stare into the sky until we're blind

by les cousins dangereux

Summary

Chloe Beale has one rule. Just one. Had she known that the odd combination of hair dye, a crappy old convertible, sixty-plus hours of driving, a mix CD, and one Beca Mitchell would lead to her breaking it, she never would have suggested going on this stupid road trip in the first place.

Notes

This is for Kay. I’m pretty sure she never thought I would finish it, since she suggested a fic based off tatianamaslamy’s roadtrip gifset on tumblr, approximately 10 months ago.

In fact, this is something of a combination of a few prompts; I was also asked, some time ago, to write Chloe as she’s sometimes represented in fandom—as someone who enjoys casual relationships more than anything super serious. The challenge was to write this, as well as a Beca who would have to be the one to initiate things. So thanks to these prompters as well!

I have to save my biggest thanks, however, for Midground, my awesome beta and to perpetuallyfive/sexonastick for being ever encouraging. Seriously, this thing would not have been posted without them.
Chloe Beale has one rule.

Or rather one rule that she actually follows, because the rest are like New Year’s resolutions or Lenten promises—observed only at their conception, when it’s convenient, or when she’s feeling especially motivated.

So, Chloe Beale really only has one rule and it is this: do not fall in love.

That’s the important thing to remember. That is at the heart of understanding it all.

[‘It’ being Chloe Beale herself; ‘it’ being what happens when you combine Chloe Beale, Beca Mitchell, sixty-plus hours of driving, and a small, old convertible; ‘it’ being the series of events entitled ‘How Beca Mitchell Broke Chloe Beale Into A Thousand Million Billion Pieces (More Numerous Than the Stars in the Sky) With Five Words, Five Syllables, and a Confused Smile’.]

The point is Chloe Beale does not fall in love.

She won’t.

She can’t.

Until she could. Until she would. Until she did.

---

Her first word is ‘twinkle’

(or something that sounds a lot like it)
and it’s followed shortly but another ‘twinkle’
and then a ‘little’
(that sounds more like ‘wittle’,
but her parents count it anyway)

Because her first words are the beginning of a song.

(She doesn’t remember it herself,
but she remembers her mom and dad telling the story
about a thousand times before she reaches eight.)

It’s really not much of a surprise;
her parents sing to her almost more than they speak,
and Twinkle Twinkle Little Star is their favorite.

Her father starts
and her mother joins in
and they perform the most beautiful duet,
over and over,
voices harmonizing in a way that awes
those who are fortunate enough to listen.

When Chloe is three,
she is able to join in.

Her parents’ eyes are bright when they finish
and maybe that’s how it starts.

Maybe that’s the beginning of it all.
Or maybe it starts like this:

“God, Chloe! You need to get your life together.”

It’s funny how often things do start with that; the friendly but forceful ultimatum that propels the heroine into a soul-searching journey that ends in her discovering herself (and usually some sort of rugged man to go on the side, but maybe Chloe’s basing things a bit too much on the cowboy ‘literature’ her grandmother is fond of).

Life, Chloe has always thought, is not much like a movie, but more like a book written by an amateur author—an author that doesn’t quite know where they are going with their story, but hits some of the main archetypal plot points and storylines along the way, simply out of dumb luck. It makes for a sometimes underwhelming tale, but at least it’s not too often clichéd in the long run.

But Aubrey is effective in her role; the scowling and beautiful blonde with her proper posture and upturned nose, all of which combined tell Chloe that she should feel bad about sneaking into their apartment at 6:00 AM, wearing her clothing from the night before and reeking of liquor in a way that only comes from spending the night in a frat boy’s bed.

“Oh, give me a break, Bree,” she says before her roommate can get out another word.

“You’re not a freshman anymore, Chloe. Don’t you think you should have grown out of this shit by now?”

“We won Nationals. My exams are over. And I’m all set for grad school next year. What’s wrong with me having a little fun? Lighten up!”

“Seriously, Chloe, you’ve done this more than once over the past few weeks. Don’t you think it’s a little excessive? I’m just… looking out for you. You know that.”

She does know—because Aubrey, despite her faults and occasional moments of insanity (see: *Captaining the Bellas*) is the best and most solid friend Chloe’s ever had—practically family at this point—and like any good big sister would, Aubrey looks out for her in a way that is at once sweet and frustrating.

“I just think it’s time you got away from this sort of thing. That’s all. You deserve better, Chlo. You really do.”

Chloe doesn’t think it has anything to do with ‘deserving’, because it isn’t as though she’s being treated badly, or being unsafe, and she doesn’t want anything more serious right now (or ever). But she can see Aubrey’s point, as she usually can when the blonde delivers her concern in the calm, reasonable tone that had been Audrey Posen’s forte before the disastrous events of their junior year.

A change might be nice; a chance to focus on herself.
“Maybe you’re right, Aubrey.” Chloe gives the girl a hug (quick but earnest) before heading to her room to sleep on it. “A change could be good.”

---

_This probably isn’t what Aubrey had had in mind_, Chloe thinks as she sits in the chair at her favorite salon, but she grins at her reflection anyways and gives her stylist a wink. The woman flushes a bit, and Chloe thinks about breaking her new vow right then and there, but stays strong and leaves without a phone number.

And when she goes to the used car lot and drops a chunk of her savings on an old Firebird Trans Am with fading paint and a top that doesn’t _quite_ close all the way, she _knows_ it’s not what Aubrey had been talking about either. But Chloe thinks the gold convertible is the greatest thing in the world and falls in love with it at first sight (inanimate objects, thankfully, do not break rule number one).

Change is change, right?

Of course, Aubrey’s eyes nearly pop out of her skull when she comes down to the parking lot of their apartment (after several obnoxious honks and three text messages), but Chloe thinks that’s all part of the fun—keeping Aubrey on her toes.

“Chloe! What the—you bought a—you cut off all—you dyed your hair!”

The newly-blonde girl beams, stepping out of her new (old) car and sliding her hand along its side.

“Yup! Change, right?”

“This isn’t exactly what I had in mind!” Aubrey almost hisses, but not maliciously—Chloe can see the small smile threatening to break out on her friend’s face. “I only meant you should stop sleeping with douchebag frat boys!”

Chloe laughs, because she’s always enjoyed surprising people, but surprising Aubrey—who is typically unflappable—is something that’s especially amusing.

“Well, I’m doing that too!”

“But a car, Chloe? I mean, really? Honestly, I don’t even know what’s going on in your head right now.”

“I’m a woman of mystery!” Chloe says with a wink. “But really, Bree, I just wanted to get away!”

“And go _where_?”

She replies with a shrug, and Aubrey shakes her head, completely bemused. “You don’t know?”

“Nope! Somewhere far though! Somewhere exciting! Somewhere that—” She pauses. “—Shines.”

“Somewhere without frat boys,” Aubrey adds (because she’s always had something of a one-track mind).

“Sure, Bree. Sure. I’d invite you to come and make sure, but…”
“But I can’t exactly turn down my internship to cross the country with you on a whim. You aren’t going to go alone, though, are you?”

Chloe grins, because this part she knows—this part she already has all planned out. And she’s pretty sure Aubrey’s not going to like it too much, but that’s just part of the fun. “Of course not. I know exactly who to ask.”

It’s a sign that they’ve been best friends for a while when Aubrey immediately looks wary.

---

Chloe’s already half-packed (with the help of Aubrey, who’s been throwing ‘essentials’ into her room at random intervals throughout the day) by the time she realizes she still needs to actually call her intended road trip buddy and let her know that they’ll be leaving the day after graduation. Because, no, there will not be any asking involved. Chloe doesn’t really do the whole ‘asking’ thing.

She finds her phone underneath a pile of shirts and quickly unlocks it, clicking to her favorites and tapping the second name there. Her call is answered before the end of the first ring, and it makes her smile, because it’s so seemingly uncharacteristic, the way this ‘alt’ girl always answers her calls with unabashed speed.

“Hey.”

“Hey.” It’s the first time she pauses since the idea popped into her head, but it’s not hesitation. “Wanna do something crazy with me, Bec?”

And Beca—Beca who took months to become comfortable enough to return her hugs, who still rolls her eyes when Chloe plants a smacking kiss on her cheek, who has this weird rule about never returning calls (that aren’t from Chloe) unless an hour has passed—doesn’t hesitate either.

“Sure.”

---

“You’re—you cut off – you dyed your hair!”

Chloe imagines Beca would probably be mortified to learn how similar her reaction is to Aubrey’s earlier one, so she doesn’t mention it. But it does make her smile.

“What? No, ‘congratulations on your graduation, Chloe’? No ‘I’m so proud of you, Chloe’ or ‘it doesn’t even surprise me a little bit that you’re graduating with honors today, Chloe’?”

Beca smirks, and the look of shock disappears under the more typical expression. “You haven’t graduated yet. Don’t get your hopes up, dude. I still think they’re going to find out you’re not worthy and pull you out of line right before you get your diploma.”

“You have no idea how a college graduation works, do you?”
“Nope.” Beca’s smirk turns into an overly cheesy grin and she actually *bounces* on the balls of her feet. Chloe has a feeling she’s being (gently) mocked. “You know what I also have no idea about?”

“Hmm?”

It’s then that Beca drops both the smile and her shoulders, relaxing into her more typical blasé stance and expression. The dramatic change makes Chloe giggle over Beca’s next words, spoken as dryly as possible.

“What this ‘something crazy’ I’m supposedly doing with you actually involves.”

The whole thing is super cute; she manages to resist reaching out to pinch Beca’s cheek, but only barely. As it is, she merely rocks forward slightly, smile stretching her face.

“*Great segue, Beca,*” Chloe replies, laughter still creeping into her tone. “And I told you to pack enough clothes for a couple weeks!”

“Um, yeah. That’s not a lot of information, Chloe.”

“I know! Isn’t it fun? The mystery? The excitement? The…”

“…complete lack of planning and high potential for disaster?”

With a grin, Chloe leans forward to give Beca a quick peck on the cheek. “That’s right! I think I’m supposed to be lining up. See you after?”

“Yeah, but…” Chloe flits away, waving over her shoulder. “But seriously! What the hell are we doing?”

She shouts her reply back before losing sight of a gaping Beca in a sea of black robes.

“Road trip!”

---

*They go on their first real vacation when Chloe is four.*

*It’s to Disney World and Chloe spends the entire three and a half hour drive bouncing in her car seat.*

*Once there, she falls in love with Mickey Mouse; a photo is taken of the adoring redheaded child wrapped completely around an agreeable Mickey’s leg.*
What the picture does not show is the twenty minutes it takes to separate Chloe from said leg.

On the way home she sings ‘It’s A Small World’ until she passes out, clutching her new Mickey doll.

---

“Wham! Bam! Thank you, man! Get inside my fuckin' gold Trans Am!”

Chloe pops out from around the open trunk to find Beca grinning like a fool as she takes in Chloe’s new wheels, and she feels the wave of warmth flush over her that she has come to associate with Beca letting down her walls to let one of those unrestrained grins loose.

“Really, Beca? We’re starting this road trip with that particular musical selection?”

“Um, excuse you. Ke$ha is a treasure!”

“‘Don’t be a little bitch with your chit chat, just show me where your dick’s at?’” Chloe quotes, an eyebrow rising.

She receives a widening grin in response. “A treasure.”

The feeling of contentment grows in Chloe as she watches Beca—defending Ke$ha with a crooked grin (that may or may not be ironic—sometimes it’s hard to tell), a duffle bag slung over her shoulder—and she simply can’t help but skip around the back of the car to bring herself closer to the brunette. And once she’s there, it’s really impossible not to give the girl an enthusiastic hug.

“Oomph! Chloe!” Beca laughs in that awkward way of hers, but she drops her bag to the ground to return the hug (carefully).

“I’m just so glad you’re coming with me.” Chloe pulls back, keeping her hands on the younger girl’s shoulders, and feels her chest expand with the joy of it all. “This is going to be amazing.”

Beca opens her mouth to… agree, maybe, and there’s something in her eyes—a spark—the nature of which Chloe cannot quite define. But then the brunette smirks and it’s gone.

“‘Come on climb into my golden cockpit. Love you ‘till you’re seeing stars and stripes,’” she sings instead, leaning back slightly, and Chloe giggles in delight.
She’s not sure why, but she feels oddly relieved by obvious redirection.

“Look at you, getting in the mood. Well, come on then! We’ve got places to go!”

Beca’s eyes roll as she grabs her bag, but her lips curl as Chloe bumps their hips together in the next moment. “Places of an undisclosed nature.”

“Not anymore! I know where we’re going today!”

“Do share. I’m assuming I’m going to be doing some of the driving after all.”

“Stop one is…. Drum roll please!”

“Yeah. I’m not doing that, dude.”

Chloe sticks out her tongue and drops Beca’s bag, freeing her hands to perform her own drum roll on the side of the car. Beca tries to hide it, but her disapproving look shifts pretty quickly into a grin.

“Pensacola!”

Beca’s face scrunches. It’s kind of really adorable. “…Where?”

“Florida! The Florida panhandle, to be exact.”

“…Why?”

“Well,” Chloe says drawing out the ‘L’ with a grin and popping out a hip. “Aubrey’s cousin owns a gorgeous condo on the beach there and she said we could crash there for a day or two or three with her and her BF.”

“That sounds awesome, actually. I hope you’re not expecting me to sun tan though, because I swear I turn into a lobster after about five seconds with anything other than SPF 5000.”

“We can do whatever you want, Bec! Only—”

“Oh no.”

Chloe forges ahead (even takes a step closer for emphasis) despite Beca’s cagey expression.

“—only there’s this one tiny detail that you should probably be clued in because, yes, it does involve you slightly and…”

“Chloe!”

“You’re gonna have to pretend to be my girlfriend.”

“What?” Beca’s eyes go wide and Chloe feels her bottom lip jut out in response.

“Woah. Calm down there. Jeez, I feel like I should be offended.”

“Oh, no. No. Don’t you dare turn this into some kind of guilt trip after—”

“—You basically screamed in horror after finding out you were going to have to pretend for like, a day, tops, that you were madly in love with me? Yeah, how I could possibly turn that into a guilt trip of any kind?”
Beca groans, but there’s a smile behind it, and a giggle slips out from Chloe’s lips. “Oh my god, Chloe.”

“There’s a perfectly good reason.”

There’s a pause as Beca waits expectantly, with an eyebrow raised. Eventually though, she gives in and asks with a sigh. “And that reason is…?”

“Okay, so Aubrey’s cousin’s boyfriend’s best friend Kaidan lives with them at their condo, which you would think would be weird but it actually works out really well for them, Ted Mosby style, and so he’ll obviously be there, and, see, whenever Aubrey and I visit—which we’ve done every summer, B.T. Dubbs, because seriously, Beca, this place is amazing and…”

Beca sighs. Again. (It might be the third or fourth time. Chloe likes to think of them as ‘fond’ sighs. She doesn’t think that’s too much of a stretch.)

“Chloe! The point!”

