

Folie

à

Deux

P . R O S E

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I.

A FAINT HAZELNUT SCENT WAFTS through a three story penthouse on Park Avenue as the morning sun rays peep through tall drapes and bathe the Billings home in warmth. The blaring New York City streets below are a stark contrast to the silence in the apartment — yellow taxis honking the second the light changes and people hustle while trying not to spill their lattes or attempting to multitask while being glued to their phones and weaving between the bustling crowd.

The stillness that envelopes the house is broken once the echo of an alarm interrupts their slumber. Curtains snatch open and spark the once-dark bedroom with light. The body in the bed hisses and pulls the sheet to cover from the blinding sun.

“Charlotte,” the voice calls from the foot of the bed. “Let’s go out and have breakfast this morning.”

The body groans and makes no effort to move. “I have a meeting.”

“Should I make you any coffee?” he asks. This causes her to slowly pull down the duvet from her face and look at her twin brother, Charles. He has identical honey-olive skin and hazel eyes as her. Freckles embellish his nose and cheekbones, just like his twin. Though his jaw is stronger and more square than hers, they are *almost* a splitting image of each other.

She doesn’t answer at first and shifts underneath the sheets before replying, “I’ll take a shot of espresso.” She tosses the covers over herself again in a dramatic huff.

Charles walks over and drops his weight onto his sister’s bed. “Do you know what today is?” She scoffs and kicks her sheets off of her to get out of bed.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Her tone is dry with a sharp edge. Bare feet patter across the floor as she heads towards her bathroom. Her sleek, long black hair follows behind.

“Charlotte --”

“If you don’t mind, I have to shower,” she snaps and closes the door behind her. Seconds later, the pipes creak silently and she steps underneath the running shower head. Charles sighs and decides not to press the issue with her anymore. He rises and walks back to his room to finish preparing for his own day.

Goosebumps spread all along her body as the hot water cascades down her back and steam rises off her skin. Her fingertips run over a thick scar she has on her right hip, but quickly withdraws when the memory attempts to flood her mind. She sighs in relief and washes her body as she hums, losing herself in this small time frame to dissociate with her reality. Right now, nothing exists but the silky coconut wash and the lullaby the water creates hitting her face. There isn’t a long meeting later, there isn’t a surgical procedure that needs planning, there isn’t any paperwork to complete, no deadlines, no responsibilities -- just for the twenty minutes she’s in the shower.

She knows she can’t hide for long and must return to the life laid before her. She cuts off the water, throws on a robe, and heads downstairs for the coffee waiting for her. Charles sits at the table dressed in a grey pinstripe Burberry suit with an espresso cup in one hand and the New York Times in the other. He peers over the newspaper and places the glass on its matching plate. “Any plans for the night?” Charles inquires.

Charlotte brings her drink to her lips. “I have a surgery tonight with a patient flying from Australia,” she says into the coffee and then takes a sip. She doesn’t meet her brother’s gaze and instead stares into the small cup between her fingers. Charles parts his lips to reply, but presses them back together. It’s something he’s been working up to ask and had hoped to butter her over breakfast at the Gramercy Tavern, but now is pressed for time and is afraid of his twin’s reaction.

He hesitates to say, “Are you sure you don’t have time this morning to see Mom?”

Charlotte scoffs and rises off her chair. "My schedule is tight today and needs to stay as is." Her gaze flicks towards the analog clock hanging on the wall. "And would you look at that, I'm already behind." She drops her empty cup and abandons the table.

Before she exits the dining room, she pauses at the doorway. "Charles?" Her voice cracks, too soft for the harsh lips it falls from.

"Hmm?"

She's staring out into the distance, in a daze. She doesn't respond for a few seconds. "Tell her Happy Birthday for me."

II.

THE STACCATO BEAT OF CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN HEELS echo against the floor of the private Randevu bathroom as Charlotte enters, placing her grey Birkin bag on the edge of the sink. She withdraws a small, orange bottle and twists off the cap to shake it into the palm of her hand. A thick, white bar is thrown into her mouth when she knocks her head back and she cups her hand underneath the running faucet to wash it down with water. She grips the side of the sink as her dark hair falls over her shoulders and covers her face. She lingers for a moment before applying a second coat of red lipstick that bursts against her perfect white teeth. She checks herself in the full length mirror near her, assuring herself that she appears flawless even though she feels as if her flesh is sliding off her bones. She wears a white Egrey loose button down, a black Alexa Chung pencil skirt that hugs her curves, and paired it with a nude Theory Oaklane trench coat in the shade identical to her heels.

There's a rapping at the door that knocks her out of her daze and she quickly grabs her possessions. She takes one last look at herself in the finger-stained mirror, tucks her hair behind her ear and runs her index finger over the outer-layer of her lips to catch any extra lipstick. She apologizes as she exits, her eyes scanning the tables for her best friends. The restaurant has large windows that allow natural sunlight to bask the room, creating a soft and warm ambiance. Large chandeliers hang above wide tables with eggshell table cloths and hardwood flooring. Randevu, currently the hottest place to eat lunch, is a high traffic restaurant filled with light chatter. There's a large wait by the hostess stand, but Charlotte's party just had to walk in. One of the many perks of being a powerful person in Manhattan.

She catches the eyes of her three girlfriends: Angelica, Katherine, and Tiffany. They are three girls she's known since high school and then pledged with in Alpha Sigma Phi at Vanderbilt. These four gathered together turn some heads from the fellow gentleman nearby, but they are too wrapped up in each other to even take notice. Angelica, who had been practically starving herself to fit back into the Givenchy dress she's wearing, pauses the conversation she's having with the girls to wave Charlotte over. She had been in hiding for the last couple weeks after she gave birth to her first child, wanting to lose the baby fat before being seen in public. The only way the girls were able to see her was if they visited her at home. She had sold her interior decorating company for her new family and became a stay at home mom at the wishes of her husband. She tucks her short blonde hair behind her diamond earrings with one hand and picks up her cosmopolitan with the other. She told the girls that a *little* alcohol in the breast milk made the baby sleep better.

Katherine holds the menu before her as she listens to Angelica speak, her light brown eyes moving slightly to a well dressed gentleman that looks at her from the other table. While her parents call her by her birth name Katarina, Katherine legally changed her name when she turned eighteen and washed away all things that are connected to her Latina background and upbringing. Wanting to be like everyone else and assimilate, Katherine always straightens out her black curly hair and listens to reggaeton in a low volume in the privacy of her home. She wears a brown, sleeveless Barney's fox fur vest, a fitting, burgundy long sleeve Fendi dress, and black Casadei techno blade thigh-length heel boots.

Tiffany plucks the olive from her martini with her perfect manicured fingers and drops it in her mouth. Arriving during her lunch break from her law firm, she wears a black and white checkered Versace asymmetric blouse, white Tom Ford tab front creased dress pants, and black Gucci pearl heel leather pumps. Her iPhone vibrates constantly in her hand, pink-cherry blossom nails flying across the touch screen keyboard with each alert.

Charlotte hears Angelica still speak of her baby when she arrives, in which she was hoping the conversation would've died when she returned. She hangs her coat and bag on her chair as she sits down, reaching for the gin and tonic that she asked the girls to order her.

-- No, Stu is actually such an intelligent baby. I know all parents say that about their children, but it's true." It took every fiber of her being to not roll her eyes. She opens the menu and flips through the pages in hope to avoid the discussion. She's starving and knows her friends are, too -- which is why she is thankful when the waiter arrives at the table. She finishes her drink as her friends order and Katherine, who sits beside her, judges silently with a short stare when Charlotte hands the glass to the waiter and asks for another.

"And what would you like to eat, Miss?"

Charlotte runs her finger down the glossy paper and clicks her tongue. "I'll take the, uh ... garlic ginger chicken with brown rice and roasted vegetables." She closes the menu and hands it to him. She's waiting for the xanax to kick in before she has a meltdown. The urge to take the fork and stab Angelica in the neck is getting overwhelming, like an itch that she can't scratch.

The girls fall into a different conversation about a fashion party that Dolce & Gabbana are hosting next week, but Charlotte zones out; indifferent about an event that would be filled with everyone who is as empty as her *'friends'*. In the outside world, these three women were her closest relationships, but in reality, they knew nothing about her. Sitting in this restaurant is such a facade, dripping in designer clothing and surrounded by high class citizens. She often fantasized about choking Katherine and ripping Tiffany's eyes out, but never acted upon it. This is untouched territory. This is the cover she slips into every day -- as if her body is not her own, but a costume that she wears and hides behind. She feels foreign to everyone she associates with and alters her veil to adapt to the life she simply exists in. To the idea she created. She doesn't move much in her seat, her form feeling heavy as if cement had been poured down her mouth and filled her body.

"Oh!" Katherine exclaims and reaches into her black Louis Vuitton Cluny Epi shoulder bag, snapping Charlotte out of her daze. She slams a copy of *Forbes* magazine on the table and points to the cover -- a photo of Charlotte in a slicked back bun and her arms crossed over her chest with a soft smile and the words "**AMERICA'S RICHEST WOMEN**" written in bold below. "I went to go get this month's Vogue when I saw this!" Tiffany and Angelica lean forward to get a visual of the publication. "Why didn't you tell me that you were mentioned for being declared one of the best surgeons in the city?" The girls' eyes widen as they look up at Charlotte, who feigns embarrassment and humility. "You've broken records. You're not only the first female to become Chief of Surgery at one of your hospitals, but also the first female to be CEO of your family's foundation and hospitals. *Successfully.*"

"We have to celebrate! Congratulations!" Angelica says excitedly as she clasps her hands together. Charlotte can't help but love the attention she is receiving. Her mother's birthday had poured such a dark shadow of the day, she had forgotten about the issue being released today. She pretends she hadn't already indulged herself in the magazine and flips through the well-written article. The xanax

starts to kick in and overlaps the high she has from the recognition. Charlotte hands the paper back to Katherine, but she waves it off.

"Keep it. Hang it up in your office later."

"How about we have a celebratory dinner at Don Georges on Friday?" Tiffany adds, eyes and hands glued to the phone she types on.

