



Star Power

Author: *Carol Wyatt*

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It still amazed Lara Soler that this was her life, that part of her job as a talent agent involved attending parties like this one at one of Malibu's most sought-after properties. She carried her glass of white wine out to the massive deck, the glass walls surrounding it nearly invisible, like there was nothing between her and the sand and the waves.

The sun was sinking in the sky, leaving behind a dramatic canvas of pinks and purples. The roar of the waves almost drowned out the lo-fi beats coming from the surround sound speakers dotted throughout the house.

Even though she'd spent three years shadowing Kerri Talbert, one of the best agents in the business, and learning as much as she could from her, Lara was still having a year of firsts, because she was doing all of these things, going to red carpet events and pressers, as an agent, not as Kerri's personal assistant.

She'd attended the official wrap party last weekend, but this was an informal version, thrown by one of the lead actresses, and she'd decided to host a more laid-back version in her home without all the higher-ups. This was meant to be a relaxed evening with the entire cast and whomever they wanted to invite. Most brought a friend or a partner, but Hayden Dent had surprised Lara by asking her to come with her tonight.

Hayden Dent was one of the last people Kerri signed before retiring to Colorado, and she was the same age as Lara. They were both thirty-two and although Hayden was still waiting for her breakout role, she was finding her feet in this business, securing

another solid side character with this TV series.

Lara took a sip of wine as she watched the pinks deepen into magenta as the last of the daylight disappeared, and she inhaled a deep breath, loving the salty, fresh scent of the ocean, wishing she made more time to go to the beach.

She'd been working like crazy these last six months, knowing that Kerri's former clients, now her clients, expected a lot from her. None of them knew that Kerri was going to retire, and Kerri had given those actors and actresses her word that Lara was going to look after them.

Lara still struggled to see how Kerri could have had so much trust in her. Yes, they'd spent three years working together, but Lara had been her personal assistant, and even though Lara always went above and beyond, that didn't translate into becoming a top agent. She'd get there in time. She was sure of that much. But what would she do in the meantime?

Lara had already lost two of Kerri's former clients in the last three months, neither of them willing to give her any more time to get them the roles they thought they deserved.

She tried not to let Kerri hear how stressed out she was anytime Kerri called, because Lara didn't want to let her down. She had so much respect for Kerri, personally and professionally, and Lara didn't want Kerri to worry about her or to think that she'd made the wrong decision by recommending Lara.

"Hey."

Lara turned to see Hayden standing beside her, her golden blond hair lifting in the light breeze. Lara hadn't even heard her approach. "Hey."

“You were miles away,” Hayden said softly. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” Lara took another drink. Hayden knew what was going on with her. They’d become more friends than agent and client in the last few weeks, both of them confessing their fears and doubts about their futures in this business.

Hayden was at a critical point in her career. She spent the last five years taking just about any job she could get, but unfortunately in this business, with each passing year, Hayden’s chances of landing a big role were reducing. There would always be another young actress coming up, who might not have Hayden’s experience, but they had youth on their side, and like it or not, that counted for a lot more than it should.

“You know,” Hayden said, “I was thinking about you when I was listening to a few veteran actors when I went inside to get a drink, and they were reminiscing about how much Hollywood has changed since they started.”

“Yeah?”

“You’ve been so supportive of me, even though I was Kerri’s find. You’ve kept me from walking away more times than I can count now, and we’ve only known each other six months. Seriously, I’m really grateful that you’re my agent and my friend. I don’t want to get all mushy and ruin the party vibe, but I want to make sure you know that.”

Lara nodded, a wry smile coming to her lips. “If only I could get you that breakout part.”

Hayden gave Lara’s forearm a squeeze. “I know you’re working your ass off to do that, so I’m not worried. It’ll happen when it’s meant to happen. But listening to those guys, it got me thinking... You’re really doing business in Kerri’s shadow. I mean, I’m sure you’re glad that she gave you this opportunity to take over some of her

clients, but I wonder if it might be time to find a few clients that you discovered, who you really believe in.”

Lara blew out a breath. “I’ve been so busy trying to hold onto Kerri’s clients that I haven’t even had time to think about finding my own.”

“I think you should start looking into it. I feel like you’re carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders, and I’m worried about you. You’re like the kid who’ll do anything to impress their parents. Kerri’s happy in Colorado. She’s not coming back, and you need to carve out your own space in this business.”

“I know.” Lara turned and leaned back against the railing, facing towards the house, the hum of laughter drifting out from the busy living area. “I think you’re right, but I also think I need to spend a few more months getting comfortable and learning all the ins and outs, the things that I need to find out for myself.”

“I hope it’s worth it,” Hayden said as she took one last look out over the ocean before mirroring Lara. “Sometimes I wonder.” She took a sip of her cocktail. “My career obviously. I know it’ll be worth it for you. You’re on the right track. But lately, I’m back to wondering if this is all worth it.”

“Only you know the answer to that.”

Hayden smiled. “You know, you’ve got this wise, old soul vibe about you,” she said as she searched her eyes. “I forget sometimes that we’re the same age.”

Lara opened her mouth but forgot what she was going to say when her eyes landed on Charlotte Dixon, weaving her way through the crowded living room, hugging and chatting to people every few steps.

Hayden chuckled beside her. “Surely, that makes it all worth it. Rubbing shoulders

with the likes of Charlotte Dixon.”

“Yeah.” Lara couldn’t take her eyes off her. That woman was the definition of beautiful. Tonight, she was wearing a perfectly tailored black suit with a white button-up blouse underneath, the sleeves of her blazer rolled up to her elbows, her blonde hair straight, falling a few inches below her shoulders.

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“I love this side of her,” Hayden said. “She came out while we were filming, and she just... She was a new person. She was always easy to be around, but it was visibly noticeable how much more at ease she was with herself when she came out.”

“I still can’t believe it.” Lara watched Charlotte wrap her arms around the host, Jessica Hodges, sharing a long embrace. They would have known each other, of course, but this was their first time working together, and their chemistry had just been fantastic to watch. They’d played rival lawyers with Hayden playing Charlotte’s paralegal.

“Why didn’t you stop by when we were filming,” Hayden said, gently elbowing her. “You clearly have a thing for her. You should have.”

Lara blinked, finally forcing herself to look away as Charlotte let Jessica lead her over to another group of people by the makeshift bar area. “What?”

“You have a serious crush on that woman. Hey, I’m not judging,” Hayden said with a grin. “I think I might even have a thing for her and I’m straight.”

“Yeah, she does have that effect on people.” Lara focused her attention on Hayden when she realized she was looking in Charlotte’s direction again.

Lara was no stranger to spending time with Hollywood royalty. Kerri’s best friend was Adelaide Atwood. Adelaide’s girlfriend, now fiancé, was Sydney Lockett. And they were both her clients now. The list went on and on. Lara had met so many famous faces in the last three years, and not just actresses. Kerri’s friends extended to athletes and musicians. Lara rarely got starstruck anymore, but there was something

about Charlotte Dixon.

Yes, she was stunning, but it was more than that. Charlotte just had this alluring mixture of confidence and talent. It was the way she carried herself. And this was all before she came out. Now, all of those characteristics were amplified.

Hayden was right. It was like Charlotte Dixon was a new woman.

“You should talk to her,” Hayden said with a grin.

“No.” Lara gulped her wine.

“Why not?”

“What would I say? She’s one of Hollywood’s best actresses. I’m... A newbie agent.”

“And that’s why you should talk to her. Introduce yourself.”

Lara inhaled a shaky breath. No, that was definitely not happening. She wasn’t mentally prepared for a conversation with Charlotte Dixon.

She’d often wished that Charlotte had been a client of Kerri’s. That way Lara might have been able to spend some time with her, to get to know her, but they’d never actually spoken despite having mutual friends.

“I obviously look up to her,” Hayden said when Lara remained silent. “But I think the thing I respect about her the most, is that she’s decided to age gracefully.”

“Yeah.” Lara once again couldn’t keep her eyes from peering through the floor-to-ceiling windows looking into the living room, searching for Charlotte, finding her on

one of the sofas chatting to another actor.

At fifty-one, Charlotte Dixon was more beautiful now than ever. The lines around her eyes, when she flashed that dazzling smile, were clearly visible, and Lara knew she was one of the very few women in this town who let themselves age naturally.

“I’m going to get a refill,” Hayden said, taking her away from her thoughts. “Want one?”

“Sure.”

Lara sipped her drink as Hayden made her way inside. She could have joined the three women to her right, sitting on the white outdoor couches, but she stayed where she was, content to soak up the atmosphere and get lost in her own thoughts.

2

Charlotte Dixon wandered over to the bar area that was set up between the kitchen and the living room area, a bartender manning the station, ready to whip up any kind of cocktail she could want.

“What can I get you?” the young man asked, his hair perfectly gelled.

“An Old Fashioned, please.”

“Coming right up.”

Charlotte rarely felt like she could relax at wrap parties, knowing that although she was in the company of friends and colleagues, one wrong move, one drunken comment, could potentially ruin her career.

Tonight was different though. Jessica was hosting, and while she invited the entire cast, she left out the suits, wanting a laidback atmosphere, and after doing the rounds, Charlotte knew she was truly in the company of friends.

More than once in the last two years, she'd thought about retiring, but the buzz she'd gotten working on this series was what kept her from officially calling time on her career.

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Yes, the parts she wanted were getting harder and harder to find, but when she could get a quality role, it was worth more than she could possibly say. It rejuvenated her. It gave her life meaning, because acting was what she was born to do, and as much as this business was ready to move on from her, Charlotte wasn't quite ready to throw in the towel.

"Here you go," the bartender said as he set her cocktail down in front of her.

"Thank you." Charlotte lifted her drink and took a sip, savoring that smooth taste of bourbon along with a hint of spice. She'd have a few of these tonight, that much she knew.

She'd come alone, even though she could have brought someone. She would have asked Ada, but she was out of town, and Sydney, Ada's fiancé, had an audition tomorrow, so Charlotte knew not to ask her.

Ada had become one of her best friends since they starred in a movie together, spending quality time in London and sharing secrets. Neither of them had been out back then, and it was hard to believe how much had changed in the last few years.

Going into that project, Charlotte never could have imagined how much she had in common with Ada, that they'd been harboring the very same secret, both afraid that coming out would cost them their careers.

Ada had come out publicly first, and seeing Ada and Sydney together, their careers still intact, gave Charlotte the courage to finally come out.

Thinking of Ada reminded Charlotte of something Ada had said the last time they'd had dinner together almost a month ago now. Ada had asked her to look out for Lara Soler, Kerri Talbert's understudy, so to speak. Apparently, Kerri was worried about her, and Ada wanted to help, but she didn't know how because Lara was her agent. She didn't want to overstep or ruin their working relationship, which Ada was happy with.

Kerri had said to Ada that it wasn't anything serious, that she just wanted to know that she was doing okay because Kerri knew the pressure she'd be under just a few months into her new career.

So, Charlotte had agreed to see if she could talk to her, maybe befriend her and make sure everything was okay, because she thought there was a decent chance that she would be here tonight.

One of the actresses from this project, Hayden, was represented by Lara, and although most agents weren't here tonight, Charlotte got the impression from Hayden that they were close.

Charlotte was not the kind of person who set people up or who tried to repair friendships or business relationships. Even though she was, or at least, had been, one of Hollywood's best actresses and regularly captivated audiences, she would never have described herself as a people person. She was actually quite introverted.

But Charlotte felt for Kerri, and if Charlotte could help, she would. Kerri had followed her heart and moved back to Colorado, leaving behind an incredibly impressive career as a talent agent, and she'd trusted that career and her clients to Lara Soler. They were big shoes to fill, and Charlotte wasn't at all surprised to hear that Kerri was worried about her.

Charlotte would text Ada tomorrow if she made any progress tonight. After her

conversation with Ada, she'd searched social media for a photo of Lara Soler but only found a few professional headshots.

Charlotte carried her drink outside, nearly certain that she hadn't seen Lara so far, but she really wasn't sure. Those headshots gave Charlotte very little to go off of, and they were probably several years old now.

She wished Sydney could have come with her tonight. She'd known Lara for years, because Kerri had been her agent, and Lara had been Kerri's P.A. back then. Now, Lara was Sydney's agent too, so maybe it would have been just as awkward for Sydney to be here while Charlotte tried her best to casually find out how Lara was doing, someone she had no recollection of meeting before despite being Kerri's personal assistant.

As Charlotte's heels clicked against the wood, she waved to a few people who were sitting on the outdoor sofas. She didn't see anyone who could have been Lara with them, so she kept walking, finding herself at the glass wall surrounding the huge deck.

The last of the light was disappearing as she looked out at the empty beach, the waves gently rolling in. When she put her back to the ocean, several outdoor lighting features were switched on, casting a soft glow on the deck without being too bright.

She turned to her left as she sipped her drink, making sure she hadn't missed saying hello to anyone, and she found a young woman's eyes already on her just a few feet away, her dark hair styled in loose curls that fell just below her shoulders.

Charlotte held her gaze, still navigating this new world she found herself in. Yes, she was famous, even if her star was fading with each passing year, but now that she was out, it was still strange for her to think that if she found a woman looking at her like she just had, that maybe they weren't looking at her because she was famous, but

because they were interested in her.

Charlotte felt a tug at the corner of her lips as the woman darted her eyes away, unable to hold eye contact. Charlotte took a drink as she stole another glance in the woman's direction, tapping into her apparently, fairly decent, gaydar. She must have been honing her skills over the years without even realizing it.

And as she let her eyes move over this woman's simple white dress that fell a few inches above her knees, Charlotte lingered on her halter neck and the tasteful amount of cleavage on display. When the woman turned to look out at the beach, the moonlight illuminating the sand now, Charlotte couldn't take her eyes off the dress's open back and the tanned skin it revealed.

Charlotte found herself approaching the woman, because at this point in her career, there were very few people in this business that she didn't know, and she'd never seen this woman before. She would have remembered if she had.

Charlotte couldn't leave Jessica's party tonight without finding out who this woman was, and while, from a distance anyway, she was an attractive young woman, Charlotte was more curious about finding out who she was than asking her out.

Because even from a distance, Charlotte could tell that this woman had to be at least twenty-something years younger than her, and while age-gap relationships seemed to be all the rage in her social circle, she didn't think it was something that would happen to her.

She'd just turned fifty-one, and she couldn't see herself dating a woman in her thirties. Maybe forties, but Charlotte also knew from those long late-night conversations with Ada in London, that the way she'd fallen for Sydney had been so unexpected, that even though she knew she was gay, she never could have imagined herself with someone so much younger.

And then there was Kerri. Someone Charlotte had known and respected for years. Now, she was happy with Rachel in Colorado, their age gap a non-issue for them. Charlotte could keep going when she thought about the rest of her wider group of friends and colleagues in this business. Even her agent was dating a guy so much younger than him.

Charlotte obviously didn't have an issue with any of their relationships, but it was different when it was her, and anyone that she'd dated in the last few months had been close to her age, although she'd never pursued anything serious with them. She still hadn't felt that spark that everyone else seemed to know about.

"Hi," Charlotte said as she closed the distance between them, and when the woman turned, her honey-brown eyes met her own.

"Hi." The woman visibly swallowed, and Charlotte briefly wondered if she'd read this wrong, and she was a fan, maybe a friend of one of the actors.

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“I thought I knew everyone here tonight, but I have to say, I don’t recognize you.”

The woman extended her hand. The movement caught Charlotte off guard, because she didn’t think anyone that young would initiate a handshake, especially at a party like this. “Lara Soler. I’m Hayden Dent’s agent.”

Charlotte blinked, momentarily dazed, her mind searching for the image of those headshots, trying to see how they could be the same person. “Charlotte Dixon,” she said after a moment, her hand sliding into Lara’s.

Charlotte tried to shake away that feeling of surprise, hoping that Lara couldn’t see how thrown she was. And her stomach dropped a little when she realized that Lara had been looking at her because she’d more than likely recognized Charlotte. They had a lot of friends in common, and maybe Lara was wondering if Charlotte knew who she was.

She hated that she was disappointed that this woman wasn’t staring at her because she was interested. She didn’t want to be that person, the kind who needed attention and validation, but maybe she was.

3

Lara had to remember to breathe as Charlotte Dixon slid her hand into hers, giving it a firm shake. She was torn between wanting Hayden to come back with their drinks and diffuse this strange vibe that appeared out of nowhere when Lara introduced herself but also wanting to have Charlotte Dixon to herself for as long as possible.

Lara's hand fell away, her mind racing as she tried to figure out what had just happened. Charlotte had approached her with her signature swag and confidence, but when Lara had held out her hand and introduced herself, something changed, and Lara had no idea what it could be.

Unless Charlotte had heard something about her. About how shit of an agent she actually was. And that she was only where she was because Kerri Talbert had handed her a star-studded client list.

Lara swallowed down the lump in her throat. She'd had Ada and Sydney along with a few more of her clients reassuring her and thanking her for doing such a good job since taking over from Kerri, but that didn't stop the nearly daily worry that she was doing a horrible job representing her clients and finding them the roles that they deserved.

Charlotte's voice took her away from her thoughts. "Well, it's a pleasure to finally meet you. We have a lot of mutual friends, but I'm pretty sure that we've never met."

Lara shook her head. "No. We haven't. I never went to any events or parties like this with Kerri. I was her P.A. so it was different back then. But yes, we are friends with a lot of the same people." She was rambling, and she didn't know how to stop herself. She was so distracted by Charlotte's reaction. It had been subtle, but at the same time, it was enough that Lara couldn't ignore it.

Charlotte's charming self was back now though, and Lara found it difficult not to fall under her spell. Those eyes were just so mesmerizing. The rest of the party fell away as Lara gave Charlotte her undivided attention, the relaxing roar of the ocean filling the gaps in conversation.

"I'm surprised you weren't at Kerri's fiftieth birthday party. At Ada's."

Lara tried not to let her gaze rake over Charlotte again, but this woman in a suit was like something out of her fantasies. “She actually gave me that week off, and I went to New York.”

“It’s funny, thinking back...” Charlotte sipped her drink. “Kerri had just bought her cabin in Colorado. She hadn’t even met Rachel yet, and she wasn’t really even thinking about retiring. And look at her now. Look at you now.” Charlotte lifted her glass towards her. “Congrats.”

Lara exhaled, not entirely sure if Charlotte was questioning how she got to where she was or genuinely congratulating her. “Thanks. Yeah, it’s been a crazy year. I had been learning from Kerri, thinking that, you know, maybe someday I’d like to be an agent, but it all happened so fast.”

“And do you love it?”

Lara opened her mouth, but nothing came out. Did she love it? She’d been so busy trying to keep her head above water, to hold onto Kerri’s clients who were now her clients, that she hadn’t really stopped to think about how she felt, if she was enjoying her new job.

“Wow,” Charlotte said, her gaze fixed on her. “You might want to do some soul searching. I can’t speak from experience career-wise, because I love what I do, but I have lived my personal life under the weight of other people’s opinions, of what I thought I should be doing to keep my fans happy... It’s my biggest regret. That I didn’t make decisions for myself sooner. And if you hesitated that much...” She pursed her lips together. “You might want to think about your career choice.”

Lara’s stomach dropped as Charlotte’s words sunk in, and Hayden appeared at that moment with their drinks.

“Thank you,” Lara said softly as Hayden handed her the glass before wrapping her arms around Charlotte, zoning out of their conversation for a few seconds, wishing she could be more like Hayden, chatting to Charlotte with ease, although they had been on the same set for months, so it wasn’t a fair comparison, but still.

