped out into the blinding sunlight. “If you do, I’ll fund it.”

“I’ll think about it but I’m pretty happy with the way my life is currently.”

“It’s not enough. Why can’t you just try a little harder?”

Shut up! Shut up!

Victoria’s demeanor changed again, dropping her hold, expression shifting toward disapproval. “You’re just a barista. Don’t you think you’re capable of more?”

“I’m an artist,” Ali corrected.

“You’re special, Ali. You could be so much more. I can help you reach your full potential if you’re brave enough to try.”

“You’re so special, pretty girl.”

Ali looked into Victoria’s dead eyes. She heard those things before. No more than a puppet on another woman’s strings until the puppet master left Ali behind, cutting her loose and leaving her broken on the floor. There wasn’t a single part of her interested in playing those games again.

“Have a good rest of your day, Victoria. I will definitely not be taking you up on that offer.”

Turning on her heel, Ali set off down the street, providing no opportunity for further discussion.

Thank fuck she walked. She couldn’t have driven even if she wanted to. Not with her mind spinning out of control.

Around the corner, she ducked into a coffee shop and tucked herself into a back, out of the way seat. She needed to calm her racing thoughts. She would rather be home. But she doubted her ability to not get lost depending on how far she sank into her own thoughts. Her leg began its incessant bouncing. There was no stopping it or the memories crawling out of her subconscious. Each clawing at the other, determined to be the first to steal Ali’s breath.

But she promised Charlotte she’d let her know when she left.

CHARLOTTE DAVENPORT
TODAY 3:57PM

Made my escape.

The three little dots appeared almost instantly.

How'd it go?

Fine.

Promise?

She tossed her phone down haphazardly into her purse and dropped it onto the floor. If she told Charlotte what was happening inside her head, she would realize what a burden it was to be friends with someone like her.

"Sometimes your youth shines through. You need to learn to communicate."

But anything she said would be wrong. What if she opened up and Charlotte saw how fucked up she was? She would see Ali was too much and never speak to her again.

"Your little tics can be so annoying."

Her stomach roiled at the thought of reliving it all again. Rummaging through her own mind, she ignored the chaos in search of some kind of coping mechanism.

Focus on your breathing.

The container on the table full of mixed up sweeteners caught her attention, her skin began to itch.

"Really, you aren't going to talk to me?"

Unable to resist, unsteady hands upended the container, spilling the little packets across the surface.

They *needed* to be put right.

She needed to put them right.

"Can't we just have a nice dinner?"

Splendas first.

"Stop. Just stop. Control your thoughts for once."

Stevias next, she told herself as her fumbling fingers struggled with the tiny packets.

"You are doing this for attention."

Sweet'N'Low third.

"For fuck's sake. It's all in your head."

Air expanded, filling her lungs, trying to slow the thundering in her chest. And hidden beneath the blacked out fern leaf over her hip bone, her skin burned white hot.

Think about something else!

An echo… a memory of a hand gripping her smooth skin before a thumb ran over the fresh ink.

"Every time you see it, you'll think about me and remember who you belong to."

Ali thumped her forehead with her palm, trying to knock the memories from her head. Still they lingered, on loop, over and over. What had she done wrong that they wouldn't go away?

Her phone chimed in her bag and her hand shot for it, desperate for any kind of distraction.

CHARLOTTE DAVENPORT
TODAY 4:26PM

Ali?

What was there to say? She wasn't fine. But she didn't want to tell Charlotte. She couldn't. She set her phone face down on the table, and looked at the container of sweeteners.

They weren't *right.*

She shouldn't give in no matter what her brain told her would happen if she didn't.

But she was weak.

She emptied the contents onto the table again, bottom lip trembling as her lungs pulled and pushed shuddering breaths in and out.

One more time, she promised herself…

Splendas first.

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13

CHARLOTTE

TO SAY CHARLOTTE'S 'SPIDER SENSES' were tingling would be an understatement. Ali was the kind of person who never went more than an hour or two without responding to a text. Unless it came with an explanation prior to her disappearance.

"Going back to work. TTFN!"

"About to paint for a while. I'll be back… eventually."

She wasn't someone who sent one word replies.

When 6PM rolled around and there was no word from her, Charlotte pondered what to do for all of five seconds. In most cases she'd assume the person needed space. Maybe there were prior commitments. Maybe they took a nap. Maybe they were with another friend. Any number of explanations.

But Ali wasn't like everyone else. Though bubbly and personable, she rarely went out unless it involved art, supporting Wren's music, or food. She had acquaintances everywhere she went, but friends? As far as Charlotte could deduce in the last month there was herself and there was Wren. On rare occasions she mentioned *old* friends, but Charlotte got the impression after college she moved too often to cultivate long-lasting relationships.

Charlotte texted Wren, asking if she heard from her. She hadn't and after a long moment featuring her text bubble appearing and disappearing she offered Charlotte her spare key to Ali's apartment. Five minutes later she parked outside of the B&B. Wren ran out the door working the key off the ring, hesitating before holding it out to Charlotte.

“Um,” Wren’s eyes darted around, teeth worrying her lower lip. “Has she…”

Charlotte took the key, waiting for her to continue.

“Told you about… um?” Wren studied her face. “She hasn’t,” pale brows furrowed together and she chewed her lower lip.

At a loss, Charlotte remained silent, hoping Wren would reveal something more.

“It’s for her to say. I already feel weird about giving you the key but… When you go in she might not be her usual bubbly self. Don’t freak out, she’ll feel like a burden.”

Wren blinked, lashes lowering as her chin dipped, attention fixed on where her hands wrapped around the edge of the window, knuckles paling as she gripped metal and leather. Her nails held flecks of the same powder blue Ali wore weeks ago. She cleared her throat, chin lifting and eyes that were the kind of blue actresses killed for pleaded with her.

“She’s the most giving and caring person, never asks for anything in return, but she thinks she’s a burden.”

Something cracked in Charlotte’s chest. Ali, who selflessly threw herself into the fray with Victoria just to spare Charlotte, thought herself a burden.

“You know, two weeks after she moved here, she found me crying in the bathroom. I was short on rent.” Wren let go of the door and trailed her fingers absentmindedly along the jagged scar running along part of her jaw and under her chin. Not for the first time Charlotte wondered how she got it. “She came back from her lunch break and handed me the money. Still won’t let me pay her back. Just asked me to play her favorite songs at my next gig which she attended without being asked.”

That sounded so much like Ali.

Charlotte looked across the road where the wind rustled the leaves of the trees lining the street. She wanted to protect Ali’s privacy but she also needed some kind of direction.

“What does she need?”

“Depends. Redirect if you can.” Wren’s lips twitched upwards in a sad smile. “But mostly, just be patient and kind.”



SHE TEXTED, called, and knocked on the door before using the key to break into Ali's dim and silent apartment. Light filtered from down the hall mixing with the waning light of evening from the window.

A soft thundering of little padded feet thudded against the floor and Willow's head popped out from around the corner. She looked at Charlotte, mewing and trotting forward.

Charlotte approached, offering her their usual greeting. "Hello, Purrito."

But the fur ball didn't run to her like usual. Instead she hopped up into the air, turned around and trotted back the way she came. Meowing at her before she disappeared from view.

Charlotte followed her to the little studio, peeping her head around the door frame to find Ali perched atop a spindly stool surrounded by crumpled papers. Headphones over ears she hunched over her desk, sketching across the page.

She looked exhausted.

If Victoria caused this… Charlotte tamped down the fury sparking in her veins. Anger was the last thing Ali needed. But based on Wren's response something more was behind her current state.

Her knuckle rapped loudly against the doorframe, trying and failing to draw her attention.

A weary sigh left Ali just before she ripped the page from the pad, crumpled it and tossed it in the direction of the trash can where it bounced off the rim and joined the growing collection.

"Just one more," she muttered.

Charlotte looked at the mass of crumpled papers, to Ali, and Willow who was sitting right beside her with an expression which seemed to say… *See what I have to deal with?* She wondered just how many times Ali said *just one more* that evening alone.

Closing the distance she rested her hand on Ali's shoulder. She startled, though not as much as Charlotte expected. Coffee dark eyes looked up at her wide and full of apprehension.

Ignoring her mounting concern, Charlotte pulled one of the ear cups back, sound blaring free.

"Hello, darling."

Winding a loose strand of red hair around her finger, she tugged, hoping her affection was clear.

Ali’s teeth worried her lower lip. Her attention dropped back to the pad of paper, hiding behind a curtain of copper. The pencil in her hand began a familiar tapping against the page. One Charlotte now realized bore a rhythm.

Tap, tap, tap, tap.

Pause…

Tap, tap, tap, tap.

Pause…

“I hope you don’t mind. When I didn’t hear from you I snagged your spare key from Wren. I did knock before I barged in.”

Her fingers began mindlessly scratching along the back of Ali’s neck and across her shoulders.

Ali’s voice was hollow, lost. “I’m sorry.”

Charlotte followed her intuition and wrapped her arms around Ali from behind.

“Why are you sorry?”

Tap, tap, tap, tap.

Pause…

Tap, tap, tap, tap.

Pause…

“For worrying everyone. I should have done better.”

The words were a shock to hear. Ali was possibly the most understanding and patient person she knew. To hear her not extending that kindness to herself… Charlotte’s chest tightened.

“You’ve done nothing wrong. But I wanted to see you. I hope you don’t have plans.”

Tap, tap, tap, tap.

Pause…

Tap, tap, tap, tap.

Pause…

“I was probably going to go be a waste of space in my bed.”

Charlotte hugged her a little tighter, feeling her body start to sag as whatever pent up tension began to ease from the pressure. She pressed a kiss to her temple.

“Please don’t talk about my friend that way.”

“Sorry.”

“I’m not certain what’s running through your mind right now or what exactly you need but I’m here, okay. Your feelings are valid and we can talk about it if you want.”

Tap, tap, tap, tap.

Pause…

Tap, tap, tap, tap.

Pause…

“Assuming what you’re working on isn’t terribly important, I thought we might order pizza. If you lend me some comfy clothes we can go watch the new true crime documentary you were eyeing the other day.”

Tap, tap, tap… tap.

The stutter in the rhythm seemed promising. Charlotte barreled on, hoping to wade through the gloom leaching from Ali. Maybe even absorb it into herself and spare Ali from whatever lies it seemed to be whispering to her.

“We can run down the street and get snacks.”

Tap, tap… tap, tap.

“And we can light your best smelling candles and cuddle under your fuzziest blanket.”

Tap…

“Okay.”

Charlotte peppered a few kisses to her cheek, not missing the oh so subtle twitch at the edge of her lips in an upward direction. For winging this entire interaction that seemed like a good sign. Ali needed to get away from whatever she was trying to sketch and out of her own head. Sitting there stewing all night wouldn’t do anyone any good.



HOURS later they were snuggled under the biggest, fuzziest blanket, full from pizza and snacks. Charlotte would have to make use of her home gym tomorrow. As time passed and the documentary held Ali’s attention she became more and more herself. Though still far from her usual cheerful countenance and chatter.

When credits rolled Ali’s eyes went sad again, fingers smoothing the soft fibers in one direction.

“Would it be okay if I stayed?”

Ali perked up, eyes sparking as she nodded enthusiastically.

Half an hour later they were cuddled up in Ali’s cloud-like bed.

Charlotte lay there, eyes closed, steeped in the quiet and the familiar comfort of Ali’s scent, filing away the day’s events. Sleep was just within reach but she could feel it, Ali’s gaze, steady and intent.

She cracked one eyelid open and caught the dark orbs fixed on her, fingers toying with the locket always hanging around her neck.

Charlotte opened both her eyes, taking Ali’s hand propped on her pillow and lacing their fingers together, knowing well some things were more easily said in the dark.

“I have OCD,” she blurted in a whisper, the first bit of conversation she initiated the entire evening.

Charlotte drew her hand closer, pressing a kiss to the back.

She pieced it together fully when Ali struggled with her compulsions on their snack run.

Making it out of the apartment was its own particular challenge, only to get halfway down the steps before spinning back around, needing to say goodbye to Willow and tell the furball she wouldn’t be gone long. Making it all the way to the sidewalk next before she turned around again, claiming she said goodbye incorrectly. She made it halfway down the street when she tried to go back again, fighting back tears as she worried her apartment might catch fire because she hadn’t done it right.

They made it to the shop where Charlotte assured her disaster wouldn’t strike if they didn’t buy four of each snack.

“I’m glad you feel like you can tell me. Did something happen to trigger it today or does it just happen sometimes?”

“It’s worse when I’m stressed, really tired, or in a new place for too long without getting to decompress. It used to be really bad but my medication helps a lot and I’m better with my self-care, therapy, and coping mechanisms. But sometimes things get stirred up and I get dragged in and I can’t get out.” Ali explained.

“How does it feel?” Charlotte asked, stomach twisting. “When it drags you in?”

Ali fell silent for a long minute.

“It’s hard to explain… Kinda like being in a dark room and all these thoughts are playing on loop over a loudspeaker. And I can’t find the door.

But if I find the door, maybe I don't have the key. Whatever I'm ruminating on takes over every thought and decision. Complete hyperfocus, like breathing through a straw. The world goes gloomy, everything loses its color, there's no joy… it's all replaced with anxiety and sadness. I'll try to be happy but I can't because I get reminded of my OCD and maybe if I do my compulsion I'll feel better but then I need to do it again. Just one more and I'll feel better."

Her voice cracked, and Charlotte wondered if she ever trusted anyone with this.

"It's harder to take care of myself. My tics get worse. Meds help… they don't get rid of it but they make it easier to get out of the dark room."

Charlotte scooted closer, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "I'm sorry you have to deal with this. It sounds exhausting."

"It is."

"What can I do to help?"

Ali blew out a breath, hand settling over her eyes, choking on her next words. "I don't know."

Swallowing past the lump in her throat, Charlotte let the moment breathe before choosing her words with care, "How was what I did today?"

Ali bobbed her head. "You validated what I was feeling or thinking was real to me while also helping me move past it. That was good."

"Okay. Pizza, snacks, and documentaries it is," Charlotte said, adding a playful note in her voice, hoping to ease the growing weight in Ali's tone. Charlotte wasn't ready to cry in front of Ali and if she broke, Charlotte would cry with her. "As your friend and fake girlfriend I feel it's my duty, dare I say privilege to have your back and help you find your way out of the dark room."

"Really?" Ali asked, a hopeful note in her question.

"Really." Charlotte vowed, squeezing Ali's hand. "You can lean on me, okay?"

"Okay."

"Do you want to talk about what got stirred up?"

Ali shot up. Charlotte thought for a moment she asked the wrong question.

"Oh my god, Charlotte!" Ali screeched in an over-dramatic way she did right before spilling piping hot tea.

"Oh my god, Ali. What?"

“Your ex is the fucking worst!”

“This is a known fact.” Charlotte said, nodding gravely.

Ali detailed the events, explaining how Victoria tried to take control of the situation and how she rounded out the meeting by trying to convince Ali to start a business so she could invest… Which was a fucking weird thing to say.

“But you’re an artist. Why would you suddenly become an event planner?”

“Beats me, babes. I fear she might be missing a few screws.”

Charlotte scooted up, fluffing the pillows and leaning against the headboard. She quietly and quickly sorted through the day’s events, knowing she wouldn’t get to fully do so until she made it home. But there was something she couldn’t let go of. “So… what went wrong?”

Ali lifted a hand, absentmindedly picking at the skin along her arms. Slowly, Charlotte pulled the hand away, lacing their fingers together.

“The things she said in the end… they were similar to someone I knew once and it brought up some memories I hoped would stay buried.”

Charlotte hummed low in her throat.

“What’s their name?” she asked, feeling murderous.

“Ashley. She was…”

Ali hesitated, looking down where her other hand was picking at the pills and pieces of lint on the comforter.

“Magnetic. I didn’t understand until after it was all over. I was so infatuated with her and I just wanted to make her happy, please her, bask in her presence. She was six years older than me and my instructor. What started as me legitimately going to her office hours transformed into something else. Something inappropriate.”

Charlotte grimaced, a dull throb starting between her ribs. A discomfort she couldn’t quite stamp out because the story was in a way all too familiar. Each of Ali’s words were barely more than a whisper but Charlotte detected an edge of shame in her tone.

“I lacked the skills I have now to manage my OCD. She would…”

Ali hesitated, and Charlotte listened to the slow breath she drew into herself.

“She didn’t believe it was real. Thought I just wanted attention… she was mean about it toward the end. Which, as you might imagine, just made

it worse. And when I told her, somehow it became my fault… *everything* was my fault."

"How did it end?"

A cold laugh chilled the air around them.

"She found the next attractive wide-eyed young thing who would worship the ground she walked on. Someone who didn't need anything from her. Someone who wasn't broken… Someone who wasn't too much…"

Those words were crushing… Charlotte wanted to deny their validity but Ali was already speaking again. And she knew Ali wouldn't believe her.

"Took me to dinner and broke things off in the car. I was relieved at first. Then she told me she started seeing someone else. She insisted we still go to dinner. I still don't know what she wanted out of it. But I basically became non-verbal. All I could do was force myself to be still or I'd give in to my compulsions and be accused of acting out." Ali shrugged, hand flitting up to her locket.

Charlotte almost reached out to take the hand, intent on giving it something else to do. But Ali was already lowering it back into her lap. She released a sigh and flopped back down onto the bed.

"I guess, she kinda fucked me up." Ali sighed. "Sometimes the things she said, they'll loop."

Charlotte shimmied back down on the bed, reining in her mounting fury. "Thank you for telling me."

"Thank you for listening, and for being here."

Ali rolled on her side, pulling one of Charlotte's arms around her until they were spooning. She pressed a kiss to Charlotte's palm.

"Don't ever tell me her last name." Charlotte grumbled, burying her nose in thick herbal scented waves, relishing Ali's warmth.

"Why?"

"Because she'll end up in a ditch somewhere."

Charlotte's hand was close enough to feel the puff of air from Ali's quiet laugh.

"Murder?" Ali's gasp was playful. "I'll visit you in prison."

Charlotte chuckled low in her throat, pulling her hand free. "Miss McCarthy, don't you know I'm an obscenely wealthy woman? No one would ever find out."

Her fingers played over Ali’s side, digging in just above her ribs. She curled into a ball, shrieking, and giggling. Catching the offending hand she drew it back around herself, hugging it to her chest.

“But murder is too easy. What I’d actually do is hire someone to break into her home. Keys, never where she left them. Furniture moved an inch to the left. The caps of her condiments would go missing one by one. Slowly escalating until she’s driven to madness.”

“That’s pretty dark,” Ali mused. “I like it!”

I like you, was the thought that bounced around Charlotte’s mind. *I like you a lot*.

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14

ALI

A RELIEF of slip painted daisies peppered the clear glazed mug Charlotte held out. Warmth seeped into her hand and wisps of steam billowed up, catching in the morning light, carrying a robust scent.

“It’s a little weird for someone else to make me coffee.”

Charlotte sipped from her own mug covered in raised violets. A loose braid draped over her shoulder. Dressed in a borrowed hoodie and sweatpants it was the most casual Ali—possibly anyone—ever saw her… Ali rendered the look in exquisite detail in her mind, determined never to forget.

“I like to think I make a decent brew.”

Ali blew into the mug, watching the little ripples her breath created before taking a tentative sip of the piping hot liquid. The bold flavor washed over her tongue. She smacked her lips, bobbing her head in approval.

“It’ll do.”

Ali noted the morning glow made by a beam of sunlight through her window.

Charlotte settled on the edge of the bed, nails ticking against ceramic, making no move to leave. “I was thinking, if you feel up to it, I could give you a personal tour of the city.”

“Oh?” Ali waggled her eyebrows in Charlotte’s direction. “Fancy.”

In a very uncharacteristic move, Charlotte rubbed the back of her neck. “We could go see all of the historical sights.”

Ali mulled over the possibilities. She enjoyed history, she did. But not enough to visit multiple places more than once a year. She and Wren

already went to all of the typical tourist sights earlier in the year once the weather warmed up. “We could do that. Or we could experience the city in a way that’s new for both of us?”

Charlotte’s head tilted and the grip on the mug tightened. “I’ve lived here my whole life. There isn’t anything new.”

Ali’s foot slid out from beneath the covers, poking Charlotte’s thigh with her big toe. “You underestimate me, Grasshopper.”

Charlotte’s entire face lit up. “Please enlighten me, sensei.” Quick as a flash, Charlotte’s hand skittered over the top of Ali’s foot, tickling the sole. Ali yelped, jerking her foot away, back under the covers, giggling and managing not to spill her coffee.

Ali poked her with her toe again for good measure, body buzzing with excitement. “We make a list of twenty things we want to do. I dig out my twenty-sided die from the time I played Dungeons and Dragons and we let fate decide what we do for the day. Whatever the dice lands on we have to do.”

“That would be different,” Charlotte conceded, gaze falling to her lap, making dark hair spill over her shoulder.

“Is spontaneity scary for you?”

“Not scary,” Charlotte peeked up at her, expression softening. “Just uncomfortable. It hasn’t always gone well.”

Ali’s head bobbed, her stomach sinking even as her heart ached for Charlotte. “Well, that’s okay. We can plan it out if an itinerary would make you more comfortable.”

Charlotte shook her head, hand coming to rest atop the blankets covering Ali’s thigh. “No, I’d like to try it your way.”

Shock zipped through Ali, and she dropped her gaze to her mug, hand falling to rest over the flutter in her stomach.

“You would?”

Charlotte nodded, reached for her phone and opened her notes, titled it, and proceeded to stare at the blinking cursor. Her foot started a soft tapping against the floor.

“Don’t overthink it. Put the first thing that pops into your head.”

Charlotte blinked at her and shrugged.

It was adorable but a little lump of sadness swelled in her throat at Charlotte’s struggle.

“Want me to go first?”

Taking another sip of coffee, she set her mug on her side table. Hand hovering between them, Charlotte passed her the phone, their fingertips brushing. Ali pondered for only a moment before genius struck.

“Charlotte Eloise Davenport, do you agree to abide by fate’s decision today?” Ali had been yearning for an opportunity to use Charlotte’s melodic full name since learning it during their fake first date.

“I do,” Charlotte replied without hesitation. But her face drained of color, realizing her mistake. “Oh no. What are you putting on there?”

“Nothing crazy I assure you,” Ali giggled, dodging Charlotte’s attempt to swipe her phone back before she even finished typing. She held out the device, watching as blue eyes widened comically.

1. *Get a tattoo!*

“Ali, I’m thirty-six. It’s too late for me to start getting tattoos!” she cried, clambering off the edge of the bed.

“Nonsense! Who said that? You are only thirty-six.”

“I—I work in the corporate world!” Charlotte cried, tugging the end of her own braid.

“Do you often go to work naked?”

“What?” A confused crease appeared between dark eyebrows. Ali’s fingers twitched, wanting to smooth it out. “No, of course not.”

“Tell me, how many tattoos did you think I had before you saw me scantily clad the other day?”

Charlotte’s eyes flitted to every tattoo visible on Ali’s skin, eyes glinting with hunger.

Hunger Ali knew would be reflected in her own eyes as heat curled in her abdomen.

“I hadn’t really considered,” Charlotte answered. “I wasn’t shocked you had a couple. But you and I have very different aesthetics and professions.”

“Oh, I have more than a couple,” Ali countered, wiggling her eyebrows. “But that’s my point. You can get them in places no one will see. I think you’d look hot with a little ink.”

Charlotte’s irritation seemed to vanish, replaced with a look of smug satisfaction as she glanced back down at the phone before typing something and passing it back to Ali.

2. *Find live music*

“See! Now we’re rocking and rolling.” Ali typed her next option.

Before long the list was complete and their mugs almost empty.

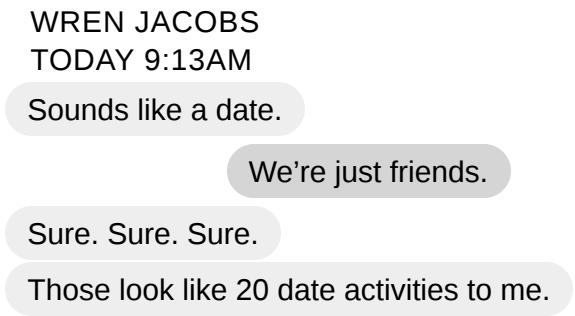
3. *Get on a random bus*
4. *Find dessert*
5. *Geocaching*
6. *Visit nearest park*
7. *Play on a playground (Preferably with swings)*
8. *Try a new restaurant*
9. *Bowling*
10. *Botanical Garden*
11. *Arcade*
12. *Get a massage*
13. *Go to a record store and pick out one to dance to*
14. *Bake cookies*
15. *Escape room*
16. *Rooftop bar at sunset*
17. *Skinny dipping*
18. *Make dinner together*
19. *Make out a lil bit ;)*
20. *Stargaze*



"COME ON NUMBER ONE," Ali tried to manifest, wiggling her fingers over the cup holder in Charlotte's car where her D20 rattled around.

"We can't start the day there," Charlotte grumbled, sighing in relief when number ten came out on top.

"You're right. The Botanical Garden is a better place to start," Ali admitted, buckling her seatbelt and pulling out her phone to check in with Wren while Charlotte prepped the GPS.



If anything, we're friends with benefits who don't have sex.

Yet.

Personally…

I think Operation Get the CEO of Sex on Legs to Be Your Real Girlfriend is going well.

I'm suddenly nervous.

Don't be. You're kinda the greatest.

You are friends. She does like you and I know she cares about you. Just have fun. Things will work out how they are meant to.

Thanks, Birdy.

You're pretty great yourself.

Don't forget it! Take pictures!

DOING AS INSTRUCTED, Ali documented the entire day. Charlotte in the botanical garden. Charlotte getting on a random bus she seemed in rather a hurry to drag Ali off of as they went in search of ice cream only to get side tracked when they stumbled upon a food truck park. Ali even managed to capture the wide smile when she suggested they try something from each one and Ali pointed out neither of them had been to any of these places. A delighted smile spread across Ali's face when someone started busking within earshot.

"We have found live music!" Ali exclaimed, performing a happy little dance before grabbing Charlotte's hand and twirling herself under her arm.

"Does this also count as a park?" Charlotte mused, joy glittering in her eyes.

"Fuck yes, it does! Hold on, let's see if there's a geocache in this place." Ali pulled out her phone and grinned. Knowing Charlotte had likely never done this, she let her put together the clues, offering assistance when she got stuck. Charlotte beamed when she found it, proudly waving it about. Ali handed her a pen from her little backpack after she unrolled the tiny piece of paper to sign their names on it.

One of the food trucks served churros, which Ali was aghast to discover Charlotte had never tried before.

"Oh, you poor, unfortunate soul."

Ali released a dramatic sigh as she dipped her dessert into the little vat of melted chocolate before lifting it to take a bite, the scent of warm cinnamon and sugar delicate against the more robust scents coming from the trucks.

Matching her energy, Charlotte hung her head, looking rather disheartened. “I know. I’ve truly not lived until this moment.”

“Don’t fear,” Ali reached across the bench to pat Charlotte’s hand. “I’ll teach you how to live.” Ali teased before finishing off her churro, brushing the grains of sugar from her fingers.

Charlotte watched her, fondness swimming in her gaze. But she didn’t say anything. Just savored the rest of her own dessert. Time came to roll the dice again. It tumbled across the table as Ali chanted number one, over and over.

15. Escape room

Charlotte got far more into it than either of them expected. They escaped with only minutes to spare.

“Remind me to take you to a rage room some day,” Ali noted the look of curiosity in Charlotte’s eye. “You get to just go nuts and break stuff.”

“Sounds therapeutic.”

“Exactly!”

Next came the playground. Over the course of their friendship, she witnessed Charlotte as uptight, a little guarded, and unwavering from her routines. Now, she was swinging as high as possible, a look of peace on her face as the wind caught wisps of her hair. Ali pulled out her phone, taking a video and a few blurred and fuzzy images, capturing the magic of the moment. She hadn’t had a day this fun in years.

When they had enjoyed all the equipment, Ali still feeling a bit dizzy from her turn on the merry-go-round, they watched the dice tumble and land on number one.

Ali let out a shriek of excitement and danced like she scored a game-winning touchdown.

But Charlotte paled and looked half a second away from throwing up. Following her instincts, Ali threw her arms around her.

“Don’t panic.”

“But I agreed to abide by fate’s decision,” Charlotte murmured, returning Ali’s embrace, their bodies flush against the others.

“Do you trust me?” Ali asked.

“Yes,” Charlotte said, blue eyes calming by the second. “I do.”

“Good.”



CHARLOTTE SAT topless in Ali’s kitchen, black lacy bra a stark contrast against her tanned skin. Her back toward Ali who sat behind her as she straddled one of the kitchen chairs. With great care, she applied the henna to Charlotte’s right shoulder blade. Bra strap pulled over her shoulder, making room for the flowers blooming across her skin, along with swirling vines, dots, and leaflike shapes. A podcast played in the background as Ali worked, only taking breaks when her hand got tired to make a batch of cookies.

Once complete, Ali tugged Charlotte into the bathroom, handing her a handheld mirror.

Her voice was reverent as she took it in. “It’s beautiful, Ali. Perfect really.”

“It looks good on you.”

Charlotte turned, eyes filled with wonder and wanting as she leaned back against the counter.

Lately, the wanting seemed a constant thrum between them, at least for Ali. But sometimes Charlotte would look at her like she understood her, like Ali was wanted and something to be desired. Those were the moments when heat sparked between them.

Her heartbeat picked up as stormy ocean depths held her captive.

Charlotte rolled her shoulders back and Ali couldn’t resist letting her eyes fall to the swells of her breasts, framed by dark lace. Her mouth watered at the sight, fingers tingling with the need to touch. She wanted to erase all distance between them.

A finger slipped behind the waistband of her jeans, pulling her closer. Charlotte’s hand melded to the curve of her jaw, eyes filled with yearning dropped to Ali’s parted lips. They were a breath apart and closing the distance.

The timer trumpeted through the apartment, shattering the haze they almost fell into. Charlotte looked like she might want to find the timer and

smash it as her hands dropped down to grip the edge of the counter, a gentle flush dusting her cheeks.

Ali cleared her throat, opening her mouth to speak the same time as Charlotte.

“I should—”

“We should—”

They both huffed soft laughs.

“Cookies,” Ali said, pointing her thumb over her shoulder toward the kitchen.

“Cookies,” Charlotte nodded, brushing a nonexistent loose strand of hair behind her ear, turning to grab the camisole Ali lent her.

Ali hurried into the hall, making her way to the kitchen. Hitting the button on the microwave to cease the repeated beeping before pulling the tray from the oven. She took a steadying breath, lips curving into a giddy smile, more determined than ever after their magical day to enjoy every second left with Charlotte.

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15

ALI

IT WAS GAME NIGHT, or so she was told. Right before Charlotte coaxed her into the car and drove her into a very nice neighborhood, pulling up to a large home sitting behind an intricate wrought iron gate.

Ali's palms went clammy as Charlotte led her up the front steps. A little voice in the back of her mind assured her that Charlotte was much too refined to be cavorting with the likes of Ali. A no-name artist, proverbial nomadic orphan, with far too much baggage. Though, she supposed she wasn't penniless thanks to being the sole survivor of two respectable families. Perfect, wonderful Charlotte could have anyone, someone… easier.

Get a grip!

Ali could have kicked herself. They weren't together. They were friends. Charlotte would never want anything more. She needed to remember that.

A loud din could be heard from inside the house and Charlotte froze, turning to Ali. "Do you like all animals or just cats?"

"I've never met an animal I haven't liked."

"Oh, good."

Charlotte continued up the steps, reaching out and gripping the handle. She caught Ali's eye and grinned. "I hope you like dogs."

The door opened and a rush of sound met them as they moved into the foyer. Cheerful barking reverberated off the walls, rattling her insides as her eyes took in the scene unfolding around her. There were so many and all of

them were smiling up at her, offering their greetings as they all snuffled and licked at her hands and legs.

“Hi! Hello! Hi!” she greeted, trying to pet each one. “EARS!” Ali exclaimed as a tall lanky German shepherd with giant bat-like ears pointing straight to the ceiling barreled around the corner to join the welcome wagon. To her great surprise, none of them jumped up on her, keeping their paws to themselves as they jostled each other to get closer making it almost impossible to move without stepping on one of them.

“Back up, knuckleheads,” Charlotte ordered, pointing to each one and introducing them.

Sadie, a graying chocolate lab; the German Shepherd was Gustus, “Gus” for short; and three pitbulls: Vincent, Kahlo, and Chicago.

A shout rang out from another room.

“Places!”

The dogs moved as one out of the foyer, disappearing around the corner. There was one straggler, small and all white except for the brown and black patches around her eyes.

“You must be our new guest,” Charlotte greeted, bending down and cupping the dog’s face in her hands and giving her a once over. “Look at your big belly. How many are in there?”

Ali bent down, running her hands over her soft fur, smiling at the happy thump of her tail. “You look ready to pop, friend.”

“This is Lily,” Diana’s voice sounded from the other end of the foyer. “We’re fostering her. She’ll likely have puppies in the next few weeks.”

“She’s so cute,” Ali said, pressing kisses to her cheek right on her smooth smooch patch. “You’ll be such a good mama. I can tell.”

“She will, the nursery is all ready to go. Just waiting for the time to come,” Diana said, approaching and pulling Ali into a warm hug. “How are you, Sugar?”

“Great,” Ali returned the hug, snuggling into it.

Diana pulled back, looping their arms together. “I’ve always had a passion for animal rescue. But with all of my children grown and moved out, it’s gotten a bit excessive.”

As they moved through into a large living room where all the dogs were settled on their beds, Ali noted the house, while massive, felt like a home. Where the Pryce mansion could be described as cold and ostentatious, the Carter-Davenport residence was elegant and filled with comfortable seating,

sporting an assortment of decorative pillows and soft throws. Diana's renowned love for art was clear in the choice of paintings hung on the wall, but her love for her children was even more apparent in the number of pictures of all of them throughout the years scattered in each room.

Plus, it smelled wonderful thanks to the expensive candles burning on the mantle in the great room, mixing with the spices wafting from the kitchen.

Ali's nerves fell away the deeper they moved into the house. A place where people gathered and memories were made and laughter rebounded off the walls.

The environment of the kitchen appeared heated. A lively discussion was taking place about what game they were going to play after dinner. Ali watched as Charlotte joined Lizzie in their quest to play charades.

"Absolutely not! You two always win!" Lilah cried, hands on her hips as she squared off against the twins.

"Agreed! The twintuition gives you an unfair advantage," Natasha shouted from one of the barstools arranged around a massive granite island. "Especially since you refuse to be on any team but each other's."

"You want to penalize us because the rest of you can't step up?" Charlotte taunted, eyes fierce.

"Your audacity is staggering," Imani quipped over the rim of her wine glass next to Natasha.

"Isn't game night supposed to be fun for everyone?" James inquired as he tossed a fresh salad in a bowl, mixing the contents together.

"No, the point is to remind the kids who's in charge," Lizzie growled, her voice held the same formidable tone as Charlotte's.

Diana led Ali around the back of the island to where there were a few open wine bottles. "Do you drink, my dear?"

"I wouldn't mind a glass or two," Ali admitted.

"White or red? Sweet or dry?" Diana asked, paying no mind to the battle of wills raging behind them.

"White and sweet, please."

"You'll have to put a stop to this, Diana, or we'll never make it to dinner and the game afterwards," Sasha said, an amused smile softening her bold features as she passed Diana a bottle for Ali. Her entire demeanor was different in this environment, softer and more at ease.

Diana looked over her shoulder, finding a much shorter Lilah in Lizzie's personal space. Lizzie grinned down at her like the devil as the younger tried to be intimidating.

"You're going down, longlegs!" Lilah warned.

"Oh, really? But I don't see any sign of a worthy opponent," Lizzie teased, throwing her arms wide and glancing around.

"Your competition is standing right here," Lilah threw air punches at Lizzie, who chuckled, putting her in a headlock quick as a flash and ruffling her hair.

Diana handed Ali a glass of wine before stepping to the island, her presence quieting the group. "It's my opinion, since this is Ali's first family night, she should get to choose our after dinner activity."

Family.

Everyone nodded and all eyes turned to her.

Family.

The last time she participated in a family night was… well, she couldn't recall. Even if this wasn't her family. Even if it would all slip through her fingers come October, she wanted to enjoy it while it lasted.

A wet nose nuzzled into her hand. Lily gazed up at her, tail swishing back and forth. She leaned to the side to scratch behind her ears. Her back leg thumped against the floor.

No, a little taste of family wouldn't hurt.

"Yeah Ali, what's your party game of choice?" Natasha prompted after a beat of silence.

"No pressure," Imani taunted, laughing at the glare Charlotte sent her way.

Ali looked up at the ceiling and tapped her chin with her pointer finger.

"I have always been very partial to Werewolf. I think it could be enjoyable for me to watch you turn on each other."

"A lover of chaos," Sasha huffed into her glass. "How fitting."

"Indeed, and it just so happens I brought my copy with all the expansion packs," Ali added, hand dropping back down to scratch under Lily's chin. "I think it'll be enjoyable because it is after all, every person for themselves."

"No teams?" Lilah asked, wriggling out of Lizzie's grasp.

"Nope, no teams. Survival of the fittest." Ali watched as her hazel eyes lit up in delight.

“I like her!” she declared turning to face the twins, pointing her finger back and forth between them. “Better watch out. I’m coming for yooooou.”

“Bring it on, short stack,” Lizzie said with a laugh.



DINNER WAS A LIVELY AFFAIR. Lily sat between Ali’s legs, head in her lap, waiting for scraps. Ali found herself unable to say no, holding out another pinch of a dinner roll, cooing when she took it so gently from her hand.

Charlotte leaned over and peered into her lap.

“Ah, I see you’re also defenseless when it comes to honey-drop eyes and a happy countenance,” Charlotte mused.

“Who could resist? *Look* at her.”

Charlotte smirked, whispering in her ear, “Sucker,” offering Lily a scrap from her own plate.

Ali snorted, shaking her head.

“Are you saying you could resist these eyes? I mean looks at her and hers wittle nose and perfect ears and hers cute markings. And she’s eating for multiple life forms.”

“Mhm, she’s a sweet one. I’m also saying I have experience being unable to resist a beautiful girl with brown eyes.”

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“Someone fucking spare me,” Imani pleaded from Charlotte’s other side, pulling them from each other’s orbit with her unamused tone.

Lilah spoke next, yanking them back to earth. “So Ali, tell us more about you and your family. What do they do? What are they like? They should come for Thanksgiving!”

“Oh, um,” Ali hesitated.

A decade later, still no good way to approach the question without making everyone feel awkward or sorry for her. She hated it, the inevitable

pity in everyone's eyes.

Her throat dried out, insides knotting up.

"Delilah," Charlotte warned, her hand dropping to Ali's knee.

Lilah's effervescent smile faded, replaced with stark confusion.

"What? What've I done?"

Silence fell around the table, all eyes now on Ali.

Her eyes darted toward the exit. She could run for it and avoid the inevitable discomfort barreling toward her.

The hand on her knee squeezed, grounding her.

"It's okay," she said, clearing her throat as she moved her hand beneath the table, grasping Charlotte's, fingers lacing together as though it were second nature. "My dad was a doctor and ran his family's practice after his parents passed. I suppose it's easiest to describe my mother as an investor. She was quite good at it."

Lilah winced, "Was?"

"They died," Ali stated bluntly.

Imani muttered a quiet "*oof*," tickling her morbid sense of humor. Another thing to love about Charlotte, she laughed at Ali's jokes about dead parents and relatives. Jokes were amusing. Jokes were fun. But it was the pity… the *"Oh, I'm so sorry."* The awkward shuffling and looks. Or a good old, *"You poor thing."* Those set Ali's skin crawling.

Charlotte never once pitied her, which she was eternally grateful for.

"My dad died when I was two and my mom just before my eighteenth birthday. They were both only children and their parents both died before I was born," she stated, bracing herself for impact.

"Oh—I'm sorry," Lilah stammered, eyes watering. "So you're all alone?"

"For fuck's sake," Imani cursed under her breath.

Charlotte's fork clattered against her plate. Lilah's eyes went wide, mouth snapping shut as her own words played back to her.

Something about Imani's responses drew her attention. She latched onto it and peered around Charlotte. Imani, mid giant sip of her wine, freezing beneath the weight of Ali's stare. Ali gave her a knowing smirk.

"Are you also a member of the dead relatives club?"

Imani's lips pulled back into a grin. "Dead brother."

"My condolences. May he rest in peace," Ali quipped.

Imani snorted. "Actually, he was a pain in the ass."

“Ah, well then, good riddance.”

Everyone in the room seemed to be holding their breath. She and Imani stared at each other before they erupted into peals of laughter.

Charlotte shook her head between them, fighting back a smile. But once Lizzie’s bright laugh joined in, no one else stood a chance and laughter spread like wildfire around the table.

Lilah and Natasha, who didn’t quite understand, looked at each other and shrugged.

“We need t-shirts!” Lizzie cried, releasing another burst of laughter that had Sasha chuckling beside her.

Charlotte snickered, drawing Ali’s hand out from under the table and pressing a kiss to the back of it.

“Dead Relatives Club!” Ali and Imani cried in unison, doubling over and clutching their stomachs, laughing so hard they struggled for breath.

Charlotte looked back and forth between them, eyes wide. “What have I created?”

THE GAME ROOM BECAME A WARZONE. Full of nothing but suspicion, betrayal, and false accusations.

Ali enjoyed every second of the bloodbath she caused.

“She looked at me suspiciously!” Lilah cried, pointing an accusatory finger at Elizabeth.

“I’m merely sitting here,” Lizzie replied, quirking an eyebrow and grabbing an Oreo from the pack she and Charlotte seemed to be working through.

“For all I know, you two are in cahoots!” Lilah’s eyes were narrowed, darting back and forth between the twins. “You’re always in cahoots!”

Charlotte wore a mask of amusement, dipping an Oreo into a small cup of milk. “You seem determined to keep the attention off of yourself. Perhaps *you* are the werewolf.”

Ali hid her face behind her glass, sniggering into it.

“You know what? Charlotte’s right; you’ve been quick to cast blame every single round,” Natasha added, playing with a Rubik’s cube, working her way through a box of fidget toys.

“Just throwing accusations around,” Imani mused.

“No! It isn’t me! I promise!” Lilah implored, eyes growing wide. “I’m only trying to keep the village safe.”

“Are you now?” Sasha asked, fingers kneading into the tense muscles between Lizzie’s shoulder blades. “What motivation do you have for such suppositions?”

“I would *never* lie,” Lilah assured, looking affronted. “I love the village. I grew up here. You’re all my friends.”

“Are friends always so quick to cast blame?” Diana mused.

“I promise!” Lilah vowed, crossing her fingers over her heart.

“Oop, there’s the eyebrow quirk,” James added, pointing at Lilah’s brow, raised just so.

“The dead aren’t supposed to speak, Father!” Lilah raged before turning a pleading gaze to the group, clasping her hands in front of her. “I swear, I’m but a humble villager. I’d never kill my own father!”

“That’s just what you want us to think,” Lizzie suggested.

Ali couldn’t have picked a better game.

“You’re reveling in the chaos you’ve brought upon this family,” Charlotte commented in a low whisper, breath brushing Ali’s ear, sending a little shiver down her spine.

“You have to admit. This is very entertaining,” Ali whispered, basking in the mirth fizzing inside her. Turning back to the table and calling out over the din. “Alright, time’s up! Final vote, who is getting voted off the island?”

Everyone agreed Lilah was the most suspicious and the obvious choice for elimination.

“I was a fucking villager! Treachery!” Lilah screeched, folding her arms across her chest and sticking her nose in the air.

“Alright werewolf, reveal yourself.” Ali called out, shocking everyone with the maniacal laugh that rattled out of her.

But the true shock came to them all when Diana rose to her feet and bowed theatrically. Everyone’s mouths fell open. No one suspected her. Not even once.

“My darling, you killed me?” James asked in mock distress.

Diana took his hand, patting it sympathetically. “I’m sorry, my love. I knew they would never suspect me if you were the first to die.”

Ali felt lighter as humor buzzed beneath her skin. On a slow inhale, she marveled at the buoyant energy in the room as they all laughed and

chattered back and forth. She worried she would feel out of place. But it didn't feel like her first game night. It felt like she'd been coming for years, like she belonged.

It terrified her.

But she pushed her fear away on a gentle exhale, resting in the moment, listening to a small voice whispering from the back of her mind, speaking a quiet truth it never had before… *I want to stay.*…

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16

CHARLOTTE

HER OFFICE DOOR CRACKED OPEN, blonde curls appeared first as Lilah peeked in.

"Knock, knock?"

Phone held between her ear and shoulder, she motioned for Lilah to enter. She skipped across her office, bypassing the chairs to perch on the edge of her desk.

"No, Spencer. We've already agreed on the timeline. You've signed documents committing to such. In fact, the acquisition is more or less complete because of those very documents. We won't be postponing the announcement so you can feel better about yourself during the convention."

Lilah's smile faded at the sound of Charlotte's clipped tone.

She continued listening to the soon-to-be *former* CEO of a once up and coming animation studio.

"Your company in its current state is failing. This is why you're selling it to me."

Delilah raised an eyebrow but looked intrigued. Charlotte threw her a wink.

"Miss Davenport, surely you can see how this would be good for team morale. A sign of stability for the staff in this time of change."

"Pray tell, what would you be presenting? Does your studio have a project releasing I'm unaware of? Because that would be in violation of the rather binding agreement." Charlotte's voice remained cold and unamused.

"No! There isn't anything like that. I simply—"

“Wanted to protect your own ego. Go out with one last hoorah. But Spencer, I’m not interested. What interests me is using the convention to announce the changes to the public. But prior to that, we will inform your company. What’s important is *my* soon to be employees know they have job security and the company will be moving in a good direction.”

“*Fine.*”

“Excellent,” Charlotte cooed. “Now I really must be going. Feel free to call me should you have any other questions.”

She placed the phone back in the cradle without giving him a chance to respond.

Lilah stared at her, mouth agape and awestruck. “How? How’d you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Be so badass and not let him take even an inch!”

“Ah. Well, he doesn’t deserve an inch. He led the company in a bad direction, forcing him to consider this current direction to avoid massive layoffs. Also, he signed a legally binding contract. I have to think about what’s best for both companies. He’s only thinking about what’s best for him, or rather his ego,” Charlotte explained, watching as her sweet sister took in the information.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be able to do that. I’m not always good at standing my ground.” Lilah admitted, looking at the view out of the office window, defeated by the prospect.

Charlotte rose, grabbing her purse and slipping the straps over her shoulder, brushing a strand of pale blonde behind an ear. “May I ask you something?”

Lilah slipped off the desk, looking up at her. “Duh!”

Charlotte knew to tread softly, understanding Lilah struggled to feel like she measured up. Which in all honesty, she didn’t. And she wouldn’t. Not while she was forcing herself to follow Charlotte’s footsteps instead of living her own truth.

“Do you want to? Do you want to have phone calls where you have to verbally castrate some poor man because he failed at something and his pride is hurting?”

“I mean, I could.”

“But do you *want* to? Would you ever find fulfillment?”

Charlotte countered, wishing Lilah would see her own value. But Lilah's eyebrows scrunched together… She would get there in her own time.

"Come on, Bug. We'll be late if we don't get going."

Lilah hopped down and looped her arm through Charlotte's. "I have a good feeling about today!"



"CRICKET, RIGHT ON TIME," Diana called from across the boutique in one of the cushioned arm chairs.

Charlotte strolled forward, bending down to hug her mother's neck. "You're early?"

"Yes. I had brunch with an old friend."

"Anyone I know?"

"Leah Coleman" Diana said.

Charlotte got the distinct sense she was under a microscope from the way her mother's gaze fixed on her. The name rang some long-forgotten bell in the back of her mind. Her head cocked and she stared across the boutique, following the trail the name led into the recesses of her memory.

"I know that name."

"She was my very best friend in college. She helped deliver both you and Lizzie. Your father was out of town and you two just had to come early."

"Aunt Leah..." Charlotte mused. The woman's face and the sound of her laugh curled up from the very depths of her mind like smoke, blurred and faded around the edges. There was warm affection woven like thread throughout. But there was a strand of sadness, too.

"That's the one," her mother said, glancing away too quickly.

Charlotte moved toward the empty chair.

"What happened there?"

It was unlike her mother to show so much ache when discussing old friends. Something happened that still hurt to this day.

"Oh, she had a falling out with her family. You and Lizzie were so little, you probably don't remember. But she moved across the pond to London, met her late wife and just… never came back."

“Until now?”

Diana’s gaze swept toward the door, some of the ache fading. “Until now.”

Charlotte went to press more, certain her aged memories wouldn’t fill in the blanks on their own. But Diana was already changing the subject.

“Where is the baby? I thought she was with you?”

“She spotted Lizzie parking down the street,” Charlotte settled into the chair beside her.

“Ah. And how’s sweet Ali?”

“A little stressed. An artist dropped out of an upcoming group show and Ali stepped in. But it’s rather last-minute, so she’s in a time crunch.”

Charlotte took one of the flutes of champagne before leaning back in her chair.

“Still working at the coffee shop?”

Charlotte dipped her chin, thoughts drifting toward the freckled artist who occupied far too much of her thoughts.

“My, she stretched herself thin,” Diana mused, leaning closer, her focus locked on her. “She’s different, isn’t she?”

Charlotte’s silence was an answer all on its own, as yearning swelled in her chest. Ali was. In every way. It was terrifying.

“She’s—exceptional,” Charlotte managed just as Lizzie and Lilah waltzed in, arm in arm.

“Who’s exceptional?” Lizzie asked.

“Ali,” their mother supplied.

Charlotte’s cheeks heated as her sisters tittered above her.

“Look at her cheeks!” Lilah exclaimed, pointing back and forth between them.

“What could this mean?” Lizzie asked as she and Lilah clutched at each other.

“She’s in love!” Lilah cheered.

“No!” Charlotte denied all too quickly, arms folding over her chest. “I’m not. She’s just—irresistibly precious.”

A wistful sigh left Lilah and she melted against Lizzie, who worked to keep them both standing.

“What else?” Lilah demanded, hand resting over her heart, a dreamy look softening her features.

“Her laugh makes my knees weak, and I can’t seem to stop smiling when she’s around,” Charlotte admitted, brightening at the mere memory of Ali’s dimpled smile.