"This Friday? That place books months in advance. Do you think you can even get a reservation this late?" Angelica asks, holding her drink by her mouth before taking a sip.

"I think I know someone," Tiffany replies, flicking her gaze up at Angelica. "Pull a few strings, but I think I can."

"Whose dick are you sucking to get a table Friday night at one of the hottest restaurants in New York?" Katherine jokes as she props her arm up on the back of her chair and crosses her legs.

Tiffany laughs and playfully hits her friend's hand. "It's actually a female."

"I didn't know you were a box muncher," Charlotte banters as the waiter arrives with her refill. She thanks him and laughs into her drink. Tiffany scoffs and shakes her head, whacking Charlotte's arm with the fabric napkin that decorates the table.

"If I get the reservation, are you guys free?" Tiffany questions, slender digits hovering over her phone. "She's an eye for an eye person. If I do this for her, she's going to expect me to do a favor for her, too. But, it's worth it." The girls flip to the planners on their phones, scanning their schedules.

"I'm available. Just as long as that favor doesn't involve me going down on anyone," Katherine quips.

"Well, that changes your usual Friday night plans then," Tiffany teases.

And the entire table erupts in laughter.

III.

THE GRAVEL CRUNCHES UNDERNEATH THE TIRES of Charles's white BMW coupe as he pulls into the driveway of a small grey and white craftsman house. A white picket fence wraps around the home that is decorated with a large Oak tree in the front yard. He checks his face in the rear view mirror, noticing the new scar that stains his flesh; an abrasion that sits on his right cheek. He dismisses it and exits the car with large balloons that read 'Happy Birthday' and pink tulips. He walks to the entrance with sweaty palms as he comes down from his cocaine high -- itching for another hit. He unlocks the door and peaks his head in. "Hello?" Silence. As he steps inside, a woman dressed in blue scrubs with wavy light hair and fair skin descends the stairs with a laundry basket in her arms. Charles smiles at her and plucks a tulip from the bouquet. "Good afternoon, beautiful." He pecks her cheek. She takes the flower and blushes.

"I have to finish this last load. She's upstairs waiting for you."

Donna, his mother, rests peacefully as he enters her bedroom. "Hello Mother, it's me, Charles." The monitor beside her beeps back at him, the only sound that echoes the large room. "Happy Birthday." He ties the balloons to the edge of her bed and dumps the old tulips from the vase to replace them with the new ones he brought. "I have pink ones this time. I don't think the yellow did you justice."

He pulls a chair to sit by her side and places his hands over hers, the coldness from her skin shocks his warm palms. "Charlotte wishes you a Happy Birthday. She couldn't visit this year, she had work. But, don't worry, one day she will." He knows he's lying and that his sister hated the living shit out of their mother, but he doesn't know if he's trying to comfort her or himself. "Charlotte is doing a fantastic job of running The Billings Foundation and hospitals. You'd be proud." Charles pulls out a small clear vial filled with a white powdered substance from his inner jacket pocket.

"Mother, you remember Charlotte and I's tenth birthday?" He asks, tapping the opening of the vial on the small indent between the bottom of his thumb and forefinger. "It was the last time you baked a cake. Chocolate cake with chocolate frosting. The whole house smelled warm. You remember that?" He takes a hit and wipes his nose violently, sniffing the remains that collected in his nose hairs. "And you got us candles and sang us Happy Birthday. Father was on a business trip and couldn't be there." Another hit. "It felt like we were a family for the first time in a while." Another hit. He rubs the remaining from his hand into his gums.

Charles stops telling the story — the following events he liked to exclude from his memory. Maybe because he always hoped that his mother would always be... *motherly*. As they cut into the cake, Donna believed that while she wasn't looking, someone poisoned the dessert. Her children told her they watched it bake the whole time and that it was impossible, but she went into a screaming rampage, grabbed the cake, and threw it off the balcony. The twins were drowned in presents the next day when their father, William, returned. But, expensive toys never replaced the void.

A light knock at the door causes Charles to quickly put his stash back in his pocket and brush his nose. The nurse walks into the room and approaches him.

"I've missed you, Robin," he lies, rising off the seat to stand before her.

"You could've called," she replies softly, still holding the flower and bringing the pedals to her nose.

"I did," he lies again, snaking his arm around her small waist.

"Charles..." She starts, taking a step back.

"You don't miss me, baby?" He slides his arm around her again and buries his face in her neck. "I've missed you so much." He leaves kisses along her jawline and pulls her body against his. She melts underneath his touch, dropping the plant and settles her hands on the small of his back. "You smell so good. Feel so good. Oh God, I've missed you." His voice falls to a whisper as his hand slips underneath her top. She quickly places her hand over his to stop him. He looks at her, confused.

"Your mom is right there."

"So what?"

Her lips quiver and hesitate for a response. She didn't know how to reply.

He pushes his hand past hers and grabs her breast, groaning at the touch. He's erect, his pulsing length against his leg.

"Charles, wait."

He sighs, annoyed with her resistance. His other hand grasps the hold of her neck into his grip. This doesn't cause fear out of her, instead it turns her on and she emits a moan. She grabs his bulge into her hand and bites down on her lower lip. "Now will you stop fucking talking?" She nods, whimpering. He kisses her hard, his hand moving from under her shirt to down her pants. Leading her by her throat, he tosses her onto the foot of the bed and beside his mother. She gives him a perplexed look, nearly appalled. His mother's toes are just inches from her head.

"Charles--."

He shoots her a look, pausing as he unbuckles his pants. She falls quiet, reaching to remove her own pants. His dark demeanor diminishes and he pulls her by her ankles to get her closer to him and to the edge of the bed. He spits on his hand, climbs over her and slips between her warm folds. She moans and he wraps both hands around her neck. He doesn't take his time, advancing into a fast pace within seconds. She grasps his wrists and he knows he's gripping too hard but he doesn't care. The coke runs through his system and he's on his high, closing his eyes and thrusting violently. Robin is gasping for air, her face changing colors. Right when she's light headed and thinks she's about to pass out, he pulls out and ejaculates on the sheets.

She coughs, fighting to catch her breath and trembles in fright. Without looking her way, he picks up his pants and tosses a thick wad of cash on the bed.

"That's this week's payment. And a little extra for any hassles."

And he's out the door.

IV.

A SOFT MURMUR OF VOICES fades into the background of the small, dim lighted Carlo's Italian restaurant. Though not usually packed this late in the evening, every table is occupied and Charlotte sits alone in the back left corner of the room. This place is a favorite of hers -- she knows the owner and the food is phenomenal. Adjusting the large, gold Gucci round-frame reading glasses that sit on her nose, she reaches for her wine glass and takes a large gulp. The candles illuminate the pile of papers that sit beside her dinner with her iPad balanced at the edge of the table. She picks up her pen and copies something down from the screen. The writing utensil is then discarded for the fork she dips into her pasta and eats. She visits the restaurant often because it consisted of the working class and no one from her *world* would ever visit this hole in the wall. She can hide the Billings name within these four walls.

Her long hair is tied into a large, neat bun that sits on her head. She's snuggled in a beige Barney's cashmere oversized turtleneck sweater that she paired with black Prada straight-leg trousers and black Manolo Blahnik velvet pumps.

A waitress arrives at the table to fill Charlotte's glass and she thanks her, not looking up from the stapled packet of paper she reads from. "Are you waiting for anyone?" She asks, motioning to the menu that is placed across from Charlotte. She tears her eyes away from the reading and lowers it down, looking at the waitress from the space above her glasses. The girl is new. She's never seen her here before.

"No, I would never ruin dinner," Charlotte replies with a slight smile, extending her arm to grab her wine.

"Really? I just honestly thought you were too beautiful to eat alone."

The glass pauses by her lips and Charlotte looks at her, again. The waitress is in her early twenties -- twenty five max -- with small, tight curly brown hair and large brown eyes. She can hear the slight mid-western accent that slips between certain words when they escape from her mouth. She's not from around here.

"No such thing," Charlotte replies before drinking from the glass.

"If you say so." The waitress's eyes falter to the paperwork laid before her. "You're someone important, aren't you?"

Charlotte places her glass down.

Charlotte breathes out a laugh as her eyes falter. "I wish," She lies and shifts in her seat, moving her gaze back to the waitress. "I'm an editor," she adds. "I make sure facts are checked out and things are written correctly." The waitress nods and Charlotte doesn't know if she's actually interested or pretending to be. For all she knows, the woman could be acting and playing a false role like she is.

"So, what's the story about?" she wonders.

"I'm still in the middle of it. I'll be able to tell you when I'm done," Charlotte responds, lifting the paper back up. The waitress takes this as a cue to leave the scene, but Charlotte gently touches her arm before she's too far. "What's your name?"

"Leighton." She lets go and returns to her work. Leighton parts her lips as if she's about to speak but stops herself and walks away to return to her job. Charlotte drums her nails against the tablecloth as her eyes scan the sheets, grabbing her fork and finishing her pasta before it gets cold. Gradually, the

restaurant starts to clear up and she soon realizes she's the last customer. Charlotte places her hand over the mouth of her glass when Leighton arrives for a refill.

"That's it, thank you. I have to get home."

Leighton places the bottle down on the table and drops into the seat across Charlotte. She pauses as she puts away her belongings into a black and tan leather Burberry banner tote, her gaze moving to Leighton. Her reading glasses are placed into its case and tucked into the bag, her eyes never leaving the younger woman.

"You're not going to get in trouble?"

"We're closed." Leighton leans her head back and drinks the rest of the wine in the bottle.

"Then, how come no one has kicked me out?"

"I was told you know the owner." She drags her thumb under her bottom lip to wipe off the wine that missed her mouth. "I knew you were someone important."

Charlotte tucks a loose strand from her face to behind her ear. "Alicia is an old friend of mine."

"Lucky you. I don't think she likes me."

"Alicia?" Charlotte feigns her ignorance, as if she doesn't know that Alicia is a neurotic bitch.

"Yeah." Leighton leans back into her chair. "She yells at me more than anyone else."

"Maybe you're just not good," Charlotte teases, rising from her seat. Leighton laughs and runs her slender fingers over her thick hair. Her curls bounce and wave over her shoulders. The alcohol hits Charlotte the second she stands, but she grabs the chair to hide it. She slips into her black asymmetric Alexander McQueen wool and cashmere coat and balances her bag on her forearm.