“Right! So Kaidan is basically Adonis in mortal form—he has, like, an eight pack and that chiseled jaw line that you know I can’t say ‘no’ to, and he’s kind of, sort of really into me, and we kind of, sort of hook up every time I’m there for the summer, but this trip is about the opposite of that, right? So, since Kaidan’s actually this really great guy, he totally wouldn’t go for me if I was there with my totally awesome girlfriend who I was crazy into, and thus the problem would be solved and I would be super, super grateful to you, and even Aubrey thinks it’s basically a good idea and I swear to you, Bec, if you don’t help me I will do that boy like a crossword puzzle and that will be 100% on your conscious and I don’t think…”

She receives more than a sigh this time. It’s a full-fledged gesture of exasperation—hands flying in the air and head falling back.

“Oh my god. Yes, fine. Whatever. Please stop. My head.”

With a grin, Chloe gives Beca a quick peck on the cheek, swooping down to once again grab her bag and skipping off towards the back of her car. “Thanks, babe!”

Beca rolls her eyes. “Don’t think I don’t realize what you did there.”

“Hmm?”

“The whole distracting-me-with-all-that-rambling thing. You’re not as subtle as you think, Beale.”

Chloe’s glad the open trunk obscures her face; her expression shifts into something that is close to surprise, and it’s not something she wants to put on display.

Not because Beca is wrong, but rather the opposite.

And she wonders how it’s possible that this self-declared ‘emotionally stunted’ girl is the first one to call her out it.

---

“If you wanna go and take a ride with me, we three-wheelin in the fo’ with the gold D’s. Oh why do
I live this way?"

Beca isn’t singly loudly. In fact, it’s barely audible over the roar of the wind (Chloe has a feeling the novelty of road tripping in a convertible is going to wear off long before they make it to… wherever their final destination will be, but she’ll never admit it). But barely audible is still audible and she can’t hide her grin as she turns to watch the brunette as she bobs her head to the beat with her ‘gangsta’ face in place (the one that Chloe is pretty sure Beca doesn’t even realize she’s making).

“Hey! Must be the—” Beca’s eyes come up and her neck twists and her expression closes as she catches sight of the look Chloe is giving her. Chloe mourns the change (and the end of her unintentional serenading). “…. What?”

“I didn’t take you for the type of girl that sings on a road trip. Is this the kind of musical fantastic-ness I can expect to be treated to during our entire time together? Because if so, I have to warn you, I might end up falling deeply, madly, and irrevocably in love with you.” With a wide grin, she flutters her eyelashes exaggeratedly. “Just throwing that out there.”

Beca flushes bright red, and for a second Chloe wonders what might be behind it, other than standard embarrassment.

“Shut up,” she mumbles. “Are you going to sing it with me or what?”

“Is that a request from the Beca Mitchell for more cheesy singing? Are you feeling well? Do you have a temperature? Is the fever making you delirious?” Chloe reaches over to feel Beca’s forehead, but the brunette squawks (a hilarious noise in itself) and pulls away, flailing about more than Chloe would have thought possible in the confined space of a car seat.

“Gah! Watch the road, dude!”

“Oh, calm down. I am an excellent driver. I’ve never gotten a ticket.”

“…I’ve seen you talk your way out two tickets,” Beca returns immediately, rolling her eyes in what Chloe thinks is an overly dramatic manner.

“Which means that I haven’t gotten any.”

“But it means that—you know what, let’s just sing.”

Beca cranks up the volume and starts to sing (the car handles a heavy bass surprisingly well, speakers only rattling slightly with the noise) and when Chloe joins in (‘if you wanna go and get high with me; smoke an L in the back of the Benzie’) the brunette seemingly can’t hold back her grin or her head bob.

And Chloe can’t quite stop the way her heart gives an extra little thud (sporadic and unfamiliar and unwanted—like a hiccup) in that moment.

---

Her parents make each other mixtapes.
It’s the late 90s and actual mixtapes are being phased out,

but her parents still make them,

like lovesick teenagers.

Chloe is five,

sitting in her car seat when ‘Endless Love’ comes on

and her mom groans and

tries

to eject the tape.

But Chloe’s dad is too quick

and his crooning is

too effective.

Because Chloe’s mom grins,

despite herself,

when he starts with:

“My love,

there’s only one of you in my life.”

And Chloe doesn’t know the words,

but she giggles and hums along

until the whole car is

full

of music.
(And so much love.)
“I thought you said Aubrey’s cousin lives in a condo.”

“She does.”

A beat of silence.

“Then what is that?”

Chloe puts the car in park and lifts her sunglasses onto her head, glancing up at the residence in question.

“A condo.”

“Chloe. That’s a freaking mansion.”

Her eyes move from the condo to Beca and back to the condo. “Fine. Luxury condo. Tic Tac?” She holds out the box with a shake of her hand, rattling its orange contents.

Beca rolls her eyes, but takes one of the proffered mints. Chloe pops two into her mouth with a crooked smile.

“That luxury condo is bigger than all the houses I’ve ever lived in… combined.”

“Yeah, well, it’s got great beds. That’s all I really care about.” Chloe adds with a wink.

“Are you—?”

“Getting into character? Sure am!”

“Oh, god,” Beca groans, actually burying her face in her hands, which—rude. Chloe tries not to take offense.

“That’s right, honey bun. Get ready for me to fake rock your world!”

“Dude, Chloe—”

“Yes, darling?”

“You aren’t seriously—”

Chloe’s eyes flicker away from the brunette for just a moment, catching sight of a blur of movement out of the corner of her eye. Her squeal of excitement cuts Beca off quite effectively (making the girl jump in her seat at the sudden noise).

“Oh my god! Denee!”

She’s out of the car before the last drawn-out syllable leaves her lips; the car door squeaks in protest at the force she employs when throwing it open.

“Oh my god! You’re blonde! Can you rock every color of hair? I mean seriously, girl! You look gorgeous!”
“Oh, do continue to shower me in praise.” Chloe teases, bouncing a little as she returns the hug. “I knew you were my favorite Posen for a reason.”

“Ugh. Probably because Aubrey is the biggest lame-o to walk the earth! How could she miss our annual beach getaway! God! I was worried that you wouldn’t make it here without her! I can’t even tell you how glad I am that you didn’t feel like you needed that slut-bucket around to make the trip down here.”

“Denee!”

“What? It’s a term of endearment, Gingie… or, god! What am I going to even call you now? But whatever. You know I love that overachieving bitch. And the important thing is that you’re here!”

“Thank goodness.” The voice comes from behind Denee’s shoulder (which Chloe has to stand on her tiptoes to peak over). “What would we all do without all the drunken show tune singing?”

“Kaidan!”

“Hey, Red.”

Chloe pulls away from Denee, and pouts, but it’s not very convincing; her eyes sparkle as she locks eyes with the man before her—with disheveled dark hair, a few days of stubble, and a lopsided grin, Kaidan is effortlessly good-looking, and she feels the familiar spike of interest upon viewing his form.

“I’m starting to feel like my red hair was the main part of my identity around here.”

“Nah, no worries. I’ve got a thing for blondes too.” Kaidan says, his grin stretching.

Denee smacks his shoulder. “Whatever! You told me blonde hair looked like straw once! It hurt my feelings deeply.”

“Ah, so I did. Maybe it’s just Chloe, then.”

It’s easy to fall back into this; the casual winks and uncomplicated flirtation. Chloe’s already starting to wonder if maybe she can make an exception to her new stance on casual flings when she hears the car door slam behind her, and she’s brought back to reality in the form of her co-traveler awkwardly moving around the front of the Trans Am.

It’s with affection and gratitude that she watches the girl come forward, one hand playing with the bottom of her flannel shirt. Because Beca had come with her on this grand adventure simply because Chloe had asked her to, and what need did Chloe have for casual and uncomplicated when she had Beca Mitchell?

The thought should have triggered an alarm bell or two (or seven), but Chloe is too busy thinking about how fun it’s going to be, making Beca squirm with all the affection she would lay on her over the next couple of days.

“Beca!” Chloe grabs the brunette by the hand and pulls her forward, wrapping an arm around the girl’s waist as she turns back to Kaidan and Denee. “Guys, this Beca!”

“And Beca is…” Denee drawls, her eyebrow rising just a bit as she watches Chloe’s fingers deliberately slip under the hem of Beca’s flannel to stroke at the skin underneath.

“My girlfriend,” Chloe finishes happily. “Who doesn’t much like PDA,” she adds with a wide grin,
feeling Beca tense up as her fingers trace the brunette’s hipbone.

“Oh my god, Chloe,” Beca murmurs, her face bright red.

But she doesn’t pull away. Chloe counts this as a major success. Especially when it’s combined with the absolutely shocked look on the faces of both Denee and Kaidan.

She has a feeling she’s going to have way too much fun over the next two days.

---

“So. Girlfriend, huh?” Kaidan says—not unkindly—the next time they’re alone (which is not five minutes later, when Beca mumbles something about needing to use the restroom, and Denee leaves to show her where it is).

“Yup!”

“I thought you weren’t ‘into’ relationships.” The words are not said with jealousy or accusation, and Chloe feels like giving the guy a hug, just for being so great. “What changed?”

“I met Beca,” Chloe replies, without any thought at all.

Because it’s true, in a way. Things had changed because of Beca—she had changed. Maybe not quite in the way she was implying to Kaidan—but in a way that was no less significant. When Chloe had told Aubrey that Beca made the Bellas better, she hadn’t simply been speaking in general terms—Beca made Chloe better too, in a way that is almost frightening (all that honesty and courage)—and for the first time, Chloe takes a second, after speaking these words, to contemplate that.

“Yeah. Apparently.”

Chloe blinks, drawn from her thoughts, and searches Kaidan’s face to place the odd tint to his tone. “What?”

“You sort of faded out for a second there. You really like this girl, huh? She’s the real deal for you, isn’t she?”

“I—yeah. I do. She is.”

There’s a real skill involved in lying—but Chloe’s always had a natural inclination for it. (It’s in her genes.) It’s in her bubbly personality too, she thinks—people tend to associate a chipper smile with the inability to deceive. It’s a silly mistake, but one that Chloe’s never corrected.

The funny thing about lying though, is that it’s actually all about truth—because the best lies are the ones that have just enough verity in them to promote believability.

“Well, I’m happy for you, Red. Really. And I’m looking forward to getting to know her.”

“Yeah—me too. You’ll like her.”

But Chloe can’t help but wonder; how much reality can you infuse in a lie before it becomes true?
Her cat dies when she’s six.

His name is Mrs. Fluffy Bottom and Chloe cries for days.

Her mom and dad tell her over and over again that it’ll all be okay.

And Chloe tells herself, day after day that it’ll be okay until suddenly, it is.

Chloe gets a new cat a few months later and her name is Mr. Princess Muffin.

When Chloe is six, she learns how lies are not simply something told to others.
“The beach, Chloe? Now? Really? We just got here. And it’s like a million degrees outside! Have you seen this skin?”

“You bet I have,” says Chloe with a wink.

Beca flushes in a way that mirrors the color she would likely turn after too much sun exposure.

“We pretty much met in the shower,” Chloe explains to Kaidan and Denee as they lounge on the leather couches in the downstairs living room, and Beca turns a darker shade of red (which Chloe finds adorable). “She was singing my lady jam.”

“Chloe!”

“Isn’t it cute how embarrassed she gets?”

“You’re the worst.” Beca says, but doesn’t pull away—not even a little bit—when Chloe intertwines their fingers. Chloe feels her smile soften (from cheeky grin to fond gaze).

“Oh, don’t even. You love me.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

It occurs to her then, how it might look—this natural teasing with Beca—because she catches the look of incredulity exchanged between Kaidan and Denee. And it’s different—this sort of flirting—when viewed through the false lenses she’s given the two of them by declaring herself the steady girlfriend of one Beca Mitchell.

“No more excuses,” she says with a bright smile, hoping to interrupt the thoughts she knows are running through Denee and Kaidan’s minds (and more importantly, her own). “It’s perfect outside and we’re hitting up the beach. And you better have packed that red bikini I helped you pick out, Bec.”

Beca opens her mouth and then closes it; the look on her face is not one Chloe can easily decipher, but she thinks it might hold a bit of displeasure. It makes her feel a pang of regret—she’s used to getting her way when it came to downtime activities (even Aubrey was apt to defer to her judgment about such things) but Beca is so the opposite of all that typical fun stuff, and she doesn’t want to drown the other girl out with her own notions on what fun entails.

Reflexively, she shifts closer, her fingers wrapping around Beca’s forearm—tips brushing over the grasshopper tattoo found there.

“But if you don’t feel like the beach we can do something else. You know I’m just teasing, Bec.”

The brunette smirks a bit, regaining her unconcerned appearance in a flash, and Chloe thinks that she might just have been played, more than a little bit.
“I know. I just figured you should grovel a little, babe.”

Chloe gasps in mock outrage (but truly, she’s rather impressed by the deception). “Well then! Now you have no choice! Go! Get changed!”

The way Beca sticks her tongue out at her as she stalks off to their (yes, their) bedroom isn’t exactly dignified, but Chloe finds it pretty damn adorable anyways.

“Did you really meet by jumping into her shower?” Kaidan asks, his grin wide, and Chloe tears herself away from the sight of Beca walking away.

“We’d met once before,” she says, unsure why she feels the need to defend herself. “And it wasn’t like that. I just wanted to sing with her.”

It’s the truth, and Chloe doesn’t think anything has changed, despite pretending differently; she still just wants to sing with Beca—simply partake in something innocent and beautiful and untainted by things impure and dishonest and unstable. She just wants to sing with Beca, and not let anything else get in the way.

So it’s good that this—this whole fun, but probably ill-advised game of pretend—is only temporary and only a façade.

Denee shakes her head, and Chloe feels a brief moment of panic, because it’s almost as though the woman is responding to her thoughts.

“Oh, Chloe. You’re something else.”

---

Beca, it turns out, has packed her red bikini—the one Chloe had coerced her into buying on one of their random (and in Beca’s case, partially forced) shopping trips, but never actually seen on the brunette.

Which is unfortunate. Because Chloe is sure that it’s the shock factor of seeing Beca in something so sexy that has her staring at one of her very best friends with no small amount of interest. And Chloe’s good at recognizing emotions in herself, and rather skilled at controlling them too. But this—this is something that she’s having trouble with, in the worst way possible.

“So now what?”

“Uhhh. Uhmmm.”

“Well, I never thought I’d see the day,” Denee drawls, and Chloe, vaguely realizing she’s in for some serious teasing, does her best to draw her eyes away from the sight of Beca finishing the removal of her tank and shorts.

She fails, of course. Fails really, really spectacularly.

“Hmmmm?”

“Chloe Beale. Struck dumb. Without the ability to produce even a single word. This is glorious. We really need to keep you around, Beca.”
“What are you talking a—”

“What, Chloe cuts in, eyes jerking upwards to Beca’s face. “Nothing. Let’s—uh—let’s go swim. Swimming is good.” She whips off her cover-up in a fluid motion. “And, uhm—sunscreen. You need sunscreen. I can rub it on your back or—”

Beca clears her throat, and the way she looks at Chloe is different—incredulous, or something.

“Uh—nah—I mean, it’s cloudy. Sort of. I guess. So let’s—uh—let’s just get in the water.”

“Oh, you two,” Denee practically coos. “You’re too precious. Really. Still getting all dry mouthed around each other.”