“Oh god, you are whipped,” Lizzie groaned, shooing Lilah toward her.

“Dimples are a powerful thing,” Diana hummed, all seeing eyes fixed on Charlotte.

Lilah came and perched on the arm of Charlotte’s chair, throwing an arm around her shoulder.

Charlotte let out an “oof” as Lilah dropped into her lap, arms circling her neck, holding on like a koala… like she had ever since she was old enough to get both arms around Charlotte’s neck. She worked her arms out from between them and held on just as tight, hoping Lilah never grew out of the little things like this.

The remaining bridesmaid, a doctor from the hospital Lizzie worked at, Cindy Zhao, arrived and a whirlwind took place. Lizzie explained what she was looking for only to be whisked away to the dressing room. Lilah slid onto the floor in front of their mother, leaning back against her legs. Diana’s hands toyed with her blonde locks.

After a few dresses, none eliciting any sort of glow from Elizabeth, Charlotte felt a familiar impulse which drew her out of her chair and back toward the dressing room.

“Oh my god,” Lizzie murmured behind the door and Charlotte just knew.

“Beth?”

“Twinnie,” she breathed. “This is it.”

“Let me see,” Charlotte insisted, hand jumping to the door handle.

“No! What if you hate it?”

Charlotte stifled a laugh. “I won’t hate it. When have I hated anything you have loved?”

“Good point,” Lizzie muttered. “But what if this is it? What if everyone else hates it?”

“It doesn’t matter. All we care about is if you find a dress that makes you feel beautiful. Do you feel beautiful?”

“Yes,” Lizzie murmured.

“Good. Take a moment. I’ll go—”

“No, don’t leave me!” Lizzie shrieked, throwing open the door and yanking Charlotte inside. Her hand covered Charlotte’s eyes.

“Just. I need you to look before I go out there. I need you to tell me it’s not in my head.”

Charlotte let out a quiet huff of amusement. She understood even as anticipation buzzed in her chest. She’d waited thirty-six years to see Lizzie in this dress.

“Okay.”

Charlotte opened her eyes and the air left her in a rush. She imagined Lizzie in a hundred different dresses and none were so perfect.

“Oh,” she breathed, taking in the soft material and intricate beading and lace work.

Lizzie was glowing.

“It’s perfect. *You* are perfect.”

“Yeah?”

“This is definitely it. If you don’t pick this one, it will haunt both of us until the day we perish.”

“You mean it?”

“When have I ever lied to you?”

A wide smirk spread across Lizzie’s face. “When you told me you weren’t in love with Ali McCarthy.”

Blood drained from her cheeks… but she wasn’t in love… was she?



“HELLO, DARLING,” Charlotte said after hearing Ali’s greeting through the line.

She and her family went to lunch to celebrate after finishing dress shopping. Lunch dragged on well into early evening, and the entire time she wanted to call Ali and tell her the news… and just… hear her voice.

“How’d it go?”

“She found the dress.”

An excited squeak echoed through the line. “That’s wonderful. I’m so happy for her. Did she cry? Did you cry? Are there pictures? Do I have to wait?”

“We all cried and I think I can sneak you a picture if you promise to act surprised when you see it in person.”

“Deal.”

Charlotte walked down the sidewalk, the sky behind her a haze of pinks, oranges, and dusty blues.

"Have you found the perfect thing yet?" Ali asked, referencing the latest task added to Charlotte's plate… finding the "something old" for Lizzie's wedding.

"I think I might have an idea for it. But it will require mama's approval," Charlotte said, looking both ways before crossing a street. "How was your day?"

"Oh…" Ali trailed off before she finished, her words lacking the previous shimmer they'd just had. "It was fine."

Something sounded off.

"What're you up to?"

A long-suffering sigh came next. "Laying on the floor in my living room staring hopelessly at the ceiling."

Charlotte snorted. Finding it easy to imagine Ali sprawled out. "Some floor time can be therapeutic. Is there a reason you're down there?"

"My last model bailed. I lay down to wallow in my defeat. I haven't found the strength to get back up," Ali groaned, *almost* hiding the wobble in her tone.

No doubt, Ali was beginning to regret agreeing less than a month before the show. But Charlotte felt her work deserved to be seen. She worked hard and she *was* talented.

"Good thing your back-up model is ready and waiting."

"I don't have a back-up model," Ali said, sounding half a second away from crying big fat crocodile tears. "It was a struggle to find this last one."

"You *do* have a back-up model," Charlotte assured her, climbing into her car and putting it in drive and zipping off toward Ali's apartment.

"Who?" Ali asked.

"It'll come to you."

ALI'S HANDS trembled as she marked Charlotte's position on the couch in blue painters tape.

The look on Ali's face when she rounded the corner of the living room to find Charlotte stark naked filled her with a deep sense of satisfaction.

Half-surprised, Ali managed not to drop the little foldable table and glass jar full of paint brushes.

Eventually she grew brave enough to approach, eyes never wandering or lingering too long. A valiant attempt at remaining professional which Charlotte respected. If she were anyone else, it would have set Charlotte at ease. But Charlotte wanted to know what specific thoughts had Ali's hands trembling.

"What are you thinking?"

"I'm excited to finally get to paint you," Ali said, a breathy laugh rushing past her lips.

"Now, the real answer."

"It wouldn't be professional to say."

"Well then, definitely tell me."

Ali's teeth dug into her lower lip. No doubt, contemplating how honest she should be.

"I was thinking that your body is kryptonite."

Ali placed a bit of tape on the couch in line with her thigh.

"Endlessly long slender legs I want wrapped around me. An ass and hips poets would write sonnets over."

Piece after piece formed an outline of dark blue against the ivory of the couch, fingers ever so careful not to touch.

"Thighs bearing lean muscle which I often feel called to bury my face between."

A rasping groan sounded in Charlotte's throat as images bombarded her mind of Ali on her knees, face buried in her dripping heat.

"Soft, sun-kissed skin I want to leave my mark on."

Ali gathered the rippling cascade of Charlotte's inky curls, pulling them into a loose thick messy bun, fastening it with the band slipped off her wrist. She tugged a few strands loose, creating a delicate frame around her face, freeing a few more to brush her shoulders and neck… leaving her back and the henna tattoo on full display.

"I will never get over how lovely your back is." Ali's warm breath brushed across her shoulder. Goose-flesh skittered across her skin just as a shudder rippled down her spine. "The definition of your muscles, my hands ache to trace them and kiss a path along your spine."

Now Charlotte was *aching.*

Ali’s words struck a match, igniting Charlotte’s entire body. There seemed a permanent thrum of need between her thighs while the rapid beating of her heart thundered in her ears. Curtains drawn, and lighting set up just so, Charlotte remained perched on the edge of her couch… naked and wanting.

“Beautiful,” Ali whispered in adoration, more so to herself than Charlotte when she stepped back to appraise her.

Charlotte studied her with intrigue, watching as she rolled her shoulders and pressed her fingers rhythmically against her thumbs before choosing a paint brush and tapping it against her palm. The same rhythmic beat that accompanied her anxiety. But Charlotte wondered if this was more of a ritual designed to center her spirit as she descended into whatever mental space she went to when she painted with purpose.

During their time together, she witnessed different versions of Ali as her moods shifted. But this… this was by far the most exhilarating.

The most captivating.

Charlotte never lacked confidence in her body or her good looks. But Ali looked at her like she was something rare, and she wondered if she’d ever felt so beautiful.

She’d forgone looking at the piece of blue tape on the wall, choosing instead to watch Ali. How could she not? This was Ali, in her purest element, humming along to the music playing from hidden speakers around the room, putting her vision down on canvas. Charlotte couldn’t deny the desire it ignited to peel away all of Ali’s layers and defenses to reveal every piece of her. But she relished the slow revelations and discoveries of her heart and soul… it was its own kind of beautiful adventure.

Time passed in a haze and she lost count of how many times the timer went off. Too enamored with watching her.

“I think I’ve reached a good stopping place. I need—can I… take a picture—for reference.” Ali asked, shifting from foot to foot, nerves jumping in her dark eyes.

If only she knew how wet Charlotte was for her…

“You may,” she rasped, voice dripping with seduction as she fought the urge to pounce.

The barest hint of a knowing smile played across her expression, the desire to touch and be touched almost irresistible.

“Hold that expression,” Ali said, fumbling for her phone and Charlotte held steady until the artist captured the perfect shot.

Ali approached, offering a hand and helping Charlotte to her feet.

Charlotte closed the distance between them. The firm press of her naked body against Ali’s clothed one wasn’t enough. Finger slipped through the opening in the side over her ribs and trailed teasing patterns over the patch of smooth skin toward her back, nails dragging across bare skin.

“Charlotte, we shouldn’t—”

“Why?”

“It’s kinda rule number one not to touch your models in any kind of inappropriate way—” Ali rambled before Charlotte silenced her with a kiss, lips molding together as though made for the other.

She craved more. *Needed* more. Pulling away she gazed into dazed coffee eyes.

“Am I just a model to you?” Charlotte asked, and her voice sounded husky even to herself.

Ali shook her head, a peachy flush creeping across freckled skin, painting her cheeks from the inside out.

“Good.”

Charlotte turned them, pushing Ali down on the couch, moving to straddle her hips.

She leaned in, whispering in her ear, “I need you to touch me.”

A shiver ran through Ali in response to her words. Pulling back, she studied the hooded gaze for any signs of retreat, but only found hunger devouring darkening orbs. For too long they danced around their obvious attraction, dipping their toes in on occasion. But now…

They moved in sync, lips crashing together.

Dexterous hands moved up and down her bare thighs, kneading the swell of her hips before sliding around to grip her ass, blunt nails digging in just enough to draw a needy whimper from somewhere deep within Charlotte.

Her hips jerked and her head fell back, exposing the length of her neck.

Searing lips trailed hot, open-mouthed kisses along the side of her neck, tongue teasing the edge of her ear. Rapid breaths tickled Charlotte’s skin. Teeth nipped at her earlobe, ripping a moan from Charlotte as she rolled her hips in response. A new wave of arousal shot straight to her core, the ache almost painful.

Charlotte's hands moved of their own accord, fumbling with the clasps keeping the straps of her overalls in place, she needed more of Ali's skin against her own.

"Can I?"

"Please," she heard herself whimper. "Please touch me."

It sounded an awful lot like begging. Which was preposterous, because Charlotte Davenport never begged. Not for anything. And yet…

Ali groaned in answer as one hand moved to squeeze her breast, thumb rolling over a stiff peak. Her other hand traced teasing patterns along the inside of her thigh, inches from her center.

"Please, Ali, insi—"

A loud crash sounded right behind them, accompanied by glass shattering, items thumping and clattering across the floor, and the unmistakable sound of a terrified cat tearing across the floor.

They jerked apart and Charlotte turned to survey the damage.

The easel wobbled, tilting forward, threatening to send the canvas tumbling down into the mess splattered across the floor. Ali all but flung Charlotte off her, overalls slipping down as she leapt across the floor, saving the canvas from joining the well-loved easel crashing into the mess below.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit," Ali swore, making certain the piece was alright, before looking down at the tragic disarray she stood in.

A trail of tiny colorful paw prints led toward the kitchen.

"Willow?" Ali called, voice wavering with emotion.

Charlotte reacted to the distress building in Ali's voice, unfolding her long legs from the couch studying the disarray and abstract splatters and smears of paint surrounding Ali's bare feet.

"I'll get the broom."



IT WAS WELL past midnight when they finished cleaning.

Willow hid in utter disgrace beneath the bed after her forced bath to wash away the evidence of her transgression.

Charlotte—fresh from the shower—rummaged through Ali's dresser, in search of an oversized t-shirt. Ali entered, a slight hitch in her step and

weariness resting heavy on her shoulders. Far too many late nights and early mornings all while working on her commissions and never missing a shift at the B&B. In short, she ran herself ragged.

“Did you step on glass?”

“I think so.”

“Let’s get you fixed up,” Charlotte led her to sit on the edge of the tub.

A quiet sniff sounded, drawing Charlotte’s gaze away from where she extracted the glass embedded in her heel.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

Ali deflated, chin wobbling as she covered her eyes with her hand. The exhaustion and defeat were so clear in her voice. “That was the last of my phthalo blue.”

Charlotte set Ali’s foot down and rose up on her knees, pulling Ali into her arms. “We’ll get you some more tomorrow, I promise.”

“Will you stay?”

Spoken so softly, she nearly missed it. Charlotte thanked her stars she heard it. Warmth swelled in her chest because Ali seemed to want her in every way.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Charlotte assured, hand cupping the back of her head.

Ali more easily received comfort and acts of service from her. A slow process Charlotte tried to handle with care, realizing early on Ali often expected conditions to accompany Charlotte’s affections. But as she clung to Charlotte and let herself be vulnerable without apology, Charlotte understood trust was beginning to flourish with safety growing parallel beside it. And that more than anything filled her with a quiet joy.

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17

ALI

GRATING sounds from the coffee grinder wore Ali's already fraying nerves. Ever the trooper, Wren held down the counter, steaming milk and mixing drinks. All while, Ali slumped in one of the leather armchairs, fielding calls and texts from Victoria.

Beyond the panes of glass lined with hand-painted white trim, a gust of wind sent leaves tumbling across the sidewalk and out into the street. The sky was a heavy gray, growing darker by the minute. It hadn't rained in weeks, but maybe if it finally did, it might wash away her terrible mood.

Thirty-six hours until the bridal shower, and Victoria—who had fallen off the face of the earth after their initial meeting—suddenly decided she wanted input. Never mind the details were finalized, deposits paid, and the invitations sent a month ago. Nor did it matter that Ali's group show landed mere hours after the shower.

Fucking Vicki.

Every time her name appeared on her screen, rage blotched across her chest.

"How's Operation Get Charlotte Davenport, the CEO of Perfect Bone Structure, to Fuck Your Brains Out going?" Wren piped up, a touch of her southern drawl peeking through like a telltale grin.

She didn't always let it show unless mischief was afoot or she was mad.

Ali rolled her eyes. "It's not."

The truth was, she'd barely seen or spoken to Charlotte since the night she modeled for her and Willow decided to interrupt what was about to be the steamiest sex of Ali's life. Since then, they'd both been buried in work.

Ali juggling her pieces for the upcoming show, Victoria's crises, and the Blend & Brew. Charlotte, consumed by the acquisition at Compose. She always sounded worn thin, her voice rough with fatigue when they managed to exchange a few words.

They hadn't even talked about what almost happened. Yet, Ali thought about it *constantly* and heat coiled low in her belly every damn time.

"That's why you look like you licked all the red off your candy?"

That earned a snort out of Ali. Wren's southernisms always managed to pull a laugh from her. They were equal parts ridiculous and charming. Over the last eight months, she'd gotten a full education in their meanings.

"Victoria wants to change the entire menu," Ali explained, eyes scanning over the barrage of angry texts lighting up her phone. "I keep telling her no, which just makes her double down."

"She throwin' a hissy fit?"

"Exactly."

"Well, bless her heart," Wren's voice dripped with syrupy sweetness. She dropped the facade, tone dropping to something far more frosty. "Block her."

Leather groaned beneath her as she stood, leaving her phone facedown on the coffee table. Her feet dragged as she rounded the counter, already knowing she was behind on inventory. With a sigh, she clicked through the registers menu, only for the entire software to stall.

She jabbed at the mouse again. Then in rapid succession sent the cursor crashing against the edge of the screen.

"Are you kidding me?" Ali growled between clenched teeth.

"Hey, hey. Be nice to Bertha," Wren said, batting her away from the mouse and register. Her chipped, dark glitter speckled nails skimmed across the frame of the monitor like it was some cranky old cat. "She can't help it if she's old and outdated."

Ali shot the register the bird just as the door opened, the chime of the little bell announcing a new customer. In unison, she and Wren began their greeting.

"Welcome to Blend & Brew. What potion can we get started for you today?"

Ali looked up, her best customer-service smile plastered across her face, only to find Natasha stepping into the cozy shop, dark eyes sweeping over

the space. The teal dress she wore hugged her every curve, the color popping coolly against the warm chestnut hue of her skin.

“Cute,” she said, gaze flicking toward them. “Did you come up with that yourself or is it company policy?”

Ali felt a little bubble of humor swell and float out of her in a soft chuckle. “Wren came up with it, actually.”

She nudged Wren with her elbow, proud of her friend’s creativity.

“Natasha, this is Wren. Wren, Natasha,” Ali stated, rushing through the introductions.

Natasha bobbed her head while Wren offered a wordless little wave of her hand.

“What are you doing here?” Ali asked.

Natasha set her bag on the counter and unzipped it, pulling out a small makeup-pouch. It was the first time she’d seen Natasha bare-faced and her skin was flawless, not a blemish or wrinkle in sight. *Beautiful.*

“I have court in a bit. I had to run into the office, but that didn’t take as long as expected. So, I thought I’d come put my face on and see if everything for the bridal shower is still good.”

“Apparently, Vicki is giving her grief,” Wren blurted, her tone a touch brighter than usual.

Ali caught it, the rose-colored hue warming Wren’s cheeks. A rare sight, as Wren preferred to make everyone else blush, hopeless flirt that she was. All the humor fell away in Natasha’s expression, going hard as she whipped out a compact mirror and a tube of eye liner.

“What’s she done?” Natasha asked, tone edged and precise as she angled the mirror.

Ali sighed, letting her head fall back as she groaned up at the ceiling, “She’s just grasping at straws. Wants to change a bunch of things last minute and is a little furious I’m not budging.”

“She’s…” Natasha trailed off as though searching for the right words as she carefully traced the rim of her eye in black, plush lips parted slightly.

“Not the sweetest cookie in the batch?” Wren supplied, her usual spark back in her azure eyes.

Natasha blinked, caught off guard but then she laughed, a rich, surprised sound that came from her toes. “Exactly! Though I’m pretty sure she’s laced with cyanide.”

“Oof,” Wren tsked, propping her chin in her hand when she rested her elbow on the counter, tracking the careful sweep of Natasha’s hand. “Better be careful. I hear that stuff is deadly.”

Natasha’s mouth curved, sharp and amused, as she finished lining her other eye. “Ironically, the case I’m assisting with today is a woman accused of poisoning her late husband with cyanide.”

“Is it really?” Wren asked, leaning closer, eager for any gossip.

Dark irises peered over the mirror, assessing them both, a glint of humor cutting through her lawyer’s poise. “No,” she admitted, shoulders shaking slightly with laughter. “But it’d be far more entertaining than the simple breaking and entering.”

Ali’s phone buzzed aggressively against the coffee table. Natasha craned her neck toward the sound.

Ali just groaned and dropped her forehead onto Wren’s shoulder, limp with despair.

“There, there,” Wren soothed, giving her back a few sympathetic pats. “It’ll be all over and done with tomorrow.”

Another groan and a soft thump of her head against Wren’s shoulder. No amount of coffee could cure her exhaustion. Somewhere in the back of her mind, Ali wished for one of Charlotte’s hugs. The ones capable of shutting out the rest of the world and made Ali feel lighter, more steady.

Across from them, Natasha flicked her wrist, dragging her eyeliner into a bold wing. Cap snapped back on, she tossed it into the depths of her makeup bag.

“I’ll handle it,” Natasha stated in a tone that left little room for negotiation.

Before Ali could protest, Natasha crossed to the coffee table, plucked up the still-vibrating phone, and glanced at the caller ID. Her deep brown eyes sparked.

“Natasha, wait—”

Too late. An extravagantly manicured thumb tapped the screen, one to answer, another to put it on speaker.

The usual silken tone Victoria wielded like a weapon was nowhere to be found in the voice that burst into the room. Already mid-rant the sharp and grating tone skipped any greetings or pleasantries, straight to her current tirade on the color scheme Ali *should* have consulted her on.

Natasha listened, logging every insult and degrading comment Victoria made, expression cool, lips barely curving. The tiny crease forming at one corner of her mouth traveled to the other before she finally cut in.

“Hi, Aunt Tori.”

Dead silence followed from the other end. Wren clapped a hand over her mouth, shoulders shaking with the effort not to laugh.

“Natasha, sweetie, is that you?”

Wren made a dramatic gagging noise. Ali didn’t bother to hide her scowl. Thirty-six more hours. Then Victoria wouldn’t be in her vicinity for at least two months. Totally achievable. And she would do it for Charlotte.

“It is, auntie,” Natasha confirmed, her tone taking on a more formal approach. “I’m with Ali, finalizing the last of the details.”

She set the phone on top of the pastry display and pulled out a tube of mascara, untwisting the top.

“Oh, is she with you?”

“She’s making us some coffee.”

Ali spun on her heel, marching toward the espresso machine before Natasha could become a liar.

“Don’t you think the color scheme *Lizzie* requested is *lovely?”* Natasha asked, brush gliding through thick lashes.

There was a slight hesitation, a beat of calculation, before Victoria drizzled them in syrupy praise for how well everything had come together.

“It was mostly Charlotte,” Natasha cut across, adjusting her grip on the wand and drawing the brush over her other set of long lashes. “Ali and I were simply foot soldiers.”

A sharp edge slid across Victoria’s tone. “Well, we all know how Charlotte likes to be in control.”

“I think she’s mellowed since she got with Ali, actually.” The smirk that tugged at Natasha’s lips was clearly baiting.

Heat crept up her neck, singeing the rims of her ears. Natasha stood there, all calm confidence and hard edges, every word she spoke deliberate. Honesty came easy to her, too easy sometimes, and it made lying about whatever she and Charlotte were feel like swallowing glass.

Situationship? Friendship? Benefitship? Hell, she didn’t even know anymore.

“I’m sure Charlotte will get tired of her soon enough. She was wearing neon yellow eyeliner in the shape of a lightning bolt the last time I saw her.

As if Charlotte Davenport would put up with such lack of taste."

Wren's snarl cut through the air. All five-foot-five of her sprang upright, eyes blazing at the phone like she could burn a hole through it. Her reaction lessened the sting of Victoria's jab.

Natasha's eyes flicked skyward. Then a practiced professional smile slid neatly into place. "I know it must be hard to see her happy with someone else." And despite the clear disdain in her gaze her tone was warm and firm. "Maybe it's time to accept the fact that she's found someone that makes her happy?"

A brittle laugh cracked from the speaker. "Forgive me if I think she can do better."

Wren darted over, covering Ali's ears and muffling the conversation. Ali couldn't help the laugh that bubbled out as she frothed milk for the latte, grateful for the ridiculousness of it. Wren's protectiveness, her humor, and sheer resilience were blessings.

Victoria's voice became as soft and distant as background noise. Wren's laughter and Natasha's steady presence made room for a dangerous wistful thought.

What if she stayed?

Even after Charlotte inevitably moved on and found someone else worthy of her… What if she stayed for them? These two forces of chaos and calm who made the world less heavy.

Natasha ended the call, tossing the tube of mascara into her bag with an exhale. "There. She should leave you alone now."

"Thank you," Ali said, gaze fixed on the coffee cup as she ran her thumb around the lid, double-checking the seal.

"She's wrong, by the way."

Natasha's voice was calm, dark eyes sharp enough to peel back every layer and unravel every secret Ali didn't want touched.

"About?"

"You are good enough for Charlotte," Natasha said simply as she pulled out a tube of lipstick. "And *good* for her."

Wren bobbed her head beside her, quick to back her up. "There's a reason she asked you to be her f—" She caught herself mid-word and veered off-course. "Her girlfriend."

Silence stretched for half a heartbeat and Ali held her breath. Natasha's brow arched. Wren turned toward the pastry case, grabbing the tongs.

“Banana bread?”

Natasha’s expression soured like she’d bitten into a lemon. “No, thank you. I don’t like bananas.”

“Texture or flavor thing?” Wren asked, clicking the tongs in Natasha’s direction.

“It’s simply the worst fruit.” Natasha snapped the lid back on the lipstick before packing it back into her make-up bag. “Well, I’ve got to head to the courthouse. I’ll see you tomorrow, Ali. Wren, it was a pleasure meeting you.”

“The pleasure was all mine,” Wren drawled, leaning a hip against the counter and peering over Natasha’s shoulder. “Wanna borrow my umbrella?”

Ali followed her gaze, the glass blurred with rain falling in a thick sheet.

Natasha winced. “I have one in the car.”

Wren fetched her umbrella and walked Natasha, holding it high enough to shield Natasha’s hair and most of her dress. Through the downpour, Ali caught a flash of teal and Wren’s bright grin as she darted back under the canopy.

She waved as the car pulled away from the curb. Then, she shook droplets from her umbrella, tapping the tip against the ground for good measure. Rain clung to her skin and lashes as she came back in, propping the umbrella beside the door. She launched into a mile-a-minute ramble about nothing in particular. Hands flying as she restocked the mugs, breath puffing damp platinum strands out of her face.

Ali listened, adding her own two cents here and there. For the first time in a long time, it felt like maybe things were finally falling into place. Maybe this was a place worth planting some roots.

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18

CHARLOTTE

INFURIATING.

That was the word Charlotte landed on to describe Victoria's current behavior.

Glued to Sasha's side, she prattled on about "her" vision for the bridal shower. Made up stories about how *she* handled the planning, colors, and the menu. Every word was fiction because Charlotte was the primary planner with Ali and Natasha acting as her assistants.

Across the table, Natasha's composure was unraveling though it hardly showed. But Charlotte knew the signs, her jaw was clenched, and anger simmered in her gaze.

"It's so strange you'd say that," Natasha said tightly. "I don't remember that happening. In fact, I don't remember you even being there."

"Don't be silly, Natty." Victoria chided, laying one lie atop another. It must be growing difficult to keep everything straight. "I was there the whole time."

More gaslighting. One of her specialties. The kind which could drive lesser minds to insanity.

"Pretty sure you weren't," Natasha's tone snapped like a whip and silence fell around the table.

"Tasha, I need your help!" Ali called from the hors d'oeuvres table.

Charlotte hadn't even noticed her slip away, but Natasha seized the lifeline and shot up, chair legs scraping across the floor before she stormed off, fists balled at her sides.

"Must be her time of the month," Victoria hummed.

“Tori, leave my baby alone,” Sasha warned.

It held no bite, like she was correcting a sibling tiff, not a forty-six year old attention whore. The lack of real reprimand put a sour taste in Charlotte’s mouth, but she held her tongue. Her jaw clenched with the effort not to speak, or stand, and definitely not acquaint Victoria’s face with a fist, breaking her nose. The nose Charlotte—for some absurd reason—paid good money to have refined. A waste of money, as Victoria’s original nose had been flawless.

“What do you think of the color scheme?” Victoria pressed on.

Sasha’s smile returned, barely sparing the decorations a glance. Instead her gaze was glued on Lizzie like she was the only thing worth looking at. “Are you happy with it, my love?”

Lizzie took in the decorations and smiled back. “It’s just what I wanted.” Pointedly turning to Charlotte, “Thank you for all your hard work in putting this together, Twinnie.”

Charlotte threw her sister a wink.

When it came to Victoria, Sasha reminded her of a frog plopped into a pot of lukewarm water not realizing the imminent probability of being boiled alive. Charlotte once had the misfortune of meeting Sasha’s parents—the late Mr. and Mrs. Pryce. They made Victoria seem harmless.

“You don’t think it’s a bit tacky?” Victoria asked, all saccharine innocence.

That does it.

Charlotte made to rise, venomous words stinging the tip of her tongue, but her mother’s hand clamped around her elbow. Sasha’s warm eyes hardened into polished stone as she turned to Victoria.

“What are you implying?”

The room stilled as Victoria’s painted lips parted, her gaze darting for an escape route.

“Apologize,” Sasha ordered, her voice was polished steel and left little room for disobedience.

“Sorry, Lizzie,” Victoria stammered. “Must have woken up on the wrong side of the bed.”

Charlotte fought a smile as the silken strings in Victoria’s web began to snap under too much pressure.

Their eyes met across the table and Charlotte held her there with calm certainty. She’d never be caught in that web again. And even if it took

years, she'd burn every last thread until no one else was trapped either.



ALI ROCKED up on her tiptoes and planted a kiss to her cheek.

"I'm heading to the gallery. You'll be alright without me?"

Charlotte looped an arm around Ali's shoulders, pulling until the crown of Ali's head fit beneath her chin.

"I will," Charlotte said, breathing her in and letting all the stress from the acquisition melt away. "Do you need me to go with you?"

Ali's fingers twitched, nails worrying at her cuticles until Charlotte caught her hand, brushing her lips across her knuckles.

"No. I'll be okay," Ali murmured, before whispering as her arms wound around her middle. "You'll be there later?"

"Wouldn't miss it," Charlotte assured her, not minding Ali's tactile nature one bit. "I'm looking forward to seeing the show."

"Oh?" Ali's head tipped upward, eyes crinkling. "Any specific reason?"

"I would be remiss to deny my curiosity for one piece in particular." Charlotte eased back, just enough to give her a real smile. "I'll see you in a few hours. I'll be the one in a rather striking blue suit, if I do say so myself."

Ali's gaze trailed over the length of her, taking in Persian blue fabric tailored to perfection, brown eyes darkened further. Charlotte felt the spark of attraction flare into a flame before Ali finally turned to go.

Only a handful of minutes passed when her phone buzzed in her pocket.

ALI MCCARTHY
TODAY 3:07PM

You know, as striking as that suit is…

It would look even better on my bedroom floor.

Oh? I'm not so certain.

Perhaps this is a theory we should test.

Yes, I believe you're right. ;)

Charlotte's mouth watered and her pulse skipped. She *really* wanted to test that theory.

THE PRYCE CLAN swept through the doors ahead of Charlotte and her family. Sasha's brother Andre, sister Jasmine, and their children trailing behind, all summoned by Natasha's insistence that attendance was mandatory.

A hush rippled out across the crowd as faces turned. Old money earned recognition in certain circles. Both families were known for their charity, but Diana's support for the arts made her practically royalty here.

The gallery was small, tucked between two boutiques, but it held a reputation for discovering diamonds yet unknown.

Charlotte's eyes swept the crowd, searching for a familiar swatch of red hair. Their eyes locked and a bright smile spread like a new dawn across Ali's face. As though drawn by a string Charlotte moved without thinking. The crowd instinctively shifted aside. The forest green dress caught the light as Ali turned. Silk hugged her curves like sin before falling in soft waves to the floor. Her golden locket glimmered against her skin, fingers tracing the etched sun in its center… a nervous tic if Charlotte learned anything at all.

"Darling," Charlotte greeted, eyes dragging over Ali's figure, drinking her in. "You look stunning."

Her hands found Ali's hips before she could stop herself, fingers itching to ghost over her curves. What she wouldn't give for the chance to map every inch of her.

"Honey bunny, you came!" Ali beamed, eyes lined in simple black wings were brighter than they'd been in weeks.

"Told you I wouldn't miss it," Charlotte said, smile tugging wider. "You look…" She trailed off before she repeated herself like some lovestruck teenager.

"Do you like it?" Ali asked, spinning in a small circle, skirts whispering around her legs.

Charlotte leaned in, voice dipping low. "It looks incredible on you but I'd love it more on *my* bedroom floor."

Ali's laugh caught halfway between delight and panic as her face paled. "I might throw up," she confessed, a fluttering hand coming to rest over her stomach.

Charlotte straightened, concern wiping away her teasing. "Why?"

“There are four very important people,” she whispered. “I have no idea what they’re doing *here* of all places. Maybe they’re scouting? Maybe they’re just here for the open bar? I can’t—this is too much pressure. It shouldn’t matter but it *does*, and I’m not—why would they even—”

Charlotte didn’t let her finish. She leaned in like they’d done this dance a thousand times and kissed her long enough to silence her spiral.

“Breathe for me,” she murmured when she pulled back.

Ali obeyed, sucking air into her lungs, cheeks puffing out as she held it. Charlotte laced their fingers together, thumbs running over hers in a steady rhythm.

“You’re brilliant,” she assured her quietly. “It’s okay to be nervous, just don’t let those nerves spoil *your* night. You paint because you love it. And what you have to say with your art is worth showing the world.”

Ali’s shoulders loosened as tension unspooled in her form. “You’re right. Thank you.”

“Ali!”

Wren barreled into her side, small frame colliding with a force that nearly knocked them both off balance. Arms wrapping around Ali in a crushing hug. “I’m so proud! Just look at ’em! My bestie is *talented!”*

“Shhhh,” Ali hissed, glancing around. “Don’t draw the attention of the critics. I’m not ready to talk to important people yet,” Ali fussed, going still as light dawned in her eyes. “Wait, did you say bestie?”

“Yes, Ali. You’re my best friend. Was that not obvious?”

Wren scratched her head, looking perplexed. The overhead lights glinted off the single silver button of her fitted black suit—no shirt, undershirt, or bra—just one single button maintaining her modesty.

“I—It’s been a while since I’ve had one of those,” Ali admitted. “But I feel the same. I just thought…”

“You thought no one could like you as much as you like them?” Wren finished for her, shaking her head and wrapping Ali in another hug.

“Yeah. Silly me.” Ali pulled back and clapped Wren on the shoulder. “Well, this made my night. Thanks for coming, bestie.”

Charlotte couldn’t help the quiet chuckle that escaped. Vulnerable and a little awkward Ali was one of her favorite versions. It was beyond endearing.

“Please, you’ve come to a countless number of my sets. I wasn’t ‘bout to miss celebrating you this fine night,” Wren stated, cornflower blue eyes

falling on Charlotte, her eyebrows immediately waggling. “Well, well, well, if it isn’t the CEO of Sex on Legs in a stunning designer brand blue suit, definitely tailored just for her.” Her grin was lopsided as she stuck out a hand.

Ali slapped a palm to her forehead, groaning.

A sharp laugh leapt free and Charlotte shook her head, taking Wren’s hand. “It’s good to see you, Wren.”

“Hello!” Natasha greeted, popping up beside them. One of Andre’s three children, Zuri, stood beside her like a taller quiet shadow.

Wren turned and Natasha’s eyes flitted over her form, lingering a fraction too long on the stretch of bare skin peeking out from underneath her jacket.

“Hey, Tasha. You look hot,” Wren greeted, smirking up at Natasha who rolled her eyes. Zuri stifled a snort. “Shall we leave these two *lovebirds* and raid the open bar?”

“Yes, we’re parched,” Natasha agreed, turning to Ali. “I’ll find you in a bit.”

As they disappeared into the crowd, Wren’s voice floated back to them, entirely unapologetic. “Are all Pryce women *fucking stunning?”*

Before Charlotte could snort, another voice drew their attention.

“Ali, dearest, darling, you little snickerdoodle you, is that a nude portrait of my twin?” Lizzie asked, appearing with a Cheshire grin plastered across her face, sliding her arm around Ali, fingers drumming against her bare shoulder.

“It is,” Ali confirmed, arm winding loosely around Lizzie’s waist. “My last model canceled and Charlotte came to my rescue.”

“Did she now?” Lizzie guided her through the throng until they stood in front of Ali’s line of portraits.

Ali’s chin bobbed in eager dips.

“Your twin’s a real life knight in shining armor.”

Lizzie’s eyes narrowed. “But nude?”

Despite the smirk tugging at the corner of Ali’s mouth, a flush crept across her cheeks. “Butt ass naked on my living room couch.”

“Twinnie!” Lizzie screeched. “Posing nude in front of that big window?”

“We closed the blinds and the drapes.” Charlotte sighed, folding her arms over her chest. “As if you haven’t done something similar.”

“I was clothed,” Lizzie said, nose in the air.

“Barely,” Charlotte grumbled, thinking of the very scandalous boudoir shot of Lizzie still hanging above Sasha’s bed.

Ali froze, head swiveling back and forth. “Wait, how do you know it has a big window?”

Lizzie scoffed, turning back to the painting, arms folding together. “Like I don’t know exactly where you live.”

Ali looked up at Charlotte with wide eyes. “Is she stalking me?”

“Likely only mildly,” Charlotte murmured with a shrug. On the list of things Lizzie had done in the name of defending her this was small. “She’s protective.”

“Uh huh.” Ali’s lips pressed into a determined line. “I respect her intimidation tactics.”

Lizzie quirked an eyebrow, pointing to the dark paint on Charlotte’s right shoulder blade. “What the fuck is that?”

Ali didn’t miss a beat.

“Her tattoo.”

“What do you mean, her tattoo?” Lizzie asked, eyes narrowing.

“Well, you see, we had a day of spontaneity and ended up getting tattoos.”

Shocked, Lizzie looked back and forth between Ali and the portrait, mouth slightly agape. “What do you mean? Are you telling me you convinced my sister to get a tattoo?”

Ali nodded, the picture of perfect innocence. “We wrote a bunch of different things on a list, rolled some dice, and let fate decide which we would do.”

“Twinnie! What is the meaning of this?” Lizzie all but screeched.

Charlotte’s eyes rolled. “Calm your tits. It’s henna.”

“Oh,” Lizzie said, outrage vanishing. “That’s okay then.” Lizzie threw her arms wide at the wall of paintings. “Speaking of tits! How much for this masterpiece, Ali?”

“Whoever said you’re getting dibs, Lilibet?”

Diana’s voice glided in as she joined the group, arm looped through another woman’s who Charlotte couldn’t quite place. Salt and pepper hair, steel-gray eyes that darted between Charlotte and Lizzie, expression unreadable.

Lizzie spun to face their mother, a wild gleam in her eyes. “Because, as a twin, it’s my job to hang it somewhere embarrassing. Keeps her humble.”

“Which is why you can’t have it. You won’t appreciate the *art*. Tell me, what do you see when you look at it? Besides your sister.” Diana turned to Ali, with a knowing smile Charlotte recognized all too well. “They’re all lovely, Sugar, but Charlotte’s *is* especially captivating.”

Charlotte’s expression closed up, as the familiar discomfort of being too perceived sank from her chest into her lower abdomen.

“Thank you,” Ali replied, color rising in her cheeks as her fingers fidgeted with the chain at her throat.

Charlotte leaned in to whisper in Ali’s ear, unwilling to allow anything to ruin Ali’s evening. “If anyone is getting that painting, it’s me.”

Ali chuckled under her breath. “Maybe you should hold onto dibs for when I do paint your tits full-frontal, babe.”

It was Charlotte’s turn to blush.

This woman…

Lizzie studied the painting for a long moment, head tilted. “Yeah, I don’t get it. I just see, Charlotte.”

“Which is why you can’t have it,” Diana stated, sharing an amused expression with the stranger on her arm. “Read the title. It might help.”

“Oh gods,” Ali whispered, snatching a glass of champagne from a passing waiter and downing it in one go.

“What does it say? I haven’t looked.” Charlotte called, watching Lizzie crouch to read the tiny plaque beside the frame.

Lizzie straightened, eyes sparkling. *“Adoration and Yearning.”*

The words hit before the meaning. Her feet were already carrying her toward the wall until she was close enough to read for herself.

Alina Marie McCarthy (b. 1995)
Adoration and Yearning, 2024
Acrylic and charcoal on canvas

The painting itself was beautiful, charcoal showing in unpainted places or through cool translucent tones. She stepped back, looking into blue eyes… her own eyes, rendered perfectly. The loose brush strokes evoked Charlotte’s spirit.

“It would have been better in oil,” Ali murmured behind her. “But it wouldn’t have dried in time. Then it might have smudged.”

Ali captured the impossible, the exact shade of her eyes and the magnetism she'd never understood when others spoke of it. The intensity held in her arresting expression kept them captive. Aptly named, the brushwork, the emotion rendered through every layer… adoration, yes. But yearning most of all.

"It's perfect, Alina," Charlotte said, voice filled with quiet reverence. It was perfect. She adored Ali and yearned for her in equal measure.

A soft inhale sounded behind her. "No one actually calls me that," Ali whispered. "Not for a long time."

It broke something in Charlotte. No one got close enough to know Ali's full name.

"Do you not like it?"

Charlotte avoided acknowledging the depths of her growing feelings. Ignoring the butterflies in her stomach or how Ali was always on her mind. How colors seemed brighter and all the songs made sense again, perhaps even more than ever before. But looking at her now… *Adoration and Yearning.*… there was no more ignoring the swell of emotions in her chest.

Ali shrugged, a shy smile tugging at her lips. "It's pretty. But people always told me I was an Ali." Her eyes glinted, small smile shifting to a smirk. "But you can call me whatever you like."

And there was that sparkle that always unraveled her.

Their little bubble burst when Diana's voice drew their attention.

"Not to interrupt, but I do have someone to introduce you too, Sugar." She guided the woman with salt-and-pepper hair forward, excitement thickening her accent. "Leah, this is Ali McCarthy. Ali, this is Leah Coleman."

Recognition clicked. Leah Coleman, the gallery owner her mother reconnected with, the one she remembered faintly from childhood, a more youthful tone reading her story after story. Back in Boston after her wife's passing.

"When Diana told me she knew the artist of the hour, I insisted on an introduction," Leah said, voice smooth as sharp gray pinned to Ali.

"Thank you for coming, Mrs. Coleman," Ali greeted, shaking her hand a touch too eagerly. "Are you visiting from London?"

"I recently returned for a change of pace," Leah said, all precision as she allowed Ali to shake her hand. "My new gallery opens soon."

“Wow, that’s amazing. Congratulations!” Ali said, finally releasing Leah’s hand. Her signature dimpled smile brightened the room, softening steel-gray boring into her. Impossible to resist, pulling people in like it was the easiest thing in the world.

“I’m quite interested to see more of your work,” Leah said. “Tell me, what are your plans for the coming year?”

Ali’s smile remained impossibly bright. “I’ll continue building my current body of work,” Ali said, no waver in tone, posture looser. “I’ve also applied for a few residencies.”

Charlotte’s stomach dropped and discomfort tightened around her ribs.

Residencies? Where? When…?

She struggled to keep her expression neutral, but no one saw… everyone’s attention ping ponging between Ali and Leah.

Her pulse thundered in her chest as a singular thought cycled through her mind… Ali *was* going to leave.

The thought drilled into her, rooting itself. She was going to miss her chance. Would it be selfish to ask her to stay? To want more time when Ali was standing right at the edge of everything she’d worked for?

Charlotte forced herself to take a slow breath. This was Ali’s night and she deserved every opportunity it brought.

Her chest ached regardless as though her heart had turned to sand, struggling to keep its rhythm. Ali wasn’t even hers. Maybe she never would be.



LAMPLIGHT ILLUMINATED THE CITY, catching on the wet pavement and passing cars as the hum of Boston’s night life welcomed them into the night air.

Questions about the residencies looped through Charlotte’s mind, each one edged in desperation. Would she really leave? Even with what burned between them. There was nothing fake about the touches… the gazes… the feelings. There hadn’t been for a long while. It was real. At least, it was for Charlotte.

Heart racing, the question tore free, breaking the soft quiet lingering around them.

“What are your plans?”

A line formed between Ali’s brows as she dug through her bag for her keys. “For tonight or tomorrow?”

Fuck no, you know what I mean. Charlotte snapped in her head.

“You mentioned residencies,” Charlotte clarified, mouth dry as they reached Ali’s car.

“Oh, yeah,” Ali unlocked her car, turning to face her. “Some I applied to ages ago. They’re hard to get. But… since I don’t know where I’m headed I thought, it might help me decide.”

Her hand dropped to her side, already missing Ali’s warmth.

“Where are they?”

Ali hesitated, nails picking at the tiny bumps on her arm. “New York, California, Miami, Germany, or London.”

Charlotte’s chest tightened, her lungs constricting, voice no more than a low dewy rasp as she pressed on. “When?”

“November or January.”

The words struck, hard. But Charlotte drew closer, taking Ali’s nervous hands in her own. “I assume any would be career-changing?” she asked, voice steady enough to hide the crack splintering through her heart.

Ali’s mouth lifted faintly. “They’d look good on my CV. The art I’d make there, maybe?”

Charlotte took step after step until Ali’s back thudded against the car. One palm nestled along Ali’s cheek, thumb brushing over the soft contours.

“You’re brilliant, Alina. Everything you are is magic.”

Adoration.

Ali’s hands slid up her arms, curling behind her neck, pulling her down. Their lips met, gentle, and whisper soft. The kind of kiss that unraveled thought. Charlotte’s hand found her hip, fingers tracing the curve beneath silk as Ali’s fingers tangled in her hair.

A low sound spilled between them.

Yearning.

The ache in Charlotte’s chest deepened. She couldn’t fight it, the desperate aching wish to hold onto the person who made everything bright. Ali gave her the courage and space to be spontaneous and try new things. She worried less. Was more herself. All the reasons to keep herself so controlled and stifled seemed irrelevant in Ali’s presence because she was safest with her… Ali never expected her to be perfect.

“Stay,” Charlotte breathed against her lips, voice cracking.

Ali’s breath stuttered in her throat.

But she couldn’t ask this free creature to clip her wings if she wanted to fly.

Charlotte closed her eyes. She couldn’t. She wouldn’t. If leaving meant happiness for Ali, she’d let her go.

But not yet. Not tonight.

So she rephrased, her voice barely more than a whisper. “Stay with me tonight.”

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ALI

RISK ASSESSMENT WAS something Ali considered herself rather skilled at. Each move she made held its own liability. Certain jobs in specific locations. More and more leaving her fate up to destiny felt like a risk. At what point should she ignore the winds blowing and buffeting and make the decision to stay or go herself? When did she decide, this is where she wanted to build her nest and plant her roots?

This new mindset guided her fingers as she typed the title of Charlotte's portrait across the keys. Because for the first time, the thought of leaving scared her more than staying. She wanted to stay.

The decision seemed like a good one right up until Diana pointed it out, drawing everyone's attention. While she wanted Charlotte to know, the thought of her knowing Ali had gone and fallen in love with her remained terrifying. But the affection and warmth in Charlotte's gaze didn't dim a single lumen. She understood and it hadn't scared her off. Instead, Charlotte stood in front of her, punching in the code to the front door.

The beeps and sliding of the locking mechanism seemed to almost welcome them in. Charlotte led them over the threshold, shutting the door behind them with finality.

Really, it seemed unavoidable they would wind up here, standing across from each other, just taking each other in. Her suit jacket hung open, white button down pristine, make up still perfectly in place, an elegant clip held half her dark hair up. But Ali knew *her* now. Underneath all glamor and status she was smart, intuitive, commanding, humorous, unbelievably kind and caring, and playful when she let go a little. All the ice and perfection

existed as a shield to keep that bleeding heart safe and whole. Ali saw it. She understood. And she wanted her all the more for the understanding Charlotte offered in return.

“I realize now my invitation was quite presumptuous. I want to be clear there are no expectations of how we spend our night,” Charlotte said, ocean eyes gone sapphire in the lowlight. “We can make brownies. Or watch TV. Or you can tell me all about your night like I wasn’t there. Whatever you want.”

Ali hesitated for a fraction of a second, reminding herself destiny no longer dictated the direction her life took. *She* did.

“I *want* you.”

Her words hung heavy between them. All the flirting, longing looks, affectionate touches, and a million veiled confessions, all held behind a dam made of restraint and fear. But the wanting grew greater than fear and that dam finally broke.

It was impossible to discern who moved first.

Charlotte’s purse fell to the floor with a heavy thud just before her back met the wall behind her, picture frames rattling. Ali’s hands molded flush along the defined curve of Charlotte’s jaw. Their lips met again and again. Charlotte’s arms slid around her waist and Ali realized what sent a deep fissure all the way up and through that dam… safety. She never felt more safe than with Charlotte.

Part of her wanted to sob with relief because at last… *at last!*

But Charlotte took a step forward, pushing off the wall and guiding Ali step after step back toward the stairs. Ali fumbled with Charlotte’s suit jacket, tugging it down her arms, letting it drop to the floor.

Then she was falling, Charlotte easing her down onto the stairs, never breaking the kiss as she hovered over her, hand tangling through her hair, pulling her head to the side, breaking the kiss to trail molten lips along her jaw, nipping at her ear lobe. Ali grew more feverish with each passing second Charlotte mapped out the column of her neck with teeth and tongue and soft lips. Her hands moved to Charlotte’s belt, undoing the buckle and ripping it from the loops, sending it clattering against the hardwood.

A low hum of approval vibrated against her neck where Charlotte seemed hell-bent on driving her mad.

“Charlotte, bedroom.”

Her voice was raw and cracking with desperation.

Charlotte hummed again, hoisting her to her feet, eyes darker than ever before, breaths ragged, one second away from devouring her.

Ali kicked off her heels as she gathered her skirts, giving Charlotte a challenging smirk before turning to bolt up the stairs. She almost made it to the top when Charlotte caught her, pulling her flush against her, bodies melding together.

The sound of her zipper being pulled down.

Yes!

It snagged and Charlotte worked at it, growling in frustration. A sharp tug preceded ripping fabric as Charlotte tore and peeled her out of the dress.

“I’ll buy you a new one.”

She shivered. Heat rushed to her core, pooling between her thighs.

Charlotte took a step up, and another, forcing Ali up onto the landing. Charlotte gripped the back of her thighs, just below her ass and lifted. Ali’s nimble legs wrapped around Charlotte’s slender waist. Her fingers shot to the buttons of Charlotte’s shirt, popping them open one by one in quick succession.

“You have no idea how long I have wanted you like this.” Charlotte rounded the corner, heading straight toward the bed.

“Probably as long as I have.”

“And how long was that exactly?”

“The first time you walked into my coffee shop.”

Charlotte pressed a kiss to the underside of her jaw, lips hovering just over her ear. “So only a minute less than me.”

Ali never got the chance to respond as Charlotte all but tossed her into the center of the bed, hair bright against the white bedding. Fingers already hooking beneath the waistband of her underwear, dragging them down her legs and flinging them over her shoulder. Charlotte had lost her heels somewhere on the stairs as well as her trousers. Long nimble fingers undid the remaining buttons of her shirt, one at a time, ocean depths fixed on Ali’s face, drinking in her reaction as each new inch of smooth skin was revealed.

Her shirt found its way into a crumpled heap on the floor. Her bra went next, straps sliding down her arms, revealing the curves of her ample breasts, perhaps a little less perky than in the full bloom of youth but no less perfect now. Ali didn’t discriminate, often finding the little signs of

Charlotte’s age dangerously appealing. Not that there were very many. Subtle laugh lines and a sprinkle of gray hair growing in a little patch behind her left ear. Those silver hairs were her very favorite.

Ali charted each and every line and curve, dip and hollow, studying her like a work of art created by the great masters who shaped the history and trajectory of art itself. The sight of Charlotte’s nude willowy form rendered her just as speechless. Fingers itched to trace those shifting planes. She ached to kneel at her altar and worship each and every inch of her sculpted temple. She would be the acolyte who studied her form, trying to discern the ways of her mystery, bound to create poor renderings of her beauty until her hands were too gnarled and wizened to hold a pencil or brush. For, how could anyone hope to capture the wonder dwelling in her soul?