"You never told me what the story was about," Leighton adds.

"I guess you'll have to catch it when it's published."

"You're no fun," she *nearly* whines. Charlotte shakes her head as she dips her fingers into her black leather Balenciaga wallet and slips a fresh hundred dollar bill under the wine glass.

"Keep the rest as a tip." She heads out the door.

The crisp, bitter chill of the New York City wind blows across Charlotte's cheeks the second she steps outside. She pulls a cigarette from her white Ugo Cacciatori cigarette case that she keeps tucked in her coat and cups the flame to light it. As she walks, she hears a familiar voice behind her say, "Wait!" She turns around to see Leighton putting on her coat and running to catch up. Charlotte takes a long drag and exhales the smoke through her nose.

"Let's go to the bar around the corner." Charlotte pretends to think twice about her invitation, lifting her left arm to look at her Baume & Mercier alligator-leather watch with a pregnant pause. "Just one drink," she begs.

A female voice appears from thin air, only audible to Charlotte, and speaks grimly. "You know you want to," the voice purrs. Charlotte flicks her gaze to the form that speaks and stands behind Leighton; body and face enveloped in darkness -- moonlight reflecting over vibrant waist-length silver hair that dances in the breeze. Thin heels click against the pavement as it paces towards Charlotte and flashes white teeth, a stark contrast against charcoal black lips. Cerulean irises peer from the shadow and stare into Charlotte's.

"I have an early meeting," Charlotte lies, giving the impression that she is speaking to Leighton when her eyes are locked on her *friend*. Long slender fingers drum over Charlotte's shoulder as it slithers behind her. It speaks again, lips hovering over her ear lobe as it squeezes her arm with its other hand.

"It's only one drink," the form and Leighton say in unison.

Charlotte ashes the cigarette and locks eyes with Leighton. "One drink," she replies firmly.

Live jazz plays softly throughout the nearly-vacant underground bar from the stage in the back. The room bathes in a magenta and blue glow that stains their skin and clothes. Leighton sits in a small booth waiting for Charlotte who stands by the bar and orders the drinks. When they arrive, she reaches into her pocket to pay the bartender and when his back is to her, inconspicuously drops a white pill into the mojito. The liquid bubbles as it diffuses and by the time she's at the table, it completely dissolves within the drink.

Charlotte holds her cosmopolitan in the air. "To new people."

Leighton clinks her glass against the other's. "To new people." Charlotte barely takes a sip out of hers and watches Leighton consume nearly half of her drink.

"How long have you been working at Carlo's? I didn't see you there last week."

Leighton nods, swishing the straw against the ice. "It's my fifth day."

"Did you just move to New York?"

"About a week ago."

"All by yourself?"

"Uh-huh. I got tired of Indiana."

"In love with New York City life, hm?"

"I'm an artist."

Charlotte stops herself before she rolls her eyes. Everyone calls themselves one, but don't earn the title. "Music?"

"Painting."

Charlotte's eyebrow spikes up in interest. "You should show me a painting sometime."

Leighton's eyes dart to the stage as she sighs. "I've been working so much, I don't have the time. Or the funds -- art supplies are expensive."

Charlotte breathes out a light laugh and twirls her glass in her hand. "And let me guess, your job -- you hate it."

Leighton's eyes falter in embarrassment and she sips her drink to buy time. "I wouldn't say I love it."

"Then, why don't you leave it?" She asks, angling closer to Leighton. "Just tell them 'fuck you'."

She laughs and shakes her head, lifting her eyes to meet Charlotte's stare. "I have bills."

"There are so many jobs here in this city."

"Yeah, you think I could get a job where you work?" She asks in a flirtatious tone.

Charlotte flashes a slight grin. "Oh yeah, I'll make you work for me."

Leighton's gaze moves from Charlotte's eyes to her lips. "And what would you have me do?" Her voice drips with lust, causing a rise out of Charlotte.

Charlotte leans her head closer, her mouth hovering just centimeters from Leighton's. "I don't think you'll be able to handle it," she drawls.

Leighton closes her eyes tightly and places her palm on her forehead. She opens her eyes again and blinks a few times, her sight blurry and then it comes back into focus.

"You okay?" Charlotte feigns concern, wrapping her arm around her shoulders.

"Yeah," she answers breathlessly. "I haven't been sleeping much." Leighton's eyes weaken; lids appearing heavy. "I'm not feeling well. I think I need to..." she drifts off and her voice falls to a whisper. She lays her head on Charlotte's shoulder and rolls in and out of consciousness. Charlotte leaves a crumpled twenty on the table and practically drags Leighton out of the bar. "She's a lightweight," she tells the concerned bystanders. "I have to take her home." The silver-haired form from earlier holds open the door as they leave and extends its arm to hail a taxi.

"Now what would you do without me?" It says.

The last thing Leighton remembers is the yellow blur of a cab and Charlotte getting in the car with her.

V.

THE VIBRATIONS OF BURSTING MUSIC HUMS through Charles's bones -- and he swears when he closes his eyes, he is alone for just that moment. There isn't anyone or anything around him but the music. A place where he feels nothing, a place where the music never ends. Nothing is real. Nothing matters. The past never happened and the future is nonexistent. The music starts to feel far away, as if in the next room.

Someone accidentally bumps into his arm as they pass and Charles snaps into reality and the music floods back in. He rubs his eyes and blinks a couple times, taking in his surroundings. Blue lights flicker over his face as the strobe lights illuminate the club. The moving images became clear and he could see everyone dancing to the beat. For a split second, he can't recall where he is. It comes rushing back to him; some buddy's birthday. *Or was it a friend of a friend?* He can't remember. He leans off the lounge chair and reaches for a glass on the table before him, realizing that it's empty when he picks it up. Charles sighs and rises, heading to the bar for another drink.

It takes a couple times, but Charles finally grabs the bartender's attention. As he waits, a shiver runs down his spine and he searches to find lingering eyes. He turns his head to his left to make eye contact with a man. He's about Charles's age, but slightly taller and dressed in a royal blue button down that exposed his chest and golden chain. The shirt is too tight, purposely worn to show off his muscles. He smiles at Charles and he returns the gesture, half-lidded eyes running over The Stranger's body. The Stranger reduces the space in between them by pushing himself off the bar and walking to Charles. Charles's eyes never leave his. He doesn't even notice the bartender placing his glass beside him. The Stranger takes a sip of his own drink and bends forward to place his lips near Charles's ear.

"Wanna dance?" His voice sends the small hairs on the back of Charles's neck to rise. A grin tugs the corners of his mouth in response and The Stranger pulls him off to the dancefloor. Charles snatches his glass off the counter and instantly empties it as The Stranger wraps his arms around him. The alcohol burns his throat and stomach, but Charles is too focused on The Stranger to realize. Hips to hips and chest to chest, the two grind against each other to the rhythm. Perspiration forms along their foreheads and neck as they dance, the two out of breath within minutes. Charles can't look away from this man, his own hazel eyes staring into amber ones. He runs his hands through the other man's hair, back, and arms. They're pressed tightly against each other but Charles, though impossible, wants The Stranger closer to him.

Charles places his forehead against The Stranger's, lips hovering over his. The Stranger slides his hand up to Charles' jawline and smashes his mouth over his. Charles is frozen, his spine frigid in his body. His eyes close and he relaxes, kissing him back. But seconds later, Charles detaches himself from The Stranger and the welcoming countenance is replaced with anger. Placing his hands on The Stranger's shoulders, he shoves the young man -- *hard*. "I'm not a fucking faggot!" Charles exclaims. Confusion washes over Charles -- realizing he is hard, but is fighting something he is craving. The Stranger takes a step towards him and without thinking, Charles knocks his arm back and punches him in the stomach. The Stranger stumbles back and hunches over from the hit, his arms covering his abdomen.

He chokes when he tries talking again and he clears his throat. "I'm a real man!" His voice cracks. When those words roll off his tongue, he hears his father's voice even though he knows it escaped from his own mouth. Frustration fills Charles and he wants out from the dancefloor and everyone around him. The music is suddenly too loud and the lights too bright. He shoves his way between people and into the bathroom, which he is thankful is empty. Tears line the rim of his eyes as he paces back and forth, seething through his teeth. He talks to himself, rubbing the back of his neck and closing his eyes. "Stop fucking crying, Charles." He hears William echo against his skull. "Are you a real man or a little boy? Stop fucking crying you little bitch." He flinches even though he is alone. "Stop being a little bitch. Be a man." He places both hands on the sides of his head and uses his arms to cover his face. He's silent as his pace stops and his breathing calms down. He reaches into his jacket and pulls out the same vial as earlier. He throws his head back as he takes a hit off his hand and rubs his nose. He tosses the empty container and groans, hungry for more.

The bathroom door opens and he jerks his head to the entrance and there he stands -- The Stranger. Charles looks at him, The Stranger stands still. He takes a cautious step towards Charles, warm eyes concerned about him. They stare at each other in silence until Charles strides forward and grabs the other man's collar, colliding his mouth with his. He parts his lips and slips his tongue into The Stranger's mouth, moaning at the warmth. The Stranger drags his mouth to Charles's neck and sucks on the tender skin. Charles pins him against the wall, the grip on his shirt tightening. The Stranger wastes no time in unbuttoning Charles's slacks and dropping to his knees. Charles intertwines the young man's hair in his fingers, tugging and pushing as he thrusts in The Stranger's throat. "Fuck," he groans, hanging his head back. *Why was this the best head he ever received?*

"Holy shit," he grunts as he cums in The Stranger's mouth, his entire body shaking as he does. He has to catch himself and place his palm against the wall as his shoulders twitch. The man wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and rises off the floor. Before Charles could gather himself, The Stranger heads for the door.

"Wait," Charles pleads.

But, he steps out into the darkness and the music swallows him whole.

VI.

“**YOU DON’T HAVE TO GO SHOPPING** with me if you don’t want to. I’m not forcing you,” Charlotte says teasing her brother, playfully bumping her elbow into his ribs. They pause on the southwest corner of Broadway and Prince, waiting for the light to change so they can cross.

