<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Teen And Up Audiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>F/F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Fifth Harmony (Band)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>Camila Cabello/Lauren Jauregui</td>
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<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Camila Cabello, Lauren Jauregui, Dinah Jane Hansen, Normani Kordei, Ally Brooke</td>
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<td>Additional Tags:</td>
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<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2017-09-10 Updated: 2019-09-22 Chapters: 17/? Words: 125741</td>
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</tbody>
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**Riptide**

by smile_lovato

Summary

Everyone had a bucket list, Camila's just included Lauren...and a dead girl.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Most people don't know that the word riptide is a commonly misused one. One that shouldn't exist because riptides don't even exist. Most people don't realize that when they describe riptide they're often describing a rip current. Most people are stupid though and will continue to refer to them as riptide - even make songs about the incorrect term. Or worse confuse rip currents for undertows. You know, those scary as hell currents that literally drag a person down to the sea floor.

But that's one of humanity's fatal flaws - thinking that they know better. Ignorance isn't really bliss if you're dead.

In the case of rip currents, however, most people fall under two sides of the spectrums, both of which are equally deadly.

The first is underestimating the power of nature. It's as if an individual actually believes they are capable of resisting anything nature has to offer. Which, come on, is total bull shit.

Then of course there's the other side of the spectrum - panic. And fear has an irrevocable way of tainting one's judgment and mind. And you find yourself doing the one irrational thing that you cannot control.

It's okay though, if you're caught in one it's a rather easy process break free from. Rip currents are just very narrow currents that pulls a person further into the deep end.

The key is not to fight it. It's a futile attempt. You'll just end up exhausting yourself, or worse, drowning because of exhaustion. You kind of just have to relax. It may seem impossible. You know, in the way that Ron made it impossible to find his chill in the Devil's Snare in the first Harry Potter movie, and Hermione saved his stubborn ass. Except it's not Devil's Snare and you won't have a clever witch by your side to save you. Maybe a lifeguard, if you're lucky. But then if the idea of luck is brought into the picture you wouldn't be down the riptide now would you?

Camila Cabello's fingers twist the ridged cap, popping it open. She swirls the bottle, watching the light blue pills collide with one another, before she tips it sideways and two unsuspecting capsules roll out. Camila closes her fist around the pills and drops the bottle next to the pill case her mother got her. The one she refuses to use because it makes her feel even worse for the daily ingestion of the grams. As if she isn't capable enough to remember to take them.

She fumbles for the half empty water bottle, only to realize that the rest of its contents must have fallen over the night before (if that dark stain on her carpet isn't an obvious indication). With a heavy sigh, Camila opens her fist, staring dully down at the blue pills. She brings the medication up to her mouth, pushing the pills to the back of her throat with her tongue and swallowing quickly, before she can so much as get a taste.

Camila is not really one for dry swallowing. She probably hates this more than the way the actual medication makes her feel. She remembers the rare occasions she had to take a pill as a child and
what a hassle it was for her to just swallow it. It became such a crisis for a simple baby aspirin that her mother was reduced to crushing the pill and mixing it in with water so Camila could drink it.

Clearly this isn't the case anymore. The case itself is probably much more than a measly little headache. Though, speaking of headaches, Camila can already begin to feel the tell tale signs of the nauseating side effect creeping up on her.

She runs a hand through her hair, fingers getting stuck in the tangles. Her feet drag against the carpeted floor as she makes her way to the bathroom.

Camila lets the tap run, focusing upon the water stream beat against the sink. The noise is comforting and soothes the ache that pounds near her forehead. She opens the cabinet behind the mirror before she catches a glimpse of her reflection and grabs her toothbrush.

"Low key I don't know how you do that," a voice says behind her. Camila spits out her toothpaste and whips around.

Dinah Jane Hansen, stands before her, leaning against the doorframe of the bathroom entrance. Her arms are crossed and a little smirk plays at her lips, as she watches Camila. It's as if the atmosphere decides to mirror her best friend's smile. Camila's headache is a little more tolerable, and the thought of the day is a little more bearable.

"Do what?" Camila asks.

Dinah's smirk deepens. "Do that whole, pill popping thing without water. Hardcore, Walz."

Camila turns around and runs her toothbrush underneath the faucet. She can feel Dinah's amused gaze. If the mirror cabinet were closed, Camila's sure Dinah's reflection would reveal exactly that. But she doesn't close it.

"That can totally come off as offensive, Dinah," Camila rolls her eyes.

"Lighten up, I was kidding," Dinah laughs. "Why so serious?"

Camila turns back around and gives her a glare.

It's as if a lightbulb goes off in her friend's head, because in the next second Dinah's expression forms recognition.

"Ohhhhh today's the day, huh?"

"Like you really forgot it was your birthday. Don't even play dumb," Camila murmurs dubiously. She quickly puts her toothbrush back and heads back into her room. Her eyes fall to the closet, taking in the neat and organized way her clothes hang. A color coded, organized catastrophe that was a result of her mother's doing. She was just trying to help, Camila tries to rationalize. It doesn't mean it's any less annoying.

"Hey, I don't need that attitude, you want me to give you the poly beat down...because I will," Dinah warns. Camila ignores her, eyes roaming across the neglected articles of clothing. It's been a while since she's actively looked for an outfit. "Besides, hello, it's my birthday. I should be the one bossing you around what the hell. And now that I mention it, you're late - to my party."

That part is true. Camila is late and not even in the fashionable sense. The party started about an hour ago. She's sure if her mother hadn't come into her room and reminded her about the party, she'd still be in bed dreading the start of a new day. Well half a day, considering it was well past one in the
afternoon

(But isn't that what unmotivated teenagers are supposed to do during summer vacation?)

And yet here she is contemplating a 'going out' outfit, something she's felt she hasn't done in eighty-four years (though it's probably only been about a few months).

"Go for the flannel," Dinah chimes in, coming to stand beside her. "I'm getting those hella crazy Sapphic vibes from you today."

Camila grimaces. "You know if I got a quarter for everything offensive you say I'd be-

"-dead ass poor. Okay come on, just wear the plaid. We both know you were eyeing it anyway."

Camila makes a few incoherent mumbles under her breath, but ultimately reaches for the top.

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She doesn't take very long to get ready, spending a few minutes trying to hide the dark rings beneath her eyes (and trying to block out Dinah's criticizing of her poor blending skills). When Camila makes it down the hallway and into the kitchen, she finds her mother at the sink and her younger sister Sofi at the kitchen table eating a sandwich. They both look at her as she stands by the doorway. And it's probably the first thing that immediately strikes her as she nervously leans against the doorway.

There wasn't anything inherently wrong with the way her family treated her. They fulfilled the basic requirements. Her parents fed her, made sure she was taken care of. Sofi learned not to disturb her in her room anymore. They all made sure not to mention the unmentionable.

But despite the unmentionable, over the past six months, Camila began noticing that they all had developed an obnoxious habit of staring at her like she was going to burst into tears at any moment, like she was this fragile little teacup that had to be held precariously in firm hands.

Yet, at the moment, the way Sofi and her mother stare at her now is different. It's not the routinely sad look that she's used to. It's one that sends an unmistakable chill down her spine.

And she hates it - the way they look at her. As if they've seen a ghost

"Are you ready?" Her mother stops the water and promptly breaks the tense spell over the kitchen. She wipes her hands on her apron. "I'll drive you."

Her mother apparently doesn't trust her enough to walk the short couple of blocks to Dinah's house. Camila doesn't really expect anything less. It's not like she goes out much now. In fact, she rarely ever leaves her room.

The morning she walked up and announced she was going to Dinah's house for her best friend's birthday, her parents were in a perpetual state of shock. A type of shock that made her uneasy and a little annoyed because it was almost downright comical the way her father's mouth fell open. Her mother's eyes had crinkled and Camila bolted back upstairs before anything was said.

She wasn't sure which was worse, seeing the sympathy or those little flashes of hope in her mother's eyes.
Camila lets her mother fuss over her for a good ten minutes in Dinah's driveway, before she calmly reassures her that she's fine. It takes another three, before her mother finally allows her to get out of the car and walk up to the front porch. And then another five, before her mother thinks it's safe enough to drive off ...at a snail's pace.

The nerves slowly creep up on her, as she stands outside Dinah's door. Something that the pills she took this morning helped calm down a little. It's stupid how suddenly the dread washes over her as she studies the familiar off white of the front door and the bleach white molding around it. One side is chipped and Camila distinctly remembers the time she and Dinah scuffed that when they were nine and had the brilliant idea of dragging a grocery store shopping cart home with them (because apparently they needed a foundation for their space shuttle). This of course was before grocery stores started putting those locks on the basket.

"I still can't believe you're doing this," Dinah admits.

"I find your lack of faith disturbing," Camila cites deeply, cupping a hand over her mouth to muffle her voice.

"Wha?"

"That was my Darth Vader impression," Camila responds matter-of-factly. If it's possible, Dinah looks even more puzzled. Camila sighs. "Star Wars, Dinah."

"Right. Hey look I know we've been friends for like years but girl when you start bringing out that nerdy stuff I have to draw the line."

"I listen to your Beyonce stuff."

"Are you seriously trying to compare Bey to Star trek right now?"

Camila rolls her eyes. She's realized that whenever Beyonce is brought into it the conversation gets completely lost.

Camila fidgets with the balloons tied around her wrist - her little sister's idea (because she was convinced Camila wouldn't be able to carry them on the way to Dinah's house). The balloons, dinosaurs (another choice made by her younger sister), bump into each other making an obnoxious plastic-against-plastic rubbing sound. And as if her short walk to Dinah's house couldn't get even more irritating, she has to listen to her best friend complain.

"So you're late," Dinah mumbles beside her.

"Yeah, I'm aware captain obvious," Camila snaps, pulling the balloons away from one another.

"If you hadn't overslept..."

"You're one to talk!"

Dinah smirks.

"Besides, it's not like this is a surprise party or anything," Camila says.

"It's my birthday! I should be more pissed off that you're not even ready," Dinah comments.
"Hey, I brought prehistoric themed balloons," Camila defends, thrusting her tied wrist in Dinah's face. The T-Rex bumps heads with the Triceratops.

She's beginning to regret this.

Camila takes a deep breath, before she knocks against the door. There's muffled noises behind the wooden surface. The door flies open and a small girl about Sofi's age stares up at her. It takes her a moment to realize it's Regina, Dinah's little sister.

"You're late," she says bluntly, starring up at her with dark blank eyes.

"That's what I said!" Dinah exclaims.

"Uh," Camila swallows thickly, picking at the cheap plastic ribbon tied around her wrist. "I'm sorry-"

"Gina!" A hiss comes from behind the small girl and soon Dinah's mother comes into view. "Oh, Camila, you're late."

"Jeez it runs in the Hansen genes or something," Dinah murmurs under her breath, as she slips past her mother and enters the house. Camila follows suit, hyper aware of the moment her foot steps over the threshold. She really tries hard not to be so sensitive to the environment. She tries to get the thought out of her head that this is the first time she's stepped into Dinah's home since -

"It's alright. You're mom let me know you were going to be running a bit late," Milika assures, placing a hand on Camila's shoulder. Camila tries not to visibly flinch. "Everyone's in the kitchen."

Milika guides her down the hallway. The walls are painfully familiar, pictures hanging along the beige surface. Pictures Camila refuses to look at. Though, that doesn't really stop Dinah from making any comments along the way.

"Ugh I told her to get rid of this one," Dinah grumbles, glaring at frame to Camila's left. "My eyebrows were so not on fleek that day. And it's so typical she used this one for the fun..." Dinah's voice trails off and Camila focuses on the ribbon tied around her wrist again.

As they pass the living room, Camila glances up and sees all of Dinah's younger siblings circled around the TV. A loud and bright game, one that suspiciously sounds like the one she and Dinah used to play and angrily chuck controllers at when they lost, is displayed across the screen. Childish laughter filters throughout the bright room, muffling the grunts of the fighting characters in the game. Camila spots Regina in the mix, attempting to steal the main controller. A thieving trait probably picked up from Dinah.

Camila's eyes promptly tear away from the scene. A lump in her throat grows, making each swallow thicker and that much harder to push down. She feels her hands tremble at her sides.

"It's really nice of you to come, Camila," Milika says. "It means a lot to us. To see you."

"She sounds more excited about you coming than me," Dinah pouts.

They walk into the kitchen and Camila is met with Dinah's older family members. Her father, uncles and aunts that Camila vaguely remembers. There's a cake sitting in the middle of the table, with a few unlit candles stuck in it. It hasn't been touched and Camila thinks it's such a shame because it's a pretty cake.

Her eyes flicker to the faces of Dinah's family members; they return the gaze.
And Camila registers the look on their faces. One that is incredibly similar to the stranger that
sometimes stares at her in the mirror. Like there's something lacking the dark depths. Like there's
some part that comes up short of complete within their blank expressions.

Some offer weak smiles and that somehow makes it worse because it reminds her of those obligatory
polite smile people give upon painfully awkward first meetings. It makes her feel small.

Her heart pounds as she tries to ignore the staring. In a pitiful attempt to distract herself from Dinah's
family members, she turns to Milika and offers her the balloons tied around her wrist. Dinah's mother
looks perturbed for a moment and then seems to realize why Camila is struggling with her wrist.

"Here, let me." Milika does not wait for Camila's response, instead gently pulling the ribbons apart. If
the empty eyes on her didn't make her feel incompetent, it's definitely Milika's hands that do.

Irritation floods her body upon the sight of Milika's fingers easily untangling the strings. Her eyes
glance back towards Dinah's family, gauging their reaction.

It's not until her gaze falls on the two people she hadn't initially noticed that her irritation jolts into an
unpleasant shock.

"No fucking way," Dinah exclaims, from over Camila's shoulder.

No fucking way indeed, Camila thinks sourly, as Ally Brooke Hernandez and Normani Kordei
Hamilton both shift in discomfort in their seats. They're sitting at the far end of the table (which
probably explains why she didn't notice them at first) looking just about as grim and uncomfortable
as she feels. Normani waves, while Ally tries to smile but it all comes out as a grimace.

"It's Mani and Ally, what the hell, best birthday ever," Dinah says cheerfully. "Did you know this
was gonna happen Walz? Please tell me you knew this was going to happen!"

Camila doesn't formulate a reply. She's not sure if she just doesn't have any time or she just simply
can't. Because in the next second, someone walks into the cramped tense kitchen. A specific
someone that makes the blood drain from her face and a very thick layer of frost envelope her
insides.

"Camz."

Camila recognizes the voice before she realizes the familiarity of the nickname. It's the voice that
makes a dreadful drop in her gut. Chills her skin over. Makes her want to crawl under a rock at the
bottom of the sea and do something completely uncharacteristic like befriend an annoying talking
spoon.

It's not necessarily the nickname that sets her on edge(though it probably is a contributing factor
considering no one else really calls her that), it's the person who's said it. The person she hasn't really
spoken to in nearly a year. One that she really never considered being in a position of conversing,
because, well, Camila pretty much wanted nothing to do with her.

But Lauren Jauregui always had an irritating habit of catching her off guard - despite the fact that the
two haven't so much as exchanged an awkward hello at the end of her Junior year.

Camila feels an embarrassing sense of mortification hit her in the chest because she begins to notice
the eyes fall on her. The eyes of Dinah's family (and that's like a shit ton of people), plus the eyes of
the girl she's spent the past minute or two avoiding.

She trains her gaze on Milika, who's still holding onto the balloons.
"What is she doing here?" Camila demands.

"Camz-" Lauren begins, but Camila fully turns away from her and faces Milika. The accusations are on her tongue before she can so much as process what exactly she's angry about.

"Why is she here? Did you tell her to come?"

"It's Dinah's birthday. " she hears Lauren state from behind her. Such an obvious answer, Camila almost expects a sarcastic 'duh' to follow Lauren's statement. But it doesn't come. Lauren was always so sarcastic and the fact that its presence is absent only seems to irritate her even more.

"I invited her, Mila," Milika murmurs. "I invited the rest of the girls too."

Milika finally lets go of the balloons and Camila watches as the dinosaurs rise and crash into the ceiling. Camila almost wishes she never even gave the balloons to Dinah's mother. She could've really used something to hide her flushed face right about now.

*The girls.* God. How Milika even manages to refer to them with such a tone of familiarity is beyond Camila. What business did *they* even have here? They were long gone. None of them had spoken to Camila and Dinah since -

"Why would you do that?" Camila snaps. She almost wants to say that they don't get to be here, they don't deserve it. Lauren, *especially*, doesn't deserve to be here.

"Oooh, shit just hit the fan," Dinah snickers beside her. Camila nearly elbows her to shut up.

A flash of hurt passes over Milika's face. It's not particularly unusual to see on Dinah's mother's face these past months. It was a look Camila became accustomed to seeing frequently. But this was different. It was directed at her. She felt the direct sympathy from Milika's expression focusing upon her in a way that suddenly made Camila nauseous.

"We thought it would be nice," Milika begins, approaching Camila as if she were approaching a skittish animal. "I thought it would be good to have Dinah's friends together again - good for you."

Milika's expression shifts, as if she notices the way Camila's feelings shift. Worry seeps into the prominent creases in Milika's face and anger bubbles in Camila's chest.

"Good for all of us," Milika tries to correct.

It all sort of goes crashing downhill from there. Camila's cornered. The walls are closing in on her. There's an ache in her chest that develops and presses down unbearably against her lungs, capsizing them against her ribs. Flattening every bit of breathe she can muster. The tears build and fall and repeat in a shameful never ending process.

She's not crying. No. She'll be damned if she cries in front of Lauren Jauregui.

"I need...I..." She chokes out, wringing her flannel sleeve tightly in her coiled hand. "I can't...I need...to leave...I can't, I can't be here."

She feels the panicked spell fall over the entire room. Everyone scrambles around trying to placate her. She even feels Lauren's hand at one point, but nearly jumps away. A blurred over image of Dinah's mother comes before her.

"Camila, hun, I'm going to call your mom. Everything's going to..."
But Camila isn't listening anymore. Everything is muffled against her hot ringing ears and before she knows it, she's bolting out the door.

She doesn't even quite remember the run back home. It's all a blur, yanking the front of her door, her mother and sister's worried faces, voices following her to her room, locking her door, the pounding from the other side. The cries and pleading. Everything all just meshes into one and she paces back and forth in a frenzy.

"Wow, way to be dramatic, Walz," Dinah murmurs as she plops down on Camila's disheveled bed. "You totally ruined my party by the way."

"They - they did this - they invited them - I'm just so - I walked right into that!" Camila yells.

"I mean, inviting our friends to my party shouldn't be something so unexpected..."

"They - are - not - our - friends!" Her voice rises as she rounds on Dinah.

"Whoa, chill, relax, breathe. Come on, do it with me. In," Dinah breathes in, gesturing for Camila to copy. She repeats the process, listening closely to Dinah's calming voice. "Okay now answer your door because your mom's hysterical crying is starting to freak me out."

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"She wants me to go see the doctor tomorrow morning," Camila murmurs, rewinding the video playing on her laptop. She and Dinah, lean against her headboard, eyes focuses on the computer screen.

An hour has passed since she came home from Dinah's party. An hour of trying to reassure her mother that she was fine. Which proved to be more than just exhausting. It took a lot of apologies and a promise to visit Dr. Abernathy to get her mother to finally relent.

"That's not so bad. Abernathy's cool. She's the homegirl," Dinah says.

"She makes me feel like those pictures you find in the coloring books. Those 'spot the difference' pages," Camila complains. "It's annoying. And besides, there's nothing wrong with me."

"Well..."

"Dinah!"

Dinah giggles, before sobering up immediately. "Wait, go back," she says, pointing to the video on the screen. Camila does as instructed, rewinding the video.

It's an old recording Camila took about a year ago of a surfing competition Dinah was entered in. The beach was packed with onlookers, and occasionally glimpses of Dinah's relatives were also caught in the crowd. It was an overcast day, something Camila was relieved about at the time because she had forgotten her sunglasses at home.

Camila watches with amusement as a far away Dinah figure appears on the screen, paddling on her surfboard.

"Them thunder thighs though," Dinah whines beside her. "Couldn't you have recorded this at a better angle, god, Mila?"
"Shut up," Camila mutters. Video recording Dinah approaches the wave and they both watch in silence as she comes to stand on the board. They've seen this same recording more times than one could count on both of their hands combined. And no matter how many times the video is viewed it always ends the same way - Dinah falling off her surfboard.

"Not that I don't appreciate all of the little fangirling you're doing, watching my old competitions every night, but are we going to talk about what happened today?" Dinah whispers, as Camila reaches towards the keyboard to rewind the video again.

"No," she answers shortly.

Today wasn't a good idea. In fact it had bad idea written all over it. What made her think that everything would be fine just showing up to Dinah's house, on Dinah's birthday?

"Hey no need to get all nasty. I just think it would be good to vent. Like the whole thing of Lauren being there."

Camila feels a small twinge of anger at the thought of her. Which is near silly because she hasn't spoken to Lauren Jauregui since the end of 11th grade. Or Dinah for that matter. When she had her falling out with Lauren, the green eyed girl distanced herself completely. Malika must have been aware of this. So why was she even -

"They ambushed me on purpose," Camila states suddenly.

"Okay hold on-"

"-And then they decide to bring in Lauren," Camila sits upright, pushing the laptop off of her. Dinah looks at her skeptically. "As if to - I don't know -fix me." A wave of nausea hits her as the confirmation she needed appears.

Camila rises from her seat on the bed, and began to pace around her room.

"They think I've been deprived!" She snaps.

It becomes clear. The fragile tea cup look has infinitely manifested into a patronizing rescue mission. Camila Cabello is a lot of things, but she is not a damn damsel in distress. And there isn't anything wrong with her.

Camila pacing becomes more frantic. She distinctly feeling Dinah's eyes following her brisk movement. A surge of anger filters into her body at the mere thought of the sympathy. She isn't a charity case. She's not even grieving, what the hell. "They don't know my life! I have friends. I do stuff." Her tone suddenly turns desperate as she turns to Dinah. "Right?"

"To be fair, your only friend is me, and I'm dead."
mentioning unmentionables is exhausting

For being the embodiment of the unmentionable, Dinah sure had a hard time with refraining from actually mentioning her – you know – unmentionableness.

It's something Camila has tried to explain calmly to Dinah...well, the figment of her imagination version of Dinah. Because, Camila had come to realize that is exactly what Dinah is at this point – a figment of her imagination. She's still not entirely sure if she should be grateful or insulted by Dinah's daily appearances. The topic of her potential mental instability is a sore topic and another thing listed under the ever increasing list of unmentionables.

But for the most part Dinah complies with Camila's rules and set of boundaries, except of course for the occasional slip ups in which Dinah blatantly reminds her of the unmentionable.

You know, the whole thing of Camila's best friend being dead and all.

It happened almost a year ago. The start of senior year. Right at the precipice of the beginning of their lives. One day Camila went to school alone (which should have been the first hint considering she always met up with Dinah at the bus stop). The whole day had gone by with Camila's grumpy disposition, thinking Dinah had up and decided upon a Senior ditch day without her. It wasn't until about the middle of the day that she began to notice the whispers, and the eyes falling on her, as if gauging her expression. It wasn't until after lunch that the school counselor and principal pulled her aside to inform her that they found Dinah's body that morning. Drowned.

