

The Tip of the Tongue

THE TIP OF THE TONGUE

By Allison Moon

CHARACTERS

LYDIA	46. Photographer.
CHARLOTTE	16. Aspirant.
HENRY	50s. Gallerist.

SETTING

New York City

TIME

Present

ACT ONE

SCENE 1

Late night in a smart studio loft. Tall bookshelves hold rows of portfolios, binders, and boxes of slides. A bed. Photography equipment. Doors to a kitchen, bathroom, closet/darkroom and the exterior hall. A white backdrop and photography equipment denote a studio set up. LYDIA enters through the front door, dressed for a gallery reception. She kicks off her shoes, loosens her clothes, and goes to the kitchen to pour herself a deep drink. She opens a fresh pack of cigarettes, but doesn't light one yet. She flips through proofs and crumples one, disgusted. She downs the drink and crumples another photo. A KNOCK on the front door. Lydia doesn't hear it at first. Then...

LYDIA

Yes?

Another knock. Lydia checks her watch.

Yes?

A beat

CHARLOTTE

(O.S.)

Ms. Marks?

LYDIA

Yes?

CHARLOTTE

(O.S.)

It's Charlotte.

LYDIA

And who is Charlotte?

CHARLOTTE

(O.S.)

Me.

LYDIA

We're really getting somewhere.

She opens the door. CHARLOTTE stands in the hall.

CHARLOTTE

Hi. Hello Ms. Marks. I'm Charlotte.

She extends her hand as though she's rehearsed the gesture. Lydia doesn't take it.

LYDIA

So I've heard. What can I do for you?

CHARLOTTE

I'm-- your-- a... potential. I have potential. Mr. Hughes said I could be-- or at least come here and... Potentially be an assistant.

LYDIA

And he recommended you apply for the job at 1am.

CHARLOTTE

I was working the reception. You looked... I saw you leave alone--

(interrupted by cell phone ring. A beat.)

And I have your cell phone.

She hands it over.

You left it on the bar.

LYDIA

Did I?

CHARLOTTE

I didn't steal it. I found it.

LYDIA

Of course.

(answering)

Hi, Henry. Yep, home alright. Thanks for wrapping up without me. Just,

walked straight home. Took my time. No. Yes. I'm fine. I'm fine. Yes.
Sunday. I'm fine. Yes. Bye.

(hangs up)

CHARLOTTE

Congratulations on the closing. Two thousand dollars for one picture.
That's a lot.

LYDIA

If anyone is willing to pay it. Which tonight no one was.

CHARLOTTE

I saw a few red dots.

LYDIA

I don't have it here if that's what you're wondering. I don't get the money
from sales for thirty days. And even then, not in cash.

CHARLOTTE

(Oblivious to the insinuation)

Oh.

Charlotte anxiously wanders.

CHARLOTTE

Why do you keep a separate studio from your house?

LYDIA

How do you know this isn't my home?

CHARLOTTE

You're famous.

LYDIA

Celebrity doesn't come with a base salary. You can be on the cover of
Paper Magazine and still have to go to openings for free cheese and
crackers. Aren't you a little young to be working nights?

CHARLOTTE

It's part of my program. A work-study thing. I earn points, they let me do stuff.

LYDIA

Program?

CHARLOTTE

It's like an after school professional vocational thing. It's not like I'm on the streets or anything. I mean, some of the kids are, but I never.. I just suck at school.

LYDIA

They let you cater cocktails?

CHARLOTTE

I'm not an alcoholic.

(beat)

I can't handle any of the liquor. I do hors' devours. I like it better. The trays are lighter. It kinda feels like you do live here.

Charlotte takes in the space, her gaze settling on the stack of proofs on Lydia's desk. Lydia snatches them and tucks them out of view. She lights a cigarette.

CHARLOTTE

You smoke. Inside. I heard people used to do that a lot. But...

LYDIA

Do your parents not smoke?

CHARLOTTE

Dad did. In the backyard though. He quit. He got...uh...

LYDIA

Cancer?

CHARLOTTE

No... Uh...

LYDIA

Emphysema?

CHARLOTTE

That one.

LYDIA

I don't anymore either. I bought this pack on the way home tonight. I'm not sure why. Nostalgia. I walked nine blocks out of my way to go to a specific-- Does your father know you're here?

CHARLOTTE

He doesn't know anything. About anything.

Lydia holds out the pack to offer a cigarette. Charlotte shakes her head no.

LYDIA

Charlotte. That's an old name for a young woman.

CHARLOTTE

There aren't too many of us.

LYDIA

Not anymore. It was my mother's name.

(A beat.)

I'm sorry to disappoint you, Charlotte, but I think Henry may have gotten the wrong idea. I don't particularly need nor want an assistant.

CHARLOTTE

What about your next show?

LYDIA

What next show?

CHARLOTTE

The one that Mr. Hughes was asking about tonight.

LYDIA

That show is not

CHARLOTTE

Can I change my mind, about the cigarette?

LYDIA

No.

*She stubs her own out then she throws the pack in the
garbage, along with the ashtray.*

But you can have a drink with me.

CHARLOTTE

Water is fine.

LYDIA

You already told me you don't have a drinking problem. Was that true?

(No answer.)

LYDIA

Wine alright? Red?

Charlotte is silent. Lydia exits to the kitchen.

(Off:)

Have you seen my work?

CHARLOTTE

Tonight...

LYDIA

My other work.

CHARLOTTE

Not in real life. But I found, like, all of them, on the internet.

Lydia returns with a bottle and glasses.

LYDIA

I hope not.

CHARLOTTE

Because they're too sexy.

LYDIA

Because they're terrible. I envy artists who came of age in the 70s and 80s. No public record of every shitty snapshot. Photography has gotten too cheap. Every shot is carried to term regardless of how viable it is.

CHARLOTTE

I mean. It seems like you kept a lot of stuff. If you don't mind me saying.

LYDIA

Most every picture I've ever taken. But here, with me. Not for just anyone.

CHARLOTTE

To like study and stuff?

(No response.)

I liked the show.

LYDIA

Which one?

CHARLOTTE

Tonight's. The show.

LYDIA

Oh, you're sweet.

CHARLOTTE

For real.

LYDIA

If you like rock stars putting on airs.

CHARLOTTE

And actors trying to look straight.

Lydia laughs, impressed.

CHARLOTTE

I don't know. I thought you captured the subjects well. Like I feel like I got to know them a little bit as people.

LYDIA

You're a quick study.

CHARLOTTE

What?

LYDIA

You got to know them a bit. That's like the seltzer of art talk. A zero-calorie compliment. "Getting to know someone a little bit" is for dating profiles. Art should leave no question.

CHARLOTTE

Oh.

LYDIA

What exactly do you expect me to learn from me?

CHARLOTTE

I don't know. I mean. I feel like I'm on train tracks. Like my life is the train. And I'm just going along the pre-decided track. And it's like chill and there are trees and shit and it's fine. But then I saw your stuff and it was like I found an entirely different train track running parallel to mine. And that track is going crazy places. Places that I don't even know how to describe, that I've never seen and probably can't even imagine. But I want to go there. Like, I need to go there. And I need to figure out how to get my train to like, jump, to that track. Cause that's the life I'm supposed to be living. Not this one. Your pictures are telling me where I need to go.

LYDIA

So you want fame.

no response

LYDIA

Money?

no response

LYDIA

Access to powerful people because of perceived hipness?

no response

LYDIA

You need a cab.

CHARLOTTE

(defeated)

I can walk.

LYDIA

I don't like the idea of you walking home this late.

CHARLOTTE

Didn't you ever?

LYDIA

It was a different time then.

CHARLOTTE

Worse, they say.

LYDIA

That's probably true.

CHARLOTTE

It's definitely true. There are studies.

Lydia considers Charlotte.

LYDIA

I have a feeling, even if I were to give you cash for a cab, you'd walk home anyway, just to spite me.

CHARLOTTE

Spite?

LYDIA

No?

CHARLOTTE

Some things are just true.

LYDIA

Fewer things than most think.

CHARLOTTE

That's why. I wanted to. This is like, the thing with me. You like. I just. I have an idea in my head, like perfectly framed and lit. Like, I *know* the truth of it. How it looks. I *know it*. And then the pictures I take don't match. They're not coming out right and it's driving me crazy. It's like my total thing. I feel like I'm doing something wrong. But everyone says,

(fakey voice)

“Oh hey, these are so nice. Yay, good job. Wow.” And it's like putting on glasses with no lenses. It like doesn't do shit. In fact it makes it worse, and so I don't know what the fuck to think about the stuff I make.

But, you. Your stuff. The older stuff at least. It leaves no question. It's like, the most true. I feel like you could teach me how to make the things I want... I see... In my head...real.

Long pause

LYDIA

What older stuff?

CHARLOTTE

With those two girls.

LYDIA

The Revel Series.

CHARLOTTE

That. I want... that. I looked for more but--

LYDIA

No.

CHARLOTTE

What?

LYDIA

There are no more.

long pause as Charlotte glances at the shelves

LYDIA

Bring your portfolio over on Sunday.

Charlotte is silent

LYDIA

Do you have a portfolio?

CHARLOTTE

Just SD cards and stuff.

LYDIA

(maybe a little condescending:)

Do you take pictures with a camera?

Charlotte nods.

LYDIA

Then bring those pictures.

CHARLOTTE

It's digital.

Lydia pulls cash from her wallet and hands it to her.

LYDIA

Print your twelve best. Use the rest for a cab.

Charlotte leaves. Lydia glances at the shelves and downs the drink in her hand.

Blackout

SCENE 2

Lydia looks over Charlotte's photos

LYDIA

All your work is self-portraiture?

Charlotte shrugs.

LYDIA

Dedication.

CHARLOTTE

Narcissism.

LYDIA

You think you're a narcissist?

CHARLOTTE

I think, like, neurologically speaking I'm supposed to be.

LYDIA

You look too much at the camera.

CHARLOTTE

Not in this one.

LYDIA

I didn't say "too often." I said "too much."

CHARLOTTE

Okay. I look at the camera "a lot" then. I'm being confrontational.

LYDIA

You're telegraphing.

CHARLOTTE

What?