“The problem isn’t the shopping,” Charles quips. “It’s how *long* you take.” Charlotte rolls her eyes as they walk across the street and into the spacious Prada store. They are immediately greeted by a sales representative with open arms.

“If it isn’t my favorite set of twins,” the man says with a large smile. His long locks are pulled back into a sleek bun, accentuating his striking cheekbones and jaw. He looks as if he should be modeling the clothing, not selling it.

“Zachary!” Charlotte beams, mirroring his smile. She leans in to press each of her cheeks against his in a double kiss. “How much I have missed you.”

“Do you mean me or the clothes?” Zachary jokes before waving at the closest employee near him. “Get me two glasses of Dom.”

Charles, who already had a couple of bourbon glasses prior, raises his eyebrows at Zachary. “I need to come shopping with you more often,” he tells his sister as they are escorted to a small private section. She waves him off as she grabs her flute. “Just help me find a dress for Friday.”

Through several colors and patterns and fabrics, Charlotte tries on different dresses from the season. Her brother, who has her own identical taste, agrees with her on the same outfits. But, the last one, Charlotte picks out, is the winner. In a red pussy-bow silk crepe de chine blouse, red and white striped ribbed-knit midi skirt, and powder-pink logo-appliquéd textured-leather pumps.

She views herself in the large mirror, pretending to be unsure, but is actually checking out her body. Her eyes, her skin, her chin, and her hair -- she’s *stunning* and she knows it.

“That’s the one,” Charles says, extending his arm out with his glass in hand, spilling some droplets on the floor. As she rips her gaze from her narcissism, she locks eyes with a gentleman who is admiring her, too. He holds a button down in his hand and stares at her long, thin legs. His eyes rise and lock with hers. Now caught in the act, his face turns red as he turns on his heel to focus back on shopping.

“Are you sure?” She asks, flicking her light irises to her brother. “It needs to be sexy, but classy.”

“Then wear a shorter skirt,” Charles chortles. She rolls her eyes and heads back into the changing room. She hangs up the blouse and skirt as it slips off her olive porcelain skin, glancing at her body in the mirror once again. Though *perfectly* thin and fit, she grabs hold of the skin on her stomach between her thumb and forefinger. “I need to do a cleanse soon,” she tells herself. “And up my cardio. I will *not* get fat.”

Charles snatches the curtain behind her and causes her to jump in her stance.

“Jesus, Charles, what the *fuck*,” she whisper-sneers as she turns to face him. He glazes over her body -- her flat stomach, her small waist, her perky breasts that sit perfectly in her bra, her thong that exposes her plump cheeks in the mirror behind her. She places her hands on her hips and glares at her twin. “Charles, close the *fucking* curtain.”

He steps into the room and obliges, striding towards her. “I’m getting hungry. Let’s go to Perrine’s. I’m craving lamb chops.”

"Fine, just tell Zach to ring this up."

"I want to do a line real quick."

Her hands fall to her sides. "In here?"

"*Duh.*"

She turns to grab the clothes she came in with. "Just hurry before people see us both in here and start talking."

"What?" Charles asks as he takes out a small plastic bag from inside his jacket. "It's not like I haven't seen you naked." He says it with a sly smirk that Charlotte knows he's wearing but doesn't have to look at him to know it. She can hear it in his voice.

"Just take a hit and leave, *Charles.*"

"There's no place for me to make the line, *Charlotte,*" he retorts, mimicking the same tone she said his name with. "Let me do it on you, for old time sakes."

She sighs heavily, but doesn't give up a fight. She complies and lies across the small bench. He kneels down and sprinkles it across her bare stomach. Charlotte looks up at the ceiling, then flicking her wrist to look at the time on her watch. Charles ignores her and holds one nostril with one hand to inhale the coke through a rolled one hundred dollar bill from the other. He rubs his nose and runs his tongue across her abdomen to catch the remaining grains. She jolts up from the warmth of his mouth, but doesn't swat him away.

"Jesus," she sighs when she stands. Charles rises off the ground and presses his fingers on either side of his nose to pull against the skin, swallowing any that sit in his nose hairs.

"Alright, come on, let's go. I want to smoke a joint on the way." He takes the outfit off the wall and smacks her ass on the way out.

VII.

IN THE SAME APARTMENT TWELVE YEARS PRIOR, Donna Billings poured herself a glass of wine and told “*the help*” (or what she liked to call the maids) that their guests will be arriving soon. With a calculated pace, she walked through the living room and paused at a large vase to straighten out the flowers a few centimeters to the left. Her husband, William, descended the stairs as he spoke on the phone, arguing about a client of his.

The couple was young -- married in their early 20's and became parents before their first anniversary. As he passed his wife, he placed a soft kiss on her forehead and walked off to carry on the conversation in a different room.

“Charlotte! Charleston! Your aunt and uncle will be here soon,” Donna called out from the bottom of the stairs. She took a sip of her drink with one hand and placed her other on the railing. When silence greeted her, she sighed and climbed up the steps. She grabbed hold of the door knob and swung it open, interrupting sixteen-year-old Charlotte as she stood in a silk robe in front of her mirror, holding a dress across her body.

“What are you doing? That’s not the dress I picked out,” Donna questioned as she stepped into the room and closed the door behind her.

“I know, but I think I like this one better,” Charlotte replied. Donna shook her head and strutted into the walk-in closet to come back out with the dress she originally chose. She placed it over Charlotte’s bed and walked up to her daughter. Charlotte turned around and knew not to fight her mother on it -- whatever Mother says; goes. Donna tucked a hair behind Charlotte’s ear and gave her a light smile.

“Wear your hair out,” she demanded. “And wear the Vivier ones I bought you.” She placed the palm of her hand against Charlotte’s cheek and then quickly left the room to tend to the delicate details downstairs. She caught her reflection in a mirror in the hallway and stopped for a quick check; swept an untuck bang back into her bun, applied one more layer of red lipstick, and readjusted her diamond necklace. Donna knew appearance meant *everything*. Especially to William.

She returned to the kitchen for a second glass (the Benzo she took hadn’t kicked in yet) when she heard the elevator *ping* as it stopped on their floor. She faked a large smile and she strode to the foyer. As if on cue, the twins headed downstairs and William’s phone call ended, allowing him to focus his attention on his family and greet his guests.

Allen and Wendy, William’s younger brother and sister-in-law, stepped out the elevator with a white bakery box in hand. “William! Donna! Don’t you two look amazing,” Wendy gleamed, her red curls bouncing on her shoulders. “And Charlotte and Charles. My, you’ve grown up so fast!”

“Wendy. Allen. It’s so good seeing you,” Donna greeted as she hugged them.

“Oh! I bought a pie for dessert,” Wendy added, extending her arm out.

“That’s so sweet,” Donna replied through her clenched teeth as she took the box from her. She turned and handed it to a maid. “Put this in the kitchen. And bring out the hor’dourves.”

“Of course, Mrs. Billings,” she replied.

“You have such a lovely home,” Wendy said as they walked into the living room. “I’ve told Allen how I want a penthouse on the Upper East Side.”

"It's so hard finding one," Allen interjected. His brother made far more money than he did and would never admit that he could not afford a quarter of the lifestyle William had.

"Really? I could help you," William said while he placed one arm around Donna as they sat on the couch. The twins sat beside them and grabbed champagne from the tray as a maid set it down. "How much did you want to spend?" Another tray, this time filled with meats, cheese, bread and fruit, is served from the kitchen. Allen used this to steer the conversation away and turned his gaze to the charcuterie.

"Thank God, I'm starving."

Charlotte reached for the bread but her mother's red digits paused over hers. "Honey, you had enough carbs today. Have a piece of cheese or an apple slice," Donna requested gently. Charlotte didn't even look at her mother, she withdrew herself back into the seat as her brother stuffed his mouth with food.

"So, Charles. Charlotte. How's school? Figured out college yet?" Allen asked to keep the topic away from any financial correlation.

Charlotte took a sip of her drink as Charles responded, "We are thinking either Harvard or Yale."

"Whatever my mother chooses," Charlotte sneered into her glass. Donna attempted to laugh it off but glared at her daughter.

"How about you, Allen -- how is your private practice coming along?" Donna asked, shifting her gaze to him. "Have any important clients we know?"

Allen chuckled and shook his head, popping a strawberry into his mouth to buy time to answer.

"I still have yet to visit, I should just show up one day," William said. Allen shook his head and quickly swallowed the fruit.

"No, no, I am a busy man, just like you, Will. How about we set up an appointment for lunch?"

Little did Allen know, William possessed more power than he appeared to. William knew exactly how the shoddy building looked and how weak his income was. But, he continued to play an ignorant role and faked the smile his brother wore.

"I'll have Gina call you and pencil you in."

Dinner was served just minutes later and laughter filled the dining room. Allen shared stories of when he and William were younger and rebelled against all authority. Wendy spoke of her love of teaching children and Donna, always trying to outshine, bragged about sending "the unprivileged" to school in the first place. William snatched the thunder by gloating about Charles's awards as a pianist and how he would play in the New York Philharmonic Orchestra in the future. Still on the high of his boasting, he praised his daughter on her academic superiority and designer modeling (that her mother forced her into).

Soon enough, dessert was eaten off the expensive china, in the absence of Wendy's pie that suddenly "went missing". Allen and Wendy finished their espressos and bade their farewells, feeling emotionally worse than they arrived.

The twins, drunk off champagne in order to survive the evening, began to head upstairs as the staff cleaned up after them, when they heard their parents bicker in the downstairs bathroom.

"You were definitely hitting on him!" William exclaimed, his voice booming through the door. The maids gathered the remaining dishes into the kitchen. Charlotte and Charles knew what to expect and lingered downstairs for a little longer.

"I was being a friendly host, Will. It really isn't that serious," Donna spoke cautiously, her voice audibly shaking. Charlotte started to head to the bathroom, but her brother stopped her and shook his head. A maid appeared from out of the kitchen and ushered the children upstairs.

"It isn't that serious? I'll show you serious." A sharp slap was followed by a loud thud on the floor.

“William, I’m sorry.”