It was almost as if fate had it out for Camila. Or at least held a big fuck you flipped off finger in her direction for the duration of senior year. The first few months were rough. And at the very least she could admit that a radical change in her personality had happened.

Happiness wasn't a term she used so lightly anymore. Who was always happy? There wasn't such a thing. She assumed that it had to do with growing up. Once a person reached the preliminary level of adulthood, they were required to trade in their happiness for the title of adult.

Things weren't always like this. She used to be happy. There are a lot of things she's in denial about. Except this one. There used to be a time she was happy. In fact, there was a time she used to be fun. A time she would've genuinely enjoyed her friends' company, sneaking into movie theaters and sampling froyo at Yogurtland until the manager kicked them out. A time she would've made awful, cringe-worthy puns and inappropriate references to Mean Girls. A time she would've playfully teased Dinah for accidentally asking the cashier at the McDonald's drive-thru for a whopper and then promptly slapping Camila for confusing her.

She used to be happy, but now everything is just so complicated. It began to feel like looking in on a window that's been neglected. Dust and grime coating the glass surface and with every swipe it seems as if another layer of dirt remains. And all Camila manages to see is the distorted images through the filthy window. It's never clean. Ever.

She can't even exactly recall the last time she was genuinely happy. It doesn't help that every time she sees a McDonald's drive-thru, she feels that familiar ache in her chest.

And then to make matters worse (or perhaps better) she began to see Dinah. It happened after she started seeing Dr. Abernathy, which seemed like a bit of a back peddle, considering she was seeing the therapist because her parents thought she was depressed. Yet, having hallucinations of your dead friend wasn't exactly the most productive result of seeing a professional.
But as strange as it sounded, Camila never really questioned it. She never told anyone about Dinah's presence, figuring she didn't need any more of parental worrying or need them to think she belonged in a nut house. And perhaps deep down, Camila knew acknowledging the ridiculous aspect of her 'imaginary' friendship with Dinah put her in a position to question her own sanity. And if there's one thing she knows, it's that she is an incredibly sane person.

It all, however, doesn't change the fact that her best friend is dead.

And Dinah's snarky comment immediately shuts her up into sullen silence.

"What?" Dinah goads, with a teasing smirk. "It's true."

"You know I don't like it when you do that," Camila responds. Her tone is light but there is something heavy in her words as she speaks them. Dinah recognizes it too because she immediately drops the subject which Camila is thankful for.

Dr. Abernathy's office is filled with neutral earth tones. The kind of traditional color schemes that try to make the patients calm and relaxed. She figures all doctors' offices are required to fit this format. But Hollywood has so royally fucked up her perspective on these offices that she immediately associates it with mental instability, or like, tooth cavities.

There's a water fall rock formation thing (that Camila never bothered to learn the name of) sitting on a small coffee table near the rack of magazines. That's new. It doesn't make her calm or the slightest bit relaxed. In fact, that stupid bullshit excuse for a water fall sculpture is annoying. Grating. The sound of the vertical rushing water muffles everything else in the room for her. Which, in all honesty is really nothing but the receptionist typing and occasional paper shuffling. But at least the lady's fumbling around isn't making her break into a cold sweat.

Camila swallows thickly, tearing her eyes away from the water fall. She feels the fingers of her right hand pick at the seam of her jeans. The flow of the water is relentless, trickling down across the wooden planks of the sculpture. She wishes there was music in here. Anything to suppress that godawful sound.

Before her mother notices her rigid posture, the receptionist tells Camila the doctor is ready for her.

Camila holds in the heavy sigh of relief until she's out of her mother's earshot.

Usually Camila is fine with these sessions. At least the scheduled ones. Abernathy is patient with her, unlike her parents. But that's understandable, she supposes. Abernathy is paid to be patient.

The first day she had walked into therapy a month ago, Dr. Abernathy was not what she had expected. Camila was ready for that entitled old white guy with the stereotypical nuclear family and the pretentious air that all therapists seemed to exude in various forms of fiction. Perhaps that was a bit too cynical and too Esther Greenwood of her to think that way because Abernathy turned out to be the exact opposite.

Abernathy was – cool. Certainly too cool to be stuck in that dressy shirt outfit and constraints of the therapy room. Too cool to be stuck with this kind of job.

There was something so Michelle Obama-esque about her. Something about her that demanded attention. The lull of her voice held a power that was so soothing yet commanded Camila's focus.
And maybe the fact that Abernathy never once made Camila feel like she was trapped under some sort of bell jar helped with her ability to like Abernathy.

"How are you today Camila?" She greets with a smile. "I wasn't expecting you until tomorrow."

*My mom nearly lost her head yesterday. Believe me, this is the last place I want to be. I just want her to leave me alone for once –*

"Sorry," Camila murmurs in a low voice.

She may like her doctor, but it doesn't necessarily mean she trusts her enough.

"No need to apologize, Camila," Abernathy smiles again.

The smile puts her at ease and the previous stiffness in her posture slowly melts.

"I feel fine," Camila answers her earlier question.

Most of her answers are short, one word and not very revealing. Sometimes she feels guilty because then she'll usually see Abernathy take a few moments to write something down. And it all makes her feel compelled to say more just to compensate for the fact that she's a horrible patient. As if there was even a definitive way to describe a horrible patient.

"Liiieeeessss," Dinah sings, suddenly dropping to sit on the floor by Camila's feet.

Camila shoots her a look, as if to say: *Where the hell have you been?*

Dinah shrugs her shoulders. "I got held up. Besides, you're the one that up and left without me."

Another normal occurrence. Dinah seemed to have developed a habit of dropping in whenever she pleased. Though, for the most part Camila's narrowed down her arrival times to shortly after the pill ingestion (or at least within the hour).

Camila bites back a sarcastic response, momentarily becoming hyper aware of Abernathy's calculating eyes on her.

"I feel fine," Camila repeats, hiding the annoyance in her voice. "Yesterday I was fine too."

"Girl I think your nose is growing," Dinah laughs. "Pinocchio, get it? Get it? Do you get it Walz? That was hilarious."

Camila rolls her eyes, trying to mute Dinah's laughter. Inappropriate jokes were her thing, at least they used to be.

Camila glances up at Abernathy and returns her attention to the doctor. Abernathy has put her clipboard down and rested her chin in her hand. The last thing she needs is for her doctor to think she talks to herself.

"Yesterday was Dinah's birthday," Abernathy finally says. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

*Not particularly.*

Camila is silent. Dr. Abernathy returns to scribbling something down. The scratch of the pen against the clipboard is grating and it echoes in her head, feeling as if it's reverberating across her skull. Camila brings a hand to her forehead, pinching the spot between her eyebrows. She lets out a sigh. "I went to Dinah's house."
"You did?" Abernathy puts down her clipboard and leans forward, interested. "That's good."

"No, not good," Camila says and she can't help the heated undertone in her voice. "My... *people* that I used to know were there too."

"Friends?"

The word makes her uncomfortable. It makes something heavy and cold drop in the pit of her stomach. There was a time she would've described them as just that. A long time ago. All of them – Ally, Normani, even Lauren – were her friends to the point of being inseparable, despite the differences in their social circles. Dinah constantly competing in surfing tournaments, Normani was always so focused upon her dancing, Ally in theater and Lauren in her softball team.

Yet there was a middle ground they all met each other at. It almost seemed cliché that when Dinah died that middle ground became distorted. As if Dinah was the glue and they were the stickers and Camila somehow became the surface in which the stickers suddenly got ripped off from, with Lauren leaving the biggest tear.

*Ouch.*

"No," she snaps. "They're not friends."

"Liar, liar pants on fire," Dinah accuses, shaking her head.

"And you didn't want these – *people* – there?" Abernathy continues, after making another note.

"Hah, more like you didn't want one person," Dinah laughs. "Go on! Tell her how Lo can pretty much get your underwear in a twist."

*Oh my god Dinah, shut up!*

"No," Camila responds.

"Can you tell me why you didn't want them there?" Abernathy asks.

Camila instinctually glances towards Dinah. Her friend gives her an encouraging head tilt in the direction of Abernathy as if prompting her to continue. The heavy feeling in her stomach becomes more apparent.

Camila shakes her head. "I don't know."

"You're such a liar, Mila."

.

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It's a Wednesday night when things change.

There's nothing particularly profound about the day. Except perhaps the conversation Camila nearly walks in on at three in the morning.

The muffled shrill tone of her mother's voice is what made her stop in her tracks, near the doorframe of the kitchen entryway. It's the wavering chill in her mother's tone that makes her stay. The fact that her father's voice has also suddenly filtered through the wall makes her completely freeze.
"I don't know what to do, Alejandro," her mother says. "I don't know how to help her."

"I know, I know."

"She's our daughter. She shouldn't be suffering like this. We need to get her help."

"Dr. Abernathy suggested to have her join a support group. It might help," his voice is hopeful. Camila isn't sure which one is worse.

"She shouldn't be up in her room all the time. She should be going out, doing just normal things girls her age do,"

"The doctor said people deal with grief differently."

"I just miss my daughter, Alejandro."

It's more than Camila wants to hear. They missed their daughter – the old Camila.

The word 'grieving' sets her on edge and resonates sickeningly in her mind, as hurries back to her room. It spreads in her mind like an unwelcome cold, in her head infecting the rest of her body. It only seems to resonate even deeper the moment she enters her room and looks at the state of it, really looks at it.

Her bed is made, her clothes neatly put away, shoes tucked in her closet. Her desk is untouched, surface shining and reflecting the light of the lamp. Everything is unnaturally tidy. It's an embarrassingly stark difference to her past self's messy room. It's like the warmth of her previous presence has been sucked out dry and replaced with this cold unfamiliarity. It's so strange and wrong and it reeks of her mother's interference. The stench of Camila's own ineptitude suffocates the walls of the room, reminding her that she can't take care of herself. That she's invalidated herself these past months.

She's stopped time in the worst way and for the first time in a long time she feels outraged. It's as if the conversation she's eavesdropped in suddenly made her realize her lack of a social life and it also made her feel dreadfully behind in her departure from adolescence. She's stuck on the shore waiting for the boat to come ship her off into the sunset.

These rites of passage had suffered because of her self-absorption.

_We're calling it self-absorption now?_

"Hey, what's up, you look like you're gonna puke," Dinah appears at her side, smirking. Camila regards her briefly.

Everything had changed because of her best friend. She had changed – so blatantly that it became such a bothersome worry for her parents. Even if she did somehow manage to "move on" there's a part of her (a very large part) that doesn't really want to. Because she knows deep down she's not ready to let Dinah go, and even deeper there's this uncanny fear that when she makes it to the other side of the ocean of passage she's going to meet the new Camila. And it's going to be this twisted hybrid version of what she used to be and who she has to be.

Perhaps surviving the bell jar is faking not even being aware of the bell jar in the first place.

Then the thought occurs to her immediately. A rush of adrenaline hits her as she scrambles to her desk, nearly pulling out the drawer from its shelf. She shuffles through it, searching for paper.
"Uh, what are you doing?" Dinah probes. Camila continues with her shuffling until she finds a notebook. Her fingers tremble as she flips through the pages, ignoring the pained reaction she feels in her chest upon looking at her handwriting.

"They want me to seem normal? Fine. I'll give them the most clichéd normal straight off of those pretentious bloggers on the internet," Camila says fiercely, finding the nearest empty page.

"So, like, you're basically just making fun of yourself?"

"I'm making a checklist," Camila continues as if she didn't hear that.

"Oh," Dinah sighs. "That is cliché."

"It's reverse psychology."

"I think the first step is admitting that you're clearly not okay, Mila."

"I'm just fine," she snaps, uncapping a pen she finds on her desk. She holds the tip to the top of the page and debates a title. After a moment of struggling she feels even more annoyed for having worried about something so trivial as a title. With more aggression than she intends (because she accidentally tears the sheet), she scribbles down the number 1 and then pauses.

"What's a thing teenagers are typically expected to want to do?" Camila asks, finally giving Dinah her undivided attention.

"That's kind of insensitive considering I won't be able to do these things anymore. You're, like, rubbing it in my face," Dinah pouts.

"Dinah be serious."

"Okay, fine, uhhh, how about losing the v-card?"

"Of course you would think of that."

"Hey, dying a virgin isn't all that it's cracked up to be! I mean, besides maybe being sacrificed to Satan or something, it's really not great."

Camila's grip on her pen tightens.

"Sorry, too soon?"

"You need to stop joking around so casually about your death Dinah. It's going to bite you in the ass one of these days."

"What's the worst that could happen? I could die?" Dinah rolls her eyes. Camila ignores her, writing down 'have sex' next to number one. "You're going to make this list of all the things we were supposed to do together and then halfway through you're going to get all sad and end up quitting. Is this really going to help?"

Dinah does have a point. The things coming to mind were things they should have done in high school. That they were planning to do, instead of Camila struggling to stay afloat alone during her senior year. She didn't even get to walk the stage, despite receiving a diploma. Not that it mattered. Everyone knows that stupid scroll the principal hands out is just for show.

Below the first on the list, Camila writes: graduate properly.
"What does that even mean?" Dinah asks, peering over her shoulder. Camila ignores her.

It takes her about twenty minutes until she's semi satisfied with her list. A list that only goes up to about, like, three, something she'll worry about later. For now, it's good.

"Okay, in no particular order: graduate, lose the v-card, go to a party – like a real party."

"Because my birthday party wasn't real enough for you?" Dinah deadpans.

"That's not the same thing and you know it."

"Mila, I don't think this is a very good idea," Dinah says after a while. "And who the hell do you plan on having sex with? Austin Mahone?"

"Ew, don't be disgusting, Dinah," Camila fake gags.

Having sex is probably one of the least of her worries on that list.

Camila doesn't tell Dinah, partly because she doesn't want to see that smug look on her face but mostly because Camila can't really admit it to herself that she was already thinking of something to check off number one.

It seems a little like backward logic. Painfully, mortifying backward logic making the one person she presently cannot stand the first candidate to sleep with. In fact, there are things that sound so much more infinitely pleasing and make more rational sense than having sex with Lauren Jauregui.

(It irritates her that there is a very tiny, miniscule (basically nearly non-existent) part of her that disagrees with this sentiment. It's a small part that should have been long gone and tossed away the moment Lauren Jauregui decided to toss Camila out of her life).

But it occurs to Camila that one of the ways she could do the most convincing jobs of seeming "normal" would be to reconcile with her. Or at least make it seem as if their friendship is going in the right direction. And perhaps being associated with Lauren could lead to an image of rekindled friendship with her former friends, Ally and Normani.

(Also the fact that Lauren is literally next door is more than just convenient at this point).

Her mind is racing with ideas, as she chews on the end of her pencil. Dinah watches her dubiously.

"You know, you're putting in a lot of work to just pretend, Mila," Dinah mutters. "I have a feeling that you're riding for some terrible, terrible fall."

"Are you really quoting Catcher in the Rye? When did you even read that?" Camila asks petulantly.

"Hey I read!" Dinah responds with a pouts. "But that's not the point I'm making. Mila this list is dumb."

It is. There is no denying it. It's probably one of the stupidest things Camila's ever even thought of doing. But she's resolute. She's determined. In fact, she's so determined, she decides to go attempt to check off number one right now before this motivation fades away and the embarrassment manages to filter into her system.

She folds her list, stuffs it into her pocket and walks towards the window.

"Hey where are you going?" Dinah asks as she notices Camila throwing on her sweater.
"Mind your business."

"Oh my god, you're going to Lauren's aren't you?"

Camila blushes. "What? No!"

"Don't lie! I can see it all over your face."

"Dinah, shut up. I'm leaving," Camila simply rolls her eyes and throws a leg over the window ledge.

"Be careful it's like really late." Dinah warns.

"I'm just going next door, relax."

"Aha! So you are going to Lauren for the sex."

Camila ignores her, leaning as far as she can until her tip of her sneaker touches the ground. She steadies herself precariously on one foot and hops out until she can bend her other knee and pull it out.

"I'll be back. Stay here," Camila commands.

"Blah, blah I'm not going anywhere." Dinah waves her off and Camila makes her way next door.

The wooden fence dividing the two yards is intimidating. It stands a good foot over her. It doesn't immediately occur to her to just walk around and enter the property like a normal person. She's on a mission. And something as rational as entering like a normal person kind of gets thrown out of the window. She's asking Lauren – Lauren Jauregui – to help her check off number one on her list. This isn't the time for rational thought.

With a sharp inhale, she begins the climb over the fence.

The movies clearly made an unrealistic impression of scaling a seven foot wooden fence. So by the time she's reached the top, she's sweating through her clothes.

Camila huffs as she straightens her hoodie, brushing away the twigs and leaves from her clothes. Her palms are scraped from the wooden splinters, but she ignores the sting as she creeps towards the window. After a few moments of clumsy stumbling (most of which she suspects is probably her own feet), Camila flashes her phone light against the window pane.

From the years that she's known Lauren Jauregui, the girl was notorious for leaving her window just a crack open. And no, it wasn't for any sane reason like wanting to not suffocate on one's own breath in a stuffy room. It was because Lauren firmly believed in the notion that Peter Pan was going to visit her one of these days and take her off to Neverland. Which is stupid. But Lauren became irritatingly obsessed with Peter Pan after that version with Jeremy Sumpter came out back in 2003, and Camila was easily enamored with a lot of the things Lauren did. So if Lauren wanted to leave her window open for Jeremy Sumpter then who was Camila to judge?

Except Lauren's window is completely shut.

"As if you couldn't make my life even more difficult Jauregui," Camila grumbles, pressing her palms flat against the glass surface and attempting to push it upward.

*She hasn't even locked the damn thing.*

The window screeches open and –
"I HAVE A BAT AND I'M NOT AFRAID TO USE IT" Lauren's shaky scream makes Camila flinch and drop her phone. The screen falls flat on its front, making the flashlight reflect upon her face. And when Camila peers through the window, she catches Lauren gripping that bat she was threatening Camila with in her hands. Lauren drops the bat as soon as she sees her. "Camila? What the hell?"

Camila bends down to pick up her phone, and moves to enter. As she straddles the window pane, she turns to look up at Lauren's incredulous expression.

For a split second, seeing Lauren's shocked green eyes evokes something in her. Something she's buried down a long time ago. But the split second is over and all she feels now is the sudden urge to slap her.

Camila swallows down the mortification and pride that bubbles in her chest upon seeing her. "I need you to help me."

"H-help?"

"Yes," Camila murmurs, throwing her other leg over the ledge and hopping off the window sill. She takes in Lauren's appearance. It's clear that Lauren was probably asleep, if the disheveled mismatched clothing and messy hair isn't an obvious indication, it's probably the way Lauren rubs her eyes. Camila feels something flip in her stomach, but before anything more can happen, she averts her gaze.

Her eyes fall around the rest of the room. The small night light offers a little visibility through the dark room. It's a lot emptier than how it used to be – before Lauren started college. The band posters she had up are long gone and there are a few plastic bins labeled stashed in the corner.

"Camila, it's four in the morning," Lauren tries to say, but Camila doesn't really give her much of a chance. She doesn't give her much of a chance for anything. Because in the next second, Camila drops quite possibly the largest and most unexpected bomb on her.

"I need you to have sex with me."
seduction is an art form apparently

It's been about three days since she's proposed that request upon her neighbor. It's also been three days of said neighbor conveniently not being home. Camila isn't stupid. She knows when someone is avoiding her and clearly Lauren is avoiding her. Which is totally so dumb and so childish. It's not like Camila was asking for Lauren's help to hide a body or something.

It went like this: immediately right after the statement fell from Camila's mouth, Lauren's father burst into the room also brandishing a bat and a wild expression. Jauregui's were seriously so dramatic.

It served to freak out both Lauren and Camila into stunned silence (not that Camila's initial request hadn't contributed to that already), and because of Lauren's father's loud threats, nearly the whole household was awake at this point. It didn't take long for Lauren's entire room to fill with groggy, frazzled Jauregui's demanding an explanation as to what on earth was going on.

Lauren had turned to Camila for the answer, which prompted the rest of her family to also turn to her expectantly. Normally, Camila would offer a joke or two or perhaps a very obvious made up excuse about sleep walking into Lauren's room.

(It's not like it would've been the first time).

But Camila floundered on the spot, feeling the mortification become painfully apparent across her face. This was a family she hadn't interacted with in nearly a year. Showing up in their daughter's room, after probably noticing their lack of friendship over the past months, was not only downright strange but suspicious as hell. Suspicious how exactly? Camila wasn't sure. Maybe they thought she had broken in to murder their daughter in her sleep or something - how the hell was she supposed to know?

Lauren, however, finally stepped in and offered quite the bullshit excuse: it was a sleepover.

"Sorry I didn't tell you guys earlier, it just kind of happened," Lauren had said. Her father then eyed Camila's jeans and sweatshirt skeptically.

"I heard you yelling," he insisted.

"She said it was a sleepover, Mike," Lauren's mother, Clara, had said wearily.

"Then listen to her." There was an unnatural bite in Clara's tone. And when Mike turned to look at her it almost felt as if a chilly atmosphere had fallen over all of them. The room felt too small, too confined, too suffocating. Camila immediately received the distinct impression that she was witnessing something she probably shouldn't have.

In the end, Camila was told to go home, which she did - reluctantly considering Lauren never got the chance to respond to her request.

But judging from Lauren's total MIA attitude, Camila thinks the hint is pretty clear.

"So what are you gonna do then?" Dinah asks, as Camila sets down her glass of water and pill bottle. It's nine in the morning. And for once, she's out of bed earlier than past noon. "You can't make someone want to sleep with you."
"I'm going to seduce her," Camila states, so nonchalantly, as if she were telling Dinah the weather. Dinah bursts out laughing. A prolonged kind of insulting laughter that frustrates Camila with each giggle.

"The day you seduce Lauren Jauregui is the day I binge watch your little Star Trek movies."

"Star Wars. And anyway what makes you think I can't do it?"

"Mila, if you couldn't even tell the girl you had a big fat crush on her what makes you think you can just skip right into getting into her pants?"

Camila feels the hot flush grace her cheeks. "I've never had a crush on her!"

"Lying don't look too good on you Walz."

"Oh shut up," Camila snaps, as she moves towards her closet. The organization still irks her, but she hadn't had the heart to say anything to her mother. Not when she had looked so happy these past few days of Camila being what was probably considered as 'active'. "This is Lauren we're talking about. Lauren Jauregui."

"What's wrong with her?" Dinah reclines on her elbows and watches Camila with an amused smile.

"Are you really asking me that?"

"Well yeah," Dinah pauses, pursing her lips. "I never really got why you guys stopped talking."

"If you hadn't noticed I stopped talking to Ally and Normani too."

"Duh, I know that," Dinah rolls her eyes. "But with Lo, it's like, different. And it was way before I kicked the bucket," Dinah says after a while.

"Kicked the bucket? That's new."

"You're not answering the question."

Camila feels a chill fall down her spine. It's something she doesn't like to talk about. Her relationship - or lack of one - with Lauren was basically nonexistent.

"What?" She tries to play dumb, which really, is pretty dumb considering Dinah can read her like a book.