Lara needed to figure out how to behave like a professional. Fast. She didn’t want Charlotte Dixon to leave this party thinking she was an incompetent agent who was too starstruck to carry on a conversation.

“...isn’t it Lara?”

Hayden was looking at her, waiting for her to answer, but Lara had no idea what they were talking about. She gave the slightest nod before lifting her glass to her lips and taking a drink.

“Someday,” Hayden continued. “Someday, I’m going to live in a house like this. On the beach.”

“Well, you have the talent,” Charlotte chimed in. “There’s no doubt about that. I’ve seen it with my own eyes. The parts will come. And you’ve got a capable agent,” she said, turning her attention to Lara. “So, it’s just a matter of being patient.”

Lara could feel the heat coming to her cheeks. A compliment from Charlotte Dixon? Was this real life? Or was that more of a backhanded compliment? Where capable meant that she should have already found Hayden a more significant role?

“Is it okay if I head back inside?” Hayden asked her. “Jessica wanted to introduce me to someone.”

“Yeah. Of course.” And then it was just Charlotte and her again. A second chance for Lara to redeem herself. She met Charlotte’s blue eyes. “What you were saying

before... I assume you were talking about coming out?"

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Charlotte nodded. “I wasted a lot of years trying to fit in, and I did, but at what cost.” She sighed. “Looking back, it’s easy for me to say now, but I would give anything to go back. To live my life differently. And yeah, it might have changed the trajectory of my career if I’d come out ten or twenty years ago, but at that point I’d already played some amazing characters, won awards, and bought my dream house.” She shrugged. “But you always want more.”

“That’s human nature.”

Charlotte took a drink. “Maybe, but it came at a cost.”

“You have the best of both now though, right? Your career was just... Iconic. All the accolades, the memorable roles. You don’t have to wonder what you might have achieved. And you still have so much time to go out there and live the life you want.”

“Past tense...” Charlotte inhaled a sharp breath.

“What?” Lara searched Charlotte’s face. What had she missed?

“You referred to my career in the past tense.”

Lara felt like the wind had been knocked out of her. “No...” She cleared her throat. “That’s not what I meant. I just—”

Charlotte brought her glass to her lips and knocked back what was left in it. “You might not have meant it, but it’s what you thought.” Her hand was on Lara’s forearm, warmth spreading across her skin. “You just said the quiet part out loud. I’m going to

get another one of these,” she said, looking down at her empty glass. “Can I get you anything?”

“No.” Lara wanted the ground to open up and swallow her. “No, I’m fine. Thank you.”

And Charlotte Dixon strode away from her, one hand in the pocket of her black slacks.

Lara exhaled as she turned back to face the water, her eyes closed as she relived that disaster of a conversation. From the career advice to that embarrassing moment.

And now Charlotte was gone. Probably wondering what Ada and Sydney and the rest of her clients were doing with her for an agent.

4

Charlotte Dixon finished her second Old Fashioned as she stayed in the living room area, listening to Jessica regale them with stories from the last season they filmed. At least a dozen guests had gathered around, between the couches and the armchairs, a few standing behind them, only now finding out about mistakes and bloopers that they hadn’t been on set that particular day to witness.

Charlotte still couldn’t believe that the series was over. They’d only had three years working together, and they’d all been hoping for a renewal, but it hadn’t happened.

Thankfully, the writers hadn’t left too many loose ends, and the finale had been satisfying, but Charlotte couldn’t help thinking about what would have happened if they’d had another year.

Jessica and her had shared some fantastic chemistry on set. They’d been rival

lawyers, and despite being great friends in real life, they'd had some heated scenes, accusing the other of something nefarious, of not having the evidence that they claimed they did. It was always dramatic with them, never mind when they filmed those court scenes.

Charlotte would miss playing a confident, intelligent lawyer who never seemed to get rattled. It was her second time playing a high-powered lawyer. The first time had been almost thirty years ago, another TV series. The one that had launched her career.

Out of the corner of her eye, the flash of white caught her eye, and when she turned, she recognized Lara's dark hair and the open back of her dress. She was in the kitchen giving Hayden a hug.

Charlotte found herself following her away from the open planned kitchen and living area, down a hall and into the foyer where Lara was looking down at her phone.

"Hey," Charlotte said. "You're leaving?" She was probably the first person to leave. It wasn't even nine o'clock.

"Yeah." Lara gave her a lop-sided smile, and there was something sad about the expression on her face as she returned her attention to her phone.

"Is your driver on the way?"

Lara looked up. "I don't have one. I'm trying to find a free car," she said, holding up her phone, a taxi app open.

"I was just about to call my driver." The words were out of her mouth before Charlotte could second guess them. She'd had no intention of leaving this early, but that conversation on the deck had only left Charlotte wondering if Kerri was right to be worried. And this would be the perfect chance to get to talk to her a bit more, see

if she could get to know Lara better and put Ada's and Kerri's minds at ease. "Can I give you a ride home?"

Lara stared at her for a second. "I'm probably out of your way."

"I heard you were staying at Kerri's place."

Lara hesitated. "Yeah. I am."

"Then you're not out of my way." Charlotte slid her phone out of the inside pocket of her blazer. "Just give me a minute to see how far away he is." She started walking back down the hall as she spoke to her driver who was less than five minutes away.

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“He’s on the way,” Charlotte said coming back towards Lara. “He’ll be here in less than five minutes.”

“Thank you.” Lara stood in the foyer, her arms folded across her chest. It didn’t come across as defensive, so she must be cold?

“Here,” Charlotte said, shrugging out of her blazer. “Put this on. Jessica’s got the AC on full blast.” She held out her blazer, and Lara took a second to turn her back towards her and slide her arms into the sleeves.

“Thank you.” Lara moved to face her, and for a second, Charlotte wondered if her initial gut feeling about Lara was right, because there was something in her gaze now that suggested attraction rather than admiration. It was the way her eyes had darkened, the way they’d flickered down to Charlotte’s lips for the briefest moment before she turned and slid her arms into the sleeves of the blazer.

Charlotte’s phone buzzed in her pocket, breaking the moment, and Lara took a step back, moving towards the door when Charlotte confirmed that her driver was outside. She’d text Jessica once she was in the car to let her know that she had to go, because she had a feeling Jessica was still telling stories inside, and that if Charlotte went back into the living room, she wouldn’t be able to get away without saying goodnight to every single person.

So, she followed Lara down the five steps that led up to Jessica’s front door and thanked her driver who was holding the door open for the two of them.

Charlotte slid into the backseat after Lara, giving her driver Kerri’s address before

she got comfortable, and he pulled off, only the hum of the engine filling the dark space as they drove along the coast.

“I’m sorry about before,” Lara said after a moment. “About using the past tense. I really didn’t mean anything by it.”

Charlotte nodded. “I wasn’t offended, but it is telling. You’re an agent after all. You know exactly what it’s like for a woman my age to try and get meaningful roles. And you were right about one thing. That I didn’t have to wonder what I might have achieved. I suppose I’m still trying to wrestle with the idea that either way there would have been doubt.” She turned to look at Lara, the streetlights illuminating her face as they slowed to a stop. “If I did come out years ago, I’d be wondering what my career might have been like if I didn’t. And now, I have the professional accomplishments, but I’m still dwelling on what might have been, if I’ve missed the right woman. If she’s out there and married to someone else.”

Lara held her gaze in the dimly lit back seat as the car pulled off again. “Do you think there’s one right person for everyone?”

Charlotte arched an eyebrow, the direction of their conversation momentarily throwing her. “Yeah. I mean, the sensible part of me thinks that’s bullshit,” she said with a smile, “But the part of me that likes to dream? It’s nice to think that there’s somebody out there who is that perfect match, who I have that indescribable connection with.” She shook her head as she turned to watch the buildings go by. “I don’t know what I think, really. This is all so new to me. Dating. Putting myself out there.”

“Hayden commented on that. When you arrived,” Lara said. “That you were like a new person.”

Charlotte smiled to herself. “Yeah. It certainly feels like it,” she said as the car pulled

up to a high set of closed gates, and Lara fumbled in her bag for her keys, pressing the button to open them. “Well, have fun on Sunday.”

“Sunday?”

Charlotte stared at her as the doors opened. “The awards ceremony. Ada’s up for best actress.”

“Oh, I’m not going. I’ll be watching from the comfort of my couch,” Lara said, flashing her a warm smile. “You’re going?”

“No. I plan on doing the same thing.” Charlotte opened her mouth without knowing what she wanted to say but recovered quickly. “Do you want to come over that night?”

Lara’s eyes widened. “Really?” She didn’t sound like an excited fan. She sounded like she was sure she’d misheard Charlotte.

“Yeah. Of course. Why watch it alone when we could be cheering Ada on together?”

“Uh, yeah. That’d be great. Um...” She reached for her bag and took out her phone, holding it out for Charlotte to take. “Why don’t you give me your number and we can figure out the time and you can text me your address.”

“Sure.” Charlotte took the phone and entered her name and number. “Night, Lara. It was really nice to meet you.”

Lara’s lips slid into a smile. “You too. Goodnight. And thanks for the ride. Oh,” she said with a shake of her head. “Your blazer.” She shrugged out of it and handed it to Charlotte. “Thank you. See you Sunday.”

Charlotte watched Lara unlock the front door, and on the drive home, she had a feeling that by Monday morning she'd have a really good idea if Lara was actually struggling like Kerri thought she was.

5

Lara's week flew by. She'd spent more time than she would have liked interviewing potential personal assistants. Ada had been the one to point it out to her when Lara had dropped by her home the night after Jessica's party.

Ada wasn't sure how Lara had gone this long without one, that Kerri had given Lara so much responsibility when she was Kerri's PA, and that Ada could always see the difference it made in terms of Kerri getting down to the important work and not getting lost in the minutia.

So, now, after interviewing six people, Lara was pretty sure that Nina was the right fit for her. She'd just graduated from college, and she was ambitious and confident without being cocky. They'd agreed on a trial week that would be paid, and as Lara joined the line at her favorite coffee place, she hadn't realized how much she needed this.

The whirl of coffee beans in the grinder mixed with the noise of the conversations going on around her as she inhaled the rich scent of pastries and coffee.

Nina had sold herself, going through a long list of ways that she could make her life easier, and Lara knew. She'd been Kerri's PA for three years. She'd done everything from taking meeting notes to picking up dry cleaning. Not that Kerri had been in any way demanding or difficult. She'd always treated Lara with respect, but she'd done all kinds of odd jobs for Kerri, and she honestly couldn't wait to have that kind of help in her own life right now.

She'd been so lost in her own thoughts that she hadn't noticed that the line wasn't moving. Three people were ahead of her: a woman with two young children, a businessman in a suit who was on the phone while he waited, and a woman at the front of the line who seemed to be having some kind of argument with the barista.

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“Do you not know who I am?”

Lara rolled her eyes as she caught that line from the woman who appeared to be causing the delay. If that wasn't the most overused line she'd heard since she'd moved to L.A., she didn't know what was.

And it never worked.

The woman must have given up because she stormed past her, pushing open the door, and it was only when she'd breezed by her that Lara thought she recognized her.

Lara was following her outside and into the bright sunshine before she even realized what she was doing. “Hey, wait up,” she called as she slid on her shades.

The woman didn't pay her any attention, so Lara had to jog a few paces to catch up with her, speeding up to pass her out to get a good look and make sure she was right.

Tracy Carrington.

Yeah, that was definitely her. Although Lara couldn't think of the name of the lawyer she'd played. That would bother her until she had a chance to Google it.

But that was her.

She still had thick, brown hair that fell a few inches below her shoulders. She'd definitely aged, and if Lara had to guess, she'd put her in her late forties. She had that sun-kissed California look about her with her tanned skin and golden highlights

streaked through her hair.

Lara's mother had watched the law drama that she'd starred in... Probably twenty-five years ago now. Lara had only been a kid when it was on, but she'd seen the reruns as a teenager. That was the series that made Charlotte Dixon famous and started her infatuation with the actress. Tracy Carrington had a starring role in that series too, but Lara couldn't recall anything she'd been in since then.

Lara tried to catch her breath as she gave Tracy Carrington a casual wave, a smile coming to her lips. "I know who you are," she said, hoping that Tracy wouldn't think she was crazy.

"Do you?" Tracy eyed her skeptically. "You're too young to."

Lara's hands were on her hips as they stepped to the side to let people get by them on the sidewalk. "Reruns."

"Hm." And then Tracy was moving to get by her.

"Hey, wait!"

Tracy wasn't going to stop so Lara reached out to gently grab her wrist, and the daggers Tracy threw her made her drop her hand as if she'd been burnt.

"I'm an agent," Lara said putting some space between them. "And I just wanted to see if you were happy with your representation." She didn't know what she was doing now that she had Tracy's attention, but it seemed like the next logical move.

"Again, too young." Tracy started to move again, shaking her head as she did.

"I represent Adelaide Atwood and Sydney Lockett."

That stopped Tracy's feet from moving any further. She turned slowly, a very skeptical look on her face, her gaze fixed on Lara, almost like she was trying to figure out if that could be true.

"No. I know who represents them. And it's not you."

"Kerri retired. My name's Lara Soler."

Tracy's eyebrow lifted. That was news to her it seemed, but the fact that Lara knew Kerri's name must have given her a little bit of credibility, because now Tracy was walking towards her again.

"What happened back there?" Lara asked, trying to keep this interaction casual and find out why Tracy Carrington felt the need to use that god-awful line. "At the coffee shop," she said, glancing behind her.

Tracy exhaled. "I've just had a bad couple of days, and when they mixed up my order, I overreacted. I'm not normally like that, by the way."

Lara nodded. "There's another place a few yards down the road. Want to sit down and get that coffee?"

Tracy searched her eyes for what felt like too long before agreeing, and Lara had no idea what this woman was thinking, but a shot of adrenaline ran through Lara as Tracy started walking alongside her. She didn't know whether it was because Lara was a little bit starstruck, even though so many years had passed since she had a minor crush on Tracy, or if it was because she'd done something smart as an agent and convinced someone to give her a few minutes of their time.

Lara had no idea if Tracy was still in the business or not, but as they entered the less crowded coffee shop and placed their orders, Lara decided to treat Tracy Carrington

like a potential client.

Lara had yet to do this, to go out and try and find her own talent. All of her clients had worked with Kerri before, and she was starting to get a little antsy about that fact. Lara needed to prove to herself that she could be a real agent.

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It was easy to find roles for Sydney or Ada. Hell, they came to them, sometimes bypassing Lara altogether with scripts being sent directly to Ada or Sydney. There were too many options for actresses of their quality.

But Kerri had found Sydney.

And Lara needed to have a find like that.

Tracy Carrington certainly didn't fit into Lara's imagined scenarios of discovering talent. Tracy was probably twice the age of that young talent that Lara was looking for. But this was a good chance to put herself out there and have those kinds of conversations. Find out what a potential client wanted from their careers, beyond the obvious, to win the most coveted awards and work with the most esteemed directors and producers.

They carried their coffees to a rustic wooden table for two tucked away in the corner of the room. Tracy put her back to the window, and Lara wondered how often she was recognized.

"So," Tracy said, folding her arms in front of her as she leaned against the table, "You recognized me."

"Hm." Lara decided to leave out the part about her mother loving the show. "I don't remember how I came across it, but it was always on when I got home from school, and I got hooked. I shouldn't say this when Adelaide and Sydney are clients, but Charlotte Dixon is probably my favorite actress, and it's from that show really."

“Huh.” Tracy brought her mug of steaming coffee to her lips and took a sip. “And you’re right. You probably shouldn’t say that.”

Lara smiled, tilting her head as she dared to ask the question that had been on the tip of her tongue since she’d realized who Tracy was. “Are you still acting?”

Tracy shook her head. “No. I’m afraid that ship has sailed. I had a few jobs on smaller movies and another tv series, but...” She exhaled. “It didn’t work out.”

Lara couldn’t ignore the way Tracy’s body language had changed, the way her voice had lowered. Was it regret? Disappointment? Frustration?

“What do you do now?” Lara asked, the idea of potentially signing Tracy going out the window.

“I run a surf school.”

“Oh wow. I’ve always wanted to surf, but I never got around to it.”

A smile tugged at Tracy’s lips. “Yeah. I love it. I started it almost twelve years ago now, but before that?” She sighed. “There were some rough years there.”

She didn’t elaborate, and Lara found herself waiting, hoping that she would, but she changed the subject.

“So, Kerri called it a day?” Tracy asked with a hint of a smile. “I’m surprised.”

“She worked so hard. I was her P.A. for her last three years as an agent, so I know. And then when her screenplay and the movie took off... She’s writing now. And she’s happier than I’ve ever seen her. She’s back in Colorado with a woman she met out there.”

“She was on the scene when I was. Ada. Kerri. Charlotte. We were all going for the same parts.” Tracy took another sip of coffee. “Kerri was a good actress, but she really found a niche for herself with the business side of things. I was always jealous of her in that way. She did what the rest of us desperately wanted to do. Come out. Be ourselves.”

Lara hid behind her mug, hoping that Tracy hadn’t noticed her jaw dropping. Tracy Carrington was gay? What?

“Ada and Charlotte got there eventually, but they had put their careers first, so at least they had something to show for it. Me?” A wry smile came to Tracy’s lips. “I managed to screw it all up before I even had a chance at any of that.”

Lara’s mind raced as she tried to keep up with everything Tracy was saying. She cleared her throat. “So, did you stay in touch with any of them?”

Tracy shook her head. “No.”

Lara blinked. She wasn’t going to say anything else? Lara watched Tracy sip her coffee, her face a mask.

What had she meant by screwing it all up?

Before Lara could figure out how to ask her any more questions, Tracy changed the subject.

“Do you really want to learn how to surf?” Tracy asked, wrapping both hands around her mug. “Because a lot of people say that they’d love to if they had the time, but really... They know they’re never going to. Deep down, it’s too challenging or scary, going out into the waves like that, possibly meeting a shark.”

“No.” Lara took a second to think about it. “No, I’m pretty sure that I will at some point.”

“Then I’ll give you my card.” Tracy took a white business card out of her bag and slid it across the table while Lara found hers in the pocket of her shorts, mirroring her actions. “Just in case I need representation?” Tracy asked with a bit of a smile.

“You never know.” Lara returned her smile. “But yeah. Just in case.”

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“Don’t get your hopes up,” Tracy said, but she did take the card and tuck it away somewhere in her bag. “Call me about those lessons. I’ll teach you one on one. I imagine your schedule might not allow you to make the weekly classes.”

“No. Probably not.” Lara slid the card into her pocket. “Thank you. I will definitely be in touch.”

“Good. Because after four or five weeks with me, nearly everyone says that they wished they’d started sooner, that they hadn’t wasted so many years talking about surfing and not actually doing anything about it.”

Lara nodded. “I need something right now. My life’s a bit chaotic. I could do with an outlet, maybe get out of my comfort zone too.”

“Then call me.”

Lara promised herself that she would.

6

What a difference a few years could make. Charlotte was almost as nervous to find out if Ada would win best actress tonight as she would be if she was the one sitting in that theater, waiting for her category to come up.

Not that long ago, they’d been so far from friends. Just acquaintances who bordered on rivals, always going for the same parts, always up for the same awards.

But the time they spent filming in London together changed everything, and Charlotte could never have imagined how much they'd have in common, how easily they could put all those years behind them and enjoy their newfound friendship and their successes together.

Lara laughed softly on the couch beside her, and Charlotte turned to look at her as she reached for the bottle of wine on the coffee table, topping up both their glasses.

"Sorry," Lara said, a smile on her lips. "Kerri was so shocked when she found out you two had become friends. I obviously, didn't know you at all back then, but it's just funny, thinking back... And now here you are."