LYDIA

You're anticipating our gaze. You didn't catch us looking. You set us up.

CHARLOTTE

I don't mean to.

LYDIA

Yes you do.

CHARLOTTE

I don't even know what that means.

LYDIA

You are savvier than you let on.

She taps on a picture.

See, there. You're trying to get the upper hand. You're taking an aggressive stance to prevent being taken yourself.

CHARLOTTE

I don't think photography's inherently violent.

LYDIA

Oh, it is. It's not just the metaphor of photography as penetration, which is obvious. Photography is the violence of freezing time. It's profane to be able to keep a record of a moment in history alive for eternity. Now, though, beholden to the ever amounting record of our existence. There should be things we are allowed to forget.

CHARLOTTE

You're the one freezing time as a job.

LYDIA

Maybe I'm a violent person.

CHARLOTTE

I think there's something beautiful about permanent reminders of

temporary feelings.

LYDIA

You are very young.

CHARLOTTE

Even the shit. I like remembering. These impressions. I mean, literally. They basically dent our brains, don't they? PTSD and whatever. Changes the shape of us. I don't want to forget. Scars, physical or otherwise are proof of, like... life.

LYDIA

What impression are you communicating here?

Charlotte struggles to answer.

...Other than trying to impress someone?

Charlotte snatches her portfolio and starts packing up her things to leave.

LYDIA

If you can't take criticism, you'll never survive.

CHARLOTTE

I can take criticism, okay? I take plenty of it every fucking day. I just don't want to have to take it from someone I just met who is poking at me for fun.

LYDIA

Put down your bag, Charlotte. This path is rife with sadists. Get good at wallowing in everything you hate about yourself, or you may as well quit now.

She puts down her bag

CHARLOTTE

Do you?

LYDIA

Do I what?

CHARLOTTE

Hate yourself?

LYDIA

I have a superb working relationship with my self-loathing.

CHARLOTTE

So then a career for masochists, too.

LYDIA

Best shown in self-portraits.

CHARLOTTE

Can I see some of yours?

LYDIA

My what?

CHARLOTTE

Self-portraits.

LYDIA

No.

CHARLOTTE

Why not?

LYDIA

I don't take them.

CHARLOTTE

None? Can I look at some of your other stuff then?

LYDIA

Why?

CHARLOTTE

Just to see.

LYDIA

Is this about my work or yours?

CHARLOTTE

Won't it help me learn?

LYDIA

Imitate? Yes. Learn? No.

CHARLOTTE

Isn't that how all the great masters learned?

LYDIA

There are no great masters of photography. Our successes are all accidents.

CHARLOTTE

I don't know if I believe that.

LYDIA

You will. Timing, a processing glitch, human error. Or, honestly, usually, the model carrying the weight of it all.

CHARLOTTE

Models can't take all the credit.

Lydia considers Charlotte. She crosses to her shelves and pulls down a portfolio. She flips through it, finds an appropriate image, and lays the portfolio flat on the desk, alongside one of Charlotte's self-portraits.

LYDIA

What's the difference between these two photos?

CHARLOTTE

She's prettier than me.

LYDIA

Well, that's debatable. But also not the point.

CHARLOTTE

The angle of her face.

LYDIA

Impression, Charlotte. Not pose.

CHARLOTTE

She seems, more natural I guess. More caught in the moment.

LYDIA

Precisely. You and I as viewers, we get a thrill when looking upon one unsuspecting.

CHARLOTTE

That's gross.

LYDIA

You like walking through the city alone at night.

Charlotte shrugs.

LYDIA

And you look in the windows.

CHARLOTTE

But not like perving out.

LYDIA

Fine. No perving. But looking. Admiring the way all those little light boxes show different worlds. Stacks upon stacks of tiny universes, each supporting different life forms, different habits, different quirks and realities.

CHARLOTTE

In my building all the bathroom windows open into the same lightwell. It's like nobody cares or notices even though we can all just see each other brushing our teeth or drying off after a shower. It's so weird. Sometimes I'll just stare out the window hoping someone notices and freaks out. No one ever does.

LYDIA

Exactly. Watching the unsuspecting is fascinating. But what we're hoping for is the sudden realization. The point of contact between the subject and the viewer. Tension, then release.

CHARLOTTE

That's what I'm going for. The point of contact.

LYDIA

You're setting them up. The model must discover the camera each time, and the photographer has to coax the model open. Even if we've seen her a million times, we need to discover something new about her with each picture. Here...

Lydia crosses back to her shelves and pulls down another portfolio. She's getting into the groove, enjoying finding some treasures in her stacks.

...from the Revel series. You should recognize it...

Lydia flips through pages but isn't finding what she's looking for. She turns back to the shelf to dig.

LYDIA

There's a picture of Janelle that perfectly demonstrates what I mean...

Charlotte flips through the portfolio Lydia pulled down.

CHARLOTTE

I can see why you're so famous. You're really good.

Continuing to flip

I was geeking out about negative space-- whoa!

LYDIA

What's that?

CHARLOTTE

Nothing. I just...

LYDIA

looking at the page Charlotte has revealed

Oh Rosa. She's mesmerizing, isn't she?

CHARLOTTE

I wouldn't really--

LYDIA

From that angle, it's hard to look away. Look at that curve here. How her flesh dissolves into shadow. That was a moment I did not need to coax. She was at such ease. Even in this photo, nude and from a relatively unforgiving angle, she looks positively regal. It's all about chemistry. Does the model stimulate you, does she turn you on, do you turn her on, does she feel at ease in your presence?

CHARLOTTE

Does it always have to be about sex?

LYDIA

You said you were familiar with my work.

CHARLOTTE

Sure, but...

LYDIA

My work is about fucking.

CHARLOTTE

I know.

Lydia tosses her a page of proofs.

LYDIA

Those were taken while fucking.

Charlotte hesitates, then takes the loupe and peers at

them.

CHARLOTTE

Is that why half of them are blurry?

LYDIA

Smart ass.

CHARLOTTE

I don't know if you should be showing me this stuff.

LYDIA

This stuff? This stuff you already found on the internet?

CHARLOTTE

Maybe I didn't see this.

picking up a more benign picture

I really like the sense of texture here. The leaves seem almost plastic.

LYDIA

They are plastic, Charlotte. It's a fake flower.

CHARLOTTE

Oh. Neat.

Lydia levels a look.

CHARLOTTE

I like the erotic. It just-- slips so quickly into--

LYDIA

Porn?

A shrug.

What's wrong with that?

CHARLOTTE

It's just different.

LYDIA

Not by much. Not these days. Lighting. Frame. Angle. Maybe. But still...

CHARLOTTE

But it's different though.

LYDIA

When people try to draw a line between art and porn, they're saying porn can't be beautiful. It can be pleasing, but not deeply, soul-achingly beautiful. It will never have the robustness of spirit, the duende that plebeians think makes art lofty. But pornography can be indescribably beautiful. Ask any gay man how he feels about cock. The image of a cock is not something to be endured for the pleasure of sex. But is rather a pleasure of its own.

CHARLOTTE

But it's like, what's it for?

LYDIA

Art is to stroke our ego and porn is to stroke our clits.

CHARLOTTE

See? Different!

LYDIA

Either way, if I don't make you wet I'm not doing my job. Sex is the definitive act of creation. If art is about transcendence, sex is where you need to start. Look again at this picture. Does it arouse you?

Charlotte squirms.

I'm not getting fresh. I'm just trying to understand.

Charlotte looks, nervous.

CHARLOTTE

I-- Uh-- What about-- Lunch?

Charlotte digs through her bag and pulls out sandwiches.
Can we just time-out for five minutes?

She holds out a sandwich.
I had some left over after the cab.

LYDIA

considers
I'll get plates.

While she's in the kitchen, a knock. Charlotte answers the door. It is Henry.

CHARLOTTE

Hello, Mr. Hughes.

HENRY

(Confused)
Hello.

Lydia enters from the kitchen. They kiss hello.

LYDIA

We were just having lunch. Care to join?

HENRY

I just had lunch with the Taschen guy. We're getting that Shibari book going. Water would be lovely. Are we not meeting?

Lydia exits to the kitchen.

LYDIA

(from off)
The collab with Yamaguchi?

HENRY

Yes, and a pro-dom from San Francisco.

CHARLOTTE

Congratulations again on a great opening.

HENRY

I'm sorry have we met?

Lydia returns with water, not having heard that part.

LYDIA

Charlotte, Henry and I have a meeting scheduled right now that I had forgotten about until this moment.

CHARLOTTE

I'll go look through those light studies again.

LYDIA

There's a nice little spot on the roof. You can take the portfolios.

Charlotte exits.

HENRY

Did I not call to confirm?

LYDIA

Could you try when I'm not drunk next time?

HENRY

And how can I possibly know when that is?

LYDIA

Perhaps not immediately after I tank a show.

HENRY

(catty, but loving)

How about you just send me notifications whenever you're sober?

gesturing where Charlotte exited

What's that about?

LYDIA

What? She works for you.

HENRY

From the catering company?

LYDIA

Did you know you're employing delinquents?

HENRY

Do they even use that word anymore?

LYDIA

You suggested she pursue an internship.

HENRY

It must have fallen out of fashion.

(Just hearing)

I did not.

LYDIA

You saw her work.

HENRY

Some cell phone snaps. Nothing substantial. I told her she had talent.

LYDIA

Why?

HENRY

Because every teenager needs to hear that.

LYDIA

You're not one to placate.

HENRY

I didn't. I would never give a caterer permission to pursue a relationship with one of my artists.

LYDIA

And yet here she is.

HENRY

Something tells me you're not finding it a burden.

LYDIA

It feels good to have a project. Get out of my own miserable head for a while. See things through the eyes of a--

HENRY

Child?

LYDIA

Novice. Give me a break.

HENRY

I can't. You didn't sell well, Lyd. We barely recouped our costs.

LYDIA

Because rock stars are tired. And lousy models.

HENRY

Which reminds me. Rolling Stone wants you to shoot a cover.

LYDIA

Great. More of the same shit.

HENRY

It pays the bills. Which I should think is a priority.

LYDIA

At the expense of my soul.