He seized her dark locks into his tight fist to bring her to feet again and slammed her back against the wall. She squealed as his other hand wrapped around her neck. She clawed at his arm, gasping to catch any pocket of air.

“Is this what you want? This is what you make me do!” He shouted, clenching his grip tighter around her neck. She attempted to utter a “sorry” but couldn’t get it out. He finally let go of her and she fell to her knees, clawing for breath. With one strike, he kicked her in the stomach and squatted down to speak to her. “Clean yourself up and come to bed,” he commanded.

He slammed the door behind him and left Donna to sob silently against the cold tile floor.

VIII.

“SAME TIME NEXT WEEK?” CHARLES ASKS his client as he opens the door for her. She nods as she exits his office and he smiles in return, wishing her a good night. He locks the door and turns back to the large space before him, heading to his desk at the far end of the room. He flicks the light switch off so that the only light glows from the lamp on his desk. As he sits, the chair groans from his weight. He pulls open the wide, center drawer and withdraws a large drawing pad and pencil. He flips through the pages, catching glimpses of dark, macabre illustrations until he stops at his recent, unfinished artwork. A figure, almost human-like, is sprawled across the canvas -- possessing large black eyes and a razor-sharp gaping mouth, as if screaming. His abdomen is perforated; cavernous holes that ooze thick, dark liquid. The details are astounding, from the palm creases in the creature's hands that stretch out to the claws to the organs exposed from the stab wounds in the body.

His hand moves lightly over the paper, careful not to rub the drawing. He pauses for a moment to pull a cigarette from his pocket and place it between his lips. He lights the end and looks down at the pad, admiring his work. Though he has light-colored irises, for a second they appear to turn dark as they stare into the abyss of the creature's eyes. He leans back into his seat, the cigarette sitting between his fingers.

Something in him changes -- his jaw tightens, his eyes narrow, his breathing becomes heavier. He shoves the pad back into his desk and turns off the lamp, suffocating the room in darkness.

He hugs his black Fendi lamb fur lapel coat against the night breeze that brushes his warm skin. The streets at night are a vast contrast to the day -- now bare and silent, Charles walks past the only person that sits outside in the cold: a homeless man lying on the bench at the bus stop. The glowing yellow and red neon lights of McDonald's down the block welcomes the young man to purchase cheap food for the less fortunate that he just spotted. He walks back to the man and smells the sour odor that he basks in. Charles sits beside him and extends the paper bag out to the stranger.

"I'm Charles," he introduces himself. The homeless man is too stunned to move or speak. "I hope you're not vegetarian," he jokes, placing the bag on the man's lap. Charles opens up his own bag and removes a sandwich, pulling back the paper and taking a large bite. "What's your name?"

"Henry," the man mumbles as he struggles to open his bag. Dirty fingers grab a handful of fries and shove them into his mouth, a few missing and falling into his open coat.

"How did you find yourself here, Henry?" His mouth is full as he speaks.

He clears his throat and unwraps his burger. "I lost my job."

"And downhill from there?"

There's a pause. "I don't want your pity."

Charles flicks his gaze to look at the man who is eating the food he bought. He throws his own sandwich into his bag and snatches the bag from Henry. Dark brown eyes widen at Charles' actions but he doesn't cower. You can't be weak and survive on these streets. "I guess you won't want my mercy either." Charles rises onto his feet and tosses the bags into the middle of the street. He pulls out his black Prada leather gloves and slips his hands into them.

"Hey!" Henry exclaims. Charles stuffs his hands into his coat as he faces the man, leaning down to make eye contact. Henry folds within himself to create a larger distance, but his back presses against the glass shelter of the bus stop.

"You're a fucking roach," Charles spats, poison drenching his voice. He places his left hand on Henry's shoulder and withdraws a nine inch switchblade from his pocket. Henry opens his mouth to scream but the serrated knife penetrates his stomach. Charles swiftly pulls it out and punctures him in the chest -- then again underneath his ribs and in the hip. Maniacally, he doesn't stop and continues to violently stab him over and over again in the chest and stomach. He throws his body weight into each thrust and blood squirts across his luxury attire and coats his glove. "Fucking pest." A puddle forms underneath the dying man and trails down into the cracks of the sidewalk.

Charles catches his breath as he hovers over the lifeless body, unclenching and clenching his left fist. He sighs, snaps a Tom Ford handkerchief open from his pocket and wipes the blood off the weapon. "Look at you now, Henry," he scoffs, shaking his head. He pulls the lids down Henry's glassy eyes and puts his hands back in his pockets again.

"Too bad," he says to the corpse as he lights a cigarette. He then walks off into the vacant streets, leaving nothing but a trail of smoke behind him.

IX.

A MUFFLED ARGUMENT SPEWS from the thin wall behind the headboard in the Dream Motel that remains almost inaudible over the droning of the obsolete television that blares at the foot of the bed. Charlotte props herself against the upholstered panel with a cigarette poised between her slender fingers. Cheap, pink sheets cover her naked body that her lean leg peaks from underneath. She doesn't blink -- her focus foggy and her mind spaced out to the voice that speaks beside her.

"I love Angelica, but I cannot stand her whining and nagging. She just goes on and on and on about ..." the man drawls with a towel wrapped around his waist. Evan is a late thirties stock broker that has been with Angelica since Vanderbilt and proposed shortly after graduating. They married before they moved to the City and had an affair with Charlotte ever since. He's a tall, muscular man with thick sandy hair that he always combs back. He buttons his shirt as he continues to complain about her best friend.

Charlotte brings the cigarette to her red lips and takes a long draw in her haze. Evan presses his knee into the mattress to lean close to her. She blinks and turns her head to shift her focus onto him, thin smoke drifting from her nose. She almost forgets about his existence and her own presence in the room. He grabs her chin into his hand and hovers his face inches from hers.

"I think you're the one, Charlotte." She almost chokes and a cough erupts from her throat. She rises off her back and presses her palm against her chest. "I'm serious. I don't want her anymore. I want you instead."

"You do realize she *just* had your baby?" He pulls away and sits on the bed with a dramatic sigh. Charlotte takes a last hit and ashes the cigarette in the tray on the nightstand beside her. "Evan. I want to get something through that thick skull of yours." She tugs the sheets to cover her breasts as she maneuvers to face him. "What we are. It isn't real. Nothing about this is real." She pauses when he looks at her. "I don't even care that you're my best friend's husband. I wouldn't care if you were single or someone else's husband." She lifts herself onto her knees to shorten the distance between them. "It doesn't matter." Pause. "Evan ... *you* don't matter." Her voice is cold and drips with venom with each syllable. "You don't matter to me at *all*." She presses her lips near his ear. "You are *nothing*," she whispers. "And will always be *nothing*."

She snatches his hair between her fingers and drops her gaze to the hard-on peaking from his towel. She slips her hand underneath and he groans. She twists her wrist as she slowly pumps his shaft and forces his head back by pulling on his hair. Evan's breath hitches in his throat. "Now, you're going to have me scream so loud that the people next door hear me over their fighting," she demands. When he doesn't respond, she jerks his head back again and he emits a moan. "Okay?"

"Yes," he responds with a trembling voice. The sheet falls off her naked body as she withdraws herself from Evan and lays down on the bed. She parts her legs and locks eyes with his hungry ones.

"Eat." He doesn't hesitate and does as commanded, dropping to place his mouth on her warm center.

Charlotte shudders at the touch and grabs his hair once more. She doesn't hold back and exclaims her pleasure loudly enough that the people down the hall peak out their doors. Back arched and lips parted, she grinds against his tongue. "Right there," she breathes. Her toes curl and she closes her eyes to grasp the full sensation. "Don't fucking stop." Evan grips her small waist and pulls her closer to his yearning mouth which causes her to gasp. She presses her thighs against his ears as her eyes snap open and she arches her back further. "Yes, yes, yes." The build up reaches its peak and she lets out a large cry when she cums into his mouth. She falls back into the sheets and catches her breath, reaching into her bag to pull out another cigarette. She lights it and looks at Evan who wipes his mouth with his towel. She lifts her wrist to catch a glimpse of the time on her watch.

"Now go home to your wife who misses you dearly."

X.

WHEN TIFFANY ANNOUNCED A CELEBRATORY DINNER, Charlotte assumed she meant a few of their closest friends -- not all of Upper East Side. She ditches the Prada she initially bought for the event and enters her party in a Dolce & Gabbana sleeveless floral brocade dress and nude Manolo Blahnik Nadira pumps. Many of their faces strike familiarity in her mind, but they were the ones she encountered at New York City events such as fashion shows, gallery openings, fundraisers, or extravagant parties. They are hollow bodies that devour narcissism and thirst for greed -- just as she does. Their lives revolved around luxury consumerism, what was in season, and what just opened in the city. They thrive on the oppression of the capitalist economy and never question their position in life. And Charlotte is one of them.

When she makes eye contact with just the few that stand up from the table before her, a cold chill washes over her. For the quickest moment, she feels like she's suffocating until her old classmates and doctors that she completed residency with peak from the crowd. Her ego straightens her back and drops her shoulders. She's an empress of a growing empire -- she doesn't need her crown to slip.

A self-indulgent smile spreads across her face and she spreads her arms open as she is welcomed warmly with burstful cheers. "Oh my God!" she exclaims, walking towards her best friends. "You said small!" She places her hands over her heart for dramatic effect. "This is so wonderful, guys." The words flow from her mouth with ease, but leaves a bitter aftertaste against her tongue.

"You deserve it," Angelica says as she hands Charlotte a champagne flute.

"We are so proud of you," Katherine adds.

Tiffany gently places her hand on Charlotte's elbow. "Now enjoy your success. There's a ton of cute men here." The girls laugh and Charlotte mirrors theirs into her glass as she takes a sip.

Her eyes scan the attendance of the party, but is pulled away when someone grabs her attention. "Charlotte. Long time, no see." She remembers that voice.

She turns around to lock eyes with a tall, dark-haired Italian man that wears his black Armani suit as if Armani himself made it *specifically* for him. He grew a beard since the last time she saw him, but he kept it short and gave him this masculine look she never saw him bear. She finds it makes him look sexier -- fitting into his skin and becoming the man she's never seen before. She can tell he's picked up a new habit: exercise. He's larger than she last remembered. He could pick her up easily...