"Here I am what?"

"Nervous."

Charlotte waved her off.

They'd spent the evening together, starting with the red-carpet coverage as they'd eaten takeout while sitting on the floor, using the coffee table for a dining table, and Charlotte couldn't hide her smile when Lara had looked at her with wide eyes, as if the likes of Charlotte didn't eat food while watching TV like the rest of the world did.

"You are," Lara insisted. "And it's adorable."

Charlotte scoffed. "I'm... Anxious."

She shouldn't have been as surprised as she was that Lara was easy to get along with, that she seemed older than she was. Not in a bad way. Just... Settled. Mature.

She couldn't put her finger on it, but she should have known, because Kerri knew

what she was doing. She wouldn't have hired Lara or kept working with her for as long as she had without reason, never mind handing over her clients to her.

"And you're not?" Charlotte challenged her. "You did send me all those texts asking what you should wear and what should you bring and who else would be here. You've been nervous all week."

Lara had provided some unexpected entertainment when they'd texted a few days ago. They'd agreed on a time, and Charlotte had sent Lara her address, but as the week went on, Lara couldn't seem to go a day without double-checking what kind of an evening they were going to have.

And in fairness, Lara was probably right to assume this might be some kind of watch party, but it wasn't at all. It was just the two of them, and Charlotte had insisted that it was casual. She was wearing jeans and a white button-down blouse, the sleeves rolled up to her elbows. Lara was wearing khaki shorts and a black scoop-neck top, both of which highlighted the bronze glow of her skin.

"Okay," Lara said with a smile. "That is entirely different. I was nervous about coming here and making a fool of myself. I didn't think this was what you meant. I thought you were having a whole... Thing. Or dinner party. Something, that I could turn up to and commit some sort of faux pas."

"Well, this is new to me, really. I rarely miss attending these ceremonies, but I have to say, I'm having a great time." Charlotte leaned over the cushion that was left between them, clinking their glasses together. "Cheers."

And she really was having a great time. Normally award show days were impossibly long and tiring but getting to watch it all from the comfort of her couch and be able to share a running commentary with Lara had been refreshing.

“Cheers,” Lara echoed, a piece of her golden-brown hair falling across her eyes as she leaned forward to reach Charlotte, the dip in her top momentarily distracting Charlotte, but she’d managed to avert her eyes before Lara could catch her.

Charlotte was buzzed, but she wouldn’t have thought she was so starved for attention that she’d be checking out Lara. Yes, she had for a brief moment at Jessica’s party, but that was before she knew who Lara was. And while she’d stalled on the dating front, the last three dates having zero chemistry, Charlotte had thought she was content with where she was in life, that as much as she’d like to meet someone, she wasn’t desperate to.

Maybe she was.

Not that Lara Soler wasn’t an attractive woman. She was. And she was progressing with her career. Charlotte had managed to get a few more snippets of information about how Lara felt she was doing. Charlotte thought she’d asked casually enough as the awards show had started, how Lara felt about being an agent, about taking on Kerri’s clients.

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Lara had been honest. She'd said she was still finding her feet, but that she was confident that in another few months, she'd feel better. Charlotte hadn't pressed her further, because she couldn't get that dramatic pause out of her head when she'd asked Lara about it at Jessica's party.

Charlotte had asked her if she loved it, being an agent, and the silence had been telling. As difficult as Charlotte's journey as an actress had been, if anyone had asked her at any point in her career if she loved it, she wouldn't have hesitated. Yes. Of course, she loved it. She lived and breathed it.

And clearly, Lara didn't feel that way about being an agent.

Charlotte just hoped that Lara would figure that out for herself and that she wouldn't trudge through the next few years, struggling to find ways to like a job that she wasn't passionate about.

But at least Charlotte could confidently say to Ada that Lara did seem to be okay. In the short-term, anyway. Charlotte imagined it wouldn't take long for Lara to burn out if she wasn't as addicted to this business as the rest of them were.

7

Lara thanked Charlotte as she topped up her glass of wine. She'd been drinking slowly, conscious of the fact that if she got drunk, she'd more than likely be unable to hide her attraction to Charlotte.

But she had been at Charlotte's house for hours, and she'd just opened their second

bottle of wine, so even drinking slowly, Lara was tipsy.

“Hey,” Lara said when the commercial break came on the TV. “When was the last time you saw Tracy Carrington?”

Charlotte frowned. “Tracy?” She blew out a breath. “God, it must have been at Ada’s wedding.”

Lara stared at her, taking a second to remember that Ada had been married to a man, a fellow actor, and that he’d died in a car accident. That was so long ago. And Ada’s life was so drastically different now. She was going to be marrying Sydney next year.

“Yeah,” Charlotte said as she took a sip of wine. “I haven’t seen her since then. I wonder what happened to her. She never got the credit she deserved.”

“I ran into her the other day.”

“Really?”

“Hm.” Lara took a drink. This wine was too good, the rich cherry flavor with hints of chocolate making it so easy to drink. Dangerously easy. “I asked her if she was happy with her representation.”

Charlotte arched an eyebrow. “And is she?”

“She’s not in the business anymore,” Lara said with a shrug.

Charlotte laughed softly. “You’re gusty. I like that about you.”

“Thank you, I think. But it was a strange conversation though. I felt like she had so much more to say, but obviously, she wasn’t going to tell me. I’d just met her. And

she was skeptical that I knew who she was, that I'd watched her show."

"But you did. That's how you recognized her."

"Yeah. That's when I became a fan of yours," Lara added without thinking, feeling the heat coming to her cheeks, although she could have said a lot worse. That's when I realized I was gay.

Charlotte turned to face her, a quizzical look on her gorgeous face, but before she could say anything else, there was Ada on the screen, with Sydney sitting beside her, both of them looking radiant as the presenter listed all of the nominees.

Charlotte leaned forward to put her glass on the coffee table, her knee bouncing.

"Wow, you really are nervous," Lara said, and Charlotte shushed her.

Lara mirrored her actions, leaving her glass down, sitting forward slightly, her hands on her thighs as the presenter went through the rest of the nominees.

Lara pushed herself off the couch, pacing the carpet before she even realized what she was doing. She could joke all she wanted with Charlotte about how nervous she was, but she really was full of anxiety, on so many different levels.

This was the first major award Ada was up for since Lara had become her agent. Yes, the movie had long been completed, and Kerri had helped secure the part and the paycheck for Ada, but Lara was the one representing her now, and she had this sinking feeling that Ada's or Sydney's careers could start to unravel now that Kerri was gone, now that it was up to her to do the best she could for some of Hollywood's most famous actresses.

She stopped pacing when she felt warm hands on her hips. Lara didn't have time to

react to Charlotte standing behind her, both of them facing the TV, Charlotte's fingers digging into her shorts.

Lara could hear Charlotte inhale a sharp breath as the presenter broke the seal and opened the envelope, adding a dramatic pause before leaning towards the microphone. "Adelaide Atwood!"

Lara exhaled in relief, her legs wobbly, and she wanted to sink to her knees, but Charlotte's hands were still there, spinning Lara around, wrapping her arms around Lara in a tight embrace, both of them swaying as Ada started her speech.

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Lara pulled back, surprised to see tears in Charlotte's eyes, and Lara kept her arm on Charlotte's shoulder as they turned to watch Ada.

Charlotte's arm was around her waist, but Lara was running on adrenaline, unable to process how close Charlotte was, blinking back her own tears as she watched Ada thank the cast and crew.

"For so many years I feared that if I came out, I wouldn't be able to do what I love. I have so many people I want to thank for believing in me. For sticking with me. My amazing friends. Charlotte, we did it," she said with a breathless smile. "Kerri, I'm dedicating this one to you, our last project together. And to things to come. To new beginnings. To Lara. To my beautiful fiancé, Sydney. I love you. Thank you," Ada said with that million-dollar smile as the music started, and she left the stage to a thunderous round of applause.

"I'm so happy for her," Lara said almost to herself, dropping her head on Charlotte's shoulder for a moment before realizing what she'd just done. She'd been so caught up in the moment, in the excitement.

"Me too." If Charlotte thought she was being weird, she didn't say anything. Her arm was still wrapped around Lara's waist, and now Lara was having a delayed reaction to Charlotte's proximity, to her touch, to the sweet scent of her perfume.

Goosebumps broke out over Lara's arms at the same time as her body felt flushed with warmth.

Lara turned towards her, ready to say something, anything to snap her out of the lust-

filled daze she suddenly found herself in, but when she met Charlotte's mesmerizing blue eyes, all she could think was, this felt like a moment.

They were having a moment.

One of those experiences where everything else fades away, and it's just two people, looking at each other with desire in their eyes, with that crackle of electricity in the air, and up until this point, Lara had kind of thought that was all just Hollywood's idea of romance, something that could never happen in real life, because she'd never found herself in a situation like this.

But it was definitely happening.

With Charlotte Dixon.

Lara could have sworn that Charlotte had checked her out earlier, but it just seemed so far-fetched that Lara didn't even allow herself to think that it had been real. She'd convinced herself that she'd seen what she had wanted to see, that there was no way that Charlotte Dixon had actually checked her out.

8

Charlotte's pulse swished in her ears as she met Lara's eyes. Why were they still standing in the middle of her living room? The noise of the TV was on in the background, but Charlotte was so focused on Lara, on whatever was happening right now, that she barely registered the sound.

She should drop her hand. It was still on Lara's hip. It shouldn't still be there. Ada had won. They'd listened to her speech.

There was no reason for Charlotte's hand to still be on Lara.

But Lara wasn't stepping away either.

Charlotte swallowed as she parted her lips to say something, anything to break the spell that they'd fallen under, but she didn't say anything. She searched Lara's caramel-brown eyes, her other hand lifting to lightly rest on Lara's shoulder, sliding up to her neck as she leaned in, closing her own eyes and eliminating what little space was left between them.

Charlotte brushed her lips across Lara's, and while she knew this was the last thing she should be doing, she couldn't stop herself, and the soft whimper that left Lara's throat only encouraged her as Lara kissed her back, her hand warm against Charlotte's cheek.

This was not supposed to happen.

As the evening went on, Charlotte had felt that tug of attraction several times, but she just filed it away, knowing that she needed to prioritize dating again, that three uneventful dates didn't mean she wasn't going to meet someone who made her pulse jump or her skin tingle in anticipation.

Someone who made her feel like she did right now.

Charlotte moaned when Lara's hand slipped under her shirt, her fingers delicately grazing her stomach, almost as if she was afraid to touch her properly, like she was holding back, and Charlotte knew that feeling. She was so close to fisting Lara's shirt and kissing her with an intensity that should have scared her.

Lara's lips parted against hers again and again, her tongue searching now, and Charlotte lost that last tiny bit of self-control that she'd been clinging onto, because fuck, she'd never been kissed like this before.

Somewhere at the back of her mind, she knew she should pull away. She knew that Lara Soler was not who she was supposed to be having a moment like this with.

Lara was Ada and Sydney's agent.

She'd been Kerri's personal assistant.

She was young. Too young. Although a vague memory of Kerri mentioning giving Lara a long weekend off so she could celebrate her thirtieth birthday flashed across her mind.

At least she was in her thirties.

And if Charlotte had questioned Jaqueline Steele's relationship with Henley Hughes when she'd first found out they were dating, completely thrown by Jackie being with someone sixteen years younger than her, then why was she kissing someone so much younger than her right now?

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And then it kept happening. Ada and Sydney. Kerri and Rachel.

Charlotte had been thrown initially, but after seeing them together, Ada and Sydney first, then Kerri and Rachel when they'd visited L.A. together a few weeks ago, it was easy to see how little their age differences meant to either couple.

But she'd never thought she'd find herself being drawn to someone that was probably twenty years younger than her.

Charlotte's body hummed, a warmth spreading through her as Lara's hand slid up along her ribs, her thumb lazily swiping across her skin, and that light touch started an ache in Charlotte's core as her lips hungrily kissed Lara back.

Charlotte finally pulled away, her breathing ragged, her heart racing. She shouldn't be kissing Lara Soler, no matter how amazing it felt.

Lara's eyes fluttered open, her cheeks flushed. "Well, that was a surprise," she said with a shy smile coming to her lips.

Charlotte tore her gaze away from those lips. She didn't trust herself. She exhaled slowly, turning away from Lara to pick up her wine glass, needing the distraction just as much as the drink.

When Charlotte dared herself to face Lara again, knowing that she had to say something, she found Lara perched on the arm of the sofa, watching her. Charlotte picked up the remote to turn off the TV, the noise grating on her now.

“I can’t believe you just did that,” Lara said softly, bringing her fingertips up to her lips.

Charlotte knew that feeling. She couldn’t believe she’d done that either.

She took another drink, not knowing what to do or say. She wanted to tell Lara that it had been a mistake, that she shouldn’t have, but at the same time, Charlotte wanted to stand in front of her, her hands on Lara’s thighs as she stepped in between her legs and picked up where they’d just left off.

“Charlotte,” Lara said as she moved past her to get her own drink, “I need you to say something.”

Charlotte knocked back what was left in her glass and set it down, one hand on her hip, the other raking through her hair. “I don’t know what to say. I shouldn’t have. I... I’m...”

Lara’s eyebrows furrowed as she took a drink. “Are you seeing someone?”

“What?”

“Is that why you said that you shouldn’t have?”

“No. I’m not seeing someone.”

Lara finished her wine and came around the coffee table to stand in front of her, her hand finding Charlotte’s at her side. “Then why are you saying that you shouldn’t have?”

Charlotte sucked in a breath. “Because...” Her voice trailed off.

“I did kiss you back, you know,” Lara murmured as she tucked a lock of hair behind Charlotte’s ear, her fingers lingering, and Charlotte felt that innocent touch everywhere.

Charlotte still hadn’t said anything meaningful, her thumping heart drowning out her thoughts as she watched Lara’s gaze lower to her lips.

“We shouldn’t...” Charlotte could hear how feeble her attempt at stopping this was. But she still had to say it. She had to at least try and be sensible about this.

Lara’s eyes found hers again. “I think you’re amazing, Charlotte. I have for a long time.” Lara’s gaze flickered down to Charlotte’s lips again, her hand on Charlotte’s hip, and she could feel the heat even through her shirt as she waited for Lara to continue. “And I’m not seeing why we shouldn’t be kissing right now.”

Charlotte swallowed, her hands at her side when she desperately wanted them to be on Lara.

Lara’s warm hand cupped her cheek, guiding their lips back together, and Charlotte couldn’t remember why she thought this was a bad idea. Yes, their age difference, but right now, in this moment, Charlotte gave in, sighing into the kiss, one hand on Lara’s neck, the other arm wrapping around her waist as they slowly kissed, their tongues lazily exploring.

Kissing Lara was awakening a desire somewhere deep inside her that Charlotte hadn’t even been aware she possessed. She’d known she was attracted to women for most of her life, and she’d had what, at the time anyway, seemed like earth-shattering nights with women, but just kissing Lara, barely touching her, had Charlotte’s entire body pulsing with want.

Lara broke the kiss, their foreheads touching for a few seconds as they both caught

their breath and when Lara lifted her head to meet her eyes, Charlotte could see that desire reflected back at her.

“I can leave,” Lara murmured, her cheeks flushed. “If you really do think that we shouldn’t be doing this.”

“No,” Charlotte replied without hesitation.

The corner of Lara’s lips lifted. “So, what you’re trying to tell me is that you’re enjoying this as much as I am. Although, I’d love to hear you say it,” Lara said softly as she dipped her head to brush her lips over Charlotte’s again, pulling back just as Charlotte was about to deepen the kiss. “Unless I’m misreading this situation, and you really do think that we shouldn’t.”

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“I’m too old for you,” Charlotte said with a sigh, forcing herself to say what was really bothering her, her heart racing as she waited for Lara to say something.

9

Lara searched Charlotte’s blue eyes, her heart racing with both anticipation and nervousness, her lips still tingling after another amazing but brief kiss.

“I’m too old for you,” Charlotte said with a sigh.

Lara sucked in a breath, relief washing over her. She hated seeing Charlotte this conflicted, but they both knew how feeble that protest was. Lara could hear it, and they both had plenty of examples in their own social circle of happy couples in age-gap relationships.

Lara had already done the math, although it had been years ago, long before she’d ever moved to Los Angeles, and could have predicted that someday they’d be at the same parties and have the same friends.

Nineteen years.

Lara had always been attracted to older women. Her exes were all about ten to fourteen years older than her, and while Ada and Sydney were great together, and Kerri and Rachel... They were just such a perfect fit. While there were years between them, the age gap wasn’t that significant.

So, Lara got where Charlotte was coming from. She really did, but that kiss... Was

Charlotte really going to deny that there was something going on here? And that she'd let it go without another thought because there were nineteen years between them?

Lara wasn't about to leave without getting more from Charlotte. "I don't think you are," Lara said, her hand still on Charlotte's hip, the other on her neck, her thumb gently moving across her jaw as she held her gaze.

"I'm fifty-one." Charlotte visibly swallowed. "Our lives are in completely different places."

Lara was still trying to process that Charlotte had actually kissed her. She wasn't prepared for a full-on campaign of why their age didn't matter.

"Do you have plans for tomorrow evening?" Lara asked.

"I don't think so. Why?"

"Have dinner with me." Lara's hands rested on Charlotte's hips, almost afraid to let go of her because she might run away from this conversation. "At a restaurant or at my place or here. Wherever you'd be more comfortable."

Charlotte exhaled, and Lara got the sense that she was about to say something like, 'What's the point?'

"Have you thought about our age difference at any point tonight?" Lara asked.

"Yes," Charlotte answered without hesitation.

"Before or after you kissed me."

“After.”

“So, you weren’t thinking about it before that happened.”

Charlotte looked away. “Well, I did. But only that you seemed mature.”

Lara’s pulse jumped. “So, your opinion of me changed after you decided to kiss me?”

Charlotte stepped back, putting some space between them. “I didn’t mean for that to happen. And no, my opinion didn’t change. I’m just trying to be realistic here. Since I came out, I’ve been on a few dates, and for one reason or another things didn’t work out, so I’m trying to stop myself from setting myself up for disappointment again.”

“Because you think you’re too old for me?” Lara guessed.

“Look, I’m aware that age-gap relationships are all the rage. We don’t have to go far to see it. And it’s a whole thing, a trope, a fantasy almost that our industry has only helped fuel. But that’s always for the younger woman. No woman my age is actively out there trying to meet someone half their age.”

Lara leaned against the arm of the sofa, her arms folded across her chest. “Have dinner with me tomorrow. No pressure. No expectations. Just dinner. And maybe by the end of it, you’ll see that the few years between us don’t really matter that much.”

Charlotte smiled as she shook her head. “Few years, huh? How many is a few?”

“Not enough to worry about.”

“Just tell me. You know I can look it up.”

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Lara bit the inside of her cheek. “I’m thirty-two.”

Charlotte’s eyebrows rose. “Okay.”

“Okay to which part...”

“Okay to your idea that nineteen is the same as a few. And okay to having dinner tomorrow.”

Lara couldn’t stop herself from smiling. “My place okay?”

Charlotte nodded. “Yes.”

“And promise me that you’ll just relax. Don’t overthink it. We’re just having a meal. I’ll cook.” Lara pushed herself off the arm of the sofa and stood in front of Charlotte. “Anything you won’t eat?”

“No, I’m easy.”

Lara felt her lips curving into a smile. “I won’t read into that.”

Charlotte’s cheeks flushed, as if she hadn’t realized the double meaning in what she’d said.

“I’ll show myself out.”

“You booked a car already?”

“No,” Lara said as she took her phone out of her pocket and tapped it a few times. “But it’s done now. Seven minutes away.”