Hands gripped her ankles drawing her out of her musing and toward the edge of the bed where Charlotte spread her thighs wide, gazing at the glistening evidence of her arousal. Her heart thundered in her chest, body trembling with anticipation. Fingertips played down the inside of her thighs only to glide nails back up, leaving trails of need in their wake.

Hushed curses tipped off her tongue, tumbling past her lips as Charlotte set her aflame. Hell bent on having her unravel before she even properly touched her.

The light from the moon streamed through the windows behind Ali, illuminating Charlotte’s form with a silvery glow, causing her pale eyes to shimmer with starlight.

“Charlotte,” Ali uttered her name like a prayer.

Perhaps it was. Perhaps she was praying for mercy.

“Alina.”

God, her name on those lips—her real name—rhapsody burst through in her chest.

Deft hands gripped beneath her knees, drawing them up, practically folding her in half. Blue eyes widened and darkened with hunger. A wanton whimper clambered up her throat ready to beg to be devoured.

“Use your words,” Charlotte rasped.

“Please.”

Charlotte kept her knees pinned while her other hand trailed down the backs of her thighs to sweep around the edge of her aching sex.

“Please what?”

“Please touch me.”

“I am,” Charlotte quipped, a smirk tugging at the edge of her mouth. “Where do you want me to touch you? Here?”

Her hand moved to cup her core, finger trailing up through slick folds.

“Oh, darling,” Charlotte said as both of them groaned. “You are wet for me.”

“Stop teasing and fuck me,” Ali’s voice was lost somewhere between a plea and a demand, her entire body tingling with breathless anticipation.

A smirk curled at the edges of Charlotte’s lips. “How do you want me to fuck you?”

Ali whined, the ache between her thighs near painful.

“With my mouth?” Charlotte asked, drawing her hand away from Ali’s core to suck the glistening essence off her fingers, moaning at the taste of *her.* “With my fingers?” she rasped, continuing her agonizing teasing strokes. “Or—”

“Both!”

Charlotte pushed inside of her with one finger, drawing a shuddering moan from her as she pulled out only to plunge back in with two fingers.

It felt so good.

Curses streamed past her lips as Charlotte wasted no time in setting a steady pace, experimenting to find what made Ali moan or curse the loudest. Ali bit into her own lips to stifle the obscene sounds of pleasure.

But Charlotte was having none of that.

“Let me hear you,” she demanded on a hard thrust.

Ali groaned, already hurtling toward release.

“That’s it,” Charlotte said, voice rough with want as Ali’s body went taut. “Good girl,” she praised when Ali’s cunt clamped down on her fingers and with a well-timed swipe of her thumb she pushed Ali right over the edge and into bliss.

She rode out her high, the haze of release seeping into her. But Charlotte didn’t pull out. Her fingers continued thrusting in and out, curling to hit the ridged patch just inside. Soft lips wrapped around Ali’s clit sending new shudders through her. Legs draped over Charlotte’s shoulders, her ankles pressed into her back, keeping her close.

Ali’s whines pitched higher, drawing out sounds yet unheard when Charlotte’s hot tongue swirled over her clit to accompany a gentle suction.

Something white hot and blinding built in her abdomen, tingling along her inner thighs.

“Charlotte—”

One of her hands twisted her own nipple, the other sought for something, anything to hold onto. Fingers laced between hers and squeezed and fingers curled a little more inside, sending Ali sailing into a world of bliss.

Charlotte helped Ali and her pleasure drenched limbs move further onto the bed. She settled next to her, fingers tracing the lines of her tattoos on her hip, all the way up to the fern over her love handle. Her thumb hit the disruption in the smoothness of her skin and she hesitated, running her thumb over and back, eyes shifting to look.

Ali’s stomach dropped, the afterglow fading as the memory of the dark room loomed.

“What happened here?” Charlotte asked, skimming the cross hatching of scars and gouge marks.

Shame scalded her throat, digging its brutal talons into her heart, sending it plummeting.

“Ashley and I got matching tattoos…” Ali began, the memory of that day played through her mind just as vivid as if it happened only yesterday. “She told me I would see it and remember who I belonged to. I was in a very dark place after she left. And one day it started burning like it was a fresh brand, blistered and agonizing. My mind convinced me if I cut it out, it would feel better.”

A hollow laugh slid out, carrying with it the echoes of her shame.

“It didn’t. Shocking, I know, right?” She tried to laugh, lighten the mood somehow… a choked sound came out instead. “When the scars healed, I got the black work to try and blot it out. But sometimes, I still feel it underneath, burning.”

Surely, this was the moment Charlotte would decide to end things. Her mind raced, playing out every possible scenario.

But Charlotte’s thumb never ceased its motions. Her gaze rested heavy on her. But Ali couldn’t bring herself to meet it. Charlotte shifted, moving to press her lips to the marred skin, peppering each line with a kiss. After trailing kisses up her abdomen, through the valley of her breasts she hovered over her. A hand settled over Ali’s racing heart. It seemed impossible Charlotte couldn’t feel the thunderous beat slamming against her chest.

Charlotte pressed her hand down, the pressure calming her rattling nerves. Ali released a shuddering breath. Charlotte kept her hand there and one by one the destructive oily thoughts screaming in Ali's mind began to quiet.

Their eyes met and Charlotte's expression caught Ali by surprise. There was no judgement or pity. Only understanding.

Charlotte kissed her, slow and deep, quieting that destructive voice, teaching her mind to be still again. Ali never felt more cared for. Never more seen and understood.

"I'm amazed by you," Charlotte murmured, craning her neck to press her lips to her forehead. "You're so resilient."

Ali met her gaze, starbright eyes soft and genuine. She meant those things.

Ali cupped one of her cheeks, thumb stroking along her sculpted cheek bone.

"How are you so perfect?" Ali wondered aloud.

But Charlotte's face fell. "I—"

"You?"

"I'm so tired of trying to be perfect."

The confession struck Ali, and she wondered if Charlotte ever admitted those words before… even to herself.

"Let's make a deal," Ali said, sweeping raven strands back, tucking them behind her ear. "Let's not worry about being perfect with each other. I'll give you the space to make mistakes and not always get it right if you do the same for me. No one is perfect. I never want you to feel like you have to be a certain way with me. I want you to be yourself even when you aren't at your best… I just want *you*, Charlotte."

Charlotte's eyes were shining as she pulled Ali into her.

"I want you, too," Charlotte whispered against her lips.

Ali grinned into the kiss and rolled to hover over Charlotte, hands trailing down her body, over the outside of her thigh and back up the inside. She was soaked and Ali slid her fingers through drenched folds, with zero resistance as she circled her clit, gathering her moisture.

Charlotte whined, hips rolling down into Ali's hand in search of friction. Unable to resist, Ali broke their kiss, slipping her glistening fingers into her mouth. Charlotte watched her suck the essence from her fingers, groaning.

“I need to taste you again,” Ali said, making her descent, desperate to have Charlotte coming undone. Her tongue swirled around her clit before she even settled between her thighs.

“Fuck, Alina.”

Charlotte’s moans rolled from one to the next as Ali’s tongue made quick work of discovering what brought Charlotte pleasure.

“More,” Charlotte demanded.

Eager to please, Ali slipped one finger in, then another, wasting little time in setting a rhythmic pace, flicking her tongue up and down and angling her fingers in a way that had curses flying from her mouth.

“Right there. Fuck!”

Ali hummed in amusement, heat curling pleasantly in her stomach at how responsive and vocal Charlotte was.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, harder—”

A wail of delight rebounded off the wall when Ali did just that, increasing the speed and force of her thrusts, sensing Charlotte’s need for release.

“Just like that. Fuck, don’t stop,” Charlotte demanded.

Her innermost fingers curled, stroking against textured flesh. All the signs of an impending climax were there in the way her body shook, the way her spine arched, the way her moans pitched higher, needing one final push. An idea came to Ali, and she slid her free hand up Charlotte’s torso until her fingers wrapped around an inky wave. A single firm tug, and Charlotte groaned, toppling over into ecstasy.

“Lina…”

The abridged name flowed from her like a reverent prayer as she rode the waves of pleasure.

The sound of her name, the way Charlotte’s core gripped her fingers like a vise as her back bowed had Ali moaning as she drew out every speck of pleasure until the shudders ceased and Charlotte’s muscles went slack. Ali withdrew, placing a kiss to her clit before crawling back up to hover over Charlotte.

Wiping arousal from her chin and licking her fingers clean, Ali felt the waring emotions swimming through her as she looked down at Charlotte. She smoothed the damp strands out of her face. God, she was beautiful and wonderful and Ali would never get enough.

“Can you say it again?” she asked, breathless.

Charlotte seemed to struggle to make sense of the request. “Say what, darling?”

“The nickname. No one has ever called me that before.” Ali’s voice was whisper soft, hand cupping Charlotte’s cheek, thumb running over her bottom lip. “Say it again.”

Charlotte lifted an arm, brushing the loose strands of autumn behind her ear. A soft smile full of adoration worked itself across Charlotte’s face as she held Ali’s wistful gaze and let the name slip past her lips in utter rapture.

“Lina.”

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CHARLOTTE

THE SQUEAK of rolling wheels broke through Charlotte's concentration just before Aurora glided into her office, chair spinning in a slow lazy circle, strawberry blonde curls fanning out.

"Do you need something, Rora?" Charlotte asked, not taking her attention off the screen as her fingers flew across her keyboard.

Her plate was full and her calendar stacked with meetings as far as the eye could see. That was the way of things for acquisitions. They took forever and everyone needed something from her at all times.

"You're working too hard," Aurora announced, giving a push to send herself sailing across the polished floor.

"I'm fine."

"What did you have for lunch today?" Aurora asked, eyeing the half-eaten wrap beside her.

"You know I'll make up for it at dinner," Charlotte reminded her, leaving suggested edits and clarifying questions on a proposal from a promising but inexperienced rep. Their ideas were insightful but their ability to articulate wasn't as advanced as she was used to.

If she'd lifted her gaze, she might have caught the sly curl of Aurora's grin. "You've been more patient since you got laid, that's for sure—"

Charlotte froze mid-keystroke, gaze finally leaving her screen. "Aurora Rivers."

Aurora spun in ever slowing rotations toward the desk. "How long *had* it been?"

Heat climbed up her throat, the answer ringing loud and clear in her head. *Long enough that I almost forgot how good it could be.*

Her mind betrayed her, summoning the image of Ali asleep in her bed, wrapped in morning light. She'd been all soft curves, smooth lines, freckles and inked skin that caught the light. She'd been kissed by fire. The streams of sunlight filtering through the bedroom windows had danced through gentle red waves, setting the strands aglow.

Charlotte had woken the morning after the group show to the weight of Ali's head against her chest, an arm flung across her stomach, feet inevitably sticking out from under the covers. She'd tucked them back in *two* separate times only for Ali to huff, grumble in her sleep about being hot and kick them free again.

That night, half-asleep and unaware, Ali had murmured against her skin, "*Want you.*" It was the easiest thing to whisper her reply even without knowing with certainty those words were meant for her, "*Want you too.*"

"None of your business," Charlotte said, schooling her tone as she went back to scanning the document. But memory clung like perfume… earth shattering in its goodness and perfect in its coalescence.

"Was it good at least?" Aurora asked, chin propped on her palm.

They *had* mastered each other's bodies and learned to play them like well-practiced instruments, composing their own symphony long into the night.

Charlotte's mouth twitched into a traitorous smirk. "Mind-blowing."

Aurora groaned, forehead thunking against the desk. "God, I'm jealous."

Charlotte's brows shot together. "Aren't you married?"

"Yes," Aurora sighed. "But it hasn't exactly been romantic since I had Waverly. Things are… off."

Charlotte's voice softened. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah, well." She straightened in her chair, fingers lacing neatly in her lap, the lavender and pink ensemble too girly for Charlotte's taste, but it fit Aurora to a T. "Anyway, I came to tell you that you're taking next week off."

Charlotte blinked. "Hilarious." She clicked over to her calendar, her stomach tightening at the sight of the empty grid. "Where are all my meetings?"

"Taken care of."

Her temper flared white-hot, forming a searing ball in her chest that threatened to shoot out past her lips.

Breathe. You rule your emotions. They don't rule you.

"What the hell possessed you to clear my schedule?"

Never mind.

"Sasha called."

Her hands stilled. "Sasha Pryce does not dictate my schedule or how I run my business."

Aurora continued as though she hadn't heard the warning in her tone. "She asked me to see if I could find a way to clear your schedule. Imani helped me shuffle things around. She mentioned—"

Charlotte's pulse spiked, irritation overtaking concern as she got to her feet. "You don't just reorganize my schedule in the middle of an acquisition without consulting me first."

Aurora didn't even blink. "You'll thank me later?"

Charlotte was already out the door, heels striking the floor like percussion, the singed edges of her temper smoldering under the control that was ripped from beneath her.

Her fingers twitched. Years ago, she might have hurled a paperweight. Thanks to therapy, it was easier to resist the urge to unleash destruction. She dragged in deep breaths, exhaling through her mouth, repeating until her thoughts weren't quite so venomous.

Imani sat behind her desk, eyes fixed on one of multiple monitors.

She halted in front of Imani's desk, shoving the sleeves of her blazer up her arms, dragging in one final breath. Imani wouldn't approve something like this and risk setting her off without cause. She was a good friend. The best really.

"There better be a good reason you gave into such a ridiculous request from Sasha Fucking Pryce," Charlotte ground out, teeth grinding together.

Imani sat back, hair forming a halo of curls around her. "It's about Lizzie."

Just like that her temper fizzled and winked out like a guttering flame, nothing but a thin pillar of smoke curled inside her. "What?"

"Sasha called me. She's worried about Lizzie. She's been exhausted and Sasha thinks one last getaway with her twin before the wedding is what she needs."

Charlotte’s chest tightened. The invisible thread between them hummed faintly, frayed at the ends. “I thought it was me,” she said, rubbing at her sternum.

Imani’s expression gentled. “Well, you’ve also been busy. And a little… love-struck.”

Charlotte didn’t bother denying it. How could she when Ali slipped into her life like a sudden burst of sunlight streaming through clouds demanding to be noticed?

“Take the trip,” Imani said gently. “We can make it without you for a week.”

Charlotte’s breath left her in a long exhale. Then it hit her, the shame and self-hate that always followed the loss of temper. “I’m sorry—”

Imani shrugged, “This one didn’t even last ten minutes.”

She said it like that made it okay. But it wasn’t. She was stronger. She was above losing control of her temper at the drop of a hat.

Her hand drifted up, fingers finding the narrow patch in her right brow where years of angry plucking had thinned the hairs. Imani gave her a look of warning and her hand stilled. Drawing in a breath, she let the pad of her middle finger run along the arched path instead, resisting the longstanding urge to pluck when she got like this.

“I shouldn’t have yelled.”

Imani waved her off. “You’re forgiven or whatever.”

Charlotte’s mouth curved but her chest still ached, detesting the harm her tongue alone could sow. “Love you.”

“Ugh,” Imani groaned, plopping back down in her chair. “Get out of my office before you get your sticky sappiness all over everything.”

A soft laugh escaped as she left, pausing at Aurora’s desk to pat her shoulder in silent apology.

Back in her office, she sank into her chair, slumping slightly as she drew out her phone from the top drawer in her desk, wincing at the two missed calls from Sasha glaring back at her. At least she tried to make contact before going behind her back.

With a tap and several rings later, Sasha answered.

“She’ll likely want to go out to the farm,” Sasha said, not even bothering with pleasantries. “But do let me know if you’d rather use one of my family vacation homes.”

“Straight to the point,” Charlotte said, massaging her temples.

“You and I both appreciate efficiency.”

“True.”

Silence stretched across the line.

If she were honest, the fact that Sasha still claimed Victoria as her best friend put a sour taste in her mouth. There was always some nagging part of her that worried she would treat Lizzie the same way Victoria treated her. Or maybe it was the fact their friendship meant Charlotte was forced to see Victoria and this beautiful time where she should be looking forward to each of the events was marred by dread.

“Get it off your chest.”

She stilled, had she said that out loud?

“What exactly?”

“Please,” Sasha made a sound caught somewhere between a scoff and a laugh. “You’re mad at me for going behind your back to ensure you’re available to spend time with your sister.”

Charlotte sighed, head falling back to rest against her chair. “I’ll admit. I had a moment of blinding fury. But once I learned the reason, I simmered down.”

Sasha said nothing. Charlotte wasn’t certain if she was giving her the chance to continue or if she didn’t know what to say herself. But the silence forced her to admit that while it was obvious how much Lizzie loved Sasha and Sasha loved Lizzie… In her mind, no one would ever be good enough for Lizzie. Maybe that was why they felt like sandpaper rubbing together at times. Two strong, no nonsense people, both refusing to yield.

“How is she?” Charlotte asked, getting to the heart of the matter.

“Exhausted. A little depressed,” Sasha sighed, a worried edge clear in her tone.

“Did something happen?”

“She lost a patient unexpectedly.”

Her heart clenched. Lizzie could handle the losses she saw coming. But the ones that came out of nowhere broke her. For all of Lizzie’s toughness, her heart was made of marshmallow.

Charlotte drew a breath deep into her lungs. Sasha was accomplished, wicked smart, well traveled, and she made Lizzie laugh because she was deceptively funny. And she adored Lizzie. It should be enough. Perhaps it was just time to accept she wasn’t the first person Lizzie went to anymore.

Ah… there it was.

Sasha cut through her musing, her voice softer than she ever heard. “Would you like to talk to her?”

The lump in her throat fought back as she choked it down. “You stayed home with her?”

“Of course.” Sasha replied. “I’ll always look after her.”

“Promise?” Charlotte pressed, voice cracking.

“You have my word.”

Her tone was steady, a soft genuine note she didn’t often show… and Charlotte believed she meant it. A knot of worry she unknowingly carried loosened.

“Here she is,” Sasha murmured.

Charlotte waited, listening to Sasha’s soft words to her sister. Lizzie’s voice came through the line a moment later.

“Twinnie?”

God. The fracture cleaving its way through Lizzie’s spirit tore at Charlotte.

“The one and only.”

Lizzie’s wet laugh trickled through the line before breaking into a quiet sob.

Charlotte let her cry as long as she needed to, brushing her own stray tear away. The sound of Lizzie blowing her nose signaled her slow return to composure.

“Let’s run away,” she said, followed by another trumpeting sound.

Charlotte laughed, the memory stirring of when they were little and their mother had first introduced them to James. The same night, Lizzie woke to find Charlotte packing a bag. She’d just gotten up, grabbed her backpack and a sweater and asked where they were going, undeterred when Charlotte said she was running away. Lizzie just nodded, asking again where *they* were going.

They only made it a mile through town when their legs got tired, the wind chill biting at their skin, making them second guess their plan. Lizzie found a payphone and called home, asking their mother not to be mad but to please come get them because they’d decided not to run away after all.

“Where to?” she asked, making her way to the floor to ceiling windows overlooking the city.

“The farm,” Lizzie said and Charlotte smiled, knowing instantly the kind of getaway Lizzie wanted.

“Perfect.”

“You didn’t have plans with Ali?”

Charlotte hesitated, remembering the constellation of bruises and bite marks she peppered Ali with. “We did,” she admitted. Plans that involved Charlotte bringing her dinner and... “But she’ll understand. She’s sweet like that.”

“Are you sure? It’s a new relationship—”

“Beth, we aren’t actually together. Friends with benefits at most.”

“Sure. Sure,” Lizzie drawled, some of her pep coming back. “Keep telling yourself that.”

Charlotte opened her mouth to argue, then let it close. The protest evaporated, leaving only warmth and ache behind. “When do you want to leave?”

“In the morning.”

She took a steady breath, the tightness in her chest easing because she might not be the first person Lizzie called but they still needed each other. There was a spot inside both of them only they could fill. “I’ll pick you up at ten.”

When the call ended, Charlotte let herself take in the city stretching out beyond the glass. Boston shimmered, misty sunlight on wet streets, car headlights sliding over stone. It would be good to get away from the city for a few days and spend time with Lizzie. But the memory of red hair tangled on her pillow, freckles like a galaxy of constellations across bare skin, stirred a longing in her bones to have Ali in her bed again.

And though Charlotte had built her life on logic, order, and control… it was that chaos, heat, and color she couldn’t stop reaching for, even when she knew it would likely leave her broken in the end.

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ALI

LEAH COLEMAN WAS AN INTERESTING WOMAN. An impression substantiated by how the woman sat with regal poise in the squash armchair occupying the corner of Ali's studio. Her attention locked with a rather judicious Willow.

"Diana had a feline just like you in college," Leah addressed the cat, who swished her tail back and forth across the wooden floor, far from amused. "Same disapproving expression." She cracked a faint smile, leaning forward and offering her hand. "I loved that fluffball."

Willow gave her one last appraising look before approaching Leah's extended hand to bestow the blessing of a cheek rub. Only to then turn with a flick of her tail and saunter from the room without so much as a goodbye, its fluffy end pointed straight up.

"Same little sashay too," Leah mused, watching her go. "Makes one consider reincarnation."

"Were you and Diana close?" Ali asked, from her perch on the window sill.

"Very," Leah admitted, a wistful smile brushing the corner of her eyes and lips. "Kindred spirits, you might say."

"That's sweet. Were you ever…?"

Leah shook her head, but a pale shadow crossed her expression.

"There's no better friend, but the carousel of needy animals drove me batty. I crave quiet. Diana's house is *never* quiet."

"It *is* a bit lively there," Ali admitted, leaning into soft laughter.

“An understatement. My wife was a reader and allergic to dogs. But she —” Leah’s mouth pressed into a thin line. She exhaled in a feeble attempt to expel the grief haunting her. “Diana’s heart has been three sizes too big since the day I met her.”

Leah’s red heels peeped from beneath the black hem of her Armani suit as she wandered through the stacks of canvases asking all manner of hard questions. But in the end, what she said was unexpected.

“Miss McCarthy, I’m uncertain how you have gone under the radar this long. I suppose your frequent moves could explain it. But your concepts and technique are exemplary.”

“Thank you.” Ali couldn’t help but smile as excitement swelled in her chest, zapping beneath her skin.

“I want to offer you an opportunity I seldom do for one so unknown as yourself,” Leah began, leveling her with a sharp stare. “Your own solo show. Fifteen new pieces, minimum.”

Her mind stuttered, the processing power of her brain lagging.

“My gallery opening is at the end of October.” Leah studied Ali’s reaction, watching as the excited smile spread across her cheeks. “I would like you to be the star.”

It took a moment, several if she were honest. Especially when she’d received her first of no doubt many rejections to one of the residencies she applied for. Leah just watched the reality sink in, her amusement growing with every passing second that Ali could only blink.

Be cool. Be cool. She told herself as she grasped the reality of the situation. The esteemed Leah Coleman was offering her a solo show at her gallery opening. That was… well that was a dream come true.

She took a slow breath, trying not to vibrate out of her own skin and wrangled her thoughts which were tripping over a slew of new ideas. She needed to remain professional. “Any particular theme?”

Leah’s expression was knowing. “Adoration and yearning.”



ALI DIDN’T HAVE time to overthink the fact she needed to create fifteen new pieces worthy of Leah Coleman’s gallery in less than three months. Before

she could spiral, Wren showed up with a six-pack of cider under her arm, declaring an impromptu girls' night at Natasha's.

On their walk there, Wren filled her in. "So, I gotta be honest, Charlotte instigated this." She nudged her shoulder into Ali's.

Her heart felt squishy as she shoved her hands in her pockets, the toe of her sandal scuffing over stone. "She did?"

Wren's steps carried her ahead, despite her shorter legs. "She felt bad for ditchin' you last minute. Even though she had a good reason." Wren's chest puffed with pride. "She asked me to make sure you would have a good weekend without her."

Color dusted its way across her cheeks as butterflies took off in her stomach. While understanding of Charlotte's impromptu departure, she would be lying if she hadn't been looking forward to getting to see her. They hadn't been too busy to send each other teasing texts about how they wanted to spend their weekend. Neither of them had any PG activities in mind.

"She's so sweet."

Wren wagged her eyebrows, ciders clinking with every bouncing step. "Totally something a *friend with benefits* would do. Definitely *not girlfriend* behavior."

Ali's ears burned and she looked out over the busy streets, not too warm now that the sun had dipped below the buildings to plummet toward the horizon. "She's just thoughtful. She knows I don't have a lot of friends here."

"She *is* pretty great. She always answers my mornin' Snaps."

"You're friends with her now too?"

Wren nodded, chin high. "We talk recipes and music. Did you know she plays piano?"

"I do. But why do *you* know?"

The bounce drained from Wren's steps as she slowed. "Heck." She ran a hand through her short platinum locks, the dirty blonde of her roots just starting to show. "Should I have asked if it was cool that I'm friends with your friends?"

Wren was trying to build something here in Boston, too. Something safe. Ali was happy to share if it meant Wren would stay…

Ali's head shook back and forth, rushing to reassure her. "No, please be friends! I just didn't know you two were swapping recipes now."

Wren's shoulders relaxed. "That's a recent development."

"And Natasha?" Ali asked, raising a brow.

"What can I say," the bounce was back in her step as she led Ali down the sidewalk again. "She thinks my jokes are funny."

Ali bumped their shoulders together. "That makes me question her sense of humor."



CROSSING the threshold of Natasha's townhouse was like stepping into a magazine. So immaculate it challenged the notion someone lived there. There wasn't a crumb or dust bunny to be found.

Where Charlotte's style was refurbished history and carefully curated hand-crafted pieces, Natasha was all high-end designer-brands and custom-built craftsmanship. Classic and crisp white, with pops of gold and blush pink.

"Holy moly," Wren breathed as they took in the kitchen, her tone touched with awe.

Ali could agree. It was drool-worthy and every surface gleamed from lack of use and regular cleaning.

"Do you think she has a maid?" Wren whispered.

They shared a look and said in unison, smiles creeping into their tones. "Definitely."

Wren placed her ciders gingerly on the pristine quartz island which dominated the kitchen. In its center, a bouquet of fresh-cut flowers reached up to the lights. Behind them were glass front upper cabinets displaying the glassware and fine china.

Wren rented a small room in a large house due for a renovation. Ali's apartment was nice but aging. While Natasha's townhouse was a cozy shoebox in comparison to the family mansion, every finish and piece of furniture screamed luxury and expense.

"Lilah should be here any minute," Natasha stated, pulling out one of a kind ceramic plates that seemed too fancy for pizza. Ali wondered if Natasha had ever even seen a paper plate before, let alone eaten off one.

"I'm excited to try this pizza," Wren chirped, popping open a cider with the carabiner bottle opener clipped to her belt.

Natasha pulled out decorative crystal wine glasses for each of them. “It’s the best in the city.”

“If it’s trash, I’ll never trust your recommendation ever again,” Wren warned. “You northerners don’t know how to season anything.”

Natasha lifted her chin in challenge, retort forming only to be interrupted by the ring of the doorbell. She turned on her heel, marching back through the house to answer the door.

Wren sidled up next to her, hands hidden in her pockets as she looked around, uncertainty clear in the tightness in her expression.

“I feel like I shouldn’t touch anything,” Ali muttered under her breath, slinging an arm over Wren’s shoulder.

“Oh thank god,” Wren whispered. “Me too.” She leaned into Ali’s side, as though huddling for warmth. “But, when I die, bury me in this kitchen.”

Lilah bounded around the corner, balancing pizza boxes in one hand and a bottle of wine in the other.

“Ali Cat!” she greeted, sliding the boxes onto the island and trotting over to a specific drawer and pulling out a bottle opener. Her smile brightened as her gaze landed on Wren. “You must be Wren. I’m Lilah, Charlotte’s little sister.”

“That’s me,” Wren confirmed, sporting a matching grin. “You look nothing like Charlotte.”

“Half-sisters.” Lilah laughed, flipping open a box of pizza and releasing the most heavenly melty scent into the air. “I look like my dad’s side of the family. I used to hate that I looked different, but I’ve grown to like it… I think.”

“What’s Charlotte like as a sister?” Wren asked, eyes narrowing, clearly hoping for dirt as she followed Lilah’s lead and grabbing a plate.

“Oh, she’s amazing!” Lilah said, prying the cork free with a pop. A buzzing came from the back pocket of her jeans she paid no mind to as she filled her glass with a deep burgundy liquid. “She was always looking after me and teaching me how to do things. Charlotte is my most favorite person. But don’t tell Lizzie.”

“She already knows,” Natasha scoffed as she reentered the kitchen, thumbs flying over her phone screen. “Very obvious.”

Lilah narrowed her gaze. “Still, this conversation never happened.”

Natasha led them downstairs to the entertainment room in the basement. A bar lined the back wall, dark blue wainscoting elevated the space that she

hardly felt like she was in a basement. They scattered across the leather sectional facing a massive TV. Idly, Ali wondered what was in Charlotte's basement. She whipped out her phone to find out.

CHARLOTTE DAVENPORT
TODAY 6:37PM

I got a serious question for you

Oh?

What are you keeping in your basement?

Little dots appeared and wiggled across the screen as she took a bite of pizza. It was damn good.

Bodies. Kept in neat little 6x4 lots.

I knew it!

How'd you do it?

Arsenic in the elderberry wine.

Are you planning my death?

Never you, darling. ;)

"So, Ali," Lilah began from her corner of the sectional, a wicked lilt in her voice that pulled Ali right out of her phone. "Have you and Charlotte said I love you yet?"

Her bite of pizza lodged in her throat, forcing Ali to succumb to a coughing fit.

"Not yet," she spluttered.

"What do you mean *yet?* She looks at you like the sun shines out your ass," Natasha groused, making Ali's cheeks burn.

"Well, have you seen Ali's ass?" Wren added, brows shooting toward her hairline. "You could bounce a quarter off that thang."

"Charlotte has always been an ass girl," Lilah tacked on. "Can't blame her though, I think it runs in the family."

"Wait," Wren held up a hand, blinking. "Are all of you queer?"

"Uh huh. Charlotte's a lesbian, Lizzie's bisexual, and I'm pan," Lilah said, tone matter-of-fact as she finished off her first slice of pizza.

Natasha groaned, looking between them. "I'm the token straight?"

Wren snorted into her cider.

Lilah’s phone started vibrating again. She rolled her eyes before putting it on Do Not Disturb and tossing it aside.

“Yeet!”

“Who is calling you?” Natasha asked, brows wiggling.

“My hoes, obviously.”

“Of the three of you,” Wren pressed. “Who is the biggest hoe?”

“Oh, me. Hands down,” Lilah said without a hint of shame. “Lizzie’s a serial monogamist. Charlotte got around in her twenties. She’s so pretty, she could land anyone. But once Compose took off, she basically stopped dating.”

“Married to her job,” Wren nodded.

“Yeah. I think she did really love her first girlfriend in high school. They were supposed to go to college together, but then didn’t and that’s why Charlotte believes long distance doesn’t work.”

“The only person I’ve seen make it work is my aunt, but I am ninety percent sure they have an open marriage,” Natasha commented, dipping her pizza into a garlic sauce.

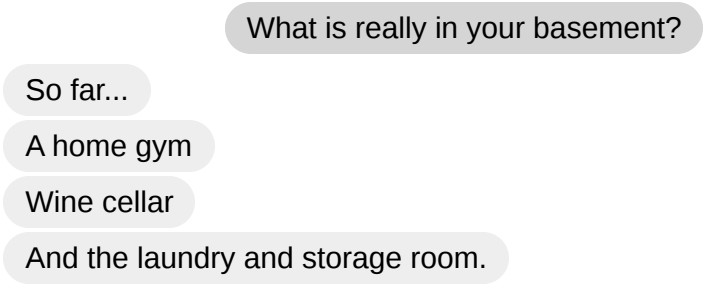
Ali’s face scrunched up as she filed that info away about Charlotte, but tried very hard to forget the info about Jasmine Pryce.

“I partied too hard,” Lilah’s tone faltered, eyes dropping to her plate as angry red splotches blotted her chest. “The twins often took turns dragging me home. Charlotte always made me pancakes the next morning.” Her voice brightened again. “I’d like to think I’ve outgrown that phase of my life, but I still have a tendency to say… just one more when I drink.”

“It’s true. I’ve seen it,” Natasha confirmed, shaking her head. “Many times.”

Wren cracked a smile. “I do the same thing. Ali has rescued me a time or two.”

Natasha put on the movie not long after that, giving Ali a chance to text Charlotte one more time.



Ali smiled to herself. Of course Charlotte had a wine cellar.



LATER, when credits rolled, Lilah caught Ali's arm, holding her back as Natasha and Wren climbed the basement stairs.

Lower lip worried between her teeth before she looked up, expression fragile.

"I'm sorry about what I said during game night. About you being alone. I heard how it sounded after it came out and I really wish I had a time travel device so I could go back and slap some duct tape over my own mouth."

Lilah's cheeks pinked and she hung her head.

"Oh uh," Ali blinked. "It's okay."

She hadn't thought much of it since, remembering the horrified look on Lilah's face once she realized Ali was in fact alone.

"No it isn't." Lilah's hands moved to cup her cheeks. "I made you uncomfortable. I never meant for that to happen." She peered up, gaze full of sincerity. "You make Charlotte so happy. I wanted to make you feel welcome."

The small bucket of affection she carried for Lilah overflowed. "Thank you," she said, pulling Lilah's hands away from her face. "I knew you were just trying to get to know me. But thank you for apologizing. I know those aren't always easy."

Lilah squeezed her hands, looking rather relieved. Not quite sure what to do next, Lilah flung her arms around Ali, giving her a crushing hug. "Thank you for being understanding."

Ali returned the hug, feeling the seeds of affection taking root.

"What are holidays like in the Carter-Davenport household anyway?" Ali asked as they pulled apart.

"You'll see!" Lilah smiled as they made their way up the stairs. "Mama cooks up a storm. Charlotte bakes all the cookies. Lizzie and I handle the decorations. It's chaos and magic all at once." She glanced over her shoulder, smile widening into a grin. "Just wait. You're going to love it."

Ali considered for a moment and smiled to herself despite the nagging wonder if she would even be here.

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CHARLOTTE

THE FARMHOUSE KITCHEN always seemed thrilled to have someone cook in it. Once James realized how homesick Diana got for the country he found and renovated the old bones. Morning light streamed through the window over the deep sink, spreading over butcher block counters to spill over onto refinished oak leading toward the mudroom. Flannels hung in a row down a line of hooks above dirty riding boots. A lead rope hung forgotten from where Lizzie absentmindedly left it.

Beyond the window, Charlotte could see the horses mosey their way out into the fields, a gentle chorus of whickers and whinnies as they shook off their sleep, satisfied from the breakfast Charlotte doled out to each of them earlier, giving their usual stable hands the morning off.

Pancake batter puddled in the old cast iron skillet, the scent of butter melted into the air on a sizzle. Bubbles formed just under the surface. *Wait for it*, her mother's voice murmured from thirty years ago. Mornings were *her* time with their mother growing up. A time when all her attention was on Charlotte.

For as long as Charlotte could recall, being an early riser was how she met each new day. Lizzie on the other hand, preferred sleeping in. Residency hours had only cemented that habit. She slept when she could. Charlotte's life was structured and there were only two things that kept her up past her usual bedtime. A good book and… good sex.

An image of Ali curled up beneath Charlotte's covers slipped forward. Even in her mind, she drank in the memory of smooth curves. Nipples pebbled in the cool air of her bedroom, the marks she left behind peppered

among her freckles. Charlotte's mouth watered at the memory of their night. *Good* was an understatement.

The connection between them was so electric, magnetic… it stole all sense from her and consumed the mind. She'd been able to think of little else, even out on the farm so far away from everything.

"Pancakes?" Lizzie's sleep-rough voice sounded. Lime-green fuzzy socks carried her across the wood floor.

Charlotte startled and caught the faint scorch in the air, attention snapping back to the pancakes.

"Shit," she swore, flipping each one with rapid-practiced precision.

"You burnin' breakfast?" Lizzie peered over her shoulder, a sleepy smile curled in her tone.

"Not intentionally," Charlotte grumbled, moving to the fridge to grab the eggs.

"Something on your mind?"

Charlotte sighed, cracking an egg into a small bowl. "Just—"

She hadn't caught Lizzie up in weeks. She'd been too busy and this getaway was meant to give Lizzie a moment to recenter and breathe before the wedding events accelerated. If she knew one thing about her twin, she loved gossip.

"Ali and I had sex."

"Oh?" Lizzie's voice took on a sly tone as she loaded the coffee maker. "That explains why you seem more relaxed. Good, I assume?"

Charlotte sighed, sweeping her hair into a messy bun, the room feeling hotter somehow. "Better than good."

"Tell me everything!"

"No!"

"Aw, why?"

Charlotte let her gaze drift up to the ceiling, the scene replaying itself. Every sound she made. The taste of her. Her entire being ached for more.

"You know how when you really like and *connect* with someone it makes the sex—"

"Like your entire being comes alive?" Lizzie offered, plucking mugs from the hooks beneath the upper cabinets. "And it's the only thing you can think about?"

Charlotte transferred half-charred pancakes to a plate. "Yes. I feel insatiable. I'm not sure I'll ever have enough of her."

Lizzie released a low whistle. “Charlotte Davenport, pussy-whipped.”

Charlotte didn’t even deny it.

“Have you made it official?” Lizzie asked, pulling creamer from the fridge.

“No.”

“Why not?”

She poured more batter into the skillet, cracking the oven door to check the bacon.

“I don’t want to sway her decision if she gets one of those residencies.”

“Well, that’s dumb.”

Charlotte lurched as she poured the scrambled eggs into a pan. “What—why?”

“Because she obviously likes you, too. I mean… you two are a walking rom-com, just as plagued with the inability to see what everyone else does.”

Heat spread through the eggs. Her stomach twisted in hunger and fear.

“I get it,” Lizzie said, her tone quiet. “It’s terrifying. To let someone in and take up all the room in your heart when they could leave or… die.”

Charlotte’s breath snagged, hand flitting up to rest over her chest. To the ache and fear woven like a cocoon around her heart. They hadn’t talked about it in years. How the loss of their father hit them even now. Lizzie never seemed to struggle expressing her feelings the same as Charlotte. She wanted to make sure everyone in her life knew how much they were loved. For Charlotte, opening up and allowing people into a place that held so much weight, it terrified her. Not in a bone-chilling way. But in a way that made her feel the need to erect a wall or run in the other direction.

“I want to tell her.”

“You will.”

Lizzie’s eyes were waiting for her. She understood. Lizzie always understood, even when Charlotte didn’t understand herself. “You think so?”

“I know so. It won’t end like the last time,” Lizzie said, leaning back against the counter as the coffee began to drip into the pot. “You should give her a call. Tell her you’re thinking about her and want to see her when you get back.”

“Maybe I will after breakfast…” Charlotte admitted, flipping each piece of bacon before sliding the tray back into the oven. “Why are you up so

early? It’s not even eleven.”

“I wanted to call Sasha before she had to go to court,” Lizzie said, a soft smile tugging at her lips as she added the scrambled eggs to their plates. “By then, she’s too locked in to even look at her phone.”

Warmth spread behind Charlotte’s ribs. For all the questions she had when it came to Sasha, Lizzie had never been so in love. She loved everyone, but Charlotte thought she might love Sasha more than even her at times.

“You miss her?”

Lizzie rubbed the back of her neck. “I’m really glad we came out here… But yeah.” Her shoulders lifted in a shrug. “I miss her.”

“You replaced me,” Charlotte pouted as she flipped the pancakes, recalling a time in their lives when Lizzie claimed she couldn’t stand breathing the same air as Sasha. That kind of tension had nothing to do with hate and everything to do with magnetic attraction.

Lizzie’s brows drew together, mouth falling open. “No! I’d never.”

Sea-like beacons that didn’t quite match her own were fixed on her, worry pooling in a way Charlotte knew meant Lizzie was torn.

“Hey,” she began, motioning Lizzie closer. “I hope whoever you marry is the person you want to spend all your time with. I hope they *do* replace me in a way, even though I’m irreplaceable.”

“You can’t be replaced,” Lizzie murmured, moving to wrap her arms around her, squeezing tight. “But I do miss her when she’s not around. She’s… home.”

Charlotte let that settle then, dry as desert sand, said, “Wooooooooow.”

“Oh, stop.” Lizzie fussed, plucking Charlotte’s phone off the counter and holding it out. “Call your wife.”

“She’s not even my girlfriend.”

“Quit being an idiot and fix that.”

Charlotte rolled her eyes. “I’m working on it.”

“Work faster.”

Charlotte scoffed, adding the last of the food to their plates and turning off the burners. As they ate in the breakfast nook, she let herself ponder Ali’s way of moving through the world like a dandelion seed on the wind… looser, more present, with every moment lived to the fullest. Her urge to force order and follow a plan didn’t grip her quite so hard. She still wanted order and control… but maybe she didn’t want it as much as she used to.

Cutlery scraped against their plates and one of the horses neighed. Lizzie's gaze peeked up, her features soft. "Thanks for coming out here with me."

Charlotte's smile came easy. "Thanks for being my sister."

Lizzie sighed dramatically. "Not like I had much choice."

But the two socked feet laying over her own beneath the table told Charlotte the feeling and gratitude was mutual.

Through the window, the forests and fields sparkled with dew in morning soft light. She needed this trip. She needed the reassurance that Lizzie still needed her, just differently than before. Needed to see what it could be like if she didn't hold so tight to the reins of control. There could be beauty and peace in simply following the current.

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ALI

FROM THE MOMENT Leah Coleman took her leave, Ali went straight to work in her studio; days went by and she never left her apartment. So much to do, so much to plan, so much to panic about, and of course so many intrusive thoughts to battle.

October would be there in a blink, and she required fifteen good pieces minimum. Which meant she needed to create something closer to twenty and pick the best. To get those twenty… about a thousand thumbnails and a hundred detailed sketches.

But nothing was good enough.

The opportunity most artists dreamed of fell into her lap and she was going to fuck it up. There would be no one to blame but her stupid fucking brain.

Charlotte hadn't visited in over a week, off on her getaway with Lizzie, and before that too busy with some kind of acquisition. Ali listened when Charlotte first explained, but her mind swarmed with endless shifting compositions, all too slippery to stick.

Wren took her shifts at the Blend & Brew. Handing in her resignation letter became a more viable option with every passing day. Wren was already doing the job, she should be paid for it.

Her insomnia flared, much to Willow's displeasure; but as her thoughts continued to loop, Ali did her best to ground herself. She'd been taking care of herself for years now. That didn't mean it was easy, but there was light at the end of the tunnel. And there was an end date to all this added stress. A plan was the only thing she needed to reach the finish line.

Her doorbell rang, grating against her sleep-deprived nerves.

Anxiety shot through her, needlepoints pricking her skin. An interruption now might only push her further off course. A layer of grime covered her like a second skin. With it, the realization she hadn't showered in days, hair a greasy rat's nest on top of her head. An odor emanated from her and the baggy t-shirt and sweatpants she'd been wearing.

Dammit.

She must have been hyperfocusing a little too much.

The doorbell rang again.

"I'm coming. I'm coming," she grumbled, dropping her pencils and pushing off her stool. Her foot landed oddly as she stepped into the hall.

Wrong.

She backed up, taking the step again and again until it felt right.

Not now. Let it go… But what if?

The doorbell rang a third time.

She berated herself after the step finally landed right. Peeking around the corner, she felt her entire being freeze as blue eyes belonging to Diana Carter-Davenport held her captive through the narrow pane of glass.

"You aren't pretending to not be home, are you, Alina Marie?"

Though muffled by the glass her name was said in a voice only a mother could produce. No choice remained but to open the door and meet her fate. Diana stepped into her dingy apartment with poise and effortless grace.

"Hmmm," she hummed, eyes scanning Ali's ratty form before reaching up and patting her shoulder. "I'll hug you after you have showered. Off you go."

"But—"

"No buts. You can't go to brunch in this state. Shower. Now," Diana commanded, fixing her with a firm glare.

"I have too many things to do!" Ali cried, the stress of it all about to crack her open like an egg.

"And you will achieve all you need to if you properly care for yourself. If however, you run yourself into the ground, you will not," Diana said, her tone and expression leaving little room for argument. "You're not the first artist on a tight deadline and you will not be the last. Shower. Then brunch. Chop, chop!"

She clapped her hands together like the words combined with action might spur Ali into motion.

But Ali’s vision blurred. She stood defeated, caving in on herself as she admitted the horrible wretched truth in a wet whisper.

“I can’t leave.”

Diana stilled, processing for a moment before speaking in a calm voice.

“Why not?”

Ali hung her head, too ashamed of her own weakness. “I just can’t.”

Diana tilted her head down, trying to catch Ali’s gaze. “I need a little more than that, sweetheart.”

“Something might happen to Willow,” Ali admitted, beyond frustrated with herself, stomach twisted up in knots as the worst of her whatifs spilled out. The one she couldn’t resist.

Diana stared at her and Ali stared back, eyes bouncing over her, reading every unspoken word her body was saying. She nodded to herself and moved to the couch, sinking into it. “Come sit with me, please.”

Not a question.

A light patting sound drew her across the room where she all but collapsed into the couch beside Diana. The other woman half-turned, resting one arm on the back of the couch behind her, other hand resting on Ali’s knee.

“Talk to me, Sugar. Tell me what’s goin’ on.”

Ali crossed her arms, pinning her hands beneath to stop the urge to pick at her own skin, or tap and fidget.

“Stuff and things.”

“Let’s start with the stuff, and then we can work our way through the things,” Diana prompted with practiced ease, her hand pressing warm circles into her knee.

Ali took a shuddering breath, ignoring the creeping anxiety across her skin. Her thoughts collided, each one determined to be the loudest so she plucked at random.

“I have OCD. So my mind likes to tell me if I leave, something will happen to Willow,” she whispered, words tumbling out now. “The apartment will catch fire. There could be an earthquake. A sinkhole. A tornado. Disaster.”

The urge to pick at her skin flared into a burning itch beneath her sleeves. She squeezed her arms tighter over her hands, trying to contain it.

“She could chew on a cord and electrocute herself,” Ali went on, voice breaking. “Or that branch hanging over the sidewalk breaks and crushes me.

I can’t really cook. Plus, using knives is sometimes difficult because I might get a thought and—” She swallowed hard, “hurt myself. I need both of my hands right now.”

She shook her head, laughing at herself because to her, after stopping the loops and redirecting her OCD… it felt ridiculous that she still struggled this much.

Diana’s voice was soft and weighted with a gentleness. She reached forward, brushing a crusty strand of hair away from Ali’s temple and tucked it behind her ear. “We can’t control any of those things. But you don’t need to worry about being alone. You have a village. One that adores you on your good and bad days.”

Ali’s eyes darted to her lap and then back up. “I feel like I’ve been having a lot of bad days recently.”

“Why is that?”

“I try to keep my stress level down to help me manage my tics and things. But with the wedding, work, and my show coming up, there’s too much to do and not enough time.” Ali sighed, scrubbing her face with her hands. “I’ve been meaning to make an appointment with my therapist, but it’s stuck at the bottom of my to-do list.”

Diana patted her knee, giving it a little squeeze. “Why don’t we go ahead and do that now?”

Ali almost laughed. It had been such a long time since there had been a maternal figure in her life. Diana was a mom to her core. But she didn’t try to force her way in. Ali knew if she was anyone else, Diana would be right where she was now.

“You’re right,” Ali agreed, leaning forward and grabbing her laptop off the coffee table.

Diana rummaged through her pantry and refrigerator, muttering to herself about the lack of ingredients. Ali made a recurring weekly appointment, cursing past Ali for not preemptively doing so to make her life easier.



DIANA CARTER-DAVENPORT DROVE like a bat out of hell, one hand on the steering wheel, the other wrapped loosely around her to-go cup of iced tea

with lemon. Occasionally, she didn't use either hand, instead using only a knee to keep the car from running off the road.

Ali had to hand it to her, for all the death-defying maneuvers that belonged in a movie, no one was hurt.

"Do you mind if we stop by the grocery store, Sugar?" Diana asked, smirk deepening as she clocked Ali's white-knuckle grip on the *oh-shit* handle.

"No, whatever you need," Ali managed.

Tires screeched against asphalt as the vehicle whipped around, onto a new street. Her phone started vibrating, screen lighting up with a FaceTime call from Charlotte.

"Hey," she rasped, voice thin as she answered the call.

She brushed her still damp hair over her shoulder, glancing down at the screen right before her body swung, knocking against the door thanks to another sharp turn. A dark pixelated brow arched, creeping toward her hairline.

"Are you alright?"

"Did you know—" Ali's hand leapt to the oh shit handle again, eyes back on the road as Diana wove in and out of traffic. "Do you think your mom was a race car driver in another life?"

Lizzie cackled off screen, the sound of it making Ali's mouth twitch even as she feared for her life.

Charlotte bit her lip, stifling her own laugh as the car zipped into the parking lot. "Her speed demon ways are legendary," she admitted. "But her driving record is good. So don't panic, your odds of getting to your destination in one piece are high."

Ali nodded, right before the car screeched to a stop and the phone flew out of Ali's hand. She left it behind, fumbling with the door handle instead as she dove out of the car, crying out as her feet touched the ground. "Land!"

"Y'all exaggerate," Diana drawled, plucking Ali's phone off the ground and tossing it to her. Ali's hands moved faster than expected, catching the device. "We always arrive in one piece."

Ali held the phone close to her face. "You wouldn't do me like this, right?"

"Never, darling," Charlotte vowed.

"Not unless she's in the Porsche!" Lizzie called.

“Your mother is insane,” Ali whispered in desperation as Diana squeezed herself into the frame until their cheeks pressed together.

“Only a little,” Diana chimed, waving at the screen. “Come along, Sugar. I’m teaching you how to make gumbo.”

Ali’s smile stretched a mile wide, her near-death experience entirely forgotten. Ali *could* cook. But ever since she lost her mom’s recipes, she rarely felt the urge. The idea of helping Diana in the kitchen and learning something new was appealing, warming some cold drafty part of her.

“I’m glad you are taking a break,” Charlotte said, her smile looking unbearably fond. “I didn’t know you and my mother had plans.”

“We didn’t technically. But I’m glad she came by,” she admitted, trailing after Diana into the grocery store. “We’ve been having so much fun.”

“I’m glad.”

Diana grabbed a basket, marching through the sliding doors like a woman on a mission.