A genuine smile beams from Charlotte's face as she reaches out for him. He places down his bottle of Dom Perignon on the table to give her a hug. "If it isn't Aemilio Valentini! How I've missed you." His parents met hers in college and they'd been friends ever since. Aemilio and the twins were conceived around the same time and thus, grew up together. Summers in the Hamptons, mornings in the country club, brunch trips to Paris, Christmases in Geneva, and weekends in Cabo were just the few things the families did together. Aemilio grew up an only child who yearned for siblings, so he fell in love with the twins as if they were his own. After the *incident* with her parents, the upperclassmen world distanced themselves from her family for a while, but Aemilio and his parents were one of the few that stood around. She playfully slaps his shoulder. "Where have you been?"

"Traveling a lot lately. I got tired of New York," Aemilio says, embracing her into a tight hug.

"Then what brings you here?" She asks when she pulls away and peers up at him through her dark, long lashes.

"Well." His tone drops, his voice soft and almost inaudible through the chatter from the party. He leans his body forward so his mouth is inches from her ear. "I came to see you." The words cause goosebumps to rise up her neck and spread across her body. She steps back to look into his light chestnut eyes, mouth slightly ajar, as if about to say something. Before she can, her brother appears from behind Aemilio with a large bouquet of light pink peonies and a Tiffany-blue box with a silver bow placed perfectly on top.

"Charlotte! You wouldn't believe the traffic here, I'm so ... *wait*," Charles calls out, but stops when Aemilio turns around. "Milio ... is that you?" A large smile tugs the corners of his mouth as he opens his arms. "Holy shit! Come here." As the waitress walks by with a tray, Charlotte takes the last gulp from her glass and swaps it out for a full one.

"It's great to see you, man," Aemilio says when they withdraw from the hug. "I'm glad to see you both." Charles grasps a look at Aemilio, recognizing him underneath the beard he wore so well. His hair was longer, parted down the side and combed back neatly. He *nearly* had a hard-on looking at him. When he hugged him, he felt the muscles that the suit hid underneath. The muscles Aemilio did not have years prior.

"How long are you in New York?" Charlotte asks, her fresh flute now half empty.

"I haven't thought that far yet," Aemilio answers with a sly grin.

"Let's get fucked up while you're here then!" Charles exclaims as he wraps his arm around Aemilio's shoulders. "The bar is this way." He turns to direct him and reaches his free hand out to Charlotte. "C'mon." She giggles and places her hand into his, allowing her brother to guide them.

The night starts off with three rounds of tequila shots followed by Aemilio's bottle of Dom. When dinner is served, they demolish several bottles of red wine just between the three of them. But, since everyone else is either drunk or tipsy up to this point, none of the guests notice. They then sneak off into the bathroom to do some lines of Charles' coke and escape through the back from the party. They hail a yellow taxi to go downtown to the Lower East Side where they hop between different bars and underground clubs. They dance shamelessly with each other -- they know no one from their world would be caught dead around here.

Through the blur of tequila, whiskey, and cocaine, they find themselves separated at a point they don't remember. Was it at Piano's? Or was it outside Pizza Beach? Charles and Aemilio were getting drinks one minute and turned around to see that Charlotte had disappeared. Her phone goes straight to voicemail each time they call and they come to the conclusion that her phone is dead. They search up and down the blocks, but do not find her. They assume that she must have gone home and hop in a cab to head back to The Upper East.

However, when they arrive at the penthouse, it remains empty. "She's a smart girl," Aemilio assures Charles. "I'm sure she's safe. Remember, she used to beat *us* up."

"I'm going to make some coffee to keep us up until she gets home." Charles walks off into the kitchen to prepare an espresso. His hands are shaky from the cocaine as he fails to put the ingredients into the machine.

"Let me help you." Steady-handed, he places his hand over Charles to grab hold of the grinded beans to prepare the drink. Charles's skin grows warm from his touch as it travels up to his cheeks. His eyes fall to Aemilio's mouth, but he does nothing. This is someone he holds dear to him and did not want to ruin what they already had. What if Aemilio isn't into men and it becomes awkward between the two? But, then he sees Aemilio's eyes linger on his lips and he drops the coffee to lean forward. Aemilio hesitates, hovering just inches away, but extends his neck to meet Charles halfway. Impatient, Charles grabs either side of Aemilio's face and kisses him hard. They part their lips and Aemilio slips his tongue into Charles's mouth. Charles moans. They discard their shirts in the kitchen and pants on the stairway up to Charles's bedroom with nothing but their briefs and rush to his bed.

They're like animals, clawing and biting each other. The connective, filthy sex that ignites the room isn't anything like these two have experienced before. They fuck like it's their last day on Earth: loud, rough, and raw. Sheets rip from the mattress, the headboard dents his wall, and somehow the lamp falls from his nightstand and breaks. They fuck on the bed, the floor, against the window, and in his walk-in closet. They collapse in bed; breathless, sweaty, and drained.

Charles falls into a slumber and Aemilio slips away into the bathroom to take a shower. When he gets out, he spots light pouring from Charlotte's open door. He tightens the towel around his waist and peers into her room. A wave of relief washes over him when he sees her standing in front of her mirror. She spots him in the mirror and turns around, gaze flicking over his toned body.

"I can't get this dress off," she whines, turning around to show the zipper on the back. "I need your help." Aemilio chuckles and walks up to her. His hands find the zipper and he slowly pulls it down, resting it underneath her shoulder blade. She parts her lips to speak, but stops when she sees him scan her body with his eyes through the mirror. She relaxes as his warm palm touches her back. He brings the zipper all the way down and drags his hands from her lower back up to her shoulders. Half-lidded eyes watch him, letting him touch wherever he pleases. He kneads his hands into her shoulders and she moans from his contact. He massages into her muscles and her head falls backward, leaning into his caress.

He swipes her long hair to the side and places soft kisses along her neck. "Close the door," she whispers. When he returns, she lets her dress fall to her feet and she steps out of her heels. She guides him to the bed and they fall into her silky, red sheets. They take their time with each other, constantly kissing, licking, and touching every nook and cranny on their bodies. The sex is sensual, lustful, and sultry. Their skins coat with a thin layer of sweat as they move slowly and rhythmically with one another. As if in sync, they orgasm simultaneously again ... again ... *and again*. It's like a drug -- they're addicted to each other and can't stop.

As the sun rises, they begin to fall asleep. Charles turns in his bed and realizes that Aemilio is no longer there. He slips out to look for him, but it doesn't take long to find him naked underneath his sister's sheets. Charles yawns and climbs onto the end beside Aemilio, pulling the silk to cover himself.

All three lie in bed naked and sleeping -- their bodies warm against each other.

XI.

LEIGHTON TRIPS OVER A TREE'S LONG SURFACE ROOTS and falls onto her hands. She pants as she tries to catch her breath and looks over her shoulder to see if anyone is behind her. She quickly pushes herself back on her feet and runs through the thickets that scratch her arms and face. The forest is dark and the only light she can use is the moon's illumination that peers through the tree's thick branches. She slips and hides behind a tree trunk as she listens for the footsteps following her. Only silence greets her.

Charlotte, although methodical and precise, displays a playful side when it comes to her victims. *She likes to play with her food.*

She walks quietly between the trees, a large blade gripped in black leather gloved hands. "Leighton," she drawls out, eyes scanning the forest. "Don't be like that. Come out." Leighton covers her mouth with her hands to stifle the sob that crawls from her throat. Charlotte drags the end of the blade across the bark of a tree when her gaze falls on the shadow that the moon reflects off of Leighton's body.

The sound reveals Charlotte's proximity and causes Leighton to run again. Charlotte laughs, it echoing throughout the vacant woods. Tears block Leighton's vision as she runs and she tries to wipe them quickly, but they continue to rush back along the waterline of her eyes.

Charlotte is enjoying the chase; the high she gets from being the predator coursing through her veins. She catches up to Leighton and drives the knife into her right shoulder blade. Leighton falls to her knees from the attack and cries out in pain. Charlotte pulls it out and Leighton screams again. Charlotte swings her leg and kicks her stomach to have her fall on her back. Leighton covers her abdomen as it throbs in agony.

Charlotte climbs on top of her and wraps her hands around her throat. Leighton fights, kicking and trying to pry Charlotte off of her. But, Charlotte is stronger and so becomes her grip on Leighton's esophagus. Leighton becomes weaker as she struggles, her eyes locked on Charlotte with every second loss of oxygen.

Charlotte watches as she takes Leighton's life, waiting for her eyes to falter and her limbs to drop. Leighton's arms fall to her sides and eyes, once bright, are now vacant. Charlotte cups Leighton's head to look at her face. "My little Leighton," she says softly before leaning down to give her a kiss.

—

A SHARP, ACRID STENCH OF BLOOD WEIGHS HEAVILY IN THE AIR as Charlotte hums to O Mio Babbino Caro that plays softly through speakers across the room. She stands over the lifeless body that lies on a metal sterile table before her. She wears blue scrubs and wields a ten blade in her gloved hand, but isn't in a surgery room in either of her hospitals. She stands in a make-shift surgical room -- covered in large plastic patches that drape over the walls and floors. Her state of the art tools sit in a tray beside her, drenched in dark red blood.

She knows no one will find her here. She hid any and all connections of the cabin's ownership from her name. This is where she brought her victims.

Leighton, or what used to be her, is just a carcass now. Her chest carved open, revealing gaps on where some of her organs once were. The voice from before speaks over the music, "She looks almost peaceful." The form then appears, now much more visible than before. Though the body and voice appears feminine, it is androgynous and dressed in an all-black men's suit. Pale white skin decorated completely in dark grey freckles peers from underneath a large dark hood as it pulls it back, allowing it's long silver hair to fall down over it's shoulders.

The form glances down at Leighton's face and runs it's black one-inch sharp nails through her hair. "She's useful now, at least," it adds as it paces to the other side of the table, it's long black coat flows behind in the air as if in water. It pauses behind Charlotte, watching as she takes the body apart. She does it with accuracy, but doesn't move slowly. Her incisions are clean and smooth.