Charlotte nodded as she followed Lara to the front of the house, both of them standing in the foyer. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” Lara put her phone away, dropping it into the pocket of her shorts.

“At Jessica’s party, when you saw me outside... Why were you looking at me?”

“Why did you think I was?” Lara asked, her heart beating a little faster.

“I thought you might have been interested in me, and then once we started talking, I guess, I thought you were more of a fan, or maybe an agent looking to sign a new client.”

“I was looking at you because ever since I saw you walk in, I couldn’t take my eyes off you,” Lara said, hoping she wouldn’t scare Charlotte off with her honesty. “That suit...” Lara inhaled a deep breath. “You looked so fucking sexy. So confident. I would have done anything you asked me to.”

“Just that night?” Charlotte asked with a glint in her eyes, completely surprising her.

“I don’t know.” Lara slipped her hand beneath Charlotte’s shirt, her short fingernails lightly dragging over her stomach as she backed them up against the wall, her other hand on Charlotte’s hip, guiding her backward.

“Maybe we’ll find out tomorrow,” Lara said as she lowered her head to slowly place open kisses along Charlotte’s neck, up to her ear, until Charlotte turned her head, their lips crashing together, a throaty moan escaping Charlotte’s lips as she tried to take control of the kiss, but Lara slipped her leg between Charlotte’s using her body

to keep her there.

Lara knew her phone would interrupt them any minute, so she didn't waste any time, kissing Charlotte thoroughly, her thigh pressing against Charlotte's center, their tongues dueling, Lara's hand lost in Charlotte's silky-smooth hair.

Lara wanted to leave Charlotte wanting her, wishing it was tomorrow already and judging by the look on her face when Lara's phone chimed and she pulled away, Charlotte's face flushed, her breathing heavy, her hair disheveled, and her eyes dark, Lara had achieved her goal.

"See you tomorrow," Lara said, leaning in for one last kiss, parting her lips against Charlotte's, pulling away before Lara wanted to, knowing her taxi was outside, and that with any luck, they'd be picking up where they left off tomorrow.

She spent the short ride home not entirely believing that any of that had just happened, her thoughts all over the place, her body on fire.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd been so consumed with want. She would have loved to be in Charlotte's bed right now, but there was too much uncertainty there. She needed Charlotte to really want this, because Lara knew she wouldn't be able to handle Charlotte's rejection after they'd already slept together.

It would be such a blow. Lara had wanted this woman for years. She could wait a little longer, because somehow, Charlotte Dixon wanted her.

Lara couldn't stop thinking about how crazy that was even as she unlocked her front door, tossing her keys in the wooden tray in the hallway, wiping a hand across her face as she went upstairs to get ready for bed.

Although she doubted that she'd get much sleep tonight. She couldn't stop thinking

about the way that Charlotte had looked at her, the way she'd kissed her. It was like something out of a dream. But it had actually happened.

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Lara just had to figure out how it could happen again. Because she could tell how much Charlotte wanted this. And while Charlotte certainly had her reservations, Lara couldn't miss the raw desire in her eyes.

The question Lara was going to have to wrestle with was what would she be comfortable with? If Charlotte didn't want a public relationship with her, didn't want anything to do with her as far as the media was concerned, would she accept a secret affair?

Lara got dressed for bed, turning that thought over in her mind. Right now? With the feeling of Charlotte's lips on hers so fresh in her mind? Yes, definitely.

But when she went back to her earlier thoughts of what it would feel like if she'd slept with Charlotte tonight and in the morning, she'd told her that this wasn't happening again? Lara felt the hypothetical rejection at the pit of her stomach right now.

Lara got into bed, hoping exhaustion would take over, because her head was a mess right now.

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow would tell her a lot about what her chances with Charlotte really were, and the fact that she was even thinking about that was still unbelievable.

She'd love to call Hayden right now. Even though she was her client, she was still one of her closest friends. Sydney too. But Lara didn't feel like she could talk to

either of them about this.

Charlotte was out, but Lara didn't feel right about talking to either of them about Charlotte. Not right now anyway.

And that meant that Lara had to make it to tomorrow evening on her own. And figure out what she was going to cook. And what she would wear.

Lara closed her eyes, curling up under the sheets, her mind a jumbled mess, but she ignored all of her worries, focusing instead on the feeling of Charlotte's lips against hers, of how soft they were, of how much passion had been in those kisses, of the way that Charlotte had been the one to initiate it.

Because that was the craziest part.

10

Charlotte shifted the bottle of wine into her other hand, uncharacteristically nervous as she waited for Lara to answer the door, and when she did, Charlotte had to take a steadying breath.

Lara stood in the doorway dressed in whitewash jeans, a black top hanging off one shoulder, her glossy hair falling across her shoulders. It was a stark contrast to the white backless dress that she'd worn to Jessica's party, but Charlotte honestly couldn't say which look she preferred, and maybe that shouldn't have surprised her. Lara had that effortlessly gorgeous thing going for her.

Charlotte was dressed casually as well, going with her favorite pair of black jeans and an olive-colored blouse.

"Hey," Lara said, her smile warm as she held the door open for her. "Come in."

“Hi.” Charlotte lifted her arm to hug her just like she would hug Ada or Sydney or Jerry if she’d been invited to their house, but it wasn’t until she had Lara’s body pressed against her own that she realized this wasn’t the same, a shiver chasing up her spine as she tried not to let that feeling of desire overwhelm her.

As much as she’d told herself that this was just dinner, repeating it over and over again throughout the day, every time she’d been tempted to text Lara and cancel, that hug and her body’s response to it made it clear that this wasn’t simply dinner with a friend, no matter how much Charlotte wanted to be.

If Lara was as affected by it as she was, she didn’t let it on, pulling away with a smile still on her lips, leading her towards the kitchen, the delicious scent of Italian food wafting through the house.

“Thanks,” Lara said as Charlotte handed her the bottle. “This will go perfect with dinner. Seafood linguine okay?”

“Yes. I can’t remember the last time I had it. It smells amazing. I didn’t know you could cook.”

“And you still came when I offered to make dinner?” Lara asked as she slid the bottle of wine into the fridge, her lips curving into a smile.

“Well, people have different definitions of cooking. I’ve seen people serve up dinners where their chef had ninety percent of it done, and they just stood at the stove stirring a sauce and plating it up, like they’d been in the kitchen for hours.” Charlotte slid onto a bar stool at the breakfast bar. “So, I don’t assume anymore.”

Lara lifted the lid on the pot on the stove, giving it a stir before turning down the heat. “Really? Who?”

“Oh, I can’t reveal names.”

Lara smiled as she came over towards Charlotte, her arms resting on the countertop across from where she was sitting. “I shouldn’t be surprised. I’ve already seen enough things in the last three years that I never could have imagined happening.”

“Like what?”

Lara took a second to think about it. “Body doubles. I knew about stunt doubles. I think everyone does. But I was on set with Kerri more than once when I was surprised to see the lead actor stride off set and someone with a strikingly similar figure and body type come in. Eerily similar. I know that’s the point, but as a fan, it just made me wonder how many scenes I’ve watched where I think I’m looking at my favorite actor or actress, and it’s not actually them.”

Charlotte nodded. “I’ve used a body double before. It’s not always the scenes with nudity either. I was so sick once, I knew I wasn’t going to be back on set for four or five days, and rather than wait for me, they shot it from behind, with my back always in the shot. A little voice-over work and some talented editing and no one’s the wiser.”

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“I’m sure you’ve seen it all at this point,” Lara said as she took two glasses down from one of the cabinets.

“Is that in reference to my age?” Charlotte asked, propping her chin up on her hand as her eyes landed on the hint of skin that was revealed as Lara stood on her toes, her back to Charlotte.

Lara’s eyes narrowed as she placed the two glasses on the counter. “That didn’t take long,” she said with a smirk. “And no, that wasn’t in reference to your age. I was referring to your vast experience in this business.”

“Over the span of three decades. The same amount of time that you’ve been on this planet.” Charlotte had no idea why she was blurting out all her insecurities before they’d even had dinner, but if anything was going to happen between them, she had to let Lara know that she wasn’t as easygoing about their age difference as she seemed to be.

Lara came around the counter to stand beside Charlotte, grabbing a hold of her hips to gently spin her around to face her. Charlotte swallowed as she watched Lara’s hands rest on either of Charlotte’s thighs, easing them apart to make enough room for her to step in between them.

“Charlotte,” Lara said with a tilt of her head as she studied her, her fingers lifting to push a few strands of Charlotte’s hair behind her ear, a wave of goosebumps breaking out across her arms at that simple touch.

“Lara,” Charlotte said, mimicking her semi-serious tone, her heart thudding in her

chest.

“I’m getting the feeling that you’re concerned about my age.” Lara’s eyes danced over Charlotte, moving from her hair to her eyes then down to her lips before lifting to meet her eyes once again. “Don’t be,” she murmured, dipping her head as she slid her hand behind Charlotte’s neck and up into her hair, guiding their lips together in a heart-stopping kiss.

Charlotte sighed into the kiss, opening her lips up to Lara, their tongues moving in an already familiar dance as her hands clutched Lara’s waist.

Charlotte wanted to drop her hands to Lara’s ass, to pull her even closer, to slowly rock her hips back against Lara’s thigh, but she couldn’t give in that easily.

Lara broke the kiss before Charlotte could wrestle anymore with her desires, leaving her sitting there on the bar stool, her breathing ragged, as Lara sauntered back towards the stove, continuing to prepare their dinner as if nothing had happened.

Charlotte took a deep breath, her head spinning as she turned back to face her, and Lara was placing two glasses of water on the counter, sliding one towards Charlotte.

Charlotte eyed Lara, completely thrown by that confident display. “I thought we were just having dinner. No pressure.”

“Hm. As did I, but you didn’t waste any time bringing up our age difference, so I didn’t waste any more letting you think that we don’t have any chemistry, because we do. And the only pressure was my thigh against your—”

Charlotte held up her hand. “I am aware that there’s something here, but that doesn’t mean that we would actually work. In the real world.”

Lara nodded, her lips pressed together, as if she wanted to say more, but she was stopping herself. “Why don’t we eat? I’m sure we’ll be talking about this again later.”

Charlotte agreed, feeling slightly guilty, a heaviness in her chest, but they couldn’t just fall into bed together, could they? She’d never been that reckless in her life before. But then again, she hadn’t been out. She might be nineteen years older than Lara, but if Charlotte stopped to think about it, Lara probably had so much more experience with women. Not just in bed. In life. Relationships. Charlotte had yet to have anything last more than a few weeks.

She followed Lara outside where she had the glass table set, the sun setting over the outdoor area that Charlotte remembered from the last time she was here, at Kerri’s place. The water in the curved pool was almost flat with rock features surrounding one edge of it. The waterfall that flowed down to it, through those rocks, created the few ripples in the water, the bubbling sounds calming. Lara tapped her phone, turning on a few outdoor lights along with the lights under the water.

“Cheers,” Lara said after she’d poured them each a glass of wine.

“Cheers,” Charlotte echoed, doing her best to stay in the moment and not let her mind drift off into what this was or where this night might be headed.

11

Lara turned on the dishwasher and took the bottle of wine out of the fridge to refill their glasses, bringing it out back to where she’d suggested they get comfortable on the outdoor sofa.

“Thanks,” Charlotte said as Lara topped up her glass. “Where did you learn to cook like that? It was honestly better than a lot of meals I’ve had out at Italian restaurants.”

“My ex was Italian and a chef.” Lara left the nearly empty bottle on the coffee table in front of them, crossing one leg over the other as she angled her body towards Charlotte, silently congratulating herself for managing to impress Charlotte with her cooking. “And on top of that, I still go to the same fish market she used to go to for the restaurant. Best shrimp in L.A. hands down.”

Charlotte arched an eyebrow as she took a sip of wine. She cleared her throat. “Would it be awfully nose-y to ask how old she was?”

Lara smiled as she laughed softly. “Nose-y? No. Predictable? Absolutely.”

Charlotte bit her lip as she nodded. “I am boring like that.”

“I don’t think you’re boring, but to answer your question. She was fourteen years older than me. I’d just turned thirty when we started going out. It didn’t last too long, but we both worked long hours and while I thought we were good together...” She shrugged. “We just couldn’t find the time to actually see each other. I wasn’t heartbroken or anything.”

“Who broke it off? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“No. Not at all. I did.” Lara took a drink. “So, it turns out that I am capable of being realistic.”

“Hm. Do you think she was heartbroken?”

“Uh, no.” Lara thought back to that afternoon when they’d walked the beach on one of the very rare occasions that they both had the same day off. “I think we were both disappointed, but she was passionate about what she did. And I hadn’t been with Kerri that long. I knew that I was so lucky to be working with someone like her, so I wasn’t about to go ask her for less hours, and that wasn’t even a possibility really, when you’re someone’s personal assistant.”

Now that Lara had Nina taking care of all the minor things in her life, she was glad that she’d done the same for Kerri. Yes, it was a hard job, always being ready to jump off the couch and run an errand or get across town as soon as she could, but it was an important job, and for her, she got to learn so much from being around Kerri for those three years.

“What about you?” Lara asked, curious to know if there was a reason for Charlotte’s reservations. Had she already had an affair with someone much younger than her?

Lara had searched online for anything about who Charlotte might have been dating since she came out, but there were just a few photos of her that some fan accounts had run with, claiming Charlotte was madly in love with that singer or TV presenter. As far as Lara could see, they were just rumors though.

“What about me?” Charlotte asked.

“Have you ever been heartbroken?”

Charlotte shook her head, her arm draped over the back of the sofa as she turned a little bit more towards Lara, still plenty of space between them. “I’ve never actually been in a serious relationship. A few very short-lived affairs. Nothing scandalous. I just wasn’t out back then. Maybe... Maybe, there was something there with one woman. But that was years ago. And I wasn’t even ready to think about coming out.”

“But now that you have? You haven’t dated anyone seriously?”

“No.” Charlotte brought her glass to her lips and took a sip. “I’ve been on a few dates. But no. There’s been nothing serious. Does that surprise you?”

Lara inhaled a sharp breath. “Yeah. I mean, a lot of people would have said a few years ago that Sydney was the most available queer woman, but now that she’s taken...And you’re out. I think you might have taken over that spot now.”

Charlotte laughed. “I doubt that.”

“You two did cause a bit of a frenzy on gay Twitter.”

“We did,” Charlotte said, still laughing softly, but she didn’t elaborate, and Lara couldn’t stop her mind from wandering, from thinking that maybe Sydney was the person that Charlotte thought she might have had a chance with. But there was a serious age gap there too. “But I am open to meeting someone.”

“Just not someone nineteen years younger than you.”

“Now who’s bringing up our age difference?” Charlotte asked with a glint in her eyes.

“I’m just trying to figure out where I stand,” Lara said honestly, a sad smile coming to her lips, because she really wished that Charlotte wasn’t so hung up on it. Had Ada

been this reluctant with Sydney or Kerri with Rachel? She'd never gotten that impression. Definitely not from Kerri.

"I might have avoided heartbreak so far by not putting myself out there, by not even remotely being in a situation where that could happen, and..." Charlotte sighed, sliding her hand through her hair as she propped her elbow up on the back of the sofa. "I guess, now that it could happen, I'm being overly cautious. I know it doesn't make much sense, but... I've seen friends, other actresses, even some family have some really dark months because they couldn't handle their relationships coming to an end."

"I get that." Lara held her gaze. "But that comes at a cost too."

"It does."

"Why did you come out? If you didn't think you'd put yourself out there and meet anyone."

Charlotte opened her mouth and closed it again, sitting up straight as she ran her hand through her hair. "I came out to make a difference, and I had no idea that that wouldn't even have been the scariest part."

Lara wanted to reach out and cover Charlotte's hand, but she was so afraid that one wrong move would send Charlotte running out of this house.

Lara had to ask though. She had to know where this was coming from. "Is that why things ended with anyone you've dated so far? Because you weren't willing to see what would come of it after a few dates?"

"No. Honestly. There just wasn't anything there. They were all wonderful women. Mostly people in the business, so they would have understood my lifestyle. But no...

There just wasn't that spark."

Lara nodded, trying to figure out what to make of all this. She never could have imagined someone as talented and accomplished and confident as Charlotte could struggle to put themselves out there like this.

And in that moment, Lara knew that if anything was going to happen between them, it would have to be slow. She couldn't imagine Charlotte spending the night with her if she was this afraid of falling for someone.

"You must think I'm crazy," Charlotte said softly, taking Lara away from her thoughts.

"What? No."

"A little?" Charlotte asked with a hint of a smile, the lines around her eyes barely noticeable.

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Lara returned her smile. “No. Really. I just wish I could say something that would put you at ease. But I know that you’ll figure it out. In your own time. When the right person comes along.”

Lara couldn’t explain how she’d gone from years of attraction, of having Charlotte Dixon as her celebrity crush, to actually kissing her, to having Charlotte Dixon be the one to kiss her, to now being so physically and mentally attracted to this woman. Lara knew she had it bad, but as much as she wanted this and thought that deep down Charlotte did too, she knew she’d have to be patient.

12

Charlotte couldn’t remember the last time she’d had such a lovely evening. Usually when she was in the company of friends or having an enjoyable meal, there was still work involved. She was having dinner with a director or another actor. If she was with friends, it was often at a press event or something that was still work-related.

There were truly very few circumstances where she felt like she could one hundred percent relax and be herself, and as she returned Lara’s smile, the faint sounds of water trickling into the pool a few feet away mixing with the soft jazz music that Lara must have put on the surround sound system at some point, Charlotte wished she wasn’t so conflicted.

“I just wish I could say something that would put you at ease,” Lara said. “But I know that you’ll figure it out. In your own time. When the right person comes along.”

Would she though? Charlotte hadn’t even realized how insulated her life had become.

She honestly thought she was making progress by coming out and then going on dates, but really, if she thought about it, she was too afraid to start something with Lara because she didn't want to feel too much too soon. Because on paper, this had such a slim chance of turning into something.

But sitting here with Lara? Spending the evening with her? That kiss in the kitchen?

This was what Charlotte had been looking for. Someone who would understand how crazy her life could get. Someone who she had unbelievable chemistry with.

And yet, Charlotte couldn't stop herself from slamming on the brakes.

"You okay?" Lara asked.

"Yeah." Charlotte took another drink. She had a lot of work to do. Coming out certainly hadn't been enough. But she didn't want to deal with it tonight. She just wanted to enjoy herself. "Hey uh... Do you think we could go for a swim? My backyard has been a construction site for weeks now. Completely new design and I needed work done on the pool."

"Yeah, of course."

* * *

Charlotte glided through the water, not realizing how much she missed this. She'd asked Lara for a robe and went into the bathroom in the hallway to strip down to her black bra and underwear before putting on the robe and coming outside in her bare feet.

She'd descended the steps without waiting for Lara who had gone upstairs to get changed, swimming the length of the pool before coming to the edge of the curved

wall, her arms resting on the concrete as she watched Lara pad over, shrugging off her robe and leaving it on the couch.

Charlotte shouldn't be staring like this, but she couldn't stop herself. Lara wore a navy bikini, and with her back to Charlotte, she could take in the toned muscles in her legs, the swell of her ass, her hands sweeping her hair up into a messy bun, revealing her athletic arms and back.

Charlotte swallowed as Lara made her way over to the steps and lowered herself into the water, pushing it away from her as she effortlessly crossed the pool with a slow breaststroke, gliding to a stop in front of Charlotte, pushing a few strands of hair away from her eyes.

"This was a great idea," Lara said with a smile. "And completely unexpected."