“I gotta go,” Ali said in a breathless rush. “Can I call you later?”

Charlotte’s chin bobbed. “Of course.”

AN HOUR OR SO LATER, her apartment smelled like the spices flavoring the ingredients simmering in a brand new stock pot, filling her apartment with a fragrant aroma.

Willow, lover of Davenport women, melted across Diana’s shoulder, purring loud enough to rattle the windows. Diana scratched behind her ears and flipped through Ali’s sketches. A look of concentration traced her expression, mirroring one Charlotte sometimes wore.

A knock jolted Ali from her focus. She hurried to the door, hopeful for Charlotte, a delivery, or anything easy.

“Ms. Coleman—hi. I didn’t know you were coming.” She stepped aside to let Leah in, staring down at her socks. Her heart climbed up into her throat as she braced for the blow. Leah would ask to see her progress and she had nothing to show. Then it would be blatantly obvious she couldn’t handle the pressure.

Steel-gray eyes appraised her with quiet precision. It prickled over Ali's skin, stoking the panic that still lurked under her ribs. She reached for her locket, and reminded herself she was doing better—much better—than yesterday. But she was still unmoored and full of noise.

"Part of working with me," Leah said, taking the door from Ali and closing it behind her, "is that I'm here to guide you when needed. You're new to this kind of demand. I'd be more surprised if you didn't need support."

"Really?" Ali asked, peeking up at her.

Leah dipped her chin, then smirked when Diana called from the studio, claiming she had a "wonderful idea," and something eased in Leah's posture. Leah moved toward the studio, all stately grace. The harsh edges of her features softened in Diana's presence.

The two women bent over her sketches, debating and laughing, offering critique where it mattered, encouragement where her doubts nagged. Together they coaxed her to share her own thoughts, only ever adjusting her direction and never taking the reins.

And the realization hit her with the force of a falling star… her village was growing into something real and safe. And for the first time in years, she didn't feel quite so alone.

SHE WAS SORTING through her photos of Charlotte, every angle and candid shot she ever captured, every little moment she hoped to translate onto canvas.

Her phone vibrated insistently in her hand, breaking her focus.

A familiar silhouette appeared in the image preview, and without thinking she answered not bothering to read the caller ID.

"Hello, my moon," Ali chirped, the pool of warmth she always held in her chest for Charlotte expanded into an ocean.

"Hello, darling," came the reply, only her tone wasn't quite right. Not as deep or as velvet-smooth as Charlotte tended to sound when she used that endearment.

Ali sat forward and peered out her studio window at the late afternoon sun. "Are you alright?"

“Better now,” she replied, giggling in a very un-Charlotte sort of way.

A prickle of confusion skated down Ali’s spine. “Are you still coming over this weekend when you get back?” she asked, hoping this wasn’t an oddly delivered cancellation.

“No,” came a dramatic drawl. “I have plans with my fiancée.”

Ali’s brain stalled. She yanked the phone back, squinting at the caller ID.

Lizzie Davenport

“Oh my god. I’ve been bamboozled.”

Lizzie’s laugh rang bright and delighted through the speaker, and Ali couldn’t help but match it.

“It happens more often than you’d think.”

Ali wasn’t sure what to make of that. “You’ve never called me before,” she said, moving to curl into her squash armchair.

“I just wanted to call and tell you to drink water,” Lizzie stated, a playful smirk evident in her tone. “Charlotte said you’ve been working really hard, so I wanted to remind you to take care of yourself.”

“I’m not always good at that,” she answered quietly.

“Me either,” Lizzie murmured.

“Are you feeling better?” Ali asked, knowing there had been a reason Charlotte rushed out of town in the first place.

“Yeah.” The sigh that followed landed soft, but Ali wasn’t convinced. She waited, giving Lizzie time to open up. “You have to get used to losing patients. Kids are as resilient as they are fragile. Sometimes—I just… don’t see it coming.”

“That…” she searched for the right word but came up empty, heart aching with empathy. “Sucks.”

“Like a bag of dicks,” Lizzie tacked on.

Ali snorted, laughter bursting free. The tension in her chest loosening.

It was easy to talk to Lizzie. Different from the gravitational pull drawing her toward Charlotte, less charged, more companionable. And as they chatted and shifted between topics, Ali came up with a hundred reasons why she would never mix the two women up ever again.

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CHARLOTTE

BEING WHO SHE WAS, Charlotte couldn't resist opening Slack the moment she was in her usual radius of Compose headquarters. One glance told her the office had fallen into chaos as the flu had flattened half the staff. The acquisition was moving at a crawl, as hardly anyone in C-suite remained.

So her first stop was to Imani's apartment, restocking her supply of soup, cough drops, electrolytes, tissues, and with assurances that she bore no hard feelings about the office catching the plague. After that, she put all of her attention into something within her control… planning a date for herself and Ali to make up for bailing on their previous plans.

She first booked a reservation at the most obscenely fancy restaurant in Boston. Somewhere only Boston's elite were able to afford. An hour later, she transferred the reservation to Lizzie and Sasha. Ali really wasn't one to be dazzled by her wallet. She was sentimental, thoughtful, and endlessly caring. The type of girl who saved ticket stubs and fortunes in a jar. She was an artist and almost always covered in paint and charcoal. Charlotte doubted a Michelin star would mean as much to her as something unique to them.

So by the time evening rolled around, Charlotte settled on a different plan that involved recreating their first "fake" date at Bella Amore and turning it into a real one.

What better place to rewrite their beginning and ask Ali to be her girlfriend?

An hour later, Ali burst out of her apartment with a smile so luminous it knocked the wind straight out of Charlotte. Those dimples struck like

lightning every damn time. Ali climbed into the passenger seat, and Charlotte was already leaning across the console, cupping her cheeks, thumbs pressing over those dimples as their mouths met.

“I missed you,” Charlotte murmured, voice dropping into a low, husky rasp she couldn’t control as their lips brushed together again.

“Really?” Ali breathed, dark eyes framed in crisp black lines were wide.

Charlotte mapped the freckles speckled across her face and answered by kissing her again, humming her affirmation against Ali’s lips.

“I’m honestly looking forward to the bachelorette getaway next weekend. You’ll get to see me in a bikini.”

“I’m not ready,” Ali gulped.

“We get to cuddle in bed and not think about acquisitions.” Charlotte murmured, pressing her lips over the deepest dimple before pulling back in time to watch the sunny smile fade away.

“I can’t believe it’s already here.”

Ali’s movements were heavy as she buckled her seatbelt, a far off look in her eye.

“It’s an all out sprint, isn’t it?” Charlotte noted, wondering where Ali drifted off to so suddenly. “Joint bachelorette weekend, your birthday, the wedding, and your solo show to finish it off.”

“Time flies,” Ali’s voice thinned out, her bright spark dimming right before Charlotte’s eyes.

Charlotte replayed the conversation, every word and shift in her expression and tone, trying to pinpoint what flipped the switch. There wasn’t a thing that should have pulled Ali’s light inward.

Well, other than the unclear path forward and the worry Charlotte herself carried.

I can fix it.

Her voice was petal soft. “Hey…” her fingers brushed a few copper strands behind Ali’s ear, flecks of dried paint hid amongst the waves. “We don’t have to go out.”

Ali shook her head. “I want to. I want to spend time with you.”

“We don’t have to go *out* to spend time together,” Charlotte countered, thumb sweeping across the nape of Ali’s neck, kneading the tension she found there.

“Introvert.”

“Guilty as charged.”

Ali huffed a quiet, tired laugh. “But pasta.”

“We can have it delivered.”

“We’re already in the car.” Ali rubbed both hands over her face. “Just… drive. Please.”

The edge in Ali’s voice stung, but Charlotte swallowed it down. By now, she knew not to push when Ali was wound too tight. She shifted the car into drive and pulled away from the curb, letting the silence settle between them.

Ali brightened a little when they reached Bella Amore. Just a flicker. But the moment they settled into their seats, her glow faded again like a candle caught in a draft.

Charlotte tried to make conversation. The worry must have been written all over her face, because guilt swam openly in Ali’s eyes. Her shoulders curved inward right before she murmured something about the bathroom and slipped away, leaving Charlotte at their table.

Her fingers curled around the stem of her wineglass as the restaurant’s chatter buzzed, accompanied by clinking cutlery. Every second that passed her stomach tightened. Should she follow? Should she give space?

Her phone vibrated. Ali’s updated contact name titled her text bubble.

LINA
TODAY 6:09PM

I’m sorry. I just need a minute.

Charlotte breathed a little easier, some of the tension spooling out of her spine.

Take all the time you need.

I’m here if you need me.

Thank you.

Her fingers drummed idly on the tablecloth. Out over the roof, the sun slipped lower, turning everything its light touched gold. Her perfect plan to tell Ali everything faded as the light dimmed. The night wouldn’t unfold the way she hoped.

Ali needed something else this evening and Charlotte would give it to her the moment she knew what it was.

Soft footfalls broke her spiraling thoughts. Charlotte turned just in time to see Ali returning to the table, face splotched, nose red. She sank into her chair and hid her face in her hands.

Charlotte waited, leaning forward as empathy expanded, making her chest ache.

When she finally looked up, her eyes were wide and pleading for Charlotte to understand something there were no words for.

“I forgot.”

For a moment, Charlotte’s mind raced through possibilities until it collided with the truth. Ali’s mother died right before her birthday…

“Lina,” she whispered, reaching across the table. “When was it?”

Ali grabbed hold of her hand without hesitation. “Tuesday,” she hiccuped. “I’ve never forgotten before.”

A familiar ache rippled through Charlotte’s chest. She remembered the first time her own grief faded enough to skip right over the date. Guilt had carved her open… like forgetting made her a bad daughter and the strands of his memory she clung to were slipping through her fingers. Like *he* was truly lost to her.

There was only one thing she could do.

Charlotte pulled a few bills from her wallet, setting them on the table she stood, still holding Ali’s hand.

“Come with me. There’s something I want to show you.”

Ali didn’t hesitate. She wiped her cheeks as she rose, letting Charlotte guide her out of the restaurant.

Charlotte kept their hands linked the entire drive home, thumb brushing in steady, soothing arcs along Ali’s knuckles. When the garage door opened, warm waning light spilled across concrete.

With a quiet breath, Charlotte guided Ali to one of her most prized possessions. Her father’s 1991 Porsche 911. She could still remember the day he brought it home, the smile on his face, captured in the picture that rested on her mantle. The breadth of that memory confined to the edges of that photo, the details lost to time.

An ache of understanding urged her along to comfort Ali the only way she knew how.

Charlotte circled the shimmering horizon-blue car to the passenger side, opening the door with reverent care. She tilted her head.

“Get in.”

Ali stepped closer, grief and wonder flickering in equal measure across her face as she climbed in.

The engine started up without fuss, a familiar steady hum vibrated beneath Charlotte's skin. She eased the Porsche out of the garage and onto the quiet road, turning not toward the city but the winding country backroads she'd known since childhood.

She switched the radio to a station that played classic rock, her father's old favorites. Guitar and smoky vocals filled the car, threading through the dusk as she drummed her thumb against the steering wheel in perfect time. Just like her father used to do…

"This was my dad's car. He loved it. I have always liked knowing how things work. Most weekends, I helped him tinker with it. I'd sit in the passenger seat and do my homework until I got stuck. Then he'd talk me through it."

The car hummed over the first long curve in the road, and Charlotte's posture went loose. These backroads always cleared her head, like motion alone could clean away anything that didn't belong.

"We'd always end those days with a drive like this," she said. "Windows down. Music loud. Just the two of us."

Ali listened without interruption, her fingers tracing patterns on the underside of Charlotte's arm that rested on the gear shift.

"When he died," Charlotte continued, "this car became my secret place. The place I felt safest and closest to him."

Another gentle turn and the countryside opened around them, the landscape bathed in the fading hue of evening.

"I was seventeen the first time I forgot," Charlotte admitted. "I came downstairs for school and my mama looked so sad. When I asked her what was wrong, she gave me this look and asked me if I remembered what day it was." She took a steadying breath, but all those emotions came rushing back to the surface. "I broke… It took her ages to calm me down."

"I'm sorry," Ali murmured.

Charlotte shook her head. "Don't be. I'm telling you because I don't want you to think it means something is wrong with you. Or that you loved her any less."

Ali's hand stilled on her arm.

"I'll tell you what Mama told me."

Ali squeezed her arm when she was ready.

“Grief is different for everyone. There isn’t a right way to heal. Sometimes, the wound closes so well you don’t feel the ache until something triggers it. Sometimes, it feels like slow motion, like you’re healing, then suddenly you’re not. And sometimes…” Her voice softened. “Sometimes forgetting the date is part of moving forward. Part of your heart remembering how to really beat again.”

Ali swallowed hard, throat bobbing as she leaned her head against Charlotte’s shoulder. Charlotte angled her chin and pressed a soft kiss into her hairline, breathing her in.

“There are years I forget completely,” she admitted. “And years I watch it creep closer like a storm. Lizzie feels it physically, a weight in her bones. Mama still cooks his favorite meals on their anniversary and his birthday. Some years, she even buys him little presents, just because she misses him.”

Ali let out a trembling exhale and nodded. Charlotte squeezed her hand tight as she kept driving, giving Ali a moment to sift through her emotions.

“I feel like she’s fading,” Ali whispered. “I barely remember her laugh. I can’t remember how she smelled. I lost all her recipes in one of my moves… All my memories of her are getting fuzzy and fragmented.”

A knot formed in Charlotte’s throat. She remembered that too, the slow erosion. Most of her father was preserved in the photos and old home videos her mother guarded like treasured relics. It broke something in her knowing there was no one to preserve those things for Ali. No backup memory. No archivist for her life before loss swept in.

“A lot has faded for me too,” Charlotte said, “But the important things stay. The way she loved you. The lessons she taught you. All the affection she wrapped you up in… those things never fade.”

Ali’s voice was wet, tremoring with emotion. “I miss her.”

“I know. I’m sorry you lost her.”

Silence draped over them like a blanket. Comforting this time as Charlotte watched the road, the light giving way to twilight. When she finally spoke, her voice carried a soft glimmer that hadn’t been there before.

“Is this what you do when you miss him?”

“Yes,” Charlotte hummed. “After my mother calmed me down the first year I forgot, James came waltzing into the kitchen. Told me to grab my shoes and come with him.”

Ali’s lips curved faintly.

“He took me out to the garage,” Charlotte adjusted her grip to fit the worn patch her father left behind. “I didn’t know it, but he’d been driving it around the neighborhood a couple times a month. Mama never learned to drive a stick, and he knew how much this car meant to me, so he looked after it until I was ready.”

Her fingers relaxed on the wheel, the memory swirling around her like gossamer.

“When I didn’t try to kill him for touching my father’s car, he gave me this big ole grin and said he was going to teach me to drive it. We spent days just circling the neighborhood while I stalled and cursed like a sailor, which he found hilarious. He taught me how to replace the clutch too when I burned that up. But I kept trying, and once I got the hang of it, he let me drive all the roads my father used to drive me down.”

James was always the one who helped her process her bigger, more overwhelming emotions. Often giving her something to *do* when talking wasn’t enough.

Ali pressed a kiss to her shoulder. “I love your family.”

“They love you too,” Charlotte said, every word ringing true.

The radio changed songs just as Charlotte shifted gears and sped down the road. Going fast enough that when they crested a hill a familiar floaty sensation lifted her stomach.

“It reminds me of the girl car from that kids movie.”

Charlotte’s expression warmed. “That’s because it’s the same model. Just older.” Her thumb brushed the steering wheel again. “He used to say he wanted one in black. But the moment he saw this color he bought it on the spot.” A small breath, eyes prickling. “It’s mama’s favorite color.”

Static-laced rock hummed through the speakers. Moonlight illuminated the fields unspooling on either side, trees blurring into smears as tires ate up the blacktop. Charlotte caught sight of Ali’s reflection and knew the drive provided the same peace she always found out here.

“Thank you for sharing this with me,” Ali said, voice threaded with emotion.

Their gazes met for a moment. Ali was smiling, eyes soft and glistening. Charlotte’s chin dipped as she pressed one quick kiss to her brow, as she swallowed the words pressing at the back of her throat.

I want to share everything with you…

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ALI

OCEAN AIR WHIPPED through her hair as she all but hung out the Uber window. It had been far too long since she'd tasted brine on the wind or felt sand sift between her toes. The soundtrack of waves crashing against the shore and seagulls calling overhead made something inside her unclench.

The Pryce vacation home came into view and Ali gaped at the sprawling beachfront property perched above the dunes. As Natasha explained it, with her usual casual elegance, her aunt Jasmine married an international businessman. One who collected luxury properties and had a knack for making money grow on trees.

The moment the car shifted into park, Ali was out, leaving Charlotte in her dust. She followed the covered deck around the exterior, through the open back deck where most of the bridal party was gathered, pausing only long enough to kick off her sandals before pelting down the dock. Her feet sank into warm sand. The feeling was so familiar. But she didn't stop to savor it, not until the surf curled around her ankles.

Lilah appeared beside her, breathless and grinning as the two of them took in the glittering horizon. Natasha joined a beat later, balancing a glass of wine with practiced ease, braids twisted into a regal knot atop her head. Her cousin Zuri was right behind her, sunglasses on, some kind of fruity frozen drink in her hand.

Ali and Lilah exchanged a mischievous glance. A breath later they splashed water all over each other, then flicked a few droplets toward Natasha's legs for good measure.

Natasha shrieked in outrage, and the games were on. They scattered up and down the shoreline, hunting for shells and bits of drift-treasure as the afternoon sun began its slow descent.

Charlotte appeared with sunscreen in hand, wrangling a defiant Lilah, who declared she hated the feeling of sunscreen on her skin. But Charlotte heard none of it as she spouted facts about skin-care. Once Lilah was sufficiently covered, Charlotte turned toward Ali with laser focus.

“Your freckles are already popping, McCarthy,” she warned, voice low and throaty and Ali saw the want in her gaze.

Her cheeks warmed and a smirk quirked at the edge of her mouth. She slipped out of her cover-up and shorts to reveal the baby blue bikini she’d thrown on before landing.

“You like them,” Ali teased.

Charlotte’s gaze swept slow and hungry over her figure before she stepped in close. “Actually,” she said, eyes darkening. “I love them.”

The shiver that rolled through Ali was immediate.

She didn’t have time to say anything before Charlotte uncapped the sunscreen and misted cool spray across her exposed skin. Then those elegant hands were on her, rubbing lotion over the tops of her breasts, her shoulders, the small of her back, and the generous curve of her ass.

Ali could only grin, because Charlotte’s obsession with her ass only seemed to grow as time went on.

Natasha and Zuri didn’t linger long, but Ali and Lilah stayed on the beach until the sky turned to dusk. Together they built an extravagant sandcastle, decorated with every shell they scavenged. As they worked, they’d traded beach stories from childhood, sunburn and jellyfish disasters, and the family beach traditions. By the time they finished the last turret, Ali felt as though she understood who Lilah was. Bright, kind, wickedly witty, and unexpectedly creative. But she was also drifting without purpose and passion.

She wasn’t given long to dwell.

Imani appeared first, arm linked with Charlotte who corralled the two of them into posing with their creation, insisting Diana would adore the photo. More people filtered out and started to move down the shoreline toward a restaurant.

Ali and Lilah dusted each other off, pulled their cover ups back on, and sprinted after everyone.

“You’re it!” Lilah declared as she streaked past Natasha, smacking her square on the behind.

Ali’s laugh burst free, bright and uncontrolled. Something effervescent rose in her chest, lightness and joy all tangled together and reminiscent of childhood before the weight of loss and responsibility snuffed out the youthful spark. The younger third of the bridal party erupted into an impromptu game of tag while the over-thirties watched with various degrees of amusement and horror.

“They’re making me feel old,” Lizzie murmured, Charlotte nodding sagely beside her.

“Just wait,” Sasha groused, pulling huffs of amusement from her sister Jasmine and sister-in-law, Giselle.

Victoria, however, looked sour as she tracked the path Lilah charted through their group to evade capture. “Aren’t they too old to act like children?”

Lilah faltered mid-stride, cheeks already rosy from the sun and their play. Ali skidded to a stop beside her, slinging an arm over her shoulders as they both caught their breath.

“What’s the matter, Vicki?” Ali drawled. “Your joints already riddled with arthritis?”

Zuri exhaled a delighted gasp as she came up alongside them. “Oh, I love you.”

“I can prescribe some joint supplements if you want,” Lizzie called, her face the picture of faux concern, right before she launched herself onto Ali’s back.

Ali staggered under the sudden weight, but managed to plant her feet in the sand, letting out a startled giggle as she caught Lizzie’s legs and secured them around her waist.

“Drop me in the sand and you’re toast,” Lizzie threatened playfully against her ear.

“I’d never,” Ali groaned, shifting to balance Lizzie’s lanky weight. Once stable, she started forward again in slow determined steps.

Charlotte walked beside them, wind whipping her dark hair into disarray every few seconds. She kept tucking the loose strands behind her ears, a futile gesture though it was.



AFTER DINNER, the bachelorette party migrated toward the fire pit, flames licking the cool night air as Ali and Lilah assembled s'mores for the group. Ali eventually settled beside Charlotte, tucked snugly under her arm, both of them half-shielded against the persistent sea wind. Charlotte was still fighting a losing battle as she twisted her long strands round and round her fingers for what had to be the fifteenth attempt.

Ali bit back a laugh as she got up and ran inside to grab a spare hair tie from her bag.

"Here," she murmured, stepping up behind Charlotte. "Let me braid it back for you."

A quiet ripple passed through the group, curiosity lurking at the edges. Ali ignored it, gathering Charlotte's wind-tossed curls. Night-dark strands slipped through her fingers like silk. The sea air drew out her natural curl. The new definition providing a picture of just how wild they must have been in her youth.

Braided into a loose plait, she secured the end with her spare tie, then pressed a soft kiss to the crown of Charlotte's head.

"That's better. Thank you," Charlotte hummed, attempting to turn and look up at Ali.

Without thought, Ali tugged gently on the braid, guiding her head back. A soft sound escaped Charlotte's throat, a faint, needy hum. Her eyes fluttered closed, body going pliant.

Ali's other hand trailed up her back, curving over the warm line of her neck, thumb resting just beneath her jaw. She dropped her mouth to Charlotte's, pressing a slow deliberate kiss to her lips. Charlotte melted, responding with equal fervor, making Ali's pulse spike. When she finally pulled back, she let her arms drape around Charlotte's shoulders.

"She lets you touch her hair."

Lizzie's voice cut through Ali's blissful haze.

Looking up, she froze.

Lizzie's seafoam-green eyes were narrowed in a sharp, dangerous way she'd never seen. Lizzie was usually warmth wrapped in sarcasm, but nothing warm remained. Only savage suspicion.

An irritated scoff drew Ali's attention to Victoria standing near the back door. Her arms were crossed and she wore a glare hot enough to scorch. She spun on her heel and stalked back inside, past Lilah who hesitated before following and asking if she was okay.

All eyes were on her. The fire crackled. Ice clinked in someone's cup. And still everyone stared. Ali hated it.

They were here to celebrate Lizzie and Sasha but here she was mouth opening and closing like a fish stuck in its bowl.

Discomfort needled into her sternum, the silky braid still gripped in her hand. What had she done to warrant being the center of attention like this?

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"I'm… her girlfriend?" Ali said, more question than confirmation, trying to deduce why everyone was still staring and why Charlotte felt tense beneath her fingers.

Lizzie's voice dropped low and ominous. "But she doesn't let anyone touch her hair."

Oh.

Ali recoiled, dropping the braid as though it burned. Every moment she'd ever touched Charlotte's hair without asking played in her mind.

"I—I'm sorry." Ali backed away, taking a shaky step, then another, retreating toward the dock.

"Lina—" Charlotte called, starting to rise, but Ali was already halfway down the dock.

The sand had cooled since sunset, fine grains slipping between Ali's toes as she wandered toward the water. It had been such a good day. Joyful, light, the kind of day she hadn't had in far too long. And she hated that one thing could send it crumbling.

Their sandcastle came into view, or what was left of it. Hours ago, it stood proud and whimsical, now it lay in an unrecognizable heap, like someone stomped through it.

Her brain fizzed.

I need to fix it or—

STOP.

Her new therapist's voice flicked to life, reminding her to breathe and practice her mantras.

I am strong.

I am whole.

Every breath I take will relax me.

I acknowledge what I fear is possible, and I release my compulsive thoughts.

She stood at the shoreline, close enough for the waves to lap at her ankles. And she breathed deeply.

Arms circled her from behind, and without thought she sank back into Charlotte as she pressed her lips to the hollow just below her ear. Charlotte nuzzled into her neck before resting her chin on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry for touching your hair without asking," Ali whispered quickly, before Charlotte could speak. "I didn't know you didn't like it."

Charlotte's arms tightened, drawing her closer. Her lips skimmed Ali's ear. "That's the thing," she began, voice low and honest. "I *do* like it when you touch it."

Ali craned her neck, looking up at Charlotte. "Really?"

"Really." Charlotte brushed her lips over Ali's brow. "I've always felt safe with you. Accepted. I've never struggled to trust you."

Butterflies took off in her stomach. She turned in Charlotte's arms, looping hers around Charlotte's neck. The rest of the world dissolved until it was just them. In that moment, as Charlotte looked at her like she was the only good thing left in the world, she believed it was real.

"When things happen, good or bad, you're the first person I want to tell."

Moonlight danced in Charlotte's irises, catching threads of palest blue, making them shimmer.

"Ali I—"

But Ali was already closing the distance before Charlotte could finish, sealing their mouths together. The kiss was lush and she savored it, their bodies fitting together as if made for that exact moment. Every nerve in Ali hummed. She wanted to forget the stares, the relentless hum of her OCD and live inside this moment forever.

Pulling back, she smirked, peeled off her cover-up, and let it fall in a whisper at her feet.

Charlotte looked at her like she was a curiosity. “It’s a little late to sunbathe.”

Then Ali reached behind her back to untie her bikini top, letting it drop onto the pile.

“I’m going skinny dipping,” she said, voice low and daring, moonlight etching every freckle on her bare skin.

Charlotte’s eyes went wide, and she angled herself between Ali’s bare skin and the distant glow of the beach house. But no one was looking, it was late, most people were already heading to bed. The rest weren’t going to come looking for them after the hair fiasco.

“You really don’t mind that I touch your hair?”

Charlotte looked at a loss for words, all sharp logic and quiet control short-circuiting. Then her hand framed Ali’s face, thumbs sweeping over cheekbones with a reverence Ali wasn’t used to.

“You’re the only person in this world I *want* touching my hair.”

Ali’s smile burst bright and unconfined, dimples popping, making Charlotte’s breath catch. Before Charlotte could blink, Ali shoved down her shorts and bikini bottoms and walked out into the sea.

The water bit at her skin, cool for the season but nothing compared to the north. Small waves lapped at her thighs, then her hips as she waded deeper. She looked over her shoulder, catching Charlotte’s eye where she stood on the shore, hands planted on her hips.

“Are you coming?”

She waited, watching the war unfold as Charlotte talked herself into the idea, out of it, back into it, brows knitting and smoothing in rapid succession. Finally, with a decisive exhale and a look over her shoulder, Charlotte grabbed the hem of her shirt and tugged it over her head. Piece by piece she shed her clothes until she stood bare, clad only in moonlight. Her olive skin glowed, turning her to something holy that Ali knew she had to paint.

Ali held out her hand, heart stuttering at the sight of Charlotte stepping into the waves with quiet grace.

When their fingers laced, Ali tugged her closer, deeper into the water.

Charlotte hissed when the next wave slid up her chest, hand leaping to cover her breasts. “Shit, I’m cutting glass here.”

The sound of Ali’s delight filled the air. Her legs looped around Charlotte’s waist. “I’ll warm you up, babes.”

“My hero,” Charlotte rasped, hands sliding up the backs of her thighs to palm her ass.

Oh yes, Charlotte Davenport was an ass woman.

“You look so at home out here.”

“I grew up on the beach,” Ali said, resting their foreheads together as the current rocked them back and forth.

“Sometimes I forget you’re a California Girl,” Charlotte mused, hands squeezing the globes of Ali’s ass. “Do you miss it?”

“Sometimes,” Ali admitted, brushing their noses together. “I think I’d miss you more though.”

She whispered it and she wasn’t sure Charlotte heard. She could imagine the real confession along with a hundred different ways Charlotte might receive it. Fear kept it folded inside her.

Charlotte kissed her then, no hesitation or restraint. Their tongues met as their bodies molded together and the ocean swilled around them as all the noise in Ali’s mind didn’t just go quiet… it vanished.

Out there in the dark waves, wrapped around the woman she loved, Ali found complete and perfect silence.

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26

CHARLOTTE

A RICH, warm scent curled through the quiet kitchen as the dark roast dripped into the pot.

Most of the house still slept. Charlotte snuck downstairs after extricating herself from the cocoon of blankets Ali had wrapped around them, replacing herself with a pillow.

Ali murmured on and off all night, not her usual whimsical gibberish, but a fully detailed recipe for *Christmas Morning Cinnamon Rolls.* It sounded suspiciously legitimate, so Charlotte typed it into her phone on the off chance one of her mother's long lost recipes resurfaced from the depths of her subconscious. She would ask Diana to test them and see if they were edible.

A soft squeak of hinges made her peer over her shoulder. The back door eased open, and Lilah slinked through, closing it with a smooth motion designed to silence the whining of the hinges.

"Where have you been, little bit?" Charlotte called.

Delilah squawked, full-body jolting as though electrocuted, clapping a hand over her mouth to stifle her mounting shriek.

"Jesus Christ, Charlotte!"

A dewy mist settled over Lilah's eyes. One hand flew to her sternum, the other to her temples, classic signs of one hell of a night catching up with her. A cocktail of sea-air mixed with stale alcohol drifted off her. Her blonde hair was stiff with salt wind.

Charlotte winced in sympathy and held out her arms. "Oh bug, I didn't mean to scare you. Come here."

Lilah shuffled forward and folded herself into Charlotte's embrace.

"Still so easily spooked," Charlotte teased, rubbing a soothing circle between her shoulder blades. "Lizzie did always have a wonderful time tormenting you."

"And you were always my protector," Lilah whispered, snuggling deeper into Charlotte's embrace. "I feel like I never see you anymore. I miss you."

Taken aback, Charlotte tried to remember when she and Lilah last spent one on one time together. Too long. Ever since she fell into an Ali shaped hole and everything else shifted around it.

She sighed and hugged Lilah a little tighter. "I miss you too. Maybe we can plan a weekend trip after the wedding, just the two of us?"

"Really?" Lilah's voice lifted, fragile with hope.

"Of course. We should reestablish our tea times. Throw in a couple shopping sprees. It's been a while since you told me what's going on in your life."

Lilah pulled back, offering a smile, though it barely reached her eyes. "So much and nothing all at the same time. And guess what? I still have no idea what I'm doing with my life… other than making a mess of things."

Charlotte studied her. Shadows hung beneath dull hazel eyes, salt-tangled hair, rumpled clothes, and sand clinging to everything. She didn't look at all like herself.

"What's going on?"

Lilah shrugged, posture wilting the longer she stood. She dragged a hand over her hair, sand fell like rain from her tousled locks as she wobbled her way around the island.

"Just me being silly, as always," she murmured, the words brittle in an obvious attempt to deflect.

"Where were you last night?" Charlotte pressed, struggling to keep her tone even, casual.

"I went to a bar. Drank a whole line of shots. And then…" Lilah trailed off as she slid onto the barstool and folded over the counter, her cheek pressed to her arms.

"And then?"

"Well, I don't really remember what happened," came Lilah's muffled reply, words echoing oddly off the granite. "I woke up on the beach a little

bit ago feeling like death."

"Delilah!" Charlotte half-shrieked.

A burst of panic detonated in her chest, her stomach plummeted, swimming with worry.

"Were you by yourself? Did you tell anyone where you were? Foolish—"

Charlotte cut herself off, before the lecture could fully ignite. Instead, she pivoted to the cabinet, pulling out painkillers and a Liquid I.V. packet from the neatly kept stash. She poured a cup of coffee, adding just the right amount of creamer, muscle memory from mornings with Lilah during her college party girl phase. A phase Charlotte thought Lilah had outgrown.

"You could've—"

"Please. Don't start," Lilah's voice was barely a whisper, but the splintering edges were impossible to miss. "I know I'm an idiot."

Charlotte carried the supplies across the island, sliding the coffee in front of her and brushing sand off Lilah's neck and shoulder.

"That's the thing, Bug."

Lilah sat up, shoulders drooping, chin tucked, refusing to meet Charlotte's gaze.

"You are brilliant," Charlotte continued, tone softening. "You're beautiful. You're kind and funny. You can do whatever you put your mind to."

Lilah's fingers twisted together, her voice so quiet Charlotte almost missed it.

"I'm not the person you think I am," Lilah murmured. "I still party too much, get wasted, mess everything up, and wake up on beaches alone." Her breath shuddered out. "I can't even stand to be around myself sometimes."

Charlotte's stomach twisted, the self-hate in Lilah's words striking to her core. She knew what it was not to trust yourself. She could see pieces of herself in Lilah. Pieces of James… of everyone. But there were pieces that were unique and wholly Lilah. She tugged on a strand of sticky, sand-crusted blonde hair, hoping for a small smile.

Instead, Lilah sniffled and angled herself away.

"What's going on, Bug?" Charlotte questioned, warm palm sweeping circles across Lilah's back, sending more grains of sand scattering.

"I'm just a disappointment," Lilah whispered, voice wet and rough, colored with defeat.

All the air left Charlotte's lungs. Lilah was wild, stubborn, and at times dramatic. But to hear her speak so negatively about herself… and worse, sound as though she believed it as fact, it was a knife to her chest.

"That's not true and you know it." Charlotte drew Lilah's chin back around, coaxing her eyes upward. "Where is this coming from?"

Lilah shrugged.

"I dunno. I think maybe I'm just having a terrible hangover and it's got me in a bad headspace."

Charlotte remembered plenty of wretched hangovers. Days hunched over the toilet, head splitting as her mood turned a particular shade of blue. But this was something else.

"We'll get you fixed up," Charlotte said, nudging the coffee closer and tapping the pill bottle before moving to make her some toast. Her gaze fixed on the glowing metal coils inside as she pondered.

On more than one occasion, she nursed Lilah back to health after a wild night. Even at her messiest, Lilah always bounced back. But over the past few months, both she and Elizabeth had been swallowed by their own lives. Charlotte only saw Lilah at game nights where she seemed her usual sunny self.

Maybe waking up alone on the beach gave her a fright, highlighting the reality of her decisions?

The toast leapt out, startling her back to the moment.

"You know you can always call me?" she said, sliding the warm slice onto the plate.

"You've been busy."

Charlotte brandished the butter knife at her, stern but soft. "If you need me. You call me. I'll always have time for you. And even if I didn't, I'd make time. I know I push you, but I'm never disappointed in you."

"Really? Even though I've achieved nothing in life?"

"Bug," Charlotte sighed, settling into the stool beside her. "You've always been a woman with many interests. Which is okay. You just haven't found what you're passionate about." She handed Lilah the buttered toast. "Sometimes, it takes time."

Lilah nibbled at one corner, voice tentative and soft.

"I think maybe I want to go back to school?"

Charlotte bumped her shoulder, a soft smile teasing her lips.

"You know, I've always thought you'd make a wonderful teacher."

“Really? In my state?” she looked down at herself in disgust. “It’s not very lucrative.”

“Teaching is a noble profession,” Charlotte countered. “Who cares how much you make as long as you’re happy and fulfilled? You always loved kids. Plus, you were so smart growing up; tutoring half the class and charging fees.”

Charlotte chuckled, remembering their mother’s scandalized fury when she discovered Lilah’s side hustle. It brought a small smirk to Lilah’s face too.

“Mama took away my allowance for sneaking out. What’s a girl to do?”

“You were very resourceful,” Charlotte agreed, bumping Lilah’s shoulder again. “Think about it. After the wedding, we’ll make a plan.”

Lilah brightened, shoulders lifting at the prospect. She just needed support and she would find her way, Charlotte was certain of it.

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CHARLOTTE

VICTORIA STROLLED in from the kitchen, wine glass dangling between two fingers.

"We're *not* sitting here all night, are we?"

Charlotte exhaled, mourning the end of a relaxing day. Everyone was tipsy from the endless supply of wine and fruity cocktails that never seemed to run out. They'd spent the morning sprawled on the beach, followed by lunch, relaxation, and grazing through an array of snacks.

"I'm a surgeon. I'm thirty-six. I'm exhausted. I'm *happy* right here," Lizzie mumbled from Sasha's lap. Sasha spent the last hour at least stroking her hair in slow hypnotic sweeps, lulling her into a state of bliss.

"No, no. Lizzie, this is your first marriage. We have to do something memorable!" Victoria insisted. "And Sasha, your first bachelorette party was far too sophisticated."

Jasmine scoffed into her wine. Sasha mirrored her expression… unimpressed. Giselle's eyes played tennis as she popped another grape between full lips.

A smug little beast curled in Charlotte's chest.

"What do you have in mind?" Sasha asked, lifting an eyebrow in warning.

Not even two hours later, Charlotte found herself in a low-lit club, sliding her credit card across the bar to open a tab for the entire party.

Charlotte wasn't opposed to strip clubs… beyond the obvious exploitation and objectification concerns. This one was far from the grime-coated dives of her early twenties. Still, she'd have preferred sipping wine

back at the beach house next to Ali, obsessing over the fact they'd skinny dipped… on a whim. Something Charlotte would *never* do… except apparently with Ali.

"We should get a *private* room," Victoria purred, sidling up beside her, brushing her chest against Charlotte's arm.

Charlotte gritted her teeth so hard she feared they might crack. Her skin crawled beneath the point of contact. It was all she could do to keep her attention on the bartender. Clinging to the hope that if she ignored her long enough, she might get bored and leave her alone.

But she knew better.

The longer Charlotte went without giving Victoria what she wanted, the harder Victoria pushed. Too self-absorbed to recognize it only cultivated Charlotte's growing resentment like a well-watered weed.

Victoria leaned in, voice dipping into the sultry register she weaponized when attempting to seduce Charlotte. "Somewhere a little more… secluded."

I would rather die.

Charlotte could think of an infinite number of activities she would rather do. Root canals. Watching interns be inefficient without correcting them. DMV lines. IRS audits. Catching the flu. Getting a hair in her eye and being unable to remove it.

Literally anything.

She clutched at the maid-of-honor sash draped over her body. A contingency she hadn't thought of as both Sasha and Lizzie said they just wanted to relax. She'd thought that was that, no going out. She wondered now if that was the entire reason Victoria needled everyone until they came out here, to get under her skin because she knew how much Charlotte hated changes in plans. But she also wondered if Ali had seen that coming. Because, when everyone agreed, Ali sprinted upstairs and produced a kit filled with sashes, tiaras, veils, and goodie bags that came with surprise penis-shaped lollipops that gave everyone a good laugh. Natasha and Imani were making use of the lollipops to participate in some kind of strange challenge. Charlotte could only mouth a quiet thank you to Ali as she draped the sash over her, in awe of how well they worked together sometimes.

Ali's shoulder nudged against hers, snapping her right back into the club's atmosphere. She leaned forward, voice deceptively light and edged

with steel. “That’s so sweet of you to think about members of our party who might be overstimulated by this kind of environment.”

“Excuse me, the *adults* are talking,” Victoria snipped in a voice dripping with saccharine sweetness.

“Yes,” Charlotte snapped, white knuckling the edge of her phone. “They are.”

She turned her back on Victoria, slipping her arm around Ali’s shoulder, resisting the urge to backhand the woman. Whatever love once dwelled in her… now lay as barren as salted earth. Nothing good could grow there again.

“Deep breaths, babe.”

Charlotte pressed her nose to the top of Ali’s head, breathing in the faint sweetness of her shampoo, allowing it to soothe her. What she wanted, more than anything, was to ask Ali to run away with her. She wanted to be curled up somewhere with her, reading a book while she painted… She wanted to ask her to be her girlfriend. But now was hardly the time and whenever it was just the two of them, there was always something pressing in on them or they were… distracted. Was it too much to ask for a moment that was just theirs, that didn’t feel rushed, or share the stage with other important things?

“I’ll protect you,” Ali murmured, nuzzling the hollow beneath her ear.

Charlotte tilted her head, breath catching when soft lips grazed her skin. When she lifted her gaze, she caught Giselle’s unsettled expression as her eyes fixed on a rowdy group of men near center stage as the loud thumping music assaulted her senses.

Charlotte procured a private room lined in connected leather benches with small tables dotted throughout. A single polished pole claimed the small stage, where the dancers weaved in and out. They weren’t just talented but magnetic, playful, and graceful in their skyscraper heels.

Naturally, Ali befriended them in minutes, calling out tricks Charlotte had never so much as heard of.

Charlotte sipped her second whiskey, savoring the smoky burn as it seeped through her. The steady vibration of music through the floorboards felt strangely calming. Everyone seemed to be having a good time.

Until—

“You look bored, baby girl,” Victoria’s voice cut through the music, slick with implication as she slid into the seat beside her. “I’d be happy to

buy you a lap dance. Might liven things up."

A flare of white-hot heat surged across her chest, crawling up her neck. She kept her gaze fixed on her glass, fearing her glare might set Victoria aflame.

But would it be such a loss?

She shifted as far from Victoria as the booth and her proximity to Ali allowed. She channeled her aggravation into her finger, letting her nail clink against the glass. The sound of it lost to the music.

"I'll have to pass," Charlotte declined, lip curling.

Victoria draped her arm across the back of the bench, leaning in, edging closer, too close. She just kept pushing, determined to get her way.

"I could always give you one," Victoria whispered, voice dropping to a sultry register. "For old times sake."

Charlotte's reaction was as instantaneous as it was violent. Her mouth flooded with saliva, nausea burning its way up her throat. Her skin tightened, compressing in on her at an alarming rate, forcing her to fight the urge to bolt or clamber across Ali's lap just to have a barrier between them.

But she didn't move. She wasn't sure she even blinked. Was she breathing?

In her peripheral, Lizzie rose to her feet as though she could *feel* Charlotte's discomfort like it were her own. The place she might normally feel her twin's emotions was buried beneath revulsion.

She didn't know what to do. She couldn't lose her temper and make a scene. But Victoria wouldn't take no for an answer. White-noise roared as her body threatened to just shut down instead. Yes, turning to stone was the best option.

But then… Ali laughed.

A low, wicked, and delicious thing that cut through it all like the crack of a whip. She peered around Charlotte, lips curving into a feral grin that made Charlotte's breath hitch.

"If anyone's giving Charlotte a lap dance, it's me," Ali's gaze swept Victoria slowly, deliberately. "Besides… Doubt your arthritic joints could handle it. I'd hate for you to break a hip or something."

A few heads snapped their way, Charlotte's own lips parted.

Victoria growled, jerking her arm back to lean forward and glare at Ali. "Don't be cringe. No one wants to see you take your clothes off."

“Wanna bet?” Ali baited, voice edged with more menace than Charlotte had ever heard from her before. A wild gleam lit her dark eyes with something gleeful and dangerous.

“Oh dimples.” Victoria’s smile curled into poison. “Aren’t you afraid you’ll embarrass yourself?”

“Nope.”

Ali pulled out her wallet and withdrew a neat wad of cash, and slapped a few bills onto the table in front of Victoria with a satisfying *thwap*.

Victoria’s smirk faltered. But always having to be right about everything, she withdrew her own bills, placing them on top of Ali’s.

Charlotte gripped Ali’s forearm, “Ali you don’t have to—”

A soft decisive kiss cut her off.

Ali leaned in close, voice low and velvety. “I believe I owe you a dance, lover.”

How she said the word lover sent a shiver down her spine.

Ali winked before striding toward one of the dancers. They exchanged a quick conversation, Ali’s hands making a subtle signing motion. The stripper grinned before leading her backstage and out of sight.

“Where is she going?” Victoria asked in utter aggravation.

Natasha wedged herself between Victoria and Charlotte, smirking as she sipped margarita through her straw.

“I hate to tell you this, Aunt Tori, but you’re about to lose this bet.”

Victoria rolled her eyes again, irritation radiating in waves as she folded her arms across her chest.

The sight filled Charlotte with a deep satisfaction. Seeing Victoria like this felt like a victory in itself.

Imani squeezed herself between Natasha and Victoria, forcing Victoria even farther down the long leather seat from Charlotte.

Imani cocked an eyebrow at Natasha. “What do you know?”

Natasha leaned in and whispered against the curve of Imani’s ear.

Brown eyes grew wide as Imani’s mouth fell open. “Are you serious?”

Natasha nodded, sipping her margarita with a knowing quirk to her brow. Imani burst into raucous laughter just before the lights dimmed. The bass shifted as a new dancer stepped into the spotlight, wearing heels so high her bare tattooed legs stretched on for miles…

Charlotte knew those tattoos. She tilted her head to the side… she knew those legs.

There was a familiar deep green shirt, held closed by a singular button, the length just long enough to skim the curve of her ass. A hand slid through thick red hair, pulling it free from her bun. It cascaded down her back like liquid flame. When she turned, dark eyes peered from thick lashes beneath a perfect smoky eye. Her gaze locked onto Charlotte, teeth grazing over her bottom lip in a slow, devastating drag.

Alina.

Charlotte's mouth went dry. The orange-and-blue lace garters hinted at what lay beneath the shirt held closed by a single button.

A hand curled around the pole. Her hips swayed, slow and hypnotic, her usual effervescence melted into something molten, deliberate, and wickedly seductive.

In a smooth motion, she flicked the button open. The shirt parted, revealing the bustier beneath. She turned her back to the crowd, body moving in perfect time with the beat of the music. The shirt slid from her shoulders, down her arms, and flung to the side. Lace framed the curve of her ass, the neon light painting her in blues and oranges.

Oh, the lace…

As Ali turned, the neon light above the stage highlighted the design and color. She bit back a groan, noting the way the pattern shifted giving the illusion Ali was partially adorned in blue and orange flame.

Ali climbed the pole, and something hot and sharp shot through Charlotte, possessive, reverent, and maybe a little unhinged.

Her little firecracker.

Desire coiled tight in Charlotte's belly as she drank in the sight of her. She knew Ali was flexible, knew she could dance but nothing prepared her for this.

Ali inverted, legs carving the air in a perfect split. One leg hooked around the pole, back arching in a sinuous bend, hands gliding down to her ankle, holding the pose with effortless control.

Charlotte couldn't have looked away if she wanted to… and why would she want to?

As the song came to an end, Ali spun around the pole, lower and lower until her feet touched back down with fluid grace. Her next step struck just as another song began. Eyes fixed on Charlotte with a smoldering gaze as she sauntered down the steps like the stage was hers alone.

The siren possessing Alina’s body came close. Fisting the front of Charlotte’s shirt she tugged her upright, guiding her back toward the stage. The smirk curling her lips made Charlotte’s pulse stutter.

Ali turned, finger sliding up to grip Charlotte’s jaw. She pulled her close, brushing a teasing kiss just over her mouth, and pushed her back into the chair. Helpless against the seductive power oozing from Ali, Charlotte went pliant.

Her tongue darted out, wetting her lips as she took in Ali’s form.

All thoughts ceased as Ali began to move. Her body flowed through sensual motions, hitting every beat with fluid precision. The pole work was mesmerizing. But this was intimate and wholly *captivating*...

Circling the chair, Ali let her hand meander across her shoulders, then down the center of her chest.

Little tease.

Ali lifted her leg, heel resting on Charlotte’s knee. One hand cupped Charlotte’s neck, thumb stroking along her pulse. The other slid from her knee, dragging over soft curves to spread over her lace-covered breast. She rolled her neck, red hair spilling over one shoulder like a silk curtain.

Charlotte’s fingers twitched, itching to touch her.

Ali lowered her foot, shifting until she straddled Charlotte’s thighs. Without warning, she dropped into Charlotte’s lap. Her back arched, breasts hovering inches from Charlotte’s mouth. Charlotte’s hands jumped to her hips, sliding down to palm the swell of her ass.

Ali seized her wrists, peeling her hands away with slow, commanding firmness. She guided them to grip the edge of the chair. Ali wagged her finger, the smirk curving her lips entirely wicked.

Charlotte’s insides fizzed and sparked as she lost herself in darkened brown eyes.

She once received a lap dance in her twenties. While enjoyable, it did little to stoke her desire, not like this. It hadn’t made her shake or her heart race as a steady pressure built low and consuming.

Ali rose, stepping away with unhurried confidence. She turned her back, paused and bent herself in half so the tips of her red hair swished a breath above the floor. Her ass like an offering on direct display.

Charlotte stifled a whimper, hands gripping the edge of the chair like a lifeline.

Ali popped upright, hair flipping in a molten arc, almost purple beneath the blue light.

God, that hair.

Ali snapped her hips in a slow deliberate rhythm as she backed up and settled into Charlotte's lap again. Her hands braced on Charlotte's knees, Ali rolled her hips, grinding in a way that short-circuited Charlotte's sanity.

Ali lay back against her, guiding Charlotte's hands down the front of her thighs, back up and over the lush swell of her hips, along her waist, skimming the lace clinging to her ribs.

One of Ali's arms lifted to loop behind Charlotte's neck, her head tipping until it nestled against her shoulder. Her body undulated, smooth and sensual, while her free hand drifted down through the light, landing between the apex of her thighs, before gliding back up her body.

Charlotte couldn't resist and kissed along her jaw, nipping at her earlobe as her hands continued to wander with growing boldness. A soft moan, barely audible, lit Charlotte up like a match struck.

Want burned, pulsing between her thighs as the air around them crackled, the electric tang of it thick on her tongue as it zipped through her veins.

The song ended with Ali settled across her lap, arms draped over Charlotte's shoulders, foreheads pressed together. Ali's breath came fast and hot against Charlotte's mouth.

"That was…" Charlotte began, voice rough and raw.

She stroked Ali's cheek, unable to articulate how much Ali surprised her. Or, how much she needed her right now.

Ali smirked, smug and glowing in her victory. Rendering Charlotte speechless was clearly her favorite hobby.

Both were oblivious to the cheers flooding the entire room. Charlotte was half a second away from pulling Ali into a rough, devouring kiss when one of the strippers brought Ali her clothes.

"I'm so glad I kept up with my dance class," Ali said, breathless as she slipped her shirt on.

"Your *exotic* dance class?" Charlotte questioned, thumbs running idly over her hip bones.