Chloe’s eyes snap to Beca at Denee’s comment, looking for something to refute the woman’s statement. But the brunette’s eyes flit about, focusing on the sky, sand, or waves at sporadic intervals, and an odd notion—a reasonable, but unexplored explanation—pricks at Chloe’s consciousness.

She blinks once, and it’s like hitting the reset button on a device that’s malfunctioning; her brain once again works in a way that she deems acceptable.

“Don’t be jealous, Denee,” she says with a wink. “Just because I have a super sexy girlfriend with an awesome bod doesn’t mean that I’m better than you. By too much.”

“Har har. Weren’t you going to go soak yourself in some salt water, fool?”

“Yeah, yeah. You’re getting off easy, Posen. You’re lucky I’m distracted by better things,” she adds with a grin. She reaches out for Beca, who, without much expression at all (which is, really, an expression in itself), pulls her to her feet. Chloe keeps their hands linked and tugs the younger woman towards the water, her grin growing. “Otherwise, you’d be getting a verbal lashing right about now.”

“Sure, Beale, whatever. Go ahead—retreat. Scurry off.”

Chloe just shakes her head and, wordlessly, pulls Beca into the water until they’re past waist-depth, where the waves splash up against their chests and into their mouths.

There’s something about the ocean that’s always fascinated Chloe (fascinated and terrified, maybe) because there’s a sort of endlessness to it that seems both unknowable and unconquerable. And that—that immeasurability, that mystery—it can be overwhelming. It can make you want to pull back from the brink before infinity swallows you whole.

Maybe there’s some of that in Beca’s eyes when Chloe looks over. Or at least, some of the same feeling that notion produces. And she doesn’t want to ask (because she doesn’t want to know the meaning behind it), but it’s Beca, so how can she not?

“You okay, Becs?”

Beca smiles in a way that Chloe recognizes as rare—it’s a bit too soft, a bit too genuine—and doesn’t completely mask the look that makes Chloe’s heartbeat become slightly irregular.

It simply makes it blend in a bit better.

“Yeah. I’m just… perfect.”
It’s not the answer she’s expecting, and she’s not sure why she suddenly feels the need to look away.

Either way, she’s glad when the next wave crashes into them, nearly knocking her off her feet, because then Beca is laughing, and the teasing smile replaces her previous expression.

Chloe can handle that a whole lot better.

---

*Her family is a happy one.*

*When she tells her parents she loves them,*  
*she always tacks on ‘to infinity and beyond’.*

*Her mom tells her she might*  
*explode*  
*with all that love*  
*(so she ought to be careful).*

*And her dad laughs*  
*and tells her mom to*  
*run for cover*  
*when he grabs Chloe and squeezes her tight,*  
*just in case*  
*she does.*

---
“This is totally your fault,” Beca groans, her face buried in a pillow, several hours later.

“For the record, I offered you sunscreen and you said no. So let’s not start throwing the blame around when it rests solely on your shoulders.” Chloe winces slightly. “Your ‘very, very sunburnt and likely going to peel in a couple days’ shoulders.”

“Let’s go to the beach’, you said. ‘It’ll be fun,’ you said.”

“… ‘Here’s some sunscreen’, I said.”

“Ugh.” Sinking further into the mattress (onto which she had gently laid herself on promptly after returning from the beach), Beca really isn’t all too threatening. “What kind of friend are you? I’m not feeling any sympathy from you at all, over here.”

Chloe has to fight a smile, because is kind of adorable when Beca is physically uncomfortable; she’s like a slightly-larger-than-normal petulant toddler.

“I’m gonna draw a cool bath for you, okay, Becs? It’ll make you feel a little better.”

Lifting her head from the bed Beca lets out another groan, her face a picture of relief. “Really?”

“Yeah, babe. And I’ll get Denee to ask her boyfriend to pick up some aloe on the way home. You’ll feel fine in no time.”

Beca drops her head back down on the bed, face first, and her next words are little more than a mumble. “I seriously love you right now, dude.”

It’s surprising, the way the panic rushes at her, despite the playfulness with which the words are said. But she shakes it off quickly, with a quick swallow that does little to alleviate her suddenly dry mouth.

“I can tell by the way you tack on the ‘dude’. Very romantic.”

“Ugh. Chloe!” Beca whines.

“Just teasing. Shesh. I don’t even know if you deserve my girlfriend-ly attentiveness.”

“Chloe!” Beca actually lifts her head for that one, face all scrunched up and red.

“Yeah, yeah, okay. Bath.”

It’s probably not the best of ideas to drop a kiss on Beca’s (burning) forehead (for several reasons), but Chloe can’t really help herself, and does so anyways. She’s rewarded with an almost gentle smile though, so it’s worth it.

---

Richard (Denee’s boyfriend) has always been the most stoic member of the group, so it’s kind of a surprise to Chloe when he walks into the apartment carrying what looks like 50 pounds of liquor in a brown bag that’s practically the size of Beca.

“Richie Rich! Have you undergone some kind of personality change since I was last here?”
He laughs and places the bag on the floor before striding over to give her a quick and slightly awkward hug over the back of the couch.

“Yes. It’s an unforeseen side effect of being a Junior Associate at a law firm. How are you, Chloe?”

“Good, good. Can’t complain.”

“Lucky you,” Beca mumbles from her spot on the couch next to her, and Chloe has to hide a smile.

“Ah, yes, and this charming woman is Beca. She’s normally a lot less—well, not less surly, but at least a lot less red.”

“Har har,” Beca groans, but pushes up off the couch to shake hands with Richard. “Hi, nice to meet you. Please ignore my lobster-like appearance.”

“Denee mentioned you got a little sun,” Richard says, his face sympathetic. “I picked up some aloe for you. It’s in with the all the liquor.”

“Dude, you just became my favorite person in this room.”

“Really now?” Chloe says with an arch of her brow. “You might want to rethink that to include the person who was going to offer to rub that aloe all over you.”

“Er—”

Richard laughs and plops down next to Denee on a separate couch, planting a kiss on her cheek. “I see you haven’t changed a bit, Chloe.”

“I don’t know about that,” Kaidan interjects with a sly grin.

“Yeah, Beca is Chloe’s girlfriend, hon. Her steady, monogamous-relationship-involving, girlfriend.”

Seeing Richard’s eyebrows shoot up in surprise, Chloe groans a little. “You guys make me sound like the biggest slut on the planet.”

“No,” Denee begins, her eyes glinting. “You just always made it very clear you never wanted to settle down. This is a kind of 180 from that, Gingie. You’ve got to understand where we’re coming from. Watching you with Beca is like watching a lion suddenly decide to get up and have tea with an antelope.”

Beca bites at the inside of her cheek. “Uh—am I the antelope in this image?”

“’Fraid so, sweetie.”

“You guys are so mean to me,” Chloe says with a groan. “Besides, that lovely piece of imagery is inaccurate for several reasons. One of which is immediately relevant.”

There’s a pause. “You’re waiting for us to ask, ‘Which one, Chloe’, right?”

“Yup.”

Kaidan sighs. “Which one, Chloe?”

Chloe’s smile is almost impish when she responds. “If we’re going to be drinking anything in this
fantasy, it’s certainly not going to be tea.”

---

It doesn’t take much gentle persuasion from Chloe to get everyone absolutely wasted after that. Rich is (surprisingly) her greatest ally in this—mainly because in years past he’d always been the hardest to convince to join in on the fun, but now he’s the first to down a shot (and then another and another and another). Kaidan and Denee follow shortly after without any persuading, and that allows Chloe to focus her full attention on Beca.

Meaning the poor brunette hadn’t stood a chance.

Case in point:

“Woo! Suck it, bitch! That’s three in a row. Beer pong master over here, assholes!”

Kaidan groans dramatically and stumbles away from the ping pong table, throwing himself on one of the couches in the den.

“I told you she was good.”

“I thought you were being, like, naughty. Like saying she was good.”

“Well, there’s that too,” Chloe says, snagging one of Beca’s belt loops with a finger as the brunette approaches, a smug look in place (one that only gets more prominent at Chloe’s comment).

“Yeah, I’m good at it all, pretty boy.”

Chloe’s not quite as sloshed as the others (Rich and Denee especially, who had both passed out under a table at some point during the night), but there’s a pleasant buzz dulling her thoughts and leaving an empty warmth in her chest. It allows her to not think too much, which is a nice change, especially when Beca (after her bold declaration) flops onto the couch, practically in Chloe’s lap, face pressing into the crook of her neck.

Otherwise, Chloe might have wondered about the spike in her blood pressure that occurs as soon as Beca’s lips gloss (accidentally, surely) over her skin—or when the brunette’s breath hits hot against the underside of her jaw.

Still, it’s a welcome distraction when the next song starts on Chloe’s iPhone (plugged into the ridiculous sound system that is wired throughout the den), and she jerks away and to her feet in reflex as soon as the tune hits her ears.

“This song is my jam!”

It’s one of those moments—one of those moments when the place, people, and atmosphere are all just so, and then that song comes on—that song that fits everything perfectly. It’s the perfect moment, and when it happens (so rarely) Chloe always feels a flash of something rush through her that cannot be recreated via any other means.

When it happens, it’s magic—it’s the first Twinkle Twinkle Little Star she can remember, it’s a duet of Unforgettable with her dad before bedtime, it’s singing along to Everybody with the girls in
her cabin at summer camp, it’s *I’m a Bitch* blasting through the speakers of her mom’s convertible during her first solo drive, it’s singing *I Saw the Sign* for the first time with the Bellas, it’s *Titanium* floating under the shower curtain in a freshman community bathroom.

But now it’s *I Love Rock n’ Roll* (the Joan Jett version, *of course*) blaring through the room, bouncing off the walls and passing mainly unnoticed through the ears of a few extremely intoxicated people. And when Beca allows herself to be pulled up from the couch and against Chloe, and, in a rare moment of silliness, actually dances along to the song (head bobbing and feet bouncing)—that’s when Chloe knows the moment will forever be immortalized.

It’s perfect.

---

The same thing cannot be said a few hours later, when Beca is nearly passed out on her lap and refusing to drink any water. It’s not so much the uncooperativeness as much as it is the very uncharacteristic behavior that makes it all so *less* than perfect.

Because Beca is nuzzling (*nuzzling!*) into her neck and cheek and murmuring unintelligible things that, despite their lack of meaning, make Chloe’s pulse pick up in a manner that’s certainly entirely reflexive (for, who wouldn’t feel something at the sensation of a beautiful girl’s breath in their ear?) but extremely confusing, and Chloe’s not drunk enough to deal with the whole being-*sort of*-really-attracted-to-her-best-friend thing—not like *this*.

“Beca. You need to drink some water.”

“Idunwanna.”

“You’re gonna regret it in the morning if you don’t.”

Beca grunts in response

“Finish your water and I’ll rub that aloe on you, okay?”


(Gives her room to breathe—to think.)

“M’kay.”

The water is gone by the time Chloe returns with the aloe (cooled by the fridge) and Beca smiles up at her—proud and lazy.

“Come on, Beca. Bed.”

“Mmm. Yeah, you *would*. You wanna taste of the Mitchell, huh?”

Chloe rolls her eyes and pulls the girl off of the couch and up the stairs (tugging at the flannel shirt the brunette had re-adorned after the beach), and into the guest bedroom that’s already looking a bit too lived in (her fault—Beca is actually pretty tidy for the most part).

“Lay down, ‘kay?”

Beca nods, and without any encouragement from Chloe, removes her shirt and jeans, leaving her in
a tank and boy shorts. Chloe feels her eyes widen at the unexpected and atypical lack of modesty, but Beca’s apparently too drunk (and too sunburnt) to care, and simply flops down on the bed, face first.

It’s almost like a role-reversal, because Chloe is just as atypical in her hesitation, but she kneels down on the bed after not too long; the mattress sinks and pushes her bare knees up against the heated skin of Beca’s thighs and she tries not to think about it—the way the warmth passes from that one point of contact and up through her entire frame.

“This is going to be really cold, at first.”

“Good,” is the grunted reply, and Chloe is unable to find any further reason to delay.

She starts with Beca’s legs. She’s not sure why, but they’re there, on display, and it seems like something she should get out of the way. Beca shivers as soon as Chloe’s hands (coated in the cool green gel) touch the back of her calf, but settles almost instantly, relaxing into the bed with a sigh that makes Chloe’s hands twitch as they move upwards.

She’s barely gotten to the back of Beca’s knee when it starts—the whispered but strong melody drifting out from Beca’s lips, sounding gorgeous and haunting despite being partially muffled by the pillow her face is pressed into.

“Come on skinny love, just last the year. Pour a little salt, we were never here.”

It makes her freeze (honestly freeze) because she feels like glass (like ice)—frozen and immovable and fragile and liable to shatter at the slightest drop (like the one in her stomach that occurs as soon as Bon Iver’s lyrics escape Beca’s mouth in a rasp). She cannot move—she can’t—but she does anyways, hands curling around to the kneecap (warm and solid—the opposite of her in that moment), pressing into the bone there and almost painfully halting again. The singing dies down to something of a hum, but as Chloe moves again—hands gliding up to the back of Beca’s thigh, and tracing over the surprisingly prominent muscle there—it picks up, melody drifting across the spaces in between.

“I tell my love to wreck it all; cut out all the ropes and let me fall.”

She tries not to linger (tries not to think), and her motions turn swift and robotic. Her hands only falter once (or twice or three times) as she finishes the legs—fingers brushing up against the bottom of Beca’s cotton shorts (and her sharp intake of breath is muted—almost inaudible, she thinks).

“And in the morning, I’ll be with you, but it will be a different kind.”

The arms are easier. Almost easier—would be easier if not for the fact that she has to learn further towards and over Beca to reach them—would be easier if not for the way Beca’s mouth is closer to her ear in this position, and her soft lyrics are harder to block out. Beca has thin arms—thin, but not weak—and her left forearm twitches when Chloe’s fingertips brush against the underside of it, where the skin is soft and unmarked (just above the dark headphones tattoo).

“Come on skinny love, what happened here? Suckle on the hope in light brassiere.”

Chloe’s gentle with the shoulders, where the red is an angry color that makes her wince in sympathy (and it reminds her, briefly, to stay focused). Touching the skin underneath the strap of Beca’s tank top feels like sacrilege, and she tries not to rush the process (for it would feel more real, that way, if she were to acknowledge it), but she does not linger; does not—after her hands
slide across to the right shoulder—trace the inked lines of the flower that peeks out from underneath the briefly lifted fabric.

“And now all your love is wasted. Then who the hell was I?”

That’s nothing though, compared to the intimacy that follows after she finishes coating Beca’s right arm. When her hands (newly covered with aloe, as though the gel is a coating that will protect her from falling, failing, falling) must journey to the sliver of skin in between Beca’s tank and underwear, where the bright pink color of the skin keeps Chloe from simply stopping her ministrations right then, and (instead) slide up underneath the maroon fabric. That’s when Beca shivers. That’s when her breath catches the slightest bit.

It’s funny (in a way that makes Chloe’s breath catch too) how well it fits with the words Beca sings.

“Cause now I’m break—ing at the britches and at the end of all your lines.”