Charlotte returned her smile. "I'm going to have to get my pool finished. I'd forgotten how much I loved night swims."

"You can use mine whenever you want."

"Do you like living here?"

Lara inhaled a deep breath as she treaded the water. "Honestly, I feel a little guilty about it. Kerri's insisted that I'm doing her a favor. That she knows her house is secure and being taken care of, but I know I'm only paying a fraction of what she'd get if she rented it out to someone else."

"Yeah, but there's a lot of anxiety with that. With letting strangers into your space. Especially someone with her connections. You don't know what kind of people might come in. Maybe, I'm being paranoid, but it's the first thing I do when I walk into a hotel or an apartment."

“Check for cameras?”

“Hm. Habit. I’ve never been caught before, but I know it could happen. I don’t think I could let anyone I didn’t know into my home for a few weeks or months. No matter what the vetting process looked like. I just couldn’t do it. So, you are doing her a favor.”

“I still feel bad.” Lara looked past Charlotte to the house. “I could never afford somewhere like this.”

“It’s not all it’s cracked up to be. The place I just bought only has three bedrooms. I got it because of the outdoor space, but success isn’t owning a mansion. Especially around here when only the truly wealthy can afford it. If I wasn’t so concerned about security and the area that I lived in, I’d probably buy a one-bedroom on the beach, but it’s not practical.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I know it’s easy for me to say. I’ve owned a five-bedroom before, and it was just me. It didn’t make sense. It was just a status thing. But there’s something nice about a home that’s cozy, that’s in a location that you love rather than the most desired neighborhood. That’s how I feel about my cabin. It’s so basic, and I love it. That’s as much paradise to me as living in Malibu was.”

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“I will keep that in mind. I need to get my own place. I told Kerri I’d stay for the first year. I know she’s settled in Colorado, but she might want to have this as a vacation home they can come to whenever they want.”

“I know I’ve made a big deal about your age,” Charlotte started as she floated on her back, letting her body go, the water warm against her skin. She could hear Lara swimming back towards her after doing a quick lap, that topic of conversation naturally dying. “But I don’t think you’re immature in any way,” Charlotte said as she lifted her head and let her legs fall. “I didn’t want you to think that maybe that was my opinion of you or that you were too young to be a successful agent. I already didn’t think that. Kerri choosing you to take over her clients was enough to tell me that you were good at what you do. That you were trustworthy.”

Lara drifted towards the edge of the pool, leaning against it as Charlotte did the same. “What are you trying to say?”

Charlotte searched her eyes, letting herself float a little closer, her hand resting on Lara’s hip underneath the water. “I’m wondering why I can’t just let myself go, let myself want you.” Charlotte’s eyes lowered to Lara’s lips as she spoke. “Let this be whatever it’s going to be.”

Lara lifted her hand, water droplets cascading down her arm, her fingertips ghosting Charlotte’s cheek and jawline as she spoke. “While I appreciate how honest you’ve been with me, I wonder what would happen if we stopped talking.”

Lara’s words hovered in the air, their gazes locked, and Charlotte couldn’t say who made the first move, but Charlotte’s eyes fluttered shut as their lips met in a slow,

sensual kiss.

A low moan left Lara's lips when Charlotte used the hand on Lara's hip to press her back up against the pool wall, and Charlotte groaned as Lara's legs wrapped around her waist as their lips parted, their tongues searching.

Charlotte gripped the edge of the pool, the other hand around Lara's waist, keeping them afloat as they deepened the kiss, the sensation of Lara's nearly naked and wet body pressed against her overloading her senses.

Charlotte's hand slid lower to Lara's ass, squeezing it under the water, and Lara broke the kiss, her hand on Charlotte's neck, her breathing ragged.

"Fuck, you drive me crazy," Lara murmured before she found Charlotte's lips again, hungrily kissing her, her tongue darting across Charlotte's, lighting up every nerve ending in her body.

Charlotte lost herself in the kiss, finally giving in, letting her body take the lead instead of her head.

Charlotte sighed into the kiss as Lara's hand slid behind her head, holding her close as they kissed for long, delicious moments, and as Charlotte finally pulled away, in need of air, she knew she couldn't deny this all-consuming desire any longer.

"Take me to bed, Lara," Charlotte said in a rush, and her breath caught as she witnessed Lara's eyes darken, her mouth falling open before she recovered, tilting her head to kiss her once more before guiding them towards the steps and into the house.

13

Lara pushed open her bedroom door, her hand still holding onto Charlotte's as she led

them towards the bed, her entire body tingling with a mixture of unprecedented desire and excitement.

Charlotte's suggestion to come up here, and the breathy voice she'd delivered it with, still echoed in Lara's mind as she gently tugged Charlotte into her arms, their lips meeting in an achingly slow kiss, as if both of them knew that this was different, that this was about more than lust.

Because Charlotte never gave her the impression that this was just a lust-filled attraction, and Lara was starting to see that this was why Charlotte was reluctant to start something, because there was a deeper attraction here, because there was room to get hurt.

But as Charlotte's lips parted against her own, warm hands sliding up Lara's side and around her back, Lara felt like something had changed in Charlotte. That she was saying fuck the consequences. That she wanted Lara enough to risk getting hurt, and as much as that filled Lara with confidence, she wanted to respect that too, taking her time with Charlotte, giving her every opportunity to stop this if she had a change of heart.

Lara lost herself in the kiss, in the feeling of Charlotte's hands on her back and waist, of the warmth of Charlotte's body clashing with the cold dampness of her wet bra.

"Fuck," Charlotte murmured a few moments later as she pulled away, her arms covered in goosebumps. "I don't want to stop kissing you, but I'm freezing."

"Shit." Lara took a step back, her eyes sweeping over Charlotte's gorgeous body, but she was shivering ever so slightly. "Hold on."

Lara ducked into the bathroom and turned on the shower, grabbing two of the rolled-up towels from the wooden shelf just inside the door. She unfurled one of them,

holding it out for Charlotte to step into.

“The shower will be ready in a second,” Lara said, her hands running up and down the towel where it covered Charlotte’s arms. “You should have told me sooner.”

“And stop kissing you?” Charlotte said with a laugh although it mixed with a shudder.

“Come on.” Lara took her hand and led her into the bathroom. “Take your time. Get warm. I might jump in after you just to warm up.”

Charlotte hung up her towel, and Lara’s gaze dropped to the curve of her ass, the wet black panties leaving very little to the imagination. “You’re not joining me?” Charlotte asked as she turned around, catching Lara staring.

“Uh... You want me to?” Lara couldn’t hide her shock. Yesterday, Charlotte was debating whether or not she should be kissing her, and now when they were about to sleep together, she was suggesting an intimate shower together? Something that might have been weeks down the road in all of Lara’s previous experiences? “Yeah.”

“Don’t look so shocked,” Charlotte said with a smirk, reaching behind her to unhook her bra.

Lara breath stalled when her eyes landed on Charlotte’s full breasts, her nipples rock hard from the cold. She slid off her underwear next and stepped into the shower, leaving Lara standing there, barefoot on the tiles, still not fully believing that this could be happening right now.

“You coming?” Charlotte asked, the steam rising around her, making her nearly invisible behind the glass, carrying the scent of citrusy soap.

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Lara swallowed. This was happening. She took off her damp bikini, padding over to the shower, and Charlotte reached out, finding her hand and bringing her under the hot spray of the massive rainfall shower head.

The warmth of the water combined with the heat of Charlotte's hands gliding all over her body was almost overwhelming, and when Lara tilted her head to find Charlotte's lips, her senses were overloaded, her heart thumping her chest as their tongues searched and her own hands roamed over Charlotte's slick skin.

At some point, they stayed apart long enough to get some shampoo and conditioner in their hair, but once that was done, Charlotte took over, and Lara smiled into the kiss as she let Charlotte back her up against the tiled wall, hitting it with a gentle thud before Charlotte's lips crashed into hers.

Lara moaned into the kiss, her hands reaching behind Charlotte to grope her ass, but when Charlotte's fingers skimmed down her stomach and up along the inside of her thighs, Lara's body pulsed with anticipation.

Lara's hands slid higher, clinging to Charlotte as her fingers explored her sex, dancing over her clit before moving lower and finding the evidence of Lara's desire.

Lara had words in her head, but she couldn't seem to make them come out. She wanted this to be about Charlotte, about taking her time, about exploring her body and making sure she knew she was the sexiest woman alive, but Charlotte had other ideas, the pads of her fingers ghosting over Lara's clit again eliciting a strangled moan, and Lara couldn't stop her hips from lurching forward.

Charlotte kissed her slowly while her hand continued to explore, and Lara was struggling to keep her breathing normal, her hips taking over, as Charlotte circled her clit, alternating the amount of pressure she was using, driving Lara's body into a frenzy.

"Please," Lara whimpered between kisses as Charlotte's hand dipped lower, entering her with just the tips of her fingers before pulling away again, returning to her clit.

Charlotte's lips moved to Lara's neck, kissing their way over Lara's chest and wrapping around one of her nipples.

Lara groaned when Charlotte's tongue battered over her, and Lara's grip on Charlotte's back and hair tightened, her body ready to combust.

"Charlotte, please," Lara begged, her head thrown back against the hard tiles, her breathing coming in pants. "I can't take anymore."

"Please what?" Charlotte murmured, glancing up at her as she moved to Lara's other breast, teasing her nipple with her tongue before biting down gently on it.

"Oh fuck. Fingers. Charlotte, please fuck me." Lara didn't think she'd ever sounded so desperate in all her life, but she couldn't hide it.

Charlotte lifted her head, her eyes locked onto Lara's as her hand cupped Lara's sex. "Do you have any idea how sexy you are?" Charlotte murmured, her eyes moving down her body, her voice thick with emotion. "I've wanted you since I saw you out on the deck, in that white dress. But I never thought it could be like this," Charlotte said, her voice husky.

And then Charlotte's fingers were inside her.

A shaky moan left Lara's lips as Charlotte's free hand wrapped around her waist, keeping her close, her fingers sliding in and out in a slow, steady rhythm.

Lara clung to Charlotte, one hand lost in her hair, the other clutching her ass, silently asking for more, her hips pressing back against every stroke.

"Harder," Lara moaned against Charlotte's neck, falling forward against her, and Charlotte listened, her fingers moving faster, deeper, until Lara couldn't stop herself from rushing towards the edge, her orgasm taking over as her hips rocked back against Charlotte's hand.

Lara's eyes slammed shut as she came, her groans lost in the misty haze of the shower, her fingers digging into Charlotte's skin as she rode wave after wave, her hips finally slowing as Charlotte eased her back against the wall, away from the hot spray.

Lara blinked as she opened her eyes, needing a moment for her vision to adjust, her pulse thundering in her ears, her legs weak. She closed her eyes again, savoring the way her body ached, the way Charlotte had made her feel.

She somehow missed Charlotte getting out of the shower, and when Lara opened her eyes again, she had a towel wrapped around her own body, holding out the other for Lara to step into.

Lara turned off the shower, wringing her hair dry. When she got out, she turned her back to Charlotte and allowed her to surround Lara with the towel, hugging her from behind, placing a soft kiss on the skin just below Lara's ear.

Lara slowly regained the feeling in her legs, drying off, her mind full of ideas of how to make Charlotte feel the way she just had.

Last night when Charlotte couldn't sleep, thinking ahead to today and this dinner invitation, she never could have imagined how relaxed she would feel right now. When she'd thought about how this might happen, how she'd end up in Lara's bed, her body had tensed, her mind overthinking the whole thing and all the reasons that she shouldn't let it happen.

But the more time she spent with Lara, Charlotte knew that she was mature, that there was nothing in the way she acted that made Charlotte feel like she was too old to be spending the evening with her.

Yet, the idea of letting herself give in to that obvious attraction still made her stomach twist with nerves.

Yes, she'd slept for four women up to this point, but she somehow knew even from that first kiss in her living room last night that this was something else entirely.

And what had just happened in the shower had only confirmed that.

Charlotte had never been so consumed with wanting the woman she was with to have the most mind-blowing orgasm. She never would have thought she was selfish in bed. Far from it. But again, this was different.

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Charlotte had been so turned on in the shower. One touch. A few rolls of her hips and she would have come, but that was the last thing on her mind. The only thing she was concerned with was satisfying Lara.

And now Lara was coming towards her, her damp hair falling across her shoulders as she let her towel drop to the ground, her hands sliding under Charlotte's hair, her palms hot against Charlotte's skin as she kissed her so slowly, so passionately, Charlotte struggled to stay standing.

She loosened her own towel, pushing it away, sighing into the kiss as their bodies pressed together, and Charlotte moaned when Lara's nipples grazed her breasts.

Charlotte's hands moved up Lara's back as they took their time, their tongues darting, their lips parting again and again.

Charlotte could feel the wetness pooling between her legs. Lara's hand started exploring, dancing over her stomach until she was between her legs, and Lara moaned into the kiss when her fingers found Charlotte's slick arousal.

"You're so wet," Lara murmured against her lips. "I want to take my time." Lara backed them up against the edge of the bed, dipping her head to place open kisses against Charlotte's neck. "I want to explore every inch of your body," she whispered as she kissed her way up along her neck, before finding her lips again.

Charlotte sighed into the kiss, loving the way that Lara kissed her, like she had all the time in the world, but there was still a possessiveness there, a hunger, and Charlotte could confidently say that she'd never felt this wanted before.

The look in Lara's eyes as she gently pushed her back against the sheets said it all. The sheer desire in them made Charlotte's body ache.

"Can I take my time with you?" Lara asked, covering Charlotte's body with her own, sliding her leg between Charlotte's as she kissed the curve of Charlotte's breast, her lips so close to her nipple.

Charlotte lifted her head off the sheets, about to agree, but the words wouldn't come out.

Lara's lips curved into a smirk before she wrapped them around Charlotte's nipple, her tongue swirling and darting around it, and a ragged moan escaped Charlotte's lips, her head falling back against the sheets as her back arched up into Lara's touch.

Lara's lips found her other nipple, giving it the same torturous treatment, her hand covering Charlotte's other breast, her thumb swiping over her nipple, and Charlotte felt it in her core, her body already close to giving in.

"Well?" Lara asked as she pushed herself up into a seated position, straddling Charlotte's leg. She looked down at Charlotte with lust in her eyes as she trailed her fingers up along the inside of Charlotte's thigh, not stopping until she was running them lightly over her sex without parting her lips. "Can I take my time?"

Charlotte's fists gathered the sheets as Lara's fingers found her clit, drawing agonizingly slow circles around it.

"Later," Charlotte managed to get out. "Take your time later," she said in a rush, her hips lifting off the bed as Lara's fingers slid lower, pausing at her entrance before returning to her clit with a little more pressure this time.

"What will I do now?" Lara husked as she lowered her body, planting a hand beside

Charlotte's shoulder, kissing her way over Charlotte's stomach and chest, her lips grazing her jaw. "What do you want right now?"

Charlotte's fingers were splayed against Lara's cheek, bringing Lara's lips back to hers, kissing her hungrily as Lara's fingers inched lower again.

"Oh fuck," Charlotte moaned, breaking the kiss, her body on fire, anticipation chasing up and down her spine, every touch building the anticipation. "I need you inside me, Lara. I can't wait. Later you can do whatever you want with me."

Lara smiled as she leaned in to kiss her again, her fingers gliding once more through her sex before she pushed two fingers inside, and Charlotte saw stars.

A strangled moan left Charlotte's lips, breaking the kiss, her fingers tangled in Lara's hair as she held her close, her hips rocking back against each stroke as Lara built her speed.

"Tell me what you want," Lara whispered against her cheek, her damp hair tickling Charlotte's shoulder as she steadily moved her fingers in and out.

"More." Charlotte's other hand chased up Lara's back, her nails roughly raking over her skin as she slid her hand down again until her fingers clutched Lara's ass while her orgasm snuck up on her, and Charlotte's body arched up into Lara, fireworks against her eyelids.

Charlotte knew she was saying something, but she didn't know what. A string of curses. Something about not moving.

All Charlotte knew was that a warmth spread through her as she shook and trembled, her toes digging into the sheets, her hands holding onto Lara for dear life.

She didn't remember Lara getting comfortable beside her.

Has she dosed off? Passed out?

No. She couldn't have. She was still catching her breath, her limbs askew, her pulse loud in her ears.

"That was intense," Lara murmured, placing a soft kiss against her shoulder, her fingertips tracing some kind of pattern on her stomach.

"What are you thinking right now?" Charlotte asked after a moment, when she trusted herself to speak, when her breathing had finally returned to normal.

"That there's so many things I want to do to you. That you are so fucking sexy," she said, her voice low, her eyes trailing over her body as her fingers drifted lower and she palmed Charlotte's sex, pushing the heel against her clit.

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Charlotte gasped at the touch, her clit already so sensitive. “Come here,” she practically growled, guiding Lara on top of her until she was straddling her waist. “I want to feel you against me.” Her hands were on Lara’s hips, guiding her back a little, and a throaty moan left Lara’s lips as she sunk down, her clit rubbing against Charlotte’s, sending her body right back to the edge.

The night turned into a whirlwind, their bodies tangled in the sheets, one breathtaking orgasm chasing another, and Charlotte didn’t know how she was going to recover from this.

Physically? It would take a few days. She hadn’t exerted herself like that in a very long time.

But mentally? Emotionally?

That was what worried Charlotte, because as she finally gave into exhaustion, wrapping her arm around Lara late into the night and snuggling up against her warm body, she didn’t think she’d ever felt like this before.

15

Lara thanked Nina as she returned with coffee and bagels from Lara’s favorite deli. They were in her kitchen, the counter a mess of paperwork. Contracts. Scripts. Nina’s research on two potential clients that Lara was thinking about approaching because she’d heard both had moved on from their agents just last week.

Lara needed new clients, but she wasn’t about to work with someone with a

questionable reputation or who wasn't willing to put in the work.

Lara lifted the lid off the takeaway coffee and poured it into her favorite black mug, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee filling the room as she unwrapped her cream cheese bagel and took a bite.

She'd thrown herself into her busy schedule, not stopping to think about what had happened here two nights ago. She'd been out all day yesterday, moving from a client's audition to a meeting with a studio about a potential TV role for Hayden, and Lara had completely underestimated how hard it would be to concentrate when every time she lifted her gaze to look outside, something she normally found relaxing, her mind would instantly conjure up images of Charlotte backing her up against the pool wall and kissing her like the world was ending around them.

Yes, it had been that unbelievable.

And what happened after?

Lara closed her eyes for a second, trying to clear her head, but all that did was give her a chance to remember the way Charlotte had kissed her way down Lara's body before getting comfortable between her legs, and what that woman did with her tongue...

"Lara?"

"Yes," Lara said, her eyes flying open. Nina was staring at her.

"You okay?"

Lara could feel the heat coming to her cheeks. "Yeah. Of course. I'm fine. Just needed to refuel," she said, distracting herself by taking another bite and turning her

attention back to the stack of papers in front of her.

Nina left the room to make a phone call a few minutes later, and Lara ran her hand over her face as she tried to get a grip.

She didn't even know what was wrong with her. The night she'd spent with Charlotte had been nothing short of amazing, and the next morning hadn't even been awkward.

They'd sat here, sipping their coffees and eating the breakfast that Lara had made. Charlotte had a lunch meeting with her agent, so she left around ten to allow herself enough time to get home and have a shower and get ready.

Nothing about yesterday morning should have left her worried. Charlotte had kissed her goodbye in the foyer. Well, it took her three attempts to actually leave. Each time one of them escalated the kiss again, distracting them for another minute or two, hands roaming before finally Charlotte left with a smile on her lips, her driver left waiting outside.