"You and Lauren," Dinah reiterates. After a prolonged moment of silence, Dinah breaks it. "I mean, like, you guys were pretty much in total honeymoon phase all the freaking time. And then all of sudden, you guys start acting like angry exes fighting over custody of a pet cat or something."

"-Oh my god, Dinah!"

"Isn't that what, like, domestic girlfriends fight over?"

"No," Camila snaps exasperatedly. "Honestly where do you even come up with this stuff?"

Dinah shrugs her shoulders. "I'm hilarious."

Camila rolls her eyes. "Look, that whole thing isn't important anymore. It's done." She grits her teeth. Even just saying the words feels like acid in her mouth... as if she knows what it feels like to swallow
"So whatever it is, you're okay with going all *Hakuna Matata* on her ass and sleeping with her?"

"I'm not going to sit here and explain it to you. I have more important things to do."

"Like plotting ways to sleep with the girl you refuse to talk about, right?"

Camila doesn't make another attempt to find Lauren until that same evening and she's thrown by how easily she's able to do it.

Lauren is sitting outside on her porch steps, seemingly unaware of Camila's staring.

It's different seeing Lauren in broad daylight (or sunset at this rate). It almost seems even more real - Camila's goal to sleep with her. At least in the shadowy lighting of Lauren's room she was able to retain a little dignity and save face.

For the first time since she's cooked up this plan she feels the hesitation. The questioning doubts come to occupy her mind. The adrenaline that was the catalyst during her first attempt has vanished leaving the all too familiar lump in her throat.

*This is a bad idea -*

Before she can turn on her heel, Lauren looks up and spots her.

Fuck.

It's an awkward stare down and Camila searches for any negative signs. Lauren is too far away for her to read her expression.

With a sharp inhale, Camila briskly walks towards her. If she thought that was awkward, closing the gap is even more awkward. It's as if her legs decide they don't know how to walk with Lauren's gaze upon her.

"She doesn't look too excited to see you Walz," Dinah acknowledges by her side.

The daylight and the lack of a nervous breakdown gives Camila the opportunity to fully look at her. And for the most part Lauren looks the same, a bit paler. Which doesn't make much sense; Camila figures people on the west coast are just as tan as those over here in Miami.

Her hair is a little darker, accentuating the pale complexion. And she's wearing the type of thing Camila would expect her to. The casual kind that should exude hobo-ness. But somehow she manages to make stylish. Camila fidgets with her flannel self consciously. The same flannel she was wearing the day of Dinah's birthday.

It's probably the most embarrassing coincidence.

Lauren wears a UCLA t-shirt with the sleeves cut off. It only reiterates the hobo fact...and the fact that it works.

It's so annoying how Lauren can look good in nearly anything. It's even more annoying how Camila even thinks of this.
"Are you here to ask me to have sex with you again?" Lauren blurts out before Camila has made a full stop in front of her. At her silence (mostly because she wasn't expecting Lauren to willingly let herself be found) Lauren's expression shifts. It's the same incredulous look Camila had the privilege of witnessing from that night three days ago.

"Technically I didn't ask," Camila quietly corrects. Lauren snorts, breaking away from that expression and immediately belittling the atmosphere. Camila's temper begins to flare.

"You call this seducing?" Dinah questions flatly.

"This is some kind of prank right? A joke?" Lauren demands. Camila catches on immediately to the defensive inflection in her tone.

It's a strange stand still. Camila towers over Lauren, head tilted down to meet Lauren's uplifted one. Yet, the height advantage does nothing to prevent the sudden oncoming nerves. Lauren's eyes are dark, matching the sinking sunlight surrounding them. Camila tries to tear her gaze away or at least focus upon anything besides the dusky green staring up at her. She couldn't recall the last time she had seen Lauren's eyes this dark.

No. That was a lie. Camila remembers.

She remembers Lauren's nervous voice, her trembling fingers, the worrisome knit of her eyebrows. Camila remembers the insistent promise and the hushed secrets. She remembers the way she held Lauren's shaking hands. The way Lauren had looked at her with scared dark, green eyes, brimming with tears.

Except they aren't holding hands and Lauren's eyes very close to a glower.

"Who breaks into someone's house at four in the morning anyway?" Lauren demands.

Camila feels her bottom lip quiver.

Her pulse quickens with every second of Lauren's hardened eyes. The metaphoric spotlight is beaming down upon her as she fumbles for a response. A comment. Anything but the pathetic gaping and the nervous feeling that comes, threatening to physically show. She already begins to feel the clamminess in her palms as she clenches them at her sides.

"Completely crazy people, that's who," Lauren answers for her.

Camila feels her bottom lip quiver.

"We don't speak for like a year, and you just come up and say something like that?" Lauren continues as if she doesn't notice Camila trembling. Or perhaps she doesn't care.

"Ouch, Lo," Dinah murmurs. "Take it easy."

"Now I'm having a shit time with my dad thinking that we're dating because of that stunt you pulled," Lauren continues as if she doesn't notice Camila trembling. Or perhaps she doesn't care.

Out of all the possible reactions to the absurd request, this is the last one Camila expects. In fact the one that she was anticipating was possibly groveling over the fact that she was willing to "be friends" with Lauren again. The petty, insulting comments are an immediate blow to her ego. And her current
controlled mood. The urge to lash out and come back with an equally hurtful remark is strong.

Because honestly? Where did Lauren Jauregui go making ignorant comments like that? And where does she get the nerve to even glare at Camila with that surly expression?

Camila is so incredibly appalled by the whole reaction it's as if her brain cannot keep with comprehending it. She feels like she could just reach over and push her, or worse she'll just break down and cry again.

No one has ever been that callous with her besides, well, Dinah.

Lauren is still glaring at her, though now it's more of an expectant glare. It takes Camila a moment to realize she's expecting response.

But she has nothing. The words have died in her throat. Demolished by the wave of anger and embarrassment and frustration. And it's all more concentrated in the way Lauren looks at her.

Camila opens her mouth, unsure of what to say. She doesn't have to make a response though because a loud, honking pierces the tense bubble between the girls. It's followed by raucous laughter and a very loud hoot.

Camila turns and sees a jeep stopped in the middle of the street with a girl halfway out the passenger side window.

The girl is someone Camila has never met before, but upon closer studying, she seems vaguely familiar. Like maybe someone that might've asked for an extra pencil in class. Camila isn't sure. All of Lauren's friends from high school always kind of blurred into one partying mob.

"Yo, Jauregui, get your ass over here!" Another girl says from the back seat.

Both of them are wearing sunglasses, despite the sun already having disappeared for a few minutes. The crop tops and tousled beach hair make them look like they've just walked out of a Banana Republic store. Or perhaps they've stepped out of a picturesque commercial about summer vacation. Those aesthetically pleasing ones that a lot of posers on Instagram try to make their lives portray.

Camila doesn't know them, but immediately she develops a distaste for the girls hollering at her neighbor.

Lauren looks at her as if she wants to say something more.

"Jauregui! Hello? Dude hurry up we're gonna be late," the girl calls again from the car. Lauren finally tears her eyes away and sighs, rising from her seat. She stands a few inches above Camila's frame. It's only a few inches, but the difference still makes Camila internally squirm.

Lauren gives her one last measured look, before brushing past her and entering the Jeep.

"Wow, that seduction game though, Mila," Dinah giggles, behind her hand.

Camila's mood sinks.

"Shut up," she snaps.
After she stomps away from her neighbor house, after she marches into her room and slams her door she realizes that that was the first conversation she's had in a while with someone in her age group. Someone who was alive and breathing.

Camila kicks off her shoes harshly and climbs into bed, already formulating another plan of action.

Angry isn't at all the best way to describe how she's feeling. She's absolutely livid. It's as if Lauren has completely yanked out the negative feelings she had been so desperately trying to suppress. There is a reason Camila can't stand Lauren Jauregui. Trying to justify negating said reason begins to feel overwhelming pointless.

Camila rifles through the back pocket of her jeans and pulls out the list. She unfolds the paper and studies her messy handwriting.

1. Have sex

Why did society have to put so much focus upon this as some kind of adolescent achievement? Or a gateway into adulthood? Couldn't she have just skipped over this step? Why couldn't she find someone more suitable for this than Lauren Jauregui?

Now she's suddenly worried about number one. She has no other option besides Lauren. Normani would give her a deliberate no and Ally'd probably slap her with a bible or something. And Dinah...well how on earth was that going to work?

Camila toys with the creases in the paper.

There was Sandra and Marielle, the two girls who would sit with her at lunch during senior year. Probably out of pity, Camila doesn't doubt. From the way they would address her in the same manner as teachers, hell even her parents.

Sandra and Marielle would make an obvious dance around the subject of Dinah and when Camila would realize what exactly they were talking about their faces would darken with sympathy and apologies would fall from their mouths.

She remembers the last conversation she had with them, or at least the last conversation she was pretending to pay attention to. They were rattling off about some party they were excited about going to near the end of the school year.

"Austin's throwing a graduation party," Sandra had begun to say, exchanging a look with Marielle. It was the type of look that implied they had probably talked about Camila.

"But it's okay. It's not like we expect you to be social with all that's happened. We get it, you're grieving and stuff," Marielle had told Camila.

And then there was Austin - Austin Mahone. A boy she foolishly dated back in 10th grade, but after a few weeks of having to hear him mispronounce her name she had hastily ended things. The thought of doing anything like that with him made her sick to her stomach.

Camila folds the list again and stuffs it into her pocket.

They were right. Her parents, Dinah's parents, everyone. They were right when they said she didn't have any friends.

Camila can't even do teenage fun thing right. It's an irritating thought, more than it is a depressing one.
Deep down though, what irritates her more about all of this is that it comes around full circle to Lauren. Yet, forcing Lauren into that antagonizing role seems unsatisfying.

And in the end, all she manages to feel is somehow tricked out of Lauren's answer. Duped. Distracted.

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Hours later, the list sits on her laptop keyboard, as another one of Camila's recordings of Dinah plays on the screen. It's almost four-thirty in the morning. Her eyes are heavy as she follows recording-Dinah paddling out in the water.

Her finger brushes over the mouse pad, pausing every so often and rewinding the footage.

"That drop was beautiful," Dinah comments, as they both watch recording-Dinah slowly stand on her board.

Camila rolls her eyes. "You're literally just standing up on the surfboard. That's hardly anything exciting."

"Shut up, like you could do that anyway. You can't even paddle to save your life, kook," Dinah snaps.

"I'm not the one with the surfing trophies. I don't know why you're bringing me into this," Camila responds. "I want to learn how to drive," she adds after a moment.

"Okay, random."

"I saw someone driving today. They didn't look that much older than me," Camila says softly, watching as recording-Dinah. She felt the same panged irritation at the thought. She's probably the only freshly graduated teenager without her license in the area. The only besides well -

"What? Why are you looking at me? You think I'm gonna teach your ass how to drive? Do you remember that time we went go-kart racing in 10th grade?" Dinah demands.

Camila does, rather clearly. All of them had gone to the local indoor track. All of them. Dinah ended up driving right into the tire-sideline markers and had gotten stuck there for the duration of the race. Camila didn't think it was even humanly possible outside of Mario-Kart.

Normani ended up winning that race, with Ally coming in a close second. Lauren and Camila were too busy bumping cars and making fun of Dinah's struggle.

Camila glances down at the list sprawled across the keyboard. She finds a pen by her nightstand and quickly scribbles down: Learn how to drive.

"Good luck with that," Dinah laughs. Camila is ready with a snarky response, but then a loud tapping sounds cuts through Dinah's laughter. Silence falls over the room, the only sound comes from the waves crashing on Camila's computer.

Another tap, harder this time, makes it obvious that it's coming from her bedroom window.

She and Dinah exchange a look.

"Freddy Krueger," Dinah whispers. "Jason, Michael Myers...Chuckie!"
Camila doesn't try to show how all of that name dropping sends a chill down her spine. Leave it to Dinah to scare the shit out of her in her own room, reminding her of all the times her friend had insisted upon watching horror movies before bed.

Instead she shoots Dinah a withered glare before hesitantly walking towards the window.

When she pushes aside the curtain, a small part of her wishes one of Dinah's guesses were true. A killer doll would have been ultimately more pleasant than having a sheepish looking Lauren Jauregui standing outside her window.

For a moment they stare at each other through the glass barrier. Though Camila is pretty sure it's because she's frozen. Lauren at least gestures for her to open the window. Camila breaks out of her stupor and moves to open it.

"You did this first so it's only fair I do the same," Lauren says, stepping inside without an invitation, and with Camila still semi blocking the window. "I didn't think you'd still be awake to be honest," Lauren admits. "You're a lot neater than I remember you to be."

"My mom," Camila murmurs quietly. Why is she telling her this? It's as if any form of filter has been rendered completely useless.

Camila watches Lauren as she glances across her room. An uncanny sense of vulnerability hits her as Lauren studies her room. It's like this pretend part of herself is displayed, naked for Lauren to consume. She catches as Lauren's gaze falls upon the pill bottle on her dresser.

"Look, I'm sorry about what I said earlier. It was totally uncalled for."

There are a lot of things Camila would rather do than forgive Lauren Jauregui. Like hitting her upside the head with the nearest pillow she can find. Or kicking her out of her room at the very least. The anger that enflames in her chest every time she looks at her is still present.

It certainly doesn't help that Camila is exceptional at holding grudges. But Camila isn't in a position to hold a grudge at the moment. Not if she wants that satisfying slash through number one.

"I'm sorry," Lauren repeats, fiddling with the hem of her t-shirt. "You really caught me off guard. I mean, we don't speak to each other and the first thing you do when you see me is freak out. I just...wasn't expecting that, first of all. And then you just - well say that to me in the middle of the night," Lauren pauses. "I just didn't really know how to react."

"I forgive you," Camila says.

Lauren's eyes widen at Camila's immediate response. And then Camila sees recognition form in the green depths.

"I'm not sleeping with you," Lauren responds abruptly. Camila visibly flinches at the tone.

"Ooh rejected," Dinah cackles from her bed.

"Just think of it as a favor," Camila offers quickly, trying not to come off as too desperate. But the fact that Lauren is in her room and she hasn't run away is a good sign.

Lauren turns to look down at her, meeting her eyes. Camila feels her pulse quicken as the nerves creep up on her. Camila looks away awkwardly. A slow, burning flush begins to form on her cheeks as she feels her neighbor's stare upon her.
"You know, asking for a favor from someone you haven't really spoken to in a year isn't exactly the most polite thing to do."

"Yeah, well I'm not exactly a polite person," Camila answers dismissively. She catches Lauren's lips twitch and she can almost read the amusement in her eyes. But rather than reveal that, Lauren leans against her dresser, remaining casual.

"You're angry," she states.

"No I'm not."

It's as if the moment Lauren makes this comment the unacknowledged anger finally comes to surface. The tension is thick and neither one of them breaks the heavy gaze. Lauren's almost-smile falls into a frown.

"Are we going to talk about this?" Lauren finally breaks the silence.

"Talk about what?"

"You know what," Lauren answers sharply. At Camila's faux puzzled expression, Lauren sighs. "About us."

"No," Camila snaps.

"We're going to have to talk about this eventually," Lauren responds and Camila hates how genuine she sounds. This would've been a lot easier had Lauren just gone along with her act of burying it. "I'm not someone who just hides stuff."

Well that's certainly new, Camila thinks sourly. She's known Lauren Jauregui for most of her life, grown up right next door to the girl, gone to the same school since Pre-K. Yet, standing before her in her room, Camila begins to realize that she doesn't really know her. At all.

A year can change a lot of things.

"Why do you want to have sex with me anyway?" Lauren's voice regains Camila's focus. "Not that it isn't flattering, but you have to admit it's kind of weird. Especially since..." Lauren's voice trails off. She clears her throat and runs a hand through her hair. "Especially since we started hanging out with different people."

Yeah, people you made quite a reputation with.

That's a bit of an understatement and a little harsh, if Camila is being completely honest. It's not really Lauren's fault that society has created unrealistic double standards and the majority of pubescent minds have already adopted 'slut' into their everyday vocabulary.

And it most certainly isn't Lauren's fault that most of the people she hooked up with had loud mouths and an IQ of probably, like, 45. Perhaps it was kind of inevitable that they would grow apart. Lauren fell into the crowd of girls who always had that party to go to each weekend and would all most likely end up in some college sorority. And Camila at the time could barely count the number of friends she had on one hand.

But despite the divide in their relationship it's hard to completely ignore the things people know after being friends for years. From the most general thing like a birthday, down to the most detailed things. Like knowing Lauren's pet peeve about open doors. Or that she breaks in her new softball gloves by
putting them under her mattress. Or how Lauren cries every time at the end of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, and how much she loves Audrey Hepburn's highlights in that movie.

Even down to the most personal.

Like the day Lauren came out to Camila.

And perhaps that's what it is about Lauren - she's familiar. A distant sort of familiar that was just enough amount of comfort, yet there was still that uncertainty Camila craved.

Lauren represented a time that was before high school, before her friends, even before Dinah. Lauren's presence wasn't tainted with who Camila is now.

"I made a list of stuff I want to do," Camila says walks to her bed and snatches the paper off her laptop. Her fingers wrap around the folded notebook paper.

"What's first on your list?" Lauren asks, glancing down at the paper.

"Have sex."

"Okay, well after."

"Graduate."

"Clearly someone has their priorities in order," Lauren mutters sarcastically.

"Thank you! Someone else who agrees that this is totally stupid, Mila," Dinah complains.

Camila chooses to ignore this and continue reading down her list.

"Three: go to a party and Four: Learn how to drive."

"That's a short list."

"I'm not finished making it."

Lauren regards her thoughtfully. Camila chews on her lip as she studies Lauren. She watches as the green eyes narrow and a wrinkle forms between her eyebrows.

"Okay," Lauren finally answers, handing the list back to Camila.

"Okay?"

"I'll help you."
Camila pops the capsules in her mouth, chugs down some of Sofi's water, and then practically rushes out the door. She swings it shut behind her before her mother can so much as reach her and smother her, or worse attempt to walk her next door.

She had enough the night before when she mentioned that she was going to be "hanging out" with Lauren Jauregui. (What "hanging out" exactly entailed was something her parents really didn't need to know). Both her mother and father had stopped what they were doing, and looked at her. Her mother did that thing where she brings her hands to her mouth, and her father had placed a firm hand on her shoulder, giving it what she assumed was supposed to be a comforting squeeze.

Don't get too excited, she had wanted to say. Look what happened the last time I told you I was going out.

But she let them have their moment. Someone needed it.

"You're not forgetting anything right?" Dinah asks, as Camila steps out into heat. "A condom maybe?"

"What? For my dick?" Camila snaps sardonically.

Dinah splutters on the spot. "Watch your mouth! I'm gonna wash that out with soap when we get back."

The Miami sun is high and drowns everything below in a sticky, muggy temperature. By the time Camila reaches Lauren's house and knocks on the door she's already sweating.

"Yeah, that's one thing I don't miss," Dinah says. An impish grin forms on her face as she takes in Camila's flushed appearance. "This weather sucks."

Lauren opens the door and leans against the frame. She's wearing a loose fitted tank with a very faded version of the Star Wars emblem across her chest. The high waist shorts leave nothing and quite possibly everything to the imagination.

Camila swallows thickly, averting her gaze from the pale legs before her.

"Someone's enjoying the view," Dinah sneers, glancing between the two. "Oh god, Mila, this nerdy shit is turning you on isn't it?" Dinah gags.

Camila glances up at Lauren's expectant face, and flushes a dark red when she realizes she's been caught staring.

"You're late," Lauren says. She doesn't miss the Lauren's lips twitch as if fighting a smile.

"Camila's late to everything. It's tragic," Dinah sighs dramatically.

"Sorry, I got held up," Camila answers sheepishly.

"Do you want to come inside?" Lauren moves, creating a gap for her.

"Don't mind if I do." Dinah walks right through.
"My parents aren't home," Lauren adds, which promptly makes Dinah back up onto the porch again.

"In that case, never mind, I'll pass on the nasty shit you guys plan on doing," Dinah says as she wrinkles her nose. Camila almost laughs at the reaction. Almost. She probably would have if she weren't so distracted with the way Lauren is staring at her.

The nerves slowly creep up on her.

Soft green. Like the texture of freshly mowed grass. An effervescent green that even when one pulled out the strands on a hot summer day they still shimmared brightly in the sun.

Camila's heart pounds as she tries to keep her cool and formulate a response. But the words fall flat.

"No one's home?" She hates the way her voice shakes.

The question is short but it's heavy, holding so much more meaning than Camila intended to give. Or perhaps, deep down she did intend it. With the way she begins to feel hot. And she knows it really has nothing to do with the afternoon heat.

Lauren's mouth tugs into a smile. It's barely there, teasing at her lips, but it immediately captivates Camila's attention. They look soft, unreasonably soft in this summer humidity where Camila constantly suffers from chapped lips.

Speak of which, Camila reflexively feels herself lick her own, coating the dry surface. She catches the way Lauren's eyes follow her tongue, trailing across her lips before coming back up to meet Camila's gaze.

"My parents are working. Chris is over at a friend's house and Taylor's at soccer practice," Lauren answers in a low voice. Her tone wraps around Camila like silk. Warm. Sleek. Velvety.

Lauren's eyebrow quirks as if she knows just the effect she has on Camila. Not that Camila is willing to admit any thing about Lauren Jauregui has an effect on her.

Camila swallows thickly, feeling a pleasant warm lull flutter at the pit of her stomach. The subtle heat travels up her chest, spreading through the flow of her pulse, and then back down to a suddenly and embarrassingly feverish place below her waist.

"So...you're alone?" Camila asks, unintentionally ghosting over all of the implications she tried avoiding in her voice again. No. Ghosting would be a compliment, at this rate she's practically shoving the wanton subtext in Lauren's face like a neon stripper joint sign.

Lauren lets out a throaty chuckle. It makes Camila shiver. "Well, you're here too."

"And me!" Dinah pipes up.

It's stupid. This is all so incredibly stupid to get worked up over Lauren Jauregui.

There's a type of tension between them. Camila can feel it, permeating from her body and colliding into Lauren's. It's thick and warm, and suddenly has her insides humming like electricity.

"Oh," Camila mutters thickly.

"Dude if you don't make a move I will," Dinah snaps.

Camila walks past Lauren, catching a whiff of her. She feels dizzy by the time she fully enters the house, the scent of fruit still filtering through her nose.
"Umm," Camila begins, glancing around the familiar hallway. Polished, wooden floors. "So, are we – I mean – should we go up to your room?"

Lauren smiles demurely. "And why would we do that?"

Lauren's eyes narrow, as if she's studying Camila through a microscope. She feels like she's under a microscope. The heat of the light upon her, burning into her skin. The intensity of the lens, focusing in upon every detail of her face.

"Because – because we're – I mean – that's where we'll..." Camila trails off, losing her train of thought.

"We'll what?"

"Do the frick frack?" Dinah supplies, shattering the heavy tension.

"Shut up!" Camila hisses.

"Did you just tell me to shut up?" Lauren asks flatly.

"No," Camila stammers, face heating up in embarrassment. "I meant, um, are we going up?"

Lauren's eyes narrow skeptically. "We won't need to do that actually."