HENRY

Maudlin doesn't suit you, dear. Besides, I got what you were doing with that series.

LYDIA

The public doesn't.

HENRY

I don't give a shit about the public. Buyers don't.

LYDIA

Buyers only want bluetooth-enabled kinetic sculpture these days.

HENRY

The gallery's had a good year. Your show was the weakest link.

LYDIA

I'm glad you're ranking us.

HENRY

Pure financials. But aesthetically, and economically, I know you can do better.

LYDIA

You can't compare me to what I did twenty years ago.

HENRY

That was your eye. That was the Lydia Marks that redefined the queer female gaze.

LYDIA

The twenty years of shit that followed isn't a slump. Revel was a fluke. I caught a zeitgeist and was arrogant enough to pursue it. And you were foolish enough to believe in me.

HENRY

You still have it.

LYDIA

You've flattered me for decades. Can we please face the reality of my mediocrity? I have nothing left to express. Everything's already been said.

HENRY

If that were true our friendship would have dried on the vine decades ago. You still have a way of seeing that is sexier and truer than anything

else going. You still have a way of cracking people open, finding the fuckable part of everyone. I'm scheduling a soft opening for the new space downtown. I would love to have something provocative, something to shake people to life. Make them rediscover the kinetic potential in photography. We could use the energy.

LYDIA

We? I thought you just said the gallery's had a banner year.

HENRY

My fate is tied to yours. I have plenty of wunderkinders who are going to burn out or give up or move to Barcelona and take up puppetry. Your work has always been the engine behind our space. The meaty humanity beneath all the veneers.

LYDIA

Your metaphors.

HENRY

I have an eye.

LYDIA

Less so with the ears.

HENRY

Just try something new. Go do Ayuasca or join a leather family or something. Maybe a torrid love affair with a tragically beautiful Tunisian poet.

LYDIA

Ugh. One per lifetime is plenty.

HENRY

You're living in your studio, Lyd.

LYDIA

I don't need two spaces.

HENRY

You mean two mortgages.

LYDIA

Maybe I should pursue the corporate angle again.

HENRY

If you were known for your landscapes, sure. But I doubt many hedgefund managers want blood play on their walls.

LYDIA

Not their office walls, at least.

HENRY

Give me something new. Something I can sell. For both our sakes. What can you deliver in two months?

LYDIA

You are out of your fucking mind.

HENRY

Hopefully it's contagious. Shake up your paradigm. For your own sake.

Henry gets up to leave. Hands her a check.

HENRY

I made accounting fast track your payment. Padded it a little on the top.

LYDIA

Henry.

HENRY

Call me if you want to brainstorm.

Henry exits. Lydia contemplates the bookshelves. She pulls down a binder and begins to flip through. Charlotte enters and creeps over. A private moment interrupted.

LYDIA

These are pictures of sex, you know.

CHARLOTTE

Of? Or about?

Charlotte peers over Lydia's shoulder. Her eyes widen.

CHARLOTTE

How many hands are there?

LYDIA

Five. And one holding the camera.

CHARLOTTE

Speaking of negative space.

LYDIA

Yes. I'm particularly fond of the contrast of tones. The gradation from pale flesh, to darker flesh, to the void.

CHARLOTTE

This hung in a gallery?

LYDIA

Why not?

CHARLOTTE

So porny.

LYDIA

Have you ever seen porn that looks like this?

CHARLOTTE

We used to type the most fucked up things we could think of into the address bar of our browsers. It was like a game.

Lydia scoffs

Sixteen doesn't mean what it used to.

LYDIA

Sixteen never means what it used to. Why exactly did you come to me?

CHARLOTTE

“Not since Mapplethorpe’s indecency trials has the explicitly queer and queered nude figure caused so much controversy and excitement in the art world.”

LYDIA

Memorizing vintage Art Forums?

CHARLOTTE

My program has an archive.

LYDIA

Do you know what that means?

CHARLOTTE

I’m not stupid.

LYDIA

The New Yorker referred to one of my early shows as "Mapplethorpe XX" meaning, of course, the female Mapplethorpe. But some silly little pervert thought it meant the really naughty Mapplethorpe. He wasn’t stupid either; and yet, a misunderstanding. Thought he was going to see more grayscale anal fisting or something. Instead he got an eyeful of naked dykes. Much to both of our surprise, however, he loved my stuff anyway. He bought twelve pieces and commissioned two more. Then he introduced me to a gallerist he was fucking.

CHARLOTTE

Mr. Hughes?

LYDIA

My entire career is based on a misunderstanding. You didn’t know any of this before you came to me.

a beat

There is no meritocracy. No certain success for the deserving. No awards for trying. It's nepotism and luck. I'm sorry to be the first to tell you that.

CHARLOTTE

But you do. You deserve it. If that dude had seen your stuff and it sucked, he wouldn't have bought it. He wouldn't have commissioned... Your stuff. It makes people feel... Nevermind.

LYDIA

Go on.

CHARLOTTE

The way I feel when I look at your pictures. I want people to feel that way when they look at mine.

LYDIA

At your work? Or you?

A pause. Lydia pulls larger prints from her files and lays them out on the bed.

Tell me how they make you feel.

CHARLOTTE

A nervous glance. Then:

I don't think so.

LYDIA

You've just seen my single most shocking picture and you didn't run screaming from my studio. If you're grown enough to have sex, you're grown enough to discuss it.

CHARLOTTE

It's different. Talking versus... doing.

LYDIA

Yes. But they improve each other.

CHARLOTTE

Not always.

LYDIA

Then you're sleeping with the wrong people. I loved it all. Talking. Doing. Didn't matter. When I was your age, everything smelled like sex. No. Yes. Like the possibility of sex. Far richer. Thrilling.

CHARLOTTE

What's it like now?

LYDIA

Like going to a restaurant you enjoy. Maybe you'll order something new, have a slightly different experience. Likely you'll have a fine time. Satisfied if not nourished.

CHARLOTTE

I don't think sex at my age does either of those.

LYDIA

Well. Maybe it's just nostalgia for what never was.

CHARLOTTE

Or, you know, sex is a complicated thing that's different for everyone.

LYDIA

More likely, yes. So look at these. Tell me what you feel.

Charlotte looks.

CHARLOTTE

I feel... warm. But not like, the usual way.

LYDIA

Aroused.

Silent assent.

What about it is arousing you?

CHARLOTTE

Her body.

LYDIA

Really?

CHARLOTTE

Well... I guess. It's her...wholeness. Like how she fills the frame. Not like composition, but I don't know how to describe it. Like, she's naked, which is totally essential. Because anything else, clothes or makeup or whatever, would distract from her, her-ness. It's sexy. But sexy like a person you want to have sex with in the morning. Like full light and sober and all of it. I don't know her, obviously. But I-- I'm looking at her like I'm in love with her.

Considers

I feel like I am in love with her.

LYDIA

Thank you.

Lydia takes away the proofs and slides them back in the folder.

CHARLOTTE

(to herself:)

That was so weird.

a beat

Were you?

LYDIA

Was I what?

CHARLOTTE

In love with her?

LYDIA

Yes.

CHARLOTTE

And the other girl...the other...hands?

LYDIA

Her too.

CHARLOTTE

So you like...

LYDIA

Lived together as a happy family? Not exactly. I met Janelle, the centerpiece here, at an editorial shoot. She wanted to walk runways. God knows she had the body for it. It was an inspired time. You've likely seen a lot of her in my older work.

CHARLOTTE

What about-- ?

LYDIA

Amy.

CHARLOTTE

(off her tone:)

So you didn't love her.

LYDIA

Oh I did. Where Janelle brooded, Amy exploded.

She flips to another picture.

There's a shot that will show you...Here. See?

CHARLOTTE

Is that real blood?

LYDIA

What do you think?

CHARLOTTE

Whoa. What happened? I mean, to the relationship.

LYDIA

We had plenty of demons, each of us, and we invented new ones in the

permutations between us. But sometimes people can be a little too in love with their demons. After the Revel show opened, Amy's ex, some meathead high school sweetheart cliché, swooped into town and dragged her back to bumfuck Ohio or wherever. Amy dragged Janelle's spirit with her, leaving it in the dirt somewhere along I-80.

CHARLOTTE

And you?

LYDIA

I captured my demons and put them under glass.

CHARLOTTE

But not these?

LYDIA

Not everything's for public dissection.

CHARLOTTE

You never showed these?

Lydia gets lost in thought.

They're good, Lydia. Like...really good. Like I get you.

LYDIA

(placating)

That's nice.

CHARLOTTE

Are you in any of your shots?

LYDIA

I'm in all of them.

CHARLOTTE

Sure, but...

LYDIA

Never for show.

CHARLOTTE

Do you have proofs? Can I see them?

LYDIA

Why?

CHARLOTTE

Just to see.

LYDIA

What do you think you'll see?

CHARLOTTE

You. Happy.

LYDIA

Happy is not the word I would use.

CHARLOTTE

Then let me see. I want to understand.

LYDIA

Set up the camera at the backdrop.

Lydia exits to the kitchen. Charlotte places the camera on the tripod, and hooks it up to the umbrella light, then sits on the stool. In a private moment, she fidgets, shaking out her hair, licking her lips, practicing her "face," etc. She adjusts her shirt, undoes a button. Lydia crosses to the studio area with two drinks and nods for Charlotte to get up.

LYDIA

Over here.

CHARLOTTE

I thought...

LYDIA

Do you want to be a model or a photographer?

Charlotte obeys. Lydia takes a long drink, hands the other to Charlotte.

LYDIA

Just a little to help you get out of your own way.

Charlotte takes a tentative sip. She grimaces. Lydia takes it away and finishes it off. Lydia sits on the stool. Charlotte starts snapping.

LYDIA

Did you check your controls?

Charlotte is flustered. She adjusts the controls and starts snapping again. Lydia unbuttons her blouse past her ribs. Charlotte stops.

CHARLOTTE

I don't--

LYDIA

(just a little exasperated)

What color is the backdrop?

CHARLOTTE

White.

LYDIA

What color is my shirt?

CHARLOTTE

White.

LYDIA

Contrast.

Pointing to her sternum

This shape of flesh.

CHARLOTTE

It's sharp, elongated. Like a blade.