"Mhm."

Everyone applauded and sang Ali's praises when they retook their seats. Lizzie going so far as to offer Charlotte a thumbs-up. Victoria sat with her

arms crossed, seething, fury brewing on her face.

Charlotte savored it.

“So what, you were a stripper or something?” Victoria bit out, voice so brittle with jealousy it filled Charlotte with triumph.

Ali’s doe eyes widened with practiced innocence as she buttoned the last of her blouse. “No silly, I was just always enamored with the artistry of it so I took a class in college and never stopped.”

Victoria sneered. “Maybe you missed your true calling.”

“I don’t think so,” Ali replied as she picked up the bills and counted them with leisurely satisfaction.

“Would be more lucrative than art, don’t you think?”

Ali tapped the tip of Victoria’s nose with her finger, all sugar-coated mockery. “Life is about more than money and whatever everyone else can do for you. Don’t you think?” Then she twirled away, dividing her winnings between the dancers.

Victoria skulked to the far side of the room.

This night was somehow turning out to be one of the best nights of her life. Not because of the environment or even the way Victoria fumed. Because of Ali… Always because of Ali.

And the night wasn’t even over.

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ALI

THOUGH THE HOUR was late when they climbed into their Uber, Ali felt wide awake. The pleasant buzz of her drinks still shimmered through her bloodstream, and the memory of Victoria's sour, pinched expression only sweetened it… worth every bit of effort.

Charlotte apologized to the driver, promising a hefty tip.

Ali pounced.

Her fingers dove into Charlotte's thick locks, roughly tugging her head to the side, exposing the elegant line of her throat for the taking. Ali caught the sharp inhale, felt cool hands slipping beneath her shirt. But Ali caught each one, lifting them away and pinning them against the seat beside Charlotte's head.

Charlotte groaned, a low and shredded sound, muttering expletives under her breath as she arched upward.

An epiphany struck.

Every time they'd had sex Charlotte was always on top. Unsurprising, as she was type-A to the bone. She liked control. Needed it, even. But this Charlotte was biting her lip and pleading quietly beneath her.

Something had unlocked in her and it required research.

Ali caught Charlotte's earlobe between her teeth, biting at the sensitive skin before murmuring praise against the column of her neck. The softest of whimpers escaped the normally composed woman, no doubt keeping herself from completely letting go due to their current location.

Once they made it to the beach house, they tumbled out of the car, rushing up the stairs to their room. They took their time getting ready for

bed, hands roaming, lingering kisses mapping exposed skin. Every touch stoked the wanting already smoldering in their bellies.

But cottonmouth hit Ali hard.

Ali left her temptress behind, promising to be swift as she padded downstairs. The house was quiet, the other party members either outside on the deck or already asleep in their beds. She found the largest possible glasses. Once halfway full of ice, she waited agonizingly long seconds for the filtered water to trickle into the glass.

Temptation was waiting and she had a theory to test.

“I have to admit, your performance tonight was impressive. You put on quite the show,” Victoria drawled behind her.

Ali refused to jump. She took a slow breath, eyes fixed on the water creeping its way up the glass.

“Glad you enjoyed it,” Ali chirped, though her internal eye-roll was something comical.

“You’ve got serious talent,” Victoria mused, footsteps clicking closer. “Makes me curious about what other talents you have.”

“Innumerable,” Ali swapped out the cups, watching the ice crack and shift beneath the water. Her skin prickled with the discomfort of having Victoria at her back, but it would be a cold day in hell before she ever let Victoria see.

“Do your talents translate to the bedroom?”

“I’ve had no complaints,” she said, fighting an eye roll. “Most of my partners have enjoyed how bendy I am.”

“Oh, I imagine. But I know how hard it can be to satisfy Charlotte. I’d be happy to give you pointers.”

Ali’s gaze turned on a slow swivel to meet her. Then she snorted and a laugh barked right out of her.

The audacity.

“What is it you hope to gain here?”

Victoria took a step closer, voice going sensual. “I have no idea what you mean.”

“Sure you don’t,” Ali huffed, taking a slow breath. “I’m not interested in anything you have to offer… which—” she swept her gaze down and up Victoria’s figure, face pinching as though the sight disgusted her. “Isn’t much by the looks of it.”

“How dare—”

“How dare *you*,” Ali bit out, temper flaring like someone had thrown gasoline on it. “You’ve toyed with Charlotte enough. You don’t care about her. You aren’t good for her. You’re not good for anyone. You are toxic. And I want nothing to do with you.”

Victoria’s mask of indifference cracked, rage gleaming in narrowed eyes.

“There is nothing you could ever do to entice me to betray Charlotte,” Ali spat, voice rising. “Take a fucking hint. You disgust me.”

Victoria’s mouth fell open, as though she wasn’t used to hearing exactly how people felt about her. Her eyes scanned Ali’s face as her own contorted into something wounded, like she couldn’t comprehend being disliked.

“You don’t know what she was like with me.”

Ali was under no impression Charlotte had been perfect. But she *did* know how hard Charlotte tried, how deeply she cared, and how much of herself she gave to the people she loved. Victoria only cared about one person… herself.

“I’d fucking hope not. That would mean ours was the same relationship and I was a fucking succubus.”

“It was her fault,” Victoria snapped. “She’s impossible to please!”

“Oh come on,” Ali scoffed, rolling her eyes. “Stop playing the victim and accept the fact you were a trash partner.”

Her temper surged again, a growl rippling through her as she came perilously close to upending the cups of ice cold water over Victoria’s head. She would do it too and have zero regrets if pushed far enough.

“How would you know?” Victoria hissed.

Ali stepped into Victoria’s personal space. “Because every word out of your mouth is a manipulation. If you cared about her, you wouldn’t be trying to get me into your bed. You don’t care about her. You care about winning. About what *she* can give *you*.” Ali released a low icy chuckle. “It drives you crazy, doesn’t it? That she’s happier without you.”

“The disrespect here is staggering. When I tell Sasha—”

“Oh please! Please tell her how you tried to solicit her future sister-in-law’s girlfriend for sex. I’m sure she will find it *so* classy,” Ali snapped and Victoria hesitated. “Maybe I’ll tell her myself. We can see what she has to say about it.”

Victoria paled.

Gotcha.

“Listen here—”

“Ali?” Charlotte called, silencing whatever toxicity Victoria planned to spew.

Ali glared into Victoria’s frozen expression.

“Out of my way,” she hissed, low in her throat.

Victoria stepped aside and Ali stalked past her, adrenaline buzzing through her. Charlotte’s jaw was tight, blue eyes frigid with fury. Ali had never seen her so close to losing control.

She knew instantly Charlotte heard most of it.

“Can I throw this water in her face? Pretty ple—”

Charlotte’s hand threaded through her hair, pulling her in until her lips brushed the shell of her ear. “You have sixty seconds to get upstairs and get undressed.”

A shiver ran through her. With no time to waste, she bolted for the stairs, trying not to spill a drop in her haste.

Behind her, Charlotte’s voice dropped into something lethal.

“If you know what is good for you, that will be the last time you proposition *my* girlfriend. Or do I need to remind you how *vicious* I can be when pushed too far?”

Ali ignored the raised voices drifting up from downstairs as Charlotte gave Victoria a quick dressing down. Where everyone else was, she didn’t know… or care. Maybe outside roasting s’mores or taking a night-walk on the beach. Already asleep, who knew.

With forty-five seconds remaining there was no time to waste on worrying about Victoria. She kicked the door closed behind her, Victoria would rile Charlotte up more which meant Ali’s chances of being railed were steadily increasing.

Most excellent!

She scampered to each side of the bed, setting down the cups of water, noting the sound of Charlotte climbing the stairs. Fortunately, they were already ready for bed, her teeth were brushed, makeup removed. Only her clothes remained, which she began removing, fingers fumbling with her shirt.

Accursed buttons!

The doorknob turned as Ali flung her shirt across the room to land somewhere next to her jeans. She spun toward the door, breath catching when Charlotte’s storm-dark gaze locked onto her. She hooked her fingers

under the waistband of her pants, making a show of sliding them down her body.

Charlotte made no show of stripping out of her clothes. Instead, removing them with military-like precision.

“You have three seconds.”

Ali moved to unhook her bra, before she stilled. Her earlier hypothesis, Charlotte’s rare, breathtaking submissive streak, needed more testing.

She settled her hands on her hips instead, smirking.

“Actually,” she purred, the timbre of her tone authoritative. “I think I’ll keep them on for now.”

“Alina,” Charlotte warned, voice low and commanding in a way that any other day would have her dropping to her knees.

But she needed to do this… *for science.*

“*You* have three seconds to get on the bed,” Ali cut her off and watched as Charlotte’s eyes widened.

“Ali. Take off your clothes.”

“Three.”

“Ali I—”

“Two.”

Charlotte hesitated half a second more before she slipped out of her underwear. She took an uncertain step toward the bed, balking. Ali could see it, how she was caught between the instinct to control, her natural armor, and her urge to surrender.

Her gaze flicked to Ali, wide and pleading in a way that made heat pool low in Ali’s belly.

Taking pity on her, Ali closed the distance.

Charlotte descended upon her lips, hands bracketing her jaw. The kiss was blistering, all the pent up heat igniting, threatening to consume them.

Ali walked her backward until Charlotte hit the mattress and toppled into its center, curls spilling like a dark halo around her.

Ali took in her naked form for a moment.

Charlotte pulled her knees to her chest, spreading them just enough, fingertips tracing teasing patterns from her knees inward, inching toward her core.

A low warning thundered in the back of Ali’s throat.

“Don’t you dare touch what’s mine.”

Charlotte’s movements faltered. Ali watched in delight as her teeth sank into her lower lip. She crawled forward until she hovered over Charlotte, thigh pressed against her center. One by one, Ali took Charlotte’s wrists and pinned them above her head.

A startled gasp echoed through the room, pupils devouring the blue of her irises.

“You’re going to keep your hands here and you’re going to let me make you feel good. Understood?”

Charlotte nodded.

Ali rewarded her with a lingering brush of lips along her throat, followed by slow teasing passes to the tender line beneath her jaw. All the while Charlotte’s hands stayed obediently above her head.

She trailed lower, leaving a path of slow kisses and nips down the warm plane of her abdomen. Charlotte’s teeth sank into her lower lip in anticipation, the action filled Ali’s chest with a glowing sense of accomplishment.

“You have been such a good girl tonight,” Ali murmured, voice dripping in honey.

Charlotte whimpered at the words, hips jerking.

A low hum thrummed in the back of her throat. “I think you have earned a reward.”

Her head dove between Charlotte’s thighs, the salty tang hit her tongue and she moaned into her, drawing upwards to strum over her clit.

Charlotte swore loudly, hands moving from their designated place to burrow into Ali’s hair. Ali growled in warning, swatting the inside of her thigh. Elegant hands shot back up and Ali spiraled her tongue around her clit, drawing her toward the precipice. Ali wanted to devour her, hands gripped sloping hips in a vise-like hold, anchoring them both as she feasted on her core.

A shriek of pleasure flew past Charlotte’s lips as Ali entered her, driving her fingers in and out. Charlotte grabbed a pillow, pressing her face into it to muffle her cries. But Ali ripped it away, sending it flying across the room.

“I want to hear you,” Ali’s voice dripped with raw demand, Charlotte’s essence glistening on her chin.

“Lina…” Charlotte moaned when Ali curled her fingers inside her. “I want—I want to come with you.”

A rough rumble rose in Ali’s chest as she withdrew her fingers and stripped out of her underwear, shifting until her knees straddled either side of Charlotte’s head, the evidence of her desire very much within reach. Charlotte moaned as she drew Ali’s hips down and dove her tongue between slick folds. Ali groaned, hips rocking against Charlotte’s tongue as she climbed higher, pleasure already coiled low in her belly.

“So good…” Ali moaned while Charlotte sucked and flicked the tip of her clit, pleasure spiraling through her like a lit fuse. “Such a good fucking girl. Don’t stop.”

Her thighs began to tremble, control slipping, and she dipped her head back between Charlotte’s thighs, tongue returning to its work.

They rose together, Charlotte came first with a muffled cry, taking Ali with her as their orgasms crashed through them. Shudders ran through Charlotte, tectonic plates shifting beneath her skin, making her quake.

A heady bliss washed through Ali as she floated in her sea of pleasure. She rolled off Charlotte after they caught their breath, trailing kisses across her body before she gave her next order.

“On your hands and knees.”

Charlotte obeyed, and soon she was barreling toward a second shattering release. She came, clamping hard around Ali’s fingers as her body seized, and her moans turned guttural.

Ali didn’t stop there.

She kept Charlotte pinned facedown, one hand tangled in her hair, dragging her head back just enough to watch her writhe. With slow, deep strokes Ali fucked her, drawing out each shiver of pleasure, savoring every broken sound that spilled from her lover’s lips. Charlotte went wholly pliant beneath her, whimpering and pleading for release. And when Ali finally allowed it, she came hard, screaming Ali’s name into the pillow.

A stray thought wandered through Ali’s mind, she couldn’t wait to see the sour look on Victoria’s face across the breakfast table.

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CHARLOTTE

THREE SISTERS STOOD before the mirrored wall for one last minute fitting, unnecessary though it might be. Lizzie's dress had been a work of pure perfection for weeks now. It fit her like a glove, honoring the best of their shared features.

All three of them knew, though none of them said. They wanted one last outing, just the three of them.

Lizzie was glowing, and Lilah sighed, fingers tracing over the intricate lace along the bodice. "If Sasha doesn't pass out when she sees you in this, I'll be shook."

"Shook?" Charlotte repeated, raising an eyebrow.

"You should really google hip-lingo," Lilah teased, a playful spark glittering in hazel orbs. "Asking me to explain only shows your age. Don't pretend it's the first time you've heard it."

"Oh, take pity on us, Bug," Lizzie groaned. "Charlotte can't ask her young *girlfriend*. It would be embarrassing."

"Hush, you," Charlotte snipped.

"Too much time behind a desk, Twinnie," Lilah sing-songed.

She nudged the twins together, lifted her phone, and snapped a flurry of photos before jumping in for a selfie. They shifted around her easily, cycling through best angles and favorite poses.

"I can't believe we're almost there," Lilah murmured, flipping through the photos.

"Me either."

Charlotte's eyes misted, but she quickly blinked away any evidence.

“Oh, shut it. You’re next anyway!” Lilah screeched, hands planting on her hips, reminiscent of the sassy five-year-old who had everyone wrapped around her finger.

“Oh, is she?” Lizzie asked, arching a brow.

“Yep. She and Ali are getting married, and I’ll be the maid of honor,” Lilah declared with unshakable confidence.

Charlotte’s cheeks warmed, currently incapable of stamping down the sheer longing swelling in response. Oh, how she wanted that to be true.

“Um, hello!” Lizzie said, gesturing to herself.

“What? You’ll be *matron*!”

Lizzie paused. “Ah. True.” She grinned, turning back to admire her dress.

“So glad you two have already picked my wedding party,” Charlotte said, tone dry. She hadn’t even had a chance to ask Ali to be her girlfriend, both of them too busy for actual romance. As she smoothed her hands down dark green fabric, she knew they were in the final stretch and everything would calm.

“Are you kidding?” Lilah snorted. “I’ve planned the whole thing. I’m thinking autumn, like Lizzie. Italian cuisine, but Ali seems like she might be into a tiny food truck park. She’ll design the invitations. And! Flash tattoos designed by Ali for guests who want one.”

Charlotte blinked, startled by how much thought Lilah put into it. There wasn’t an ounce of doubt in her voice. To Lilah, they were inevitable.

“Then, I’m thinking of a cool, yet unexpected honeymoon destination: like Norway or Alaska or something. Also—”

“Okay! You weren’t this excited for my wedding,” Lizzie cut in, arms folding across her chest.

“Yes, but you’ve been dating Sasha for years,” Lilah deadpanned. “And Charlotte has been so *dreadfully* single.”

“Hey!” Charlotte jabbed a finger between Lilah’s ribs. “Rude.”

But neither of them were listening to her. Lizzie cocked her head, eyes narrowing at Lilah.

“What have you planned for *your* wedding, Bug?” Lizzie asked.

“Not a thing,” Lilah declared, spinning to eye the way her dress hugged her ass. “Who the fuck would want to marry me? I’m a disaster, remember?”

“My god!” Lizzie gasped, swatting Lilah’s arm. “Say another self-deprecating thing, and I’ll make you suffer.” She pointed at Charlotte and back to Lilah. “Charlotte, fix your child!”

Charlotte reeled her in, cupping Lilah’s cheeks with both hands. “There’s *nothing* wrong with my baby. She’s a free spirit, still finding her way. Smart, compassionate, kind, far too forgiving at times, and oh so beautiful.” She squished Lilah’s cheeks together, exaggerating the scrunch of her nose. “Look how precious.”

Lilah batted her hands away, cheeks pink as Lizzie giggled behind them.

“You two are somehow simultaneously the best and the fucking worst! How do you manage such a feat?”

“Ha!” Lizzie snorted. “Years of training. Near telepathic communication. Superior humor. Unrivaled intelligence—”

“Fuck you both!” Lilah cried, though a reluctant smile betrayed her amusement.

Lizzie bumped her shoulder. “You’ll find your person, Bug. And when you do, we’ll help you plan the perfect wedding *for you*, if you want.”

Lilah smiled down at her shoes, toying with her fingers. “I’d like that a lot.”

Lizzie tapped her chin, eyes narrowing. “You did have a point, though. Charlotte was a bit of a workaholic until *Alina* came along.”

“Exactly,” Lilah said, chin lifting like a smug sunflower.

“Excuse me,” Charlotte huffed. “I don’t appreciate the insinuation that my own flesh and blood thought I’d die a spinster.” Charlotte pinned them both with an unamused stare.

Both of them reached out, pulling her into a hug.

“We’d never let you die alone,” Lilah promised.

“Yes, we’re dying together, remember?” Lizzie said matter-of-factly. “No more than six minutes apart.”

Charlotte shook her head, swallowing the swell of affection. “You’re both lucky I love you.”

“We love you too,” Lizzie murmured as the three stared at their reflections, all standing on the edge of a new chapter.

“Even if you do die a spinster,” Lilah added, smothering a grin.

Lizzie bit back a laugh, fighting to keep her expression neutral. “But not if she becomes a crazy cat lady. Unacceptable.”

They looked back and forth between each other in the mirror and simultaneously dissolved into laughter. Charlotte allowed herself to hope. As she took in Elizabeth's dress, it truly settled in. She wanted Ali for the long haul. And she wanted to have this moment with her sisters again, but in preparation for her wedding and someday Lilah's, too.

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ALI

WATER STREAMED over her hands as she worked the streaks of color from her brush, circling it through the soap puddled in her palm until a whirl of pastel suds bloomed between her fingers. The moment the water ran clear, she tapped the brush against the sink, and smoothed its hairs back into careful position as she padded back toward her studio.

Her phone buzzed against her desk.

Charlotte's picture brightened her screen, and Ali smiled as she answered, leaving faint suds smeared across the glass.

"Hello, darling. What are you up to?"

Ali's toes curled at the smokey tone humming through the line.

"Finishing up a portrait," Ali admitted, eyeing the piece over her shoulder.

The portrait captured the brightness of Charlotte's full smile; a scene burned into her mind when they swam naked in the sea. She looked rather like a naiad, the water dripping from her hands down into the surf where it pooled around her hips. Her posture, for once, easy. Her beauty, effortless.

"Well, you need to shower and get dressed," Charlotte instructed. "We're going out."

"Oh, are we?"

"Indeed."

"And what if I have plans?"

Silence stretched just long enough for Ali to imagine Charlotte's brow knitting, gears turning.

"…Do you?" Charlotte asked, curious but hopeful.

“Yes, I do.” Ali waited a moment. “With you.”

Charlotte let out a relieved huff. “You are aware of what your teasing does to me, yes?”

A dark chuckle rippled in Ali’s chest. “What does it do to you, Charlotte?”

Another huff filtered through the line, further tickling the edges of her humor.

“You have forty-five minutes to be ready,” Charlotte said in a crisp command before her voice softened to silk. “Comfortable but cute attire. I’ll see you soon, Lina.”

Something in the way Charlotte’s mouth seemed to wrap around the nickname sent a shiver down her spine and had butterflies flapping in her stomach.

A nickname only Charlotte used. Ali added another tick mark to the column of decidedly not fake-girlfriend behavior.



TO SAY Ali never appreciated her birthday would be an understatement. Never one to watch the day approach with anticipation. Dread was a stretch, she just never expected much of anything. Because nothing exciting or different ever happened.

But this year *was* different.

Charlotte eased her into the celebration on her birthday eve. First stop, bowling. Ali hardly noticed she was demolished on the scoreboard, too busy attempting chaotic trick shots, cackling when they worked, and devouring greasy concession-stand food.

Next came the movies. Charlotte bought her the largest popcorn available with a subtle warning she was eating her way toward a stomach ache. Ali ignored her, vowing her stomach was made of steel. It wasn’t, confirmed by the moment Charlotte wordlessly fished an antacid from her purse, commenting on the woes of getting old.

Once recovered, ice cream was obtained. Followed by a second *dessert* which took place in her bed, well into the night.

Charlotte was the first to wish her happy birthday, breath warm against her thighs as she kissed her way up Ali’s body, settling over her, and

pressing kisses flavored with Ali's essence to her lips.

Ali smiled into it.

For the first time in years, she believed it might be the best birthday she ever had.

Lilah kicked off a rush of text messages as nearly everyone she loved sent their wishes. Natasha sent paragraphs about all the things she appreciated about Ali.

By the time Wren FaceTimed her, strumming her guitar and singing to her while Charlotte joined in, her smooth alto voice sending goosebumps skittering across her skin. Ali's eyes burned.

"I feel so loved," Ali whispered, dew gathering on her lashes as Willow hopped up on the bed, chirping her own salutations.

Charlotte wrapped around her from behind, warm and certain, kissing the hollow just beneath her ear.

"That's because you are."

❧

BRUNCH CAME the next morning with Charlotte's immediate family, all of whom arrived bearing gifts. Lilah gave her about five and watched Ali open them, noting which she seemed to enjoy the most, claiming it was *"research for Christmas."*

Afterward, Lizzie and Lilah tagged along to a nearby record store, where Ali unearthed several new gems for her ever-growing collection. Naturally, Charlotte insisted on buying every single one. The four of them wandered through different shops for a little while, searching for treasures.

"Charlotte," Ali chided when Charlotte plucked an antique vase from her hands. A piece she admired for three seconds too long. "Just because you can buy me everything doesn't mean you should."

Her eagerness to downright spoil Ali wasn't fake-girlfriend behavior, or friends with benefits. Was it?

"True," Charlotte conceded. "However, I think you need it." She held the vase just out of reach.

"Where would I even put it?" Ali lunged for it again as Charlotte shifted left, anticipating the move.

“Bathroom counter. Windowsill in your room, or even the TV stand. It would look beautiful anywhere.”

Ali couldn’t argue, it *would* look nice in any of those places.

“But I don’t *need* it.”

Lilah snuck up behind Charlotte, swiping the vase and cuddling it to her chest. “It’s your birthday. You don’t have to *need* it.”

Charlotte spun on her, holding out her hands. “Give it.”

“No,” Lilah said, nose lifting into the air. “I wanna get it for her.”

“I touched it first.”

“Yes, but presents are my thing.”

An arm slid over Ali’s shoulders as Lizzie appeared, sighing as though they’d all been through this song and dance a time or two.

“Presents are *both* their things,” Lizzie explained. “Every Christmas, they have a contest to see who gives the best one. They call it, ‘*winning* Christmas.’”

Ali looped her arm around Lizzie’s waist, watching as Charlotte and Lilah continued to argue over who would purchase the vase.

“Well,” Lizzie sighed, “they’ll be here a while.” She perked up. “There’s a bakery across the street?”

Ali grinned and spun them toward the door. “I love bread.”



LIZZIE, Charlotte, and Lilah accompanied Ali back to her apartment for a little while. Lilah wandered through her space, hunting for the perfect spot to put the vase she bought her, eventually settling on the TV stand. Charlotte had flowers delivered in record time.

The four of them piled onto the couch, Ali and Charlotte snuggled beneath a blanket while Lilah and Lizzie kept trying to steal the majority of their shared blanket. Ali didn’t pay them much mind as her favorite movie played on the screen. After the first film, Lizzie and Lilah made their departure, leaving Charlotte and Ali to enjoy stolen kisses and their favorite take out as falling leaves drifted past the window.

As evening crept in, Charlotte insisted they both get dressed for dinner, admitting she made a reservation.

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“I forgot to grab your best present in my haste to get to you yesterday,” Charlotte said as they climbed into her car. “We have enough time to swing by and collect it, I think.”

Dressed to impress, they drove to Charlotte’s, their conversation light and easy as always.

“Come inside and I’ll sing and play you a happy birthday song on the piano,” Charlotte offered as they pulled into the driveway. “We should have time for one or two requests if that interests you.”

“Have you ever fucked anyone on your piano?” Ali wiggled her eyebrows, hungry gaze tracing Charlotte’s form.

“You’re ridiculous,” Charlotte replied with a shake of her head, stepping out of the car and leading the way up the walkway.

“That’s not an answer,” Ali said, trotting after her giggling, eyes glued on Charlotte’s ass and the sway of her hips.

Charlotte unlocked the door and made her way down the hall toward the kitchen. “Maybe I’ll call and have our reservation pushed back a bit.”

A little shiver ran through her as she followed Charlotte, distracted by the delectable scents filling the air, making Ali’s mouth water, though she couldn’t quite place them.

“Hey, I just wanna say thanks for making this birthday a good one. It really means a lot—”

Her words were cut off as they rounded the corner, voices erupted at once.

“Surprise!”

Ali shrieked, grabbing Charlotte’s arm as fright snapped through her. Her brain caught up as a chorus of happy birthday surrounded her.

Her gaze swept the room. Everyone was there. The Davenports, Carters, Pryces, Wren, a few of her artist and Blend & Brew friends, Imani, and even Leah were there. This was a party *for her.*

Charlotte slipped an arm around Ali’s waist and kissed her cheek. By the end of the song, the shock wore off enough for a smile to blossom

across her face.

Mouth opening and closing, all Ali managed was a thin, breathless thank you, while treacherous tears threatened to spill down her cheeks.

Wren bounded toward her, lifting Ali off her feet in a bear hug.

“You look like you’re about to pass out.”

“I might,” Ali said, hugging her back.

When Wren set her down, her hand leapt to her locket, unsure what to do with being the center of unexpected attention.

Cinnamon… A familiar smell hit her again, inhaling deeply, something tickled the back of her mind.

“What smells so good?”

“One of your presents!” Lilah chirped, clapping her hands and beaming with excitement.

“What do you mean?”

Charlotte took her hand, leading her toward the island. She plucked one of the wrapped gifts off the counter and pressed it into Ali’s palms.

“Open this.”

Ali peeled back the wrapping paper, revealing a bound leather journal. Across the front, etched in gold letters: *Family Recipes.*

“I know you lost your mom’s recipes. I wish I could give all of them back to you. But we thought—” Her voice wavered just slightly. “I thought each of us could share our favorite family recipes. So you can make something new.”

Ali flipped open the book, pulse thundering in her ears as emotions swarmed in her chest.

Labeled dividers greeted her.

Breakfast. Bread. Sandwiches. Main Dish. Sides. Dessert… Dreams…

“This one,” Charlotte murmured, turning to a slim final section. The title read *Christmas Morning Cinnamon Rolls.* “You told me this one in your sleep. I’m not certain it’s your mother’s, but Mama tested them and said they were delicious. That’s what you’re smelling now. She made them for you.”

Ali couldn’t compute.

The crowd shifted and parted like something holy was occurring. Perhaps it was. Diana stood waiting beside the stove, a single steaming cinnamon roll on a small plate. James handed over a fork, his warm smile steadying her trembling hands.

She went right for the gooey heart of the roll. The very best part. The flavor hit her tongue, heat and spice and buttery sweetness exploding across it, flooding her mouth and heart with memories Ali thought to be forgotten.

A vivid echo of her much shorter legs perched atop a kitchen stool came from the depths of her subconscious. Her mother had stood behind her, guiding her tiny hand as they drizzled homemade icing over a pan of steaming rolls. Caitlyn McCarthy's soft voice had been so encouraging and full of love.

The memory hit like sunlight breaking through clouds.

Her throat ached, not with grief but something gentler. Love pressed in from every side, rubbing against the old bruise she tried not to talk about. She breathed out, afraid that if she inhaled too deeply the treacherous tears would betray her.

The taste was so close to what lived in her memory. But it had the most important ingredient… love.

All she could say was…

"It tastes like Christmas morning," she whispered.

Grins spread around the room as cinnamon rolls were distributed. Everyone made the recipes they contributed in the book. Ali tried each and every one, proclaiming each dish a scrumptious delicacy.

Across the kitchen, Charlotte watched, eyes shining with emotion. She gave Ali something no one else ever managed: a sense of family, of hope, and home. The loneliness always threatening to consume her on her birthday was nowhere to be found. Replaced with something warm and breathtaking.

Ali took a few slow steps toward her. Charlotte's thumb smoothed across her cheek, circling her deepest dimple with such care it made Ali's heart twist.

Either Charlotte was putting on a performance worthy of an Oscar. Or this was all real for her, too.

"Best birthday," Ali whispered.

Charlotte's grin was triumphant, chest puffing with pride.

"The first of many," she murmured.

Ali could hear the hope in her tone and she knew what Charlotte meant. The promise beneath those words. Charlotte wanted more birthdays—years of them. Ali wanted them, too. Needed them, like she needed air. She wasn't ready for this to end. She wasn't sure she ever would be.

Ali let herself sink into ocean pools. In that moment, she wasn't afraid anymore. She made the decision to choose her own path and not be a leaf on the wind…

The confession bubbled up so easily and began to trickle past her lips.

"Charlotte, I—"

But another chorus of happy birthday began as Wren, Natasha, and Lilah approached with a cake blazing with thirty flickering candles. Her confession was lost to the music. But as she closed her eyes and blew out her candles, she made her wish.

She wished for a life, here, with these people who showed her they cared. She wished for a life with Charlotte.

She wasn't done loving her.

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31

CHARLOTTE

ASPEN'S LANDSCAPE was like it had been stitched together to create every landscape artist's wet dream. Crisp air, pine-drenched mountains, and a resort terrace glowing with fire pits and string lights.

Charlotte arrived early with her family, all of them eager for time together before the big day. Sasha and Natasha arrived a few days later, though no one had seen much of Sasha or Lizzie since.

Natasha lounged on one of the terrace sofas, locked in a spirited debate with Lilah over… something. Charlotte wasn't listening. Her attention kept drifting toward every entry point, pulse flickering each time someone moved near the stairs.

Imani appeared first, springy coils pinned back on one side, the rest haloing around her as she descended the stairs. Charlotte's gaze flitted past her, searching the empty space behind her.

Still no Ali.

Unfortunately, with her show right around the corner and paintings that still needed to be finished, Ali was forced to stay behind. Thankfully, she was free by the time Imani originally planned to leave. Charlotte booked Ali's flight first class, wanting to ensure her travel was stress free.

"I don't even get a hello?" Imani groused, sinking onto the couch beside her. The fire pit crackled, their only defense against the mountain chill of late fall.

"I see you all the time. Plus, you stroll into my office often enough I've grown to associate your arrival with business."

“A crime,” Imani scoffed. “My entrances are the only things that brighten your dreary workdays and you know it.”

“True,” Charlotte conceded, eyes fixed on the stairs. “But my mind simply isn’t on work at the moment.”

“Oh, that much is painfully obvious.” Imani leaned in, voice dropping into a teasing rasp. “Did you skip dinner? You look hungry.”

There was no denying it. Once Ali had only one more painting to finish, a constant stream of teasing texts and late night FaceTime calls began. Want coiled tight in Charlotte, leaving her restless.

“I thought you and Ali arrived together?”

Imani sighed, slumping against the couch and flinging an arm over her eyes. “Just tell me I’m not your favorite anymore.”

Charlotte turned, a smirk curling her lips. “You’re my best friend.” She paused for effect. “But wild horses couldn’t drag me into your bed.”

Imani made an exaggerated gag. “First of all, ew. Second of all…” She blinked, face scrunched up. “Yeah, no. No.”

“Where is she?”

Imani rolled her eyes as a low chuckle slipped free. “She went up to your room. Said something about her skin feeling too loud after being on the plane and wanted to shower. But I got the impression she had zero intention of coming back down.”

Charlotte was on her feet before the final word left Imani’s lips, tossing back the rest of her whiskey and aiming for the stairs, purpose blazing in every step.

The elevator took longer than it had any right to. Her foot tapped against the stone floor, impatience vibrating through her bones. She’d been aching for days. Orgasms she gave herself just weren’t cutting it. Not when what she truly craved was Ali writhing and falling apart beneath her.

The doors rolled back and she stepped inside, finger hovering over the button to the top floor… only to stifle a groan when Victoria slipped in after her.

“Floor?” Charlotte asked, voice hard and unyielding.

“I’m going wherever you are, baby girl.”

Charlotte fought the growl and deliberately pressed the button for the basement. Victoria didn’t even notice, her lips just curved with smug satisfaction.

“Remember the last time we were here,” Victoria murmured, sidling closer.

Charlotte turned her head slowly. “You mean the trip you insisted on planning for my birthday? Where you forced me to miss Christmas with my family and said birthday… with my twin?”

The doors slid closed, partially muffling Victoria’s laugh, which convinced Charlotte she still didn’t understand why it was a problem.

“We had a wonderful time—”

“That’s not how I remember it.”

Charlotte recalled being alone far more than together because Victoria seemed to disappear. There were epic fights, leading to the night she tried to break things off and go home only to be convinced to stay because Victoria promised to do better and Charlotte *desperately* wanted to believe her.

“Let me make it up to you,” Victoria purred in that same practiced, sultry tone, green eyes dark as she peered up through thick lashes.

The elevator dinged. The doors rolled open.

Charlotte gestured for Victoria to exit ahead of her. She waited just long enough for her to realize the ride hadn’t been long enough and the finishings here were decidedly not the guest floors. Victoria’s brows knitting in confusion.

“I would rather peel my own skin from my bones than breathe the same air as you,” Charlotte said, voice frigid and dipped in venom. Then she smiled, as though this was a friendly chat. “Enjoy your night. I fully intend to enjoy mine, with my girlfriend, who I plan to have bent over our bed in…” she glanced at her watch for effect, “two minutes.”

Charlotte hit the button for her floor and let the doors close on the look of pure outrage souring Victoria’s face.

Sweet, sweet vengeance.

MUSIC DRIFTED FROM THE BEDROOM, accompanied by the soft sound of Ali’s humming. Charlotte followed to find Ali flitting around the room, turning on an assortment of candles, dressed in nothing but a robe, her hair half-damp from the shower.

Charlotte’s sparking temper ebbed away.

“Setting the mood?”

Damp waves spun as Ali whirled around, dimples impressing themselves on either side of that wide breathtaking smile.

“Babes!” Ali chirped, running forward and launching herself into Charlotte’s arms.

Charlotte caught her easily, using the momentum to lift her feet off the ground and spin them around in a single rotation. She kept her close, pulling back to get a closer look at her.

“You’re looking rather rosy-cheeked,” Charlotte said, kissing the freckles peppered across her cheeks and the bridge of her nose. “Did you have the water set to scalding?”

Ali shook her head, fingers toying with the strands at the nape of her neck.

“Imani flirted with me the entire flight.” She sighed wearily. “I haven’t recovered.”

Charlotte’s head fell back and she groaned, making a mental note to text Imani a death threat later. “I’m sorry. She does these things to mess with me.”

“I know she’s straight. Still turned into a tomato.”

“I’ll avenge you,” Charlotte assured her, burying her nose in Ali’s neck, breathing her in… she smelled different, more expensive.

Ali must have felt her pause because she giggled.

“I forgot my shampoo and conditioner,” she explained. “I hope it’s okay that I used yours.”

A low hum rumbled through her chest as she inhaled again, catching the way *her* products blended with Ali’s natural scent. “The idea of you using my things appeals to me.”

Ali made an amused sound as she dipped to press a kiss into the hollow beneath Charlotte’s ear, followed by a little nip to her lobe. “You’re not a jealous person, are you, Miss Davenport?”

Charlotte arched her neck, giving her better access. “Jealous? No.” A slow smirk wandered across her face. “Territorial, on the other hand? Absolutely.”

Ali preened, dragging her tongue along the shell of her ear, making want ripple and spread, her breath roughening. She let Ali tease her, content to feel this moment. And while she trusted Ali’s ability to make her soft, to

let her surrender when she needed to be cared for… tonight wasn't one of those nights.

"You like a touch of possessiveness, don't you?" Charlotte rasped, feeling Ali melt against her.

Her answer came barely above a whisper. "It makes me feel wanted. Like I matter."

Charlotte stilled.

Later, she would wish she'd admitted everything. But, she was coiled too tight, too aware of how they'd already agreed this night would go. Still, she cradled Ali's jaw, thumb pressing over the deepest dimple.

"I want you," she said quietly. "God, I want you."

She kissed her, deep and unhurried, feeling the truth of it echo in her own soul.

"You matter. You matter to me."

Ali's eyes glistened, lower lip trembling. "You matter to me too."

They kissed again, and Charlotte's hands grew bold, sliding down Ali's back to palm her ass through the robe. She gathered the fabric and lifted it, her hands meeting the smooth, perfect curves beneath. Every instinct urged her to lose herself between warm thighs, but she knew she needed to say something true first.

She drew back, taking Ali's hands in her own. "Lina…"

"Charlotte?" Ali looked up at her, puzzled.

"There's something I've been wanting to discuss."

"Oh," Ali said, color draining away. "That sounds… serious."

"It is. But it's good," Charlotte promised, running a hand through her hair. "It just feels strange bringing it up during my twin's wedding. Even though no one has seen her since Sasha arrived." She took a steadying breath. This was Ali, why was she anxious? "I want to wait for the full discussion until after. I just—" Her voice went soft. "I don't want to go through this entire weekend with you wondering if I mean the things I say or if it's pretend. It's not..."

"Real?" Ali asked, and it killed Charlotte *that* was her first assumption.

"No." Charlotte's head tilted as she tried to read the emotions swimming in her gaze. "It's not pretend. And it's very real. At least… it is for me."

Ali looked stunned. But then something luminous burst behind her eyes, like a star flaring to life. "I don't think it was ever fake for me. You're kinda

my favorite person in the whole world."

Charlotte smiled despite the way her heart swelled too tightly in her chest.

"Don't tell my siblings," she warned. "But you're who I want to spend all my time with."

Her blush deepened, eyes going glassy as relief left her in a quiet exhale. "We can leave the logistics for when we're back in Boston. I just need to know one thing."

"Oh?"

"We like each other. For real?"

Charlotte chuckled, looping her arm around Ali's waist, pulling her in until their foreheads touched.

"Like is an understatement," she murmured, brushing her lips over Ali's brow.

Charlotte pulled the tie of Ali's robe. The fabric parted, revealing freckled skin warmed by artificial candlelight. Ali shrugged the robe from her shoulders, letting it descend to the floor like a fallen constellation. She rose onto her toes, bringing their lips together.

Charlotte allowed her gaze to map the galaxy of freckles scattered across Ali's skin, each one glowing softly in the candlelight like distant stars.

"Lina."

Fingers tangled through her hair, drawing her into a fierce kiss as their bodies molded together. Charlotte's hands curled behind her neck, pulling her in for a toe-curling kiss that made heat burn bone deep.

A sharp gasp tore from Charlotte's lungs as teeth caught her lower lip, just enough pain to spark lightning through her.

Neither of them managed to say those three little words, but it was enough for now. They came together in a cosmic collision, finally pulled into the same orbit. Hardly any space remained between them, only the desperate need to translate feeling into motion. The words would come when they were meant to, not a second sooner.

Charlotte surrendered to the pull.

Her mouth claimed Ali's, biting, tasting… plundering. Her hands traced the curve bound in slippery fabric, then slid lower, following the long, luminous line of her thigh, slipping toward waiting heat.

A raw, unguarded sound tore from Ali, rising from a rasp into a low, helpless whine as Charlotte's fingers met warmth and slick need.

Charlotte's forehead dropped to Ali's shoulder as she found the core of her pleasure. Ali's nails bit into her shoulders as her hips began to grind in desperate search of relief.

"Always so ready for me," Charlotte murmured.

Charlotte pushed in with one swift, unrelenting motion, burying long fingers to the knuckle.

Ali shattered into sound, moans spilling free as she disintegrated into a brume-like haze as Charlotte scorched a trail of molten kisses down the column of her neck. Ali moved against her, matching her rhythm.

"I was wondering when you were going to claim what's yours," Ali taunted.

The sound Charlotte made in response was low and dangerous, the vibration pressed into Ali's skin right before she sank her teeth into the base of Ali's neck, lips drawing a dark mark as her pace sped up. She could feel Ali tighten around her, legs going weak as bliss gathered, a star barreling toward collapse.

Her tongue traced upward over sensitive skin to hover over Ali's ear.

Her voice was little more than a rough breathy purr, sending gooseflesh rippling across Ali's neck and a shudder running down her spine.

"Is it your intention to rile me up, darling?"

Charlotte added a hard thrust, fingers hitting just right to cause Ali's nails to dig in deeper, biting into Charlotte's exposed back as she folded forward.

"Do what you want with me," Ali gasped, teeth catching on Charlotte's shoulder.

"Anything?" Charlotte rasped, palm grinding against her clit.

"Anything."

One hard thrust, then she withdrew, and stepped back, putting space between them.

Ali whimpered, reaching for her.

"On your knees."

The command hung between them. Ali blinked, dazed and panting, brain struggling to catch up.

Charlotte's voice sharpened.

"Do I need to repeat myself?"

Spurred into motion, she dropped down… and waited.

Such a good girl.

Charlotte pulled her sweater over her head and slid out of her jeans, watching the way Ali's brain visibly short circuited at the sight of her willowy frame encased in dark lace, the corset and matching underwear forming a delicate shell over olive skin, leaving little to the imagination.

"Holy—" Ali breathed, eyes devouring fair curves accentuated in all the right ways. "You look—"

Charlotte trailed one perfectly manicured nail along the swell of her own breasts. "Do go on, darling."

Hands slid down the lingerie, thumbs teasing her nipples into stiff peaks.

"Charlotte," Ali panted, her tone breathless with want.

"Lover?"

"I might explode if you don't fuck me," Ali rasped.

Charlotte moved to the side table, pulling out the bag she stowed in the bottom drawer, unzipping it, she laid out what she needed with precise intent.

Harness in hand, black leather slid up her thighs and over the swell of her hips. Buckles fastened, and extra length tucked away. She fitted the dark blue dildo through the O-ring, ensuring it sat perfectly over her clit.

Ali looked near ravenous.

"Is the size alright?" she asked, even though she let Ali pick it out online.

Ali shuffled forward on her knees, eyes locked on the space between Charlotte's thighs.

"More than. I want to feel you tomorrow."

A cocky grin tugged at Charlotte's mouth.

"Do you?" she asked as Ali took the strap in her hand and pressed the base into her clit. "I think I can manage that."

Big doe eyes looked up through thick lashes as she ran her wet tongue along the length of the toy, slow and worshipful.

"Promise?"

Ali's lips wrapped around the tip, taking the strap into her mouth.

Heat slammed through Charlotte at the sight.

She might be the death of me.

Speech abandoned her as nimble fingers sank into fiery strands, an ache in her core blooming. Ali's free hand slipped between Charlotte's thighs without warning, two fingers dipping into her and curling with devastating accuracy, making a show of taking the strap deeper at the same time.

Charlotte's thoughts scattered. Curses spilled past her lips as sensation overwhelmed her. She couldn't look away.

Fingers curled deep as stars spotted her vision.

503 service unavailable.

Error.

Error.

Error.

Ali gave a push of encouragement to the fist Charlotte had tangled in her hair. Ali took her fully, the vibration of her moan traveled straight through the strap and into Charlotte's clit. It was pure cosmic feedback.

Reality rebooted.

A low sound tore from her chest and Charlotte shifted her grip and guided the rhythm herself, drawing Ali forward in slow, controlled thrusts, pulling them together like gravity.

"Where have you been all my life?" Charlotte growled between thrusts, legs trembling as Ali's fingers drove her over the edge. The universe narrowed to heat and friction and stars bursting behind her eyes. She lost herself, fisting handfuls of damp hair, chasing the crescendo. When it arrived an obscene moan tore through the room like a shockwave.

Her legs went unsteady, but Charlotte refused to collapse. She had work to do.

With a light tug, she drew Ali up. Their mouths found each other again before Charlotte sent her toppling back into the mattress.

Ali spread her legs in welcome, eyes dark and shining, arousal glistening like an open invitation.

God, she was dripping.

A glorious sight. Stray wisps fanned out, shocking against white bedding. Her chest rose and fell in quick, needy breaths, teeth worrying her lower lip. A sneaky hand slipped between her own thighs, moving to tease her bundle of nerves.

A possessive sound rumbled from Charlotte's chest as she prowled onto the bed. She caught one wrist, then the other, lifting them above Ali's head and pinning them there. Her hips settled between Ali's thighs, the length of

the strap resting at her apex as muscled legs wrapped around her, pulling them flush against each other.

Charlotte dipped her head, sucked Ali's bottom lip between her teeth, and bit just enough to draw a breathless moan as Ali arched up into her.

The hidden cuffs clicked and tightened around Ali's wrists. Ali groaned her approval, anticipation sparking in her very blood.

"If at any point you want to stop, say red," Charlotte instructed, voice dripping with liquid night before she sealed it with another kiss.

Charlotte shifted, guided the tip to her entrance, pushing in slow and steady, inch by exquisite inch, giving Ali time to adjust to the length and thickness.

Ali's frustrated breaths brushed her cheek as she angled her hips, silently begging for more.

"Eager little thing, aren't you?" Charlotte husked, fighting the urge to bury herself fully in the tight cunt already clenching for her.

Ali lifted up, nipping at Charlotte's lip as her legs tightened around her waist, pulling her forward and taking her all at once.

Charlotte froze there, trying to give Ali time to adjust, but Ali had turned into a needy ravenous creature, hips undulating beneath her.

"Move."

"So demanding," Charlotte drawled.

She trailed kisses across her chest, then pulled back to meet darkened eyes, watching as her next words turned them almost wolfish.

"I'm going to ruin you for anyone else."

She emphasized it with a slow withdrawal.

"You're *mine*, Lina."

Then she drove forward until she was fully seated inside her.

Ali gasped, head falling back to bare the elegant curve of her throat. Charlotte repeated the motion, delighting in the pleasure carving its way across Ali's face. She tried to thrust her hips up for more, but Charlotte held her steady… only to answer with a sharp drive of her hips that tore a guttural sound from her, brown eyes squeezing shut as starlight scattered through her.

"Please," Ali whined.

Charlotte brushed her lips across a thundering pulse point, smirking against speckled skin, hips resting between trembling thighs. "Please, what?"

Ali grumbled and bucked her hips. “If you don’t fuck me. I’ll take matters into my own hands.”

“If you insist,” Charlotte purred, drawing out with agonizing slowness, savoring the flash of fire that ignited in those dark eyes. “You’ll take it all, won’t you?”

Then she drove forward, hard, and the rhythm took over.

Slick, obscene sounds of the strap driving into her tight heat resounded, in a steady pulse. Charlotte swallowed the crescendo of moans, drunk on each broken sound.

Propping herself up on one elbow, her other hand slipped between them, circling Ali’s center with merciless precision. The base of the strap pressed against her clit, stoking the fire burning low in her own stomach.

“That’s my girl.”

She watched the color bloom across Ali’s skin like an expanding nebula, darkening already vibrant cheeks. And just as Ali tipped toward the edge, Charlotte went perfectly still.

Dark eyes snapped open and flared with outrage.

She gave Ali long enough to simmer, then ebb before she brought her right back to the edge again. Only to freeze before she could tumble into endless bliss.

Ali’s whimper turned helpless when she realized she was being edged, desperation reverberated in each trembling note.

“Charlotte, please.”

“Please, what?” Charlotte asked, nipping at the sensitive skin of her neck.

“Please let me come,” Ali whined.

“Not yet.” Charlotte buried the strap fully inside her again, and again.

Ali’s pleasure built quickly, coiling tight, ready to burst. But just before the collapse, Charlotte slowed to a crawl. Ali broke on a whimpered sob, wrists straining uselessly against the cuffs.

Charlotte edged her three more times before Ali reached the verge of losing her patience.

“Please, baby. I need to come. Please—let me come. I can’t—please.”

One plea after another tumbled off her tongue and Charlotte was intoxicated. Ali begged so beautifully and it filled her with a heady power buzzing through every cell in her body.

Charlotte's thumb pressed firmly to her clit as her hips rolled in a slow unforgiving grind. Her lips brushed the shell of Ali's ear, their bodies flush.

"Come for me."

Release hit and Charlotte felt it ripple through her. Every shudder and tightened muscle, every desperate cry as pleasure detonated and tore through Ali's body, down to her curling toes and back through the elegant arch of her spine. Charlotte rode the wave with her, heart hammering, muscles burning, every nerve lighting up.

Ali's moans turned to vapor on her lips, breaths stuttering and breaking apart.

"Breathe," Charlotte commanded.

A choked gasp rushed into Ali's lungs and she went slack, every bit of tension leaking out of her to pool somewhere on the floor.

Charlotte reveled in the moment. Wearing a strap was its own type of high. But wearing it with Ali… God, she'd never had sex this good. She went soft, peppering Ali's chest with kisses, murmuring quiet words against her skin.

Mumbled, pleasure-drunk words dripped from Ali's lips. "Thank you."

Charlotte chuckled low as she rolled away. Ali could make out the sound of rustling. Cuffs were removed as Charlotte pulled out.

"Again," Ali whimpered, tilting her hips up in invitation. "I need it."

"Do you?" Charlotte's voice carried a sinful rasp, eyes like wet-cut sapphires in the candlelight as she rolled her hips, letting the strap tease between slick folds.

"Yes," Ali stuttered, hips jerking as the hard length rubbed against her clit. "Yes, please."

Charlotte dragged the strap through her heat, covering it in fresh slick. Ali's hips rutted against it, whining when Charlotte paused, tip nudging her entrance, waiting for her to go on.

"Please, I want it."