When she approaches the sternum, her phone rings. "CHARLES" reads back at her from her screen. "Would you bring that to me?" Charlotte asks It and It obliges, answering it and resting it on her shoulder.

"Hello?"

"*Where* are you?"

There's a pause. "I'm at the market, on the line for fresh meat."

"Oh, what's for dinner? What time should I be home?"

She balances the phone on her ear as she grabs hold of Leighton's ribs. "Um ... *ribs*. Seven pm."

"Thank God, I'm starving. I'll be there."

XII.

WHEN THE TWINS FOUND THEMSELVES OBLIGATED TO ATTEND social events such as charity balls or fashion parties, they depart once their photos have been taken and slip out into the night. They hop into their limo and direct their chauffeur to whatever New York City club is buzzing all over Elite. Elite is a social media platform where New York's exclusive class shared their lives in the forms of photos, videos, and thirty second 'highlights', which posted media that disappears after 24 hours.

This helps mold and solidify the life that Charlotte projects onto others. This helps her fit in.

The second a 'ping' notification illuminates across their phones, Charlotte and Charles are on their way to the opening of club RED.

"And how do you know this kid?" Charles asks as he cups a flame at the end of his cigarette. Charlotte lowers her window to allow the smoke to escape and takes the cigarette from her brother's mouth to take a drag herself.

"Ryan runs the PR for the place. You remember him." Charlotte answers as she gives Charles his cigarette back. Her eyes are glued to her screen as she scrolls down the feed of Elite. Images of shared posts of the upper class in the city flood across her phone. "I have to post on Elite about it all." She glances at her brother. "Plan on joining the rest of civilization and finally getting the app?"

"How much longer is the drive, Xavier?" Charles shouts at the driver, avoiding her question.

Xavier turns his head to the right to respond. "We will arrive in about ten minutes."

"Let's open the champagne and make a highlight," Charlotte ushers to her brother. He snatches it out of the ice bucket and slides over the leather seats to get closer to his sister. She extends her phone out to capture a video of both of them. He pops open the bottle and they cheer towards the camera as they fill the flutes. She double taps the screen and a confirmation pops up as it's instantly posted on her page. Charlotte takes a sip from her glass and watches the video once more before discarding her phone into her bag. Charles's pocket vibrates and he withdraws his phone.

"Eve. It's been a while." He says as he presses it against his ear. "Oh, you saw my sister's highlight?" He glimpses her way. "Yeah, we're on our way to, uh...", he snaps his fingers as he tries to remember. He then nods when she responds. "Yes, yes. RED...Oh, you're *already* on your way?" A sly smirk pulls at the corner of his lips. "Then I should see you there soon. Just say my sister's name to get in and we'll be in the VIP room." And he hangs up.

"Who was that? One of your little toys?"

Charles licks his lips. "Something like that."

Xavier drives up to the line outside RED and opens the doors for the twins to step out. They tell him they'll notify upon their departure and to remain close. They hadn't been to this club and after all, do not know if it'll be a flop. Arm in arm, they head up the front of the line where a tall, older gentleman in a red suit stands beside an even taller, broader bouncer. He speaks into the headset,

clearly annoyed with whoever is on the other end. "Figure out a way to get more ice then!" His demeanor completely shifts when he sees Charlotte and a bright smile decorates his countenance.

"Charlotte! Honey! So glad you came." He leans forward to air-kiss each cheek. "And your brother. I forget how hot he is," he whispers into her ear.

Charlotte rolls her eyes and scoffs playfully, "Please don't tell him that."

"Have a great time, babe. You're in Room 1. Take a right and you'll see the stairs to your left. You're right on the balcony."

The club holds up to its name -- completely bathed in a dark red light. Room 1 overlooks the large bar that wraps around the dance floor downstairs. The *regular* people chat, drink, laugh, and dance as Charlotte looks down at them with a martini in one hand and typing quickly on her phone in the other. Charles rests his elbow on the arm of the couch as he sits with a bourbon in hand.

"Do you think they'll care if I take a line?" Charles asks when he takes out a small, clear bag filled a quarter way with coke. Charlotte turns to face her brother and watches him shake the bag lightly over the table.

"Do *you* really care?" She snaps as she lowers herself into the seat across from him. He lets out a humorless laugh and shakes his head, but he leans down anyway to snort it into his nostril. He sighs and knocks his head back, rubbing his nose violently.

As if on cue, men and women dripping in designer enter Room 1 and greet the twins; thanking them for their invite. They welcome them in and gesture to the champagne bottles gifted by the club. A young man, no older than 22 or 23 approaches Charlotte. His sandy blonde wavy hair is parted on the side and ends by his stubble beard.

"Hello, Charlotte. It's good to finally meet you in person." This is Dean, a newly founded underwear model that follows Charlotte on Elite and often comments on her uploaded photos.

She extends her hand and smiles in return. "Pleasure is mine." He shakes her hand but her attention is pulled away when she sees a dark short-haired woman enter the room alone. She wears a red velvet Alexandre Vauthier plunging v-neck dress and struts in Yves Saint Laurent black silver heel patent leather pumps towards Charles. She focuses back on Dean and attempts to keep her smile.

"New York is amazing," he says. Her gaze moves again to watch her kiss Charles and whisper in his ear. "I'm glad I left the South. There's honestly nothing there." Charles's eyes fall onto Charlotte's and they linger for a moment before dropping to the ground. Charlotte shifts to the model droning on about loving the city. He bore her.

"Excuse me," she interjects and pushes past him. She walks up to Charles and, who she assumed had to be Eve, with a forced smile. "Charles, I need to escape from this guy. Please save me." With her back to the stranger, she ignores the girl's existence.

"Glad you're here. You can meet Eve." His eyes move from Charlotte to the woman standing behind her. Charlotte pretends as if she hadn't seen Eve in the first place and feigns shock of her presence as she turns around.

"Eve? Who is this? You've never mentioned an Eve," Charlotte lies as her eyes scan over Eve's body. Eve anxiously tucks a curl behind her ear and meets Charlotte's gaze.

"We'll, I've heard so much about you. It's great meeting you," Eve says excitedly as she extends her hand out. Charlotte looks at Eve's hand and then turns back to her brother.

"Text me if you're taking a cab." She walks off and grabs Dean's hand. She snatches a glass from the tray a waitress walks by with and directs them off to the dancefloor downstairs. Charlotte finishes her drink by the time they descend the stairs and drops it off a passing table before they slip between people to get closer to the center.

She wraps her arms around his neck and presses her hips against his. Dean places his hands on her lower back and moves to the music with her. They grind to the rhythm as they lock eyes, never wavering. On the corner of her eye, she spots the red dress she saw just moments ago. She alters her gaze to Eve and Charles, a few feet away on the dance floor. She presses her back on his chest and rubs her ass against his groin. His fingers press into her hips as he burrows his head in the crook of her neck. Something rises within Charlotte as she watches Eve and her brother and she snatches herself away from Dean, turning to the bar to get another drink. She flashes her *Elite* pass from her phone and the bartender slips out into the back to get Charlotte the bottles reserved for her and her party.

Dean appears from behind, snaking his arms around her waist and drops his lips to her ears. "Where are you off to?" She snags herself from his touch, pulling away from his hold. The bartender returns with an ice bucket of Dom.

"Just leave me be," she replies, snatching the champagne bottle from the bucket. Dean steps to the side and stands in her way.

"C'mon, don't be like that."

"I want to be left alone, Dean." She pops open the bottle.

"Let's go back to dancing. We were having a lot of fun."

She furrows her eyebrows in annoyance and opens her mouth to respond, but her brother's voice comes out instead. "She said to leave her alone." Charlotte looks at her twin, who stands behind Dean. Dean turns around and crosses his arms over his chest.

"I know she's your sister, but mind your business. This is between me and her."

Charles scoffs out a humorless laugh and nods, rubbing his chin. His demeanor shifts quickly -- Charlotte is the only one who catches this and steps aside. He knocks his arm back and punches Dean straight in the jaw. Dean stumbles backwards into the bar and everyone around stops what they're doing and watches in shock. He lurches forward at Charles and punches his cheek, sending him to fall against the audience behind him. They catch him and bounce him back on his feet. Charlotte steps in the middle of it, spreading her arms to keep the distance between them.

"Dean, please leave," she says sternly to him. Dean flicks his eyes from Charles to Charlotte and then huffs off to disappear within the crowd. Charlotte grabs ice from the bucket to put on Charles's

cheek, but he slaps her hand away. He snatches Eve's wrist and marches off to the other end of the party, dissolving between the people.

She realizes she's alone and people are still watching. "Well, the show is over," she snaps and takes her bottle, knocking her head back to take a gulp. Everyone turns away and returns to their previous actions. She slides through the throng to find her brother and make sure he is okay. Charlotte checks the bathrooms, back up to Room 1 to scan below, and the front to find him. It isn't until she steps out the back that she spots him.

He stands across her, leaning against the damp, cold wall of the building as Eve is on her knees (he was even a gentleman enough to put his jacket underneath her). He holds a fistful of her hair as her head bobs forward with each stroke he pumps into her mouth. He locks eyes with his sister, but doesn't cower and continues. She silently walks towards him, her eyes never wavering. She stops behind Eve and slips her fingers into her locks, guiding her head. Charles moans and grips his sister's hands, his gaze now softer than before. Charlotte leans in ever-so-slightly so that they're faces are mere inches away from each other. His breathing quickens and hitches in his throat as he parts his lips.

"Fuck," he groans into the gaze of Charlotte's. She smirks and pushes Eve's throat further. He twitches and moans again. She thrusts Eve's head faster as she watches her brother reach his peak. "Don't stop," he begs. His eyes shut close as he releases himself into Eve's mouth, falling forward to place his hands on Charlotte's shoulders. She smiles as she places her hands over his.

"C'mon," Charlotte says as she buttons her brother back up and dismisses Eve. "Let's go back to the party."

XIII.