Moving her hands up further takes effort, and Chloe has to close her eyes when she traces Beca’s spine and spreads out to touch at the younger woman’s shoulder blades. She can feel Beca’s breaths—feel the way her shoulders move with each (now smooth) inhalation. She tries to take comfort in the rhythm of it, and does (for a moment that is too long), but it’s too seductive—too easy to fall into—so she jerks away, hands pulling out—body rocking back.

Beca doesn’t say anything (her hums have died down to silence); the brunette’s eyes are closed and Chloe thinks she may be sleeping, or drifting away. The sight is just as entrancing as the rise and fall of the woman’s back beneath her hands, and Chloe has to pull back further—out of the room and down the stairs.

Distance cannot break the spell, because she finds herself finishing the song under her breath—gasping out the lyrics as though they are propelled from her lungs unwittingly.

“Who will love you? Who will fight? Who will fall far behind?”

---

Chloe’s dad dies when she’s eight

(and a half).

It’s a pulmonary embolism

and it’s quick

and sudden

and Chloe doesn’t understand why

in one minute he’s standing next to her,
laughing

and in the

next

he is on the ground,

not moving.

*Her mom doesn’t cry at the funeral.*

*There is a stone angel looking over the grave*

*the casket is dropped into.*

*Chloe does cry.*

*(Her mom’s arms are solid and strong around her*

*because she is Chloe’s stone angel too.)*
The next morning she realizes how foolish she had been.

She blames a lot of things—the music (played, but mostly sung), the alcohol (consumed by her, but mostly by others), and, of course, the whole pretending-to-be-dating-one-of-her-best-friends thing (which she really can’t blame on anyone but herself). It’s natural that a combination of such things would cause her to feel a slight panic, because of course their presence would result in some weird, unexpected feelings. It’s not like the feelings were those feelings (the insurmountable, rule-breaking ones). It’s just friend-love (which is perfectly acceptable) that’s been a little confused by the whole situation.

Chloe should have anticipated it, really, but it’s fine. It’s whatever. She hasn’t gotten to where she is today without a few scares. Like going to Prom with Zachery Blesol during her senior year of high school; she’d been concerned about the rampant butterflies in her stomach she felt throughout the night, but it had ended up being a bad bout of food poisoning (thank God).

So when she rises in the morning, it’s with a smile in place, despite having only gotten a few hours of sleep, and she even hums as she makes breakfast for the house (chocolate chip pancakes—her specialty and Beca’s favorite). By the time she’s finished cooking and has the pancakes warming in the oven she figures she should probably bring Beca some kind of peace offering; for even if the brunette doesn’t remember it, Chloe had basically ran from their room the night before, leaving the younger woman face down on the bed—not exactly a great best friend move.

Her gift to the brunette consists of a few tablets of Advil and a large glass of water, which she brings with her as she climbs the steps to the guest bedroom. Once there, it takes her a moment to find Beca, who is on the floor, practically under the bed, and Chloe feels a renewed surge of guilt that is admittedly partially masked by amusement and curiosity (because how the hell had Beca ended up there?)

“Becs?”

Placing the tablets and water on the end table, she kneels down next to the unresponsive woman and gives her shoulder a gentle nudge that is mindful of the burn; it doesn’t do much, she only receives a grunt in response, and so her next attempt at rousing Beca is a bit more persistent—a steady (but gentle—she’s still feeling a bit guilty, after all) scratching at the woman’s back.

“Beca—”

“Hmmmgh?”

“C’mon, B. I brought you Advil. And water.”

“Ughh.” Beca shifts slightly, turning her head, and Chloe has to hide a laugh at the lines the carpet has pressed into her face. “Ugh. ‘M not ready. Sleeping.”

“I made pancakes.”
Beca lifts her head slightly, her eyes squinting at the light slipping past the blinds. “God, don’t even—I’m never drinking again.”

“Mmhmm.” Chloe’s hand slips up to rub at Beca’s neck, playing with the fine hairs found there. “They’re chocolate chip pancakes.”

The brunette’s head lifts a bit further, and her eyes focus on Chloe, her lip curled in something that might be a hint of a smile. “Chocolate chip?”

“Yup.”

“Alright. Gimme that Advil and help me up.”

Chloe doesn’t bother trying to hide her amused smile as she complies.

---

Breakfast is a muted affair.

Kaidan stumbles out of his room within a half an hour of Chloe getting Beca downstairs, grumbling something at them as he enters the kitchen, where Chloe is basically feeding Beca pieces of pancake (butter only, no syrup) at the counter. Denee emerges about ten minutes later, sans Rich, and passes on the pancakes in favor of some pain killers.

“Why are you never hung over?” She grumbles in Chloe’s general direction, her forehead pressed against the cool granite of the countertop.

“Magic,” Chloe replies, and Beca lets out a snort (immediately followed by an apologetic look when Chloe momentarily halts in her cutting up a second pancake for the girl).

“Whatever. I hate you, bitch. You’re gonna stay another couple nights, right?”

“At least one. Beca needs to recover. I’m guessing there won’t be a round two tonight, eh, babe?”

“Ugh. God, no.”

Chloe chuckles. “We’ll take it easy today, Bec. Don’t make that cute little pouty face.”

“Oh, please stop,” Denee groans. “I can’t take your goopy love shit this morning. I’m battling nausea as is.”

“So rude,” Chloe tsks. “Good thing we won’t be gracing you with our presence much longer this morning, then.”

Denee just sighs, but Beca snags another bite of pancake before frowning up at Chloe. “Are we going somewhere?”

Chloe grins.

---
“What is that?”

“A bridge” Chloe replies drolly, popping a mint in her mouth. “Tic Tac?”

Though she can’t see it, Chloe can imagine Beca’s eye roll perfectly well.

“No, thanks. And yeah, I see that, Chlo.”

“Do you? Because I was wondering; I don’t think I’ve ever seen such dark sunglasses.”

And Chloe can’t be sure (the glasses really are dark), but she thinks Beca squints her eyes at her in an attempt to be threatening. It’s not super effective; she’s still really red—especially on her cheeks and nose, and Chloe finds it absolutely adorable, especially when combined with the whine in Beca’s voice when she responds.

“These are Ray Bans! They’re not exactly obscure, Beale.”

“Mmhmm. Way to be mainstream, Mitchell.”

“Yeah, whatever—”

“I got my hata blockas on. I got my hata blockas on!”

“What are you even—?” Beca shakes her head. “Please don’t ever rap again.”

“This coming from the girl who gave the whitest rendition of ‘No Diggity’ I’ve ever heard.”

“You know you loved it.”

“I did,” Chloe confirms with a wink.

There’s a pause wherein Beca simply stares at Chloe, a slight crease in her brow; Chloe’s about to interrupt the moment with something when Beca finally shakes her head again and grins wryly.

“Anyways, you were saying? About the bridge?”

“Oh, right! Well, this is the graffiti bridge!”

Beca’s eyebrows rise. “Yeah, I got that from the shit ton of tags covering it. I meant why are we here?”

“You should have said that, then. Instead of ‘what is that’.”

“Chloe!”

“Fine, fine.” With a grin Chloe lifts up the large canvas bag in her hand and gives it a shake. “We’re making our mark!”

“You don’t mean—” Beca looks so alarmed that Chloe has to laugh, lightly bumping into Beca’s shoulder in the process.

“Yup!”

“But it’s—it’s broad daylight, Chloe! We’re gonna be caught!”
“So much for being a badass DJ. Shesh.”

“I—I—” Beca shifts awkwardly, transferring her weight from one foot to the other, and then back again.

“Oh, calm down, goodie-two-shoes. This is a Pensacola tradition. No one gets in trouble for it, I promise. As long as you keep the paint on the bridge it’s cool. Bree and I do it every summer.”

“Aubrey’s done this?”

Chloe’s grin turns sly, removing a can of paint from her bag and shaking it slightly. “That’s right. But you can wait in the car if—”

“Oh, shut up, Beale.” With a jerk, Beca reaches over to grab the can, right out of Chloe’s hand, and Chloe has to hide her grin. “What’s the plan?”

“Why I thought you’d never ask. Lemme ask you something; how do you feel about David Guetta?”

Beca snorts in laughter, but her smile is genuine.

---

Beca is an artist with beats and drops, but it turns out she’s not so bad with a can of spray paint either. Chloe’s not exactly surprised—she’s seen the doodles that cover the margins of the brunette’s spiral notebooks during the late night cramming sessions Beca had very unsubtly gotten her to attend—but this is different. It’s grander, in a way; the curving arc of Beca’s arm as she loops a line of black around Chloe’s bright and bubbled lettering is beautiful, and Chloe can’t help but feel a little in awe of the finished product.

It’s clear which part of the creation is hers and which is Beca’s; the stark, bold lines of Beca’s headphones, stylized in block patches of black that drip down into a long cord that loops around and around, interweaving with the neon colors of Chloe’s lettering. It’s visual music; she can almost see the heavy bass wrapping around Sia’s high vocals (see the delicate lacing of two things that shouldn’t fit together, but do—and do so perfectly), and it almost makes her shiver.

Beca steps back to stand alongside Chloe. The tip of her index finger is stained black (professional tagger, she is not), and her blue eyes, normally so dark, seem lighter than Chloe can ever remember them appearing. That almost makes her shiver too.

“Wow,” she says instead.

“Yeah.”

It’ll be painted over in a week at most; covered by a new layer of paint in the endless cycle of tagging, but Chloe doesn’t much care. Right now, it’s bold and beautiful, and the lyrics, framed by the loops and twists of a black cord, seem kind of eternal to her (and maybe they are).

YOU SHOOT ME DOWN BUT I WON’T FALL
She reaches out to take Beca’s hand and gives it a squeeze; their fingers interlace (thick dark lines entwined with bright but hollow letters) and it doesn’t occur to Chloe that she should panic.

---

Her mom never cries.

Not that Chloe ever sees.

But there are changes.

There is less music in the house.

Things are moved to the attic.

There are subjects that are avoided.

And her mom’s smiles and laughs are brighter than they ever were.

Like how artificial light can sometimes startle the eyes more than the sun.

Over-illumination.

It’s dangerous,

but Chloe doesn’t realize.

---
“Well, you look better. Nothing like a little vandalism to make everything A-OK, eh?”

Kaidan, the most alert of the three occupants of the living room, directs his comments at Beca as they return to the condo, and Chloe has to agree with his assessment. Beca does look better, for, despite retaining her reddened coloring, she is… content, perhaps? Chloe can’t quite figure it out, even after she takes a closer look. It’s something though—something that has to do with the calmness in Beca’s face, or the lack of cynicism in her expression. She just looks happy, and, as Chloe looks down at their joined hands (a new but not unwelcome development) she thinks that maybe she’s had more than a little to do with that. It makes her swell with a happiness of her own, and a little bit of pride too.

“I guess so,” Beca says, completely devoid of sarcasm.

“What’d you guys paint?” Denee asks, her fingers playing with the auburn strands of Rich’s hair as he slouches against her, dark sunglasses in place.

Chloe exchanges a look with Beca and shrugs. It’s silly, maybe, but despite being displayed on the side of a prominent bridge, it feels private, their mural. It feels like—not a secret—but a precious treasure of some kind—one that she doesn’t feel anyone else deserves.

“Seriously? You’re not going to tell us?”

It’s Beca that shrugs this time before slumping onto the remaining couch, pulling Chloe with her.

Denee scoffs at them, rolling her eyes. “You guys are so weird.”

“And loud,” Rich groans.

“We basically haven’t said anything since we got back, you dork.”

“You’re making other people be loud.”

“Oh?” Chloe asks, her tone overly innocent. “Are you feeling overly sensitive to sound, Richard?”

“Chlo—”

“So me doing this—” She picks up the empty cup on the coffee table and slams it back down on the wooden surface.

Richard winces. “—Would be unpleasant. Yes.”

A smirk slides on to Chloe’s face as she shifts forward on the couch, dropping Beca’s hand with a look that receives a raised eyebrow from the brunette in return. Beca’s confusion vanishes almost immediately however, as Chloe begins, clapping her hands and then drumming on the table in a rhythm that both girls know quite well.

“I’ve got my ticket for the long way round…”

Clearly not amused, Richard groans, but Beca leans forward and (in a way that’s always been effortless whether in practice, on a bus, or in a shower) begins to harmonize with Chloe, her rich, lower tone weaving in and making the song fuller.

Beca takes the second verse and Chloe pulls back, her hands manipulating the cup with all the skill and grace that comes from endless hours of watching that Lulu and the Lampshades video on repeat as soon as she’d returned to her dorm after Beca’s audition. (Aubrey had not been amused.)
This is way better than any of her solo runs though, and when she glances up at the girl beside her, the brunette sends her a grin, because clearly, this better than any of Beca’s solo attempts too.

“…But it sure would be prettier with you.”

When they finish their impromptu performance, Richard’s scowl is a little less severe, and Kaidan and Denée are outright beaming.

“That was awesome,” Kaidan breathes. “What a couple act!”

“Seriously! Is that how you placate people after you dose them with an extra serving of cheesiness?”

“Actually,” Chloe says, leaning back on the couch. “We’ve never done that before.”

“Not together,” Beca adds.

“It sounds better this way, though.”

Their hands come back together again automatically and Beca leans into her, a quiet smile in place, but Chloe figures that’s just because it’s expected, after a performance like that.

---

The rest of the day is low key; they lounge around the condo like bums, doing nothing more strenuous than eating and watching a movie (Beca dozes off about a quarter of the way into *She’s the Man;* Chloe simply shakes her head and allows the girl to snore softly in her lap).

Despite this—despite not doing much of anything—the group retires early; Rich heads off to bed around 8 o’clock, and Chloe laughs at him, but follows Beca to their room not an hour later. She’s not thinking about anything much other than finally getting some sleep until Beca starts fidgeting—shuffling about the room as she grabs a t-shirt and boxer shorts from her bag.

“Um. I can—I can, like, sleep on the floor or whatever.”

Chloe laughs. “What are you talking about? We’ve shared a bed like a zillion times. Are you afraid I’ll snuggle against your sunburn?”

“Uh—no—I…” As Beca continues to struggle with her words, the crease in Chloe’s forehead deepens. She feels as though she’s missing something, but she’s not sure what. “Y’know—never mind. I was just—I’ll just change.”

It turns out Beca had not needed to worry; they settle under the covers quickly and without drama, Beca keeping to her side, Chloe keeping to hers, and after customary goodnights are exchanged and the lights go out, Beca’s breathing turns deep within what seems like minutes.

So, yes, Beca had not needed to worry.

But *Chloe* should have.

Because sure, she and Beca have slept in the same bed on numerous occasions without any problems whatsoever, but apparently, assuming everything would be the same—that those weird
feelings from the night before had been dealt with (taken care of—exterminated—crushed in her Jack-Donaghy-like mind vice)— had been a very big mistake.

And when Beca shifts in her sleep—rolling over and throwing an arm over Chloe’s stomach—Chloe knows just how massive that mistake had been.

[ mas-sive  adj.