Satisfaction hummed through Charlotte as she sank in, slow and steady, stretching Ali in one smooth thrust. Charlotte could already feel the muscle fatigue but there wasn't a chance in hell she would let that slow her down. She pinned Ali's hips and stole her breath with a kiss.

She pulled out, almost to the tip. Ali whined at the loss, before Charlotte snapped back in.

Ali pleaded for more.

Charlotte obliged, hammering into her, her thrusts sharp and unrelenting while soft praise spilled from her lips. Ali seemed to burn brighter with every motion. The boundless breadth of her affection swelled in her chest, mixing with the tremors of divinity beneath her skin, a nimbus of heat and devotion wrapping around them.

Charlotte read her easily. Felt the blaze in her core like it was her own. It was too much and not enough all at once.

“Charlotte—” Ali choked out between moans.

Understanding struck. Charlotte withdrew and flipped her onto her stomach, hoisting her hips high. Before Ali could fully orient, Charlotte buried herself in her again, setting a bruising pace. Skin met skin as Ali rocked back to meet each drive of Charlotte’s hips.

Charlotte slowed, pulling out of Ali’s reach, taking just a moment to catch her breath. “You’re insatiable.”

“Please, Charlotte,” Ali breathed.

Charlotte trailed a hand over the curve of her ass and up her spine, nails raking back down. Red lines bloomed beneath her touch.

Something primordial laced her tone.

“Beg,” Charlotte said. “Be good and beg me to fuck you.”

Ali gasped, shattered on a breathless moan as Charlotte teased her entrance again.

“Please, Charlotte. Please, fuck me.”

A crack rang sharp as Charlotte’s hand struck her ass, tearing a startled yelp from Ali, more shock than pain.

“Fuck! Please,” Ali pleaded breathlessly. “I’ll be so, so good. I *have* been so good.”

Charlotte’s hand landed again on the opposite cheek. Ali groaned at the sting.

“I need you to take me, Charlotte, please.”

Fuck. Those words splintered something inside her. Heat flooded Charlotte’s veins, molten and untethered.

“You need me to claim you,” Charlotte rasped as she lined herself up. “Is that what you’re saying?”

“Yes,” Ali gasped, toes flexing as she gripped the sheets. “I’m yours. Please.”

Those words sent a shiver down her spine.

A swift thrust forward and she buried herself deep, drawing a wrecked moan from Ali. Charlotte withdrew only to slam back in, hands locked around her hips, pulling Ali back into every powerful thrust.

Ali chanted and moaned beneath her. The toy slid in and out as Charlotte pushed her toward the breaking point, a star about to collapse.

“Touch yourself,” Charlotte growled.

Her grip tightened on Ali’s hips, hard enough to leave little bruises behind as evidence. The thought of perfectly shaped bruises and the claim they declared sent a dark thrill through Charlotte.

Ali obeyed, fingers slipping between her thighs, stroking herself as her cheek pressed into the mattress. Charlotte ran her hand down her spine to tangle within damp hair.

Then her body seized, the air catching in her throat as she shattered in an ephemeral release.

Charlotte’s thrusts gentled, working Ali through her orgasm. Every whisper of praise sent aftershocks rippling beneath her skin.

Ali melted, her muscles heavy with delight, weakened beyond hope of recovery.

Charlotte eased out with a wet sound. Ali collapsed forward, breathing hard while Charlotte sprawled out beside her, sucking down air as the burn in her muscles ebbed away.

Her fingers fumbled with the straps.

Ali’s head popped up. “Not done.”

“Oh?” Charlotte inquired, hands stilling as she took in the rise and fall, the blissed out expression. Charlotte lifted up on an elbow to hover over her. “You look utterly spent to me.”

“You had your way with me,” Ali panted, willing strength back into her limbs. “Now it’s my turn.”

Charlotte liked sex. Loved it. In past relationships, she’d been accused of wanting it too often… She could go without it. They made toys for that. But was it so wrong to want to *be* with your partner? Was it so wrong to want to make someone else feel good?

Yet, here Ali was, telling her they weren’t done, despite what Charlotte just wrung out of her.

She rolled beneath Charlotte. Their lips met in a bruising kiss, heat flaring anew.

Ali’s nails grazed down the column of her neck and across her chest until they met her corset, teasing her peaked nipples through the fabric.

Charlotte’s hand slid under Ali’s knee, intending to bury the strap in her once again. But Ali had other plans. With sudden strength, she hooked a leg behind Charlotte’s and rolled them, reversing their positions. Charlotte hit the sheets in a spill of dark hair, swirling wisps made of impenetrable night against the white sheets.

Ali didn’t hesitate, she gripped the strap, lined it up with her entrance, and sank down with a groan of satisfaction. Charlotte’s breath caught, hands sliding along inked thighs, over the cinch of her waist to palm her breasts. Charlotte bit her lip, drinking in the delicious way she arched into the touch and candlelight warmed her skin and caught in the fiery strands of her hair.

Ali rolled her hips and Charlotte groaned as the base of the strap ground perfectly against Charlotte’s clit, making her back arch in answer. A breathless wanting sound left her. After making Ali fall apart several times, she was orbiting the cusp for what felt like an eternity, and the need burned bright beneath her skin.

Judging by Ali’s satisfied smirk, she knew exactly what she was doing.

Ali braced her knees into the mattress, lifted up, and dropped back down.

Both of them moaned.

Ali repeated the movement, again, and again, and again. Each plunge grew faster, more punishing. Charlotte’s hands gripped her hips to keep her steady, moaning as every downward roll sent shockwaves through her body.

“If I am yours,” Ali rasped, breathing ragged, “does that make you mine?”

“Yes,” Charlotte groaned, one hand moving up to cup the sensitive swell of her breast.

“Say it,” Ali growled, measuring every drop and roll of her hips so the base ground against Charlotte’s clit with every movement.

Charlotte’s other hand slipped between Ali’s thighs, thumb finding the bundle of nerves. “I’m yours.”

“Again,” Ali demanded, teeth clenched, fighting to keep her rhythm steady as Charlotte’s voice betrayed her growing desperation.

Charlotte pressed harder, the thought of Ali unraveling above her too good to resist. “I’m yours, Lina.”

A tension inside her coiled into a blinding singularity, threatening to collapse.

“Come for me.”

Charlotte shook her head, voice cracking. “Only if you come with me.”

She fought the oncoming rupture as her head tipped back. Her thumb moved in tighter circles.

Ali’s body answered first, cunt clenching around the strap as her control splintered, pleasure stormed through her, pulling Charlotte with her.

Charlotte’s cry tore free as her spine bowed, release exploding through her with the force of a dying star.

Her hands fell slack into the sheets. The cosmos flared white-hot behind her closed eyes as they shattered together.

Ali fell forward and their bodies slipped together, slick with sweat and starlit aftermath. They lay tangled and trembling, laughter bubbling up between ragged breaths as the universe slowly settled back into place.

At last, Charlotte found enough strength to draw Ali into her arms and roll them onto their sides.

“Best fuck I’ve ever had,” Ali murmured deliriously, patting Charlotte’s shoulder.

Charlotte huffed a quiet laugh and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

How could she possibly disagree?

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ALI

DRINKS FLOWED FREELY in the resort bar, laughter spilling over polished wood and glittering crystal. Ali barely touched her own glass. In a new crowded place coupled with rising stress always made her tics flare. Still, the mood was light. Even Victoria—for once—seemed pleasant. Not a single cutting remark. She even told a few stories that had everyone laughing… including Charlotte.

A true miracle.

But the din of the bar crept toward overstimulating. Noise layered over noise until Ali's skin began to crawl, that familiar urge stirring at the backs of her arms. She leaned close to Charlotte and murmured that she needed air. Charlotte offered to come—of course she did—but Ali could see she was relaxed, glowing, unburdened. A rare sight. A well-earned one.

Ali could still feel her in the most delicious way.

Outside, the courtyard was quiet and cold. She dropped onto a leather sofa near the fire pit, tugging her jacket tighter as the sharp alpine air shocked some of the static from her nerves. The fire crackled, steady and grounding.

A flash of blonde crossed her peripheral. Lilah. Soft blonde curls bounced as she walked, glancing over her shoulder before hurrying toward the stairs that led up to the pool.

Ali lifted a hand to wave but Lilah never saw it as she disappeared up the stairs. Surely she wasn't thinking of taking a dip in this weather… Everyone kept telling her it wasn't *that* cold but she begged to differ.

Another flash of blonde.

Victoria.

Something in the way she moved like she was stalking prey set off spidey senses forged by years of watching True Crime documentaries.

Her boots hit stone as she crossed the courtyard in record time and started up the stairs, the wind biting at her face as she reached the top.

The deck was deserted.

Except for Lilah who was curled in the farthest corner beneath the pergola's shadow and Victoria who stepped forward and strategically blocked her exit.

Ali's stomach dropped and she retreated, darting down the stairs just to creep to the opposite side. She softened her footfalls up another set of stairs to peer through the railing, just close enough to hear and see everything.

She might feel bad for eavesdropping later. But part of her knew…

Victoria's voice floated up into the air, like honey poured slowly over silk, warm and unhurried. But beneath all the sticky sweetness was something cold and deliberate.

"Come upstairs with me."

Ali's breath came out in a white puff that dissipated. There was no way.

Lilah's hazy voice shook as she spoke. "No…"

This wasn't Lilah. She mistook her for someone else. This was a horrible hypothesis that made her wretched for jumping to such conclusions.

Then Victoria spoke again and Ali's next breath froze in her lungs.

"Please, Lilah. I want you all to myself."

Oh.

Fuck.

"No," Lilah managed, firmer but smaller somehow.

Cold flooded Ali's veins. Accompanied by a horrid realization she was privy to something no one was meant to know.

Shit.

"Come on, baby girl," Victoria coaxed, taking a step closer. "Sasha has kept me busy. We haven't been able to spend any time together. I miss you," Victoria's voice dipped low, all saccharine sweetness and seduction.

Ali forgot how to breathe as she white-knuckled the railing.

"I don't—I don't think we should keep doing this," Lilah replied, her voice tight, trembling on the edge of tears.

Victoria’s laugh slipped through the night air… Ali could swear the temperature dropped several more degrees.

“You always say that,” Victoria replied, heels clicking as she drifted closer. “But we both know you never mean it. No one else makes you feel the way I do.”

“I told you I don’t want this anymore.”

“Don’t be stupid.”

“I said no.”

“Baby girl, please.”

Stay strong, Lilah! Don’t do it. Ali screamed in her mind, legs trembling as shock sank through a hole in her stomach all the way down to her toes.

“If you cared about me, you wouldn’t have left me passed out on the beach. Alone,” Lilah fired back, her voice breaking as she pushed to her feet, inching sideways, the small table between them a pitiful shield.

“It’s not my fault you drank enough to take down an elephant,” Victoria snapped. “I didn’t want anyone to get suspicious.” On a dime her tone turned pleading. “I just want to talk.”

Ali’s stomach roiled, imagining the look of despair on Lilah’s face.

“No,” Lilah said, shaking. “I’m done, Victoria. I told you I was done, and I meant it. This is over. My answer is *no.”*

Victoria lunged, snagging Lilah’s wrist.

Ali lurched as Lilah let out a startled yelp. Anger ignited in Ali, the heat of it scalding its way from her chest to the top of her head.

“Do I need to remind you that you don’t just get to walk away, sweet thing?” Victoria warned, stepping around the table, crowding Lilah’s space.

Desperation shredded Lilah’s voice, “Let me go.”

“You know what happens if you don’t do as I say,” Victoria warned. “Christ, you can be such an idiot.” Her sneer sharpened. “Let me spell it out for you since you’re really living up to the dumb blonde stereotype tonight.”

Shaking with rage, Ali’s vision tunneled.

“What do you think happens when your family, when your precious Charlotte, finds out what a *whore* you actually are?”

Righteous white-hot fury surged through Ali as she began piecing the facts together. Charlotte admitted her worries about Lilah.

Well, here was the cause.

Ali surged up the remaining steps, her voice loud and clear through the crisp night. “Oh, *Vicki*.”

Victoria startled, whirling around.

Ali’s lip curled into a snarl, eyes burning. “Did no one ever explain to you,” she said, voice icy and lethal, “*no* is a *full* fucking *sentence?”*

“I don’t remember asking you,” Victoria shot back.

Ali’s fists balled tight. “I suggest you leave.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because if you don’t,” Ali growled, her pulse roaring in her ears, “everyone is going to hear about you harassing Sasha’s future sister-in-law.” Smoke had to be billowing out of her ears and flaring nostrils. Ali was never one to lose her temper at the drop of a hat. Her fuse was long. But this was an unprecedented situation. “Let her go and get lost. Now. Before I lose my temper and make sure you need a second nose job.”

Victoria hesitated, fury warring with the barest hint of embarrassment. With a scoff, she stormed past Ali, striding quickly down the stairs.

Fucking coward.

Ali hurried underneath the pergola, stopping just short of where Lilah had curled into the corner of a couch.

Her anger evaporated, voice turning gentle.

“Are you okay?”

“Please go away,” Lilah whispered, voice shattered as she hugged herself.

There wasn’t a chance in hell she would leave Lilah alone. Not like this. Ali inched closer, not touching, but just… there.

“I’m not leaving. Not until I know you’re okay.”

She stared at her boots and listened as Lilah cried into her hands. The air felt heavy, pressing down, making it impossible to draw a normal breath.

“Are you going to tell Charlotte?”

Ali sighed, chewing the inside of her cheek, eyes flitting toward the stairs. “I won’t lie if she asks. But… I think she deserves to hear it from you.”

“I fucked up so bad,” Lilah’s voice cracked with emotion, her breaths coming a little too quick. “She’s never going to forgive me.”

Ali’s heart clenched as she rested a hand on Lilah’s knee. “She loves you so much. There isn’t anything you two couldn’t work through. Might take some time, but you mean the world to her.”

“I don’t know what to do,” Lilah admitted, choking down another sob. “I don’t know how I got here.”

Ali’s throat tightened.

I do.

She remembered feeling the exact same way sitting across from Ashley. She hadn’t recognized herself for a long time.

“I’ll help,” Ali vowed, voice cracking as she squeezed Lilah’s knee. “You aren’t alone. I’m not going anywhere.”

She glanced toward the stairs again. This situation was a powder keg. One wrong move and it would destroy the wedding, shatter relationships, everything.

“Do you want to tell me what happened?” Ali asked. “Then we can make a plan for what to do.”

“You’ll hate me when you find out.”

“Not possible.”

“I—” Lilah struggled to find the words.

“Hey.” Ali tugged Lilah’s hands from her face and wiped at her tears. “I already know what’s going on and I’m still here. I’m right here. Whatever else is left to tell won’t change that. I’m still right here.”

“Promise?”

“I do. I promise.”

Lilah swallowed hard, dragging in a shaking breath, then another. When she finally spoke, her voice was wet and fragile, every word dragged up from deep water.

“Remember how I told you I partied a lot in college?”

Ali nodded, hadn’t they all?

“I got wasted every weekend. Slept around. Made… really bad decisions.” Lilah huffed a broken, humorless breath. “I never wanted my parents to know, so if I got too drunk I’d call Charlotte or Elizabeth and they’d come get me. But this one night, Charlotte was out of town, and Lizzie was performing life-saving surgery.”

“As one does,” Ali quipped, trying to ease the weight pressing down on them.

Lilah gave a weak, cracked laugh. “Yeah, just a normal everyday activity.” That laugh broke into a sob. “I called Victoria. She and Charlotte were still engaged. She came to get me. Took me to get some food. Drove

me home. She was always… really nice to me. Listened to me play the violin. Asked about my classes. Told me how smart and talented I was."

Ali felt bile rising in her throat, fighting the sinking feeling that she knew where this was going.

"I don't really remember how it happened. I get flirty and overly affectionate when I'm drunk. I think I flirted with her. She kissed me and then we were making out in my bed, my shirt was gone. She was unbuttoning my pants when my brain caught up with what was happening."

A sob ripped out of her, but she choked it down. All Ali could do was wait as cold dread slid into place.

"I shoved her off of me. We started screaming at each other. I was distraught. I just did this terrible thing to my most favorite person in the entire world." Lilah pressed her fists into her eyes. "But she acted like it was nothing. Like I was overreacting. She *wasn't* sorry."

Ali's jaw tightened. "Of course not."

Unsettling truth pieced itself together. It wasn't just cheating. But control, skewed power dynamics. Victoria took advantage of the twenty plus extra years of experience, stacked against a drunk college girl who trusted her.

"So I told her to end it with Charlotte," Lilah said, voice cracking. "I swore I would tell her what happened if she didn't. I couldn't let Charlotte marry someone like that." Her breath shuddered out of her. "I'm the reason she left Charlotte."

Each new piece Lilah revealed struck Ali right in the chest. But that last admission crushed and enraged Ali in equal measure. Bitterness hit the back of her tongue making her stomach roil. It felt all too familiar… and if time machines existed, she'd break physics just to erase Victoria from all of their lives.

"How'd it start up again?" Ali asked, keeping her voice calm. The cold had crept into her nose and fingers now, but she barely felt it.

"It was before the bridal shower." Lilah's fingers threaded through her hair, tugging at the roots. "She showed up at my apartment out of nowhere. Told me she was in love with me and she'd been waiting for me all this time but she couldn't wait anymore." Her breath hitched. "I was *so* confused. It came out of nowhere. But she said she broke up with Charlotte for me. And, she asked me to dinner."

Words were pouring out of Lilah, rushing out of her one after the other, scrambling to get out after being trapped for far too long.

“But I said no. And she left.” She passed her hand over her face. “Then the flowers started. Presents at work. Sweet messages. Even love letters.” Lilah shook her head. “She just… wore me down. We went to dinner and somehow we were in a secret relationship I don’t really remember agreeing to. I thought it was casual. But then she started controlling everything. Asking me to do things. Changing her mind all the time. Nice one second, furious the next.”

Ali’s jaw tightened, noting the amount of concealer beneath Lilah’s eyes. Her hand squeezed Lilah’s knee, to help keep her rooted in reality.

“She called and texted me all through girls’ night. Told me to have fun then demanded I leave the second I got there. Bachelorette weekend she stormed off. I thought maybe I did something wrong. So I followed her.” Her voice broke on a hiccuped sob. “We got really drunk. She fucked me on the beach and left me out there. Alone. I’ve been trying to get her to leave me alone ever since.” Lilah gave a hollow laugh, looking toward the direction Victoria had vanished. “You saw how that’s going.”

White-hot rage came roaring back full force searing through her veins.

“I’m gonna break her nose,” Ali seethed. “It’s gonna happen. I’m so heated right now. She’s the fucking worst.”

Lilah peeked up, face puffy. “You don’t think I’m terrible?”

Ali softened, anger ebbing as she pulled Lilah into her arms.

“I think you made a mistake and she exploited it. I think she used you to get to Charlotte. And when that didn’t work…”

Lilah’s voice dropped to a fractured whisper. “She never actually cared about me… did she?”

Ali rubbed slow circles into her back. “I don’t think she’s capable of caring about anyone. But, if she left you on that beach where anything could happen, if she spoke to you the way she did… that’s not love.”

Little sobs shook Lilah’s shoulders. “I’m such a fucking idiot.”

Ali held her a little tighter, chest aching in sympathy.

“Please, don’t call my friend an idiot. She doesn’t deserve it.”

Lilah pulled back, managing a half-hearted smile as she wiped her face. She opened her mouth to speak when a familiar voice called from the bottom of the stairs.

Both of them froze.

Lilah’s eyes went wide. She scrambled over the back of the patio sofa, landed in an awkward heap and disappeared into shadow, leaving Ali alone, heart pounding, scanning for somewhere—anywhere—to hide as she leapt to her feet.

She spun, ready to follow Lilah. Only it was too late.

“There you are,” Charlotte called, her tone so warm and relieved. “You’ve been gone for ages.”

Ali straightened her shirt before turning to face her, plastering on one of her dimpled smiles. But the way Charlotte’s expression faltered the moment her eyes landed on her made it clear… she already knew something was amiss.

“What are you doing up here?”

“Um… nothing. Just chilling,” Ali stammered, hands hovering uselessly at her sides.

She was a terrible liar. But lying to Charlotte? Ali never wanted to even attempt to, not with her…

“Literally,” Charlotte quipped, stepping closer, gaze dropping to the damp patch on Ali’s jacket, then to her clenched fists. Her eyes lifted again, sharp and searching, lingering on her cheeks.

The cold track of drying tears fully registered.

When had she started crying?

Curse her marshmallow of a heart. Her eyes were no doubt red rimmed above splotchy skin. A dead giveaway.

“Ali,” Charlotte began, a gleam in those ocean depths made it clear that she was prepared to burn the world down if needed. “What’s going on?”

“Please don’t ask me that.”

“Alina.”

“I promised I wouldn’t say anything unless asked specific questions,” Ali rushed out, words tumbling after each other. “Questions I really hope no one asks.”

She dropped her gaze to her boots, fingers loosening to begin their familiar rhythmic tapping.

“I can’t lie to you,” she added, voice barely more than a whisper. “I’m already shit at it. But with you? I’m toast.”

Charlotte cradled her face in her hands. God, they were so warm, making Ali realize how cold she’d become. Charlotte drew Ali’s eyes up to study the fresh tears swimming in her eyes.

God, she was so beautiful. Even now, even worried, there was a quiet steadiness to her. A restrained ferocity held in check by care alone.

Charlotte took a slow, deliberate breath. Ali matched it, her racing heart easing just a fraction.

She sniffled, chin wobbling. Charlotte wasn't letting this go.

"Don't look at me with those big ole blue eyes," Ali muttered. "It's not fair."

Charlotte's thumbs stroked across her cheeks, catching one mutinous stray tear.

"Lina," she murmured, voice soft but unyielding. "You can tell me anything."

Ali nodded, teeth digging into her lower lip. "But it's not mine to tell."

Her traitorous eyes flickered toward the couch Lilah disappeared behind.

Charlotte tracked the glance.

"Lilah?" She let go of Ali, approaching the couch, already half-crouching. "Lilah, I bought you those Jimmy Choos for Christmas. I know it's you."

A fresh sob broke free.

Charlotte sank onto the edge, fingers curling around the backrest. But before she could peer or climb over, Lilah spoke.

"Lilah is busy and can't come to the phone right now," Lilah said, her voice wet and ragged. "Please leave a message and she will return your call."

Charlotte hesitated only a second before her tone shifted, going soothing and full of affection.

"Hello, baby sister." Her gaze lifted to the strip of night sky visible through the pergola. "I was thinking about that time when you got stuck in the pear tree. You swore you were too high to jump."

Ali watched the faint smile tug at Charlotte's lips, her own curving to match.

"You argued with me for ten minutes. But the reality was, you weren't up that high and you were still light as a feather." Her voice softened and she leaned toward the backrest like she might look over. "You finally jumped and I caught you and I promised I always would."

Ali's fingers started rhythmically tapping, watching Charlotte's slow inhale.

“I know we’re bigger now. Our problems are bigger too. But that promise still stands, Bug. I will always catch you. Always.” A pause, her tone brightening slightly. “Anyway, call me back when you get this. I love you.”

Her throat burned at witnessing the true depth of their bond, the unwavering certainty of it. Her hatred for Victoria sharpened. She hadn’t just crossed a line...

“Promise?” Lilah sniffled.

“I don’t need to promise,” Charlotte replied, tone softer than Ali had ever heard. “There’s nothing that could change that. Whatever it is, we *will* figure it out.” Her voice was steady as the tide, but Ali could already see the storm gathering beneath it. “That much I promise.”

Lilah swallowed her sobs, a wavering determination entering her tone. “Do you remember when you went on that business trip to Colorado? Like threeish years ago?”

“Vaguely.”

“I made a big mistake,” Lilah rushed on, words tangling with her choked breaths. “It’s horrible. It’s the worst thing I’ve ever done. My biggest regret. I’d give anything to undo it. All of it. Before I tell you, I need you to know how sorry I am.”

“Just tell me, Bug,” Charlotte urged.

Worry knit her brow as she glanced toward Ali. Ali stood frozen, teeth worrying her lower lip, the moment stretching like a slow-motion collision she was powerless to stop. There wasn’t a thing she could do to soften the impact. All she could do was stay.

Ali offered her hand. Charlotte took it, weaving their fingers together and holding tight, as if she understood the gravity.

From behind the couch, Lilah drew a deep breath, then another. And then she told Charlotte everything.

Betrayal flickered across Charlotte’s face first. Its appearance shattered the steadiness. Hurt came next. Fury, then sorrow. One by one, each emotion flashed and vanished, hidden behind a mask of perfect indifference. The mask didn’t match the tear rolling down her cheek or the way her spine went rigid.

Ali felt it when Charlotte let go of her hand. The withdrawal stung, sharp and sudden, as Charlotte folded inward, sealing herself away. Emotion drained from her expression until only cold apathy remained.

This level of compartmentalizing couldn’t be healthy…

Ali could only watch as the woman she loved turned to stone. They’d never been *here* before, and the realization landed hard. Charlotte always knew what Ali needed. Ali didn’t know how to do the same, and the guilt tightened around her throat.

“I’m sorry,” Lilah whispered. “I don’t have any excuses. I’ve been so stupid and the worst sister.”

“Come here, Delilah,” Charlotte commanded, rising and taking two steps back.

Lilah peered over the back of the sofa, hesitating before climbing back over to stand before her sister, head bowed.

Charlotte stood ramrod straight, hands clasped behind her back, unfeeling in the face of Lilah’s tears. The only sign of warmth was the small pack of tissues she pulled from her coat, handing them to Lilah, who took one out and blew her nose.

Oppressive silence stretched between them. Charlotte took several slow, measured breaths. When she finally spoke, her voice was clipped, sharper than ever before.

“Please know that I still love you more than you can imagine. Not even this changes that.” Her shoulders rose and fell in another slow breath. “I am, however, hurt and furious. I appreciate your honesty. This will take some time, but we will work through it, just as I promised.”

Lilah wiped her cheek, taking a shuddering breath as she peered through damp lashes at her sister.

“I’m sorry.”

“So you have said,” Charlotte replied, tone frigid. “I am not ready or open to further discussion.”

The temperature around them seemed to drop. Charlotte’s composure radiating an icy finality. Ali wouldn’t have been shocked to see their breath fog in the frosted air.

“I have conditions.”

“Anything,” Lilah vowed, nodding at the floor.

“You will not speak to or see Victoria again after this weekend. You will block her number and every social platform. How she has treated you is unacceptable, and you deserve better.” Charlotte’s voice vibrated with restrained force.

Ali could tell she was trying not to yell. She was hurting. That much was clear in her rigid stance and the faint crease between her brows. But beneath the mask of artificial calm, rage churned, contained only by sheer will. One wrong breath from boiling over.

"Do I make myself clear?"

Lilah bobbed her chin, standing up a little straighter.

Charlotte's gaze snapped to Ali, blue eyes lit like flame. "Will you escort my sister to her room?"

"Of course," Ali said, wringing her fingers as the tics she'd fought earlier crept back in. "Do you want me to stay with Lilah? If you need to be alone for the night I understand."

"I do not care."

Charlotte spun on her heel and strode toward the stairs, heels striking tile with sharp, decisive clicks, leaving little time for Ali to feel the sting of those words.

But Lilah's voice piped up, wet and raw. "Where are you going?"

Charlotte stopped at the top of the stairs, looking back at them. The rage in her eyes was bone rattling.

"To kill Victoria."

Then she was gone.

Ali stared at the empty space Charlotte had occupied. Then at Lilah, who dragged trembling hands through her hair.

"Shit. Shit. Shit!"

Ali lifted a hand toward Lilah's shoulder just as Lilah bolted for the stairs, following Charlotte's trail.

"Where are *you* going?" Ali called, dread blooming fast in her chest.

"To try and stop a murder!"

Ali followed without thinking. "I'm sure she wasn't serious about the murder part." But the image of Charlotte's burning gaze surfaced again. "… Right?"

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CHARLOTTE

THE AIR CRACKLED around her as fury leached from her skin, turning to static in the night air. Wind howled in her ears… or maybe it was the rush of blood, pounding so loud it drowned out everything else.

That fucking cunt.

Her hand closed around the vertical metal door handle, jerking it open.

"Charlotte, don't!" Lilah called, her feet thundering closer.

Charlotte stepped through and dragged the door shut behind her, twisting the deadbolt just as Lilah reached it, Ali hot on her heels. They'd have to use the other entrance.

"Please," Lilah pleaded from the other side of the glass. "Be reasonable."

She paused long enough to take her in. Lilah's face was red and blotchy… Her hand spread over the glass, heat fogging around her fingers. And suddenly, Charlotte was eighteen again, staring down at a much smaller version of her sister, sobbing because the girls at school teased her for dressing in head-to-toe lime green. Yes, Lilah was older now, but to Charlotte she would always be the sensitive six-year-old who never wore lime green again.

Ali peered over her shoulder. Charlotte turned away before she could witness coffee-dark eyes widen with shock and… No. She didn't want to see that.

Lilah banged on the door, begging her to stop, to think, to not throw a grenade into the wedding.

Charlotte didn't listen…

Her heels struck the marble hard, measured beats as she crossed the atrium toward the bar. The core group was still around two narrow tables pushed together. Sasha and her siblings. Their children had migrated a table over for a rousing poker game. Lizzie and Imani were locked in one of their playful mock-fights which Cindy was refereeing.

And Victoria sat in the middle of it all, basking.

Charlotte took the seat across from her, grateful her parents already went up to their room. Victoria's green eyes swept over her, cataloging. They had played this game before, only Charlotte had no intention of even trying to temper her fury. There was a flicker of apprehension before her lips curved and she lifted her glass of Chardonnay.

"You look tense," she drawled.

"We need to talk," Charlotte stated, contained rage vibrating around each word. "In private."

Imani paused mid-banter beside Lizzie, her attention sliding toward them.

Victoria heard it too. "It'll have to wait."

"It will not wait."

"I'm not in the mood for one of your temper tantrums."

"Tough," Charlotte bit out, fists curling into tight balls in her lap as Lizzie and Sasha tuned into the conversation. She waited half a beat for Victoria to realize she wasn't messing around and get up. But when she didn't— "I guess you're fine with everyone hearing how you've been grooming my little sister for years."

Silence wrapped around the table as all eyes shifted to them.

Victoria scoffed, rolling her eyes. "That girl is even more dramatic than you. She's completely misrepresenting the situation."

In all their years together, Charlotte couldn't remember a single time Victoria owned up to her mistakes and just apologized. The blame always lay at someone else's feet.

"You would know all about twisting things to suit your needs."

Victoria set her wine down, sitting a little straighter. "It's so like you to pin this on me."

"And who would you suggest I hold responsible for pressuring my baby sister into a secret relationship?"

Imani cursed under her breath, her hand darting beneath the table to grip Charlotte's wrist. A warning or an anchor. But there was no stopping what

was about to be said and done.

Victoria folded her arms across her chest, nose in the air. “She flirted with me.”

“And I suppose she convinced you to leave her unconscious on a beach all night.”

Murmurs rippled around them. Charlotte heard none of it. Her focus zeroing in on the woman who hurt Lilah… Charlotte wished she never met her. Never fell for her pretense or let herself be manipulated. She wished she’d been a better sister. She should have seen it. How had she missed it?

“It’s hardly my fault she drank enough to take down an elephant.”

Charlotte’s fist struck the table, hard enough to vibrate through her bones and have glasses and cutlery rattling, drawing the attention of the rest of the bar.

“But it was your decision to leave her out there alone where anything could have happened to her!” she roared, surging to her feet so fast her chair skidded back and toppled over. Imani grabbed her, but Charlotte wrenched free.

“If you hadn’t left me, none of this would’ve happened,” Victoria said coolly, crossing her arms. “You’re blowing this out of proportion. Baby girl, I did this for us.”

Something in Charlotte snapped.

She lunged forward, snatched Victoria’s wine glass and upended it over her head. Chardonnay splashed down, soaking her hair and shirt, flooding the air with a sticky scent.

“I am not your baby,” Charlotte snarled, grabbing a fistful of Victoria’s shirt and dragging her in close until they were nearly nose to nose. “And I am not your girl!”

Victoria clawed at her wrist, nails scraping. Charlotte barely felt it.

“When are you going to get it through your fucking head that I *don’t* want you?” Charlotte hissed, teeth bared. “You’re manipulative. You think you’re entitled to everything you might possibly want. You never take responsibility for your own shit. I don’t care about the hell you put me through and how you *still* won’t stop trying to manipulate me.” Her voice cracked. “What I care about is when I stopped playing your little games, you went after my *little* sister.”

Victoria’s lips pulled back into a sneer. “Just admit you’re jealous so we can move on.”

“I wouldn’t let you touch me if we were the last two people left on this planet,” Charlotte spat, her voice filled with menace. “You’re emotionally stunted, and I would get a better orgasm grinding on a goddamn cactus than you are capable of dishing out.”

“Char, let’s take a walk,” Imani warned low, looping an arm around her waist. It was perhaps the only thing that kept Charlotte from spitting in Victoria’s face, or throwing a fist. That reminder that Victoria was the type to sue… and they were in public… on the weekend of Lizzie’s wedding.

Fuck.

This would blow everything apart.

“You manipulated her,” Charlotte said, voice shaking. “You isolated her, threatened her, abused her, and you don’t have the decency to apologize.”

“She’s an adult.”

“You are twenty-two fucking years older than her and you knew exactly what you were doing.”

“I have nothing to apologize for.”

“Really? Not even manipulating her into making out with you while *we* were still engaged?”

Victoria went pale. Charlotte could see it… the moment she realized Lilah told her *everything.* She thought she convinced Lilah to keep that part buried.

“You will never touch my family again,” Charlotte growled. “You do *not* speak to us in public. You do not even *look* in our direction. And *if* I *ever* find out you tried to contact Lilah again, there’s no limit to what I will do to ruin your life.” Charlotte gave her a little shake. “Do I make myself clear?”

Victoria glared back, defiant to the end.

“That’s enough,” Sasha cut in, her voice slicing through the red haze.

She released her with a small shove. Imani hauled her back a step. Her eyes stayed locked on Sasha… a pivotal moment lay before them, all trust hung in the balance. Sasha knew it too. The first few times they met when she and Victoria first started seeing each other, they’d gotten along. Charlotte used to think they could’ve become friends if things hadn’t gone south between her and Victoria.

“You’re not going to let her treat me like this,” Victoria sniffled, reaching for Sasha’s arm, “are you?”

Sasha caught her wrist. Her eyes scanned the room, landing somewhere behind Charlotte where the muffled sounds of Lilah's panic and pain were coming from. Charlotte didn't want to look. Instead, she watched dark eyes narrow in assessment, something aching cracked across her stoic expression.

"Look me in the eye and tell me you didn't," Sasha demanded.

Victoria changed tactics. "It's a misrepresentation of the facts." Sasha's hand tightened in warning. "You know me. Do you really think I would do something like this?"

Sasha's gaze went hard, flashing with more emotion than was ever allowed to show through her usual mask. "Get your things. You're done here."

Charlotte thought maybe she misheard. But Sasha dropped Victoria's wrist like it was suddenly hot enough to burn. "Jazz," Sasha murmured, a subtle, barely detectable note of desperation in her tone.

Jasmine rose behind her, stepping up beside Sasha not needing more than that to know what her little sister needed.

"We'll have a car take you to the airport," Jasmine said, her tone frigid and unforgiving.

"You can't be serious. She's being ridiculous—"

"Don't say another word," Jasmine commanded.

Victoria opened her mouth, but Sasha held up her hand. Her tone was sharp, every inch the courtroom legend once again. "You heard my sister," Sasha said, locking eyes with Charlotte. "Don't try to contact any of my family again. If you try to speak to Lilah…" her gaze hardened. "Charlotte won't be the only one who ruins your life."

"You're just going to believe her?" Victoria sobbed, chin wobbling. "What happened to innocent until proven guilty?"

"You just pled guilty when you couldn't look me in the eye and say you didn't *coerce* Lilah, and *cheat* on Charlotte," Sasha's tone left no room to second guess with how final it was. "She's younger than Natasha," Sasha seethed, disgusted. "I don't want to see you again. You are nothing and no one to me."

The words echoed like a thunderclap. Victoria's tears dried up, her face going furious. But all Charlotte could feel besides the sea of rolling anger was relief. When it came to it, Sasha chose Lizzie without hesitation.

Charlotte needed air.

Imani released her, sensing the shift. Lizzie was gone from the table, Charlotte spotted her across the room, holding a teary Lilah while Natasha and her cousins formed a shield around them.

Charlotte turned for the exit.

Her rage still thundered through her veins. Sweat slicked her palms. Behind her, Victoria was still arguing her case.

Her gaze snagged on the figure in the doorway.

Ali.

The sight of those wide brown eyes hit Charlotte like a physical blow to the stomach, knocking the remaining air from her lungs. A sudden, sickly heat crawled up the back of Charlotte's neck, pricking under her skin—the kind that made her fingers itch to pluck at the dark hairs lining her brow.

Ali's fingers tapped against her locket, fast and rhythmic, like they always did when her world went unsteady.

Her chest didn't just twist, it caved in… The adrenaline that had fueled her confrontation with Victoria curdled in an instant, transforming into something acidic and heavy in her gut. Of course Ali would look shaken. Anyone would. Charlotte's mind, traitorous and cruel, assumed the worst.

She hadn't just thrown a grenade into the wedding; she'd let the ugliness inside her spill out and blacken everything.

Gods, she never wanted to be the one to put that look on Ali's face. She only ever wanted to be the place Ali felt safest, but as she stood there, she felt oversized and jagged. Her pulse thundered in her ears, a rhythmic reminder of her own heartbeat that she currently loathed. Ali was so, so good… she was sunlight… and Charlotte was just the shadow that ruined it.

Fuck. I am the bomb, she thought, the realization settling in her marrow like frost. *And I just went off.*

Charlotte looked away, fingers twitching toward her eyebrow before she stopped herself. She didn't need smeared makeup on top of everything else.

Ali took a step toward her, but Charlotte felt a frantic, vibrating need to disappear, to shrink until she was nothing but an inconspicuous speck. Charlotte walked right past Ali, her spine rigid, shoulders rolled back on instinct like she was something unbreakable.

Ali called her name in a fragile voice. It was a sound so delicate it made Charlotte's skin crawl with self-disgust. She'd done that… turned that sunlight into something trembling.

Charlotte didn’t stop. She couldn’t. With every step, she felt the phantom weight of everyone’s eyes on her back, peeling her open. She wasn’t safe for anyone like this… this riot wrapped in skin.



FOR HOURS, Charlotte sat alone on the balcony. The world was dark, still, and silent, save for the gentle breeze rolling in off the valley. She wished she could say the same for her mind, where a raging sea churned without mercy. Without the moon, everything would be cast in pitch, impenetrable as her heart now felt.

At long last, the door slid open.

Ali stepped out onto the balcony and stopped, hovering near the threshold like she wasn’t sure she was allowed to exist in the same space. She stood silent and fidgeting, studying Charlotte where she sat like stone, unmoving except for loose strands escaping the messy bun the wind kept worrying free.

The longer the silence stretched, the more Charlotte knew the beginning of the end had finally come.

Still, Charlotte remained frozen, unable to prevent the love of her life from seeing just how wretched she could be. Her fingers clenched around a crystal tumbler full of whiskey and waited.

“Hi,” Ali murmured, voice rough with exhaustion.

Charlotte hated the uncertainty threading that single syllable… It was a low, wary sound that made Charlotte’s skin feel much too snug. She never wanted to be the reason Ali slipped toward the dark room. Judging by the way her fingers toyed with her locket, she’d pushed her toward it.

“Hey,” Charlotte replied after a beat. Her voice felt like it was being dragged over gravel, rough and crisp as the night air around them. Inside she was loud and humming, like a high-voltage wire with nowhere to ground itself. She was vibrating with it, frustrated that she couldn’t just flip a switch and be *normal*.

“I… um,” Ali swallowed, her gaze flickering to Charlotte’s hands before darting back up to her face. “I just left Lilah. Natasha took her to her suite. She’s okay, just feeling a little down.”

A jagged shard of relief pierced through Charlotte's chest, followed immediately by a fresh wave of shame. She had been so busy drowning in her own anger she forgot to check the wreckage.

"Lizzie and Sasha had a tiny fight," Ali said, holding up her hand, thumb and forefinger a hair's breadth apart, "but they made up really fast. They're still getting married. And I convinced Imani to not find Victoria and give her a beat down." She shook her head, a ghost of a weary smile touching her lips. "Not that you need to know that. I'm sorry, I don't… this is a lot."

Charlotte's fingers tightened around her glass again, the frantic buzzing in her limbs dulling… Ali had taken care of the people she loved most when she was too much of a mess to do so herself. Charlotte had been a whirlwind and Ali had been an anchor. She walked in the wake of her storm, picking up the pieces, soothing and easing the chaos that remained.

Ali wrung her fingers, dragging in a deep breath. "Are you okay?"

The question felt like a hand reaching into the dark. And for the first time in her life she felt a terrifying, unfamiliar urge to stop holding her own weight… and lean. But her jaw was still locked so tight her teeth ached.

Ali huffed, a shaky exhale. "Of course you aren't. Who would be? I don't think anyone could have predicted this."

I should have. The voice in her head returned, vicious and familiar.

She knew Victoria. She knew each and every version of her. The charming intellectual, the sensitive dreamer, the ambitious entrepreneur, and yes, the manipulative, soul-sucking, succubus of a woman who wore Charlotte down, leaving nothing but a drained-out husk who pretended it hadn't hurt.

Charlotte had been infatuated when they first met… If she closed her eyes she could feel the ghost of that intoxication.

But those echoes were buried beneath the searing burn of her rage. The truth stood with utter clarity… Victoria was whoever suited herself in the moment. But even so, it baffled as much as it infuriated her that she would suggest she'd done this to Lilah… for them…

"It's pretty late," Ali added quietly. "Will you come to bed with me?"

Oh, how Charlotte wished she could.

She wished she was the kind of person who could let her anger burn itself out and leave ash instead of wreckage. She wouldn't sleep for hours. She knew that with the certainty of gravity.

“No.”

Ali shifted, but nodded once. “Okay.”

She retreated, sliding the door closed. The scrape of metal on metal grated along Charlotte’s nerves.

She swallowed the burn rising in her throat, ignoring the sting behind her eyes.

What a fucking mess this weekend became. What was she supposed to do? What could she do? All of this was her fault. She brought the wolf into her own home… to feast not just on her but her family. On *Lilah*.

She could stomach the abuse from her own experience. She couldn’t face Lilah’s trauma. She wanted to scream. To rend the world in two. Beautiful, sweet, and joyful Lilah… She delivered her baby right into the devil’s hands, and Charlotte would never forgive herself.

The door slid open again and the balcony light snapped on. Ali reappeared, a small first aid kit in her hand. Her steps were careful, measured, like she was approaching a wounded animal that might bolt or bite. She knelt in front of Charlotte and something like concern flickered through the rage.

Ali pulled out an alcohol swab and took *Charlotte’s* hand, the one that had fisted the front of Victoria’s shirt.

“What are you doing?” Charlotte asked, fighting the instinct to jerk away.

Ali lifted her own hand into view. Scratches… Some shallow, some gouged deep enough to bleed. Only then did the dull ache register.

“I’m making sure you don’t get infected,” Ali said, voice gentle, steadier than moments ago. “I wouldn’t put it past her to lace her nails with some kind of toxin.”

A sound caught in Charlotte’s throat, half snort, half sob. Ali’s mouth twitched, but her eyes stayed soft, like she was glad to get any kind of reaction out of her.

“This might sting,” Ali warned, dabbing one scratch with such care it stole Charlotte’s breath.

Her emotions churned then shifted like the tide to crash against the wall holding it all back. Charlotte clung to anger like it was the only thing holding her together. But it started slipping through her fingers anyway. Each subtle sting was a balm to her temper. Hairline fractures appeared in

the seawall. One tear broke free, cooling as it plummeted down the slope of her cheek.

Ali didn't notice at first. She was too intent on cleaning every mark.

She didn't deserve this…

Why was Ali here, taking care of her after she scared her? After she'd been so cold? After she said no like a door slamming shut?

"I'm sorry," Charlotte rasped, a note of fragile desperation barely detectable, "if I—scared you."

Ali's motions slowed to a stop and her gaze lifted, brown eyes tracking the tear's path. She lifted a thumb, brushing the wetness away.

"Can I be honest with you?"

Charlotte nodded, her fingers tightening around the tumbler until faceted crystal bit into her skin.

"I am scared—" The words hit Charlotte like a punch to the gut— "but not of you."

Charlotte went utterly still.

Ali peered down at Charlotte's hand in hers, then back up again, the wind catching loose strands of her hair and lifting them like the night craved to touch her warmth too.

"You always know how to help me," Ali said quietly. "When my world gets loud, you make it all go quiet. When I'm in the dark room… you bring candles and snacks and company. You ground me. You encourage me. You're patient with me when anyone else would be frustrated."

Her voice cracked and it was the crack that made Charlotte believe she meant what she said.

"You make bad days better," Ali swallowed, eyes shining. "And I'm scared because I don't know what you need."

Charlotte's chest tightened, sharp and aching.

The truth was she hadn't even been looking for coffee when she stumbled upon Ali McCarthy all those months ago. The January chill had settled into Boston to stay when she caught a glimpse of her smile through the Blend & Brew window, hair pulled into a messy bun, copper strands fallen loose. Blue and gold eyeliner catching the light in a bold mix of lines and dots. Laughter bright on her face. What had made her laugh like that? Charlotte would never know. But those damn dimples caught mid-stride and her steps stuttered, changing course without command, drawn by some

invisible string. The second those coffee eyes met hers, her heart began to truly beat for the first time.

She hadn't been looking. She found her anyway. And when she smiled anew, Charlotte swore lightning struck.

"I want to help," Ali continued, words tumbling out one after the other. "I want to be your steady in the storm. I want to be your safe harbor. But I don't want to rush you into feeling better because you're entitled to feel this, for however long you need to… You've never once rushed me. You always go at my pace."

She hadn't expected Ali to be so understanding the first time she experienced the might of her temper. People always said her fury was like a storm. That she could call down thunder with a look and lightning with a word. But Ali came into her life like a bolt from a clear sky. No warning, no clouds, just a thunderous boom echoing through the empty chambers of her heart with electric intensity, leaving behind the sudden understanding that her world had fundamentally changed.

"I just—" Ali's laugh wobbled, small and anxious, her words tripping and bumbling. "I feel like I'm winging it. And that gives me anxiety because I don't want to accidentally make it worse."

Ali had arrived like the end of a drought.

And like the first rain after a long hot summer… the reality seeped in… Ali could never make anything worse. Because she was *in love* with Ali McCarthy. She loved her, of course she did, had loved her since the beginning. But this was different. This was the full weight of it landing without warning, quiet and complete… like gravity. Her heart didn't belong to her—maybe it never did. Maybe it always belonged to the woman kneeling in front of her with a first aid kit and shaking hands and the audacity to be afraid of making things worse.

Her grip on her glass loosened.

Ali peered up at her, searching. "You're unreadable right now," she whispered. "I'm making it worse, aren't I—"

Charlotte moved without thought.

She cradled Ali's face and kissed her, a quiet, grounding kiss that stopped the spiral mid-breath. When she pulled back Ali's lashes fluttered, dazed.

She wanted to tell her. But they both deserved a moment that was their own. She didn't want anger still smoldering in her voice when she finally

said it.

"You could never make it worse."

Ali huffed a laugh, rolling her eyes. "That's sweet, but unrealistic."

Charlotte guided their eyes together, holding the two of them steady with just a look. "You are sunlight, Lina."

Ali's breath caught.

Charlotte exhaled, thumb brushing Ali's bottom lip. "I'm a mess right now. My emotions are everywhere. I'm still so angry. It's been handled, but the rage is still here, and I don't know where to put it."

Tension leaked from Ali's shoulders, her body exhaling as if she'd finally been given the right map.

Charlotte thanked every lucky star she ever scoffed at… somehow, even like this, she found the right words.

Her own anger shifted in Ali's presence, ebbing just a fraction. Normally, it took her far longer to calm the storm. Ali always tipped things upside down.

A small, wicked smirk tugged at Ali's mouth. "I might have an idea."

She rose onto her knees and kissed Charlotte hard.

Charlotte made a rough sound she didn't bother to swallow, fingers threading into Ali's hair, gripping, tugging as she met her motion for motion. Ali's teeth sank into Charlotte's lower lip, leaving zero doubt for how she planned to calm the storm inside her.

Charlotte paused just long enough to ask if she was sure. Ali didn't hesitate and pounced.

Later—much later—when they finally collapsed into bed in a tangled, breathless heap, Charlotte stared into the dark and let herself acknowledge the reality… The sea of her anger was still there, but it didn't feel quite so vast.

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ALI

TENSION ENCASED THE BREAKFAST TABLE. Hanging thick in the air, heavy and poisonous, coating every clink of silverware and rustle of clothing. Everyone knew what happened. Everyone *except* Diana and James, who had gone to bed after dinner, blissfully unaware.

Hardly anyone spoke. Eyes fixed on their plates, coffee cups, anywhere but each other. Ali was doing her level best to keep her tics in check for Charlotte's sake. But if someone didn't say something soon, she would explode.

"Is someone going to tell me what the hell is going on?" Diana demanded, dropping her fork with a sharp clatter that made Ali flinch. "You all look about as happy as a flock of wet hens."

No one looked… except Ali, whose gaze darted instinctively around the table, cataloging every reaction. Diana's eyes narrowed.

"Delilah," she said, sharp and precise, like she was lining up a shot and knew just where to aim to get each of them to talk. "You're looking suspiciously guilty."

Lilah's gaze snapped up, eyes wide, panic flashing across her face so fast Ali's chest tightened in sympathy.

"Spill."

"No one is making Lilah do anything she doesn't want to," Charlotte snapped, her tone clipped and dangerous.

"Well someone needs to explain," Diana shot back, already barreling ahead. Ali could see exactly where Charlotte got her strength of will from. "Lizzie and Sasha haven't gushed over each other once. Imani is on her

third mimosa and we've been seated less than thirty minutes." Her gaze slid like a blade of ice across them all. "Natasha and Zuri are fussing over Lilah—"

"I'm not fussing," Natasha denied, then went for her own mimosa, downing it in one go.

Diana didn't even slow down.

"Lilah looks like she's been caught sneaking out after curfew. Ali hasn't smiled or said a damn word." Her eyes flicked to Ali, pinning her in place. "Charlotte looks like she's five seconds from blowing a fuse."