"What?"

"It's a good thing. We won't have any interruptions," Lauren continues, seemingly unaware of Camila's confusion. "Because I really don't need to hear any comments from my family about you and I dating."

"What what?"

"Yeah they want to talk to you. You know, have that serious conversation about finding out your intentions with their daughter," Lauren air quotes around the phrase.

"HAHAHA if they only knew exactly what your intentions were Mila," Dinah laughs.

"So might as well save the awkward interrogations," Lauren says. "Anyway are you ready to go?"

"Go? Go where? I thought..."

"That we were going to have sex?" Lauren asks incredulously. "Don't flatter yourself. I'm still not sleeping with you, Camila."

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So Lauren decided to plan a trip to the local DMV without running anything by Camila. Not that she should be so surprised. Lauren always used to have a tendency for spontaneity. Forget the fact that Camila knows next to nothing about cars, much less traffic regulations.

In response to this, Lauren digs out a tattered handbook made out of recycled paper from the glove compartment of her car.
"Just read this on the way," Lauren says.

"This is from 2012," Camila answers warily, flipping through the wrinkled pages.

"Girl's setting you up to fail," Dinah mutters, shaking her head disapprovingly from the backseat.

"Not much has changed," Lauren responds. "Besides the written test is easy if you have common sense."

"Whoop looks like you're out of luck there Walz."

Once they arrive at a building with the large ominous DMV displayed across it, Camila begins to think spontaneity can basically kiss her ass.

Cars upon cars crowd the parking lot, and a lengthy line of people extends around the left side of the building leading into the entrance.

It's honestly the last place Camila would have wanted to spend on a Friday morning. But when Lauren found out she didn't even have a permit, her neighbor immediately shoved her out of the driver's seat. Then she proceeded to go on about how they needed to abide by the law.

Camila doesn't really believe this. She's convinced Lauren is more concerned about her car than Camila's driving legitimacy. But whatever.

It takes nearly an hour of sweating and listening to complaining about sweating before they manage to enter the building. And when they do, the inside is quite possibly just as worse as the outside.

They squish themselves in the nearest empty seats, sandwiched between a large beefy man, and a boy around their age who doesn't understand the concept of making room. She catches Lauren's glare at his splayed out legs and arms overlapping the empty seat.

Camila scoots away from the man, and ends up very much pressed up against Lauren. She feels a rush of heat upon the brush of Lauren's smooth thigh against hers. Camila shakes the feeling, curling her hand into a loose fist and pointedly looking in the opposite direction.

"You gonna thank me now or later for telling you to wear the shorts?" Dinah asks with a smirk.

Camila tries not to roll her eyes or react to the teasing.

"This is so annoying," Lauren mumbles, running a hand through her hair. "I didn't think people would even be up this early."

The boy beside Lauren turns as if barely acknowledging the fact that Lauren is sitting next to him. Camila can already see the cogs working in his head, the flash in his eyes upon studying Lauren's profile. He's the typical guy Camila went to high school with. Hell, he probably still is in high school if the Palmetto School t-shirt he's wearing isn't an obvious indication.

Camila doesn't blame him. Not really. It's not like it's much of a secret how unreasonably attractive her neighbor is. Not that she's attracted to her. Because she's not. Because that's stupid. And if to further prove her point she moves her leg away.

Camila isn't the least bit surprised when the boy turns his full body around to face Lauren. A sleazy grin forms on his lips and his eyes squint as if attempting to do a smoldering look. But Camila thinks he just looks constipated.
"So, getting your license?"

"No," Lauren answers shortly.

"I'm getting mine. I've got my test in a few minutes," the boy brags, leaning into the plastic chair. He throws an arm over Lauren's chair; it gives Camila closer look at his disgusting sweaty fingers.

If he sank any further, she wouldn't be shocked if the plastic chair swallowed him up. Ha, if only.

"You sound sure of yourself," Lauren states flatly.

Annoyance twinges in Camila's chest. She suspects it's a lot of things. Like the lack of sleep she's been getting. The fact that she left the house without eating. Or that she's stuck here with Lauren Jauregui of all people. Or perhaps it's because she's listening to this fuckboy chat up Lauren, and hearing her neighbor respond to him is far from the least bit enjoyable.

She shifts irritably in her seat, and her thigh rubs against Lauren's again. This gets Lauren's attention almost immediately.

Lauren crosses her leg over the other, creating a very tiny gap between their pressed skin. It's so subtle, had Camila not been hyper aware of the feeling she probably would not have noticed.

How rude.

"Well yeah, my dad's already got a car for me. Nissan 350Z," the boy continues. "Imported wheels from Japan and-"

"-I thought Nissan's had a reputation for factory recalls," Lauren questions coldly.

The boy's face flushes. It's almost comical the way the color melts into a darker one as he stammers for a retort.

"Because you're a car expert then? I bet you don't even know the difference between a four-cylinder and v6...."

Both of them had no idea Lauren had just set off an onslaught of painfully annoying random car facts. They suffered through the boy's superior knowledge for the next half hour, right up until Camila finished filling out her permit form.

"Yo, does this guy have an off button?" Dinah complains

"I should've known it would be this full," Lauren mutters.

"When you said you'd help me this wasn't what I had in mind," Camila says as the man next to her decides to lean over and take almost half of her seat.

"I said I'd help you. I didn't say I'd have sex with you," Lauren leans in to say the last part. The whispered words brush against Camila's ear pleasantly, despite the clear rejection. "And I'm not letting you drive my car without a permit," Lauren adds rather petulantly.

"I'm not going to crash it."

Camila scoots closer, unintentionally closing the gap between her and Lauren again. She feels her neighbor stiffen at the contact.

This probably stings more than her neighbor's adamant, verbal refusal to sleep with her.
After about another hour of waiting, Camila is then gestured into a cubicle and handed a test. She twirls the miniature pencil between her fingers, wishing that it was at least a bit sharpened. Taking tests with dull pencils was such a hassle.

**To Avoid glare from high-beam headlights of an approaching car:**

- Look to the right edge of your lane.
- Focus on the center line on the road.
- Adjust your instrument lights so they are brighter.
- Turn on your high beams.

"The third one, or the last one," Dinah hisses.

"I don't think that's right, Dinah," Camila mumbles.

"Hell, if they're making me suffer trying to see past that bright ass light I'm going to bring them down with me," Dinah snaps.

"This is why you don't have a license."

"I don't have a license because I'm dead you asshole."

"Dinah oh my god!"

"Hey, no talking," the proctor calls from his desk at the end of the aisles of cubicles. The other test takers turn to look at Camila.

"Jesus, it's like they'll never be able to take this test again. Nerds," Dinah grumbles.

It's two-thirty in the afternoon by the time the girls walk out of the overpopulated building. Camila's newly acquired permit is clutched in her hand, though despite this, a frown mars her face.

"You just got your permit. Why are you so grumpy?" Lauren smirks.

"You could've told me they were going to take my picture," she sighs exasperatedly. The moment she found out it was as if she forgot how to smile. Was one even supposed to smile for a driver's license photo?

She glances down at the photo, feeling a weird disconnect. The girl in the picture is pale, unnaturally so, as if all the color has been wiped away. The brown eyes are dull and shallow, heightened by the dark rings beneath them. The face has lost the round shape, making the jaw line and cheekbones more prominent.

The person in the picture is her, but not really her at the same time. Perhaps it's because it's the first time she's really studied her facial features since –

"You look good," Lauren reassures. "You always look good honestly, even when you think you don't."

Camila doesn't say anything else.
"Smooth, Jauregui," Dinah nods in approval.

Lauren blasts the AC as soon as they get into her car. The music picks up again where it left off. She lowers the volume, before turning to Camila.

"Are you hungry?"

Camila hasn't really eaten a substantial meal in a while. But Lauren doesn't need to know that.

"I could eat."

She should've expected it the moment Lauren first made the suggestion.

It should not have come to such an unpleasant surprise when Lauren pulls up to the familiar Mexican restaurant. The small business had been their go-to eating place for years, and was within walking distance of all of their houses. Not that it mattered now. It's not like Camila ever stepped foot in this building since the last time they were all still speaking to one another.

It's as if Lauren is trying to induce some twisted sense of nostalgia within Camila. It's not working. Clearly.

Camila feels her hand grip the handle on the car door tightly as Lauren parks.

"You don't mind if we eat here?" Lauren probes.

"You're eating here?" Dinah whines from the backseat. "God I miss eating so much."

The first thing Camila notices stepping into the restaurant is the fact that the furniture is different. The days of rickety wooden chairs and tables with stupid carved dick doodles, love confessions and profanity are long gone. The air has lost its 'hole-in-wall' vibe as the mainstream consumerism and capitalism obviously hit the family owned business square in the face.

Camila can even see that they've changed their logo. Something more commercial friendly.

"Every time I come in here I feel like I'm inadvertently insulting my mother's cooking," Lauren sighs.

"This is a Mexican restaurant. Your mom is Cuban," Dinah deadpans. "Quit being offensive to yourself, Lo."

"We could go somewhere else," Camila begins, hopes for it.

Before Lauren can respond however, a voice breaks through their conversation.

"Wow, no way, hey guys!"

Camila glances up and promptly feels the blood drain from her face.

"Z!" Dinah exclaims, clapping her hands together.

Z short for Zendaya.

As in the girl who used to sit with them during biology in high school. As in one of the girls Dinah
used to surf with.

She's wearing a polo shirt with the restaurant's logo on it, hair pulled into a bun. But Camila's already come to the conclusion that she must work here before she glanced at the girl's outfit.

Camila doesn't really know her too well. From the few exchanges they had during Dinah's beach bumming days, and the occasional mentions her friend would make, there's almost next to nothing she knows about her.

"You work here?" Lauren asks, but her eyes are on Camila.

"Oh yeah, it's a summer job," Zendaya says, making a noncommittal shrug. "Saving up for California. Ride the waves on the west coast, and check out Mavericks."

"Please, we both know you'd wipeout on those, Z," Dinah sneers.

"What about you guys?" Zendaya asks. "Are you going to school?"

"UCLA," Lauren offers.

"Nice," She turns to Camila expectantly.

School. Perhaps another topic on Camila's long list of perpetual things to not talk about. It's not that she never applied. And it's not like she didn't get accepted anywhere either. It's just...

"I think we know what we want to order," Lauren cuts in.

"Yeah, okay what'll it be?" She asks with a smile.

Why Zendaya seems so cheery is beyond Camila. What could possibly be so fun about running into a person who's only mutual friend is dead? Was it some kind of morbid sense of satisfaction rubbing it in her face that she was clearly doing so much better than Camila?

It takes her several moments to notice the way Zendaya's eyes flicker towards her nervously. And then another few more to realize that Zendaya must be overcompensating. She's trying too hard to make this pleasant and it's coming off as annoying.

"Burrito?" Lauren probes.

"Uhh I want a burrito," Dinah pouts. "You better get the d-mac special, Mila."

"I'll just have a water..." Camila begins.

"Two burritos please," Lauren cuts in. "Al pastor."

"You were always my favorite, Lo," Dinah says before glaring at Camila. "You're my number 4 now. I hope you're happy."

Camila rolls her eyes, leaning back against the chair.

"What? Don't like burritos anymore?" Lauren teases.

"No, Mila here still likes them. She just gets hella crazy gas from eating them, don't you?"

"Man, too bad Cesar isn't here," Zendaya says.
"I'll tell him you guys swung by. You guys should come more often. Bring the rest of the girls. He talks about you guys a lot – wait actually give me a second," Zendaya hurries through the kitchen doors. A few moments go by before she returns with what looks like a bulletin board.

Upon closer inspection Camila sees photographs, candid photos of customers and employees surrounded by scrapbook decorations.

"The new manager they hired thought it was unprofessional to keep this out around here, so we put it up in the kitchen," Zendaya explains. "Anyway, look we've got all of you here too."

She points to a Polaroid, near the left end of the board and sure enough Camila spots it. Dinah, Ally, Normani, Camila, Lauren, and even Troy, Ally's then boyfriend are all squeezed into the snapshot.

Normani and Ally are grinning from their side of the booth. Ally throwing a peace sign; she had a fringe then. Normani sits beside her doing a half-mock over the shoulder pose. Her hoop earrings so large they rested upon the upturned shoulder. Troy is half cut off (which was karma for stealing Camila's usual seat).

Dinah leans proudly against the table arms thrown around a large trophy sitting on the wooden surface. Her lips puckered towards the tiny silver surfing figure at the top.

Camila was forced to sit in Lauren's lap in order fit in the frame. An act that might have bothered the shit out of her now, but at the time she didn't mind. She was smiling a half smile, teeth biting her bottom lip, eyes directed at Lauren's shy grin.

She remembers that day. It was one of the last times they all came to eat here together. Lauren had offered her seat but Camila, feeling bold that day, just plopped right down into her lap. It earned several teasing remarks (mostly on Dinah's part) and a rather flustered looking Lauren. But it was okay. It was great. They were happy.

She can still remember Normani accidentally tipping over the trophy, and Dinah nearly lunging across the table to save it, only for it to fall on top of Ally (which was quite the feat considering the trophy was about the same size as her). She can still remember the butterflies in her stomach when Lauren had placed her hands at Camila's waist and giggled into her shoulder.

The feelings from the picture don't resonate in her presently as Camila stares at it. The nostalgia doesn't come. The bitter barges through, abandoning any semblance of the sweet.

This is why she doesn't have any damn pictures in her room anymore. This is why she can't walk in to any familiar place without feeling sick. This is why she hadn't even stepped foot in Dinah's house for months.

Because even though Dinah is here, sometimes it just isn't enough. Sometimes it never is.

Camila lurches from her seat abruptly, causing both girls to turn up and look at her. Zendaya lowers the photo and Lauren's eyes narrow.

Camila watches as the green flickers to her shaking hands, and she hastily shoves them in her pockets.

"I-I need – um – bathroom," Camila sputters, and rushes towards the restrooms. She pushes past the
door, grateful for its single occupancy. She locks the door, and leans heavily against it.

It's hot, despite the cool AC thrumming from the ceiling. She pulls at her top's neckline, brushing against her feverish skin. A cold sweat breaks out on her forehead, sickly sweet, making her claustrophobic surroundings even more humid.

She feels her breathing escalate as the air becomes thin around her. Sparse. Spread out. Her lungs grapple with in-taking enough of it, overworking as her chest tightens. The oxygen feels completely squeezed out of her.

"Mila," Dinah's voice breaks through her wheezing. "Hey, you need to calm down. Breathe with me."

Camila stumbles towards the sink, and flips on the water. It comes pouring out like it's been held in for so long. Nothing about it is soothing. Nothing about it makes her think of the faucet she runs at home in her bathroom.

Her eyes flicker towards the mirror above the sink. She catches a glimpse of a clammy, pale face, and a look of terror in the stranger's eyes.

The water continues to run. It reminds her too much of that stupid water sculpture in Dr. Abernathy's waiting room. It reminds her too much of the video recordings of Dinah.

Her hands tremble as she grips the porcelain sink.

It runs harshly against the smooth shiny surface. It runs down the spigot like rapid white foam. The same familiar kind of foam that washes up on the shoreline at the beach. That accompanies the power of the familiar waves. Pulling and tugging only to shove back with the tide.

The water pools in the sink basin, threatening to flood out over the porcelain rim. The small miniature currents are restless, moving in a motion that lacks rhythm. It's a dizzying movement that makes her head hurt and suddenly wonder if this feels like drowning.

"I can't be here," Camila choked out, pacing back and forth. Her shoes beat almost heavily against the tiled floor, exaggerating the rapid pounding of her pulse.

Fuck fuck fuck fuck.

Frustrated, she fumbles with the faucet handle, roughly shutting it off.

Her throat tightens, mirroring the painful compression she feels in her lungs. Breathing becomes laborious, a desperate struggle to break to the surface, as if all of the oxygen has been sucked in a vacuum and she's left suffocating the cramped bathroom.

"Mila, breathe. Look at me," Dinah nearly shouts to get her attention. She's standing there by the door. Arms outstretched, as if waiting for her to come into them. It doesn't work. Camila knows. She's tried it before and all she manages to do is walk right through Dinah.

Camila thinks Dinah forgets sometimes.

"Come on," Dinah urges, stepping closer.

The dim lighting of the fading bulb above the sink creates a soft halo around Dinah's head. It lights up the gentle brown hair, accentuating the highlighted blonde ends. The same ends she coerced Camila into dyeing the summer before senior year. Before she –
Camila lets herself study Dinah. Puts all her effort into concentrating on her features, anything to take away from the inferno scorching in her exhausted lungs. She focuses on Dinah's face and the kind dark eyes. The ones that never failed to crinkle up at the edges every time Dinah laughs. The lips that, despite currently being turned down into a worried frown, still managed to hold that furtive mischief within them. The straight nose that widened near the end in an endearing way that always used to give Camila the urge to tap it and usually earn a petulant glare. The caramel skin which always turned bronze after hours and hours spent on the beach, soaking up the warmth of the sun.

The image before Camila is almost perfect. It's almost tangible. Almost solid. Camila can press her fingers against Dinah's cheek and almost feel the soft texture. Camila can inhale and almost smell a freshly applied layer of sunblock.

But Camila knows better. She knows her fingers will trace over nothing but the empty space, and she knows all she will smell in this moment is the bathroom's air freshener.

Her chest aches painfully as she tries to even out the ragged huffs falling from her lips.


Camila focuses upon her smooth tone, listening to the calm inflection as she obeys Dinah's instructions.

Her breathing comes to a slow calming rhythm. The burning in her lungs subsides and loosens every passing second of hearing Dinah's voice.

"Are you good?" Dinah asks softly.

Camila nods.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Okay, hey, look at me," Dinah instructs, bringing her attention by pointing two fingers near her eyes. "Look at me. I am the captain now."

"You're such a fucking asshole, Dinah," Camila exhales heavily, as Dinah bursts into an obnoxious round of laughter.

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"Going to eat there. It was a bad idea. I thought," Lauren pauses, her hands closing over the rubber cover of the steering wheel. Camila hears the slight squeak and knows Lauren is gripping it harshly. "I just thought it would help...to be around something familiar."

Lauren stares directly at the road, frowning.

"I didn't think it would still hurt so much, you know?" Lauren continues. "it's like she's unavoidable here. Everywhere."

The direction of the conversation suddenly has Camila's delicate uplifted mood sinking

"I don't want to talk about this," Camila mutters shakily.

"Camz."

It's as if the nickname is a direct trigger to the anger laying dormant, simmering in her core. It bubbles to the surface threatening to explode. It all goes to shit the moment Lauren turns to her and gives her that fragile tea cup look.

"Don't call me that."

"I've always called you that," Lauren's tone is questioning.

"I don't like it, it's a stupid nickname."

She knows the moment she says that, a suffocating thickness appears in the air. Stuffy and smothering. She wants to roll down the window. Perhaps slowly crawl out at the next stop light so she doesn't have to feel Lauren's eyes on her.

Her neighbor is quiet as she pulls up in front of Camila's house. Camila can already predict her next words.

"I get that you don't like to talk about Dinah. Fine,", Lauren finally breathes out. She pulls the keys out of the ignition and faces her. "But sooner or later we're going to have to talk about this thing between us."

"I don't want to."

"I know you don't want to but if we want this – whatever the hell it is – to work we need to talk about it. What happened before I left –"

"-It's fine. It's done. I forgive you," Camila spits out harshly. Lauren visibly recoils looking as if she's been slapped.

And then Lauren's eyes narrow, the shade darkening.

"You forgive me?" Lauren asks. The question falls cold from her mouth, feeling as if a melting ice cube is traveling down her back triggering the trail of goose bumps on her flesh. "You've got to be kidding me! I should be the one forgiving you."

"You're the one that..." Camila stops, trying to reign in her frustration.

"I'm the one that what? What did I do?"

Camila feels the sting of the question and that bothers her more than it really should. Or at least she feels that it shouldn't. The feeling that Camila has been so desperately trying to avoid falls between
them. The type that feels as if the whole world has been sucked dry.

"Okay, lowkey I'm kind of lost with what's going on here," Dinah comments. "Can you guys like back up a bit?"

Lauren gives her this long look that makes Camila wish she had been giving her pitying eyes. It's a look like she knows exactly how Camila is thinking and feeling. It's the same one from that day on the porch. There's a hardness that never used to be there before. A guarded layer that used to be so open.

And instead of making her even more livid, all it does is make her sad.

"Can we just – stop?"

Silence.

"Fine," Lauren agrees with a small sigh.

And Camila thinks that perhaps Lauren sees something in her as well.
After Camila washes down the pills with the water bottle sitting on her dresser, she decides to do something different, besides the daily hours curled up in bed.

Perhaps she should learn by now that breaking this routine hasn't exactly panned out the way she's wanted it to. Considering all of the times she's deviated from habit recently. Nonetheless, Camila closes the door to her room and heads into the kitchen.

It's a familiar sight - her mother at the stove, the frying pan sizzling with bacon, the smell of pancakes in the air, and Sofi at the dining table eating off of her breakfast plate. Camila assumes her father is at work. She doesn't know, hasn't really paid attention to his schedule.

It's almost picturesque in a way. As if Camila might see this scene perpetually frozen in a black and white frame on a photography blog.

For a moment she just stands there, leaning against the doorframe, watching them. Her mother is humming distractedly, as she flips over the pancakes. It's the first time Camila has seen anything come out of that woman besides sad looks and uneven sighs. She's not even looking at her mother's face and she can already tell that that fragile tea cup expression is not present.

For a moment, she wants to go back into her room and not disturb this scene. It's almost happy. She doesn't really do well with almost happy. She doesn't trust herself with it.

But at the last minute, Camila steps into the kitchen.

They don't immediately notice her until she pulls out the nearest chair. The wooden legs scrape against the tile floor, causing both her mother and sister to turn to find the source. Her mother's eyes widen, as she sets down the spatula in her hand and Sofi stops mid-chew of her scrambled eggs.

"I was just about to bring your food to you room, mija."

"I, um, thought I'd eat here today," Camila admits in a small voice. She takes a seat, and her mother hastily begins to serve her. Camila can see the way her mother tries to hide the smile as she sets the plate of food before her.

She feels a hand stroke the top of her head affectionately. But her eyes fall to Sofi, who's watching the entire interaction with a blank expression.

"I'm going to be right back, and then we'll go see Dr. Abernathy," her mother says. Camila can already tell from the shakiness of her voice that her mother wants to cry. It wouldn't be first time she'd caught her anyway.

As her mother leaves the kitchen, Camila shifts uncomfortably in her chair. Her eyes fall to the food before her, and her stomach churns sourly.

She picks up her fork, tossing a few pieces of egg, before setting the utensil down again. It looks just so far from appetizing. It's not that her mother's cooking is bad, because it's not. It's more so that she still has that awful taste from the medication on her tongue. As if she'd learn by now how to take the damn things without tasting it.
"You look normal," Sofi's voice breaks through the silence. Camila nearly drops her fork at the sound.

Sofi isn't looking at her, but piercing her pancakes, face resting against her left hand.

"What?" Camila sputters.

Her sister doesn't say anything, as she continues to eat. The lingering happy atmosphere fades away as Camila studies her and the discontent expression on her face.