1. Consisting of or making up a large mass; bulky, heavy, and solid
2. Large or imposing, as in quantity, scope, degree, intensity, or scale
3. The size of Chloe Beale’s mistake when she let Beca Mitchell fall asleep with an arm around her with her breath floating across the tiny space in between them that is growing smaller and smaller with every shift of the brunette’s body, which will surely eventually be nonexistent and then Beca Mitchell’s head will be on Chloe Beale’s shoulder and Chloe Beale will be unable to think about anything but how that makes her feel
4. The scope of Chloe Beale’s feelings for Beca Mitchell
5. The best way to describe Chloe Beale’s headache the morning after, when she spends the night telling herself that those feelings are strictly platonic]

---

Chloe is almost nine

and her mom never cries.

But Chloe often does.

And Chloe prays, begs, pleads,

every night,

that she can learn to be strong

like her mom.

(That she can learn
to not feel like this.)

Because otherwise,

she will not survive.
“So, I think we’re going to head out this morning, Dee.”

The blonde frowns at her, and Chloe hopes she can’t see what she herself had seen in the mirror that morning: dark circles under dulled blue eyes (glazed by a lack of sleep and animalistic anxiety), fidgeting fingers that won’t stay still, the downward turn of the corners of her lips that seems to persist even when she smiles (without sincerity). But makeup and a false smile both work wonders when carefully applied by one with years of practice guiding their hands and lips for this reason exactly, and Denee rolls her eyes after another second.

“You are so flighty, Gingie.”

“Not flighty! We just have so many places to go!”

So many places that did not involve Chloe torturing herself with confusing thoughts and stupid games of pretend.

“No, I get it. You just want to spend some more alone time with your lady.”

“Denee—that’s not—”

“I know, I know. Just teasing.” Denee, in a rare moment, shifts her face into something that actually resembles a look of seriousness. Chloe is immediately concerned. “I actually think—”

“What?”

“I think she’s good for you, Chloe. I know you and Aubrey have only been coming here for a few years, but there’s been some serious girl-bond formation during those trips, and I consider you one of my good friends. I think you’re pretty amazing, Chlo, and you deserve someone who looks at you the way Beca does. I’m happy you finally found that, is all.”

Chloe tries to congratulate herself on once again selling a lie so successfully, but she finds herself unable to. It’s a hollow victory. Anyways, according to Denee, it’s Beca, who can’t act to save her life, that’s sold it.

She tries not to think on that.

---

The goodbyes are quick, but not painless (like pulling off a Band-Aid), and even Chloe’s happiness about being done with the whole façade is not enough to make her feel absolutely no sadness at leaving her friends (and their awesome condo) behind.

Still, a long sigh of relief escapes her as she backs out of the driveway—a sigh that’s clearly audible, as Beca turns to her with a smirk as soon as the noise reaches her ears.

“I feel like I should be offended,” she says, throwing Chloe’s words from the beginning of their trip right back at her.
“Oh, calm down, Beca. I just didn’t think they were going to make such a big deal of it! I mean, seriously, did they talk about anything else aside from how weird it was that I was actually committed to one person?”

“I know, right? You’d think they would have understood after getting a look at me.”

A quick glance to her right shows Beca wearing her customary smirk, and Chloe giggles, feeling lighter already.

“Fair point. But seriously, Bec, I hope it wasn’t too bad for you. I should have just told Kaidan I wasn’t going to hook up with him, like an adult. I don’t even know why you went along with the whole thing.”

“Nah, don’t worry about it. It was—” Beca’s brow furrows, almost imperceptibly. “It was easy. It was really easy.”

It should be a compliment, or something, but Beca’s still staring at her in that puzzled way, like she’s working through a particularly complex math problem, and Chloe feels her hands tighten on the steering wheel until her knuckles are nearly bloodless.

“Aca-obviously,” she tries to joke. “I mean, who wouldn’t want to be my girlfriend?”

It’s 100% the wrong thing to say, probably, but Beca’s expression clears and a slight smirk appears on her lips.

“Especially now that you’re a blonde. The red hair wasn’t really doing it for me.”

“Hey!”

The blood flows back into her hands and Chloe breathes yet another (softer) sigh of relief.

---

After about an hour the adrenaline wears off and the wave of exhaustion that hits Chloe is almost overpowering; she blinks once and knows if she does so again, her eyelids will remain closed.

“Chlo? You wanna switch?”

The question comes immediately, and Chloe wonders how Beca, who is now watching her with an almost casual expression (‘almost’ because there is the slightest crinkle in the woman’s forehead, and Chloe knows Beca well enough to recognize it for what it is), had picked up on her altering mood so quickly.

“Yeah. Yeah, that’d be good.”

She takes the next exit and pulls into a gas station, sitting in the driver’s seat and staring blankly at the worn-down pump alongside the window until Beca appears in her line of view (she hadn’t even noticed the brunette get out of the car) and opens the car door for her. She stumbles out and moves around the car, before slumping into the passenger seat. Her eyes close almost immediately.

“Chloe? Where are we going?”
“N’orleans,” she mumbles.

She hears the car door close, and then nothing more.

---

When she awakens it is dusk, and the car is stationary. There is also a large sweatshirt around her (Beca’s—or so she assumes from the pleasing scent) and the Postal Service (her favorite napping music) is playing softly in the background, overlaid with the soft humming of the woman beside her, who is reclining in her seat with her eye closed, but clearly conscious.

“Bec?” It comes out as something of a croak and she clears her throat to try again, but Beca’s eyes snap open at the first sound of her name.

“Hey.”

“Where are we?”

“Just outside of New Orleans.” Beca pronounces it fully (all syllables enunciated) and it makes Chloe smile for reasons unknown. “I figured whatever you had planned for us here probably wouldn’t start till night anyways, so I just pulled over to let you get some more rest.”

Chloe stretches in her seat, cracking her back with a sigh, before grabbing the box of Tic Tacs from the central cup holder and throwing a few into her mouth. “You’re the best. And you’re also right.”

“I was afraid I might be,” Beca groans, starting the car fully. “Look, Beale—lemme be clear; no strip clubs. They’re awkward and weird and too expensive.”

“Oh, please. I’ll have you know, Mitchell, that tonight happens to be the one night I actually planned out in advance for this road trip. So nothing you say will have any bearing on me whatsoever, and you are coming along for the ride.”

“Oh, God. Those plans actually involve a strip club? Are you serious? C’mon, Chloe!”

Chloe just smiles.

But when they’re back on the interstate, and Beca moves to take the exit for Bourbon Street, Chloe shakes her head, and her smile grows at the brunette’s confused expression.

---

“Bloody Mary’s Voodoo Tour? You have got to be fuc—”

“Beca! Language! There are youths about!”

“—king kidding me.” Beca finishes, an eyebrow raised in challenge.

Chloe sighs, glancing apologetically at the young family of four standing not five steps from them
as they wait to purchase their tickets. But a smile threatens slip through her stern façade. “Y’know, your hysterics are totes unnecessary. I took a lot of time to research the different Voodoo tours in the area and this one was said to be an authentic representation of the religion and culture.”

“You are so weird, dude.”

“If by ‘weird’ you mean wanting to learn to respect a spiritual practice that has been commercialized into being viewed as little more than hexes and pins and dolls, then yes, I guess I am.”

Two grade school children run by, giggling and making ghost sounds, and Beca actually scowls at them. The skin on her nose is starting to flake and it kind of ruins the effect. In fact, Chloe has to keep herself from cooing at the whole image.

“This is going to be super lame, Chlo. I can’t believe we drove around looking for parking for fifteen minutes for this.”

“What’evs. It’s going to be aca-awesome.”

“I would almost prefer Bourbon Street.”

Chloe brightens immediately. “Really?”

“No.”

“Well then, we’re sticking with Bloody Mary. I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised.”

---

An hour later, and Chloe is the one feeling surprised, and not entirely pleasantly.

Despite her insistence that Voodoo was more than what White Zombie had made it out to be, Chloe had been hoping for a little more spectacle on the tour. She didn’t think it was too much to ask for that her learning be facilitated with a few educational horror stories. Would the inclusion of a ghost that bloodily tore through the town in a fit of vengeance for his falsely accused and horrifically slaughtered Voodoo practicing girlfriend really have taken away from the overall message?

Chloe didn’t think so.

The closest they’d gotten to any kind of ‘fun’ was taking pictures of ‘charged’ spots and looking for ‘spirits’ in their photos. And really, the glowing-orbs-of-light thing wasn’t doing it for her.

“It’s dust,” Chloe whispers to Beca. “I mean really, how could anyone actually think that these ‘orbs’ are anything more than light reflecting off of—”

“Shh!” Beca hushes. “Don’t say that. You’re being disrespectful.”

“Ha. Ha. ‘Disrespectful’. Very funny, Beca. I get it, okay? The tour is lame and the little orbs are lame and—”

“I swear to God, Chloe, if one these things follows us back to the hotel because it wants to teach
you a lesson or some shit, I will sell you out. I swear to God.”

Chloe’s about to roll her eyes and tell Beca to quit with the overly dramatic teasing when she realizes that the brunette is shuffling along the dark path with her hands in her pockets, her shoulders hunched, and her eyes darting about wildly.

Her resulting laugh is loud enough to draw the attention of several members of the tour group, a couple of which actually glare at her. Chloe’s a bit too amused to care.

“Well, well,” she drawls, a shit-eating grin in place. “Well, well, well, well, well.”

“Shut up, Chloe.”

“Beca Mitchell; Bad Ass DJ Extraordinaire.”

“Shut up, Chloe.”

“Scared by a few little orbs in a photograph.”

“Shut up, Chloe.”

“I’ll hold your hand, if you want. I’ll protect you from the orbs, I swear.”

Beca glares at her, jaw flexing. (Adorable—just adorable.)

“Chloe!”

“Okay, okay, just teasing.”

Chloe falls silent, but it’s less out of mercy and more out of a need for stealth for when she scoops a stick up from off the ground. It is this stick that she employs several minutes later (after taking the time to fall back a few steps from her younger companion) in lightly brushing up against the back of Beca’s neck. The brunette spins around partially, swatting at the air around her, and Chloe does her best to appear innocent with a casual eyebrow raise.

After a few repeats of this, Beca halts in the middle of the path until Chloe nearly bumps into her (an unfortunate side effect from looking at the ground to avoid Beca’s occasional twitching, the sight of which would surely send the blonde into a fit of laughter). Chloe thinks she’s been quite surreptitious in her disposal of the incriminating stick, but as Beca spins around to face her, she’s pretty sure she has been caught.

“I know it’s you doing that,” Beca says (rather unconvincingly), her face as close to a pout as Chloe’s ever seen. “So quit it. And c’mere.”

Beca snags her hand and pulls Chloe closer, almost grumpily.

And Chloe hadn’t exactly been hoping for a response like this (honest), but it does feel pretty nice, even if Beca’s grip turns a bit too tight to be casual every time the wind shifts.

Chloe probably shouldn’t find the whole thing as amusing as she does.
Watching Beca check the locks on their hotel room door for the third time, Chloe doesn’t bother hiding her grin.

“Pretty sure the *spirits* will just float right on through that, Bec.”

Beca pales the slightest bit (Chloe finds it endearing in every way) but covers with a scowl. “I’m kinda more thinking about us being in the middle of the worst neighborhood of all of New Orleans. Really, Chlo, could you have picked a sketchier hotel?”

“Oh, please. This place got great reviews on Hotels.com! Said it gave a good look into some of the more underappreciated flavors of New Orleans. And besides, I wanted to see all the lights of the city.”

“Underappreciated,” Beca repeats with a scoff. “Underappreciated like a bullet to the head. Speaking of which, you’d better have brought your earplugs ‘cause there’s probably gonna be at least one gunshot right outside of our hotel room tonight. Not to mention all those lights make it seem like it’s daytime right about now.”

Chloe rolls her eyes. “You’re so dramatic, Beca.”

“*Dramatic*? It’s not exactly dramatic if—”

A loud bang sounds from outside, and Beca jumps about a foot in the air, stumbling over her bed upon landing.

“Holy fuck!”

Chloe laughs—loud and hard.

“Car backfiring, babe. Honestly, you are the least badass DJ I’ve ever—Beca!”

Her teasing tone vanishes immediately as she catches sight of the bright red streak dripping from Beca’s right nostril. She’s off the couch and directly in front of Beca in seconds, hands fluttering about the younger woman’s face, which is suddenly a darker pink than her healing sunburn alone can account for.

“Oh my god! Are you alright?”

“It’s—it’s fine. Not a big deal,” Beca says, batting away Chloe’s attempts at ministration with one hand while she presses up against the right side of her nose with the other. “It happens sometimes. The nosebleed thing. *Randomly,*” she adds stubbornly.

“Oh, but—” Chloe shifts from foot to foot before rushing off to the bathroom, and when she returns, it’s with a handful of tissues, from which she pulls a single sheet to wipe at the blood on Beca’s upper lip.

“*Dude,* Chloe.” Beca moves to pull Chloe’s hand away, but Chloe catches the wrist with her free hand.

“This doesn’t happen often, does it?” Chloe frets. “That could be a sign of a deviated septum or even liver disease or—or have you injured your nose lately, because—”

“God! You’re on WebMD way too much.”

“Beca, I’m just—”
“Looking out for me, I know, but look.” Beca removes her fingers from the side of her nose, and sniffs experimentally. When no blood appears after a few seconds, she grins. “See?”

Chloe removes the tissue slowly, her fingers brushing against Beca’s cheek almost reflexively as she pulls away.

And that’s when Chloe feels something very, very alarming.

In that moment—in possibly one of the least sexy situations of all time—she wants to kiss Beca Mitchell.

She’s almost relieved when Beca’s nose starts bleeding again, not a second later.

---

Her mom starts dating again,

too soon.

(Or so Chloe thinks,

at ten years old.)

She never meets any of the guys,

but she knows they exist.

She knows several of them exist.

They take her mom out

and treat her to dinner

and take her to movies and make her laugh

and grin

and say things in a weird tone of voice.

Her mom seems happy though,

so maybe it’s okay.
(But her mom’s laughs
and grins
and weird cadences
feel wrong to Chloe.
And she can feel,
but not see,
the cracks.)

---

They’re about 10 miles outside of New Orleans, the next morning, when Chloe realizes she’s overlooked a very important lifeline, and she feels like an idiot for not remembering it until now.

“So, how’s Jesse?”

Beca is with Jesse, and that makes her breathe a whole lot easier. People don’t usually assume it (because of her rather open approach to relationships, though she’s not sure why the two thoughts are so often connected in peoples’ minds) but cheating is one of the few things she puts in the ‘black and white’ category (one of the others being music, wherein if a person does not like some form of music there is something very, very wrong with them and they cannot be trusted).

But anyways, cheating is bad and not something she would ever do purposefully. Ever.

And Beca is with Jesse, so…

Problem solved.

Except that Beca’s awkwardly fidgeting in her seat and picking at her peeling skin and Chloe’s pretty sure it’s not in the I’m-embarrassed-to-talk-about-my-boyfriend-because-I’m-emotionally-stunted-but-really-love-him kind of way.

“About that—” Beca begins, and Chloe sighs.

“What?”

“There was a—complication.”

“Beca, this isn’t a job report. Shesh. What’s up, hon?”

“We broke up,” Beca blurts, but then, after a moment’s hesitation adds, “I think.”