"**WHEN YOUR MOTHER GETS HOME**, make sure you help her," their father told them thirteen years ago. "A new baby at her age is very tiring." William had the habit of concealing their mother's depression with her being *tired*. The twins just nodded at their father before he got into the apartment's elevator and pressed the door close. "I'll be home soon." He wasn't even going to be home when the baby boy -- they had yet to name -- would arrive. Once the coast was clear, they both sat in the living room and lit up the cigarettes they would keep hidden in a false, carved-out book above the fireplace.

"Do you think this baby is going to be bothersome?" Charles asked his sister. She shrugged and looked at her brother.

"If he's anything like you, he definitely will be," she jokes and bursts into laughter. He playfully smacked her arm and took a drag. "Maybe it'll make Mother happy. She's been really sad lately."

Charles's gaze fell to the ashtray as he ashed his cigarette. "You really think that would help?" She shook her head as she exhaled the smoke.

"I hate babies, so you're asking the wrong person." The elevator pings and they scurry to open the windows to air out the smell. Charles rushed to the front to greet his mother.

"Hello, Mother!" He peered into her arms to catch a glimpse of his brother. Charlotte followed shortly behind, leaning forward with her twin. He had the same black hair and green eyes as his siblings. He cooed and rubbed his face. The twins fell in love with him at that instant and had this urge to hold him. They reached out to carry him, but their mother looked down at her children, eyes vacant and expressionless. Her gaze caused a coldness to wash over them, as if a winter's breeze ran down their spine.

"I need a bath." She spoke flatly, dragging her body upstairs and to the bathroom. The twins looked at each other in confusion and took a couple strides with their mother but stopped at the steps and followed Donna with their eyes.

"Do you want us to take the baby?" Charles asked. Their mother didn't respond and closed the bathroom door behind her. The twins exchanged worrisome glances and hesitated leaving the bottom of the stairs.

An hour passed and they got worried, so they climbed to the second floor and knocked on the door.

"Uh ... Mom." *Silence*. "Are you okay?" *Silence*.

"I'm coming in," Charlotte added. She looked at Charles and slowly twisted the knob. She pushed the door open but her feet remained planted. Her eyes widened in horror and she brought her hands to her mouth to stifle a scream. Charles stepped inside to view what was before him: his mother sat in a small pool of water beside the large filled tub, where the baby boy floated; unmoving. She sat there, unnerved, in a daze. The mother they knew was no longer present. He rushed to aid his brother, only to hold a drowned corpse in his hands.

Charlotte grasped hold of her mother's shoulders and shouted, "What have you done?" Her mother didn't answer, just gazed at her daughter with an empty look. "Are you going to answer me?!" She screamed as she shook her violently.

"What is going on?" William stormed into the bathroom. They looked up at their father, stunned at that tragedy that just occurred. He stood by the door frame, unsure on how to respond -- unsure on what he was seeing. He didn't move for a while, his eyes locked on his dead newborn and listless wife. Charlotte pulled away from her mother, upset in ways she was unable to express. She looked at her less-than-day old brother that Charles was still holding. Her hands shook as she reached out to the body and Charles placed him in her arms, bloated with water.

"How could you do this to your son?" She whispered, the words hitched in her throat as a sob rose from within her stomach. "What is *wrong* with you?" Charles put his arms around his sister's shoulders as they shook from her cries. For someone who hated babies, she couldn't believe she cared about one she barely knew.

William turned around and left the twins alone to go into his bedroom. They could hear him yell through the walls — a muffled sound of him speaking on the phone. He had to make sure that he got ahead of this and could bury this as much as he could - the Billings image must not be tampered with. It was everything to him.

He was able to convince everyone else that his second son died on his own shortly after delivery and even bribed a judge to keep it quiet; who had sent his wife to a ward under the ruling that she was deranged.

William was ridden with the guilt of his dead son. He believed that if he was there - and not busy with work - he could've saved his son. He attempted to make up for his recent absences by being more present at home and sending others for his business trips.

The twins preferred him to be as removed as he was.

A few nights after their mother was sent away, the twins were cuddled up on Charlotte's bed and watching television when their father interrupted them.

"Charles," he says as he enters the room. Charles gripped his sister's hand underneath the sheets. "Come downstairs." He hesitated and glanced at Charlotte for help, but knew what father says, goes — and climbed out the bed and followed William to the living room.

William walked to the bar cart and handed his teenage son an old fashioned. "Have a drink with your old man." Charles' eyes flicked between the drink and his father before he took it from William's grip. William sat down on the couch and motioned with his head for Charles to sit beside him. "Talk to me - how are you? Are you still dating Stacy?"

Charles took a sip and he sat down, the liquor burned his throat as it dripped down to his stomach. His stomach rejected it and Charles' shoulders winced in response.

"That's good whiskey," his father stated. "Don't even *think* about throwing that up."

Charles would rather be upstairs. His father made him extremely uncomfortable to be alone with. He looked into his glass as he leaned forward, his elbows pressed against his thighs and the drink

between his legs. He didn't want to have a conversation about his life, so he remained silent and kept his eyes focused on the orange slice that bounced in the whiskey.

"Have you and Stacy had sex yet?"

This had visibly upset Charles as he whipped his head to his right to glare at his father. William raised his hands up in defense as the ice clinked against the glass held in his own hand.

"I'm just making sure you're getting laid."

Charles sighed and looked at his drink again. He shook his head and replied, "She's waiting until marriage." Pause. "And I'm fine with that." And he *really* was - sex was not important to Charles at this point in his life. His father's laughter shook against the silence of the large apartment, echoing through the halls and empty rooms. Charles flinched, his right eye winced at the abrupt volume and sound that hit his ears, but took a large gulp of his drink to mask the reaction.

William rose from his seat and grabbed the bottle of whiskey off the bar cart. He shook his head and he turned back to his son. "Charles - you are a Billings. You do not have to wait for anyone or anything." He refilled Charles' glass. "Are you having sex *at all*?"

Charles raised his arm to meet the bottle and watched William fill his glass — his eyes faltered when the question fell from his father's lips. William looked at his son in shock as he poured whiskey into his own glass.

"Charles... are you a *virgin*?" His father jeered. Charles took a long sip to avoid answering the question. "You *are*, aren't you?"

Charles flicked his gaze to William and then back to his drink. He's ashamed. Embarrassed. His friends in school spoke about it and would brag to each other, but Charles did not understand the hunger they had. He had a peckish appetite — sure, but they seemed ravenous: starving for anything to stick their dick in.

"Hold on," he said as he put the bottle down and disappeared into the kitchen. His voice fell into a whisper as he spoke to someone and Charles knew he did not — could not — be around his father sober. So, he gulped what he had left in his glass and took a swig from the bottle. The warmth of the alcohol hit his empty stomach and it was not long before he was tipsy.

Williams returned to the living room and continued to keep things uncomfortable with his son. Telling him vulgar, obscene ways to 'please' a woman and details on the importance to 'dominate' them. Charles tried to find ways to get out of the conversation, but his father had responses every time to keep him. He used his bedtime as an excuse but William pointed out it was Friday and didn't need to worry about school the following day. He said the liquor made him feel lightheaded and his father warmed up the leftovers the maids made from the day prior.

There was a point he wished Charlotte came down and interrupted them, but knew William's short fuse would only harm his sister and was unnecessary for her to suffer with him.

As he was nibbling on the food, the doorbell rang and his father sprang from the couch with enthusiasm — like a child excited for his gift. And in his eyes, she was. Charles peered over as the elevator doors opened, revealing a young woman with deep, long red curls that spilled down her

open back dress. She steps into the penthouse in thin, black stilettos that match her black mink shawl that rests by her elbows.

William took her hand into his and kissed it. "Welcome," he said as he guided her to the living room. Charles wiped his hands and mouth with a cloth napkin as he made eye contact with her blue irises. "Charles, this is Cherry."

She smiled at him. "Nice to meet you Charles." She then noticed how young he looked and her smile weakened. She turned to William. "It's not with him, right? I'm with you."

William walked up to the bar cart to pour more into his empty glass. "It depends." He turned around to look at her and then his son. "I got him for you, but —" He took a sip. "— I might have a taste after."

She started to back up and shook her head. "What is he 16? I can't do that. That goes against my morals." William's eyes darkened and he took a long stride forward, grabbing her firmly by the arm before she could increase space between them.

"Cherry, my love, you're a prostitute — you have no morals." He lifted his grasp from her to reach into his pocket and expose a thick wad of cash. "Because if I offered \$2,000 more, you'd do it, right?"

Her gaze flicked between William and Charles, her expression visibly hesitant on whether to take the cash. After all, if it was not her, he would find someone else. She sighed and looked down at her red nails before meeting William's stare. "Double it," she stated firmly.

William looked at her for a moment before breaking into a smile. "Deal."

Charles jumps out of his seat. "B-b-but, Dad, I have a girlfriend."

"Who doesn't fuck you." He turned to his son. "And what she doesn't know, won't hurt her." He placed his hand on Charles' back and pushed him towards Cherry. He leaned into his son's ear. "Remember everything I told you," he whispered.

Cherry took Charles' hand and smiled warmly. "I'll take good care of you." If it wasn't for the liquor, Charles knew he would be shaking. His stomach was in shambles; twisting and turning into knots. He walked slowly up the stairs and into his room, glancing at his sister who peeked into the hallway as he closed the door.

He wiped his sweaty palms against his pants as he breathing accelerated, his chest rising and falling rapidly. He felt unable to move from the floor, as if his feet were glued to the ground.

"It's your first time, isn't it?" She asked as she sat on his bed. Her shawl falls off her body and onto the sheets. She patted the spot beside her. "It's okay, I will help you." He stood by the door for a moment before walking over and sitting on the bed. He looked down at his hands. With her thumb and index finger, she lifted his head by his chin and turned him to face her. She lifted herself off the bed and lowered the zipper on the side of her dress, letting it fall to her feet and exposing her black lace and garter belt. She reached behind her to unhook her bra and tossed it on the bed.

Charles ran his eyes all over her body and he swallowed saliva to help with his dry mouth. She put her legs on each side of him to straddle his waist and took his hands to cup her breasts. A breath

hitched in his throat. She smiled. She wanted to be gentle and take her time with him so that his first time would be as fond of a memory as she could make it.

UNFINISHED CHAPTER, WILL CONTINUE LATER