Lara shouldn't be worried, but she was. Despite falling asleep with Charlotte's arm draped over her stomach. Despite that passionate goodbye kiss. All of them. Lara still couldn't shake the feeling that Charlotte might not want anyone to think they were together.

Lara sipped her coffee. She knew Charlotte was at a strange point in her career. Ada definitely had more star power. The decision to focus on movies rather than Charlotte's varied jobs that took her from TV to movies and back again regularly seemed to make her much more appealing to casting directors when they were looking for the star of their next blockbuster movie.

Charlotte was fifty-one, and if she hadn't already starred in her last major movie, the one she'd gone to England to film with Ada, she probably only had one left. She had

years ahead of her of smaller parts, of side characters, but the chances of her headlining another movie were slipping away.

So, Lara imagined that Charlotte and her agent, Jerry, were probably trying to keep her media presence squeaky clean. Although she had come out. And as she'd asked Charlotte, why had she come out? Wasn't it to feel a little freer about who people thought she was dating?

Unless it really was just about Lara's age. But again, they were surrounded by examples of couples with more than a few years between them and not only were they happy, the media didn't give a shit. Not any of the media outlets that any of them cared about anyway.

Lara had felt more that night with Charlotte than she ever had with anyone else. It wasn't even close. And if she had to guess, she'd say that Charlotte felt the same way.

So, maybe Lara was overreacting. Spiraling for no reason whatsoever.

But as amazing as that night had been, they hadn't spoken a word about their future and if there was a chance of one at all. If what they were doing right now was dating or was this just a casual thing?

Lara picked up her phone, bringing up Charlotte's name and typing out a text.

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Lara

Hey, hope your meeting went well yesterday. Are you free tonight?

Lara didn't want to be clingy, but she might as well see if and when Charlotte would see her again. And she got her answer a few minutes later.

Charlotte

Hey. Yes, all good with Jerry. I have a thing tonight that I can't get out of. Tomorrow night?

Lara sighed.

Lara

I'm flying to New York. I have a client on Broadway who I need to see before the musical closes.

Charlotte

Will you be back in time to go to Ada's on Sunday?

Lara

Yes. I fly back in the morning. See you there?

Lara hated that she wasn't going to see Charlotte until then, but at least Charlotte seemed like she wanted to see her if their schedules weren't so busy.

Charlotte

Yeah. Maybe you could come back to mine after?

Lara

I'd love to.

Nina appeared, and Lara put her phone face down on the counter, feeling slightly better about things.

"Nina," Lara said as she sat down on the stool beside her. "I'm actually going to start sharing my personal calendar with you."

Lara couldn't believe that she'd nearly forgotten about Ada's dinner party, but Sydney had texted her about it when she'd been cooking dinner for Charlotte the other night, and she'd completely forgotten about it until Charlotte had mentioned it.

After Ada's big win on Sunday night, Sydney wanted to host a dinner at their house to celebrate. Just friends, Sydney had said. Very casual. And it would have been.

Except now Lara would have to figure out how she would navigate whatever it was she was doing with Charlotte. They weren't going to see each other until then, when they would be surrounded by friends, and this was the kind of conversation that had to happen in person.

If they even were going to have a conversation. How long would Lara keep sleeping with her without knowing what Charlotte wanted? If Charlotte was seriously

concerned about their age difference, she might only want a casual thing that was never going to be serious, and Lara had no idea what she would say if that's what she suggested.

Actually, she did.

Lara knew she couldn't turn Charlotte down. Even if it would hurt her in the long run. She couldn't do it.

She would definitely see Charlotte in secret. If that was what she wanted.

That was the problem though.

Lara had no idea what Charlotte wanted.

16

Charlotte took a seat on the couch beside Ada just as Sydney got up, everyone relaxing after dinner, mingling and having a few drinks. Ten of the twelve people that Sydney had invited were still here, and Charlotte hated that if anyone asked her at any point tonight if she'd seen Lara, she would know exactly where to find her.

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Not that there were too many places to look. After they'd left the dining room, Ada's guests moved between the kitchen, the living room or the backyard and pool area. But Charlotte couldn't seem to stop her eyes from landing on Lara, and she'd been caught more than once.

For dinner, Lara had taken the seat beside Charlotte, and she couldn't say whether it had been accidental, that they just happened to take those two seats, or if Lara had timed it that she chose to sit there once Charlotte had pulled out the chair.

Either way, they'd be able to talk throughout dinner, which had been nice, because Charlotte hadn't really spoken to her since she'd left Lara's that morning. The few texts about trying to find a day to see each other and coming up empty didn't count.

And thankfully, things hadn't been awkward.

Challenging maybe. Between Lara's form fitting black jeans and her dressy emerald green tank top, Charlotte had struggled not to check her out. And then there were the two times that Lara's hand had landed on her thigh. One was mid conversation, when they'd been laughing, and it was probably a natural movement, Lara squeezing her thigh like that, but fuck did it send a jolt of electricity right to her core.

The second time, Ada had been thanking them all for coming, for celebrating with her, and while they'd both been listening, Lara's hand had found its way back to her thigh, gently resting there for a few seconds before she moved away, leaving Charlotte wishing she hadn't.

"This is the way to celebrate," Ada said, clinking her wine glass off Charlotte's and

bringing her back to the present. “I hate all the after-party bullshit. This is who I want to be with after a win, even if it’s a week later. Just my closest friends.”

“I’m so happy for you. We were pacing the living room waiting to see who won, although I just had this gut feeling that it would be you, that it had to be you after that performance.”

“We? I thought you would have savored the chance to skip an awards ceremony and watch it alone. Who did you have over?”

Charlotte inhaled a sharp breath, covering it up by taking a drink. “I ran into Lara at that wrap party at Jessica’s. I assumed she’d be going to the ceremony, but when she said that she’d be watching it at home, I thought why not invite her over.”

Ada stared at her. “Really?”

“Yeah.” Charlotte took another drink. “And I was thinking about what you asked me to do, to see how Lara was doing, that she wouldn’t tell you if she was struggling because she’s your agent.”

“Oh. Well, I appreciate that, and Kerri will too, but you didn’t have to invite her over. You didn’t find out anything at the wrap party?”

“A little. I actually left Jessica’s a little worried about her, and that’s what made me think it was a good idea to spend some more time with her.”

“Okay, so what did you find out?” Ada asked, her eyes shifting past Charlotte. “Lara’s talking to Sydney on the other side of the room. She won’t overhear us.”

Charlotte nodded. “I think she’s still trying to find out how to do the job. I think she’s managing just fine as Kerri’s successor. But as far as Lara Soler, talent agent?”

Charlotte blew out a breath. “I don’t know. I don’t get the impression her heart’s in it. That this is a business she could live and breathe for the next twenty years.”

“Really? I’m surprised.” Ada turned her body towards her, blocking out the rest of the room. “Kerri always made it seem like Lara wanted this. I thought she approached Kerri with the idea that not only would she be her P.A. but that she also wanted to know the ins and outs of the business, that that would make her an even better personal assistant. And she is good at her job. I know Kerri always made it look easy. So, you don’t think she’s happy?”

Charlotte sighed. “I don’t know. I’m just saying, short term, I think she’s doing just fine. But I wouldn’t be surprised if she burnt out in a year. That’s all I’m saying.”

Ada held her gaze for a second before taking another drink. “Thank you. For doing that. I know Kerri always thought of her as more than her P.A. and I can really see that now. Most people would have moved on and not given Lara a second thought, but Kerri really wants her to succeed, and it’s not just that. I think they genuinely became really good friends over the last few years.”

Charlotte nodded. “Yeah. I like her,” she heard herself say. “I can see why Kerri stuck with her for so long.”

“You know Jerry tried to get me to sign with him when Kerri decided she was leaving.”

“No, I didn’t know that.” Charlotte’s lips slid into a smile. “Although that doesn’t surprise me.”

“He thought I was absolutely insane for going with Lara.”

Charlotte shook her head. “He’s good at what he does because he’s ruthless, but I

hope he dropped it after you declined.”

“Yes and no. Every time I see him, he brings it up.” Ada chuckled. “I don’t know how you haven’t fired him yet. I know he’s one of the best, but god is he difficult.”

“Oh, I know.”

“You should think about switching.”

“To who?”

Ada stared at her like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Lara.”

Charlotte waved her off. “No.”

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“I thought you always said you wouldn’t be loyal for the sake of being loyal. That if an opportunity came along, you wouldn’t turn it down because you had a loyalty to someone else.”

“My career’s winding down. As is Jerry’s. I’m not switching representation for the sake of two or three years.”

“You’re not serious. Charlotte, you know you don’t look fifty-one. And things are changing. Because of actresses like us. If we fold, we’re only fulfilling the assumption that Hollywood won’t entertain actresses in their fifties. We have to keep going. For Sydney. For everyone else coming up.”

“Woah, relax Ada.” Charlotte took another drink. “I’m not retiring tomorrow. I’m just being realistic. If Jerry still wants you to sign with him, he thinks he can get you the roles you want. And in theory, that means I will have those opportunities too.”

“If you haven’t retired.”

“Ada, we’re celebrating. Stop talking about work and careers and the next generation. Write that damn book if you want to make an impact. That’s what you should be thinking about. Not my career.”

“Okay, okay.” Ada held up her hand. “If I can’t talk about your career, can I talk about your relationship status?”

“What? No.” Charlotte narrowed her eyes. “Is this some kind of an intervention?” She swept her eyes around the room. “Is this party just a cover?”

“Get over yourself. It’s not an intervention. But you came out months ago, and I have heard exactly nothing from you or anyone else about who you might be seeing.”

Charlotte didn’t get a chance to reply.

Ada kept going. “Unless you’re having a secret affair.”

Ada’s eyes bore into her, and Charlotte had to look away. Of course, she looked right at Lara.

“Charlotte...” Ada’s gaze followed hers. “Why are you looking at Lara?”

“I’m looking at Sydney and the very secretive affair that you had.”

“And I wouldn’t recommend it to anyone. It nearly ruined us. I nearly ruined us. But I’m still waiting for you to deny that something’s going on between you and Lara. I thought I saw her looking this way a few times, but I thought it was about me.” A slow smile came to Ada’s lips as she took a drink. “But I’m nearly certain it has nothing to do with me.”

Charlotte closed her eyes for a second. Like Ada, she was the problem. Charlotte was sure that Lara would only love to shout from the rooftops that they were seeing each other or could be maybe. Shit, they really needed to talk.

“All this silence,” Ada said with a smirk.

“Okay, fine. I might have kissed Lara Sunday night. When she was at my place for the ceremony.”

Ada’s smile was genuine now, full of warmth. “Really? I know she’s young, but obviously, I know that sometimes that means absolutely nothing. There’s so much

more to a relationship than age.”

“Yes. I know. I’m just...”

Ada’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t mess her around Charlotte. Seriously. I can’t even begin to tell you how much I wish I could have done things differently with Sydney. It’s not even the three years apart. It’s the way I treated her at the start. The hot and cold. All the reasons why we shouldn’t. If you want her, fucking go for it. We’re not getting any younger. And she’s lovely. Honestly. She was so shy when Kerri first hired her. Star struck probably. But she’s an amazing person. And Kerri has never had a negative thing to say about her. Not once.”

Charlotte bit the inside of her cheek, her eyes darting towards Lara again, only to find both Sydney and Lara staring back at her.

17

Lara leaned against the living room wall as Sydney’s focus moved from the couch across the room where Ada and Charlotte were sitting to her, an eyebrow raised.

“Why do they keep looking over here?” Sydney asked, bringing her bottle of beer to her lips. “Do you think we should go over?”

“No,” Lara blurted out. She cleared her throat. That had sounded desperate. “No,” she said softly. “I wanted to ask you something.” She had to say this while they were alone. Well, they were in a room full of people, but no one was paying them any attention. Except maybe Charlotte, but she was out of earshot.

“Sure. What’s up?”

Lara tucked a lock of hair behind her ear as she spoke. “Okay, so this is off the

record. I'm not your agent right now."

"Okay..."

"You and Charlotte." Lara wasn't even sure how she was going to ask this. "When you two... Was she ever weird about the age difference?"

“What?”

“Like did she say that it wouldn’t work? I know you were seen in public together. At an awards ceremony. And you did the red carpet together and everything. But did she ever say that she didn’t want anything serious with you?”

Sydney tilted her head as her lips curved into a smile. “Are you sleeping with Charlotte?”

“What?” Lara blinked. That was the last thing she’d expected Sydney to say.

“Because she hasn’t taken her eyes off you. I’m sure I’ll hear all about it later. Ada hates it when she’s having a conversation with someone who’s not giving her their full attention.”

“Isn’t that kind of normal?”

“Don’t change the subject,” Sydney said with a laugh. “First of all, there was no me and Charlotte. I asked her to go with me to that awards ceremony, and that is the extent of it. Yes, she’s gorgeous. She’s my type. And maybe something could have happened. But no. Nothing did.”

“Okay.” Lara knew she was blushing, but there was nothing she could do about it.

“So, are you seeing Charlotte?”

Lara took a deep breath. “I don’t know.”

Sydney's mouth twitched with amusement. "How do you not know?"

"I like her. A lot. Too much probably."

"Okay, back up for a second. How long has this been going on?"

"A week?" Lara bit her lip. Yeah, it had only been a week. "I bumped into her at a wrap party. I'd never spoken to her before. And..." Lara closed her eyes for a second. "I might have made a fool of myself. But for some reason, Charlotte still asked me to come to her place to watch the ceremony on Sunday. And we were both so happy for Ada. I don't know," Lara said with a shrug. "We got caught up in the moment or something. But she kissed me."

Lara swallowed. It was so strange saying it out loud. Charlotte had kissed her. Lara had gone over that moment in her mind so many times in the last few days, and she was sure of it now. Charlotte had initiated it.

"Oh shit," Sydney said, complete surprise on her face. "I kind of assumed you would've started it."

"Does that make a difference?"

"Yeah." Sydney brought her beer to her lips and took a swig. "I mean, no one has seen Charlotte with anyone since she came out. I kind of interpreted that as she's not getting involved with a woman just because she can now. She's not out there dating every single queer woman in the entertainment industry. As far as I can see, she's dating no one. And I looked. Because Ada brings it up every week nearly. When is Charlotte going to meet someone? Should I set her up with..." Sydney shook her head. "You get the idea."

"Oh." Lara didn't know what to say to that. Her stomach knotted at the thought of

Ada setting Charlotte up with someone.

“Shit, you’re jealous.”

“I don’t know what I am.” And that was the truth.

“Anyway, finish your story. What happened after Charlotte kissed you?”

“More kissing,” Lara said with a lopsided smile.

Sydney chuckled. “You have it bad.”

“I went home that night after convincing Charlotte to see me the next day. To come over for dinner.”

“You put the brakes on?”

Lara shook her head. “Charlotte did. And that’s why I wanted to ask you about her. She was so caught up in our age difference.”

“How many years?”

“Nineteen,” Lara said as she exhaled.

Sydney nodded. “Well, she’s certainly seen enough examples of it working.”

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“Yeah, that’s the thing I don’t get. She was so concerned about it when her own agent’s boyfriend must be twenty years younger than him. You guys. Kerri and Rachel.” Lara knew she was gesticulating, but she couldn’t stop herself. “So, that’s why... I mean, I wasn’t expecting her not to care at all. But I thought if she did, that it would be a minor thing. Like a speed bump. Something to be aware of but that wouldn’t matter too much in the big picture.”

“So, she came over the next night?”

“Yeah.” Lara pursed her lips. “And she was the one who suggested we go upstairs.”

“Shit, Lara.” Sydney’s smile was infectious. “It seems like she’s the one who’s got it bad. And she keeps looking over here.”

“That’s the thing. I don’t really know where we stand. Tonight was the first time I saw her since she left that morning. And things were good then. It wasn’t awkward or anything. But she was busy the next day, and then I was in New York, and... I guess, we need to talk.”

“Yeah. Sounds like it.”

“But that’s why I wanted to ask you about her.”

“I have nothing to contribute,” Sydney said with her hand up in mock surrender. “Despite what gay Twitter thinks, #Sylotte was never a thing.”

“Is it bad if I say I’m glad to hear it?” Lara asked with a smile.

“No. Not at all,” Sydney said as she wrapped her arm around her shoulder and led them back towards the kitchen. “We need another drink. Because I think we have something to celebrate.”

18

Charlotte couldn't say for sure whether Ada noticed that Lara had gotten in the back of Charlotte's car with her. The last six guests had practically left together, knowing it was getting late, and although they'd barely spoken all night, Charlotte had caught Lara's eye as they were getting ready to go.

And Lara had slid into the backseat beside her.

“I told Sydney,” Lara said once the car pulled off and they were on the way to Charlotte's. “I didn't mean to. It just kind of happened.”

Charlotte turned to face her, and even in the dim lighting, she could see the worry etched on Lara's face, like she thought she might have screwed up whatever it was they were doing by telling someone.

“I told Ada.”

Lara's eyes grew wide. “Really?”

“Same thing. Kind of just happened. She knows me too well,” Charlotte said with a bit of a sigh.

“But you didn't deny it?”

“No. She guessed that I might be having a secretive affair, and I guess I looked in your direction, but apparently my silence was what gave me away.”

Lara's face fell a little, and Charlotte realized that she was basically saying that while she hadn't outright denied it, she silently had.

"I was caught off guard by Ada," Charlotte said. "I didn't think she'd make the connection. And I also didn't know what I could tell her. We haven't exactly talked about what this is." She motioned between them. "But she could tell that something was going on. How did Sydney guess? Did she catch you staring at me?"

"She actually thought you were staring at me." Lara's expression lightened for a second. "But uh..." Lara's voice trailed off. "I think Sydney knew because I asked her about you."

"You did?" Charlotte asked, feeling a smile coming to her lips. "Did you think we were together?"

"Yeah."

"Hm. So did the rest of the world for a few weeks. And she told you we weren't?"

"Right." Lara pressed her lips together for a second.

"What did you ask her though?"

Lara ran her hand over her black jeans. "I asked her if you were worried about their age difference."

"Interesting."

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“I know I shouldn’t have.” Lara turned to face her. “I’m sorry. I was just curious. I thought she might have said, ‘Yes Charlotte was, and this was how I convinced her not to be...’ But obviously she had no advice to give me.”

Before Charlotte could reply, her driver was pulling up outside her house, opening the door for her. Lara got out too, although she looked a little uneasy, as if she wasn’t sure if Charlotte would still want her here after what she’d just said.

“Have you changed your mind?” Charlotte asked.

Lara visibly swallowed. “No. Have you?”

“No.” Charlotte strode up the steps to her front door without another word, hearing Lara’s footsteps behind her and the sound of her driver pulling away.

Charlotte flicked on a few lights as they went inside, illuminating the hallway and the kitchen. “Drink?” Charlotte asked, her fingers drumming against the countertop.

Lara slid onto a bar stool. “Water?”

Charlotte took out a bottle from the fridge and poured them two glasses of water.

“I want to have a clear head,” Lara said softly after she’d taken a drink.

“For the conversation we’re meant to be having?”

“Hm. And what might come after.”

Charlotte took a drink and left her glass on the counter, her mind choosing that moment to remember the way Lara had placed her hand on Charlotte's thigh during dinner and what that slight squeeze did to her, that shot of electricity that went right to her center.

"You're optimistic then," Charlotte said, coming around to Lara's side of the counter and standing in front of her, her hands sliding up Lara's thighs as she stepped between her legs.

Lara left her glass down on the counter behind her and tilted her head, her eyes searching Charlotte's. "We might not have spoken much tonight, but I lost track of the number of times I caught you looking at me."