Chloe opens her mouth to express her condolences—to unleash a healthy dose of girl talk that had served her so well in past situations like these—but, seeing the way Beca now stares resolutely ahead (eyes not even momentarily straying to Chloe’s form), realizes that’s probably not what
Beca wants or even needs.

“What happened, Becs?”

“—Fought. Before I came on this trip. He didn’t think— he didn’t understand why I’d rather spend my summer with—not with him.”

“Oh, Beca, I—”

“It’s not your fault or anything. Things have been—they’ve been off for a little while and I guess… It didn’t go how I thought it would—our relationship, or whatever. So, yeah. It’s cool. No worries. I just didn’t really wanna talk about it, so—”

Chloe pauses before removing a hand from the steering wheel and—without taking her eyes off of the road—placing it over Beca’s (which is now currently playing with a frayed bit of fabric on her seat).

“I’m sorry it ended badly, Beca,” she says slowly. “But I’m not sorry you’re here with me now. And if you ever do want to talk more about it—”

“Yeah, yeah. I get it. Enough sappiness, Beale.”

Chloe smiles as Beca turns up the radio.

Until she realizes she’s just lost her lifeline.

_Goddammit._

Chapter End Notes

Credit to the always wonderful _sinandmisery_ for being the origin of the phrase 'Bad Ass DJ Extraordinaire' in _The Perfect Melody and the Perfect Rhyme_ I was _totally_ aware of that before I wrote this chapter, right, Mads?
Chloe doesn’t much care for Texas; it’s flat and hot and dry. But the deciding factor is the flashing blue and red lights that appear in her rear-view mirror after about 20 minutes of driving through the Lone Star State.

“Shit,” she sighs.

Beca almost looks smug, and Chloe doesn’t exactly appreciate the lack of sympathy. She does, however, appreciate the lack of a verbal ‘I told you so’, because Beca’s been telling her to slow down since they left Georgia, so it’s probably well within her right.

The dust actually clouds around the Trans Am like some kind of cartoon as she pulls off the road and stops, but after a minute or so it clears, and Chloe is able to catch sight of the police officer who had pulled them over in her rearview mirror.

“Oh, whoa. She’s hot.”

Beca starts to twist in her seat, but Chloe throws a restraining hand out.

“What are you doing? Don’t look! Okay, here’s the plan—"

“Plan? You have been pulled over way too often. What is this? Plan W, in your ‘how to get out of tickets’ playbook?”

Chloe ignores her. “You have to hit on her.”

She would laugh at the expression on Beca’s face if she had the time. “Wait. What? Chloe that’s—that’s the shittiest plan I’ve ever heard. That never works. Never.”

Another glance in the rearview mirror shows the officer starting toward them, face impassive.

“Trust me, okay? I’ve got this all figured out.”

“Why don’t you hit on her then? You’re much better at this flirting shit and—"

“Aw, Becs! Thanks. I do think it’s a gift, but—” Chloe catches sight of the officer in her side mirror and starts to roll down the window (actually roll—automatic windows were not a feature of her beloved Trans Am—not surprising, considered the price she’d paid). “—But you’re going to have to draw on your own gifts now,” she adds hurriedly.

“Chloe!” Beca hisses, but shuts up almost immediately as soon as the policewoman comes into view. Shuts up, at least, for approximately a second.

“Holy shit, you are hot.”

“Oh my god, Beca,” Chloe cries, faking (rather convincingly, she thinks) a fair amount of aghast. “What the hell is the matter with you? You can’t say that to a police officer!”

Though the tint of Beca’s sunburn has faded, her cheeks once again turn a bright red, her mouth gaping open, but Chloe beats her to the apology, trying not to let any of the giggles loose that are threatening to escape at Beca’s expression alone.

“I am so sorry, Officer. Please don’t take offense; Beca has this weird thing for redheads. You
probably thought you were going to get out of gross dudes perving on you for once when you pulled us over, and then Becs opens her mouth and ruins *that*. Seriously, how many times have you gotten the ‘I was racing to get here to you’ line?’

The woman’s face is stoic, but Chloe thinks she might *almost* smile. Or, she’s not frowning, at least. Chloe takes that as a good sign.

Until.

“License and registration, please.”

“Oh! Ah—Officer—can I just—it’s in the glovebox—can I just—”

She receives a nod in return, and Chloe nudges Bec aside—who is still blushing a fair amount—to reach the glovebox. And there’s a *definite* upturn to the policewoman’s lips when Chloe pats Bec’s leg and stage whispers that she should really not stare so intently at a woman with a gun. (Beca sputters delightfully.)

Still, Chloe’s information is taken by the officer and Chloe jiggles her leg a bit as she looks it over.

“Coming all the way from Florida, are you?”

“Oh! No, ma’am. Georgia. Though, yes, we did stop in Pensacola. But Beca and I are on a road trip and—oh, not to make excuses, but honestly, we were listening to music and I just didn’t realize how fast I was going. And really, we didn’t mean any disrespect with the—” Chloe gestures helplessly towards Bec, and watches the blush take off again.

It’s a long moment before the officer says anything else, but when she does, that slight smile is more pronounced, and Chloe tries not to breathe a sigh of relief until her documents are handed back.

“Drive a little slower the rest of the way.”

“Oh, yes. Thank you, Officer. We totally will. Promise.”

Chloe also tries not to laugh when the woman *almost* smirks at Bec before walking away.

---

Beca doesn’t speak for about five minutes, during which Chloe attempts to school her expression into something that doesn’t broadcast her amusement over the entire situation.

She’s not especially successful.

“I can’t believe that worked.”

Chloe grins.

“Seriously. How the hell did that work?”

“My effortless charm.” She twists and leans towards Bec. “I’ve heard I’m irresistible.”
With a groan Beca pushes her back. “Beale! Eyes on the road. I don’t care how charming you are; let’s not push things.”

“So you do think I’m charming, then?”

“That’s not—”

“That’s exactly what you said.”

Beca frowns.

Chloe’s grin widens.

Beca rolls her eyes. And lets a smile lift her lips.

“You’re a nerd.”

“But I’m your favorite nerd, right?”

Beca’s smile is fond, and Chloe softens. “Right. Which is why—” Beca actually fidgets a bit, and Chloe stills. “I made a mix for the trip.” Chloe breathes again. “But you can only listen to each song once! So choose carefully, when you want to put it on.”

“Only once? God, what is this? You rationing your music?”

“No, dude! I just don’t want to listen to my own stuff that much.”

“Oh,” Chloe teases. “So you think I’d just play your stuff over and over again if you let me?”

Beca freezes. “Uh. Well—”

With a wink, Chloe lets her off the hook. “You’d be right. I totes would.”

“You’re such a nerd,” Beca says again, that same smile in place.

---

The first song is a mix featuring Die Young, with some Taio Cruz and Calvin Harris expertly thrown in.

“Really, Ke$ha? Again?”

“Soundtrack to my life,” Beca grins and Chloe laughs so hard that Beca starts to blush.

“Shut up.”

---

They arrive in Houston that night.
It’s a semi-planned stop, because Cynthia Rose happens to be home for the summer and gives them a call to see if they’ll be visiting her home city, and after that it’s just a matter of staying on I-10 and following it into Houston where CR waits with a grin and 9 shots lined up on her counter.

Beca looks wary, and Chloe should too, but everything’s fine so Chloe doesn’t need the gentle persuasion that Beca does before downing the three drinks in quick succession before getting glammed up for a much needed night out (not a distraction, of course, because everything’s fine).

“Woo! We gettin’ crazy tonight, bitches!”

As means of a reply, Chloe throws back another shot and grins, not at Cynthia Rose, but at Beca, who shakes her head. She continues to shake her head with each step Chloe takes towards her, until they are no more than a foot apart, and Beca’s eyes roll skyward with a sigh as she takes the glass Chloe is brandishing. The action makes Chloe’s grin spread, and she sees Beca fighting her own smile, before she downs the drink.

“Fine.” Beca’s arms aren’t folded, but they might as well be; her suddenly resolute expression conveys the same meaning. “But I’m not dancing.”

---

Beca’s a surprisingly good dancer.

Like, really surprisingly good.

It only takes a few more shots and then she’s on the floor—no longer complaining about the mismatching beats of the house DJ—and instead grinding up against some random guy who’s found her on the middle of the dance floor.

“Wasn’t Shorty the one who needed all that special attention to lock down the Bellas moves?” Cynthia Rose comments, and there’s something in her voice that makes Chloe pause (because it can’t be due to the way Beca is currently rolling her hips, not five steps away).

“Uh—yeah. She—yeah.”

Cynthia Rose laughs, and wolf-whistles as Beca drops it low and Chloe’s jaw falls along with the motion. She’s glad for the darkness of the club, especially when Beca glances over and winks.

“Well I guess she didn’t need it.” (But it’s not dark enough to hide the way CR’s eyes gleam.) “Guess she just wanted the special attention.”

(“I know it—I can do it.” Beca’s hair brushes against the side of her face as she leans in further.)

“Right, because Beca would totally want Aubrey on her case all the time.”

The look she receives is knowing, but Cynthia Rose doesn’t say anything further. Not that there’s anything to say. Not that any of CR’s implications have any truth to them, whatsoever. And it’s like she’s proving it when she takes those five steps forwards and slips in between Beca and the moron who’s really doing a poor job at keeping up with her.

See? This is what friends do. Keep creepers away from each other at dance clubs. Obviously.
But she miscalculates.

Beca’s hips only stop for a moment—only stop for the second it takes her to look back and see Chloe, and when she does, her slight smirk shifts into a full grin and—and then her hips are moving again and—

(And Chloe miscalculates.)

She’s not used to being in back. That must be it. She’s just not used to being in back. Chloe’s pretty short, and she can’t recall the last time she danced with someone who was shorter than her, but she has a couple of inches on Beca, and the situation had demanded it and—it must be the new positioning that makes Chloe’s blood pulse and her hands shoot out to rest on those rolling hips in front of her and her breath come out in a heavy gust against the side of Beca’s neck.

And Beca’s reaction to it all might be a shiver, or it might just be part of the dance, but either way it flattens her back against Chloe’s front and Chloe’s moving with her before she realizes what she’s doing and they’re dancing more slowly (sensually) than the song calls for and somehow she can barely hear the music—it’s pushed to the back of her mind along with everything else and for a second—

(There is only Beca. For a second, Beca is all she can feel.)

Chloe pulls away. She pulls away quickly.

Beca spins around to give her a questioning look, but Chloe shakes her head and gestures vaguely in a direction a bathroom might potentially be in, before taking several steps away, allowing herself to be swallowed by the crowd and then pushed out to the outskirts of it, not a minute later.

There’s a back door and she takes it—there’s no cool air outside to chill the blood that heats her skin and inflames her brain, but there’s no Beca around to push that blood to places where it will do the most damage, so she takes it.

She breathes in the humidity and tells herself that nothing is wrong.

Nothing has changed.

And she’s fine.

---

The anniversary of his death isn’t ever the worst day.

At first, Chloe expects it will be when her mom finally cracks—

finally reveals all the wear and tear

that is so cleverly concealed by such radiant smiles

—but it never is.
It’s on the in-between days;
the ones that feature no prying eyes.

The ones where even Chloe lets her guard down,
and is suddenly singing Twinkle Twinkle Little Star
under her breath
as she muddles through her math homework

and she only realizes what she’s done
when she hears
the sharp gasp
and choked sob that follows.

But,

when she looks up,
her mom is smiling by the kitchen island,
preparing her an after-school snack
of cookies and strawberries.

But,

the hand holding the knife
is shaking
and Chloe sees the cracks
she’s usually so vigilant about searching for
on the days she most suspects they will appear.
But,

she doesn’t know what to do about them

now.

So,

she pretends

she doesn’t see them.

She pretends

nothing has changed.

---

Texas is really, really big, and Cynthia Rose warns them of that with a big grin when they depart the next afternoon. She offers a few suggestions about where to go, but she and Beca get back on to I-10 and just keep driving, without much (any) discussion about where they might actually end up that night.

The car ride feels strangely silent, despite Chloe chattering throughout the entire thing. Maybe because she doesn’t really say anything, in the course of throwing out all those words. It’s just noise—just meaningless sound—and she convinces herself that this is not unusual for them.

But she does stop eventually—closing her mouth with a snap—to fiddle with the dashboard for perhaps a longer amount of time than it would take in a normal car (the volume knob fell off somewhere in Louisiana and they haven’t been able to reattach it since). But eventually she manages to switch it to Beca’s CD of mixes and when she immediately recognizes the background beat, even covered by the Notorious B.I.G as it is, her smile melts into something infinitely more genuine as a giggle passes through her lips.

“Really, Becs?”

Beca just smirks. And when the chorus starts, her eyebrows raise before,

“So I put my hands up…”

Chloe feels something settle back down in her chest, before the song is even halfway through. And after another two songs (an ingenious combination of Nelly and the Bee Gees that has Chloe squealing, and a mix of Childish Gambino and Passion Pit that has her dancing so enthusiastically in her seat that she feels restricted by her seatbelt) Beca is full out grinning, especially as she takes
the next exit, which features a sign that quite boldly declares, ‘NO ATTRACTIONS’.

It’s Chloe’s turn to raise an eyebrow.

“Something special about this exit?”

“Let’s find out.”

---

Texas is still hot and flat, and the deserted stretch of road they find themselves traveling may be doubly so.

But when Chloe sees the tire swing hanging from a lone and barren tree, a few hundred feet from the road, she grins like she’s just found Atlantis. And when Beca pulls over without her needing to say even a word, Chloe races toward it, heat notwithstanding.

Beca is behind her—not running—but there nevertheless.

She doesn’t have to turn around; she just knows.

She knows, even before she has jumped onto the swing (heedless of whether it will support her weight or not) and slipped her legs between the hole and felt Beca’s hands at her back, giving her a none-to-gentle push.

Beca’s hands are there again, when she swings forward and then back, arresting her movement only slightly and then pushing her higher. And higher.

And higher.

Until after a few swings the hands do not give, and they halt her movement completely, assisted by a gentle collision with Beca’s chest. Beca grips the rope, just above where Chloe’s hands rest (the outside of Beca’s finger brushing against her own) and leans forward until her chin is resting on Chloe’s shoulder and somehow Chloe is higher than the tire swing would ever be able to take her.

“Are you okay?”

Chloe wonders if she asks in reference to the feelings Beca is producing in her now (in which case the answer is no), or the ones she had produced last night (no, again), or that night in New Orleans (no, once more), or the one in Pensacola (no), or just in general (no, no, no, no, no).

“Yeah. I—what do you mean? Of course I’m okay!”

She can only guess at the expression Beca wears, because she doesn’t dare turn and upset their positioning, even if it burns.

“I just—last night—” There’s more hesitancy in Beca’s voice than Chloe has grown to expect. It’s softer too. Gentle, but stumbling. “You sort of ran off and then today you’ve been a little—different. I just wanted to make sure I didn’t—that you were okay.”

It surprises her that Beca is bringing it up.
(It *should* surprise her that Beca even notices, but somehow, it doesn’t.)

The surprise still isn’t enough to make her turn, but the concern is, and she twists until Beca’s hands are forced to shift to the tire in order to hold the swing in place—until Beca’s hands are the only thing keeping her from spinning back around and then overshooting (stuck outside of any kind of equilibrium).