Camila doesn't know why she's so nervous sitting next to Sofi. It's not like she should be so uncomfortable around her. But something about the fact that the younger one is wearing her hair differently disturbs her. The fact that she's just noticing this now disturbs her even more.

How could she not have noticed something like that?

Sofi glances up, regarding her briefly with a measured look. And maybe it's the first time she's looked at her, really looked at her younger sister in a while. Brown eyes stare up and it frustrates her because they don't match the ones that stare at Camila in the mirror anymore. Or rather, Camila's don't have that innocence in them anymore.

Lackluster, deprived of the sparkle that she sees in Sofi's eyes.

A mixture of pride, sadness, and frustration filters into her system as she stares at her younger sister.

"You look normal," Sofi repeats. "Are you gonna stay like this?"

Camila blinks, perplexed.

"Stay like what?"

"Like Kaki."

It hits her harder than she expects it to. This whole conversation is a lot harder than she wants it to be. The eggs go down her throat coldly, leaving an unpleasant feeling in her stomach.

She doesn't respond. She doesn't know how to respond to that. But she doesn't need to because Sofi continues.

"You always look sad and you talk to yourself all the time. I think that's why mami cries in the bathroom. You make her cry a lot," Sofi says quietly while chewing. "She missed my play at school because she had to take care you."

It probably isn't meant to be an accusation but Camila feels the deep sense of guilt manifesting where the eggs don't sit well.

"I'm sorry."

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The conversation with her younger sister still plagues her mind, as the three of them prepare to leave for Camila's appointment. If there was ever a time she felt like an obligation it's now.

Camila gets into the back, behind the driver's seat, as Sofi takes the passenger seat. She's already
halfway buckling herself in when her mother speaks.

"Sofi, let Camila sit there," her mother begins to scold.

"I want to sit here," Sofi begins.

"I'm fine in the back," Camila says. Sofi turns to look at her from over the seatbelt, as her mother huffs, muttering something under hear breath. The car purrs to life as her mother turns it on.

She only absently listens as Sofi fiddles with the radio moving back and forth between the pop radio stations as the reception fades away. It doesn't go unnoticed that she doesn't recognize any of the songs on any of the stations. She used to be so good at recognizing music. Listening to the sounds and rhythms and the voices blending in with it. She used to challenge herself to learn the notes by ear. Then she'd try to learn it on the guitar to impress Lau-

"Morning loser," Dinah appears beside her.

"You're late...again," Camila hisses, eyes darting towards her sister and mother in the front.

"Coming from the girl who's late to everything," Dinah responds dismissively. "So what's on the agenda today? Are you gonna talk to Lauren?"

Camila rolls her eyes at the mention of her neighbor. They hadn't spoken in days. Well two to be exact. It shouldn't have been anything so worrisome. It was only two days.

Lauren could be busy. She has friends that clearly enjoy her company. Camila remembers those girls in the jeep from the other day. It seems a bit unfair to judge them based on one encounter. An encounter that didn't even technically include her. Perhaps that's what was secretly bugging her.

Besides that, Lauren also has a family that doesn't treat her like a skittish animal. And Camila was probably infringing upon family time...or whatever.

Camila thinks back to the tight, almost aggravated sigh that came from Lauren that afternoon. The resigned way she agreed to stop things. There was a sense of defeat that day. She wasn't sure on whose part exactly.

Maybe Camila was just overthinking all of this. It wasn't like they ended things on a completely bad note. In fact they came to a compromise... Kind of. This was good. This meant everything would be okay now, right?

Still, it had been two days of silence. No 4 am visits or phone calls or texts. Not that she should expect the latter. She doesn't even have Lauren's new number, and she was not going to ask any time soon.

"I don't know," Camila murmurs, suddenly not feeling too great about how they left things. "I'm not sure ...what's going on."

"So we find out today," Dinah reassures. "I'm sure she's lying in bed listening to depressing Coldplay music because she misses you. She's dumb like that."

"I listen to Coldplay." Camila shoots her a dirty look.

"Yeah, you're dumb like that too," Dinah adds peering over at my mother driving. "By the way, where are we going?"
"Abernathy."

"This early?" Dinah complains.

"I decided to change appointments to the mornings so I had more time to work on the list," Camila mutters, annoyed. "I told you this already."

"Right right, sorry I forgot."

"How do you forget? You went with me to my last one."

"Jesus, Mila I'm dead not a time keeper."

Camila scoffs, turning away to glare out the window.

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Camila notices that stupid water figure is still sitting on the coffee table of Dr. Abernathy's office. It's turned off now. Her appointment is too early and she thinks the office people probably don't turn it on until about midday. They're either cheap or very into water conservatism. She doesn't really care, but she secretly hopes it's the latter.

"Good morning, Camila," Abernathy greets, as she takes her usual seat. "How was your week so far?"

"You gonna tell her you're trying to get laid?" Dinah smirks, as she plops down on the floor by Camila's legs.

Camila makes a noncommittal shrug. If she could kick Dinah she would.

She watches as Abernathy picks up her notepad and settles into the armchair across from her.

"Tell me about it," the doctor suggests.

She can't even imagine where to begin. How would one even begin trying to explain to her that she's trying to have sex with an ex-friend, neighbor, person?

Camila thinks that beginning with the creation of her list is a good start but the thought of having to explain that is absolutely mortifying.

"You look like something's on your mind," Abernathy comments gently.

Camila hesitates.

"I've been...hanging out with someone I haven't spoken to in a while," Camila finally mutters. Abernathy is intrigued.

"Really? Why do you think you've been doing that?"

Camila looks away. Her eyes meet Dinah's and her friend's lips tilt into a small smile.

"I wanted to do something different."

"Is this one of the people who was at Dinah's house on her birthday?" Abernathy presses.
She feels herself glaring at Abernathy. It's not intentional, not entirely. She doesn't mean to let the anger get a hold of her. The subject is touchy. She begins to think at this rate every subject will be touchy.

Camila's clenched fists loosen, and she sighs, expelling the negative energy. She glances up at Abernathy apologetically.

The doctor simply gives her an understanding look.

"Yeah. One of them. We drifted apart I guess," Camila admits. "Her name is Lauren." She adds, ignoring the little flutter in her stomach when the name rolls off of her tongue. "We were... really close."

"Close?" Abernathy's eyes are inquisitive. Camila isn't so sure why she feels accused of something more, which is stupid. She feels Dinah smirking at the entire dialogue.

"I've known her for most of my life," Camila mutters. "She was my best friend, well, right after..." Her words die out when she realize what she's been saying. Too much.

"Is there a reason you can maybe pinpoint why you both stopped talking?"

There is. There are plenty in fact. All that evokes the same heated reaction. Camila tries to articulate it without giving away too much. She still has her pride to keep intact.

"Lauren goes to UCLA," Camila abruptly brings up.

That's 2,748 miles away from Miami, Florida. She knows. She'd toss the mileage around her head all of her junior year. She scribbled them out on the margins of her notes in class distractedly. The number had been ingrained in her mind the moment she found out Lauren planned on applying for the university on the west coast.

Ally and Normani had applied out of state as well, but Lauren's decision had hit her the hardest. They had always been together. Grown up together. Whenever Dinah wasn't there, Lauren was.

There are a few memories of their childhood that stick out to Camila. Like the times Lauren's given her the red otter pops (even though those were Lauren's brother's favorite) because Camila loved them. Or the times Camila played hide and seek with Lauren. Something she can't exactly forget because the last time, Lauren left her in the middle of the game while she was hiding up in a tree. She was stuck up there for hours, before she began crying, and Lauren's father had to bring out the ladder and carry her because she was too scared to climb down. And as an apology Lauren brought her an otter pop every afternoon that summer.

It was always different with Lauren. Not that her friendship with Dinah was anything less. Just that with Lauren there was always an almost with her. They were almost always on the same page. They were almost best friends. They were almost on the verge of something more.

And for the first time there was the possibility of an undeniably distant gap between them. They had never been far apart, even physically with Lauren living just next door. To say it hurt would have been an understatement.

Abernathy's expression softens. "It makes you upset?"

"I guess."

"Can you articulate why it does?"
"I'm not upset anymore," Camila cuts in swiftly. She can feel her temper flaring again. "I mean, I was. I don't know."

"You sound a little unsure about your feelings, Camila, regarding Lauren currently."

Because she is. Though she would never admit that out loud. What gets to her the most is how she's afraid of it all. The past days of being in her neighbor's presence has put her at the edge, dancing dangerously across the set of boundaries she he had buried a long time ago.

"I guess," Camila hesitates, glancing down at her hands playing with the hem of her sweater. "I am still upset."

"Because she left to UCLA?" Abernathy fills the silence.

Because she left me without so much as a goodbye.

Of course at the time Camila and Lauren weren't speaking to each other, but they were still friends once. She would have thought that that itself would've overcome whatever stupid fight they were having. But apparently it didn't and the next thing Camila was aware of was Lauren off on a flight to Los Angeles.

"So Lauren is home for the summer?" Abernathy continues at her silence.

"I think. I don't know I didn't ask."

"You haven't spoken to her about all of this?"

"Of course not," Camila snaps, remembering the last conversation she had with her neighbor. More like argument. Her hands clench into fists again. "It's like she doesn't even realize what she did. She tried to make it seem like it was my fault."

Abernathy leans back in her armchair. She scribbles something down in her notepad. "Funny thing about arguments Camila - everyone always thinks that they're right. There really isn't a right or wrong. Just perspective."

"Unless yours is stupid," Dinah adds sagely.

"I want to do a little exercise," Abernathy says, setting her clipboard against her lap again.

"Ha! Mila and exercise?" Dinah says incredulously. "I'd like to see the day."

"I want you to think about the last time you remembered being happy. Can you do that for me, Camila?"

There it is again. Happy. It springs upon her in the least expecting situations, as if to goad her. Torment her. She's looking in on its teasing through impenetrable glass. Never able to breach the transparent surface because she knows that the moment she does whatever little happiness that afflicts her will become tainted the moment she tries to touch it.

But she tries to remember. She tries to remember a time when she was on the other side of the glass. Happy.

The first memory that comes to mind is the one that was forever imprinted upon that photograph at the restaurant. The flitting images of Dinah and the rest of her friends coming to eat after Dinah had won that trophy. She was happy then.
She was happy listening to Dinah scolding Normani for almost dropping her trophy and the threats falling from Normani's lips of stealing one of Dinah's Beyonce posters. She was happy watching as Ally tried to diffuse the situation by trying to make them eat their food. She was happy with Lauren's arms wrapped loosely around her waist. She was happy twirling a piece of Lauren's hair around her finger. She was happy when Lauren playfully nipped her shoulder. She was even happy with all the blush induced teasing that came when their friends finally noticed them.

"I can't," Camila murmurs.

"Try," Abernathy encourages. "It doesn't matter how long ago it was."

Camila shakes her head. "I can't."

She leaves the office feeling like she revealed more than what she's comfortable with. It's not until she gets home that she realizes this last session is probably the most she's ever talked. And it's not until she crawls into bed and turns on her laptop that she realizes the majority, if not all, of what she talked about was Lauren.

After a lot of annoying pressing and prodding from Dinah, Camila agrees that she should speak to Lauren. It takes her about a half an hour to summon up the courage to make up her mind. It takes her another ten minutes to get passed her mother and out the front door.

She walks with a purpose, not even hesitating knocking on the wooden door, though her heart is beating really fast. The apology is on her tongue, sitting, waiting until she sees her.

The door swings open and Lauren Jauregui stands still, looking as if she'd seen a ghost. Well, if she only knew.

"Hi," Camila greets. She feels her pulse race as Lauren's green eyes look her up and down skeptically.

"Hi," Lauren responds.

Camila shifts her weight on her feet, a distraction to quell the nerves bubbling.

"I, uh, I wanted to see if you wanted to... hang out?"

The question sounded a lot cooler and less pathetic in her head.

Lauren's eyebrows knit together and her lips fall into a frown.

"Hang out?"

Now Camila just feels stupid. Stupid. Of course more stupid ideas. It's as if she was born to make
them. She wonders absently if it's too late to just make a run for it.

"Sorry that was - wow - never mind I'm just going to go," Camila stammers.

"Chicken shit," Dinah coughs behind her.

"No, no that's fine," Lauren steps out of the doorway and closer to Camila. She runs a hand through her hair. "I just didn't think you wanted to talk to me after..."

"We agreed to stop," Camila reminds her.

"I know. I thought you meant stop everything," Lauren admits. At Camila's silence, she continues. "But no, yeah that's great."

"Is this the part where you guys have make up sex now?" Dinah probes.

"Can I come inside?" Camila asks, shooting a pointed look in Dinah's direction when Lauren looks away.

"Are you going to ask me to sleep with you again?"

Her lips tilt, amused. Lauren gives her a returning smile.

"Because I have company over and I'm not sure that's the most appropriate topic to get into," Lauren continues.

"Company?" Camila blurts out.

"Ally and Normani are here. Do you mind?"

. .

Camila follows Lauren down the hallway, until they reach the living room. Both Ally and Normani glance up and hurriedly look away.

"Aw, Lauren, you shouldn't have," Dinah gushes, plopping down beside Normani. "How did you know I wanted to see these losers?"

"Hi, Camila," Ally greets with a nervous smile, rising from her seat. It's too bright and all teeth and it painfully reminds her of the cheery grin Zendaya wore at the restaurant.

This one doesn't bother her as much because she knows Ally, or at least she knew her. She knew that whenever Ally was uncomfortable or nervous the charm kind of just oozed out. There was always a selfless kind of atmosphere that followed her around, as if she had some kind of ability to sense the discomfort within people. And she would do anything to try to relieve even at her own expense.

Except this composure falls off Ally. As if this ability has been rendered ineffective considering the circumstances. How could you fool someone when you can't fool yourself?

Ally sits back down awkwardly.

Normani nods in Camila's direction with a weaker grin. No words pass through her lips as she regards Camila silently. But Camila knows she's thinking something.
Normani was always the quieter one of their group, the observer. The one who wasn't always as trusting as Ally. Or willing to easily let someone in like Dinah was. She was always assessing someone's character, especially around strangers.

The fact that she remains silent during this entire exchange kind of hurts Camila more than she wants to admit.

But she tries not to take it personally.

Silence falls over the four of them. She knows it's because of her. She can feel the uncomfortable glances Ally and Normani try to keep hidden. If Camila weren't already familiar with this behavior she might not have caught it so easily.

They don't know how to talk to her, she comes to realize, after studying their body language. Ally plays with the ends of her skirt, head bent down. Normani drums her manicured hands against the arm of the couch, angled away from her.

Her gaze moves towards Lauren. Green eyes watch her intently. Warmth spreads against her cheeks when Lauren doesn't look away. The talk with Abernathy earlier isn't helping at all.

Because now all she can think about is how well she and Lauren used to know each other. Almost to the point where they knew exactly what the other was thinking. She wonders if Lauren can read her as easily now, because it's difficult for Camila to decipher her neighbor's expression.

It's as if she's grappling with a language she used to speak fluently, and now all that manages to reach her tongue is botched, unsure words of speech that was once so clear.

The feeling of being under a microscope comes back again. Her heart begins to pound as she finally tears her eyes away.

"I think we should go," Normani finally says in a gentle tone, shattering the silence. Ally glances up at Lauren and Normani looks as if she's let out a sigh she's been holding in.

"What? We just got here," Dinah protests. "We didn't even to start marathoning the Vampire Diaries!"

"That's probably a good idea," Ally perks up, rising from her seat again.

"Sit down shortstack," Dinah commands. "Mila, tell them to stay," she pleads.

"Okay," Lauren agrees. "So then I'll just see you guys Saturday?"

Normani nods.

"Yesss," Ally claps her hands together. "Also you're invited too Camila. If you want to come."

At Camila's confused expression, Lauren steps in.

"We're, uh, going to the beach."

Camila sees Dinah's face fall from her peripheral vision.

"It'll be fun," Ally adds nervously, glancing between Lauren and Camila. "But, uh, you'll let us know?"
"I'll let you guys know," Lauren cuts in.

"It was nice seeing Camila," Ally says, as she and Normani head towards the hallway.

"Bye, Camila," Normani says quietly.

Lauren walks them out the door, leaving Camila sitting awkwardly on the sofa.

"You owe me, Walz," Dinah sighs moving to sit beside her.

"Owe you what?" Camila questions flatly.

"I want to go to the beach. Do you realize how long it's been since we've gone? And we need to hang out with them. I mean I love Lo and all but this whole are you guys gonna do it or not thing is getting old."

Camila rolls her eyes. "I'm working on it."

"Yeah whatever."

Lauren returns before Camila can respond.

"Sorry about that," Lauren admits sheepishly.

"You didn't have to kick them out."

"It's okay. We're gonna see them Saturday anyway," Lauren waves a dismissive hand.

Camila doesn't respond, and her neighbor notices.

"We are going right?"

Camila tries not to pay too much attention to the way Lauren refers to them as a we. She ignores the little flutter in her chest at the pronoun because it's stupid. Just like this beach idea.

"I'm not really a big fan of the beach," Camila quickly says. "You go ahead."

"OOOH, you're such a liar, Walz." Dinah shakes her head.

Lauren's furrows her eyebrows.

"It's the beach," Lauren states obviously. "We go all the time."

"To see me," Dinah exclaims. "Who are you going to see now?"

"Let's go to your room," Camila abruptly suggests.

Lauren looks as if she wants to say more, but drops the subject. "Fine."

She gestures for Camila to follow her, and they all make their way to Lauren's room.

"I feel like walking into this room with you two is either the best or the worst decision I'm going to make," Dinah says warily, following Camila inside.

It's probably stranger walking into Lauren's room now than it was at 4 am in the morning. Everything is much clearer. The emptiness within the four walls is more blatant. Camila takes in the lack of band posters Lauren had taped up for so long that the edges would rip. She studies the
suitcases unzipped laying beside the bed, clothes spilling out. Her eyes move to the desk, the one that was usually always cluttered with books and knick knacks, and it's completely bare, save for an unfamiliar lamp.

Boxes are stacked up neatly in the corner, labeled Lauren's.

"It's not really much," Lauren mutters, watching Camila look around. "My parents were talking about turning this into a study room. Well, for my mom. But they left the bed in here."

Camila feels her heart sink as she sees Lauren turn away. She remembers the tension between Clara and Mike that night she broke into Lauren's room. The feeling comes back again. The feeling that she's imposing upon something she shouldn't.

"You're staying for the whole summer?" Camila asks, changing the subject, taking a seat at the edge of her bed.

A small part of her kind of dies when Lauren moves to sit at her desk chair, creating an unnecessary gap between them.

"I'm not sure yet. We'll see I guess," Lauren responds. Her lips curl into a smile, teasing and inviting.

"Look right there! There's your opening! She is totally flirting, ooh girl get it," Dinah says.

"If you plan to help me with my list I think you're kind of stuck staying here." Camila shrugs, nonchalantly.

Dinah buries her face in her hand. "Did I teach you nothing? You have no swag, no definition of game, no nothing. I'm embarrassed to be your friend."

"Instead of worrying so much about crossing things off already, why don't you focus on actually making a list? How many things do you have on it now?"

"She just changed the whole conversation. Do you realize this? You suck, Mila."

Camila pulls out her list (that's gotten a little wrinkled) and unfolds it. Her eyes scan over it with a little disappointment.

"I still only have four."

Camila watches as Lauren spins in her chair. And then she gets up and walks over to her.

"Let me see," Lauren says, as she takes a seat next to her. Camila inhales, feeling a languid dizzying spell fall over her at the smell of her shampoo.

Focus here.

"Is this stuff you haven't done or just stuff you want to do?" Lauren breaks through the haze.

"Uh both?" Camila blurts out absently.

"You should just cross out have sex and put Lauren Jauregui in big ass letters," Dinah suggests from over Camila's shoulder.

Camila huffs.

"What?" Lauren asks, noticing her reaction.
"Nothing, I just want to get through this already. Before the summer ends."

"Before school starts up again?" Lauren probes.

Camila's expression hardens. At this point, she thinks Lauren just has that knack for bringing up topics that Camila hates to talk about. But maybe Lauren gets the point this time, because she changes the subject. Camila is grateful.

"Anyway, what haven't you done that you want to do?" Lauren asks.

"You," Dinah says gesturing towards Lauren. "Aha, am I right, Walz?"

"I've never tried alcohol before," Camila says uncertainly.

"Your coordination says otherwise, girl," Dinah snickers.

"I want to get drunk," Camila says abruptly. "I've never had a drink in my life...I mean except for the times I've accidentally sipped my dad's beer thinking it was soda."

"You're not twenty-one," Lauren points out with a raised brow.

"Don't lecture me. You mean to tell me you've never gotten drunk before?" Camila snaps.

"Okay point taken."

"And weed. I want to try weed too," Camila exclaims.

"Let's just throw in cocaine and heroin while we're at it," Dinah says sarcastically.

Lauren purses her lips. "I take it your parents aren't aware of this?"

"I'm sure they would've already killed me after the first one on the list," Camila admits.

"Well let's just focus on one thing at a time," Lauren says.

"Yes, I agree. In fact, let's go in order."

"Oooh, smooth Walz."

"No," Lauren states flatly. "We are not going in order."

"Aaaand rejected. I think I'm gonna start keeping count," Dinah laughs.

Lauren hands her a pen. Camila scribbles down the latest two new additions to her list. For the first time since its conception, she's beginning to feel - dare she say it - excited about all of this. There's some strange sense of adventure thumping through her veins as she glances down the list. It's a sensation she admittedly hasn't felt since - since - god - since forever.

"Can you think of anything more you want to do?" Lauren asks.

Camila shakes her head, tapping the end of her pen against the tattered sheet of paper.

"Well maybe it can be something you have to learn, like driving," Lauren suggests.

"Like learning to put a tampon on," Dinah sneers.

"I actually don't know how to use a tampon," Camila says.
"I wasn't serious Mila, oh my god," Dinah blurts out after Camila's suggestion.

"Oh, well it's not that hard," Lauren says. "I can teach you."

"Ooh, kinky," Dinah mutters suggestively, making Camila shoot her a disgruntled glare.

"Ugh you're disgusting," she gags.

"Sorry, I wasn't aware I grossed you out? So no to the tampon lessons?" Lauren asks uncertainly.

_Crap. Dinah. Look what you made me do._

"No, no no, sorry I just - that's fine. I _want_ to learn."

"I hear Ms. Jauregui is a good teacher," Dinah chimes in, as she writes down _Tampon_ on her list.

_I swear to god Dinah..._

"What about the beach?" Lauren offers.

Camila feels her hand tighten around the pen.

"What about it?" Camila asks evenly.

"Don't people go to the beach during summer vacation and stuff? And it'll be easy crossing it out, since we're going Saturday."

"Oooh, Lo you better shut your mouth before you get her angry," Dinah warns.

Camila's fists curls into a tighter fist around the small, plastic body of the pen, as she glares at Dinah.

"No I don't want to get a sunburn," Camila dismisses. She glances at Lauren. Her neighbor stares at her with a puzzled expression. As if she doesn't believe a word that came out of her mouth.

"We could always go at night. Make a bonfire. We could cross off the whole alcohol and weed thing there," Lauren continues.