LYDIA

Is that good?

Charlotte snaps.

Breathe, Charlotte.

CHARLOTTE

You're making me nervous.

LYDIA

I'm not making you anything. You get to decide how you want to feel.

CHARLOTTE

I don't want to feel it.

LYDIA

Then choose something else.

CHARLOTTE

I don't think that's how feelings work.

LYDIA

Try it.

CHARLOTTE

Like?

LYDIA

Aloof. Angry. Intrigued. Horny. Invested. Any of those are better.

CHARLOTTE

Scared.

LYDIA

Scared of what?

CHARLOTTE

Fucking up.

LYDIA

What else?

CHARLOTTE

You.

LYDIA

It's impossible to be afraid of someone through the viewfinder.

CHARLOTTE

Well I am.

LYDIA

Fine. But you shouldn't be scared of me because I'm older or more experienced. You should be scared of me because I am your model. Do you want to fuck me?

CHARLOTTE

What? Oh my god.

LYDIA

You should. In a professional capacity.

CHARLOTTE

I should want to professionally fuck you? You don't want to fuck all those greasy rock stars.

LYDIA

In the moment they're posing for me, absolutely I do. I want to crawl inside them. Be enveloped by them. Greasy hair and all.

CHARLOTTE

That's not what fucking is.

LYDIA

Do you really think you can tell me what fucking is?

an ashamed silence

Breathe. Your job. Find that fuckable part of everyone and let it take over the frame.

Charlotte takes a deep breath, then snaps more. A pause.

LYDIA

What?

CHARLOTTE

There's a weird shadow.

LYDIA

Fix it then.

CHARLOTTE

Move your chin to the left. A little less maybe. Or more.

LYDIA

Dammit Charlotte move me.

Charlotte cups Lydia's chin and adjusts her head. A tender moment, electric. Charlotte snaps a picture.

Good girl.

Blackout

SCENE 3

Charlotte and Lydia look at prints spread out on the bed

CHARLOTTE

Wow. Wow wow wow wow.

LYDIA

Pleased?

CHARLOTTE

You look so lit. I mean, like, luminous.

LYDIA

That's all you.

CHARLOTTE

It's you though. Super you.

LYDIA

You're quite good.

CHARLOTTE

I just can't believe I took these. They're so much better than any of my self-portraits.

LYDIA

Why do you think that is?

CHARLOTTE

I mean, I felt connected. When I shoot myself I'm always doing all this mental math. But this time I was shooting what was happening, you know, not like what I was trying to make happen. It was like the best date ever. Listening and responding. And changing when you gave me something different. It was like a conversation without words. Does that sound weird?

LYDIA

Not even a little.

CHARLOTTE

I mean, wow. I just. Thank you.

She hugs Lydia.

LYDIA

You should be proud.

CHARLOTTE

You too though.

Off Lydia's cynical laugh:

Seriously. You felt good to shoot. This whole thing. Feels good.

LYDIA

I'm glad to hear it. A high point to end the day.

CHARLOTTE

What?

LYDIA

I'm meeting with a buyer at the gallery. And then I have a few other things.

CHARLOTTE

When will you be back?

LYDIA

Late.

CHARLOTTE

From meetings?

LYDIA

I also have a date.

CHARLOTTE

Oh.

LYDIA

Why not take yourself out to celebrate?

Lydia fishes for some cash.

Here, buy yourself some new supplies. What?

CHARLOTTE

Can I just stay? Here? I can help catalogue or something. I just. Your shelves are super messy. I can help, just like, organize. Do keyword stuff. Make a spreadsheet. I won't steal anything or whatever.

LYDIA

Is this a home thing?

CHARLOTTE

Is what? I mean. Home sucks. School sucks. My program is just... keeping me off the pole or whatever. Today is like the best I've felt in a really long time. I guess I just don't want that to end.

LYDIA

The rest of the work on those shelves. I don't want you--

CHARLOTTE

It's okay.

LYDIA

At lot of it isn't even--

CHARLOTTE

It's fine. Really. There's nothing for me out there right now. This is the only place I want to be. And if you want to bring your date home just text me or whatever and I'll bounce.

LYDIA

There is no order to all of this. And plenty of shit, too. Don't...

CHARLOTTE

It's alright.

LYDIA

Alright.

Lydia leaves.

Charlotte takes in the shelves. She pulls down some portfolios and flips. It seems as though she's looking for something specific. She pulls out a portfolio covered by others. Yanks it free, blows off dust. She opens it and is transfixed. She brings it to the bed, and lays out a number of the pictures on the bed. She takes out her cell phone and takes pictures of the photos. Light shifts from day to late night. She falls asleep. Lydia returns home, slightly drunk. She contemplates Charlotte tenderly; then sees the pictures. She starts grabbing them in a panic. Charlotte wakes.

CHARLOTTE

What?

LYDIA

What the fuck?!

CHARLOTTE

I'm sorry! What?!

LYDIA

Where did you find these?

CHARLOTTE

What?

LYDIA

These!

CHARLOTTE

Buried. Under a pile of stuff.

LYDIA

Were you digging?

CHARLOTTE

No. It just. Caught my eye. I don't know.

LYDIA

You had no right!

CHARLOTTE

I was just looking. I wanted to understand.

LYDIA

Get up.

CHARLOTTE

What?

LYDIA

Get! Up!

Lydia gathers all the proofs from the bed, clutching them to her chest.

CHARLOTTE

They're so beautiful Lydia.

LYDIA

Stop.

CHARLOTTE

Really. Incredible.

LYDIA

Stop.

CHARLOTTE

The way you hold them. The indents on Janelle's flesh. It's like you're afraid of letting her--

LYDIA

Stop!

Lydia grabs Charlotte's face, forcing her back onto the bed, silencing her. She lets go.

LYDIA

I'm sorry.

CHARLOTTE

I shouldn't have...

LYDIA

No.

CHARLOTTE

I'll leave.

LYDIA

Yes. No. I'm sorry. I won't touch you again.

CHARLOTTE

It's okay.

LYDIA

No.

CHARLOTTE

It didn't hurt.

LYDIA

It shouldn't. I shouldn't. I'm not--

CHARLOTTE

I'm not scared of you.

LYDIA

You shouldn't be. Here. With me. I'm not--

CHARLOTTE

Amazing. These. Are amazing.

LYDIA

No.

CHARLOTTE

I want to see women the way you do.

LYDIA

You don't.

CHARLOTTE

I want to know what it feels like to be seen that way...

LYDIA

I will ruin you.

CHARLOTTE

You make me better.

LYDIA

I can't.

CHARLOTTE

You do.

LYDIA

These pictures--

CHARLOTTE

Are beautiful.

LYDIA

(calming)

I haven't seen them in fifteen years.

CHARLOTTE

Do you see what I do?

LYDIA

I know that I don't.

CHARLOTTE

Her hair, dissolving into the bedspread. Her ass casting a shadow. Or is that...?

LYDIA

That is... moisture.

CHARLOTTE

flips to another

Here, your teeth on her neck. Almost menacing but so loving. You can see the power shifting even in the frozen image. It's like what sex is supposed to be like. Full surrender on both sides.

LYDIA

How do you know that?

CHARLOTTE

I know plenty.

LYDIA

But not enough.

CHARLOTTE

You should show these.

LYDIA

No.

Charlotte pulls a new page.

CHARLOTTE

This. How can you have a career that doesn't include this picture?

LYDIA

(moved)

I forgot all about this.

Lydia gets lost in the photo. Charlotte grabs her bag.

CHARLOTTE

I'm gonna go home.

Lydia nods, stuck in the photo.

Can I come back tomorrow?

LYDIA

You want to?

Charlotte nods.

LYDIA

I want that. I'm sorry. Thank you. I'm sorry.

Charlotte leaves. Lydia is left alone with the pictures.

Blackout.

SCENE 4

Lydia sits with her portfolio, poring over the images, making notes, engaging with the work as though for the first time. Charlotte digs through her archives, cataloguing.

CHARLOTTE

Can I model this time?

LYDIA

Why?

CHARLOTTE

I want to know what it feels like. When it's done right.

LYDIA

Stand by the shelves there.

Lydia opens the curtains, letting sun in. She sets up her tripod and snaps.

CHARLOTTE

But, like, tell me what to do, okay?

LYDIA

(All business.)

Don't smile. Don't pose. Shake out your hair a little. Good. Don't pose. Chin up. Not that far. Good.

A couple more snaps. She moves the tripod closer.

Your shirt is distracting. I know how that sounds but it is.

Lydia exits to bathroom and returns with a towel.

Take off your shirt and bra. Wrap this around your chest but I'd like your shoulders to be bare. We'll do a tight frame.

Lydia turns away.

CHARLOTTE

Ready.

LYDIA

(Through the viewfinder.)

Much better. You warm enough?

Charlotte nods. Lydia snaps a few shots.

Chin down. Good.

a few more shots. Then:

CHARLOTTE

Do you want to fuck me?

Lydia stops

Professionally, I mean.

She offers a sly grin. Then a KNOCK.

LYDIA

It's open!

Henry enters.

CHARLOTTE

Hi Henry.

LYDIA

Hey Henry. Just give me a sec. Torque your shoulders just a tiny-- there. Good. This roll is toast.

She unloads the film and hands it to Charlotte

Why don't you try developing these on your own? There's a new bottle of stabilizer under the sink.

Charlotte grabs her shirt and film and exits to the dark room closet.

HENRY

Please tell me I'm misinterpreting.

LYDIA

You are.

HENRY

Because that girl...

LYDIA

Just wanted to practice modeling.

HENRY

Is she any good?

LYDIA

She will be.

HENRY

Dare I ask, any progress?

LYDIA

In the form a regression.

Lydia shows Henry the shots she'd been reviewing.

HENRY

What are these? From Revel?

LYDIA

Concurrent. Well, immediately after.

HENRY

Are you kidding? I asked for new.

LYDIA

(reaching for the book)

Fine.

HENRY

Wait.

flips

Why haven't you shown me these?

LYDIA

Is that a question or an accusation?

HENRY

You've shown me everything you've ever shot.

LYDIA

Evidently not.