“I’m okay.”

And maybe it’s not a lie—not just then. Because Chloe’s hands fall from the rope to grip Beca’s forearms and suddenly it’s not just Beca making sure that she stays.

“I’m okay,” she says again, but instead of ‘I’ she means ‘we’.

---

When they next stop, the sun is down and the stars are out and Chloe can hardly believe how many of them are in the sky.

Not a single car has passed them for hours, and neither of them can get signal, so they might be lost for all eternity, but they have plenty of gas and the top is down and the wind has picked up and Beca is sitting in the seat next to her, looking up, and Chloe can’t bring herself to worry about anything at all.

“I know what we need.”

Chloe hadn’t thought they needed anything else at all, and when Beca switches on the stereo and the strings of the theme song from *Up* suddenly fill the air, she opens her mouth to question the choice. But Beca is stepping out of the car and stepping around to open Chloe’s door, and as soon as Chloe allows herself to be pulled out, Jay-Z’s *Moment of Clarity* is suddenly overlaid on the track and Beca smiles at her widening eyes.

Eyes that only widen further when Beca extends her hand, palm up, and performs a half curtsey, half bow.

“Madame, may I have this dance?”

She’s sure her jaw is completely dropped at this point, but the shock that prevents her from picking it back up does not keep her from taking the proffered hand with absolutely bewilderment.

“Bec—”

Beca’s smile turns a little hesitant and a little unsure (and Chloe’s pretty sure her cheeks are pink, underneath the now fully peeling skin), but offers no explanation.

“How’s your waltz?”

“It’s—good.”

“Good.”

“Can you—?”
Beca nods once and slides her right hand just below Chloe’s shoulder blade and brings her left up, just at eye level, palm up. She’s closer, perhaps, than she should be, but her posture is nearly perfect, and Chloe rests her dominant hand in Beca’s, and drapes the fingers of her left arm around Beca’s shoulder without another word.

“My mom taught me,” Beca says softly, in response to Chloe’s unasked question.

(Chloe’s dad had taught her, but this is not something she says. Not just then.)

And then Beca moves.

Slowly.

Carefully.

But without any missteps or hesitation.

Beca steps: left forward, right diagonal, together. Right back, left diagonal, together.

Chloe steps: right back, left diagonal, together. Left forward, right diagonal, together.

Quarter turn.

Switch to right box.

And at first Chloe grins and giggles, because Beca is making that face—the smug ‘badass’ one that is almost a mockery of itself—and it’s cute. The whole thing is cute and Beca is being a goofball in a way she only occasionally lets herself be, and Chloe just—

She’s charmed, sure. She’s charmed and happy and grateful and this is okay. She can deal with this. She’s okay with Beca swinging them around and making that face and Chloe’s really, really okay.

But then Beca is suddenly rapping.

(The music business hate me ‘cause the industry ain’t make me)

She’s rapping, and she’s somehow closer all of a sudden, and then Chloe is very much not okay. Everything shifts and Beca’s smug look fades slightly and it almost looks like she’s going to pull back—like the weird rising tension within Chloe that is (impossibly) not translating to her movements is piecing the very air around them instead and making it impossible to continue.

But Beca licks her lips and smiles quietly, and she keeps moving.

Keeps rapping.

(Your inception, fuck perception go with what makes sense)

Beca keeps rapping and Chloe moves on instinct.

(You don’t hear me though)

Beca keeps rapping and Chloe loses herself.

(These words ain’t just ‘pared to go in one ear out the other ear. No)
Beca keeps rapping and Chloe is gone.

---

When she looks back on it, Chloe thinks that must have been it—that moment.

Because it’s so Beca—so quintessentially Beca—rapping along with the muted lyrics of Jay-Z while gliding across the grass with surprising skill and grace, one hand tapping on Chloe’s back, drumming out the beat of the song, the other warm and solid and sure in hers (for contradiction, thy name is Beca Mitchell).

And in that moment—as the simple piano chords softly play out from the car’s stereo, as the tips of the slightly wet blades of grass brush against her ankles, as she sucks air into her lungs and tries not to breathe out for fear of doing or saying or thinking something that will bring about her ruin—in that moment she breaks rule number one.

Chloe Beale falls just a little bit in love.

And (surely) into a pit of nothing but pain.

---

Because rule number one exists for a reason.

---

She’s fifteen when her heart is first (last) broken.

It’s stupid really.

(She can’t even remember the guy’s name now, even when she thinks on it.

Dominick?

David?

Daniel?

Something with a ‘D’, she’s pretty sure.)
But when she’s fifteen,

it’s the end of the world

and she’s sobbing in her bed

and her mom rushes in

and then she is being rocked in trembling arms

and it

hurts.

Chloe can’t think of a time when something hurt

so

badly.

Aside from the one.

Of course.

And thinking about that only

makes her cry harder.

“Oh, Chloe. Honey.

I know it hurts, sweetheart.”

Her mom says nothing more

until the sobs have subsided,

the tears have dried,

and the whimpers have been lulled away

by the gentle rocking motion of the body she nestles against.

Her mom says nothing more

until Chloe’s eyes have fluttered shut
and her breathing has steadied
and she has almost fallen asleep.

But
only
‘almost’

“People who love as much as we do, baby,”
her mom says, and her voice is
as low
and as pained
as Chloe has ever heard it.

(And it is definitely,
definitely
not meant to be heard.)

“We shouldn’t really love at all.”

---

(Fear.
The reason is fear.)

---

Their next destination is Las Vegas.
Neither of them say anything about it, but they pass a mileage sign for the city the next day and an exchange of looks is all the confirmation needed.
Chloe insists on driving the whole way because it gives her hands something to do; gripping the wheel as tightly as is physically possible is better than showcasing (with twitching fingers and a shaking knee) her clashing desires to, at once, reach out and simply touch Beca, or jump out of the car and start running away, as fast as she possibly can.

But instead she drives and tries not to think about the way Beca’s hand had rested along the bone of her shoulder and how it had lead her through their quiet waltz and right into something that feels an awful lot like love.

But Beca seems calm. Almost unnaturally calm. There's a smile in place and it's not a smirk and her fingers are drumming lightly alongside the side of the door— arm resting partially outside the open window—not in the antsy, preoccupied way Chloe has often seen, but simply content— tapping out of time with the music on the radio, as though she is hearing a different song entirely.

Chloe thinks that’s often the case with Beca— hearing music the rest of them aren't privy to—and she wonders sometimes, what might be required for her to hear the strands that float through Beca's head. What it might cost.

But for now, she tries not to think about costs or desires or the way Beca occasionally looks over and smiles in this way that is utterly genuine and how it makes Chloe smile back, in the same way, despite it all. She tries not to think about where her control goes when Beca's eyes or smile or hands are on her in any way.

So she drives instead.

They drive through Albuquerque, where they do not stop, and underneath the Grand Canyon, which they, for reasons unknown, skip as well. That’s where they see the sign for Las Vegas and the four hours along the Arizona highway pass without much conversation (but with an underlying current of something else).

Their entrance into the city of Las Vegas is something like entering another world; it’s bright, despite the sun being down, and full of energy and beats and everything Chloe had been looking forward to.

But when they get there Chloe keeps driving and she doesn’t know why.

---

They end up at a diner about an hour outside of the city Chloe had intended to be their destination.

Beca gives her a look, but shrugs and follows her toward the slightly rundown building, quickening her steps to be the one to hold open the door, though her gaze rests on the ground as Chloe passes through with a quiet ‘thank you’.

But the diner, with a mix of interesting people to watch, Top 40s hits coming from what sounds like partially damaged speakers, and an elderly waitress named Marge, offers exactly the atmosphere Chloe had been looking for. Calm, but distracting; a chance to recalibrate before heading into Las Vegas.

(Also, they serve breakfast all day, and have really comfy bright red booths so that’s a bonus.)
“I bet Marge was a Mafia consigliera in her prime.”

There’s much more than amusement in Beca’s features, but Chloe—leaning forward on the wide table separating them—chooses to ignore the bewilderment (and more importantly, the affection that threatens to distract her from her distraction).

“What?”

“Marge, our waitress. She totally has a dark past. I’m thinking Mafia. Seriously, just look at her!”

Beca glances to her left, where Marge appears to have fallen into a light doze while cutting into the cream pie displayed on the counter.

“Oh yeah.” Her lips twitch. “You’ve got her all figured out, Chlo. She’s clearly a criminal mastermind.”

“Not anymore! She’s on the path of redemption! She thought nothing would come of the casual flirtation between her and Detective Matthew Burnett, but the affair spanned the years and clouded her judgment and softened her iron heart. Until that fateful day when Detective Burnett and the young savant he had saved from the brutal conditions of the arms operation that had been fronting as an orphanage, perished in a suspicious fire! A fire that Marge found was ordered by the very Boss she vowed to serve.”

Marge wakes up with a start. Beca looks back and forth in between the waitress and Chloe and then starts giggling. Chloe has to lean over the table a bit more in order to slap her on the shoulder.

“You’re drawing attention to us! Don’t let her new identity fool you; she could end us both with that cake server. And… oh, god, be cool. Act natural. She’s totes coming this way.”

But Beca is still giggling and Chloe’s grin can’t be held back, and Marge probably thinks they are more than slightly insane when she takes their order. (To her credit though, she never falters in her duty. A total pro.)

The giggles continue long after she’s left with their order, and Chloe thinks her face might split. Until Beca says:

“You are such a weirdo.”

**Blurred Lines** is playing in the background. One of the Bikers at the bar lets out an obnoxiously loud belch. Marge twirls her pencil around her fingers with suspicious skill.

But all the shitty music, poor manners, and further evidence pointing to Marge’s shady past cannot distract Chloe from the fondness that decorates Beca’s tone, and the warmth in her expression.

---

When they exit the diner, she’s reminded of the stars of Texas (remembers waltzing in a field underneath them), because they’re in the middle of nowhere again and the stars are just as impossibly bright. Nevada might have Texas beat though, or maybe it’s Chloe that’s been worn
away, but either way, she’s entranced enough to prolong their journey further, hopping onto the hood of the car and leaning against the windshield, instead.

But it turns out that it’s not the stars that hold her attention or even the lights of the city, far off in the distance.

It’s Beca’s eyes when she turns to look at her.

(Her eyes, her eyes, make the stars look like they’re not shining; Chloe nearly chokes on the thought.)

And the words that fall from Beca’s lips.

“I love you, you know.”

Those are the words; five words, five syllables, spoken with a sort of nonchalance that only comes when words thought to be mentally whispered are instead forced from lips (absentmindedly tilted in a half smile) in an innocent and revealing puff of air.

Those are the words that are followed by two sharp gasps of air (both surprised and both afraid).

Those are the words that break Chloe Beale.
staring into the sky until we're blind

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Those are the words that neither girl mentions for five days.

---

Until:

“I meant it,” Beca says—brave and terrified—eyes unwavering and fingertips frantically drumming on her denim-coated thigh. “I meant what I said.”

They have not left Las Vegas. (Today, they have not even left their hotel room.) Chloe’s not sure why, but she thinks it has something to do with losing themselves in the spectacle (trying, at least); there are shows and slots and drinks and bright lights and it all helps her forget about the softer (but somehow more brilliant) sparks in the sky that had been reflected in Beca’s eyes that night.

Chloe has connections (they’re also both more than attractive) so they’ve gotten into some of the best clubs in the US; TAO, Marque, XS (the list continues), but she can’t enjoy the press of bodies around her—can’t focus on the flashing lights and pounding bass—not when it all seems like a pointless distraction that can’t begin to measure up to an empty field, a luminous sky, and a low melody coming from her car stereo.

But now Beca has shut off the TV and she’s sitting up straight and it isn’t supposed to go like this. Part of what Chloe had always liked about Beca was that she understood. She knew what Chloe had always known so well—that deep emotions were a cesspit—were quicksand—were a vat of boiling tar. She’d always known Beca was hiding underneath her projected persona, but she had thought her excavations of the woman had been complete after the ICCA’s; she’d thought that the still sarcastic but slightly sappy girl she’d found underneath had been it.

But this—this is something else entirely. This is a woman who uses the ‘L’ word and doesn’t take the easy way out (doesn’t run away) once it’s offered. Chloe wonders if that kind of strength (weakness? wasn’t she supposed to be thinking of it as a weakness?) had always existed in this one Beca Mitchell, and why it has decided to reveal itself now of all times.

She thinks she knows the answer to her own question.

It’s in performing a shower duet, fast friends, and the smile that spreads across her face after a post-prison visit; in Just the Way You Are and Just a Dream, in playing pretend and spray painting murals. It’s in the way Beca doesn’t flinch when she holds her hand—in the way she answers the phone without pause—in how she goes on unplanned road trips with an honest-to-god smile in place.

The answer to her question—the answer to why Beca is suddenly this way—lies in her—lies in Chloe herself. Because Beca has revealed this side of her personality to Chloe alone, and so Chloe has no one to blame but herself.
But ‘blame’ feels wrong, doesn’t it? People do not ‘blame’ themselves for revealing something wonderful and beautiful and precious. (And isn’t that exactly what this is?) Too wonderful, really, because it begs the question; ‘what’s the catch?’

“Beca—I think maybe you should—“ Chloe swallows. Gets up off her bed and tries not to begin pacing. “You should take a step back. This isn’t—”

Beca does not grow angry or agitated; she merely looks sad—annoyed with herself, if anything. “I wouldn’t have said it if I wasn’t sure. You know me, Chloe. I don’t— this stuff isn’t exactly— I don’t—” She slumps, shoulders dropping and hands falling onto the bed. “I don’t like it.”

“Then why did you say anything at all?” Chloe makes an effort not to sound panicked. But her hands are restless, one twisting inside the grip of the other. “God, Beca! These things are much better left alone!”

It is (admittedly) something of an outburst, and an undeserved one at that. Beca still looks sad (still not angry—still not agitated), but also a little defeated and Chloe hates herself a little, right then and there.

Of all the things to say to this. To Beca. And she picks the one that will make Beca’s face fall like that.

(Correction: Chloe hates herself a lot, right then and there.)

“Yeah.” Beca’s voice is gruff and her eyes flick away. Unfamiliar—a stranger—again. “You’re right. I shouldn’t have. Sorry.”

It’s too late to take any of it back. She’s not even sure she wants to. Or whether she should.

But Beca leaves after not even a minute, headphones placed firmly over her ears, and Chloe stares at the door long after it closes, trying to remind herself why this is all for the best.

---

If appearances are to be believed

(and they aren’t)

her mom truly mourns Chloe’s dad only once.

He’s been gone for years

and that should somehow make the pain

vanish

but it doesn’t.

Still, it’s nice to pretend.
So when she comes home from school early one day
(seventeen and taking full advantage of her senior skip days)
and slips through the door to grab a few things from her room,

the first thing she feels is an

unjust

anger

at seeing her mom

on the ground

crying

over an old box full of

pictures and notes and trinkets.

She feels

actual anger that she

(they)
can still feel so much

after so long.

(Chloe’s gotten so good at appearances.

Sometimes she is fully convinced

that it doesn’t still occasionally catch her off guard,

how fresh the hurt is.)

And she’s angry.