"Sand. There's just a lot of sand and it gets everywhere."

"Okay, girl even I know that was a dumb excuse," Dinah complains.

"I mean there's always the boardwalk and -"

"I don't want to go, Lauren," she nearly yells this out.

Why her neighbor is so insistent upon going is beyond her. There's no way, absolutely no way she could ever think about going. The beach was probably the worst place right after Dinah's actual fucking house.

Silence falls between them. The type that Camila has been trying to avoid ever since their last argument in Lauren's car.

"I'm sorry, Camila," Lauren breaks it gently.

"It's fine," she relents, but then she feels something soft envelop her hand.

"No, I shouldn't have pushed. I'm sorry," Lauren repeats, giving her hand a squeeze.
Camila's gaze darts down towards Lauren's pale hand covering hers.

And then the eye contact comes back again.

Lauren's eyes are bright. The sunlight peeking through the blinds, reflect off of the green shade, making them look very light. It's dizzying being this close, being able to decipher the points at which the green shades turn from light to dark.

Lauren's always had that affect. Camila's pretty sure it's been on everyone she's ever come in to contact with. Lauren's eyes made you feel a certain way. As if you were stranded on some kind of starving vessel in a storm and the darkness shrouded everything. It surrounded everything around the wooden planks, everything besides the faint lighthouse guiding you back to shore.

Blinking. Flickering. Beckoning the travelers to safety. Lauren's eyes were the light that gave that sense of security that you weren't out there alone.

They were the green light across the bay. Shining, welcoming the hopeless romantic into their lingering hope of a happy ending.

Camila swallows thickly, averting her gaze. Before she does something stupid. This was all becoming too irritatingly Gatsby-ish for her liking.

It should be a crime for someone's eyes to evoke such a reaction of dumb pretentious, poetic feelings.

She can still feel the green gaze upon her. But before she can do something else dumb like blush, something vibrates.

The warm palm pulls away from her hand, and Camila glances back to see Lauren typing on her phone.

"Oh thank you! I thought I was gonna barf if I had to watch you guys continue with the eye sex," Dinah whines. "But hey at least you're getting laid somehow right, Mila?"

Camila ignores her, before she slips and ends up coming back with a snarky response. Instead, she chooses to focus on Lauren sitting beside her. There's a hint of a smile playing on Lauren's lips that somehow manages to bring out something almost playful within her.

"Texting your girlfriend?" Camila asks, and immediate regrets it because Lauren turns red.

Why did she ask that? Or more importantly why didn't she ask that sooner?

What made her think that Lauren was even single, and by extension able to even fulfill number one off her checklist? Oh god, was she pursuing a taken person this whole time?

"Uh, not exactly?" Lauren mutters, clearly embarrassed by this whole subject. But Camila is already intrigued, if not a little annoyed by the lack of mentioning a potential significant other.

"What's that supposed to mean?" She questions sharply.

"Oooh, careful Walz. Those claws are coming out," Dinah giggles.

"She's not my girlfriend," Lauren says, putting down her phone. Camila tries to ignore the way it goes off again. Her eyes dart down to the screen. She can't read the name fast enough because Lauren is stuffing it in her pocket, but she does notice all of the various heart emojis. "She's more of - uh - like a friend"
"Like fuck buddies?" Camila deadpans. Dinah bursts out laughing, Lauren's jaw drops.

"OH MY GOD, I CANT BREATHE," Dinah wheezes, grasping her chest as another round of laughter comes tumbling out of her mouth. "This would happen to you, Mila oh god!"

Lauren's pale face turns a deeper red. "Jesus, Camila. Is sex on your mind all of the time?"

Camila rolls her eyes as Dinah practically Chokes in the background. "Well she's not your girlfriend, and it doesn't really seem like she's your friend..."

"It doesn't matter."

"If you're going to help me with my list..."

"I'm not going to sleep with you, Camila."

"How many times have you been rejected already?" Dinah asks.

The subject is dropped before it even begins. But Camila is relentless.

"What's her name?" She presses.

"What?" Lauren stammers incredulously.

"Your not-girlfriend? What's her name?"

Lauren looks as if she'd rather be anywhere but here. "Ashley. She - uh- lived on my floor while I was in the dorms."

"Is she cute?"

"I guess."

"What do you mean you guess?"

"I just guess."

"Well are you attracted to her?"

"Obviously if you think we're sleeping together." Lauren snaps.

"So you are fuck buddies."

"Camila," Lauren sighs. "We are not having this conversation."

"I mean, I wouldn't really be so surprised," Camila murmurs under her breath but Lauren hears it.

"Wait, what? Why do you say that?" Her neighbor demands.

"You weren't really lowkey with who hung around with in high school."

"Are you calling me a slut?"

"Okay, that's my cue to bounce," Dinah mumbles in the background.

"No, of course not I'm just saying people talked."
"And you believed it? That's what you think of me?" Lauren suddenly looks upset.

There are a lot of things that come to mind when she thinks of Lauren. The most obvious of which is anger. But beneath that buried in all of the dumb feeling she swore she'd never admit to anymore, there was a small part of her that wondered if all the rumors she heard about Lauren were true. The boys on the football team and all of the pretty girls that gossiped during class weren't so quiet about their bragging. It left Camila doubtful. She would've asked Lauren, except they weren't on speaking terms at the time.

But it didn't matter. Camila isn't really one to judge in that manner. Besides, internalized misogyny was such a turn off.

"No, I don't think of you like that," Camila reassures.

Lauren chews her lip, runs a nervous hand through her hair, and then finally rises from her seat beside Camila.

"My parents will be home soon. I think you should go," her neighbor mutters without even meeting her eyes.
She's truly struck out in the stupidity level, she thinks, poking at her French toast absently. She watches distractedly as her mother hands Sofi the syrup, and loses focus when the seven year old completely drenches the slices of bread.

What did Camila expect? For her neighbor to just barge through her window at 4am again?

(Camila won't admit that she was secretly hoping for this to happen).

Her thumb unlocks her phone, and she scrolls through her contacts, pausing in the L section. She still has Lauren's number saved, despite never using it during the end of Camila's junior year. And the only reason she still has it is because she has this habit of hoarding people's numbers. If she looked hard enough, she's sure she'd probably find Austin's in there somewhere too.

Camila hovers over Lauren's name, before opening up a new message. She begins to type out an apology, before quickly erasing it.

Worst case scenario: Lauren has changed her number. Even worse of scenario: Lauren's deleted Camila's number and she's forced to deal with the awkward "who's this?" response.

Camila sighs, deleting the unsent message, and stuffing her phone back into her pocket. This is stupid. It wasn't even like they ended their quality time on a bad note. There wasn't any fighting or the usual unspoken negative tension.

Deep down, however, Camila knows better. And she doesn't think she can get that look Lauren gave her out of her head. As if Camila had just humiliated her in front of a crowd of people rather than just in the presence of two.

After she eats a little, Camila heads back to her room, though she knows her mother and Sofi's eyes on her retreating figure. She can distinctly feel the semblance of disappointment in her mother behavior. But she ignores it.

It's one of those days, Camila realizes, hours later, with her head buried beneath a pillow.

One of those days where time seems to move in a nauseating fast motion, yet feels as if it shifts at a snail's pace, matching the lethargic spell that falls over her.

The afternoon slow sinking sunlight settles through the half closed blinds, leaving the room in an orange glow. She reaches up and pulls the pillow off, eyes blinking blearily in the fading sunlight.

This used to be her favorite time of the day.

Mostly because the sun, the source of her of distaste for the Miami weather and her inability to wear practically eighty five percent of her autumn infested clothing, was leaving for a few hours. It was because it was the end of the day. The hustle and bustle of the mornings and the heated traffic of the afternoon disappear. People are coming home from work, school, wherever, exhausted yet resolute
in returning home. It was the desired sigh of relief after a long day, painted into different shades of red and yellow and orange.

Camila turns away from the window. All it reminds her of now is how easy it is for her to pathetically waste away a day of her life.

She reaches for the pillow again, but stops when she sees Dinah, perched cross legged, at the foot of her bed.

"This is too depressing, even for you," Dinah says.

"Shut up," Camila groans.

"It's like you've taken five steps back," Dinah continues, tilting her head to the side. "I thought we were going out today."

"Well, we're not," Camila answers shortly, turning over on her stomach.

"We've got things to do though," Dinah persists. "Actually, we've got people to do, if you know what I mean," she adds suggestively.

Camila reaches for the pillow again, draping it over her head.

"You have to see Lauren today," Dinah says, her voice closer than before. "Come on!"

"She doesn't want to see me," Camila grumbles.

"Because you called her a slut?"

Camila sits upright and throws the pillow at Dinah. She watches as it goes right through her friend and topples over the edge of the bed. They both stare at it, silently for a moment, before Camila rounds on Dinah.

"I didn't call her a slut," she snaps.

"That's not what her face said."

"I already feel bad about it. You don't need to make it any worse," Camila sighs. "Besides, I'm always making the moves."

"The bad moves," Dinah chimes in unhelpfully.

"It's time she shows some interest."

"I like how you jump to this conclusion."

"Dinah moves to sit closer to her. "That she's just so interested in you."

"She wants to be my friend," Camila responds irritably.

"See, this is where you lose me. You want to hate her? But you want to be friends with her? Or you want her to like you enough to sleep with you or what?"

Camila flushes, rising from the bed completely to create as much distance between her and Dinah's playfully accusing stare.

"Oh, no you're doing that constipated look you get when you think too hard," Dinah says with a
wince. She pats the empty side of the bed. "Come back. We'll watch some old videos again."

So they spend an hour going through Camila's saved videos. The same ones, the ones that they've both gone through more times than they could count. She knows Dinah's reasons for it. Tactical. Analyzing every detail and move projected on the computer screen in a way only athletes do. Camila, however, isn't sure why she still does it. Why she plays, rewinds, fast forwards and repeats almost every day.

It's the only routine, since the conception of this dumb list, which she hasn't broken or even thought of breaking.

Recording-Dinah, bronze skin reflecting off the bright sunlight and bright blue ocean, rips through the shiny surface. She rides the small barrel, a tiny speck from Camila's camera angle on the beach. Camila can hear herself through the recording, over the sound of crashing waves, chirping seagulls, and the murmur of people on the beach that day. She can hear herself cheer and giggle, and chant Dinah's name.

"The waves were weak that day," Dinah mutters from over her shoulder. "The waves are always weak here," she sighs dramatically. "Unless there's like a storm or something. I would've liked to go with Z to Cali.

"Like she would take you," Camila murmurs, moving over to play a different video.

"Hey we would have gone. We always planned to go to the west coast," Dinah says. There's something in her voice that doesn't settle well with Camila. "The dream was Waimea. Eventually save enough money to go to Hawaii."

Camila feels a lump form in her throat. She struggles to swallow it down as she tries to focus upon the recording. This is the first time she's heard Dinah speak like this. With a twinge of longing in her voice. It's the first time Camila thinks Dinah has ever spoken on this matter in a serious tone. It's the first time she catches a hint of bitterness in her friend's expression. It's the first time she sees the ache that twists in her chest reflected in Dinah's dark eyes.

But it's not the first time these moments come, as if the gravity of the situation falls upon her like an avalanche. It comes in small bursts. That tragic realization that Dinah hadn't even really lived much.

Dinah had never gone anywhere despite the constant comments about wanting to leave. She had expressed a lot of desires with wanting to see the world. Joking about going to Australia and seeing koalas. The UK (though Camila's sure it's only because the legal age to drink was 18).

They'd never even left Miami. Most of the memories that come to mind when she thinks of Dinah's life is within the small area of their neighborhood and the beach. There was never really any money for trips out of state, much less out of the city. Every opportunity would forever be taken away from Dinah.

She would be eighteen by now. Dinah probably would have gained that glamorized freedom one demands the moment they become legal. Or at least she's sure Dinah would've rubbed it in her parents' face that she would've been officially able to go into a club.

It comes in a slow lethargic moment - the moment Camila realizes that she, herself, is also eighteen. Has been eighteen for much longer than Dinah would have been.

Hell she could stroll down to the nearest liquor store and demand a box of cigarettes if she really wanted to. Not that she would. Those tobacco commercials with people's faces ripping off had pretty
much traumatized her into never purchasing a pack.

But the point was that she could do it. If she wanted to.

And yet, what have these months accounted for? Absolutely nothing.

There was a whole other world out there that Dinah didn't and would never know. The familiar sand and waves of the local beaches would be the only thing Dinah would ever surf. Dreams of seeing the west coast, traveling would forever be out of her reach.

It's insulting that the very thing that brought life into her eyes was the very thing that took it all away.

Camila stops the video, earning a questioning glance from Dinah. But she doesn't say anything. It's like opening up a can of worms. More unwanted things to think about.

But even if she did want to, her thoughts are interrupted when a familiar tap comes from her window. It's almost absurd to say she recognizes the gentle knock, as if she memorized the motion in which someone's knuckles rap against the clear surface. It's even more ridiculous how the feelings of relief come flooding through her body with each approaching step towards her window.

Camila hates the way she feels her heart skip a beat as she pulls away the blinds to find Lauren Jauregui standing outside.

"Do you guys not know how to use doors or what?" Dinah probes as she also approaches the window.

Camila lifts up the lever and then they're staring at each other without the transparent barrier.

"Hi," Lauren greets nervously.

"Hi," Camila returns, stepping aside to let her neighbor in.

Lauren hesitates, glancing uncertainly through the open window. It's a stark difference to the past situation in which Lauren had just casually waltzed into her room at four in the morning.

"I'm sorry about yesterday," Camila begins.

"Don't worry about it. You didn't do anything," Lauren reassures, almost helplessly.

An awkward pause fills the room. Awkward, filled with more things Camila wants to say but doesn't know how to articulate.

"Come in," Camila adds, as the seconds of Lauren's lingering becomes even more awkward.

"Do you want to hang out?" Lauren blurs out.

And perhaps it's the way she says it- shyly and hopefully - as if she's hanging on every word Camila's answer could potentially entail. Or maybe it's the way Lauren's chews on her lip, a nervous tick that was undoubtedly picked up from Camila herself. Or perhaps it's because Lauren standing outside her window, staring at her with such a soft, timid gaze reminds her too much of the times Camila would stand outside Lauren's window. Just because Lauren's room wasn't that far away from hers. Just because she wanted to see her neighbor.

The thought makes Camila's stomach flutter. It makes her cheeks flush. And suddenly she is seventeen again, standing outside her Lauren's window, nervously strumming her guitar to her neighbor's latest song obsession.
It comes and goes like the waves down by the beach. It tickles in the way the wet sand sinks beneath her feet as the tide pulls away, water bubbling around her toes.

"Right now?"

"Yeah," Lauren responds. "Please?"

The *please* is so unnecessary. Camila would've gladly dropped everything to get out of this room. But the plea simply sets her resolve: that there is nothing she'd rather be doing than hanging out with Lauren Jauregui at this very moment. And the silly feeling is so incredibly stupid, but Camila brushes it off. She puts the annoyances away because she's not going to ruin today like she had managed to do so beautifully in nearly all of their most recent encounters.

No. Instead, she will smile and say: "Okay."

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They decide to meet up at Lauren's house instead of having to explain to her mother how her neighbor got into her room. Camila only gives her mother five minutes for fussing and smothering, before she's zipping up her hoodie and darting outside the door.

Dusk has fallen softly in the neighborhood as Camila makes her way next door. The sky's reds have long faded, engulfed by lilac clouds brushed across its pale body.

The light on Lauren's porch is on, dimmed by the fading gleam of the end of the day. Camila barely presses her finger against the Jauregui's doorbell before the door is pulled open and Lauren stands there, smiling expectantly.

"Hi," Lauren greets breathlessly. She blushes softly, runs a hand through her hair and smiles.

"Hi," Camila returns, feeling her stomach bubble with nerves.

"Someone's excited," Dinah teases beside Camila.

"Come in. No one's home," Lauren says immediately.

Camila almost wants to believe it's said as a challenge. As if Lauren waits for the inevitable request that rolls out of Camila's mouth, but there isn't a hint of a smirk on Lauren's face. Camila decides to put the question to rest for now.

Camila follows Lauren, but questions when she suddenly leads her into the kitchen rather than her room.

"Thought we'd have a snack before adding more stuff to your list," Lauren answers Camila's unspoken question.

She watches silently, as Lauren rummages through the freezer. She has a vague idea of what she's looking for, and she tries not to assume because there is bubbling irritation surfacing in her system. Her suspicion is confirmed when Lauren pulls away with a blue otter pop in her hand.

"It's hard to find red. Chris practically eats these like candy," Lauren says, holding the end of the blue pop with her teeth, as she uses both hands to dig through the freezer again.

She doesn't understand what it is with Lauren and her need to just crack open everything from the
past. So what if the red otter pops were her favorite flavor? So what if this was literally all they used to eat during summer vacation?

The forming irritation begins to seize up. Could they go once without any kind of reference to the past?

Well, no.

It hits her, as Lauren begins to stare at her worried. There's too much history here. And the moment she walked into Lauren Jauregui's room that night she should have realized it. The inevitability of facing it.

"Wait hah I found one!" Lauren nearly squeals, catching Camila off guard.

It's such a tiny, childish sound that comes from her neighbor it almost makes Camila smile. She feels her stomach flip pleasantly at the sound, and the stupid grin fighting its way on to her mouth. She'd almost forgotten that Lauren could be so adorable.

Wait...

As if that random train of thought deepens her sinking mood, she snatches the red pop from Lauren's outstretched hand.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Camila says as she tries to rip the package open with her teeth. "So are we going to cross something else off?"

"Ouch, Mila, I think I got like a second degree burn from that cold shoulder," Dinah comments.

At the confused, hurt look on Lauren's face Camila relents. "Thank you," she adds with a tiny smile. A peace offering. Lauren seems to accept this as she gestures for Camila to follow her.

Camila chews through her pop, as they head to Lauren's room without any more of an exchange of words.

"So I was thinking, we should go out driving tonight," Lauren begins, once they enter her room.

"Tonight? You're going to let me drive your car? Let's go now," Camila exclaims.

"I have to see this," Dinah sneers.

"Well my brother has the car right now. He should be coming home soon though."

"Uh, oh. This is sounding like a potential cock block," Dinah mutters. "Is that what you call it when it's two girls though? Taco blocko? Clam Jam? Clitoference?"

Camila turns abruptly to shoot Dinah a warning glare.

"I can keep going all night," Dinah says with a smirk.

Camila is on the verge of reprimanding Dinah, but Lauren speaks up before she has the opportunity to do so.

"You don't mind waiting right?" Lauren asks, uncertainly, and Camila realizes she probably looked insane randomly turning her back to her neighbor.
She hears Dinah giggling behind her, as if her friend has come to the same conclusion.

"That's fine," Camila responds through gritted teeth.

"Ooh do I detect some passive aggressiveness in your tone?" Dinah teases, but Camila doesn't offer that question a response.

Instead, she bites into her otterpop, eyes roaming around the empty room, trying to focus upon anything but Dinah rattling off in the background.

The annoyance begins to fade away as Camila takes in Lauren's room. She decides that this space is probably more disconcerting than her own room. It's as if she can't shake the fact that the room has been stripped of Lauren's personality and packed into boxes, shipped clear across the country, away from here.

Speaking of boxes...

Her eyes fall upon the ones stacked into the corner. One of which has been opened, revealing the books and other miscellaneous contents inside it.

"You can go through them if you want," Lauren mutters, gesturing towards the boxes in the corner.

"What? No I don't..." Camila sputters, feeling her face begin to turn red.

"I can tell you want to," Lauren responds flatly. "I was in the middle of going through them anyway. There's some stuff I have that's yours."

She stares at Lauren uncertainly for a couple of seconds, before Lauren rolls her eyes and dips into the boxes herself. Her neighbor folds down the flaps and slides one in Camila's direction. After another reassuring nod, Camila digs into the box, eyes hastily absorbing everything in sight into memory.

She's not really sure why she's so excited to go through Lauren's things. For someone who has an undeniable distaste for dwelling in the past, it's downright illogical for her to get such a thrill looking at old trinkets and mementos from her neighbor's pre-college days.

But the tiny feeling slinks its way into her head. The feeling that she's looking for something. What it is exactly remains even more puzzling to her irrational thought process.

She finds a pair of Lauren's old cleats still caked in red dirt from the softball field. She finds a few unreturned books from the local library (a copy of Peter Pan being one of them). She finds a slightly worn wooden chess board, along with the pieces in a matching wooden box.

"Talk about hoarder, huh?" Dinah murmurs, as she peers over Camila's shoulder.

But Camila is only half listening, as she lifts up her gaze to find Lauren staring at her with an inexplicable expression. Though, Camila can't decipher the contours of Lauren's face, the green gaze is undeniably heavy. It's loaded with something that makes Camila's heart skip. And thud. And skip. And thud again until all she's aware of is the irritatingly loud, nervous pounding ringing through her suddenly warm ears.

After a paused moment, Lauren finally clears her throat and turns away, as if attempting to preoccupy herself with something other than staring at Camila.

Camila, however, continues to watch her; her neighbor begins rustling through her half open suitcase.
until she pulls out dark fabric. When Lauren turns around and holds it up to her, Camila immediately recognizes it.

"This is your sweater," Lauren states, as if Camila couldn't deduce that herself. "You let me borrow it a while back..." Lauren trails off, holding up a black hoodie, with thick white drawstrings.

Camila remembers the day she lent it to her, nearly a year and a half ago. They were hanging around the docks at the pier with the rest of the girls, watching the sunset.

Lauren hadn't complained about being cold, but Camila was aware of the fact that she kept rubbing her arms for warmth. And in the end, she pulled off her sweater and offered it to Lauren. Despite the chilly weather, despite the fact that Camila was only wearing a tank top underneath, and despite the fact that she was freezing her ass off the entire night.

It didn't matter. Not when Lauren looked so good wearing her clothes.

Camila flushes darkly, turning away from the offered clothing.

"Keep it."

"But it's yours," Lauren begins.

"You didn't pull that sweater out of a box," Camila mutters, returning back to the box before her. The implications are blatant in her statement, and Lauren must realize it too because then she begins to blush.

"I accidentally packed it," Lauren responds almost defensively.

"I'm sure you accidentally wore it too," Camila says, feeling a smile form on her lips.

"Oh god no. I own my own sweaters thank you," Lauren sneers. "Besides, you're one to talk."

"What do you mean?" Camila asks, dropping the overdue library book she was leafing through.

"You still wear my clothes too."

"No I don't."

"Camila, I've literally seen you wearing my flannel a couple of days ago."

Camila's face burns. "That's my flannel."

Lauren shakes her head, lips pursed into a smug little grin. Camila looks to Dinah for confirmation – anything really. Yet all she is met with is a matching smirk and it doesn't take long to realize that the days she wore the red flannel was clearly a set up for this.

"Oh god," Camila groans, making Lauren burst out into a round of laughter. It's so sudden and so startling Camila becomes momentarily distracted by the noise. Her neighbor's laughter rings throughout the room, rolling out of her parted lips in a deep, rich tone and ending on a feather light note.