HENRY

Fifteen years I've been dragging work from you and you were sitting on these?

LYDIA

I wasn't ready. I'm still probably not.

HENRY

I can't believe you'd hide these from me.

LYDIA

Can you refrain from scolding me for a goddamn second? I'm showing you now.

HENRY

My god, I think you're making me straight.

LYDIA

Impossible.

HENRY

A dyke then.

LYDIA

More likely.

HENRY

You want to do a retrospective?

LYDIA

What about a "lost" series or something? Outtakes from a queer, polyamorous romance gone south.

HENRY

Ooh. Are you comfortable showing this much of yourself?

LYDIA

The only way I'll find out--

HENRY

These are perfect for the new space.

LYDIA

I was thinking the tub one could go in the front window. Maybe use some plumbers pipe to cover the goods.

HENRY

Very nice. These will sell, Lydia. A little retro. A little modernist. Queer as fuck. What do you want to call it?

LYDIA

"Volunteers."

HENRY

For when the radical feminists try to pillory you?

LYDIA

They always do.

HENRY

God, Janelle has never looked better.

LYDIA

Nor will she ever.

HENRY

Thank you for showing me these. They're exquisite. Get me your selection by the end of the week and I'll have our printer fast track it. I'm still mad at you, but... these are going to put you back in the spotlight.

*Henry leaves. A look of doubt crosses Lydia's face.
Charlotte enters. She is still wrapped in the towel.*

CHARLOTTE

Can we keep going?

LYDIA

You want to?

CHARLOTTE

It feels good.

LYDIA

Yes. It does.

Blackout

SCENE 5

Hustle and bustle preparing for the opening. Lydia is checking her list and sipping a glass of something boozy:

LYDIA

I have to pick up those last three prints from the framer.

CHARLOTTE

Why not Henry?

LYDIA

He's supervising the hang. And then I have to send the details to that NEA wonk.

CHARLOTTE

And the interview.

LYDIA

The... Oh shit. I suppose I can do that after I grab my dry cleaning.

CHARLOTTE

Should I call to reschedule?

LYDIA

Let me do that.

CHARLOTTE

I can do it.

LYDIA

I know. It's just better if I do.

CHARLOTTE

What if you forget?

LYDIA

Send me a text to remind me.

CHARLOTTE

I can post to social media.

LYDIA

Henry's guy has that covered.

CHARLOTTE

I can do something.

LYDIA

You can. . . clean up the mess you left in my darkroom.

CHARLOTTE

I mean something to help.

LYDIA

That would help.

CHARLOTTE

I'm a capable person.

LYDIA

Of course you are.

CHARLOTTE

But I'm just arm candy I guess.

LYDIA

I don't have time to placate your concerns of irrelevance.

CHARLOTTE

They're not irrelevant.

LYDIA

Your concerns aren't irrelevant, that you feel... Nevermind.

CHARLOTTE

Then I guess since it's the only thing I'm good for, I'll just figure out what to wear.

LYDIA

What do you mean?

CHARLOTTE

I should run home. Find something classy.

LYDIA

The reception is twenty-one and over.

CHARLOTTE

Am I not allowed to work it?

LYDIA

He's hired a different company.

CHARLOTTE

I can come early. Help set up.

LYDIA

Henry is already taking a risk, opening a new space with these photos.
More of a risk than he knows.

CHARLOTTE

It's your show. You could get me in. I'll hang out in the office until it starts.

LYDIA

There will be socialites. Politicians.

CHARLOTTE

That sounds fun.

LYDIA

It's not.

CHARLOTTE

I want to support you.

LYDIA

You can do that from here.

CHARLOTTE

That doesn't make any sense.

LYDIA

I don't want you there.

a beat

CHARLOTTE

Oh.

LYDIA

This isn't about your maturity. You are far more impressive than the people I have to ass-lick tonight.

CHARLOTTE

I'm your protege.

LYDIA

That word is more loaded than I think you understand.

CHARLOTTE

Don't be gross.

LYDIA

Whatever you say.

CHARLOTTE

Are you ashamed of me?

LYDIA

Of course not.

CHARLOTTE

Then what's the deal?

LYDIA

There is no deal.

CHARLOTTE

Well something's up. You know every artist in town but you haven't introduced me to anyone. You haven't even shown my new stuff to Henry. We haven't taken pictures anywhere other than here. How am I not supposed to believe you're ashamed of me?

LYDIA

You think this is fun. Tonight I will have to smile and pose with rich assholes who will belittle me as soon as they leave. I will have to distill the entirety of my career into soundbites for aloof bloggers. And I will try to convince misogynistic stockbrokers that photos of my naked lesbian lover are exactly what they need for their penthouse walls. I will have to lick assholes I don't want to lick and be grateful when they write me a check for what amounts to a half-day's work for them. And all the while, I will have to hide the fact that I am a fraud and a hack and anyone who believes otherwise is an idiot. To you, tonight may feel like a cool opportunity, a chance to see and be seen. But to me it's a slog through hell as I attempt to hold it together when all I want to do is drink until I'm delirious and dissolve into the drywall. I am ashamed, Charlotte. But not of you.

CHARLOTTE

What can I do, then?

LYDIA

I would like to come home to you tonight.

CHARLOTTE

What?

LYDIA

I don't mean-- I would like to know that when I get home after dredging up some of the worst experiences of my life for mass consumption and critical evaluation, I would like to know that you will be here. That's all.

You have proven to be a person I can trust, and someone who doesn't seem to find me as depressing as I find myself. Stay here. I'll order you a nice dinner. You can play around in the studio. Experiment. Shoot some stuff for us to look at together. It'll be more educational and fun than what I have to put up with. And then I can come home to you and complain about what a nightmare it was and you can tell me all about the fun you had. Okay?

Charlotte nods.

LYDIA

Thank you.

She holds her by the shoulders. As close as they get.

Lydia leaves. Slow shift of lights to denote hours passing. Charlotte wanders in the space and slips into the vibe of a teen in her room. She pours herself a glass of wine, pulls down binders, fiddles with camera equipment, snaps some self portraits, checks her phone. She should repeat each of these actions at least three times. At the end of this sequence, there should be a half-empty wine bottle on the desk. Photos are scattered on the bed, floor, and every available surface. Charlotte goes back to the shelves. She pulls over a chair and stands on it to grab a box. She digs through and finds a photo that disturbs her. She stuffs it in her bag and makes to leave. Just as she exits, Lydia comes home, sullen and drunk.

LYDIA

Were you leaving?

CHARLOTTE

(still a little shaken)

I'm here. Like you asked.

LYDIA

I'm sorry. I'm sorry I asked.

CHARLOTTE

It sounded like it went well. I was hitting social media like a crack pipe.

LYDIA

Anything good?

CHARLOTTE

There were a lot of famous people there.

LYDIA

That's nice.

Lydia finds the half-empty wine bottle.

CHARLOTTE

I hope it wasn't an expensive one.

Lydia pours some into Charlotte's glass and downs it.

CHARLOTTE

Did you have fun?

LYDIA

Fun.

CHARLOTTE

Did you at least sell?

LYDIA

All of it.

CHARLOTTE

What?

LYDIA

Every one.

CHARLOTTE

Oh my god!

Charlotte throws herself around Lydia. Lydia doesn't respond. A beat

CHARLOTTE

Are you okay?

LYDIA

Seeing us all up there. Under glass.

CHARLOTTE

Oh.

Charlotte pulls away. Lydia drinks down another glass

LYDIA

The picture of Janelle in the tub, my tub?

CHARLOTTE

Of course. It's like the centerpiece of the series.

LYDIA

I didn't remember until tonight. I'm holding an empty champagne flute, listening to some jerkoff talk at me about his new fashion line, just tuning him out, staring at her on the wall. That picture is so her. So perfect. So... Janelle died in a tub. Not mine. Some creep's uptown. She died naked in a creep's bathtub. And a picture of her in a tub is the fucking cover to my collection.

long beat

CHARLOTTE

She probably just fell asleep.

LYDIA

Sure. Hopefully. I've read too much to believe that. But. It's nice to think. They told me she was covered in vomit. Probably suffocated before her heart failed. But still. Nice to think.

CHARLOTTE

I'm so sorry.

LYDIA

After everyone had gone, staring at Janelle in my tub, I thought how that... scene... would have made a hell of a photograph.

Lydia breaks down. Charlotte embraces her.

LYDIA

Why are you here?

CHARLOTTE

You asked me to.

LYDIA

But why did you say yes?

CHARLOTTE

I never said-- I just... I like you. I like being with you.

LYDIA

You shouldn't.

CHARLOTTE

I do.

LYDIA

You don't deserve this.

CHARLOTTE

I want to.

LYDIA

I'm anathema.

CHARLOTTE

You're beautiful.

LYDIA

I have no idea what it is to love something without corrupting it.
Corroding its shine. Letting rot find its way inside. And then shooting it

for posterity.

CHARLOTTE

Not me.

LYDIA

Not yet. I want to pretend that my appreciation for you... my contentment with your presence is because the proximity to your youth makes me feel relevant. How cliché.

CHARLOTTE

You sold out a gallery of twenty year old photographs. How is that not relevant?

LYDIA

It's not right though. None of it is right. I thought about you-- I kept thinking about you tonight and feeling like I was just doing that because you are easy and that was hard. You make me feel important and they make me feel like a fool. Because you are alive and vital in all the ways the rest of my life is dead. I wish you had been there. I needed you there.

CHARLOTTE

I wanted to be there.

LYDIA

I know. I'm sorry. I thought it'd give me a second to get my head on straight. Focus. I can't be what you want me to be. Not really.

CHARLOTTE

You already are.

LYDIA

I have been enjoying the way you make me feel, and I don't think that that is wise.

CHARLOTTE

Do I remind you of Janelle?

LYDIA

No. You are curious where she was world-weary. You are focused, where she just...

makes a wandering gesture with her hand

You're heartier. Meant to survive this world. I don't want to be the first one to scar you.

CHARLOTTE

You're not. Couldn't be. I'm not here because you're feeding me lines. Or feeding my ego. I'm here because. I --

Charlotte kisses Lydia. Tentative at first, then growing passionate. Lydia pulls herself away and looks at Charlotte.