"Or was it the other way around?" Charlotte asked softly as she pushed a lock of Lara's hair away from her eyes.

"You looked stunning tonight. How was I supposed to not look at you?"

Charlotte's thumb lazily drifted across Lara's jawline. "So, you know exactly how I felt. You look good in black you know. These pants have been driving me crazy all night. But then again, at Jessica's you were wearing white. I think it might have very little to do with what color you're wearing."

"Maybe you should stop fighting this," Lara murmured, her body arching up as Charlotte slipped her hand behind Lara's neck, the other on Lara's hip.

Charlotte dipped her head as Lara rose up to meet her, her lips grazing across Lara's neck, a frustrated sigh leaving Lara's lips as Charlotte trailed kisses along her neck.

"I was just trying to save us from disaster," Charlotte whispered as her lips brushed over Lara's soft skin.

“I don’t want to be saved,” Lara said, her voice husky, sexy and determined all at once as she cupped Charlotte’s cheek, bringing their lips together in a luxuriously sensual kiss, their mouths parting, their tongues searching.

Charlotte moaned into the kiss, one hand lost in Lara’s hair, the other sliding underneath Lara’s top, gliding over her hip and up along her ribs as they continued to kiss.

When they came up for air, Charlotte lightly rested her forehead against Lara’s for a few long seconds before standing upright, her hands on Lara’s thighs. “We’re supposed to be talking.”

Lara stared at her with flushed cheeks, her hair disheveled from where Charlotte’s hand had been moments ago. “I can’t think never mind talk.”

Charlotte smiled. “I know what you mean.” She leaned in, parting her lips against Lara’s.

“What do you want this to be?” Lara asked, running a hand through her hair when Charlotte pulled away again, knowing that they really should talk. “That’s what we need to talk about. I’m here, a little too invested in this already, but I can say without a shadow of a doubt that I want you, and I don’t give a fuck how old you are.”

Charlotte inhaled a shaky breath as she bit her lip, somewhat thrown by Lara’s honesty.

“Too blunt?” Lara asked with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

“No. I like it. And I also happen to like you,” Charlotte said with a smile as she stepped back between Lara’s legs, her hands finding Lara’s in her lap.

“Now that is a relief.”

“Ada might have talked some sense into me.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Just how she regretted treating Sydney. And that I shouldn’t mess you around. Yeah, I think that’s how she put it. And I couldn’t agree more,” Charlotte said. “So, I’m going to stop being an idiot now and admit that whatever this is... I’m not going to ignore it because of our ages.”

Lara shook her head as she smiled. “Is this real?”

“Very,” Charlotte said as she smiled into the kiss, Lara arching up off the stool to kiss her properly, her arms wrapping around Charlotte as they lost themselves in another kiss.

19

The earthy smell of soil mixed with the aroma of coffee as Lara surveyed Charlotte’s new backyard, the morning light peeking through the leaves.

“What a difference a week makes,” Lara said as Charlotte came outside to join her, a soft breeze moving through her blond hair as sat down. “If I hadn’t seen what it looked like before, I wouldn’t have believed this much could have changed in a week.”

The gentle chirping of birds filled the air, finding their place among all the new plants and flowers.

“I switched landscaping companies,” Charlotte said as she lifted her mug to her lips. “I gave them the plans, and they said they’d have it done in a week. And they did.”

“Are you happy?”

Charlotte’s eyes swept across her newly landscaped backyard, from the lush greens to the vibrant flowers. It was like it had all been here for years not days. “I love it. Although, I have to say I’ve grown rather fond of your pool area.”

Lara smiled as she shook her head. The night in the pool three weeks ago had started all of this, and that wasn’t the last time things had gotten heated in that pool. A delicious shudder ran through Lara’s body when she thought about the night they’d drifted through the water, kissing slowly, ending up on the steps that descended into the pool, Lara straddling Charlotte’s waist. Lara had moaned into Charlotte’s neck as she came, her hands lost in Charlotte’s hair, her hips rocking back against her.

“Is the pool ready to go?” Lara asked, trying to get her mind out of the gutter.

Charlotte nodded. “We’ll have to test it out some night.”

“I was thinking the very same thing.”

“I have a charity dinner tomorrow evening. I think it’s for climate change. I have a few of those kinds of events lined up, and I’m not sure which one is first. Anyway, that’s beside the point. I was wondering if you wanted to go with me?”

Lara quirked an eyebrow, hiding her smile behind her mug as she took a sip of coffee. They’d fallen into an easy going routine these last three weeks of staying over at each other’s home two or three nights a week. They went out for hikes and walks on the beach, always wearing hats and dressing very casually, never getting noticed.

This would be the first time that they would be stepping out in public together. And Charlotte was the one suggesting it.

“Yeah. I’d love to. But are you sure?” Lara studied Charlotte’s face, still not quite believing that these last few weeks had been real. Everything had been so natural between them. It almost felt like they’d been together for months.

“Yes. I don’t imagine that there’ll be a huge fuss. I could be bringing you as a friend or someone interested in the cause. But if someone asks, I’m not going to deny it. Is that okay?”

“Yeah, of course.”

Lara bit the inside of her cheek to keep herself from grinning like a fool, because as amazing as these last few weeks had been, they’d never really spoken about how this would work. How they would come out as a couple. If they really were being serious. Lara never knew for sure.

She wanted to believe that Charlotte thought they could be in a long-term relationship, but they’d never actually spoken about it.

Lara knew she was falling for Charlotte, but she held back any kind of declaration, knowing that Charlotte wasn’t there yet.

But this was definitely a positive sign.

20

The soft tones of jazz music floated through the air as Charlotte navigated her way through the crowded ballroom after stepping out to find the restrooms. She ran her hands over her simple yet sleek black dress as she searched the crowd of elegantly

dressed celebrities and sports stars, spotting a few local politicians mixed in, the hum of their conversations surrounding her as her eyes landed on her agent.

Charlotte shouldn't have been surprised to see Jerry here. He'd certainly donate to the cause tonight, but he'd also get some business done. He'd no doubt try and pitch one of his clients to do the narration for a documentary that was in the works on the state of the oceans.

He caught her eye, and Charlotte weaved her way through the crowd, the scent of expensive colognes and perfumes hitting her nose.

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“Charlotte,” he said with a wide smile, a tumbler of whiskey or bourbon in his hand. “I would have hoped that if you were cheating on me, you’d have the decency to tell me.”

Charlotte just gave him a look, gladly accepting a glass of champagne from a waiter passing by. “What are you talking about?”

“I saw you arrive with Lara Soler. Don’t make the same mistake Ada did. She doesn’t have the experience, and one day, very soon, Ada’s going to find out why she should have picked me.”

Charlotte pursed her lips, her fingers tapping against the glass flute. “Lara is a perfectly capable agent, but I’m not switching.”

“So, you just brought her tonight to antagonize me?”

“Everything isn’t about you, Jerry,” she said with a smirk as she tilted her head back and took a drink. “But I’m honestly not even thinking about switching agents, so you have nothing to worry about.”

“Then why did you bring her?” Jerry asked, but the light bulb went off a second later, his eyebrows arching very high. “Oh...” He tilted his head. “Really? Charlotte Dixon,” he said with a shake of his head. “I didn’t think you had it in you.”

“What’s that exactly?”

“Dating someone half your age. I highly recommend it by the way. I just never saw

you doing it.”

“She’s not half my age. Just so you know. But yeah, it’s new. And it’s going really well.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Happy clients make my life so much easier.”

“Again, not all about you,” Charlotte said, rolling her eyes. “I’m going to take her to my cabin in Idyllwild.”

“Oh wow. Not many people get there. You’re letting her into your home away from home, tucked into the woods and far away from all this madness?”

“Yes.” Charlotte took the two and a half hour drive out there as often as her schedule would allow it. As much as she loved the beach and being near the ocean, there was nothing like spending a few days surrounded by nature, her winding and very private driveway leading up to cabin, the rustic exterior almost blending into the landscape.

“That’ll certainly tell you how happy you two really are. Spending a few days isolated like that. It won’t be the same as sneaking around L.A. dodging the paparazzi, getting a few hours alone before one of you has to be somewhere else.” Jerry clinked his tumbler against Charlotte’s champagne flute. “I hope it goes well.”

They took a drink, and Charlotte thought Jerry was in strange humor tonight, even for him. She wasn’t going to dwell on it though, and as she looked past Jerry, her eyes landed on Lara, her hair swept up, revealing her toned arms and shoulders, that red dress fitting her perfectly.

Charlotte wasn’t sure whose house they would end up at tonight, but as soon as they got back, she’d ask Lara if there was any way she could get away for the weekend.

Lara closed the passenger door of Charlotte's Mercedes, slightly taken aback by the cabin they'd pulled up to. Lara had never been out to Idyllwild and the San Jacinto Mountains, but this was nothing like she'd expected. The house was secluded, the woods providing them privacy as they carried their weekend bags up the winding stairs that led to the front porch.

"Charlotte, this is some getaway," Lara said, standing behind her as she unlocked the door, revealing a rustic interior with pine walls and stone features throughout the kitchen and living area, the stone fireplace taking up most of the living room wall to her left. "Wow."

"Not what you were expecting?"

"I don't even know what I was expecting, but no."

"Extravagance probably?" Charlotte said as she tossed her keys into the stone bowl on the kitchen counter. "Which this is definitely not."

"I mean, it's no shack."

Charlotte chuckled. "No, it's still got charm and that country feel, along with four bedrooms, but it's far from the mansion with a three car garage that you might have been imagining. Sometimes, it pays to be lowkey," Charlotte said with a knowing smile. "Pro tip."

Lara left her bag on one of the cream suede couches and wrapped her arms around Charlotte. "Thanks for that tip, and thank you for inviting me up here. I'm getting the impression that not many people have seen this place."

“Ada and Sydney. That’s about it.” Charlotte tilted her head as she leaned in to kiss her, and Lara parted her lips, the feeling of Charlotte’s lips brushing softly over hers still making her entire body hum. “Will I give you a tour?” Charlotte asked as she pulled away.

“Please.”

* * *

Lara stood out on what had to be the biggest deck she’d ever been on, breathing in the fresh scent of pine needles. Charlotte had showed her around the house, moving down the hall where the guest bedrooms were and up to the loft to the master bedroom, the white sheets and plump pillows inviting.

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Now, Lara was taking in her surroundings. The dense woods sheltered them from any neighbors, the trees towering over the house, and Lara was glad that she always packed a bikini in her bag, because when she turned to see what Charlotte was doing, she was getting the jacuzzi going, the jets coming to life.

“I was thinking we could come out here after dinner,” Charlotte said, taking one last look at the jacuzzi before joining her at the edge of the deck. “Spend some time in there.”

“I’d love to.”

“And I’m cooking. As amazing as everything has been the you’ve prepared for me, I feel like I’m slacking on the cooking end of things. So, I’m taking over the kitchen.”

“I’ll allow it,” Lara said with a smile tugging at her lips, still struggling to believe that this was what her life was like right now.

With all the struggles of following in Kerri’s footsteps, this was the first time she’d felt truly relaxed in the last few months.

22

Charlotte closed her eyes, the soothing sounds of the water bubbling in the jacuzzi surrounding them. She leaned back, her arms draped across the walls of the jacuzzi, the water the perfect temperature. Her eyes fluttered open when she heard Lara’s footsteps approaching on the deck, her flip flops gently slapping against her feet.

As it approached sunset, the golden rays filtered through the leaves, and Charlotte sighed happily as Lara glided through the water, settling on the bench beside her.

“Maybe I should retire,” Charlotte murmured as she lightly kissed Lara’s temple. “There were so many TV series or movies that blended into one another over the years, no break in between projects... I’ve actually done very little relaxing out here.”

“I don’t think I could stay away from this place. It feels like we’re so far away from Los Angeles.”

“I think no matter what I take on next, I’m going to try and spend more time here.”

Lara lifted her hand out of the water, droplets trickling down her tanned arm as she tucked a piece of Charlotte’s hair behind her ear. “I know a way to get you relaxed.”

“Oh yeah?” Charlotte asked with a smile coming to her lips.

“Hm. When we get out, I’m going to give you a massage.”

Charlotte must have frowned because Lara playfully shoved her shoulder.

“Hey, I give really good massages,” Lara said as if she was offended.

“I’m sure you do, but I was kind of hoping you’d do that thing with your—”

Lara’s hand disappeared under the water, groping Charlotte’s breast through her bikini, her lips parting against Charlotte’s as she kissed her deeply, silencing her, until Charlotte was moaning into the kiss. Lara’s fingers rolled her nipple, sending a pulse of electricity right to her core.

“Just a preview,” Lara whispered between kisses, her attention on Charlotte’s other

breast as their tongues probed. “After the massage.”

“Yeah, but maybe,” Charlotte murmured, their lips meeting again. “Maybe I’ll need the massage more after.”

Lara smiled into the kiss, and Charlotte couldn’t remember feeling this light, this comfortable in someone else’s company.

Charlotte hadn’t wanted to start anything with Lara because she thought there were too many years between them, but that was the least of Charlotte’s concerns right now.

Now, she was scared of seriously falling for Lara.

And it wasn’t that Lara had given her any reason to doubt her. It was more that Charlotte had never been this vulnerable. Her own happiness never being so closely tied to someone else’s, and it was a strange feeling to carry with her this weekend, because she knew it already.

There was no point denying it or thinking that it was something that would happen down the road. It was happening right now.

She was falling for Lara.

Lara sighed as Charlotte’s tongue skimmed across her own. “Why don’t we go inside,” Lara whispered between kisses. “And come back out here again later.”

* * *

Charlotte backed Lara up against the wall in the hallway as they kissed their way inside, water dripping off them, leaving a trail of puddles on the wood floors.

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“Upstairs?” Lara asked when Charlotte’s hand slid into her wet bikini bottoms. “I don’t want to ruin the couch,” she said, her voice catching when Charlotte’s fingertips found her clit.

“And I don’t want to ruin the bed. Guest room?”

“Please,” Lara whimpered as Charlotte continued to tease her.

Charlotte removed her hand, and Lara led the way, stopping at the first door on the left.

“This okay?” Lara asked, her cheeks flushed.

Charlotte smiled as she grabbed her hips and gently pushed her inside and onto the bed. She stripped out of her wet bikini, and grabbed a hold of Lara’s bikini bottoms, tugging them down her legs while Lara flung the top half aside.

Charlotte shook her head as she climbed on top of Lara. “Stunning,” she said as she leaned down to kiss Lara, their tongues slowly gliding. She smiled into the kiss when she slid her fingers up Lara’s thigh and over her sex, finding her ready and waiting for her.

“I love how wet you get for me,” Charlotte murmured against Lara’s lips.

Lara’s hands were on her ass, her grip almost painful as she urged Charlotte on, silently begging her to give her what she needed.

Lara groaned into the kiss when Charlotte slipped inside, two then three fingers easily sinking into her heat.

“Just like that,” Lara moaned into Charlotte’s neck as she picked up the pace, knowing exactly how Lara liked it now, and it only took a few more strokes for Lara to cling to her, her body quaking, a string of curses on her lips.

Charlotte smiled down at her as Lara recovered and as Charlotte withdrew her fingers, she brought them to her mouth, loving the fire that was in Lara’s eyes as she watched her lick them clean.

Lara pushed herself up to kiss her, her arms wrapping around Charlotte.

And Charlotte lost herself in the kiss, in the feeling of Lara’s lips expertly meeting her own again and again.

Lara guided Charlotte back against the sheets, kissing her way down her body until she was on her stomach between Charlotte’s legs, her tongue working its magic.

“Oh fuck,” Charlotte moaned, her hands in Lara’s hair as her tongue flickered over her clit. Charlotte arched off the bed when Lara’s fingers entered in slowly, her tongue still teasing her, and it didn’t take long for Charlotte to lose control, her hips rocking back against Lara’s tongue, her thighs tightening against her head.

“I’m coming,” Charlotte cried as her orgasm took over, her body shuddering, one hand in Lara’s hair, messing up her bun, the other clutching the sheets as one of the most intense orgasms she’d had yet washed over her entire body.

“Fuck,” Charlotte panted, and Lara took her time kissing her way up her body, letting her recover.

Charlotte held out her arm, and Lara snuggled into her. There were so many things she wanted to say right now, but she kept them to herself, knowing that they were too new, that this weekend away wasn't a reflection of what their lives in Los Angeles were like.

But there was no denying that she was falling for Lara Soler.

23

Lara finished cleaning up the kitchen after another delicious meal that Charlotte had made, although at least this time, she let Lara help. She wasn't really sure where the last two days had gone, because tomorrow morning, they would be leaving early to head back home, and Lara wished they had another day or two out here together.

Charlotte was in the loft packing even though it was almost eleven o'clock at night. She wanted to be able to have a lazy morning and enjoy one last coffee out on the deck.

Lara had felt something change between them this weekend. They hadn't had a serious conversation, but even the fact that Charlotte had brought her here said a lot.

Even though they had to get back to L.A., Lara knew she should be optimistic about the future. They'd only been seeing each for a month, but so much had happened in those few weeks. So many nights falling asleep in one another's arms. So many breakfasts shared outside at either of their homes.

And these last two days had proved that this was about more than sex. They'd been so comfortable around each other this weekend, with Charlotte going for a walk on the trail behind the house while Lara preferred to read on the deck.

They'd spent considerable time in the jacuzzi this weekend too, long hours kissing,

exploring each other, although they never actually had sex outside, because as remote as the cabin felt, Lara had a feeling that Charlotte wouldn't risk it.

While Charlotte had seemed like she was in her element at the charity event the other night, Lara knew she preferred quiet nights like the ones they'd had this weekend, that she wasn't the kind of person to seek out the spotlight. And Lara loved seeing her so relaxed.

"Hey babe," Charlotte called from the loft above the living room. "Jerry just text to say I'm trending. Should I be worried?"

Lara didn't have much time to bask in the warmth of Charlotte using an endearment like that for the first time, because trending was rarely ever good news, not for people like Charlotte, and Lara immediately found herself switching into agent mode.

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Lara finished drying the pots and pans, hanging them back up on the rack above the island, before walking over to where her phone was charging on the dining room table.

Lara's pulse quickened when she saw seven texts from Nina who she specifically told not to get in contact with her unless it was an emergency.

Nina

Charlotte's all over social media right now because of these photos. Check this link.

That was sent about two hours ago, and the texts became increasingly more urgent, ending with one in all caps.

Nina

PLEASE CHECK YOUR MESSAGES!

Lara clicked on the link, and her stomach fell as she read the headline from the tabloid's website, 'Charlotte Dixon's Steamy Weekend With Mystery Younger Woman.'

"What the fuck," Lara whispered as she flicked through the photos, one after the other of them kissing on the deck or in the jacuzzi.

The entire weekend, Lara hadn't seen another soul. Who got these photos?

They must have been hidden in the woods.

Lara covered her mouth with her hand, her pulse racing as she tried to figure out what to do. She had to tell Charlotte. Obviously. But there was no way that she was going to take it well. She'd told Lara how safe she felt out here.

"Lara?" Charlotte's voice carried down the stairs.

Lara skimmed the article, which was extremely light. So, it was just the photos really driving that headline, but it was enough.

Lara exhaled as she tried to put on a brave face as she climbed the stairs to tell Charlotte.

24

Charlotte folded her last blouse and zipped up weekend bag, knowing that she could take her time waking up tomorrow, that she was ninety percent packed.

She heard Lara's footsteps on the stairs just as she lifted her bag off the bed.

"Sorry for shouting down at you like that," Charlotte said, leaving the bag out of the way in the corner of the spacious loft.