Ali swallowed, unable to look away as Diana delivered the kill shot.

"Where the hell is Victoria?"

The table went dead silent… no one moved. No one blinked.

"Ah, there it is," Diana seethed, reading the room like an open book. She paused long enough to drum her nails against the table, once. Her gaze whipped toward Ali again. "Ali, darling, would you be a dear and tell me what happened."

Charlotte leaned forward, partially blocking Diana's view as she fixed her with an equally frigid stare. "Do not put Ali in the middle of this."

"It's clear she's already smack dab in the middle," Diana seethed, her accent coming out more and more with every word.

Ali's hand reached for her locket, she had to… her entire being itched to give into her tics.

"Love," James said, resting his hand over one of Diana's. "I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation."

"Yes, and one of them needs to spit it out," Diana said, a muscle in her jaw feathering.

Ali shot up, the scrape of wood against tile too loud for her ears. She was going to burst if she didn't get out of there.

"I promised I wouldn't say anything unless asked specific questions. And I'd really prefer no one asked me those questions."

Her body trembled from head-to-toe with pent up anxiety. She didn't wait for permission. She was halfway out of the restaurant when voices rose behind her. Each one sharp and overlapping.

Someone said her name.

Someone else swore.

It was her fault… her mind supplied, unhelpful but as immediate as ever.

Ali didn’t slow down, the wind bit at her cheeks as she made it outside and started up the hill back to the resort. Her mind racing, fingers tapping.

The room felt like a sanctuary the second she closed the door behind her. She kicked off her shoes, slipping out of her clothing to let her skin breathe. She didn’t bother with the curtains, just collapsed face down onto the bed and let her eyes fall shut.



WHEN SHE WOKE, the light had shifted.

A blanket was draped over her, tucked around her shoulders with care, and for one blissful, disorienting moment, Ali considered closing her eyes and sleeping until tomorrow. Her body still felt heavy, like it hadn’t quite caught up to itself yet.

“Hey,” Charlotte whispered, nails trailing across the back of her neck and the base of her hair in a slow, grounding sweep.

Ali jolted, eyes fluttering open, fighting the sleep that clung to her. Her mouth moved, mumbling something altogether unintelligible.

“You didn’t answer my texts,” Charlotte said, no immediately detectable note of the fury Ali half-expected. “It’s time to get ready for the rehearsal dinner.”

“Whattimesit?” Ali mumbled, propping herself up on one elbow and rubbing at her eyes.

“We’ve got about fifteen minutes before we need to leave,” Charlotte said, already moving toward the closet and pulled out the dress Ali planned to wear.

“Fif—fifteen!” Ali shouted, jolting fully awake, limbs flailing as she tried to extricate herself. “What happened to the rehearsal?”

“You were sleeping so good. I couldn’t wake you up,” Charlotte murmured, passing by with Ali’s shoes in hand.

Ali swung her legs over the edge of the bed, heart thudding. The morning came back to her all at once, raised voices, tight faces, and tension thick enough to choke on. She stumbled to her feet and moved to the bathroom, scrubbing her face under cool water.

“I’m sorry,” Ali said, the words slipping out before she could stop them.

“For what?” Charlotte asked from the closet.

Ali stared at the bathroom counter, at what had once been her perfectly organized makeup bag and was now just… chaos in the form of polished metal, bright plastic, and labels blurring together.

A novel for your next quiet moment.

Find something to read on Lokepub.

“Everyone’s mad,” she said, the cap on her internal anxiety loosened, letting it seep through. “Everyone’s fighting. I keep thinking maybe I should’ve minded my own business and not followed Victoria. But then I think it needed to come out. But did it have to come out at the wedding? Then this morning, I just threw a grenade into brunch and left. Now we’re going to be late. You hate being late.” Her words sped up, breath shortening, struggling to find anything. “And I need you to know I’m actually chronically late unless it’s important or work-related. But you’re important, so I try really hard. When you aren’t around, I set like six alarms!”

Her eyes stung as her fingers fumbled through the bag.

“Fuck,” she muttered. “Which one of these is mascara?”

Charlotte’s hand appeared in her field of vision, calm and steady, plucking out the mascara and a tube of dark green eyeliner.

“No, I can’t wear colored eyeliner,” Ali blurted, trying to grab it back. “I’m trying to be classy.”

Charlotte lifted it out of reach and fixed her with a look, one hand coming up to grip Ali’s jaw, holding her steady.

“Listen to me.”

Ali’s mind went quiet. Just like that.

“Families fight,” Charlotte said.

“But—”

“No.” Charlotte’s tone softened but didn’t waver. “Listen. My family fights. We get loud. Sometimes, we yell. That doesn’t mean we stop loving each other.”

Ali searched her face, looking for doubt, for frustration, for blame but she didn't find any.

"None of what's happened the last two days is your fault. You hear me?"

She could see the lingering pain, a mix of blame and guilt swimming in those ocean eyes. But after last night she suspected it was mostly directed inward.

"It's not yours either."

Charlotte shook her head, her hand falling away. "I should have seen it. I should have protected her."

"You couldn't have known," Ali countered, fighting the urge to grab Charlotte's hand and glue it back to her face. But she learned, when Charlotte was feeling vulnerable she needed to be the one to initiate contact. "You're not psychic."

"I knew her," Charlotte said, a hard edge lining her tone. "Every version. I knew what she was capable of. And then with you… I should have done better."

Ali understood then. This wasn't rejection. It was guilt. The same kind she carried, just sharpened by Charlotte's need to fix, to protect, to be perfect.

"Hey," Ali said, reaching for her hand. "We made a promise, remember?"

"What promise?" Charlotte asked, brows scrunching together though her eyes remained downcast.

"We promised we wouldn't worry about being perfect with each other. We'd give each other space to make mistakes and not always get it right. To breathe. We'd talk about it and support each other through whatever it is."

Charlotte looked up, the tide shifting in ocean eyes.

"I just want *you*, Charlotte," Ali said, feeling more certain of the truth in those words than ever. "Even on your stormy days."

Charlotte's eyes went glassy, her posture loosening. "But—"

"No," Ali cut across. "You're a wonderful sister and daughter. And you're the best *totally* fake girlfriend I've ever had."

Charlotte blinked rapidly. "Lina…"

"Babes…"

They held each other's gaze, a thousand unspoken things settling into place.

Charlotte held up the eyeliner. “I like when you wear colored eyeliner. Even the neon ones.”

Ali smiled despite herself, a knot she didn’t even realize was tied inside her unraveled. “Really?”

“It’s very you. And I happen to really like who you are… more than like, if I’m honest.”

Warmth bloomed in Ali’s chest and the nagging thought that some parts of her were too much faded. Maybe to Charlotte, she was just the right amount.

“I guess dark green is classier than lime green.”

“It’s for daytime events.” Charlotte shook her head with a quiet laugh. “Or an 80s themed party. Or whenever you’re feeling quirky.”

Ali snorted, imagining Charlotte in head to toe 80s attire. Then, she saw the dress and Charlotte’s hair and simple make up. She was a vision… the air knocked clean from her chest and she forgot how to even draw a new one in.

Charlotte’s indigo evening gown made her look like she was born of starry night. Silver threads shimmered through, tiny diamonds catching the light like distant constellations… Ali couldn’t help but smile, drinking in the sight of her.

“Wow,” she said, breathless and unable to look away. “You look—You look incandescent.”

Quick and faint the glimmer of a smile sparked at one corner of her mouth. Its luminosity lingered and Charlotte smirked. “You’re such a simp.”

“For you? Absolutely.” Ali turned back to her make up and the mirror, realizing she’d been naked the entire time. “I’ll hurry,” she said, noting the way Charlotte’s eyes were definitely glued to her ass.

Charlotte dragged her gaze back up Ali’s form, lips curving into a sultry line. “We can be five minutes late.”

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CHARLOTTE

Hours earlier…

THE MOMENT ALI left the table, everything went to shit.

As if she'd been the last little bit of peace holding everything back. Emotions broke free, spilling everywhere. The only good thing was Charlotte got to yell loudly, a few times. It only took their mother another ten minutes before the entire story spilled out.

The devastation that washed across Diana's face cracked something open inside Charlotte. It wasn't anger. But it shattered Charlotte completely.

Charlotte couldn't stomach sticking around. She couldn't face that look. Lilah was her baby sister, and she promised her mother a thousand times over she would always look after her.

It was warmer than the day before, but the wind cut sharp.

A block over, a small park sat tucked between buildings. A bench rested beneath a tree across from a small playground. Charlotte dropped onto it, elbows on her knees, hands clasped tight.

A group of kids tore past her in a blur of motion, their laughter pealing through the air. A little girl with bouncing curls lagged behind, working hard not to be left out.

Charlotte watched them longer than she meant to.

She hoped someday Lilah would stop chasing after everyone else's path. There was a path all her own waiting for her. There always had been.

Charlotte's teeth ground together. This would just set her back, make her even more timid and afraid. A life Charlotte never wanted for her.

Nearby, an older blonde girl lifted the smaller one into a swing. The little girl shrieked with laughter as her sister pushed her higher, curls flying, joy echoing through the park.

“That’s a sight that brings back memories.”

Charlotte went still, line of sight fixed on the scene, refusing to acknowledge him.

James sat beside her anyway.

“It doesn’t seem so long ago that you were the one pushing Lilah,” he said, pulling a little square of fabric from a pocket. “Making her swear to hold on so she wouldn’t fall.”

He removed his glasses and wiped the lenses with care.

“We do have a lot of love in this family.”

He squinted at the glasses, then added casually, “Should I wear the cornflower blue tie or the navy one to the wedding? I keep flip-flopping.”

Charlotte snorted despite herself and rolled her eyes.

“We have been over this.”

“Have we?” he asked, holding his glasses up to the light, checking for smudges.

Her anger began to bank. He always did this. Distracted her just long enough for the storm to lose momentum. He always found a way to reach her when no one else could. It didn’t matter that she knew what he was doing. Or perhaps it helped… *because* she knew.

“I think the cornflower blue would bring out the blue in your eyes,” she said, tone flat. “But you’re well aware you’re required to wear the green tie we picked. You must coordinate with the family.”

James smirked, slipping his glasses back on. “Right. How could I forget?”

“You could wear the blue tonight to the rehearsal dinner.”

“I knew you’d have the answer,” he smiled. “You’ve always been such a bright girl.”

The praise softened something sharp in her chest. A stark contrast to the lingering self-loathing gnawing at her insides.

“You’ve grown into such a brilliant woman.”

He leaned forward, hazel eyes—Lilah’s eyes—sparkling with affection. He never got mad or frustrated with her. Always patient and effortlessly kind.

He would say just the right thing and her anger would begin to evaporate…

“I’m proud of you, Charlie.”

“Don’t—” her voice cracked, the sincerity in his tone breaking her.

How could he say that when he knew the wolf she allowed into their family?

“I’ve always been proud of you,” he said simply. “You know that.”

“I don’t deserve it today, Dad.”

“You are always deserving, Charles.”

She almost scoffed. Charles was a nickname he used when he needed to make room for something other than anger. It was simply so absurd. But without her anger, her spirit wilted like a tomato plant in the heat.

“How can you even look at me?” she asked quietly.

“Because I love you.”

“But it’s my fault.”

“Oh?” He tipped his head. “You told Victoria to terrorize your little sister?”

“What?” Charlotte blurted, gaze jerking toward him. “No.”

“Then you must have sat by and done nothing once you knew?”

She passed a hand over her face. “No. My retaliation was… swift.” The edge of her lip twitching upward. “I dumped her glass of wine over her head.”

His head fell back, a bark of laughter tumbling free. He wrapped an arm around her, pulling her snug against him. “That’s my girl.”

They watched the children play for a moment as Charlotte took a few deep breaths like she could breathe away the rest of the ache.

His next words were soft. “Don’t hold onto blame that isn’t yours to carry.”

She pressed herself more snuggly against him, fighting the burn in her eyes, as a weight lifted. It was going to be okay. They weren’t the kind of family who just walked away and let things fall apart.

“I’m sorry for yelling at everyone.”

“I know. You’ll make it right. Just remember: families fight. Our family gets loud. Sometimes we yell.” He squeezed her shoulder. “That doesn’t mean we stop loving each other.”

She knew he was right, knew that blaming herself wasn’t doing anyone any good. The storm in her settled, really settled. She rested her head on his

shoulder for a minute, watching the children race across the playground, breathing in deep steady breaths as the truth settled.

She'd given Victoria enough sway in her life. She didn't deserve another moment.

James was right. They were going to be okay. There was too much love for it to end any other way.

"So," he said lightly. "How's your speech coming along?"

Charlotte stilled.

"...Shit."



THE DOOR banged shut behind her as she stepped into the living area of their suite.

The cold marble did nothing to quiet her steps as she absently gathered the trail of Ali's discarded clothes and tried to remember where she stashed her laptop. Inked thighs and a bare ass greeted her.

God damn, that ass.

Ali lay sprawled on her stomach across the rumpled covers, mouth parted, soft snores puffing rhythmically into the pillows.

The sight didn't surprise her as much as she thought it might. Of course Ali had retreated somewhere quiet. Her tics had been ramping up at breakfast, and neither of them had slept nearly enough. Of course she crashed.

Charlotte followed the smooth lines of her body, the body she bent in very interesting ways the night before. Carefully, she pulled a blanket over her, tucking it around her but leaving her feet poking out the way she liked.

Her laptop waited for her in the bag she hadn't opened since getting off the plane. Still charged. She settled on the other side of the bed, the steady rise and fall of Ali's breathing oddly grounding as she opened the blank document.

She chose a different font, perfecting the formatting, waiting for words that weren't coming. The cursor blinked at her… taunting her.

This was her twin. The other half of her soul, and she couldn't string two words together. How was she even supposed to articulate what this day

meant? What *Lizzie* meant? How much love lived inside her for this person who had walked beside her since birth.

The cursor continued to wait patiently for her to produce words. Words that seemed too out of reach and abstract to articulate.

“Hey,” Ali mumbled.

Charlotte studied her, lips pressing into a thin line to smother her laugh when it became apparent Ali was still fast asleep.

“Hi,” she whispered back.

“Can you bring me a popsicle?”

“Sure,” Charlotte murmured, letting her head fall back against the headboard. “What color would you like?”

“Ketchup.”

“Iconic choice, love.” She paused, then smiled as an idea struck. “What should I say in my speech?”

Ali was silent long enough Charlotte thought the moment passed…

“Somethin’ from when you were little,” Ali mumbled, her body entirely still. “How amazin’ Lizzie is.”

Charlotte began typing, rough notes forming the shape of an outline.

“How you knew Sasha was the one,” Ali hummed. “Love… Wishes for the future… Somethin’ funny.”

Memory and intent wove together, and suddenly the words were there. Fingers flew across the keys with a pleasant mechanical click.

“Thank you, Lina.”

A second later, Ali snorted softly and sank deeper into sleep.

Charlotte studied her, and something warm tightened in her chest until she was achingly full.

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ALI

CHARLOTTE MOVED through the venue like a goddess. Ali trailed in her wake, happily watching the sway of Charlotte's hips and how she worked the room, far more settled after her nap and their talk.

Ali felt confident in her own strapless dress. Pleated satin hugged her curves just right, rich carmine-colored fabric encased her bust and hips before draping straight to the floor. But the part Ali knew would have Charlotte's fingers itching later was the slit climbing high up her thigh, exposing the black ink of her tattoo with every step.

She received more than a few compliments on the dark green eyeliner applied in a dramatic wing. Thanks to Charlotte, she stood a little taller and smiled a little easier.

The tension between the family was still there, a low hum beneath everything, but it wasn't choking anymore. Everything was on the mend.

"How are you doing?" Natasha asked, appearing beside her, wearing a teal sheath dress that looked incredible against her rich brown skin, clinging to every gorgeous curve. "I meant to text you."

Natasha gave Ali's shoulder a brief, affectionate pat. Ali noticed how reserved Natasha was about touch. Lilah hugged her and Natasha accepted it, but she rarely initiated. One second there, gone the next, her hand lifted to push her mix of spiral curls and neat, fresh braids back over her shoulder.

"Better," Ali said honestly, not wanting to trip Natasha's internal lie detector. "I took a seven-hour nap."

Natasha's eyebrows shot up. "Seriously? I nap for more than twenty minutes and I feel like I've been hit by a truck."

“It’s true,” Zuri chimed in. “She gets droopy and everything.”

“Aw,” Ali said, logging that detail away as she swiped a glass of champagne from a passing waiter. “Maybe you’re dehydrated?”

Dinner followed soon after, and Ali, who hadn’t finished her breakfast and slept right through lunch, was ravenous. Charlotte sat beside her, leg bouncing beneath the table.

“Oh your speech!” Ali blurted suddenly, fork hovering halfway to her mouth. She told Charlotte she would help her and listen to her practice but that was before everything blew up. “Just speak from your heart. The words are in there.”

Charlotte smiled, leaning in to press a kiss to her lips. Her hand slid through the slit of Ali’s dress, warm as it wrapped around her thigh. One by one, Ali’s thoughts dissolved, pooling somewhere deep and quiet inside her, like rain soaking into earth.

Charlotte pulled back with a wink and rose to her feet.

With ethereal grace, she crossed to the microphone, the very air shifting as she took command of the room with a quiet authority. Light rippled through the skirts around her ankles, catching the silver threads and diamonds just so. Her posture was flawless. Her smile, radiant. Eyes bright and alive, leaping out from beneath dark lashes shadowing her lids.

She was resplendent, night triumphant.

“Hello, thank you all for being here tonight and for helping us celebrate Elizabeth and Sasha’s union. As some of you may have gathered, Lizzie and I *are* related.”

Chuckles echoed around the room and Natasha gasped dramatically, earning more laughter. Any second-hand nerves Ali had for Charlotte evaporated at the sound of the first laugh.

“Being twins, we found ourselves in a fair amount of trouble over the years. Usually Lizzie’s fault, of course.”

More laughter followed, and Charlotte’s lips curved into a genuine smile.

“We switched places all throughout elementary, middle, and even high school. And while this revelation will no doubt scandalize our mother,” she paused, glancing toward Diana, “it proved surprisingly useful when it came to helping each other pass certain classes.”

Diana shook her head in exasperation, adding to the amusement.

“But it was also useful when it came to standing up to each other’s bullies. Or helping each other flirt with our respective crushes. We were always there, looking out for one another. At eleven, just after we met James, Lizzie and I made a promise. No matter how our lives changed, no matter how our family grew… nothing would change between us.”

Charlotte took a breath, voice softening. Ali propped her chin in her hand, finding it impossible to ignore just how bright Charlotte shone when she had the attention of an entire room.

“But I’m happy to say things did change. Everything changed. We grew and became our own people. Our family shifted, our home expanded, and so did our hearts. We were blessed with a mother who loved us fiercely. A father who taught us to be brave. And when he left this world, it wasn’t long before he sent James to fill his shoes. We couldn’t have asked for a better second father.”

Charlotte’s voice wavered, and Ali blinked rapidly, chest tightening as she willed Charlotte to get through this.

“And when Lilah came along,” Charlotte continued, smiling through it, “we were handed this tiny little bundle. Lizzie and I made a new promise. We promised we would always fight for each other, but together, we would make sure that tiny baby was loved and safe.”

Ocean eyes drifted across the crowd, landing on her twin.

“Lizzie’s capacity to love is one of her greatest strengths. To be cherished by her is unlike anything else. There’s a ferocity to it. A protectiveness that shatters those made of lesser stuff.”

A murmur of agreement swept the room.

“I knew Sasha was the one before Lizzie did. Long before they ever went on their first date.” Charlotte peeked at Lizzie across the room, both sharing a silent conversation just for them. “You see, Lizzie will admit she had a crush the moment they met. But after their first date, I began to receive text messages. Messages longer than anything I’d ever received about anyone else. She planned their next twelve dates in meticulous detail. Romantic gestures included.” Charlotte smiled. “Of course, when she called me after their third date and told me she was going to marry Sasha, my suspicions were confirmed.”

Lizzie hid her reddening cheeks behind her hands. Sasha couldn’t look anywhere but at her fiancée with open adoration, her strong features

softened into something almost reverent. Lilah's cheeks were splotchy, her smile small and luminous.

"Over time their love has only grown," Charlotte said. "They've built something unshakable. Watching our family evolve again through them has been a gift."

Her voice gentled and Ali thought she'd never heard a better speech.

"There was a time when I was the person Lizzie went to first. And I was never sure I'd ever be okay with not being first. But after meeting Sasha, after seeing the way she loves Lizzie, supports her, challenges her, stands beside her without hesitation… I couldn't be happier that my sister found her person."

A dazzling smile bloomed across Charlotte's face as she raised her glass of champagne.

"Welcome to the family, Sasha. To the brides."

Charlotte floated across the floor to Lizzie, who waited with open arms, green eyes shining. Their embrace was fierce, filled with whispered words meant for no one else. Charlotte and Sasha shared a brief hug before Charlotte turned to Lilah, who stood with remorse in her eyes and tears clinging to her lashes.

Charlotte appraised her for a moment, then pulled her into a hug. Lilah melted into her.

Ali breathed a sigh of relief, everything was finally on the mend.

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CHARLOTTE

THE SUNRISE on the morning of the wedding had been one of the most beautiful Charlotte had seen. She took it as a good sign as she waited in the cafe tucked into an east-facing corner of the resort, waiting for Sasha.

Her hair was still tucked into a satin bonnet when she appeared. A sight Charlotte had never seen, but Lizzie spoke of like it was the most adorable thing. And dammit, it was pretty cute.

“Thank you for agreeing to meet with me last-minute,” Sasha said, settling into the seat across from her and taking a long pull of her coffee.

Charlotte nursed the cream to sugar ratio in her own cup, her face carefully neutral.

“I wanted to apologize.”

Charlotte stilled, glancing up to the warm eyes swimming with sincerity. “For what?”

Sasha sighed, nails clinking against her mug. “For not cutting Victoria loose sooner. For taking her side when I shouldn’t have.”

She could only stare for a long moment, her anger and resentment when it came to Sasha’s role in the Victoria of it all quelling.

“Why did you?” Charlotte asked after a long moment of holding her breath.

“Our fathers worked together. We were the same age. And when things were too much at home, I would go to her house. It felt safer there.” Sasha’s tone was clipped, and having met the late Mr. and Mrs. Pryce, Charlotte could see why. “But her house really wasn’t much better. But at least we had each other.”

“I’m sorry—”

Sasha waved her off, taking another sip of her coffee. “I didn’t want to admit she wasn’t the same girl. I didn’t want to believe she turned into her father… but that was wrong of me. And I’m sorry for what she did to you… and to Lilah.”

Brown eyes misted over and Charlotte knew she meant it. She reached out a hand and waited for Sasha to take it. “I’m sorry you lost her.”

“I think I lost her a long time ago.”

“I’m still sorry.”

“I’m sorry too,” Sasha said, her tone rough with emotion and Charlotte knew she meant it. “I wish I had handled things differently.”

Charlotte squeezed the warm hand in hers before pulling back with a sigh. “It might take me a bit to fully forgive you, if I’m honest.”

Sasha nodded, full lips pressing together.

“But I will,” Charlotte promised.

Those same full lips twitched into something like a smile. “I appreciate that. More than you know.”

Charlotte flashed her own smile, drawing in a quiet breath. Maybe there was hope they wouldn’t always feel like sandpaper rubbing together. Maybe someday, they could even be something like friends… or sisters.

LIZZIE’S long hair spilled over the edge of the sofa she lay sprawled on like a contented, unbothered cat.

The mountaintop venue was a dream. Sweeping views in every direction. Valleys flecked with autumn color, giving way to evergreen forests that crept up the sides of snow-capped peaks. Through one specific window, the arbor waited at the edge of an overlook, dressed in Lizzie’s wedding colors, the mountains rising behind it like something out of a painting. The pictures would be amazing.

Charlotte had planted herself in front of that very window, arms crossed, determined not to sour the morning with her mood.

She wasn’t angry exactly. It was more that something felt unfinished. She needed… she didn’t know what she needed. Her arms tightened around herself, an unconscious attempt to stay grounded.

Earlier, she fussed over Lizzie, who refused to move from the couch until absolutely necessary. She tried to talk to Lilah too, but while things were better between them, her little sister wasn't ready for another serious conversation. Instead, Lilah escaped to the playground outside, with Ali, Zuri, and Natasha taking turns on the swings. Natasha snapped pictures on the snazzy digital camera Ali had brought.

"Cindy," Lizzie began from her sofa, addressing her other bridesmaid, another doctor at the hospital where she worked. "Could you and Imani see if you can find my mom? I need to ask her something about the reception."

They left, the door clicking shut behind them.

Fabric rustled and bare feet padded softly across the carpet.

Lizzie leaned around Charlotte to peer out the window.

"Okay that's what you've been staring at. Thank god. I thought you were disassociating for a minute."

"No…" Charlotte sighed, watching as the three of them leapt off the swings and landed in a tangle of laughter. "I just… everything still feels unresolved. And I feel like I failed."

Lizzie's voice softened. "I know. Me too. But she's not a little girl anymore. She's going to get herself into situations that we might not hear about until after. What matters is when we did know, we protected her."

Charlotte swallowed. "I'm sorry, Lizzie."

"For what?"

"For making a scene on your wedding weekend."

Lizzie snorted. "Oh. Yeah, no. That was epic." She slipped an arm around Charlotte's waist. "I wish I'd recorded the look on her face when you dumped wine over her head."

"You aren't mad?"

"I was, for about five minutes when it happened. But mild justice was served. I've imagined doing much worse to Victoria, that bitch."

Charlotte hesitated. "I heard you and Sasha got into a fight… after?"

Lizzie followed her gaze to where the others were heading back toward the lodge. Her expression held no anger. Just understanding.

"I won't lie and say it wasn't intense," Lizzie said. "You aren't the only one who says dumb, hurtful things when emotions are running hot."

"What'd she say?" Charlotte asked, tone biting, fists tightening around her biceps.

Lizzie softened, shaking her head. “I love that I’m apparently incapable of wrongdoing in your eyes.” Then she sighed. “It was me. I insinuated none of this would’ve happened if she listened to me when I said Victoria was bad news bears.”

She ran a hand through her hair. Charlotte couldn’t quite make sense of it. Lizzie, with her surgeon’s patience and steady calm, losing her temper. It shouldn’t have shocked her… and yet, it did. Maybe because it was overshadowed by the sheer hurricane-like force of Charlotte’s destructive temper. By comparison…

Stop.

Why did she feel the need to compare herself to Lizzie? It was so easy. They were twins for fuck’s sake. But perhaps Lilah wasn’t the only one who grew up measuring herself against her sisters. Maybe Charlotte had been doing it too, always seeing Lizzie as the perfect one, and herself as the volatile liability.

An unfair box to put either of them in. One she was tired of trying to squeeze into. Maybe it was time to stop trying…

Lizzie’s shoulders lifted with a slow breath. “She did that thing where she just lets you talk yourself out and then calmly asks if you’re done. The fucking nerve.” She released an affectionate laugh. “Sometimes, I wish she’d yell back.”

“I’m glad she doesn’t.” Charlotte stepped away, toward her bag.

“Me too.” Lizzie looked up at her. “Ultimately, it ended up being a conversation we needed to have before the wedding. So you don’t have to be mad.”

Charlotte nodded, grateful not to have a new reason not to like Sasha after their morning talk. “I, um… I had something made for us.”

Lizzie blinked. “You did?”

Charlotte pulled out a small, velvet box and carried it back. Lizzie hesitated, then opened it.

Inside were two small charms, crafted from their father’s old cufflinks. One meant to be attached to Lizzie’s bouquet. The other… saved for Charlotte’s own someday. A quiet hope that didn’t feel so feeble anymore.

Moisture welled in both their eyes in sync.

“Twinnie,” Lizzie breathed. “Are these?”

Charlotte nodded. “Papa’s wedding cufflinks.”

Her fingers ran over round faces, the old etched pattern curling inward. They were heavier than they appeared. Their mother kept them safe all these years. Seeing them now, remade and waiting for Lizzie, loosened something deep and aching in both of them.

"He would have loved this day," Charlotte murmured, brushing a tear from Lizzie's cheek.

Lizzie nodded, smiling wistfully as she walked into Charlotte's waiting arms.

❧

JOY CARRIED them the rest of the day.

Hair and makeup were perfected, dresses donned just in time for the photographers to arrive, and ten thousand buttons down the back of Lizzie's gown held Charlotte and their mother hostage for what felt like entire eras of human history.

"How did the ladies at the bridal shop do this so fast?" Diana groused, working her way down her back.

"They did make it look easy," Charlotte agreed.

They shared a look and Diana dropped a hand down to tuck a strand of hair behind Charlotte's ear, and it was a reassurance she didn't know she needed.

"You both grew up so fast," Diana said, eyes misting with tears.

"Ah mama," Lizzie groaned. "You're going to make us all cry if you start."

Ali flitted through it all, capturing precious moments the other photographers missed. Every time she checked her screen and shimmied with delight over a perfect shot, it was impossible not to smile with her.

She spoke to everyone she crossed paths with, learned their stories, took their portraits. Most never thought to ask about her in return. Ali knew so much about everyone, but so few *knew* her.

Out on the overlook, as Ali and Imani roasted each other to keep genuine smiles on everyone's faces, Charlotte could hardly take her eyes off her.

Ali looked radiant in the bronze gown with gold detailing; the bodice hugged her waist before the skirt fluttered softly to the ground. A striking

contrast to the phthalo green of Charlotte's own dress, which clung to every curve and hollow of her body before flaring out to pool around her ankles and kiss the ground. A braided crown of auburn circled Ali's head, wisps escaping to frame her face, sprigs of baby's breath tucked in by Lilah until she looked like something straight out of a woodland fairytale. Charlotte's hair fell in glossy waves swept to one side, dark and dramatic against her skin.

The ceremony itself was full of laughter and happy tears. Both brides were breathtaking, eyes only for each other. Even Sasha's more reserved disposition cracked into something far more radiant. Their vows were touched with a pure vulnerability and unequivocal love. Just as the sun hit the horizon, they marked their commitment with a kiss.

There wasn't a dry eye in sight.

The reception shimmered beneath twinkling lights strung to perfect elegance. Candles glowed from every centerpiece. It remained a sophisticated event right up until Charlotte and Lizzie's cousins hit the open bar and declared the festivities tragically under-hyped.

They took to the dance floor early, only pausing for speeches and milestones, namely the cutting of the cake and the tossing of the bouquets.

Lizzie's bouquet landed squarely in Ali's unsuspecting hands as she stood off to the side, other hand holding her camera. The look of pure confusion on her face when Lizzie turned and tossed it to her directly was beyond adorable.

But it also melted Charlotte's heart as Lizzie's dazzling grin boomed. A very clear seal of approval she would never take lightly, considering Lizzie never once approved Charlotte's past relationships.

Sasha agreed with Lizzie. Or so Charlotte assumed when Sasha didn't even throw her bouquet, just handed it to Charlotte without ceremony as she walked past her.

She knew what she needed to do.

The night wore on, winding down after Lizzie and Sasha made their grand exit, Sasha dipping Lizzie and pressing a deep kiss to her lips before they vanished into the limo. The venue would close soon, but the cousins had already declared a mandatory hotel after-party. One by one, guests left until hardly anyone remained.

Ali lingered near the table, photographing the melting wax and lopsided candle stubs like they were priceless artifacts. Charlotte approached the

band, making one last request and dropping a large tip into their collective jar. They were more than happy to oblige.

Drawing up from behind, Charlotte gently wrapped herself around Ali, pressing a kiss to her cheek.

“The only thing that would have made this night better is fireflies and s’mores!” Ali remarked, a giddy tone to her voice as she snapped one last photo of the dwindling candlestick. “When we—”

She stopped short, tension flickering through her body.

“When we get home,” she corrected quickly, “I think I want to add a couple more paintings to my show. I got some incredible shots of you. Your bone structure is criminal. It’ll be the envy of every artist, the object of all their desires.”

Charlotte smirked against her shoulder, letting Ali ramble herself out, then gently turned her around and pressed a kiss to her still jabbering lips.

“Dance with me?”

Peachy cheeks darkened as Ali ducked her head smiling shyly before meeting Charlotte’s gaze.

“I’d love to.”

Charlotte offered her hand. Ali set her camera aside and gave a playful curtsy before taking it, letting herself be led onto the now-empty dance floor.

“Did you plan this?” Ali whispered, glancing around like they were breaking some secret rule.

“I might have.”

“Why?” Ali asked, one shy dimple peeking out.

“Because you deserve all manner of romance,” Charlotte’s voice was soft but steady as she pressed a kiss to the back of her hand as the first notes floated through the air. “And I enjoy giving it to you.”

Dark eyes glistened with emotion.

Ali’s voice was soft as silk as she whispered, so soft Charlotte almost missed it. “And why is that?”

Charlotte hesitated, the words crowding behind her ribs.

“Because… you are every good feeling I’ve ever had. I want you. I need you. I adore you. I—” The words were the closest they ever were; but Ali tensed slightly in her arms whether from anticipation or fear, she was unsure. They had agreed to talk about them when they got home. She

wouldn’t risk spooking her, on this night so perfect all on its own. “I’m enamored with your existence.”

Ali took a shaky breath. “I… I often find myself contemplating your mysteries.” Her tongue darted out to wet her lip before her gaze lifted again, soft and full of yearning. “I’m captivated by you.”

They held each other like that for a moment longer, until Charlotte finally spun her, sending Ali into a breathless giggle as she twirled across the floor.

Whatever tension lived in Ali’s shoulders melted away as Charlotte drew her close again. It had been a long, emotionally draining weekend, and it was late. Sleep was elusive and the cousins would ensure no one found any until the early hours of the morning. They were truly the fun side of the family as Lilah loved to refer to them.

The song came to an end and Charlotte pulled her close, capturing her lips in a kiss, thankful for these stolen moments they found together.

She wanted more of them. Years worth… a lifetime even.

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CHARLOTTE

THEIR RETURN to Boston found them all gathered at the main house for one last family meal. Diana was feeling sentimental, and no one minded eating her cooking.

Ali and Lilah were out in the backyard, laughing as the dogs tore around them in ecstatic loops, thrilled their humans had returned. On the patio, Charlotte sat beside Imani with little Lily tucked between them, Charlotte's fingers idly rubbing the dog's soft ears.

Imani set her phone face down on the table, eyes tracking the ridiculous cartwheels Ali and Lilah were attempting. Over-the-top and silly as it was, they could both see Ali was keeping Lilah's mind off Victoria.

Ali was just… too good. Her laughter too infectious. Her joy too genuine. And it was a time they were all meant to be happy. Charlotte loved her all the more that she wouldn't allow Victoria's memory to dampen it.

Imani leaned forward just as Charlotte lifted her teacup, her voice dropping into a conspiratorial whisper.

"When are we going ring shopping?"

Charlotte choked, coughing into her hand as Imani leaned back with a victorious grin.

"You better hurry," Imani added, smirking toward the yard, "before I switch sides and ask her myself. I think I've got a shot."

Charlotte snorted, thumping her chest and clearing her throat.

"You want to go on the pussy diet?" she rasped.

Imani's face twisted in horror.

“Absolutely not.” She waved a hand. “Never mind that. When and where?”

“Aren’t you missing a vital step?” Charlotte asked.

Imani’s brows scrunched together. “Impossible.”

“We still aren’t together… technically.”

“Still!” Imani roared in outrage. “What do you *mean*?”

“Don’t you think I would’ve told you?” Charlotte muttered, feeling ridiculous for letting it drag on so long.

“There’s nothing fake about whatever is going on with you two,” Imani growled, fist thumping against the tabletop. “Skip to the end already.”

“But the journey is the best part,” Charlotte countered, snickering into her cup.

“Fuck the journey! Just ask her, dammit.”

“I can’t just ask her.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Where is the romance in that?”

Imani scoffed, rolling her eyes so hard Charlotte worried they might stick. *“Lesbians.”* She growled under her breath like a curse.



DINNER WAS SUBDUED COMPARED to the weekend’s festivities. Everyone was officially worn out, Ali and Lilah most of all, both looking drowsy like the cartwheels took the rest of their energy.

Food revived a few of them, at least a little.

“Are you looking forward to seeing Willow tonight?” Diana asked Ali, who was demolishing her bowl of ice cream.

“Oh yes,” Ali chirped, pulling out her phone. “Look at this picture Wren sent me.”

The screen showed Willow sprawled in the middle of the floor, belly up, looking up adorably at the camera. The phone made a slow circuit around the table before returning to Ali.

“Charlotte, have you heard from your sister?” Diana asked.

“I did. They’re safe and enjoying the amenities,” Charlotte replied, dipping an Oreo into a cup of milk, feeling a little wrong indulging without

Lizzie. “Said she won’t be coming back, so I suppose that’s the last we’ve seen of them.”

“She will be missed,” Diana added with a soft chuckle.

“I’m looking forward to pictures of Sasha on the hike Lizzie has planned,” Lilah mused.

“Me too,” Imani agreed darkly. “Very much me too.”

“Oh. Shit.”

The curse was just loud enough to snap every head toward Ali. One hand covered her mouth, eyes wide and fixed on her phone.

“What is it?” Charlotte asked, already reaching for Ali’s knee.

“I— I—”

Charlotte’s pulse thundered in her ears. Some ancient instinct surged to life, ready to rip the world apart if something had made those eyes shine with tears.

“I got the London residency.”

Charlotte’s breath caught and her world ground to a halt.

No.

Everything froze, no one even breathed. Dread settled heavy and cold in Charlotte’s chest, her thoughts grinding to a halt around one brutal truth… Ali was going to leave.

Charlotte caught the tremble of Ali’s lower lip, watery gaze fixed on the screen. As it always did, Ali’s distress kick-started the old rusted gears that produced thought. Her hand slid from Ali’s knee to her neck, pulling her close and pressing a kiss to a flushing cheek.

“Congratulations,” Charlotte said, and she meant it.

Because Ali did deserve this. Of course she did. Her talents and achievements should be celebrated. Charlotte would *always* celebrate them… even if they took her away.

“Are you excited?” she asked, forcing brightness into her voice that didn’t quite bleed into her expression.

“I—” Ali’s voice wobbled. “I never thought I’d ever be accepted. It’s so competitive.”

Diana rose immediately, moving around the table and wrapping Ali in a proud hug.

“And you’re an incredibly talented young lady,” Diana proclaimed, beaming with pride though one brow lifted at the rigidity in Ali’s spine.

Everyone else began offering their congratulations and Charlotte mustered all the strength she could to keep her smile plastered onto her face, rubbing slow circles into Ali's back to soothe the anxiety humming beneath her skin.

"What's wrong?" Charlotte asked.

Diana tucked a few strands behind her ear, eyes bouncing back and forth between Ali and Charlotte, studying them both.

"With my show and the wedding, I've been so busy. I forgot all about the residencies. I hadn't decided if I was going or not," Ali explained, eyes glued to the screen as though the information might change.

Silence fell around the table and Charlotte swallowed thickly, trying to clear the lump forming in her throat.

"Of course you're going," she said gently. "It's the opportunity of a lifetime. You've earned it."

"Yeah," Ali murmured.

Lilah spoke, voice hesitant. "You don't seem excited."

Ali looked up then, sitting back in her chair.

"I think I'm either in shock or overwhelmed, maybe both." Rising to her feet, Ali flashed a bright smile. "I have a last-minute painting that I need to get started on. And I'm sure Willow is waiting and very offended I'm not home yet, so…" She turned to Diana, pressing a kiss to her cheek. "Thank you for feeding me."

"You're always welcome," Diana said, cupping her dimpled cheek. "We love you and we're proud of you, Sugar."

Ali nodded, pulling back before she spoke, voice a little rough. "Love you, too."

Charlotte watched as Ali made her way to the exit. She hesitated only a moment before rising to follow, packing away her dread and quieting her racing thoughts. She always said she wanted what was best for Ali. She wanted it to be Ali's choice whether she stayed or went.

Now here it was, that choice.

Her stomach churned as she caught up with Ali in the foyer, collecting her bag and patting her pockets, making sure she had everything. Her fingers tapped their familiar rhythm before she turned to face Charlotte.

"I'm okay, I promise," Ali said quickly. "It's just a lot to think about. I don't even have time to process it with my show this weekend. My lease ends and—fuck. See? Too much."

“I know you’ll figure out the best course of action.” Charlotte gave her a half smile, her sorrow digging in between her ribs. “I’ll be here when you do.”

Ali nodded, a crease forming between her brows as her worry stitched itself into place.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Like what?” Charlotte inquired, trying to school her features to no avail.

“Like this is the last time you’re going to see me.”

Was she really so transparent?

She dropped Ali’s gaze, eyes finding the floor as the weight of everything threatened to pull her under.

“If you go, I’ll miss you.” She bit back a huff of frustration. The words were right there, lodged in the back of her throat. She needed to say them and yet they wouldn’t just wiggle loose and fly off the tip of her tongue like they were meant to. “I—” Her words were good and stuck, but surely they were written on her face and visible in the fathomless depth of adoration in her gaze. “You are every good thing that has ever happened to me.”

Ali closed the distance between them, wrapping her arms around Charlotte, burying her face into Charlotte’s neck.

Of course, Charlotte couldn’t resist returning the embrace. Of course she did. Because what if this was the last time? The thought hollowed her out, made it hard to breathe.

“You’re my favorite person to spend time with,” Charlotte murmured.

“You’re my favorite, too,” Ali replied, and Charlotte didn’t need the way Ali squeezed her tighter to believe she meant those words.

When they finally pulled apart, Charlotte pressed a lingering kiss to Ali’s forehead. Those three words skipped through Charlotte’s mind on repeat, begging to be said. All she had to do was open her mouth. But what if it was too late now? What if every chance had already passed? She didn’t want to add the weight of her own feelings to everything Ali needed to consider.

“Will you text me when you make it home please?”

“Of course,” Ali said, lifting up on her tiptoes and pressing a fleeting kiss to Charlotte’s lips before turning away, grabbing her bag, and heading for the door. “Goodbye, Moonbeam,” she called over her shoulder, throwing Charlotte a half-hearted smile.

“Goodbye, Lina,” Charlotte returned, watching as the door closed.

Shell-shocked, Charlotte stood motionless, staring at the closed door. She barely had a moment to process what just happened before—

“Cricket?”

Charlotte didn’t turn. Instead, she moved to her suitcases. “I’ve got to go.”

“Charlotte.”

“I need to check on my plants,” she said weakly. “They’ll be feeling neglected.”

A gentle hand caught her arm and tugged her into her mother’s embrace. It remained one of the safest and most comforting places in Charlotte’s world.

“I fucked up, Mama,” Charlotte whispered, voice cracking.

Her mother rubbed her back in a familiar soothing motion. “Tell me what happened.”

Charlotte pulled away, passing a hand through her hair, bracing herself. “Ali and I aren’t actually together.”

A bemused smile curled across her face before her lips pressed together. But then she broke, bursting into laughter. Charlotte couldn’t understand until…

“Your father owes me ten bucks.”

Her arms folded across her chest, not at all appreciating the laughter while she was having a crisis. Of course her mother had known. And of course, she hadn’t said anything, just watched it all play out, waiting for Charlotte to come to her. All the while, placing bets.

Composing herself, Diana faced her, fixing her with that knowing expression as she pulled Charlotte’s hands free, holding them in her own.

“You have always told us when you were seeing someone,” Diana began, ocean blue tunneling right to the core of her. “Maybe we wouldn’t meet them right away, but you never hid anyone. You are,” she caught Charlotte’s eye, none of the anger she expected lingered, “the most honest of my children. And it is incredibly easy—*for me*—to see when you aren’t being entirely honest.”

All the breath whooshed from her lungs. Guilt slithered in her gut, coiling itself into knots. She hated this feeling. The heat of it mixed with the sour taste coating her tongue. For a moment, she couldn’t remember *why* she lied in the first place.

Then it came rushing back, sticking like tar to every corner. She wanted her family to stop worrying. Ali was the perfect solution with her bright smile and easy nature. She was believable.

“Cricket,” Diana murmured, lifting a hand to cradle her jaw and chin. Her mother’s soft use of the childhood nickname broke her open. “No matter how it started...” Her thumb brushed across her cheek like she could brush away her sour emotions. “There is nothing untrue about what you both feel for each other.”

Charlotte’s eyes stung.

The weight of a little lie told to keep everyone from worrying pressed in. But her mother had always been a safe place. So, she told her everything.

How she’d first seen Ali through the B&B’s front window, red hair catching like embers. How Lizzie and Imani teased her mercilessly. How Lizzie’s fears about Victoria pushed her to invent a secret girlfriend. How Ali agreed to play along. And how, somewhere along the way, none of it felt fake anymore.

“I love her, mama.”

The confession caught like a splinter in her throat.

“She’s like sunlight and I didn’t know I was living in darkness my entire life until she walked in. She’s like a piece of me that I didn’t know I was missing. But now, she’s here and I love her so much and it’s terrifying.” She swallowed thickly, heart achingly full as her mother listened to her spill her guts in their foyer like it was ordinary. “She’s the one I want.”

Her mother’s voice was soft as snow. “So tell her.”

Irritation flared. Nothing was ever that simple.

“How?” Charlotte demanded. “She just got accepted to her residency and I don’t want to stop her from going. I want what’s best for her. She deserves to be happy, to chase her dreams, not be stuck here with me and all my baggage.”

Mouth dry, eyes wide and pleading with her to understand. Her mother’s gaze shone with understanding. But the determination in them told Charlotte everything was about to change.

Any remaining frustration vanished in the face of her mother’s steady calm.

“My foolish, brave, intelligent, stunning, compassionate daughter.”

She took Charlotte's hands in her own again, holding on tight. For a moment, Charlotte feared she wasn't ready to hear whatever was coming.

"Ali wants someone to *choose* her," she said, voice steady, every word weighted with intent. "She *longs* for someone to see her for everything she is and pick her anyway. She wants a family, even if it's hard for her to let people close enough. She's trying."

Charlotte's voice faltered. "But… her art?"

Diana's lips curved, a knowing glint in her eye.

"I think being surrounded by a good support system would do wonders for her. And I think Boston is a good place to put down some roots."

Her mother tightened her grip, thumbs running across her knuckles. She took a slow breath and Charlotte matched her, preparing herself for whatever revelation was coming.

"Cricket, don't you see?" Diana's voice sparkled with unshakable certainty that left no room for doubt. "What Ali wants, more than anything, is for someone to ask her to stay."



THE DRIVE HOME passed in a blur of thoughts she couldn't quite catch or quiet.

Her house greeted her with familiar creaks and heavy silence. It had never felt so empty.

When she bought this house, she hoped she'd find someone to settle down with and together they would fill it with children, maybe a dog or two, or a few cats. The house was so run down from the numerous families who dwelled in it before her, and the years it sat empty and neglected. She wanted to fill it with life again.

She spotted Ali's dark blue hoodie draped over the arm of one of the matching chairs by the window. She could still see Ali tossing it there mid-story, eyes bright as she artfully retold one story or another.

Charlotte picked it up and brought it to her face, inhaling Ali's familiar scent.

It smelled like home.

Her empty bedroom was painted the same blue-gray it had been for years. She once told Ali her favorite color was umber. At the time, it was

little more than a flirtatious jest. Brown, an under-appreciated color. But it wasn’t just brown… It was the auburn, copper, and gold that made up her hair. The peach of her blush. That viridian green color she loved to wear. Dusty rose. The sunny yellow Charlotte felt when Ali brandished her brightest smile.

Ali came into her life like a bolt of lightning shot straight from the heavens. Bringing an explosion of colors. And each was her favorite in one way or another. Ali sparked something pure and brought everything to life, painting her world in all the bright colors she never noticed before.

Her world used to be exactly that, blue and gray toned… cold and lifeless… no longer calming.

And the silence which she once craved was deafening…

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ALI

BENDING herself in half at the waist, Ali's hands splayed over the tops of her bare feet, breath coming slow and heavy. Bone-deep weariness ached in every joint and stiff muscle after a masterful display of strength and stubborn determination.

She finished the last painting that would be added to her show. Acrylic paint dried on the largest canvas she ever painted. But the moment frozen in time deserved the scale. It was the finale, after all. The culmination of everything she tried to say with this series.

Everyone was familiar with love and lust through the male gaze. But her show looked through a sapphic lens.

On Love, Sapphic.

Willow chirped from the armchair, then hopped down and wound around Ali's ankles, tail flicking. Ali widened her stance and held out her hands. Willow circled her, trotting between them, looking up with bright green eyes and an impatient trill.

Ali lifted her a mere two inches off the floor swinging her forward and back before giving her a gentle little toss. Willow meowed before trotting right back in between her legs. A little game they played ever since Willow was a teenager, though Ali was gentler with the ole girl these days.

Straightening back up, she sighed, not at all sure what else to do with herself now that the painting was finished. She checked her phone, hoping for something from Charlotte… no new messages, no missed calls… nothing.

By Wednesday, Ali decided to accept the residency. Wren had been ecstatic. Natasha was relentlessly practical, citing the doors it might open. Leah Coleman was outright insistent. But none of them were who she wanted to talk to.

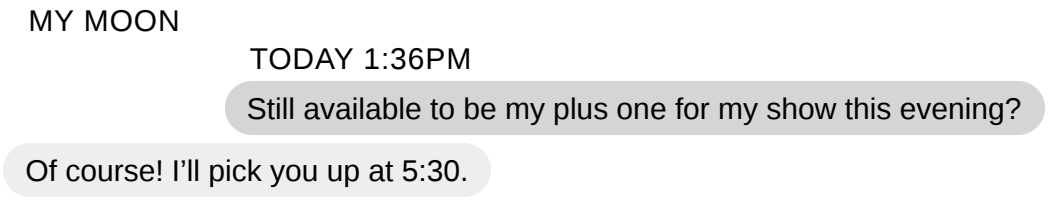
But Charlotte felt farther away than ever. In the silence, old anxieties crept in, planting little seeds of doubt. Despite everything they shared, the nagging little voice needled, long distance would be too much pressure too soon…

She worried on her lower lip, fingers drifting to her necklace as she stared at the screen, rereading their stilted attempts at conversation. While she decided to go, it didn't feel like the kind of news to share over text.

So she told herself Charlotte was busy, moving heaven and earth to support Lilah. To keep her mind from dragging her down the lonely hallway, right into the dark locked room, she stayed busy. Painting. Packing. Loading bins into her new storage unit.