LYDIA

No.

CHARLOTTE

Yes.

They kiss and begin making love.

Blackout. End Act 1

ACT TWO

SCENE 1

Lights Up. Charlotte alone, center.

CHARLOTTE

I have a map in my head of my body. A map of my body. It's color coded: red wherever she has touched me. Blue where she has yet to. It started after that night. That first night. I remember every part of me that she touched. The back of my head, my left ear inside and out, the right side of my jaw. Both shoulders, my spine from the nape of my neck all the way down. Both hips, both thighs, genitals, inside and out, hands, wrists, right forearm, right breast. Both sides of my waist.

Each time I see her, another part of my body gets colored in, like a paint by number. Someday I will be all this color. Inside and out. She will have touched me everywhere.

Charlotte slips into bed with Lydia. Lights up as they make love. Morning light streams through the window over the bed.

LYDIA

Don't move.

CHARLOTTE

What?

LYDIA

The light on your hair is just perfect.

She grabs her camera and snaps a picture. They kiss and she continues snapping. She pulls back and takes another shot.

CHARLOTTE

Hey! I'm naked!

LYDIA

You're beautiful.

CHARLOTTE

Just don't.

Lydia puts down the camera. They continue to fool around.

CHARLOTTE

I don't want to be just another one of your porn girls.

Lydia withdraws

LYDIA

Is that what you think is going on? You think I couldn't shoot you without turning it into porn?

Charlotte reaches for the camera.

CHARLOTTE

Let me try.

LYDIA

Try what?

CHARLOTTE

Let me shoot you like one of your French girls.

LYDIA

Har har.

Charlotte hesitates

Well?

CHARLOTTE

Oh baby you look so hot in those clothes.

LYDIA

No no no. That is not even in the general vicinity of correct.

CHARLOTTE

I'm in charge here. I'm going to make you famous, baby.

LYDIA

Closer.

Charlotte shoots Lydia, working her way down her under the covers and snaps a shot

LYDIA

Did you just take a picture of my vulva?

Charlotte giggles

How was that for you?

CHARLOTTE

Naughty.

LYDIA

Something tells me you like feeling that way. Was it in focus?

CHARLOTTE

Um...

LYDIA

Do it again.

CHARLOTTE

Really?

Lydia lifts up the sheet and Charlotte scurries under. For a moment Lydia looks as matter of fact as a doctor's visit, speaking to the ceiling.

LYDIA

Did you open the aperture?

Charlotte is quiet for a moment.

CHARLOTTE

F's at 2.

LYDIA

That should be fine. Try bumping up the ISO.

Snaps from beneath the sheet.

CHARLOTTE

I'm too shaky.

LYDIA

Take a deep breath and shoot on a slow exhale.

She does so.

CHARLOTTE

Oh wow that totally works.

She crawls back up.

LYDIA

It's almost like I know what I'm doing.

CHARLOTTE

I doubt it.

Charlotte snaps more. Lydia reaches for her.

CHARLOTTE

Find your light.

Lydia snickers and cocks her head toward the light from the window. Charlotte grinds against Lydia's thigh as she shoots her face. Then she stops, too into the sex. She hands the camera to Lydia.

Your turn.

LYDIA

You sure? You're--

CHARLOTTE

Get this.

From her position, Lydia takes the camera and shoots: her hand on Charlotte, Charlotte's face, etc. Lydia's phone rings. They try to ignore it. The ringing stops. Then starts again. Lydia drops the camera and reaches for her phone as Charlotte continues grinding against her.

LYDIA

(into the phone:)

What?!

listening

Are you fucking kidding?

Lydia covers C's mouth as she moans. Lydia sits up, furious. Charlotte falls back.

Yes. Yes. I understand.

She hangs up

LYDIA

Bitch!

CHARLOTTE

What?

LYDIA

Amy is suing me.

CHARLOTTE

What? Why?

LYDIA

Fucking hick fuck dumbass knuckle dragging shit!

Lydia throws the phone across the room.

CHARLOTTE

Who?

LYDIA

Fuck him and fuck her for fucking believing him!

CHARLOTTE

Lydia...

LYDIA

AAAAGGHHHH!

Lydia roars. Then calms.

CHARLOTTE

What are you going to do?

Blackout

SCENE 7

Henry and Lydia talk. Lydia smokes. Or drinks. Probably both.

HENRY

You may want to consider settling.

LYDIA

Killing the show.

HENRY

You can make more work. You can't do that from prison.

LYDIA

Please. There are no criminal charges.

HENRY

Still. You settle. We both take a financial hit, but we can spin it back in your favor. Suppressing the arts, censorship, queer and gritty urban life versus gentrified post-tech bullshit. I'll rush the next show and maybe put up some of your cityscapes in the meantime. This doesn't have to be a career killer.

LYDIA

I can't bury this. Volunteers is the best thing I've ever made.

HENRY

Do you have contracts?

LYDIA

Yes. Somewhere.

HENRY

And proof of age and everything?

Silence.

HENRY

Lydia.

LYDIA

Amy, yes. I don't have records on Janelle.

HENRY

You lost them?

LYDIA

I never wanted them.

HENRY

(Realizing)

My god.

LYDIA

Janelle was a grown woman. When she found me, when she posed for me, when she fucked me, and when she killed herself.

HENRY

Are you the only one who believes that? Does Amy know?

a beat

If this goes to trial there will be criminal charges pressed. Your work is risqué enough. They'll call you a predator. A pornographer.

LYDIA

I am a pornographer.

HENRY

You want a jury to know that? Or did you just use that pseudonym for kicks?

(Realizing)

Oh my god. Did you keep records for your other models?

LYDIA

Some.

(off Henry)

It was a different time. There weren't all the legal hoops.

HENRY

If you have a record of photographing young--

LYDIA

My god you make me sound like one of the priests.

HENRY

If there's a pattern, the lawyers will find it. That's what they do. Jesus, do you really want to go down for child pornography because of this show?

LYDIA

Janelle was seven-fucking-teen. If she had stayed in her bumfuck Ohio town she would have had a whole trailer full of kids by then.

HENRY

And your other models? Were there children?

LYDIA

Define "children."

HENRY

Pre-sexual human beings, Lydia.

LYDIA

Pre-sexual how?

HENRY

Unbelievable.

LYDIA

If you mean, prepubescent, no, of course not. But pre-sexual isn't very clear. I did photograph virgins. I know I photographed girls who weren't virgins but should have been. Many girls lied about their age. They still do, I'm sure. God knows I did. But we didn't care. We told ourselves that

if they were old enough to get themselves there, they were old enough to accept the consequences. But the truth, of course, is that no one knows whether they're ready for something or not until it's happening, whether it's sex, love, or death.

HENRY

We're killing this show, Lydia. We're settling and we're praying they drop it all.

LYDIA

Janelle sought me out.

HENRY

And no one fucking cares. They will dig, Lydia. They will dig and destroy you. And you probably deserve it.

LYDIA

We can fight it just the same. Queer aesthetic and all that.

HENRY

That argument falls apart when it comes to photographing minors. At any point in our entire relationship any one of these women could have come back and taken everything from us. Everything we made together. Every scrap of our lives, our art, our reputations. Our freedom! I cannot believe you would sacrifice all of that to get...whatever the lesbian version of getting your dick wet is.

LYDIA

How dare you imply that this was about getting off.

HENRY

We both know there's no difference between art and sex when it comes to you.

LYDIA

You think I keep these photographs for masturbatory material? You who slathers me in complements, who petitions the MoMa to give me retrospectives? You cannot accuse me of profiting off filth when you're

the one cashing the checks.

HENRY

This is criminal.

LYDIA

So were our lives until the 90s! We committed crimes against the state just by being born. And every choice we've made since. Drugs, sodomy. It's what we're paid to do. It's why they love us. Transitive transgression. But I have not done harm, and I refuse to pretend that I have.

HENRY

I am not, as a gay man and public figure, going to make a stand in defense of these photographs. We are not that liberated yet. You'll make a new show. Something with models you can trust.

LYDIA

I already have that.

*Lydia hands Henry the loupe and points to the light box.
A long pause as Henry takes it in.*

HENRY

(with eerie calm)

You are willfully misinterpreting a schoolgirl crush as something more sophisticated.

LYDIA

She seduced me.

HENRY

Did you never seduce someone just to see if you could?

LYDIA

Who are you to tell her how she feels?

HENRY

I'm just pointing out that you are completely incapable of seeing the effect you have on people. What makes Volunteers so mindblowing is

your lack of self-awareness. These pictures show the destruction and degradation of two young, vibrant women. The narrative is so clear, and you're the author of that story. It's not edgy, it's solemn. Painful. And now you show me these proofs, of you holding the neck of a teenager while out of the frame I can only imagine what was going on. It implicates me as a viewer. I become complicit in your abuse.

LYDIA

She's not being abused, Henry! The relationship is intelligent, and compassionate and sober!

HENRY

But is it equal? Does she have as much power, as much to lose or gain? Does she have money or fame or a name or her own goddamned apartment? She came to you because she needed something.

LYDIA

Of course she did! She needed a loving woman in her life. She needed someone to talk to without judgement. To offer compassion and guidance. Someone to recognize her intelligence and talent and potential.

HENRY

You just described a mother, not a lover.

LYDIA

Why not both? Did you never have a father figure who you also fucked? Come on, your people invented the concept of "Daddy."

HENRY

It's different with men.

Lydia scoffs

LYDIA

How old were you?

HENRY

When?

LYDIA

The first time you fucked a man? Could you even claim the title of "man" yourself?

Henry is silent

LYDIA

Come on, Henry! Tell me about Fire Island again! Or the kindly silver fox who needed help around the house. Or maybe the lonely married man just looking for a little momentary joy in exchange for twenty bucks.

HENRY

I was fourteen. I was lucky. He wasn't much older and it was only blowjobs.

LYDIA

But then? You stopped for ten years, joined a monastery like all the delicate boys were supposed to.

HENRY

You know what I did. I got paid for it, just like you did.

LYDIA

Ah, victims we two.

HENRY

I wasn't a... I was... dazzled. Men would pay me to please me.

LYDIA

That surprised you.