It's like Camila's forgotten the sound of her laughter. And perhaps she has and now she's simply soaking in the smoothness of it. The warmth of it. The pleasant, languid blanket the almost musical laughter creates around her.

And perhaps, in the moment Camila unintentionally reacquaints herself with Lauren's expression
filled with mirth. And the way her green eyes crinkle into small slits as her lips stretch wide with each gesture of glee that falls out of her mouth. And the way the light flush spreads across Lauren's pale cheeks

And perhaps, this time, Camila welcomes the slow, tender affection that swells in her heart.

"I'm sorry," Lauren giggles softly, beginning to sober up. "Your face was just – it just looked hilarious."

"Ha....ha....ha," Dinah deadpans. "Mila, please don't tell me you guys are gonna start doing that thing where you say something dumb and Lauren thinks it's the funniest thing ever since sliced bread."

Camila wants to tell Dinah that sliced bread isn't even the least bit funny, but even if she were in a position to say something, the words die before they make it past her throat. The very same affection building in Camila's core seems to be mirrored in the way Lauren is looking at her presently.

"You know, even though we stopped talking," Lauren begins softly, as she lowers the sweater. "Would it be completely messed up to say that I missed this?"

Camila feels her chest ache pleasantly, in the best way. In that warm way she feels every time she's in the presence of her neighbor. As if she's just stepped inside her home after a particularly long day.

"You were my best friend, Camila," Lauren murmurs quietly.

Camila isn't entirely how they wound up talking about this. She isn't even sure when the atmosphere got so damn intimate, or when she got so close to Lauren. But she immediately leans away, back to the box sitting before her.

She begins shuffling absently through it, trying to ignore Lauren's green gaze and the rapid pounding of her heartbeat.

*Calm down, Christ.*

She spots something that grabs her attention and mellows her pulse.

"You bought a yearbook," Camila blurts out, as she grabs the object. A flicker of irritation hits her as she fumbles with the book. The irritation deepens when she realizes it's because her hands are shaking.

"Oh yeah, my parents made me. I wasn't really into it by the end of senior year."

The black surface is a little scuffed on the back, but the etched golden words still shine. She flips open the book, counting the pages in her head. Anything to distract from the stupid feelings that were threatening to overwhelm her a few seconds ago.

"Oh stop!" Dinah blurts out, before Camila can turn the page again. "There I am." She points down, over Camila's shoulder.

Camila glances down and sure enough, a wallet sized photo of Dinah is imprinted, along with the rest of their classmates. Her hand brushes against the smooth glossy page, fingers pausing over Dinah's face. Dinah is smiling widely, standing out from the portraits beside her of people looking bored, or caught off guard.

*Dinah Jane Hansen* is displayed in fine print beneath the photo.
Camila remembers every year Dinah trying to pick a fight with the yearbook staff for not letting her put her full name.

"I hate this picture," Dinah mutters sourly beside her. "I look like I'm holding in poop."

Of course Dinah thinks every picture taken is horrible if it wasn't taken with her own hands.

"You used to wear bows then," Lauren comments, startling Camila out of her reverie because her voice sounds a lot closer than Camila was initially aware of. Somewhere between Camila staring at Dinah's picture and hearing Dinah's self-deprecating comments, Lauren had moved closer.

A few inches separate their arms, as Lauren leans in to peer down at the book as well. Camila watches as Lauren's pale fingers run along the page, until her index points at a different picture a few last names before Hansen. In the C range.

And then Camila finds herself staring down at – well – *herself.* Her sixteen year old self with a wide, overbite smile, round face, and a side hair part, topped with a white bow.

A mixture of feelings surface, a mixture that doesn't seem all together good. In fact if she can pinpoint one feeling it's probably an oncoming wave of unsettling nausea. She exhales shakily, hoping Lauren doesn't hear her within their close proximity. Her hands begin to clam up against the smooth surface of the yearbook, palms sweaty as she fumbles to turn the page.

She ends up hastily flipping through the rest of the book, like one would do to those homemade animation booklets, ignoring Dinah's protests.

It isn't until she reaches the end pages that she lets out a tiny sigh of relief. Along the blank spaces various scribbled words in different writing and ink fills the page. It comes as an opportunity of diversion for her attention and focus. It comes as a convenience to suppress her building unpleasant mood.

Camila's eyes glance over all of the messages, beginning to regain her composure. "Class of 2014 was an original bunch," she snorts as she reads "*don't ever change*" for the umpteenth time.

Lauren scoffs. "I didn't even know half of those people."

The statement bothers Camila more than she's willing to admit, and it's only a small part that's willing considering the other part wants to pretend nothing is wrong. The larger part wants to dismiss the sense of guilt laced beneath the irritation. And the irritation develops once she's noticed a lot of girls signing their names with their phone numbers and little hearts throughout the book.

"They seemed to want to get to know you," Camila mutters sullenly, snapping the yearbook shut.

"And some of them did," Lauren acknowledges.

"What?"

"I'm kidding," Lauren giggles.

Camila tries not to let it get to her. But she has the distinct feeling Lauren wasn't kidding. At all. Which annoys her even more.

"It doesn't matter anyway. There was really only person I wanted to sign my yearbook."

"Ashley?" Camila asks petulantly, as she looks up at Lauren. But there isn't any trace of humor on
"No," Lauren says slowly, holding her gaze in a heavy stare. "You."

It's there again, appearing swiftly, like an electric current. The soft, warm atmosphere sinks over them. It falls over Camila dissolving the frustration.

"Well, it's a good thing I'm here right? Do you have pen?" Camila clears her throat abruptly. Lauren hands her one, as if expecting Camila to ask for it. Or maybe Lauren just carries pens around with her all the time.

(Camila seriously doubts that).

"Did you really just write your number?" Lauren questions flatly, after Camila finishes writing and hands Lauren back the pen. "I already have your number."

Camila tries not to show how pleased she is that Lauren's kept it for this long. Not that it should be anything to be so pleased about with apps managing to back up everything, making humanity ever so dependent on technology.

"I could have changed it," she responds airily.

"But you didn't," Lauren counters, lips tugging into a playful smile.

"And you still kept it," Camila adds, feeling a smile of her own grow.

"Of course I kept it. Why wouldn't I have kept it?"

"I still have yours too."

Lauren's face softens into something more serious. Something that suddenly has Camila's heart pounding and stomach flopping. Her hands curl into loose fists in her lap, yet despite this she knows very well they're trembling.

The air around them has turned hazy. A light filter has fallen over them, wrapping around the two in an intimate space.

Camila watches as green eyes glance down towards her mouth. Immediately she licks her dry lips and Lauren's eyes follow the movement. Trained on the tongue sweeping across her bottom lip.


Camila swallows thickly. Her pulse races to a beat that she's not used to but has warmly familiarized herself with recently. An involuntary shiver courses through her body, despite how feverish she begins to feel. Despite the heat emanating from Lauren's close body. It's a teasingly small distance that relentlessly urges Camila to close.

Her eyes fall to Lauren's own lips. A scattered thought breezes into her head. One that has her blushing and biting her own lip in anticipation.

Because it's an irrational thought that shouldn't reduce her into this melting mess.

Because she swore that she was going to bury this thought accompanied with the feelings away a while ago, back at the end of junior year.

And because, despite vows of never considering it ever again, this isn't the first time she's ever
thought of kissing Lauren Jauregui.

She knows this isn't going to be her last...

...if the fact that they've both started leaning in towards each other isn't an obvious indication...
The first thing she's aware of is how close Lauren's face is.

Close enough that Camila feels the warm breath falling softly, tantalizing and teasing against her dry lips.

Close enough to trace the shape of Lauren’s deep set eyes and study the malachite stone texture, with her own eyes.

Close enough that the distance becomes nearly nonexistent to the point that Camila's sure she can count how many eyelashes curtain green eyes if she tried hard enough.

God, she doesn't think she can try if she really wanted to because of the second thing she's suddenly aware of. And that's the soft hand that brushes delicately against hers. She feels Lauren's grip come around the beginnings of her forearm, before caressing an effortless pattern towards Camila's hand. Lauren's fingers pause at the back of her palm, and then settle loosely until her thumb begins tracing slow circles on Camila's inner wrist.

It creates a nervous, pleasant tingle in the pit of Camila's stomach. It creates a spread of light pinks and reds across her cheeks. It makes her hear heart leap and float down again, prompting her to become hyperaware of the third thing – Lauren's other hand.

Camila feels as Lauren's fingers pad gently up her arm, skimming it, and then a hot palm plants itself near her shoulder, cupping it, giving it a tentative squeeze.

She wasn't ready for this kind of skin to skin contact. She still isn't ready. And she most certainly was far from it the moment Lauren's left hand slides past her shoulders, running along the curve of her neck and settling loosely in her hair. She suppresses a groan as Lauren's fingers curl around a few locks.

Camila blames it on the aforementioned things. She blames it on the intoxicating smell of Lauren's breath. She blames it on the now intricate patterns being rubbed into her wrist. She blames it on the pleasant tug Lauren's fingers make in her hair for not noticing the bedroom door opening.

"Am I interrupting something?"

Lauren pulls away abruptly, in a way one does when they accidentally touch a hot pan.

They hadn't even touched lips. Camila had barely felt Lauren's nose, a feather light brush against hers before the overwhelming sensations of her presence was ripped away.

Camila blinks, slightly dazed, before meeting eyes with Lauren's younger brother.

"Chris?" Lauren's voice squeaks, rising an octave higher than her normal tone. From all the years Camila's known her, she recognizes this voice. She'd heard it the numerous times Lauren's siblings had gotten angry with her as a child after they'd notice their Oreo cookie crumbs all over her mouth. She'd heard it as Lauren tried to convince her parents that the mark on her neck wasn't a hickey but really a bruise from softball practice. She'd heard it when their old music teacher questioned Lauren about using the school's wifi to read One Direction smut.
(Really that one was Camila's fault).

It's the voice Lauren does when she's been caught doing something she clearly shouldn't be doing.

"What – uh – what are you doing home?" Lauren clears her throat and runs a hand through her hair.

Chris's eyes narrow. "You're the one who gave me a time limit with the car."

"I knew this was going to happen," Dinah mumbles. "I called it." She looks down at her nails, smug.

"There's been a scissorception."

This breaks Camila out of her daze as she wrinkles her nose and turns to glare at Dinah.

"You're gross," Camila murmurs under her breath.

"Like you weren't thinking of that," Dinah scoffs.

"So did I interrupt something? Sexy times perhaps?" Chris questions. There's a delighted grin across his face as he takes in both girls' flustered expressions.

"Shut up, Chris!" Lauren scoffs.

"What? You mean to tell me I didn't just walk in on you guys making out?"

"He does have a point," Dinah mutters.

"Just give me the car keys," Lauren snaps, holding out her hand. Chris glances down at it, then towards Camila, before the smile on his face grows twice its size.

"Why don't we all hang out?"

"Ew no," Lauren gags.

"When I say we I really just mean me and Camila," Chris responds.

"Camila and I," Lauren corrects heatedly. "And no, we're busy."

"Yeah, they were just about to get busy," Dinah snickers.

"What? Can't share? I haven't seen her in a while, well if you don't count that secret little rendezvous you guys had at like four in the morning," Chris says on the verge of laughter.

"Just get out," Lauren groans.

"No, no I think I want to talk to Camila for a bit," he returns, as he closes the door behind him. He plops into the desk chair, and spins around until he faces her.

He leans back against the chair, reminding her of a similar position Dr. Abernathy adopts. The smile turns into a smirk as he brings his hands together, crossing them over his stomach.

"So what are your intentions with my sister?" Chris asks bluntly.

Perhaps it's some kind of inherently dominate trait in the Jauregui genes. The getting-straight-to-the-point dominate trait, Camila thinks. She's not sure she's ever met a family so straight-forward.

Camila shifts uncomfortably on the bed under Chris's inquisitive gaze. Not that Chris Jauregui has ever intimidated her. But considering the circumstances...
(That Camila’s intentions really were rather crude, and it doesn’t help that she hasn’t seen Chris Jauregui in nearly a year and this kid has grown almost three feet within that time span, and that height advantage has become suddenly unnerving).

She nervously glances at Lauren, hoping to give off a silent plea. Chris purses his lips and raises a bushy brow. Really, one of the only prominent physical features that he shared with his sister. "Well?"

"Hah, stay mute, Walz," Dinah cackles.

"Uh, we're just friends," Camila supplies rather weakly.

This time Lauren turns away from her brother to stare at her in surprise. It takes her an embarrassingly long moment to realize that this is the first time she’s acknowledged her friendship with Lauren.

"I mean, if I wanted obvious answers I wouldn't be here asking you would I?" Chris drawls.

"Fuck off dweeb," Lauren blurts out before Camila can even process the sass.

"Your profanity loses its oomph when you use such a childish insult. You're losing your touch," Chris teases.

"Get out of my room," Lauren reiterates without missing a beat.

Chris ignores her, returning his attention to Camila.

"Anyway, since Dad is busy, I'm taking it upon myself to give you the talk."

He leans back against the chair again, interlocking his fingers across his stomach. "Which is fortunate. I think I'm a little less threatening than the Mikeinator."

"You're a lot more annoying," Lauren mumbles.

"I'm still waiting for your answer Camila."

"You don't have to answer that," Lauren reassures.

"Uh, yeah she does," Chris snaps. "If she's gonna date my sister than she needs to go through the Jauregui dating protocol."

"That dumb patriarchal bullshit has been put to rest a long time ago," Lauren returns heatedly. "I told Dad I wasn't having any of that unless he did that to every girl you try to sneak up to your room."

Chris crosses his arms. "And who says he hasn't? Thanks to you every girl I try to bring home is practically forced into the Spanish Inquisition. It's only fair that we extend the same courtesy to you and your girlfriend."

"I'm not – we're not – Lauren and I are not dating," Camila blurts out, immediately breaking the siblings’ argument.

Lauren flushes and runs a nervous hand through her hair. Chris, however, leans forward in his seat and narrows his eyes as he stares at Camila.

"Is that supposed to be reassuring?" He questions. "Am I supposed to feel better that you're not dating my sister? Because this now sounds an awful lot like you're just using my sister for a hook up."
Camila blanches.

"Oh wow, I suddenly got to go," Dinah coughs.

"What the fuck Chris?" Lauren demands.

How he comes to that conclusion, she has absolutely no idea. But if he only knew...

Camila swallows the nervous lump forming in her throat and turns to Lauren helplessly.

"Look, I like you Camila. You're a nice girl and all, but my sister has been hurt pretty badly before-

"-Chris," Lauren warns.

"And I'd really like it if it didn't happen again."

"You need to leave now," Lauren practically growls. She doesn't wait for Chris's snarky response as she moves to his chair and all but yanks him up.

"Ow, ow relax," he whines, as she pulls ok his ear. He bats her hands away, glowering. "I should've waited until Taylor got home. We could've done the good cop bad cop routine."

Lauren doesn't offer this a response, instead, dragging her brother out of her room. He makes mild protests as she finally snaps the door shut on him, hastily turning the lock.

"Dad has an open door policy!" Camila hears his heated, muffled voice through the door.

"Sorry about that." Lauren winces coming back to sit beside her. There's a significantly larger gap than the one they were threatening to close a mere few minutes ago. "He's an idiot," she adds, gesturing towards the door.

"He worries about you," Camila offers.

"I know," Lauren mutters and there's something pained about the way she says it. "So, you ready to drive?"

"Hell yeah," Dinah exclaims.

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Music filters through the confines of the car as Lauren drives down the street. Camila watches silently, ears adjusting to the sounds coming from the stereo. She hears Lauren humming along under her breath. It's not a song Camila knows. Not that she would recognize anything new.

"So where are you taking me again?" Camila asks over the music. The car continues to drive past the familiar streets of their neighborhood.

"The mall parking lot," Lauren answers. "My dad took me there when he was teaching me to drive. They don't have those stupid cement blocks in each spot."

"You think I'm going to hit one of those don't you?" Camila surmises.
"She knows you're going to hit one of those Walz," Dinah chuckles from the back seat.

Lauren gives her a noncommittal shrug. "It doesn't hurt to be safe."

Dinah then feels the need to let Camila know that all of this precaution is simply because Lauren is worried about her car. Not that she doubts that, but the constant reminder is – well – annoying.

The parking lot comes into view, and Lauren turns into the driveway.

There's a weird, twisted sense of nostalgia seeing the normally packed lot so empty. Camila remembers all of the years she and the rest of the girls would do their Christmas shopping at this mall. Every year they swore they'd get it all done before December, because they couldn't stand frantic Christmas shoppers. It was inevitable that their promises were full of procrastinating crap because every year the five of them ended up becoming frantic Christmas shoppers.

Dinah, Ally and Normani in particular. Dinah, of course having the designated duty of shopping for her whole family, and Ally shopping for pretty much anyone within a five foot radius of her because she was Ally and she gave everyone Christmas presents. Normani, on the other hand, would end up shopping for herself, and then panic upon realizing her mistake at the last minute. And repeat the process in the next store.

As for Lauren and Camila, they would end up at the nearest Starbucks, looking for a poor (or perhaps an absurdly expensive) excuse for a sugar rush to complete their shopping. She remembers hot chocolate foam mustaches and giggles, the smell of cinnamon, and Lauren in a beanie with Camila's scarf wrapped loosely around her neck.

Camila's phone rings, breaking her out of her stroll down memory lane. Thank god.

She glances down at the phone, feeling a small twinge of annoyance at the name flashing before the screen. Lauren doesn't need to say anything. Camila just knows what she wants to ask.

"It's my mom," Camila answers, as she mutes the ringtone and puts the phone back into her pocket.

"Aren't you going to pick up?" Lauren asks. She puts the car in park, and turns the ignition. The music immediately cuts off.

"No," Camila responds evenly.

Maybe it's the way that her voice has shifted into a sharp tone that gives Lauren the hint. Or maybe it's that same exact tone that makes Lauren press.

"Your parents – how are they doing?"

An image of her mother crying and her father comforting her comes to mind.

"They're fine," Camila says through gritted teeth.

"Not gonna lie this lying thing is getting kind of old, Walz," Dinah murmurs gently.

"What about your parents and you?" Lauren asks. It feels like the same question just worded differently.

"What about me and my parents?"

"Well do you they know where you're at right now?"
"Since when have you been so concerned about my parents knowing where I'm at?" Camila snaps.

"It's a valid question. It is kind of late and you know, given the circumstances..." Lauren trails off, looking more and more uncomfortable. Maybe it's because Camila is already silently fuming at this point. The whole mantra of trying to not spoil the day (or in this case night) has been completely thrown out the window.

"If you're trying to say something then just say it."

"No, no, no," Dinah complains. "You guys were doing so great a few seconds ago."

Lauren hesitates. Camila can see it in the way she nervously moves her hands around the steering wheel. Finally, Lauren sighs, averting her gaze.

"Camila, I saw the pills," Lauren begins. "If you want, we can talk about-"

"-I don't want to talk about it," she interrupts coldly.

She doesn't mean to be so harsh. She had promised herself that she would behave around her neighbor. It's just Lauren makes it so difficult sometimes. She should have known. Lauren was never the type of person to fill in the emptiness with mindless chatter.

"Sorry," Lauren mumbles.

It's not the first time Lauren's apologized. In fact, it feels like since their newfound friendship, she's been hearing her neighbor apologize more than necessary.

It's probably why Camila suddenly feels guilty at the hurt look Lauren tries to hide.

"I told myself I wasn't going to mess this up today and I'm doing such a shit job," Camila sighs, bringing a hand to rub her forehead.

"You think?" Dinah deadpans.

"You're not ruining anything, Camila."

"No, she totally is," Dinah disagrees.

"I am ruining things. Can we just--"

"-Stop?" Lauren suggests.

"I was going to say can we just start over," Camila murmurs. "Like, let's just forget about this."

Lauren stares at her for a prolonged moment. It should make her uncomfortable or at least apprehensive. It should make her feel like she's being studied beneath a microscope again, but there's nothing. Nothing except a drained sort of hope.

"Let's trade seats."

So they switch spots, and Camila fills in the driver's seat. An excitement that almost feels foreign tremors through her body. Her hands come to grip the steering wheel, palms grasping the slightly
warm encasing. It's still warm from Lauren's touch.

Camila clears her throat, trying not to dwell on that thought too much.

"Oh god, this is really happening," Dinah exclaims. "Oh my god I don't think I'm ready for this."

"Before you turn on the car you should make sure all of your mirrors are fixed," Lauren instructs.

"Are they broken or something?" Camila asks, as she stops mid-reach towards the keys hanging in
the ignition.

"No, I mean adjust them. And your seat too," Lauren responds sardonically.

"I miss snapchat," Dinah mumbles glumly from the backseat. "Everyone would have gotten a kick
out of you trying to drive."

Camila gives Dinah a withering glare through the rear view mirror.

"Please be careful," Lauren adds, almost miserably.

"Look if you don't want me driving your car I can just ask someone else," Camila snaps.

Which is a total lie. Dinah catches on to that immediately.

"Who's going to teach you? Your mom? She won't even let you leave the house without a thorough
pat-down," Dinah blurts out.

She wants to turn around and tell Dinah that that doesn't even make any sense, but Lauren's voice
draws her away.

"No, I _want_ to teach you," Lauren implores.

The car purrs to life, vibrating gently beneath her seat. Music pumps through the speakers again.

She glances over Lauren nervously who stares back at her with an odd expression. Camila wants to
think it's a composed one, but from the way her hands are clenched in her lap, Camila knows Lauren
is probably internally screaming.

"Lo looks like she's regretting this decision." Dinah laughs from the backseat. Not exactly the best
words of comfort but they'll have to do.

A song Camila doesn't recognize again comes on. But she's secretly thankful that their voice has
gone mellow as she grips the gear in the middle of the console, sweaty palms grasping the handle.
She puts the car in drive and lets out a sharp intake as the car begins to roll.

"Did you check that you were clear?" Lauren blurts out.

"Lauren," Camila says, adding pressure to the gas. The car moves forward suddenly, making all of
them jerk forward along with the car. Lauren huffs. "We're in the middle of an empty parking lot."

"There could be a cat roaming around," Lauren justifies.

"Or guys in a creeper van could totally just start shooting up at us for stealing their plutonium."

Camila shoots Dinah a confused look through the rearview mirror. Immediately Dinah's thoughtful
expression turns sheepish.
"Hey I pay attention to some of your nerdy stuff. Back to the Future is cool. Shut up."

Her hands grip the rubber cover of the steering wheel. The slight squeak sound of the cover beneath her fingers is heard, revealing the nerves that build up inside her.

"Just relax," Lauren murmurs gently.

And she does, for the most part. Lauren guides her through the parking lot, giving her clear instructions not to hit the nearest lamp posts that she encounters.

"Seriously this is a huge empty parking lot and you keep driving straight towards the damn lampposts," Dinah remarks.

Camila ignores her. After a few minutes of tentatively pressing on the gas, Camila begins to get the hang of it, and not letting the direction of the car fall to the nearest pole.

"It's weird," Camila murmurs as guides the car into another circle around the empty parking lot. "Having this much power in your hands. It's like ...having my life and yours in my fingertips. Whatever I do sets everything into motion as to whether I want us to live or like, fatally crash into a tree or something."