But distraction only worked for so long.

Eventually she found herself sitting on the couch, thumbs hovering over her phone, typing… deleting… typing again.



The tightness in her chest didn't ease.

THE APARTMENT WENT from quiet to chaotic in a matter of moments as Wren, Natasha, and Lilah waltzed through the front door. Lilah carried a basket full of goodies. Natasha looked like she'd come straight from a courtroom. Wren wheeled in a dolly, wearing work boots, and worn faded blue jeans.

Ali took the basket from Lilah and retreated to the kitchen.

The truth was, Ali was never good at goodbyes.

In the past, she resorted to more of an Irish goodbye. Just packed up and left without much ceremony. Rarely saying goodbye at all. Farewells were

—in all honesty—the bane of her existence. She hated them. Each one a reminder of who and what was lost over the course of her life.

Vanishing into the night was a much easier option.

While she was grateful for the help, delivering her paintings and moving the rest of the boxes and her furniture to storage, a nagging voice in her mind insisted Charlotte's distance meant something… What was left for her here without Charlotte?

"What's wrong?" Wren's voice chirped from where she peeked around the doorframe.

"Nothing…" Ali denied, sorting through the candies in the basket.

"You're not foolin' me, sister," Wren drawled, sidling up to lean against the counter. "What's got you lookin' so blue?"

"I just… Charlotte and I agreed we'd talk about us when we got back from the wedding," Ali sighed, shoulders sagging under the weight of it all. "About making this a real relationship."

A small, scandalized squeak came from the doorway.

Natasha and Lilah stood, both frozen. Lilah's mouth hung open. Natasha glanced at her and matched her shocked expression.

"What do you mean, *real*, relationship?" Lilah demanded, hazel irises widening until there was far too much white showing.

Ali looked helplessly at Wren who looked back at her, lips pulled back into a grimace.

Natasha, meanwhile, dropped her shocked expression and took a sip of her coffee, entirely unbothered.

Ali narrowed her eyes at her.

Natasha shrugged, "Wren told me."

Ali's head snapped toward her best friend. "You blabbed?"

"In her defense," Natasha cut in smoothly, leaning against the doorframe. "Birdy is no match for my cross-examination techniques."

"I'm so sorry," Wren pleaded, blue eyes going misty. "She hoodwinked me. But I hired her as my lawyer, so she's bound by client confidentiality."

"True," Natasha agreed, looking far too smug. "She pays me in those cake pops from Blend & Brew."

Lilah jabbed Natasha in the ribs. "You didn't tell *me*?"

"I take my clients' trust very seriously," Natasha countered, poking under Lilah's arm, making her yelp and jump away. "Plus. You're terrible at keeping secrets."

“I keep plenty of secrets!” Lilah shrieked, pale skin splotching.

“Lilah, I’m sorry no one told you,” Ali jumped in quickly, panic rising. “No one was supposed to know.”

Lilah scrubbed her hands over her face. “So… it’s not real?”

“Depends on your definition of real,” Natasha pointed out.

“How can it *not* be real?” Lilah screeched, staring at her hands like the universe itself was glitching. “She looks at you like—and you—” she pointed at Ali, “you paint her like she’s the only thing worth painting!”

“It’s real, Bug,” Natasha soothed. “It’s just not… official.”

“It’s complicated,” Ali murmured, fingers twisting together as Willow appeared at her feet, summoned by the emotional distress. She bent to scoop her up, burying her face briefly in soft fur.

“Maybe we should sit down?” Wren prompted, rummaging through the gift basket for something to soothe all of them.

Natasha looked over her shoulder. “On what furniture?”

LESS THAN AN HOUR LATER, they were unloading the U-haul at the storage unit, passing boxes down the line while Ali word-vomited every fear she’d been sitting on.

“Well,” Wren said, passing a box to Lilah, “sounds like you both want the same things.”

“It sounds like you’ve *always* wanted the same things,” Lilah grumbled, still not quite over being kept in the dark.

Natasha took the box from Lilah, swiveling to pass it to Ali. “What it sounds like is they need to talk.”

“I just—” Ali began, neatly stacking the box and plopping down on top of it. “When we said we wanted to talk about the possibility of there being more… long-distance wasn’t even a thought. I guess I’m scared that more for her doesn’t include everything that comes with being a professional artist.”

Wren dropped down to sit on the edge of the truck bed, legs dangling over the side. Natasha moved beside her, leaning back against the truck. While Lilah crossed over to her, climbing onto the box beside Ali.

“You sound like you don’t believe she thinks you’re worth waiting three little months for,” Lilah mused, resting her head on Ali’s shoulder.

“I—” Ali sighed, feeling unbearably tired. “I’m just so tired of moving.”

“Then stay,” Lilah said, like it was the easiest thing in the world.

“Go to London,” Wren added, smiling broadly, the sun hitting the silvered skin of the scar that ran along her jaw. “Do your residency. But then come back. Personally, I’ve decided to stick around a little longer.”

Natasha’s brows knitted together as her attention snapped to Wren. “You were thinking about leaving?”

“I mean—”

“Nope! Not allowed,” Natasha barked, glaring at Wren before she whirled on Ali. “You either. You’re going to talk to Charlotte. Because what you have is real and you’re a catch.” Her hands settled firmly on her hips. “No one is moving!”

They all looked around at the boxes and the storage unit, Wren stifled a chuckle, smirking at Natasha’s outrage.

Natasha rolled her eyes, adding. “Permanently. In a year, we’ll be laughing about this. Ali will be conquering the art world. Lilah will be deep into her master’s program. Birdy will get a break with her music.” She fixed Ali with a look that brokered no room for argument. “You and Charlotte will be obnoxiously in love.”

“What about you?” Wren asked, a subtle blush staining her cheeks.

Natasha inspected her manicure. “I’ll have my own office by then, for sure.”

Ali smiled at each of them. And it hit her then. Charlotte wasn’t the only reason she wanted to come back to Boston.

“Alright,” she agreed, nodding her head in determination. “I’ll talk to Charlotte. And in a year, we will celebrate our achievements.”

Wren grinned, hope bright in her eyes. Ali couldn’t help but smile back. Maybe they had both found a soft place to land after all.

“I’d like to rename our operation,” Wren said, getting back to her feet. “New name is —” her hand passed through the air like she could see the title written there. “Operation: Get Charlotte Davenport, CEO of Ridiculously Dreamy Eyes, to Admit She’s in Love With You.”

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CHARLOTTE

HER EYES SKIMMED the same lines on her computer screen for the twelfth time. Some deep mystery lingered within the blurred script. Still nothing made sense. Focusing on anything but her own heartache and what Ali might possibly have to say was next to impossible.

Imani more or less ran their meetings all week. Her quiet, unwavering support, offered without question, was a godsend.

"Are you going to tell me what is going on with you?" Imani asked at last.

She leaned against the doorframe with a practiced ease, studying her with an expression Charlotte felt equally grateful for and undeserving of.

"There's no judgment," Imani added, pushing off the frame and stepping inside. "You're allowed to have a bad day. You just typically aren't this… blue."

"It's been an eventful couple of weeks."

"The wedding went well, all things considered. You've found a therapist for Lilah. Ali's show is this evening. The business is running smoothly. Profits are up." Imani cocked her head, manicured nails tapping against the chair arm. "Have you talked to her yet?"

Charlotte didn't respond, she didn't need to. Imani already knew the answer.

Charlotte spun in her chair, the abstract paintings bracketing her shelves went by in a blur. She circled twice more before she slowed to a stop, meeting Imani's gentle gaze. It kept her pinned, making escape impossible.

“Back in Aspen, before the wedding. We agreed to discuss the possibility of more once we got back.”

“That’s great,” Imani said immediately, her approval of Ali as ever, resolute. “So do that.”

“But long distance is hard,” Charlotte groaned, shaking her head and dropping Imani’s gaze.

“True,” Imani sighed, clinging to patience. “But, you can afford to fly to London every weekend if you want. We aren’t slammed right now. We can manage it.”

“She hasn’t actually told me she accepted yet.”

Imani lifted a brow. “Seems like a safe assumption.”

Charlotte sighed, swiveling in her chair to look out of her window at her view of the city. “We just… need to talk.”

“Bingo!” Imani cheered, drumming her excessively long manicured nails against the arm of her chair.

“I think I’m nervous,” Charlotte admitted. “Every time we’ve spoken, it’s like we’re both walking on eggshells.”

“Doesn’t it make sense given both of your histories?” Imani’s tone was unbearably patient. The tone she used when trying to help someone in a meeting comprehend simple things they should already understand.

Charlotte couldn’t stop herself from bristling at the tone.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Oh, come on. You think you aren’t enough and Ali thinks she’s too much,” Imani explained, lifting her finger to tap her chin. “Those are practically textbook.”

Charlotte’s lips parted…

“You’re both overthinking and catastrophizing when all you need is honest communication.”

Imani rose to her feet, brushing an imaginary speck from her sleeve.

“You’ve changed since Ali, you know. When things go wrong, you keep calm. You don’t spiral the way you used to. You’re more open. Looser. Everyone can see it.” She gestured to the fogged windows and the hum of employees beyond them. “Compose has never been better.” She leveled Charlotte with an affectionate gaze, warm eyes full of sincerity. “You are deserving of happiness, Char.”

She took a few steps toward the door, pausing in the threshold and turning back to Charlotte, expression sincere.

“I just hope you’re brave enough to fight for it.”

Imani was right, of course. About everything.

She popped her head back in, a wry grin on her face. “Better hurry before I shoot my shot.”

Charlotte snorted, flipping Imani off. Her friend retreated with a cackle.

Charlotte pulled out her phone, opened Ali’s text thread. Her breath caught at the three little dots blinking on the screen. Ali wanted to talk to her. But as the dots disappeared, she could easily imagine Ali struggling to find the right words.

The little dots appeared again.

Her chest tightened. She wanted every word Ali had to give, no matter how messy or painful. Even if this ended, she never wanted Ali to feel alone. They’d helped each other heal too much to give it all up and disappear from each other’s lives.

That alone was worth fighting for.

Charlotte shot to her feet, snatching up her purse.

“I’m stepping out,” she called to Aurora as she rushed out of her office. “Reschedule whatever’s left on my calendar.”

She needed to go to the florist and one other errand before she picked Ali up.

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ALI

As it turned out, she needn't have worried.

The moment Ali opened her front door, every anxious thought scattered at the sight of Charlotte bumping the passenger door closed with her hip, a massive vase cradled in her arms, overflowing with ruby-red roses.

"Babes, you shouldn't have!" Ali scolded, meeting her on the stoop, accepting the heavy vase and an affectionate kiss to her cheek.

"Of course I should have," Charlotte smiled wide, faint laugh lines crinkling at the corners of her eyes. "It's your big night. Flowers are the minimum requirement."

Her gaze dropped to the blooms, admiring the array of perfect petals curled around each center. If Ali knew the symbolism, then plant-loving Charlotte had to. Judging by the size of the bouquet, perhaps this was Charlotte's way of shouting from the rooftops. From the very beginning, Charlotte supported and encouraged her in all things. Every *logical* interpretation of her actions suggested Charlotte wanted more. They just needed to talk everything out, get on the same page, and make a plan.

Ali wouldn't be gone *that* long, they could make it work.

Charlotte leaned in, her perfume curling around Ali making her head spin. "Do you need help putting those somewhere you'll see them every day?"

Ali let out a nervous laugh. "Maybe."

There weren't many places left to hold such an enormous bouquet. Her side table would have to do.

“I have another present for you in the car,” Charlotte added, sauntering past her into the empty apartment, black slacks held up by suspenders hugged her hips just right.

Ali watched her go a second too long before snapping out of it, hurrying to her bedroom, skirts of her black dress swishing around her legs. She shifted the lamp, set the vase down, gave it a little shake to make sure it was steady, then bent to kiss Willow’s head, promising she’d be back soon.

Ali knew something was wrong before she even managed to leave her apartment.

One, Charlotte wasn’t where she left her.

Two, the way she stood beside the car, posture rigid, shadows swallowing the black of her slacks into the black of the door, didn’t match the woman who just brought her flowers.

Ali hurried down the steps and slipped into the passenger seat.

Three, the way Charlotte shut the door was a *little* too firm. A slam by no means, but hard enough to leave no question that it was in fact secure.

Ali buckled her seatbelt, hands folding neatly in her lap as she stared at Charlotte.

Four, her grip on the leather steering wheel was verging on vise-like.

She waited, but Charlotte never met her gaze as she pulled away from the curb and drove them down the street toward the main road that would take them to the gallery. Ali waited, her mind beginning to race. When they had gone three blocks with nothing, she caved.

“What’s wrong?”

Charlotte’s grip tightened. Leather creaking under the pressure.

“Your apartment is empty,” her tone was careful, measured, like she was trying not to break or lash out. Ali wasn’t certain which.

“Yeah. My lease is up and I have to be out by Monday,” Ali said, twiddling her thumbs for something to do that wasn’t a tic. “My landlord wouldn’t give me a short-term extension, so...”

“I see,” Charlotte said, pulling up to a red light.

“So, I have to put everything in storage,” Ali continued, desperate for some sign of what she was meant to say. “Because I have to be out.”

Nothing. Nada. Zip.

“You didn’t go into detail about your lease being up.”

Ali let out a nervous laugh. “I kinda forgot. I was originally just going to renew, but that didn’t really make sense with me leaving in January.”

Charlotte's lips moved, barely parting, the words coming out thin and raw. "January."

"What's going on?" Ali whispered, holding her breath for a reason things were going south. "You seem really upset."

Surely Charlotte wasn't surprised she'd taken the residency. She'd said it herself at dinner. *Of course you're going.*

No, that was Ali making excuses for herself. The truth was she'd been too scared to talk to Charlotte about it. The longer she put it off, the longer she could delude herself that her getting the residency hadn't changed the entire tone of the conversation they'd put off for months.

"I'm just… waiting," Charlotte said at last as they neared the gallery.

"For what?"

Charlotte didn't answer right away. She parallel parked, shifted gears, and cut the engine instead. Ali fought the looping thoughts that threatened to crop up. A deep, instinctive certainty told her to listen. This was it. This was the moment everything tipped.

"For you to tell me what you want," Charlotte inhaled slowly, eyes fixed on the bumper of the car in front of them. "For you to tell me that what we have isn't enough. That *I'm* not enough."

Ali's breath hitched, heart clenching at the certainty in Charlotte's tone. She questioned everything she knew about Charlotte's sense of self-worth.

"That you want to leave," Charlotte went on quietly. "That you don't want to stay here and build a life with me."

Ali's mind couldn't compute. Her gaze drifted toward the polished gallery windows, where twenty-two paintings of Charlotte waited inside. Each one of them a moment she'd fallen a little more in love.

And yet… Charlotte didn't think she was enough.

"I think that is the most heartbreaking thing I've ever heard you say," Ali murmured, chin wobbling as she looked at Charlotte through misted eyes.

Before she could say more, Leah was at her window, opening the car door for her and ushering her out with a flurry of excitement and last-minute instructions, leaving Charlotte alone in the car, her expression full of resignation and quiet devastation.

Ali wanted to run back. To kiss her. To tell her every cruel thought she carried about herself was wrong. To press reassurance into her skin until it drowned out the doubts Charlotte carved into herself.

But Leah was all movement and logistics and gallery talk, and she asked which pieces were not for sale.

“There are two I’ll never part with,” Ali said automatically.

She knew them by heart, every color and brush stroke she added with her own hand. The very first painting of Charlotte, *Adoration and Yearning*, and the last one she completed this week, *Rhapsody.*

“There is nothing I can say to persuade you to part with Rhapsody?” Leah’s tone was lighter than Ali ever heard before. “I’d love to add it to my personal collection.”

“Afraid not,” Ali stated, puffing out her chest and squaring her shoulders.

“Name your price, Miss McCarthy.”

“Ask me again in fifteen years.”

Her gaze drifted toward the entrance, searching for Charlotte. No amount of time or money would ever convince her to part with those two pieces.

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CHARLOTTE

CHARLOTTE DAVENPORT, try as she might, was still a long way from perfect.

She was well aware of her flaws. One of the things she prided herself on about Compose was the software was nearly flawless. Coding was a language all its own and she hired developers who understood languages. But life wasn't so straightforward as debugging some simple mistranslation. Flaws were never fixed swiftly.

She couldn't run diagnostics on her own heart. She couldn't debug grief or fear or the way doubt resurfaced like a virus she thought already purged.

Her phone buzzed. She answered without thought, not needing to look to know who it was.

"Hi there, Twinnie," Lizzie chirped from the other end of the line.

"How's the honeymoon?" Charlotte asked, leaning back against the headrest.

"Well, Sasha soldiered through the hiking for a few days, but we're heading for the beach instead."

"Oh?" Charlotte sat up. "Which one?"

"Dunno yet." Faint conversation buzzed in the background. "We made a pit stop in Boston though. Had to come to Ali's show. Didn't wanna miss my chance to call dibs on a painting with our tits on display," Lizzie chuckled, dark and mischievous. "And I am not disappointed."

Charlotte craned her neck and spotted a familiar figure through the gallery window.

Lizzie grinned as she waved at her.

“Quit sulking and get in here before I convince Auntie Leah to sell me two *scandalous* portraits. They would look so good in the foyer.”

Charlotte’s lips pursed together before muttering. “I’m not sulking.”

“Then what do you call doing whatever it is you’re doing?”

Charlotte exhaled and broke their eye contact. “I’m just trying to compartmentalize so I can go in there and smile and support her through the night, all while knowing her apartment is empty and she didn’t tell me she was moving or that she accepted the residency.”

“Okay… but what did our therapist say about compartmentalizing?” Lizzie teased, her tone entirely baiting.

But Charlotte felt entirely too heavy to be riled in such a way. “I don’t think she wants to be with me.”

Lizzie barked out a laugh. “Twinnie, please tell me you’re joking,” she wheezed. “You’re supposed to be smart. Like me.”

“Well, what else am I supposed to conclude from the lack of communication?” Charlotte bristled, nails drumming against the wheel.

“Can’t speak for her,” Lizzie sighed, pausing. “But I can tell you she’s communicating very clearly in here. Loud and clear. So clear even I, mama’s least artistically gifted offspring, can understand.”

“What does it say?” Charlotte asked, looking to the gallery doors.

“Why don’t you come inside and find out?”



MUSIC FROM A STRING quartet greeted her at the entrance. The gallery wasn’t yet crowded, just early arrivals murmuring over champagne. Someone placed a brochure in her hand, another offered her a flute, guiding her into the open airy space.

She saw the paintings. But at first, she couldn’t comprehend them.

She’d seen more than a few of the paintings hung up on the gallery walls. Watched as Ali’s brush moved across the canvas, rendering patches of color into form. Charlotte never got tired of watching the transformation. She’d seen, but nothing could have prepared her for the feeling that squeezed around her heart as she beheld a room full of paintings, *beautiful* paintings, of *her*.

The first hung near the entrance. Seeing it for the first time was when she started to believe Ali felt something real for her. The moment Charlotte stopped denying her own.

But moving through the gallery now, following the quiet narrative Ali had painted in loving and exquisite detail… the feeling when she looked at that first portrait paled in comparison to what swelled in her now.

The sensation only grew more vast and unshakable as she moved from one piece to the next, taking in the details, the loose textured brush strokes, the lines of charcoal peeking through that echoed like memory. Ali painted her in so many ways, but through a lens that was so incredibly hers.

Then she reached the end, the final piece. The largest and the only one with two figures. Charlotte, in the center, and in her arms, a woman with auburn hair.

“Lina,” Charlotte whispered, awestruck.

Ocean eyes swept the room again, her head spinning as her breathing went shallow and something profound shifted in the depths of her psyche.

This must have been the photo Ali found waiting on her camera after the wedding. The moment they danced alone on the empty floor. Now frozen in paint and charcoal, Charlotte guiding Ali back into her arms after a spin, their joined hands hovering between them, Charlotte’s arm firm at her waist. Ali’s free hand floated out to one side, an elegant lift to her pinky and index finger.

A fragment of affection preserved.

Ali’s dress captured a state of motion. Gold threads woven throughout the skirts caught the luminance from the twinkling lights and lanterns hung overhead. The background was dark, except for the lights or what their soft beams illuminated. Everything behind the figures was blurred giving it the sense everything outside of them was fading away.

Charlotte looked just as stunning as she was in all the other portraits, only in this there was so much joy and affection in her expression. There was desire too, hidden in the crystalline pools Ali depicted. All mirrored in Ali’s expression. Light wound over her twisted strands, making them glow, embodying the spirit of autumn. The braided crown and flowers woven into it kept her trapped in the form of some woodland fairy.

The highlights Ali added to her dress where the light struck gave the illusion she came alive in Charlotte’s arms. And the warmth flowing from Ali became a light for Charlotte herself.

An accurate representation of who they were to each other and what their affection and support brought to each of their lives.

A presence lingered beside her.

Ali, looking like autumn.

The gallery lights caught the strands of copper in her hair, winding through her curls and turning them to living embers. She released the breath she hadn't meant to hold as a spark coaxed Charlotte's heart to find its rhythm.

She was the one… there was no doubt in Charlotte's mind.

Ali was hers and she was Ali's.

Adoration, and yearning…

Ali's tone was wrapped in reverence as she stepped closer. "Leah upped her offer for this one to a hundred thousand. I'm pretty sure she's just being sweet but…" Her gaze lifted and there was nothing but devotion in those coffee eyes. "I wouldn't part with it for the world."

Charlotte had to look away. Emotion surged too fast, filling her up all at once. The title of the show written across the front of the brochure looked back up at her.

On Love, Sapphic.

Charlotte's lips parted as her breath hitched.

On Love.

On love.

On love… sapphic.

There was no denying it anymore, and the abstract sensation that had been growing since she stepped into the room became tangible. The truth of it settled in her chest, warm and solid and unmistakable. There was no denying that the woman who painted all of these portraits loved her.

A smile bloomed across her face as the last of her doubts dissolved, leaving her feeling lighter. Ali wanted her. And Ali *loved* her.

She lifted her gaze, heart steady now as she said with absolute certainty.

"You *love* me."

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ALI

ALI MCCARTHY WAS NEVER a morning person. But she would never regret rearranging her schedule just to drag herself out of bed to make coffee for a woman she saw for five minutes, four days a week. A woman who would ask her on a ridiculous adventure that led to this moment. A moment where Charlotte's joy turned luminous.

Joy never looked so good on anyone. And it was all because Ali painted a few portraits. Still, all together they did scream rather loudly.

Ali stepped a little closer, hands tucked behind her back. "What gave it away?"

Nothing could have prepared her for what unbridled joy did to Charlotte. She glowed like a star, entirely incandescent.

"I—" Charlotte began, taking a steadying breath. "I'm sorry I let so much time go by without being honest with you about how *I* feel."

Ali took another small step closer.

"I'm sorry, too. But I felt it." A mix of nervous amusement fizzed in her stomach, bubbling out of her in a quiet huff of air. "You're very good at acts of service. And presents. And… so many other things."

Someone called her name from across the gallery and it all came crashing back. They were in public. At *her* show. She needed to greet the guests, network. She shot to attention, whirling toward Leah who was by the door, motioning for her to come.

A step away and a warm hand closed around her wrist, stopping her.

"Wait, I just…" Charlotte murmured, gently regaining Ali's attention. "Before we meet your soon-to-be adoring fans. I need you to know

something.”

Ali waited, turning their hands and intertwining their fingers, grounding herself in the moment.

“I don’t want you to leave. Ever.” The words rushed out, breathless and raw, making Ali’s stomach swoop. “Residencies and art related matters excluded,” she amended. “But I want you to come home. To me. Every time.” Charlotte took a breath, stepping in and tucking loose strands behind Ali’s ears. “I want you to stay, Lina.”

Ali’s breath caught. The quartet crescendoed as if in response to the ache blooming in her chest. The world fell away until there was only Charlotte, her ocean blues shimmered with sincerity and so much honest hope. Ali’s body buzzed, humming with elation, joy, and abiding love. So much love she could fill the vast expanse of space with it.

A blink passed before they moved in tandem, pulling each other close as their lips met, sealing the moment as everything finally clicked into place. It was only a second, stolen before Leah barked Ali’s name again across the gallery.

Their hands stayed laced together most of the night. Neither letting go for long as guests and critics alike jockeyed for Ali’s attention.

By all standards, the show was a raving success.

Ali was stunned by the turnout. Leah Coleman’s name carried weight, sure; but Ali wrongly assumed people wouldn’t give two figs about some no-name artist. On the contrary, everyone seemed eager to catch a glimpse of the mysterious woman Leah Coleman plucked from obscurity.

Charlotte stood steadfast beside her, never leaving her side for an instant. Ali could talk to just about anyone about anything. But after the third person asked her a barrage of questions about herself and not at all art-related, her stomach began to quiver. Charlotte would swoop in, each and every time, keeping the conversation flowing and Ali from stumbling.

“You’re just like, really impressive,” Ali stammered, rolling her eyes at herself. “I’m so very eloquent.”

“It’s alright, darling,” Charlotte replied smoothly, sipping her champagne. “It’s my sincere hope the day never comes when my beauty and intelligence cease to render you speechless.”

Just about everyone came to support her.

She spent a few moments sandwiched between Diana and James, both telling her how proud they were before they dragged her around the gallery.

Pulling blushes from Ali every time Diana read a title aloud or gave her a knowing look.

Charlotte released a low chuckle each time and kissed one of Ali's burning cheeks, making Ali's pinched toes wiggle in the confines of her heels.

Lilah ran up to her at one point, Wren and Natasha right behind her, giggling like schoolgirls. A wide smile bloomed across Lilah's face as she informed Charlotte that Lizzie had successfully convinced Leah to let her buy a pair of very revealing paintings.

Lizzie's smile was devious when she finally appeared, stooping to kiss her cheek.

"Ali, my dear. Wonderful show. You look stunning. That slinky black dress does wonders for your curves, especially your tits," Lizzie said, not even looking before she whirled on Charlotte who was already mid eyeroll. "Speaking of tits. I'm delighted to see my sister's *assets* getting the attention they deserve."

"They are your tits too," Charlotte groused, groaning and jabbing her sister in the ribs.

"Yes, yes, I know," Lizzie said, a devilish smirk curling at the edges of her lips. "And aren't they magnificent?"

Ali bit back her laughter. "I have to agree."

"I second that," Sasha said, appearing beside Lizzie. She pulled Lizzie in just to press a kiss to her wife's cheek. "Magnificent."

"You depicted them *perfectly*!" Lizzie declared, leaning into Sasha's touch.

Then she vanished back into the crowd, pulling Sasha along behind her.

Lilah chased after them, Natasha and Wren followed arm in arm, shaking their heads and laughing.

"I always feared this day would come," Charlotte sighed, before chuckling to herself. "You did do them justice."

"Well, they're my third—no, fourth favorite—asset you have. Had to get them just right," Ali teased, before proceeding to wax poetic about Charlotte's beauty until the skin over those marvelous cheekbones reddened.

Leah passed by, Imani walking beside her.

"Is it usual for someone to fill a gallery with the same person?" Imani asked, gaze sweeping the gallery.

“It’s typical for there to be a connecting theme,” Leah stated, softening as she looked over her shoulder to Rhapsody. “But it is quite rare for that theme to be carried by a single subject.”

Ali and Charlotte watched them pass. She turned toward her, stepping into her. “See?” she said, nodding her head to where Leah and Imani had disappeared into the crowd. “You are enough.”

Charlotte’s lips parted and she drew in a slow breath as some invisible weight lifted off of her.

Ali closed the distance and pressed a kiss to Charlotte’s cheek. “You are *more than enough* for me,” she murmured, knowing that was all that needed to be said.

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CHARLOTTE

CHARLOTTE SHOULD HAVE GOTTEN a cat sooner. Or maybe the house had been waiting for Willow all along.

Ali's show played like a song that only used the good notes from start to finish.

Most of the portraits had already sold. A good portion to her own family. Lizzie claimed a pair of full-frontal pieces to hang across from one another in her and Sasha's foyer. Lilah picked one that captured Charlotte mid-motion, looking over her shoulder and smiling at something Ali said. And her mother, well, it was Leah in the end who kept her from buying all of them. It took flat-out refusal, insisting she limit herself to two. In the end, they compromised and Diana went home with three.

Afterward, Ali and Charlotte were wide awake.

But when they returned to Ali's barren apartment and Ali asked her if she would look after Willow while she was away, Charlotte not so subtly suggested Ali come stay with her instead. Willow would be more comfortable and it wouldn't be such a shock. And if Ali was going to move in *temporarily*, why not just… start that very night?

Ali's bags and suitcases were strewn around the bottom of the stairs, her focus on making sure Willow had everything she needed set up. Charlotte followed the ole girl around, watching as she pranced from room to room without a shred of fear.

"What do you think, Purrito?" Charlotte asked as Willow hopped onto the window seat in the piano room.

It was Charlotte’s favorite room. A wide window overlooking the front lawn and lush flowerbeds, and walls lined with built-in bookshelves stuffed with rare books. In the center, beneath a Ginkgo Chandelier, sat her piano, quite possibly her most prized possession. Her first purchase after buying the house and finishing the renovations. Everything else had taken months to curate, but the piano she’d known immediately. A Model A Salon Grand piano in traditional mahogany.

The keys beckoned her, fingers itching to dance across their smooth surfaces.

Charlotte found peace in the time signatures inked into the score. No decisions to be made. Just follow the composition, straying only when the mood struck.

Ali floated in behind her, her voice the exaggerated accent and pitch she picked for Willow. “Finally, a dwelling befitting my station in life.”

Willow started kneading biscuits into the cushion, her purr filling the room.

They watched Willow for a few minutes, Charlotte not-so-subtly adding a *few* items to an online cart.

“She has everything she needs,” Ali protested.

“Yes. But does she have everything she deserves?” Charlotte countered, selecting different varieties of catnip. “Besides, she needs a welcome gift.”

Ali rolled her eyes, but gave up with a shrug, moving to sit beside Willow.

Charlotte straightened, realizing she still hadn’t given Ali her other present.

“Don’t move,” Charlotte ordered, rushing off to the garage where she stashed it. She returned with a square gift bag and held it out. “For you, my darling.”

A slow grin warmed Ali’s face and she inspected the gift bag.

Tissue paper exploded into a cloud as Ali reached in and pulled out a thick stack of records, tossing the bag aside.

“Treasures!” Ali declared, flipping through and assessing the covers.

“They um—” Charlotte hesitated, a soft flush dusting her cheeks as she moved to sit on her piano stool. “They have a song in common.”

Ali flipped one over, scanning the titles. She skimmed over the next one, finding the match immediately. Her eyes narrowed before she gasped, a sharp intake of air filling her lungs.

“It’s the song we danced to at the wedding.”

Charlotte nodded. “Lilah helped me scour three separate record stores to find them.”

Ali pressed her lips together, eyes shining. Charlotte lifted the fall board, revealing the array of black and white keys.

“You love me,” Ali murmured, hugging the records to her chest.

Charlotte traced the shape of her, committing the look of wonder on her face to memory. The words came easily, her tone hushed.

“From the first moment I saw you.”

Stacks of sheet music lay in teetering piles atop the piano. Charlotte set her foot over the pedal, her fingers alighting on the keys as she took a breath and began to play the very song they danced to, gentle notes wafting about the room. She lost herself to the music her fingers created; each note carrying one worry or another away until her head was empty, save for the music and Ali.

Dressed in sweat pants and one of her sleep shirts, Ali drifted closer as the notes colored their world with sound. Charlotte realized she would play until her fingers went numb if it kept that joyful expression on Ali’s face.

Ali leaned forward, resting the top half of her body on the piano lid, pressing her ear to the polished wood, hands splayed as she soaked up the vibrations.

As Charlotte played through the piece, the world once again fell away as music filled every corner. Her eyes fluttered closed, fingers playing in perfect tempo. Rustling followed by a small huff told her Ali climbed fully atop the piano. And when no spark of irritation came, Charlotte knew Ali could get away with anything.

Charlotte sucked in a sharp breath.

Coffee-dark eyes were heavy with desire and understanding. Her chin rested in her hands, elbows braced on the glossy surface, feet pointed lazily toward the ceiling.

The collar of her oversized T-shirt dipped low, offering Charlotte a teasing glimpse of the small, perky breasts she adored. Her gold locket dangled between them, catching the light.

Charlotte swallowed thickly. The look in those eyes similar to the way she gazed at Ali while she painted her.

Adoration and yearning.

Her fingers kept moving over the keys, right up until the end of the song. There she froze, unable to look away from the eyes that had seen straight into her soul.

“Again?” Ali asked, content to wait there and hunger.

Charlotte looked down at the keys, no longer able to decipher them. Her mind was on… other things.

Rising slowly, she let her fingers trail along the edge of the piano. Ali rolled over and sat up, legs dangling, tongue darting out to dampen her lips.

Charlotte tugged her sweats and panties down together, letting them fall somewhere among the scattered tissue paper. She gripped Ali’s knees, spreading them as she slotted herself between them. “I have something else in mind.”

Ali’s voice was husky as she looped her arms around Charlotte’s shoulders.

“Do you know how beautiful you look when you lose yourself to the music?”

“Tell me,” Charlotte’s hands slid up her bare thighs, around her hips, pulling her forward, right to the edge.

“I get what you meant now,” Ali breathed. “Seeing someone at peace in their element... It does things to a person.”

“Does it?”

Ali leaned forward trailing kisses up and down the column of her neck before purring against her ear. “Investigate and see for yourself.”

Without hesitation, Charlotte’s hand slipped between her thighs, fingers finding the evidence of Ali’s arousal. She was soaked.

“I love the effect I have on you.”

Charlotte couldn’t resist teasing her entrance before pressing into her wanting core, burying her fingers to the knuckle. A loud moan ripped from Ali as she arched, head thrown backward.

“Please—”

Ali collapsed against the piano lid, hair fanning out around her.

Charlotte’s free hand slid over her abdomen, up to cup her chest, her touch deliberate, unhurried. No need to rush. They felt the same and Charlotte had all the time in the world to have Ali unraveling.

Such sweet sounds tumbled past Ali’s lips.

“More, please.”

“Greedy girl. But since you asked so nicely.”

Charlotte deepened her touch, curling her fingers and increasing her speed. She watched every tremor, every breath, every shift of expression. Desire burned through her slow and sweet.

Many times, Charlotte tried to find words to describe the sensation of being inside a woman. For the way a woman responded beneath her hands. To feel the grip and shudder of an orgasm and to know she was the cause… there was nothing else like it. To lay between trembling thighs and worship… what bliss. But there between Ali's thighs, Charlotte decided there was no greater honor than to be right where she was.

Ali's voice rose with her release, creating a different kind of melody, their own perfect kind of music. Charlotte watched enraptured as she witnessed every shifting facial expression, every clench and twitching muscle. Desire burned just like the finest whiskey, it left her aching, desperate for another sip.

Later, they lay in a tangled heap across the rug, limbs wrapped together, hearts still racing. Charlotte looked deep into her eyes, drinking her in. Grateful they'd finally been honest and gotten to where they were. She brushed a dewy strand away from her face and released a shuddering breath.

"You're the kindest thing that ever happened to me, Lina."

A soft hum left Ali, thumb tracing over Charlotte's lower lip before flitting up again. Swirling pools of sweetest honey shimmered with warm affection.

"You hold me in a state of rapture. I spend my days lost in reveries of you."

If Charlotte hadn't already fallen in love with Ali, those words mixed with the warmth of her affection would have done it.

She tipped Ali's face up and there on the floor of her piano room, surrounded by books and soft lamplight, their lips met.

They weren't perfect, and neither of them had to pretend they were. The little white lies were gone, replaced by honesty that took root and joy that was as effervescent as it was true. They loved each other in a way that made imperfection irrelevant. Love made room for everything else.

Charlotte felt full to the edges of herself. Because after all, there was a soul meant for her all along.

Smudged make-up blended with the freckles she'd grown to adore. Something gentle and certain settled within her. Forever was in her arms…

“What is it?” Ali asked, gaze full of adoration.

Charlotte breathed it all in, letting herself sink into coffee eyes.

“It’s just…”

Her thumbs caressed Ali’s cheeks, tracing over the dimples just peeking out. Charlotte closed what little distance remained, capturing Ali’s lips in a lingering kiss, pulling back once again to meet Ali’s curious stare. Blue eyes glittered with warmth as her smile turned dazzling.

“Welcome home, Lina.”

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EPILOGUE

THREE MONTHS, eight days, and seventeen hours. That was how much time passed since she left Boston.

Not that Ali counted or anything.

Try as she might, she couldn't remember ever being this excited to return to a place. She waited (impatiently) as the older couple in front of her moseyed down the tunnel to the terminal. The second there was enough space, she squeezed past them and took off toward baggage claim, her backpack swinging and thudding against her back, sneakers squeaking against the floor.

Charlotte had flown with her to London, where they spent a few blissful days exploring the city before Ali locked herself away in her new temporary studio. There had been a very excited FaceTime call where Ali showed everyone the space that was to be hers for the next few months, larger than any space she'd gotten to call her own. Of course, Charlotte wanted to visit, but the residency rules were strict, and the only time Charlotte was allowed to see her was at the show.

The entire family flew in as a surprise to celebrate and support her. Ali had been too nervous to ask if anyone was coming, and surprisingly, no one spilled the beans. Ten minutes past the start time, when there still wasn't a single familiar face in the crowd, she'd swallowed her disappointment and told herself it was fine, she'd see them when she got back.

Then, one by one, they all walked through the front doors, reducing her to tears.

Those three months had felt like an eternity. Alone again, even surrounded by people, the only place Ali wanted to be was back in Boston, with Charlotte and all the other people she cared about.

She and Charlotte were hardly able to say more than five words to each other as London's art crowd demanded her attention. It wasn't until they shared a cab to the hotel that Ali was finally able to bask in Charlotte's presence. Truthfully, there hadn't been much talking. After a few drinks with the family, Charlotte stole her away to her suite upstairs. The suite was lovely, though neither of them could claim they made much use of it beyond the foyer table, the arm of the sofa, the massive bed, the shower, and, in the morning, the balcony before Ali had to sneak back to her studio.

Seeing Charlotte after so long was a temporary balm to the ache of homesickness. A new feeling, one Ali was still learning to name. Charlotte and Boston were her home, and she couldn't wait to be back.

According to the incoming texts lighting up her phone, the flight had been two minutes behind schedule. Ali sprinted, worried Charlotte might feel compelled to lecture flight control on the immorality of keeping her girlfriend from her for even one moment longer than necessary.

Her phone vibrated again, and she checked it while weaving through foot traffic.

MY MOON
TODAY 11:37AM

It's unacceptable.

Not to mention cruel.

Ali ducked into a restroom with a laugh, using the facilities, and making sure she looked presentable in record time. Her phone buzzed again.

There will be a reckoning if this isn't rectified.

She spotted Charlotte the moment the baggage claim came into view. So tall with her silky hair spilling down her back. Ali called her name, and Charlotte craned her neck just in time to catch sight of a familiar splash of red hair weaving through the crowd.

A grin bloomed across Charlotte's face as she opened her arms wide. Ali all but launched herself into them, knocking the breath from their lungs as Charlotte used her momentum to spin in a small, dizzying circle. Ali

peppered kisses along her neck, her jaw, her cheeks, until she was caught between two hands and their mouths found each other.

Then came the hug. Long and tight, grounding Ali in the moment as they nestled together like two puzzle pieces finally whole again.

"You're here," Charlotte breathed.

Ali snuggled closer, breathing her in, soaking up the warmth she'd missed more than she could articulate. "I'm so glad to be back."



THEY SPENT the drive home with Charlotte catching Ali up on everything that transpired while she was away. Lilah officially started her masters and was loving it. Lizzie and Sasha were happy. Imani's new boy toy was fighting for something serious. Diana and James were meant to be taking a break from fostering, only to end up with a litter of kittens needing to be bottle fed. Wren was rocking it at Blend & Brew as the manager and was saving money and playing at Bella Amore nearly every weekend. And Natasha was moving out of her cubicle and into her own office.

When they pulled into the garage, both silently agreed the bags could wait. Ali scurried for the door, Charlotte right behind her.

A surprised gasp burst from Ali as Lily popped up on her hind legs to greet her, yipping with delight before being struck by a sudden case of the zoomies. She tore around the kitchen island, down the hall, to the front door, and back again, little paws drumming against the floor, pulling laughter from both of them.

"Oh my goodness, Charlotte!" Ali cried, dropping to welcome Lily's affection when she finally skidded to a stop in front of her.

"Are you okay with this?" Charlotte asked, leaning back against the counter, trying hard to look casual.

"We get to keep her?" Ali asked, eyes wide with wonder.

"I think Willow would be very sad if we didn't. They're best friends now. I wanted to surprise you, so I documented their entire friendship." Charlotte opened the cabinet where she kept the treats. "Look, here she comes now."

Ali's face lit up as Willow pranced into the kitchen, chirping excitedly. Lily trotted over, and the two touched noses before walking back to Ali

together like they had practiced. Ali whipped out her own phone, taking pictures of the new dynamic duo.

“Willow, you made a friend?” Ali whispered, scooping up the cat and cradling her close. “I’m so proud of you.”

“She was getting sad with you gone and being home alone while I was at work,” Charlotte said softly. “I kept them separated at first and introduced them slowly. Willow was wary, but Lily is patient and gentle.” Lily chose that moment to sit at Charlotte’s feet and lift her paws expectantly. “Once she warmed up to the idea, they became nearly inseparable.”

Charlotte handed Lily a treat, then pulled out her phone to show Ali photos and videos of the two sleeping in tangled heaps and chasing each other through the house. One video in particular had Lily grinning wide and derpy while Willow clung to her face with both paws and gave her a very aggressive bath.

Charlotte’s laughter in the background sounded like music.

Ali’s eyes suddenly went wide. She darted back out to the SUV and returned with a small box pulled from her backpack, offering it up eagerly. “I got you a present.”

“You shouldn’t have,” Charlotte said, unable to stop the delighted smile spreading across her face.

“Yes, I should!” Ali cocked her head, studying the elation in Charlotte’s eyes. “Hold on.” She tugged the box back just out of reach. “Are gifts your love language? I thought you just loved birthdays and Christmas, but you really like presents!”

“I like all of the love languages. I don’t discriminate,” Charlotte replied, her expression solemn. “But gifts make me feel thought of. Especially when you’ve been gone for months.” She reached for the box again.

Ali surrendered it and watched as Charlotte opened it, her expression lighting up at the sight of the sapphire-and-diamond bracelet inside.

“It’s beautiful,” Charlotte murmured, eyes shining as she slipped it onto her wrist.

“Just like you. Here, have another!” Ali produced a second box, giggling with delight.

“Lina, you didn’t,” Charlotte laughed, opening it to find the matching necklace. Ali stepped closer to fasten it around her neck.

“I did,” Ali whispered, pressing a kiss to the back of Charlotte’s neck, and breathing her in. “I missed you so much.”

“I missed you, my love,” Charlotte said, tilting her head back to steal a kiss.

Ali produced a final box, handing it over. Charlotte shook her head, laughing softly as she opened it and revealed the matching earrings. “What am I going to do with you?”

“I can think of a few things,” Ali teased.

With careful hands, Charlotte put the earrings on.

Ali took in every small movement, the way the soft lines around her blue eyes crinkled when she smiled, proof of how truly happy she was.

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Her fingers twitched toward her backpack, where a matching engagement ring she designed herself lay buried. It wasn’t the right time. But she was already planning the most epic proposal. Something worthy of Charlotte Davenport.

“Is there anything else you’d like to spring on me, or can I give you your gift?” Charlotte asked, pulling Ali closer into another kiss.

“Lily wasn’t my present?” Ali asked, grinning when Charlotte shook her head.

“I like to think of her as *our* gift.”

Ali sighed dramatically, though the smile never left her face. “I guess that’s all for now.”

“Good,” Charlotte said, eyes bright. “Because I’ve been very excited to give you this.” She kissed Ali once more, then reached across the island for a small intricately carved wooden box.

Ali wiggled with anticipation as she opened it and found a rolled up piece of paper. “What’s this?”

“There was one more thing on our list we needed to cross off.”

Confusion flickered across Ali’s face. “We already checked everything off.”

“I added another,” Charlotte said, that familiar knowing smile tugging at the edges of her lips.

Ali unrolled the piece of paper and scanned the list. Every item was crossed out… except the last.

~~1. Get a tattoo!~~
~~2. Find live music~~
~~3. Get on a random bus~~
~~4. Find dessert~~
~~5. Geocaching~~
~~6. Visit nearest park~~
~~7. Play on a playground (Preferably with swings)~~
~~8. Try a restaurant neither of us have been to before~~
~~9. Bowling~~
~~10. Botanical Garden~~
~~11. Arcade~~
~~12. Get a massage~~
~~13. Go to a record store and pick out one to dance to~~
~~14. Bake cookies~~
~~15. Escape room~~
~~16. Rooftop bar at sunset~~
~~17. Skinny dipping~~
~~18. Make dinner together~~
~~19. Make out a lil bit~~
~~20. Stargaze~~
21. Ask Ali to move in, permanently.

Ali’s breath caught. Her gaze lifted to Charlotte’s twinkling one, then dropped to the bottom of the box, where two keys waited.

“Charlotte,” her name fell from Ali’s lips like a prayer.

Charlotte reached in and took one of the keys. “Move in with me. Officially. Your stuff is already here, and I want *you* here. With me. Always.”

“You do?” Ali whispered, feeling like she might burst with how much joy bubbled up inside her.

“Yes. Move in with me.”

Ali’s head bobbed, beaming brighter than ever. “Okay. Yes.” She snatched up the key and leaned into Charlotte’s touch, then sighed. “I really don’t want to move again. I’m so tired of moving.”

“If we ever have to leave this house, I will hire movers,” Charlotte vowed.

“My god, you really do love me,” Ali teased.

“That I do. Very much,” Charlotte said without hesitation.

“Are you sure you’re okay with your house smelling like paint and chemicals?”

A slow, delighted grin spread across Charlotte’s face. “Come with me.”

She took Ali’s hand and led her upstairs, past the familiar hallway and through the door Ali had always assumed led to an unfinished floor. Up another short flight, Charlotte stepped onto the landing and guided her through a door on the right, then backed up a few steps, arms opening wide.

“Welcome to your new studio.”

Ali froze.

It wasn’t dusty or barren. To the far left, sunlight poured through wide windows onto neatly arranged painting supplies and canvases. To the right, white walls and soft gallery lights displayed several of her portraits, already hung with care.

“Oh,” Ali breathed, barely managing the word, as she took it all in. There was a thickness in her throat. A mixture of so many emotions she didn’t know how to express.

Charlotte took her hand and led her through the gallery to a door near the far end.

Ali’s hand leapt to her mouth, covering the catch in her breath when they stepped into the turret room. The curved walls cradled a new desk and computer facing the windows. Her beloved couch sat nearby, angled toward the TV mounted between tall bookshelves. Plants dotted every corner, all healthy and alive.

“This is just for you,” Charlotte said quietly, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze. “For creating. For thinking. Or just when you need to focus or be alone.”

“You did all this… for me?”

“Yes,” Charlotte said, settling herself neatly in the center of the couch. “Could never decide what to do with this floor… before you.” She sank

back into the cushions. “I added a bathroom and two bedrooms on the other side.”

Ali wandered the room in a daze, peering back into the gallery and down toward the studio space.

“I’m considering some sort of elevator system,” Charlotte added thoughtfully, “so you don’t have to carry your supplies up and down the stairs.”

Turning back to Charlotte, ocean eyes were waiting, open and hopeful… full of adoration.

“Do you like it?” Charlotte asked.

Ali crossed the room and settled onto Charlotte’s lap, still taking everything in as Charlotte’s arms looped around her waist, fingers teasing warm skin beneath her shirt.

“It’s perfect,” Ali murmured, certain she’d never felt so loved.

Charlotte’s expression softened as she lifted a hand, thumb brushing over the deepest of Ali’s dimples. “I wanted you to have a place that was yours,” she said quietly. “Here. With me.”

Ali’s hands slid to the nape of Charlotte’s neck, fingers threading into her hair. “I love you,” she whispered. “So much.”

“I love you too,” Charlotte said easily, like it was the simplest truth in the world, leaning in to kiss her. “I’m so glad you’re back.”

Ali smiled, dimples on full display, gratitude and joy tangling together in her chest. By some cosmic miracle, she and Charlotte had found each other, and she found the courage to stay, and choose this so they could build something real.

She lowered her forehead to Charlotte’s, breathing her in, grounding herself in the warmth and steadiness of her arms. After everything, after all the wandering and waiting, there was only one thing left to say.

“It’s good to be home.”

And they lived happily ever after…
The End.

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TROPES, THEMES, & CONTENT WARNINGS

TROPES:

- Fake dating
- CEO x Artist
- Black cat x golden retriever
- Age gap
- Forced proximity
- Wedding season
- Meddling family
- Mutual pining
- Friends-with-benefits to Lovers
- Found family
- Hurt/Comfort
- Tattoos
- The ex-fiancée is the worst
- Light angst
- Fluff
- Dual POV
- HEA

THEMES:

- Learning to be vulnerable again
- Making peace with imperfection
- Family expectations
- Finding a place to put down roots
- Love after heartbreak

CONTENT WARNINGS:

- Explicit sexual content
- Depiction of OCD, depression, and anxiety, including intrusive thoughts, panic, and mentions of self-harm
- Past parental loss and grief
- Alcohol consumption
- Previous emotional abuse/manipulation (off page)
- Emotional confrontation
- Ex-fiancée is a narcissist
- Sexual contact while a character is intoxicated and unable to consent (referenced, off page)
- Emotionally and sexually coercive relationship involving a significant age and power imbalance (largely referenced with one witnessed on-page scene of verbal abuse and manipulation)

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All my love,

Claire

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Claire Summers writes warm, character-driven sapphic romances built out of her own favorite things: slow burns, found family, yearning, and hard-won happily ever afters. When she isn't writing love stories or dreaming up epic fantasy worlds, she's illustrating, working through an endless TBR, repainting a wall on a whim, or trying to talk herself out of buying another house plant.

She shares a home with her wife and a chaotic collection of rescue plants, dogs, and cats, most of whom have talked their way into her books. *Coffee Eyes and Little White Lies* is the first novel in the Blend & Brew Collection, a series meant to portray the kind of love this former Louisiana native grew up only being able to imagine.



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