HENRY

Then it did, yes... Now.

a small chuckle as he reminisces

When I was a kid-- young man-- I would save up from mowing lawns for

a ferry ticket. On the Island, I found a spot under the black cherry trees. I liked it when others watched. Sometimes the men would pay, I wouldn't even need to ask. But it was never about the money for me. I went back, years later. I was... twenty-five, twenty-seven, perhaps. To cruise. I was curious. How it had changed. And of course it hadn't. I saw a kid there. Fifteen, sixteen at the most. Black hair. Bright eyes. He wanted to hook up. I thought he was a hustler, but he just liked being out there. Just like I had. Trading blowjobs, sunbathing, and having all the older guys just fawn over him. Yes. We went to the dunes, jerked each other off, sun drawing sweat from our skin. I felt so...saggy compared. At twenty something. Can you imagine? He was just so... Afterwards, he told me he went there every day. Hooked up constantly. But he had never kissed a man... I asked if he wanted to kiss me. He said yes. It was...

LYDIA

Has there ever been a number more arbitrary than the age of consent?

HENRY

It's different, Lydia.

LYDIA

Like you can make that assessment.

HENRY

Young men, they're just...

LYDIA

Grotesque. What you are implicating is grotesque. That a young woman can't have her own sense of sexual agency. That she can never consent when a young man of the same age can have dozens of men before he can even drive. You want me to believe that Charlotte, or Janelle, or any woman is a victim from the day she is born until some magical moment when she becomes a victimizer. Is that it? Is that your true perception of women?

HENRY

It's not that simple.

LYDIA

No. It's not. That's precisely the point.

Charlotte enters through the front door

CHARLOTTE

Sorry, I can come back.

LYDIA

It's fine. Come in.

CHARLOTTE

Hi Henry.

HENRY

Charlotte.

Awkward pause.

HENRY

Charlotte, would you mind having a word with me?

CHARLOTTE

Why?

LYDIA

You don't have to.

HENRY

You don't have to do anything you don't want to do.

LYDIA

Jesus, Henry, knock it off.

CHARLOTTE

What's going on?

LYDIA

Henry thinks I'm taking advantage of you. You're here against your will.

CHARLOTTE

I have keys.

HENRY

This isn't the right way to have this conversation.

LYDIA

Would you rather dress it up in queer theory or urban cynicism?
Charlotte and I are fucking and you find that disturbing.

CHARLOTTE

Lydia.

LYDIA

Why is everyone acting like they're meeting me for the first time?! I have made you rich. A naked seventeen year old with track marks and smeared lipstick put your gallery on the map.

HENRY

I didn't know that.

LYDIA

But you never asked.

HENRY

You have made me an accessory to child abuse.

Gesturing to Charlotte.

Twice over!

CHARLOTTE

I'm not a child.

HENRY

Legally speaking. Charlotte, darling, legally you can't consent to this, no matter how much you like her.

CHARLOTTE

Don't patronize me.

HENRY

Then don't implicate me! What must I say to convince you that this is an categorically bad idea?! They will take everything from you, Lydia. Everything. Our homes, my galleries, your studio. Your equipment. Your reputation. No one will buy you. No one will touch you. They will not only kill your career but erase what's already been. They will update textbooks to remove your images. Everyone you respect will try to distance themselves from you to save their own asses. There is no middle ground with this. This is your end game. You still can make a play, just make a smart one for god's sake. You still have access to my lawyer. I strongly suggest you put her to use. Settle, Lydia, for the good of us all. You can have whatever this is. Or you can have your career. But not both. And my friendship, whatever that's worth to you. Let this go so we can bury it and you can hold on to your dignity, your reputation, and... whatever's left.

He exits.

CHARLOTTE

Let what go?

LYDIA

Everything. You.

CHARLOTTE

Do you want to?

LYDIA

Of course not.

CHARLOTTE

But the show.

LYDIA

Yes.

CHARLOTTE

What Henry said. You have to bury one of us. It would be easier if it were

me.

LYDIA

Yes.

CHARLOTTE

I love you.

LYDIA

No.

CHARLOTTE

What?

LYDIA

You love a series of moments. You're filling in the blanks with illusion to make up whatever narrative you want.

CHARLOTTE

Isn't that it? Our lives are just flip books, aren't they? There's no real continuity. We fill in the blanks between images, and we make up stories about what's happening out of frame.

LYDIA

Well maybe we're making up the wrong story.

CHARLOTTE

I can't imagine fucking you without a camera in your hand. I can't imagine coming without knowing what it will look like in print. These things, you can't separate them. They're like sheets photo paper wetted together. To peel them apart would ruin everything. Let me stay.

Charlotte kisses her. Lydia pulls away

LYDIA

I should-- I should have been the adult. I should have stopped it. But it was just so much fun. We were so much in love with what we were doing. And who we were. I should have been the one to put on the brakes. But that feeling of making something amazing. It's stronger than lust or

hunger. It's the strongest thing I've ever felt. And I've never been much of a fighter.

CHARLOTTE

You're not talking about me, are you?

LYDIA

What?

CHARLOTTE

Don't punish me for this.

LYDIA

Charlotte...

CHARLOTTE

I'm afraid that my life is destined to be peaceful mediocrity.

LYDIA

Well, luckily mediocrity is one of the few things you can kill with willpower alone. I'm sure you'll be fine.

CHARLOTTE

I don't want fine. I want this. It feels like a drug.

LYDIA

It is.

CHARLOTTE

I want you.

LYDIA

No.

CHARLOTTE

Please... Please keep me. Please let me. Please...

She breaks down. Lydia hesitates, then moves to comfort her. The embrace turns from maternal to sexual. Who initiates it is a question. They begin to kiss, all while

Charlotte continues to cry. Then:

Get your camera.

LYDIA

What?

CHARLOTTE

This is what you do. Capture this. Pin it down. Help me freeze this feeling.

Lydia pulls away:

LYDIA

No.

CHARLOTTE

Please.

LYDIA

Charlotte...

Charlotte climbs over Lydia and grabs the camera. Places it in Lydia's hands and pulls off her shirt.

CHARLOTTE

I'm yours.

Blackout.

SCENE 8

An hour or so later. Lydia is alone on stage, half dressed, a simple dark room set up in front of her. Red light. As she speaks, she develops and washes pictures, hanging them on a line to dry above her.

LYDIA

The first time I stood in front of a camera, I was in a bathing suit. That's not so salacious. Most kids have records of beach trips and swim teams. Most kids don't get paid for those pictures, though. What I found, crammed on sweaty subway cars, a bikini in my backpack and wads of twenties in my shoes, wasn't insight into the male mind, or some sort of cycle of abuse. It was power. Not in some sort of defiant, post-feminist, late-capitalistic way. But rather a sense of intrinsic agency. In a moment, when the man behind the camera snapped, I could decide who I wanted to be. Vixen or victim. Concubine or conqueror. I had access to the infinite mutability of the self. And in each moment, with each shutter snap, I would decide anew who I would be. I knew, like it was some sort of magic, that the viewer would know who I was without even understanding why. I would infect their minds with the avatar I assumed. Somewhere along the way, I lost that skill. Maybe once I picked up a camera, I imbued that magic into my models, and it was no longer mine to wield. Or it never really existed at all. I look at these pictures. Of Amy. Of Janelle. Of Charlotte. My protege. My Proteus. Changing shape, moving through forms, trying to find something true so they can release themselves from my grasp.

Lights up. Charlotte enters from the bathroom, freshly showered. She takes in the newly developed images.

CHARLOTTE

Who's is this?

LYDIA

What do you mean?

CHARLOTTE

Who does this picture belong to?

LYDIA

Well, my finger was on the shutter, obviously. Your hands are there and there.

CHARLOTTE

But I'm in the frame.

LYDIA

Yes, that is correct.

CHARLOTTE

If it were hanging in a gallery, what would the placard say?

LYDIA

It would say, something like Charlotte #1, Color Photograph, Lydia Marks.

CHARLOTTE

So Subject/Object.

LYDIA

More like subject, objectifier.

CHARLOTTE

pointing to a photo

I like my mouth here.

LYDIA

reaching for her

I like it here, too.

They kiss, but Charlotte ends it, turning back to the pictures.

CHARLOTTE

If it were me...

LYDIA

It is you.

CHARLOTTE

I mean, if I had shot it, I'd probably want the scratches to show a bit more.

LYDIA

I like them subtle.

CHARLOTTE

But I think this one is about the scratches. I'd probably bump up the reds a bit. Otherwise my skin looks too clear. Like it's photoshopped.

LYDIA

You have very lovely skin.

Charlotte contemplates the rest of the shots, with cool remove and studied eye of an art director

CHARLOTTE

But I shouldn't. I look too pretty.

LYDIA

I thought you liked looking pretty.

CHARLOTTE

Not in these. They shouldn't look too done, you know? Like there should be more menace at the edges, to set the viewers off balance, so it's not just some pretty girl in the throes of passion, but some real dark energy creeping in at the peripheral.

LYDIA

Why do you want that?

CHARLOTTE

Because it feels. . .

LYDIA

Go ahead.

CHARLOTTE

True. I guess.

LYDIA

Ah.

CHARLOTTE

Like with Janelle and Amy.

LYDIA

What about them?

CHARLOTTE

Like, that one where they're in the bed and their fingers are entwined and it looks like they're holding hands but you can just barely see the needle? Or the Volunteers one where you're clearly the only conscious one and there's this kind of question as to "Are they asleep? Are they passed out?" you know?

LYDIA

Yes.

CHARLOTTE

So don't you think that maybe the menacing factor is, like, the whole point of your work?

LYDIA

Are you writing a dissertation?

CHARLOTTE

I just mean, I think maybe that should be in these pictures, too. The...darkness. Or else...

LYDIA

Or else?

CHARLOTTE

They don't look like yours.

LYDIA

Maybe I'd like to try something new. Something... kind.

CHARLOTTE

I thought you said you were a violent person.

LYDIA

Am I not allowed to try to be better?

CHARLOTTE

Better? Or someone else?

LYDIA

(a question or slow dawning)

You want me cruel.

CHARLOTTE

I...