"It's fine."

Charlotte turned. There was something off about Lara's voice, and her body language only backed up Charlotte's gut feeling. Lara was hovering by the stairs, her hands shoved in the pockets of her jeans.

"Oh," Charlotte said as she padded over. "That's not a good look. What kind of

garbage have they made up about me now?"

Lara took a deep breath. "Have you ever had any problems with privacy here?"

"No." Charlotte sat on the edge of the bed. "Never. Why?"

"This is why you're trending," Lara said, reaching behind her to slide her phone out of her back pocket and handing it to Charlotte.

Charlotte could feel the heat coming to her face as she read the headline, a dull ache forming somewhere above her eye. "Fucking bastards."

Charlotte handed Lara her phone, her jaw clenched as she tried to process the fact that thousands of people were sharing that article and those photos.

"We should leave tonight," Charlotte said, pushing herself off the bed. "There shouldn't be anyone out there now. Not in the middle of the night."

She immediately went into survival mode. Even though she wanted to figure out how this could have happened, that wasn't important right now. The fact was that it had happened. That at least one photographer had been out in the woods the entire weekend, watching them, photographing them, and selling those photos for the world to see.

If something like this had happened years ago, Charlotte would have been more concerned about her image, about people finding out that she liked women, but right now, that didn't matter.

She was out.

She was more than happy to be seen with Lara it turned out. It hadn't phased her at all at the charity event.

But this was so much different.

This was an invasion of her privacy, and Charlotte felt sick.

25

Lara was pretty sure she'd never been in a car moving this fast before, but strangely she felt safe as Charlotte sped past the occasional car they met on their way through the darkness back to Los Angeles, the headlights illuminating the road ahead.

They must've been on the road for at least an hour. Lara hadn't noticed the exact time when they'd left. Conversation had been sparse, but what was there to talk about besides the obvious?

How had this happened?

Lara tried another topic instead. "I had no idea you could drive like this." Even though they'd been traveling over the speed limit the entire time, every maneuver that Charlotte made was precise, like she was in complete control of the car. "You know," Lara continued when Charlotte hadn't said anything. "When you had a driver."

"I took a course," Charlotte said, her eyes flickering up to the rear view mirror.

“Years ago. Paps are crazy. I needed to know I could get myself out of a situation if I had to.” Her grip on the steering wheel tightened as she sped past another car.

Lara struggled to think about anything else other than how this could have happened as they drove in silence.

“How did they find us?” Lara finally blurted out a few minutes later. They were nearly in Los Angeles. How could they not talk about this?

Lara was met with silence, and she stole a glance in Charlotte’s direction, noticing even in the dim lighting that her jaw was tight, and a knot formed in the pit of her stomach.

“Wait,” Lara said, feeling a little nauseous, “You don’t think...”

“Did you tell Nina?”

“No.” Lara stared at Charlotte whose eyes were checking the mirrors every few seconds. “No. I didn’t. I wouldn’t. I haven’t even known her for two months.” Lara stopped herself from asking Charlotte how she could think that she’d be so careless. “Who did you tell?” Lara asked instead.

“Jerry.”

The rhythmic tick-tock of the blinker filled the silence as Charlotte turned left.

“So, it was me or Jerry or someone followed us,” Lara said, trying to get Charlotte to see that there were other possibilities, that she wasn’t the one who let this happen.

“No one followed us.”

Lara could feel the bile rising up in her throat. Charlotte seriously thought that she'd told someone. And why wouldn't she? Jerry has been her agent for years and years. Charlotte had only met Lara one month ago.

Lara hadn't even noticed the streets growing familiar, but they were outside her house. Charlotte didn't turn off the car.

"Do you want to come in?" Lara asked once she'd retrieved her bag from the trunk.

"No. I'm meeting Jerry first thing."

Lara sucked in a breath. "Okay." It felt strange to tell Charlotte that she'd had an amazing weekend after everything that had happened, so she didn't. "Goodnight."

"Night," Charlotte said, her eyes lingering on Lara.

Lara thought she was going to say something, but then it hit her that Charlotte was probably waiting for her to close the passenger side door.

With a sharp inhale, Lara pushed the door closed and walked to her front door in a daze, the sound of Charlotte's car fading away into the night.

26

Charlotte fell onto her couch, throwing her feet up as she stretched out, exhaustion taking over. What a fucking day. The longest one in a very long time, and it was only five o'clock.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:18 pm

She'd met with Jerry at nine to start her day after having slept just a few hours the night before. She'd been wired after driving back from the cabin, her mind jumping from one thought to the next.

If she wasn't thinking about Lara and why she couldn't just say that she'd accidentally told someone, Charlotte was thinking about how some sick pap spent their weekend crouched in the bushes around her house, their lens peeking through the leaves.

At around four o'clock in the morning last night, she decided it would be a good idea to go on social media and see what people were saying about her.

She probably shouldn't have been surprised that most people were happy for her, but it wasn't her fans she was worried about. It was the sleazy tabloids, writing sensationalized headlines.

Charlotte Dixon Can't Keep Her Hands Off Hot Younger Girlfriend

She sent Ada a text, asking her if she was free for a phone call, but she texted back, asking her to come over.

Charlotte closed her eyes for a few seconds. The last thing she wanted to do was go back out. Thankfully, the paparazzi weren't sitting outside her house right now. That was one thing to be grateful for. So, she could go out.

She knew she wouldn't sleep again tonight if she didn't talk to someone about this, and right now, at this point in her life, Ada was that person.

Not that Ada could make this go away, but at least she could relate. It hadn't come up with Lara yet, but this was one of the problems with dating someone who wasn't as famous as she was. Lara just couldn't relate to this, to having her face all over the internet with hundreds of people commenting about her steamy weekend away.

Until someone experiences that level of public scrutiny, it's impossible to relate.

Luckily, the tabloids hadn't figured out who Charlotte had been with. Lara's back was to the camera in just about all the photos, and the one or two where it wasn't, the picture wasn't clear enough to identify her.

Charlotte pushed herself off the couch, and sent her driver a message to swing by as soon as he could.

It had to be Lara.

Hopefully, she'd just told someone and was afraid to admit it. A friend. A family member. Maybe she'd told Nina in passing and didn't remember it.

Privacy was so important to Charlotte. Slip ups like this were a disaster, but she would forgive Lara for making that mistake.

If she owned up to it.

If they couldn't be honest with one another... What were their chances really?

27

Lara stifled a yawn as she kicked off her ankle boots, leaving them in the hallway, too tired to bend down and pick them up. That was the kind of day she was having.

Normally, she kept the house tidy, and stuff like that, leaving things all over the place would have bothered her. But not today.

She'd hardly slept last night after Charlotte dropped her off. Even though it had been the middle of the night, her mind wouldn't switch off, so she got three or four hours of restless sleep, and now she was paying for it.

But at least she'd made it through her work day. Her stomach rumbled as she flicked through her phone on the way to the kitchen. Today was not a day for cooking. She needed someone to deliver her food. Something to make her feel better. Chinese maybe?

At least Nina had acted normal today, not asking her anything about her weekend or even bringing up the tabloid headlines.

Lara slid onto a bar stool and ordered her food, her phone ringing in her hands just after she'd paid.

She answered it. "Hey, Kerri."

"Hey. I've been meaning to call you," Kerri said with a sigh. "Things have been surprisingly busy here. But Rachel showed me the headlines. Because of Charlotte. But it didn't take me long to tell that it was you in those photos. First of all, I'm happy if it's true, if you're with Charlotte and you're happy, of course. But I'm sorry that you're all over the internet like that."

"Yeah," Lara said, covering her face with her hand. "It's true. I am the mystery younger woman."

"Ada had said that Charlotte had met someone."

“She didn’t say it was me?” Lara asked as she got up and moved into the living room, needing to be more comfortable.

“No.”

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That shouldn't have surprised Lara. Ada was trustworthy like that.

Lara flopped onto the couch. "I haven't heard anything from Charlotte. We came back in the middle of the night last night, and she left without coming in. I know it was late, but..."

"Breaches of privacy to someone as famous as Charlotte are..." Kerri sighed. "It's hard to explain how much this'll affect her."

"It's just... We've had an amazing three or four weeks together now. I think she was just starting to believe that we could really work." Lara could hear the sadness in her own voice. "And then this... And she hasn't said as much, but she definitely thinks this was my fault."

"How could it be your fault? Maybe someone followed you?"

"No. Charlotte kept an eye on the road behind us. I don't think anyone did follow us. And the only two people who knew about our plans were me and Jerry."

"Well, I wouldn't put it past him. Look, just give her some space. She'll figure out it wasn't you."

"I hope so."

"If you need to get away for a few days, you're always welcome here."

That brought a smile to her lips. "Thank you."

They caught up for a few more minutes, and Lara felt a little better by the time her food arrived, but she just wished that Charlotte would have sent her a text or something. Not hearing from her after the way they left things last night was killing her.

28

Charlotte thanked Ada as she topped up her wine glass. They were sitting outside, the sun nearly gone as darkness started to set in. Her eyes landed on Ada's pool, the water calm and still, but it seemed that she couldn't look at a pool anymore without remembering that night at Lara's, the one that started all of this nearly a month ago.

"So," Ada said, getting comfortable beside her on the outdoor furniture. "Is there any way that someone might have followed you out there?"

"No. I had my eyes on the mirrors every few seconds. I would have noticed. You know the way I drive."

Ada gave her a lopsided smile. "Two years playing a top secret government agent on a thriller series..."

"I do think about her occasionally. How I'd love to play her again."

"Sounds like you kinda did." Ada took a sip of wine. "So if you weren't followed..."

"Then it was Lara or Jerry. They were the only ones who knew. Lara said that she didn't tell anyone. That her new P.A. didn't know."

"And what did Jerry say?"

Charlotte took a drink. "I didn't ask him. I met him this morning to make a plan.

‘Damage control,’ as he likes to call it,” she said with a sigh.

“I don’t think Lara did this.”

“Maybe not purposely. And what does that mean? That Jerry did? That he tipped off the paps?”

Ada gave her a look. “He’s never been the most ethical agent.”

“Fuck,” Charlotte muttered before she took a long drink, doubt creeping in.

“How did you leave things with Lara?”

“I didn’t. I just left last night. I was all over the place. I’d just had one of the best weekends of my life, and while I’m still out there enjoying myself, it all blows up.”

Ada reached for her hand. “Don’t mess this up. Go talk to Jerry. Ask him. Grill him. Do whatever you have to do, because if you don’t, things are never going to go back to the way they were with Lara. She’s not going to trust you when you didn’t believe her. You’ve got to sort this out, Charlotte.”

“I know.”

Charlotte closed her eyes for a second, knowing she had to go see Jerry right now.

29

Lara slowly climbed the stairs, full but far from happy. It was almost eleven o'clock, and she still hadn't heard from Charlotte.

She should probably give up at this point.

She really wanted to text her, but she stopped herself, leaving her phone to charge on the nightstand while she got ready for a bath. As tired as she was, she knew she wouldn't be able to sleep yet. She was too restless.

Lara got undressed and slipped on her charcoal gray robe. She hated being in this limbo. Charlotte hadn't ended it, but she might as well have. It certainly felt like she had.

Lara sat on the edge of the bath and turned on the water, adding some salts, still feeling sorry for herself by the time she shrugged out of her robe and lowered herself into the warm water.

* * *

When Lara padded back into the bedroom, she went over to her phone to check the time but did a double take when she saw a message from Charlotte.

She'd sent it ten minutes ago.

Charlotte

Are you still awake?

Lara didn't even debate making Charlotte wait.

Lara

Yes

Charlotte

Can I come over?

Lara's stomach fell to the floor. That was it. Charlotte wanted to break up with her. In person. Tonight. She didn't even want to wait until tomorrow.

Lara bit the inside of her cheek.

Lara

Yeah

Lara got dressed in a daze, putting on her pajama shorts and a black t-shirt, not even bothering with a bra. If she wasn't going to bother getting dressed up for this, she wasn't going to wear a bra either.

Lara left her hair tied up in a messy bun and slid her feet into her flip flops, making her way downstairs just as the doorbell rang.

Charlotte must have been circling the neighborhood, waiting for Lara to reply to her text.

Wow. She really wanted to end things. Fast.

Lara exhaled loudly before she unlocked the door, standing back to let Charlotte in.

“Hi,” Charlotte said softly. She shoved her hands in the pockets of her jeans. “I know it’s late.”

“It’s okay. This probably won’t take long.” Lara closed the door behind her.

“Oh.” Charlotte frowned. “I just wanted to apologize. For not believing you. I should have. And I’m so sorry.”

Lara blinked. Surely, she’d misheard Charlotte. “What?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know how to make it up to you.”

Lara took a deep breath, her arms folded across her chest, her mind trying to catch up with what Charlotte had just said.

30

Charlotte followed Lara into the kitchen. She was acting weird, but it was late, and they were in a strange place. Charlotte just needed ten minutes to explain herself.

“Why did you think I wanted to see you?” Charlotte asked, her hands on the counter as Lara went to the fridge and pulled out two bottles of water, sliding one across the counter towards her.

“To end it,” Lara said bluntly with almost no emotion before she took a long drink.

“What?” Charlotte’s mouth fell open. “No. I just came from Jerry’s. I... He didn’t say anything this morning when I saw him. But I also didn’t ask.”

“Because you assumed it was my fault.”

“Yes.” Charlotte closed her eyes for a second, wishing she could go back and do things differently. “I was with Ada earlier. She knew you wouldn’t do this. That if you said that you hadn’t told anyone, then you hadn’t. So I went back to Jerry’s and outright asked him.” Charlotte swallowed the lump in her throat, still not quite believing it. “He tipped them off. And he wasn’t the least bit sorry about it.”

“What? Why?” Lara asked, anger flashing across her eyes.

“Some bullshit about it being better to know now. I don’t even know if he meant in terms of the media’s reaction or if he was talking about us and if we were the real thing. It doesn’t matter. I fired him. I can’t believe he would do something like that.”

“What?” Lara stared at her from across the counter. “You fired him?”

“Yeah. After something like that? I had to.”

Charlotte watched Lara come around the counter to stand in front of her.

“I was sick all day,” Lara said, her eyes searching Charlotte’s. “I thought we were done. And I get it. You’ve known him for years and me for just about a month. Of course you had a reason to trust him, but I wish you hadn’t dismissed my explanation like that.”

“I know. I should have listened to you. I just shut down.” Charlotte wanted to reach out, but she stayed where she was.

“I thought after the weekend...” Lara’s voice trailed off. “I thought you might have realized that we are really good together. That this wasn’t some fling.”

“You were never a fling, Lara.” Charlotte couldn’t stop herself from taking a step closer, her hand finding Lara’s at her side. “I was just trying to protect myself. I don’t expect you to forgive me tonight. And I’m sorry you got caught up in all this.”

A hint of a smile ghosted Lara’s lips. “Sexy mystery younger woman has a nice ring to it though.”

“I’m being serious,” Charlotte said, her heart beating faster as she tried to put her thoughts into words. “This is part of this. Of being with me. Photos. Paparazzi chases. Eventually your name will be out there. People will start digging into your past. It’s

all fair game if you're my girlfriend."

"I know," Lara said softly, a smile coming to her lips. "Am I?"

"Are you what?"

Lara's eyes contained a warmth, a bemused smile on her lips. "Your girlfriend."

Charlotte smiled, a laugh floating up from her throat. "Yeah. If I haven't put you off completely. Yes. I would really like that."

There was a tingling sensation in the pit of her stomach as Lara's smile spread into a grin, her fingers interlacing with Charlotte's. "Yes."

The air around Charlotte seemed electrified, the heaviness she'd felt when Lara had answered the door looking so sad long gone.

Lara's other hand slid around her waist as Charlotte leaned in to brush her lips across Lara's, her hand on Lara's neck as she deepened the kiss, needing Lara to know how much she wanted her.

Lara sighed into the kiss, and all of the stress and anxiety of the last twenty-four hours fell away as Lara grabbed her hand and led her up the stairs.

EPILOGUE

Lara's feet sunk into the sand as she carried her surfboard under her arm, the taste of salty seawater on her lips as she waited for Tracy to catch up to her.

She brought her hand up to shield her eyes from the sun, barely making Charlotte's aqua-blue umbrella out in the distance, a green windbreaker set up beside it even

though there was only a light breeze today, but Charlotte set it up anytime she came down to the beach with Lara, giving her privacy from any beachgoers.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 6:18 pm

“Lara, I think you’ve hit that sweet spot,” Tracy said as she jogged towards her, the sound of the waves crashing against the shore swallowing up her words. “Three months later, and you’ve mastered the basics.”

“I can’t believe it’s been that long,” Lara said with a grin as she walked alongside Tracy.

“You stuck out those hard weeks. Was it worth it?”

Lara smiled. “Yes. And thank you for being so flexible with my lessons. I never would have gotten this far if you weren’t.”

“Not a problem.”

Lara had struggled to find enough time for more than one lesson in the first three weeks, but then as she started enjoying herself, she managed to fit in two or three lessons most weeks now, and she was finally starting to feel like she knew what she was doing.

Hayden wanted to join her, but her schedule never allowed it, not since she got another role on a TV series.

Lara felt her lips tugging into a smile as Charlotte made her way across the sand, her sunhat low with shades covering her eyes. She’d been nervous the first time Lara suggested coming down to the beach with her while she was getting lessons, but she hadn’t been noticed once.

“Hey Charlotte,” Tracy said with a wave. “When are we going to get you out there?”

Charlotte laughed. “Not you too. I’ve got Lara trying to convince me to take on this biopic and play one of the best surfers in the world.” She made a face. “I think that’s a bit of a stretch. I’m too old for it, and I know she offered it to Ada first,” she said with a half-smile. “So, there’s that...”

It had been three months since Charlotte had fired Jerry. She’d never hired a new agent even though she hadn’t retired, so Lara was keeping an eye out for scripts, and maybe it was her new love of surfing, but she thought this one was a gem.

The only problem was that the lead actress would need to be convincing as a surfer. They’d certainly find a stunt double, but Ada didn’t think she’d be able to pull it off, and Charlotte had said something similar.

Lara struggled to follow what Tracy and Charlotte were talking about. Lara had gotten a call last week about that part. They couldn’t find an actress who was in her forties and was the right fit, and they weren’t going to compromise. They’d rather the movie never happen than get someone in who wasn’t right for the part.

And now Lara couldn’t take her eyes off Tracy.

Tracy Carrington was perfect for this movie.

Except for the part where she hadn’t acted in more than twenty years.

But that acting experience was there, and Lara couldn’t stop thinking about it the entire ride back home.

* * *

“I know you’re not listening to me,” Charlotte said as she drove. “You haven’t said

more than two words since we left. Is everything okay?"

"She's perfect."

"What?"

"Tracy. She's perfect for the biopic."

"Uh..." Charlotte stifled a laugh. "I'm not sure... From everything Tracy's said since I've got to know her again, I don't think she has any interest in getting back into acting."

"No, I know. But she is perfect."

"Don't get your hopes up. And don't push too hard. I know you love this script, but don't ruin your friendship with her. I don't think I've said this out loud, but surfing has been really good for you."

"Yeah?" Lara asked as they stopped at a light.

"Yes. You can't wait to get to your next lesson. You come back with a bounce in your step."

"Yeah," Lara said, a smile coming to her lips. "Yeah, I love it."

"So, just enjoy it." Charlotte found her hand and gave it a squeeze as she drove away from the lights. "Don't mix business with pleasure."

"Another pro tip?" Lara asked with a smirk.

"Yes," Charlotte said, flashing her that dazzling smile.