Because Chloe had thought

that if she kept pretending,

it would no longer be a lie.
But now she can see
(her mother on the floor)
that there is no end to the hurt
when someone leaves.

And she is angry.
(Maybe determined.)

She leaves without saying a word.

---

That night, Chloe goes out alone.

She dances with a number of people, but it all feels wrong.

When she returns to the hotel, it’s earlier than is appropriate for a night out, but Beca’s already in her bed, sheets over her head.

Chloe fights the impulse to crawl in with her, and then fights to forget she’d ever had such an impulse in the first place.

She fails, and her dreams are full of brightness and warmth.

When she wakes, the world is cold and dim, despite the bright midday heat of Las Vegas, just outside the hotel room window.

---

Sin City has lost any sort of appeal it once held, and they have nowhere else to go, so it’s decided that they should return to Atlanta. ‘Decide’ is a bit of stretch, or maybe it’s ‘they’ that is, because things have been stilted and weird and the smooth ground that had once existed between Chloe and Beca now feels unleveled—torn apart by cracks that are slowly filling with—what? Things unspoken?

Chloe can’t imagine how that can be, when Beca looks almost deflated with the loss of all the things she’d previously kept inside, but she senses the cracks filling and it does little for the underlying panic that bubbles in her throat and pulls at her vocal cords in the most unpleasant of ways. She cannot speak properly, and Beca apparently feels little desire to do so, and thus the ‘decision’ as it were, is more of an inevitable conclusion that still, somehow, feels unsatisfactory.
And it’s inevitable that she start to think that maybe this is a worse result than if she had just—
But no.
That line of thought will get her nowhere. Things would work themselves out in time.
She swallows, avoids looking at Beca, and just drives.

---

Beca falls asleep after a couple of hours (of silence).

Her head falls back, neck at an odd angle, and her mouth opens slightly as she falls into a deeper sleep. She does not snore, or even breathe heavily, but she makes soft noises—almost short hums—that, all combined, form a slow melody. One note a minute. And Chloe wonders: if she recorded it and sped it up, what would Beca’s unconscious song sound like?

(What would it say?)

For a moment, Chloe feels like she can’t breathe.

She takes the next exit with a jerk of her wheel that, miraculously does not awaken Beca, but Chloe hardly notices.

(“We shouldn’t really love at all.”)

The wheels actually squeal during her next left turn.

She doesn’t notice that either.

---

She needs space.

Lots of it.

A canyon full of it.

The parking lot is full of cars and people, so that doesn’t much help, but Chloe manages a bright smile and a wave at a toddler passerby when she steps out of the car to stretch her back. Beca is still sleeping, but her little hums are increasing in frequency, as though her sleeping symphony is about to end, and not ten seconds later, it does, with a particularly violent twist and heavily lidded, fluttering eyes. Chloe is relieved and disappointed in both directions, and it’s a confusing sensation, but not the most confusing one she’s felt even today.

“We’re at the Grand Canyon,” Chloe supplies brightly, before Beca can say anything. “I thought
we shouldn’t miss it.”

Beca blinks once, squinting against the sun. “Oh.” She swallows and blinks again. Chloe leans back in the car to offer her a Tic Tac, but it’s denied with a slight shake of Beca’s head. “Okay.”

Chloe takes that for a rousing agreement of her decision to bring them here and grins again.

(Beca is wiping sleep from her eyes and twisting her neck left and right and the grin feels like it’s stuck—scene frozen by a scratch on the DVD of her life.)

“We don’t have to stay long! Just check it out and leave, even!”

Beca does not reply until she is out of the car, and her eyes are trained on Chloe (suddenly no evidence of her earlier nap present). “It’s your call. Whatever you want.”

Chloe wants.

—Space.

She wants space.

“Okay!” (Her voice cracks—right in the middle of the word.) “Let’s go!”

It’s not exactly difficult to find the canyon. Even if it weren’t huge, there’s a steady stream of people to the main viewing platform and Chloe just follows the crowd, Beca trailing behind her. And when they reach it, the sight of the canyon restores her breath. It’s beautiful and open and so very vast.

But it only lasts for a few moments.

A woman bumps into Chloe and she smiles politely and receives nothing in return and her breath is gone again. She takes several steps towards the ledge, hands coming to rest of the hot steel of the railings that seem less sturdy than they should be. Or maybe it’s just everything in her that feels unsteady and she’s not sure what’s wrong with her but when the guy standing next to her along the railing hands over his camera and asks her to take a picture of him and his girlfriend, Chloe doesn’t engage past a short nod and a shaky smile.

(She does not ask them how long they’ve been together or where they’re from or why they’ve come here. She just tries to make sure the picture doesn’t come out blurry. A monumental task at the moment.)

She looks back out over the landscape and curls her nails into her palms, and she’s not sure what’s happening but she still needs space and she can’t quite remember that the best place to lose yourself is in a crowd and not in the openness of the night sky and she needs—

“Hey.” The touch at her back is light and deliberate. “Chloe.”

Beca says her name in a way that’s light and deliberate as well, and Chloe turns without fear. She is greeted by a half smile and a nod towards the direction they had just come from—off the platform and toward the car. But Chloe does not pause in nodding in return. And Beca only hesitates a moment before taking Chloe’s hand and leading her away.

Not towards the car though.

She turns right as soon as they leave the platform and leads Chloe along the ridge, before pulling
her down into an area that isn’t roped off, but probably should be; the rocks are not particularly sturdy, moving under their feet as they descend down to a lower platform that wraps around and opens up into silence and—

Space.

Chloe moves to the edge of the gorge, looks out over red rock and dizzying heights, and she breathes.

Beca’s hand is still in hers and she breathes.

“Oh my god.”

She could be talking about a lot of things.

But she might only be talking about one.

“I know.”

And even though Beca is staring out over the vista before them, she could mean a lot of different things too.

But Chloe’s still breathing.

There is so much space.

“Can you imagine what it looks like at night?” she whispers. “All the stars. The quiet.”

Silence is Beca’s only reply, unless stepping closer counts. And maybe it does.

“Bec—?”

“Close your eyes.”

Chloe licks her lips. Shifts on her feet. (Tiny rocks slip from underfoot; they roll towards the canyon edge.) But Beca nods once, and Chloe closes her eyes.

Beca’s hands slip over the closed lids and the breath Chloe sucks in is somehow the steadiest thing she’s done all day.

“Can you imagine now?” Her voice is low and by Chloe’s ear and it’s hot outside, but the heat coming from Beca’s front (not pressed against Chloe’s back, but close—so close) reaches a level of intensity that the sun could never match.

“Can you imagine?” Beca says again. “What it would be like?”

The sky, Beca means.

(Maybe. Not at all.)

There is darkness over Chloe’s eyes and rocks under her feet and wind brushing over her skin and she is meant to be imagining the night sky.

But she can only feel Beca’s hands on her face and her breath in her ear.

Her answer fits, regardless.
“Yes.”

---

“Chloe.”

That’s all Beca has to say, an hour later, and Chloe knows what is coming next.

“I can’t.”

They are still on the rim, standing side by side. Beca’s hands are no longer over her eyes, but her shoulder is warm against Chloe’s and her stare is hot on her face.

Beca says nothing. Simply rubs at the bridge of her nose once, and the last remnants of her peeling skin flake off. Chloe wonders if the layer underneath will be less susceptible to the burning sun.

The need to repeat herself grows until it cannot be ignored.

“I can’t.”

(But no. Repetition does not help. It sounds no less weak.)

(No less pathetic.)

And Beca face is painfully blank.

But she does not push.

---

Not for another few hours, at least.

Not until Beca is behind the wheel and they’re somewhere in New Mexico, and she abruptly pulls through two lanes of traffic and off to the side of the road amidst a cacophony of honking and Chloe’s sudden stream of swears.

“What the fuck, Beca?”

“Why?”

Chloe’s hands are still wrapped around the handle of the passenger door and her stare is absolutely incredulous and not at all comprehending.

“Are you—what?”

“You say you can’t. But why?”

It another one of those rare moments of bravery (singing Bulletproof in the middle of a crowded auditorium with no warning to her team), and Beca—hands jittery and jaw twitching—clearly
thinks this might be just as badly received, but is pressing on nevertheless.

And Chloe—just as she does with every instance of Beca’s startling courage—feels dumbstruck by it; equally impressed and annoyed, but more than anything else, is engaged by it and attracted to it and this time is no different. But she doesn’t know how to respond to it now (just as she hadn’t known to respond to it before).

“I—”

“If it’s because you don’t want me—if it’s because you only see me as a friend or don’t see us going anywhere or you’re just not attracted to me. That’s—that’s fine, Chloe. We can stay friends and that’s fine. But if it’s—if it’s anything else.” She swallows. “You should at least tell me why. Please.”

It’s the please that does it.

Not the word itself, but the way Beca’s eyebrows twitch and her mouth slants and her fingers curl and her shoulders hunch and it breaks Chloe’s heart a little, the way Beca seems to be expecting Chloe to do the same to hers, but purposefully and devastatingly.

“I—” She swallows. Readies some excuse. Some way to salvage the relationship that is seemingly falling apart around them.

“I’m afraid.”

And that’s not it. That’s not the way to proceed. That’s not the direction Chloe has ever gone in, because it’s the truth and it’s dangerously close to making this all very real. It’s clear Beca is not expecting this answer either; her eyes go wide and her body just opens up and her hand shifts off the wheel and closer to Chloe (stopped midway by a bought of sudden insecurity).

“That’s bullshit.”

Beca pulls back, eyes widening, but draws forward again not a moment later, dark blue once again narrowed. Her mouth is in a thin line and Chloe barely hears the rush of the traffic around them.

“That's bullshit.”

Barely feels the rattle of the Trans Am that results when each car passes.

"Excuse me?"

Beca is close now. Leaning forward over the seat and Chloe feels the heat flood her face and the calm seep from her skin.

"That's bullshit."
"I heard you, Beca. But—"

"You care, Chloe. You care about everyone. You care about the dude at the fucking Barden post office. And the woman who serves your coffee at Moris’.

"Derrick. Janice," Chloe responds automatically, before realizing that she's not helping prove her point.

Beca doesn't let up. Not for a moment.

"You care more than anyone I've ever met. God, Chloe, you care enough that you eat Tic-Tacs every fucking three seconds because some bitch told you your breath smelled like eggs once."

"That's—"

"You care a lot, Chloe." Beca is overly earnest. Overly everything. "And that's—that's fantastic. That's—you. God, it's one of the best parts about you. Why would you ever—"

"That's not the same, Beca!" She says it loudly. Shrilly. (Desperately.)

"Why? Why not?"

"It's more. It's—more. More to lose."

There’s a brief moment of silence from Beca—her index finger taps against the steering wheel once.

Twice.

"More to gain," Beca says quietly. And Chloe wonders who this woman beside her is.

(And if she might be right.)


It’s as though the words are at once water and air in her lungs—she's breathing for the first time and drowning at the same instant.

Could it be that easy?

The only answer she can come up with is:

Perhaps.

Beca must see that in her eyes because she pulls back with a half-smile (awkward and hopeful, but unassuming) and switches on her left turn signal to get back on to the highway. Chloe’s iPod comes on shortly after, Beca’s hands now sure as they select shuffle and return to the wheel. But it’s soft enough that Chloe still hears Beca’s last say on the matter, even if her voice dips as low as she’s ever heard it.

“I wouldn’t say it if I weren’t sure.”

Chloe believes her.

---
They go through the rest of Beca’s mixes over the next couple of days.

(A mix of ‘I Kissed a Girl’ and ‘Too Close’ follows a ‘Titanium’ and ‘Starry Eyed’ mash up and Beca says nothing, but a stain of red spreads down her neck.)

And it’s easy, listening to a song an hour—savoring the pieces of Beca that are slotted carefully into each mix—understanding that when Beca slows down Sia’s vocals or adds a heavy bass underneath Katy’s chorus, she is telling Chloe something—the same something she had said with spray paint and a hand on her shoulder blade and a brightening of her eyes.

But it’s not until the last song that she really gets it.

Because it’s Beca singing (both parts), and it’s a mix of Bulletproof and Titanium and Chloe thinks it might be the most gorgeous thing she’s ever heard.

Beca doesn’t laugh at her when she pulls over the car and has to wipe away a few tears, even though Chloe feels like she might deserve to be laughed at, just a little. Because this is ridiculous, this feeling (this swelling in her chest that she, despite innumerable attempts, cannot contain), and if she can’t manage to laugh at it, then—

“I love you,” she says, her temple resting on the steering wheel, her eyes (probably a little red—a little watery) focused on Beca’s.

“I know,” Beca returns, corners of her mouth turning upwards with just the smallest amount of smugness that is nearly completely erased out by overarching fondness. “Why do you think I was able to say it first?”

Chloe does laugh at that.

But not for long, because then Beca’s mouth is on hers and she’s unbuckling her seatbelt to lean further over the central console and knocking over her stupid container of Tic Tacs in the process and she can taste the curl of Beca’s tongue over her teeth and the tilt of her lips when she makes a noise in the back of her throat that might mean finally.

---

Her mom picks up on the first ring,

and the surprise in her greeting is clear.

Chloe calls home often
but regularly
(Sundays at 4:30 PM).

It’s a Wednesday,
and the clock on her phone says 8:43 PM
so it’s not much of a surprise that when her mother says her name,
it is followed by a question mark.

‘Chloe?’

‘Hi! Mom!’

This too, sounds different, at least to her own ears.

(She is bubbling over with happiness
and it is in her gait and smile and voice.)

And her mom is smiling in response.

Chloe can hear it in her reply.

It makes the grin on her face widen.

‘Chloe, honey. How are you?’

(Beca looks up from across the room,
clearly trying not to eavesdrop—
headphones over her ears—
but smiling anyways, because Chloe is smiling too.

It all feels kind of perfect.

Chloe feels kind of perfect.)

‘Great! Mom, I’m—I’m really great’.

Chloe’s eyes flicker upwards once again,
finding Beca’s.

‘I’m—dating someone.’
There’s a long

pause

before her mom responds.

‘Oh.
That’s—you usually don’t mention it—
when you’re seeing someone, that is.’

‘This is different, Mom.’

Chloe thinks Beca might not be listening to her music too loudly
(or at all)
because her smile curls into a teeth-flashing grin at that exact moment.

‘She’s really different.’

There’s another pause.

Chloe thinks she might hear a heavy swallow on the other line.

‘Mom?’

‘Oh, Chloe. It’s—I’m glad.’

There’s more (true) emotion in her mother’s voice than Chloe is used to.

It feels nicer than she would have expected.

Really nice.

‘Will you tell me about her?’

Chloe nods—
wide grin still in place—

and,

in great detail,

(love bursting through every syllable,

her gaze finding Beca’s throughout)

she does just that.

And she starts by talking about the night sky.

Chapter End Notes

We made it, guys! And this would never have happened without some really awesome people: my beta (Midground), the Giver of Prompts (Kay), and the the gifset that started it all. ALSO, fearlessfan and her amazing story Con Affecto, from which I shamelessly (with her permission) stole the idea of Chloe liking orange TicTacs. And thanks to all of you, for being the lovely, encouraging people you are!

Should you want to check out the music mentioned in this fic, you can check out my 8 tracks playlist.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!