LYDIA

You want me sadistic. You want to see me holding the needle to the vein while snapping a shot with the other. Or clutching a pale throat until lips turn purple. Is that why you're here? To play the part of the downy virgin so you can force me into the role of the monster? To assuage your guilt as you take me down?

CHARLOTTE

What are you talking about?

LYDIA

You. This. You're setting me up.

CHARLOTTE

What?!

LYDIA

You weren't a nervous fan. Or a gentle naif. You knew exactly why you came to me.

CHARLOTTE

Come on.

LYDIA

It makes more sense. Why would someone like you desire anything from me but money and proximity to power? You're probably not even sixteen.

Lydia grabs Charlotte's bag, digging through.

CHARLOTTE

What the hell?! Lydia, stop!

Charlotte rushes to stop her, they fight.

LYDIA

Maybe you're not even queer. You have a boyfriend at home, delighting in the stories of you dyking it up, as you tell him about the pervert you're using while you spread yourself for him.

CHARLOTTE

Fuck you!

Charlotte pushes Lydia. Lydia pushes back. Charlotte falls back, weeping. Lydia finds a photograph in Charlotte's bag.

LYDIA

And now stealing from me! God you are--

Charlotte leaps to grab it back.

CHARLOTTE

Fine! I lied! Fuck. Just give it back.

LYDIA

It's not yours.

CHARLOTTE

She's more mine than yours!

LYDIA

You're going to use it build your case against me?

CHARLOTTE

Could I? How old was she?

LYDIA

How should I know?

CHARLOTTE

It's true then. You shot young women.

LYDIA

Have you not been poring over my entire oeuvre for two months?

CHARLOTTE

Did you fuck her?

Lydia sounds a haughty scoff.

Did you?!

LYDIA

You're not allowed to be jealous of things that happened decades before you were born.

CHARLOTTE

Fuck you.

LYDIA

You wouldn't believe me if I said no.

CHARLOTTE

You're lying.

LYDIA

What does it matter?

Charlotte rips the picture from Lydia's hands.

CHARLOTTE

It matters! To me, it matters, okay. Call it whatever you want.

She turns away and weeps. Lydia softens.

LYDIA

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I just don't understand why you'd steal. Why you'd push--

CHARLOTTE

My dad has emphysema. I told you that already. We were barbecuing in the back for Fourth of July. He had an attack and I ran inside to grab his inhaler. It wasn't in his sock drawer like usual, and so I just dug and dug through like four drawers of crap and I found this picture. A copy of it. Torn from a magazine. Like one of the gross kinds. I'm super impressed with myself for tracking you down, actually. You don't sign your pictures. Not these kinds at least. The fancy ones you do. But I guess there is a style. The difference is just... lighting, frame, angle...

LYDIA

(with Charlotte above)

...Angle.

she sighs as she realizes.

CHARLOTTE

I almost didn't recognize her. I mean, this was from way before I was born. I had her chin, people said. And I guess the same figure but of course no one would have known that. "Spitting image." Do you know how she died?

Lydia shakes her head

Aneurism. In the bathroom of the Capital Diner. I was having blueberry pancakes. My dad worried that her eggs were getting cold. So he ate them. He ordered more and sent me to look for her.

long pause

Blueberries make me sick now.

LYDIA

I'm so sorry.

CHARLOTTE

My dad never talked about...this. He said he met my mom in a club. Which could've been true. I guess I never asked what kind of club.

LYDIA

Your mother posing for me... It doesn't have to mean anything about who she was. All sorts of people make money in all sorts of ways. There's no shame in any of it. We do what we have to do to get by. That's just...

CHARLOTTE

Art?

LYDIA

Capitalism.

CHARLOTTE

You're not my mom, Lydia. Despite what Henry or whoever the fuck thinks. You're nothing like her. But holding you makes me feel closer to her. Sorry if that sounds gross.

LYDIA

It doesn't.

CHARLOTTE

The way I feel. When you shoot me. I don't feel like a model. I feel...loved.

LYDIA

You are... Better than this. Than me.

CHARLOTTE

I hate that these can't be a thing. It's so fucking arbitrary. Like how old do I have to be to decide when I can use my body and for what?

Lydia just smiles, resigned from forty-some years of asking that same question

LYDIA

Depends on what state you're in.

CHARLOTTE

Geographically? Or mentally?

a gentle laugh from Lydia

LYDIA

Can I tell you why I shot you like I did?

Charlotte nods

This story, at least my version of it, isn't grim or dire. Nothing ends up dead this time.

CHARLOTTE

Except maybe your career.

LYDIA

I had a good run. Far more than I deserve.

CHARLOTTE

What about us?

LYDIA

The truth?

Charlotte hesitates

It's a yes or no question.

a pause

But you aren't very good at those.

CHARLOTTE

The real answer is never that simple.

LYDIA

You and I will inspire each other. If you stay, we will make great art and have great sex and you will quickly outgrow me. You will find people who captivate you and you will turn your lens to them. And you will find some measure of success. At least I hope you will. And I will cheer for you, and maybe I'll drink wine at your receptions and write letters of recommendation to art schools and all the other things dried-up elders do for their proteges. But I will be proud. And I will be ashamed. And I will be better having known you.

a long, tender pause

CHARLOTTE

I lied.

LYDIA

It's okay.

CHARLOTTE

I'm twenty-two.

a beat

LYDIA

...What?

a beat

You said...

CHARLOTTE

I didn't.

LYDIA

How... How dare you?

CHARLOTTE

It's not so villainous.

LYDIA

You made me believe....

CHARLOTTE

I didn't make you anything. You decided. Does it really change anything?
Is anything different? Am I different to you?

LYDIA

No! I am different.

Long pause.

Why?

CHARLOTTE

There's something about interacting with youth that makes people self-aware. When people think I'm young, it's weird to see how they shift. Maybe just simple mortality stuff, or the ego of being able to shape a future. It's easier. People don't really listen to what you say. But it gets in, and sometimes gets integrated, so they think they came up with it themselves. It can be really beautiful. To watch the slow dawning of what feels like an epiphany. When you were the one who planted the seed.

LYDIA

You lied to me.

CHARLOTTE

You wanted to see in me what you needed. Are these new photographs not your best work? Are you not proud of what we did?

LYDIA

It's a lie.

CHARLOTTE

Because you believed you were committing a crime? Being transgressive?
Sticking it to conservatism or cultural priggishness? Or because you just

liked the idea of fucking a teenager... again?

a beat

LYDIA

You have no idea. No idea how cruel...

CHARLOTTE

I don't mean to be. I'm sorry. I'm not some...whatever they call girls like me.

LYDIA

There are many names.

CHARLOTTE

These pictures are really good, Lydia. You know that. They're gorgeous. You should be happy. I am.

LYDIA

No. You have made me...

CHARLOTTE

Not a criminal. That's a win. In this case at least. You're not going to go to jail. And you're not going to have to kill...anything.

LYDIA

It's already done. Are you, really?

CHARLOTTE

What does it matter?

LYDIA

It matters. Of course it matters! You just said--

CHARLOTTE

That it's arbitrary. Is that what you believe?

LYDIA

I--

CHARLOTTE

How about you decide which one you want to be? Victim or villain.

LYDIA

That's not how this works.

CHARLOTTE

If I don't press charges. If you settle with Amy. All of this goes away.

LYDIA

Yes, it does.

CHARLOTTE

So. You decide.

Charlotte gingerly places the photo of her mother inside her bag, and then packs up a few more things. She is about to leave, when she puts down the bag and turns back to Lydia.

CHARLOTTE

Did I make you feel beautiful?

LYDIA

(ashamed)

Yes.

CHARLOTTE

You made me feel that way, too. Not just in the photographs. But especially in them. Do you know why these pictures are so good?

Lydia shakes her head

Because one of us is telling the truth. And one of us is lying. In every shot. These pictures are the point of contact. Tension. And release.

She lays the photos on the bed.

Take a look and tell me who you think you are.

Charlotte watches Lydia pore over the images for a moment and then leaves. Lydia is alone.

Blackout

SCENE 9

Empty picture frames create a box in which Charlotte dresses and primps. She is illuminated by bright, white light. Beyond the box is dim, red lighting, like a darkroom. Lydia is barely visible, sitting in alone her bed, reading a magazine. A KNOCK.

CHARLOTTE

It's open!

Henry enters

CHARLOTTE

I'm just about ready.

HENRY

No rush. The caterers just arrived.

CHARLOTTE

Oh yay! I can't wait to see them.

HENRY

I had to tell them to scale back on all the staff they wanted to bring. They're all so proud of you.

CHARLOTTE

Or jealous.

HENRY

Those feelings coexist more often than one might expect. Get used to it. How do you feel?

CHARLOTTE

Sober. Scared.

HENRY

That's good. New review posted today. Have you seen this one?

CHARLOTTE

Read it to me while I finish my makeup.

A few sentences in, Henry's voice fades and is replaced by Lydia's.

HENRY/LYDIA

"Newcomer Charlotte Bratton's must-see debut is an implication, an exorcism, and a crime. Protege of the former queen of downtown queer aesthetic Lydia Marks, Bratton's photographs lead viewers far beyond Marks' distant and distancing gaze, placing herself in the center of the frame. Though viewers, to spare themselves guilt, may hope otherwise, there's little doubt that the sex acts portrayed featuring the underage Bratton are the genuine article. At first glance, the images invite moral outrage. A close-up of Bratton's face, wet with tears, and a woman's thumb in her mouth as though to pacify her. A diptych of city-window voyeurism paired with Bratton's bare and bruised back. Her mouth in ecstatic flush mirroring the red fingermarks on her slender throat. It is her ferocious yet fragile gaze and the assurance that it is her finger on shutter that partially allays anxieties of bystander guilt. Where most attempts to communicate the visceral power of sadomasochistic submission flounder as cheap theater or freshman gender studies essays, Bratton makes a clear statement as to whom is truly in control. The only exegesis required: the artist as a young woman offering up the tender flesh of her throat to the hand of an unseen lover. If one is to make sense of what it means to be a brazen, modern, relentlessly sexual artist, Bratton, and only Bratton, is the one to watch."

HENRY

Are you ready?

CHARLOTTE

No.

Blackout.