"Not that I don't appreciate morbid cynicism but I'm not entirely comfortable with this while you're behind the wheel." Lauren laughs nervously.

"I'm not going to crash it." Camila rolls her eyes.

"Why don't we just take a break?" Lauren suggests.

"That's code for she doesn't want you driving her car anymore," Dinah says from the back seat, amused.

Camila sighs, but agrees as she pulls up in the nearest parking spot.

She puts the car in park, and turns off the headlights. The music continues to play, this time shuffling to an old Maroon 5 song. Camila fights the urge to roll her eyes. Not because she dislikes the song, but because she has a distinct mortifying memory of singing "She Will Be Loved" to Lauren as an attempt to console her after Lauren broke up with her first boyfriend.

"Aww I love this song," Dinah pipes up from the back. "Hey, Mila remember when you sang this to Lauren after she dumped Small Paul."

How appropriate, Camila thinks sourly, shooting Dinah a glare through the mirror. Her cheeks flush at the memory.

It wasn't really one of her finer moments. She had stumbled upon some of the song's chords, and she was pretty sure her voice went sharp a couple of times. But at the time, her nerves didn't really matter not when her only concern was to get Lauren to stop being so sad.

She remembers that day at school, the way Lauren's douchebag of a boyfriend yelled at her in the middle of the hallway, causing an unnecessary scene. She remembers Lauren locking herself up in her room, not answering the door until Camila had reassured her that she was alone.

It was a routine she had slowly become accustomed to after every other stupid boy Lauren went out with came into their lives. And since then she had promised she'd always be there for Lauren. Despite the same patterns Lauren fell into, and despite the way it made Camila feel. And it
worked...right up until the point they had stopped speaking to one another.

Camila almost goes to shut the stereo off, but then a thought crosses her mind.

"Chris said you got hurt before," Camila begins, glancing at Lauren. She notices the way her neighbor's hands tighten into fists. "What did he mean by that?"

"It doesn't really matter," Lauren answers shortly. "You don't want to hear about it, Camila."

"But-"

"-I thought you didn't want to talk about it," she cuts in sharply.

Camila wants to press. She wants to find out why Lauren's mood has taken a dive for the worst—something that happens to Camila. She wants to know why she's being shut out. It's almost painfully cliché that the moment Camila feels some semblance of finally opening up, Lauren becomes guarded. They can never seem to be on the same page.

Maybe it's just karma and finally she is on the receiving end of a hasty dismissal.

But Camila can't shake the feeling that it has something to do with her.

"You can't just do that, Camila," Lauren suddenly says. "You can't just expect me to open up to you when you won't do it either. It doesn't work that way."

It's a tense silence that encroaches upon their space.

Then Camila sighs softly, defeated. "You're right."

"Wait she's what?" Dinah demands.

Lauren looks at her almost expectantly.

And Camila knows that whatever she's going to say next will probably change the nature of their tentative friendship.

She grips the steering wheel with slippery palms and straightens in her seat. She tries to ignore the way her breathing begins to come out in shallow puffs, uneven and heavy. Dragging out desperately, like her first initial attempt to turn the keys in the ignition.

"My parents think I'm depressed," Camila admits. She tries to sound nonchalant, tries to encourage conversation. The slight tremor in her voice isn't very encouraging, even to herself. "At least my mom thinks I am."

The words come falling from her mouth before she can so much as stop them, or realize how much she's revealed.

Camila looks away before she does anything more stupid.

"Are you?" Lauren asks. Camila's head snaps back up in her direction.

"Am I what?"

"Depressed."

Camila only half listens to it. But the word pierces through her eardrums, reverberating against her
skull.

She shakes her head. "I'm not."

"Sorry," Lauren murmurs.

"Cool," Camila responds dryly, as she reaches down to fiddle with the gear.

"I didn't mean that in a bad way," Lauren quickly corrects. As if there's any good way to say it. "I guess what I meant to say is – I'm here."

The first thing Camila wants to do is strike with a harsh, defensive comment and then retreat into the shell she had haphazardly constructed over the past months.

But then Lauren's hand presses against hers. A small rush of heat melts into the back of her hand, as Lauren's fingers close around it.

"I mean it," Lauren mumbles quietly. Camila feels Lauren's hand squeeze hers. "I'm not going anywhere."

The atmosphere is gentle despite the previous time they had been in Lauren's car. There isn't an icy silence but rather the opposite. Something subtle and heated. Something that makes Camila's face, along with the rest of her body warm. As if taking the first sip of hot chocolate on a chilling winter day.

Lauren eyes are bright in the dim lighting of the parking lots street lamps. Half of her face is illuminated and Camila studies that half with a held breath. She takes in the curve of Lauren's cheek and the way her dark hair makes a wavy curtain around it. Camila comes up to Lauren's eyes last, quietly savoring the open green stare. Emerald rock melted into liquid form. She's getting that feeling again - the one she always seems to get whenever she stares too long into her neighbors eyes. As if Lauren will guide her back to shore. As if Lauren knows exactly what she's thinking.

And what she's thinking... God, there probably isn't anything more she wants to do than just stare into Lauren's eyes forever.

Camila's gaze falters when that absurd thought comes into her head. But the next focal point her eyes land on isn't a step better in her clouded mind because now she's looking at Lauren's mouth. And at the precise moment her gaze comes into contact with it, she catches Lauren's tongue sweep across her lips.

And perhaps Lauren truly does know what she's thinking because when Camila glances back up to her eyes, she catches Lauren staring at the lip caught between Camila's teeth. A nervous tick.

A week ago, she would've been repulsed with the idea, with even the deep seated desire of kissing Lauren Jauregui. Because she was supposed to dislike Lauren Jauregui. She was supposed to despise her and avoid her neighbor at all costs.

But how could anyone feel that with Lauren Jauregui?

Especially when she's staring at you with half lidded eyes and moving in closer. Camila feels herself leaning in.

The song changes into something slow and smoky. Camila absently thinks it's probably the Arctic Monkeys, but it's something she doesn't recognize.
Alex Turner's soft crooning filters through the car. Something about vacuum cleaners and coffee pots.

Her heart pounds in her chest and with the increasing close proximity she wonders if Lauren can hear it. Beating like a drum, calling her closer. Camila feels herself lick her own lips as she closes her eyes. Her hand leans against the gear as she moves over the console.

"Camz," Lauren murmurs. She's so close Camila more so feels the nickname fall from Lauren's mouth against her lips than hear it. Her legs shift across the padded driver's seat, right foot moving away from the pedals.

And once again, she barely feels the brush of Lauren's nose against hers before the sensation is pulled away all too suddenly. This time, however, it's the sound of Lauren's phone that derails another kiss.

"Just ignore it," Camila whispers, almost desperately.

The suggestion seems to do the opposite however. Recognition flickers in Lauren's dark eyes, and Camila suddenly gets the distinct impression that her neighbor didn't even realize what she was doing.

"Unless of course it's Ashley texting," Camila says, as she leans back against the seat.

It's ruined. Whatever thick tension that was between their little intimates pace has vanished the moment Lauren's phone went off.

Yet despite this something else lingers in the air. Something still intimate but lighter, causing a small tilt of Lauren's lips.

"Does it matter if it's Ashley?" Lauren questions.

Camila feels her own lips curve into a matching smile. There's something unspoken lingering beneath the conversation. Something tempestuous and strangely – *erotic*. As if the lack of physical intimacy that's been interrupted has manifested into a frustrated ball of energy simmering in her core.

Camila has flirted in the past before, though not realizing it during the act of said flirting. It was always so difficult to determine whether someone was initiating it or not, particularly among boys. The only one she had any kind of experience with would have been Austin, though he was crass and blatant; he might as well have been asking her to send him nudes.

(In fact, she thinks she can recall an obnoxious texting conversation leading up to that during their time dating).

The point is that she falls terribly below the self-awareness scale when it comes to flirting. Yet, at this moment, there really is no way to describe the current playful lilt of their voices other than – well – *flirting*. Which is strange because, out of all of the conversations and forced smiles she's had with Lauren since she's reconciled with her neighbor, this one, specifically, feels the most natural. It feels the most authentic to how they used to be, how their words danced back and forth with each other in a precise, effortless waltz.

Or perhaps a tango or rumba would seem more appropriate, considering the tell-tale signs of a familiar throbbing below her waist

"Well, see it kind of does, because if you plan to help me with my list, and you're already with someone, that makes you cheater. And me, like the evil temptress seducing you away from your
partner." The words flow out of her mouth in one smooth motion, surprising not only herself, but Lauren as well.

(And Dinah, if those choked, strangled noises in the background are anything obvious to go off of).

The small smile dancing across Lauren's lips stretches.

"You're going to seduce me, Camila?" She sounds amused. Though if Camila weren't so distracted with it, she would have noticed the flush gracing Lauren's cheeks.

"Do you think I am?"

"I don't know."

In the barely lit illumination from the dingy parking lot lamppost, Camila sees Lauren's eyes darken. At least she thinks she does. Or it simply could be the fact that the silent half darkness within the car swallows them both up. The tension that manifests in the space is different than the almost kiss. There's something playful about it, layered with inherent sexual undertones that the previous one lacked.

And maybe Camila is willing to let herself play along, allowing the suggestive words slide off her tongue, sweet and warm, like hot fudge dripping over melting ice cream, because the tension has shifted. The gap between them has given her the necessary confidence to acknowledge it – the humming of her pulse, racing throughout the rest of her body. There's something primal, heady, blurring her focus and concentration, prompting her for something witty to come out.

Camila's hands move against her own jean clad thighs nervously, as if in a poor attempt to do something with her hands before she does something stupid like try to touch Lauren's thighs.

(Smooth, pale, thick and teasing her for pretty much the whole evening).

Her eyes move to meet Lauren's eyes again. Her heart pounds again, drumming against her chest and echoing throughout her ribcage.

"Maybe I'm just giving you the opportunity to let you have your way with me," Camila finally says and is momentarily struck by how low her voice sounds to her own ears. It's an interesting combination against the smooth track playing on the stereo.

More coffee pots and Pacific Oceans...

"Damn is it hot in here or..." Dinah says, fanning herself.

She hears, more than sees Lauren gulp. Her eyes dart down to see Lauren's long, pale neck bob nervously, pulse point moving with her hard swallow. Camila feels herself lick her lips.

"Is that what you want?"

"I think I'm more concerned with what you want."

"What if I want to know what you want?" Lauren presses, almost stubbornly. Camila would have half a mind to make a sarcastic remark if she weren't suddenly so turned on. Or the fact that Lauren is not even really looking at her, but rather glowering quite blatantly at her mouth.

"You know what I want, Lauren."

Lauren swallows audibly.
"Holy shit, where the hell did that come from? I don't remember teaching you this Walz," Dinah screeches.

Lauren exhales shakily, turning away from Camila's lingering gaze, breaking the bubble with her as well.

Camila watches as her neighbor fiddles with her phone and tries not to show how pleased she is to notice Lauren's trembling fingers.

"Well it's not Ashley," Lauren finally answers, after clearing her throat. The phone lighting up her side profile. The whites and blues reflect off of Lauren's face, brightening her face and eyes.

Camila releases a long breath she wasn't aware she was holding in. With a deep sigh, comes the exhale of the momentous pent up energy that built up within her.

"Oh."

"It's Normani," Lauren mutters, still not meeting her eye. "She wants to know if we're still on for the beach Saturday. Are you coming?"

She's not really thinking rationally. Her mind is still fuzzy, her heart is still regaining its normal beat, and she's still slightly drunk on the power rush she felt a few seconds ago.

So of course going to the beach sounds like the best idea ever.

And of course thoughts of the beach have travelled to the back of her priority list in her head. Because one thing is currently occupying her mind, something that was proven just a mere few seconds ago.

Despite all of the previous adamant refusals, there's no doubt in Camila's mind.

Lauren wants her.
The front porch light is still on at the Jauregui’s house as Lauren pulls up in the driveway. It's not entirely a good sign, considering the annoyed sigh that falls from her neighbor's lips.

"Crap," Lauren mutters, turning the keys in the ignition and promptly shutting the car off.

Camila's attention flickers from the lone light bulb shining dimly beneath its rustic shade, and the brows knitting irritably above Lauren's green glare.

"Something wrong?" Camila presses. It's a stupid question that has an overt answer. Clearly something is wrong, and the fact that she chose to state the obvious makes her cringe. "What's wrong?" She quickly corrects.

"Nothing," Lauren mumbles offhandedly. She turns to Camila, and in the split second the hard expression softens.

Camila feels her stomach flip at the expression. The face that was once distressed is now contemplative, thoughtful. Yet with the way green eyes cast over Camila's slowly flushing face suggests that whatever is going on through her neighbors mind has instantly made Camila its prime subject.

"My parents are still up," Lauren says, nodding her head towards the door. "And there are probably going to be questions."

"Makes sense." Camila nods in understanding.

"I wouldn't know what to tell them," Lauren continues. The warm flush licks at her cheeks when Lauren's gaze suddenly falls down to her lips.

"Tell them the truth," Camila responds, noting begrudgingly how her voice has lowered. "That you were with me."

Camila isn't sure if she's imagining it – the soft shadow castings across Lauren's chin from smiling. It would be completely out of left field to assume so, considering her best friend is a figment of her imagination...

(And also the fact that she had caught herself staring so intently at Lauren's lips recently, she's pretty sure she can recognize the variations of gestures they project).

"That's going to cause more questions honestly," Lauren admits.

"Then lie," Camila quips.

Lauren's smile becomes apparent after this comment.

"I think that's more complicated than telling the truth," Lauren answers playfully, though Camila notices that it's laced with something fabricated. Something that she's become an expert in herself – half truths.

"Tell them we are dating then," Camila offers.

Lauren looks at a loss for words and Camila notices the way her phrase could have fallen into lie or honesty. Perhaps it was a subconscious way of asking Lauren. But Lauren's silence creates doubt...
and an insecurity that Camila desperately tries to shake off. "They already think we are anyway. Besides, I don't really know what to tell my parents either. If that's any kind of consolation."

Lauren's soft expression stiffens for a moment, as if a thought has passed through her head. A thought, Camila thinks, is not entirely a good one. It's proven in the way Lauren turns away, and sighs through her nose.

"Questions are just going to lead to arguing," Lauren finally says. A feeling of slight discomfort comes to Camila, as she watches Lauren quietly. The playful atmosphere has subsided, leaving the space between them dry and cold. And once again, Camila gets the feeling that she's listening in on something she shouldn't.

Questions form in the back of her mind, yet die when Camila takes in the frown marring Lauren's lips. A response to the statement falls flat on her tongue. Any potential words of comfort get stuck in her throat. The last thing she wants is for Lauren to get offended or lash out on her for saying something. Or worse saying the wrong something.

She wonders if this is how Lauren felt. As if she were tiptoeing in on an undecided subject.

(Though it seems that perhaps Lauren isn't that so aware of what's appropriate and not appropriate to talk about considering their frequent arguments).

So, instead, Camila resorts to unbuckling her seat belt.

"I should probably get home," Camila murmurs. Lauren is already unbuckling her seat before she can say anything more.

"I'll walk you," Lauren says, hastily reciprocating Camila's movements.

It's unnecessary considering Camila is just right next door. And really, she thinks she should feel completely patronized after all of the instances her mother would babysit her, but it comes off as sweet. Painfully so. It's as if the gesture meant Lauren was trying to prolong their time together to the very last moment. It was also apparent in the way Lauren took the longest route to get home, and barely cruised the speed limit.

And even now, with Lauren lingering by the front door expectantly.

There's something slightly hopeful in the gesture that both flatters and annoys Camila, and she isn't sure which to settle on.

She hopes it falls somewhere in between.

"I had nice time tonight," she begins.

Lauren immediately bursts out into laughter and Camila wrinkles her nose, embarrassed. "Did I really just say that?"

"Yeah, you did," Lauren responds after sobering up.

Amusement flickers through green eyes, reflecting brightly from the dim porch light. There's a tiny smile playing at the corner of Lauren's lips. It's inviting, and Camila soon feels the signs of a flush developing on her cheeks. She reverts her focus back on the eyes staring into hers intensely.

"Maybe we could do it again?" Camila probes.
And it's there again. The soft, melted look in the green depths, pooling beneath dark blown out pupils. Camila feels her heart begin to race as thoughts of their almost kisses fill her mind, drowning out the rational part of her that tells her not to think about it. Because it's almost silly to think that they've been interrupted twice already. The latter of which shouldn't have really been an interruption.

She's beginning to come to the conclusion that fate went to great lengths tormenting her mercilessly, with the almost nonexistent gaps in each instance.

But Lauren is here now, once again. With an agonizingly short distance between them that Camila barely realizes wasn't there a few seconds ago.

If Camila really wanted to, she could easily reach out and pull Lauren's face even closer. If she wanted to, Camila could move into her personal space. She could bring their lips together for a desperate moment of contact, taste the uneven breathing echoing in her mouth, brush against a plump bottom lip. She could run her hands through thick, dark hair, twist her fingers around tangled strands. She could push Lauren against the front door, press against her body and –

"Do it again?" Lauren questions. It's breathless and encouraging, and doesn't help at all with the heated little fantasy that flutters behind Camila's fuzzy mind.

"Or we don't have to if you don't want," Camila whispers nervously. Lauren's lips tilt into a distracting smile. Camila's eyes dart down, licking her own dry lips. "Do you, um, do you not want to?"

Camila realizes absently that Lauren never answered her question.

"Camz," Lauren breathes. The nickname rolls off her tongue, making Camila shiver involuntarily. She doesn't even have a half a mind to correct her, much less say anything besides the utterance of a weak mewl.

She licks her lips again. Her body hums in anticipation, flesh prickling in an intense heat.

She feels Lauren's fingertips brush against the side of her cheek. A soft, almost nonexistent caress, and then Lauren is tucking a piece of Camila's hair behind her ear.

Another step closer.

She gets one last image of Lauren's half lidded green eyes before she feels her own beginning to shut. Camila leans forward, feeling the familiar touch of Lauren's nose against hers and then –

The front door flies open. Lauren pulls away, ripping all of the fervidity with her. And this time Camila doesn't suppress the groan of frustration at being interrupted for the third time within the same day.

Her eyes dart towards the source of the interruption, and she finds her father, clad in pajamas standing in the doorway. She wouldn't have been surprised had he waited up all night for her.

His arms are crossed and there's an unusually stern expression on his normally friendly face. (Though the new addition of wrinkles probably adds to the solemnity).

She peers over his shoulder and catches her mother watching the exchange.

This was starting to become ridiculous. At this rate, she wouldn't be surprised if fate was just pulling a cruel joke on her. Her life was a fucking cruel joke.
She's absolutely infuriated with her luck. She's *livid* with the entire situation. Of course she would get interrupted. Of course this would be already be the third time this has happened to her within a painfully short time frame.

*Three times! It's been THREE TIMES!*

She glances at Lauren, nearly burning with unresolved tension. If she had her way, her neighbor would have been pinned to that front door mere seconds ago. She's almost tempted to do it anyway, just to appease the ache below her waist beginning to form.

Or just to get one damn kiss already.

*Three fucking times!*

"Mija, it's getting late." Her father's voice breaks the tiny temper tantrum she was prone to pulling. "Come inside."

He steps aside to let her in, but Camila stays rooted to the spot.

"Lauren," he greets, finally directing his attention to her neighbor who had come around to hide behind her.

"Uh, hi," she responds awkwardly.

"I would appreciate the next time you take my daughter out on a date you run it by me first, and bring her back by her curfew."

Lauren flushes. "I - sorry."

"That's okay." His expression softens. "Next time. It's good to see you though."

Her glare turns from her father's stern look to Lauren's flushed face. The temptation to get the damn prolonged kiss she feels she deserves at this point comes back again. As if her father can read her not so PG thoughts, he clears his throat.

"Well goodnight Lauren." His tone leaving all of the implications in the world, making Camila scowl.

"Goodnight," Lauren stammers, slowly backing away from the porch.

Camila takes back what she felt earlier because watching Lauren stepping out from the dim aura the porch light radiates. It's the moment that the space between them grows that Camila feels the warmth seeping out of her, as if Lauren has taken it away with her.

And maybe Camila understands it a little.

That desire to just simply be around someone. To crave their presence. To savor every last minute of time spent down to the moment of parting ways.

She understands it a little because she knows she's felt it before.

"Wait," Camila calls out, shooting out to grab Lauren's wrist. Her palms prickle against the smooth pale skin, and she resists the urge to draw circles around it with her thumb. "I'll see you again right? I mean soon?"

Lauren's eyes dart nervously over her shoulder, presumably to stare at her father, before nodding.
"Yeah, totally. I'll um – text you," Lauren mutters uncertainly.

"Alright, cool." Camila lets go of Lauren's wrist.

"Goodnight Camila."

It's the last thing Lauren says before completely stepping away from the porch light, the darkness of the warm Miami night shrouding her form.

With a small sigh, Camila turns back to her parents waiting for her at the doorway. The solemn expression falters in her father's face and he almost looks apologetic.

His hand reaches out for her, but she doesn't meet his outstretched fingertips.

There's probably a million and one things she wants to say. Most of which includes profanity and various forms articulating "back off". But despite how frustrated and how deprived she feels of Lauren's disappeared presence, they don't really deserve that.

So instead she settles for a disgruntled: "I'm really tired."

No other words are exchanged, though she distinctly feels their eyes upon her as she heads to her room.

The frustration goes away almost as instantly as it comes when the door shuts behind her. She kicks off her shoes and practically flounces to her bed.

She's been denied three times, but deep down she knows it's okay. Because it's still there waiting like an unspoken promise and by god, the next time she sees Lauren she's going to kiss the hell out of her.

Camila becomes so heavily occupied with thoughts of Lauren and how their next meeting could potentially unfold, that does not immediately realize Dinah isn't there with her.


The next day, Camila wakes up in what feels like a rather pleasant mood. The sunlight peeking through the curtains isn't completely bothersome. The pills don't go down as awfully as usual. And the smell of bacon wafting from the kitchen doesn't make her want to hurl.

It feels almost like the opening of an animated Disney movie. A song will burst from her lips about the brand new day ahead and the meeting of her Prince Charming. Birds will chirp at her window and hold open a bathrobe for her to slip on.

Realistically speaking, she doesn't even own a bathrobe and there aren't any cute tweeting blue jays flitting about in her room. Instead she gets her best friend, sitting at the edge of her bed, looking far too pleased with herself.

"You're up early," Dinah comments happily.

(And in hindsight, this is one of the reasons Camila knows this isn't real. Dinah was never an early riser).

"I have things to do," Camila responds airily.
"You mean go on more dates with Lauren?"

Camila scoffs. "That wasn't a date."

"Huh, it didn't look that way from how I saw it," Dinah murmurs. "Romantic drives, almost kisses..."

"That all doesn't mean anything," Camila snaps. "She's just helping with my list."

Camila rummages through her closet, going through different potential outfits. She reaches for the flannel – Lauren's flannel – but Dinah's laughter makes her hesitate.

"What's so funny?" She questions suspiciously.

"That's not really for beach weather."

"Beach weather? What are you – oh shit."

It comes at a startling crash. Which is absurd considering it had only been a few hours since she'd given her consent to these plans.

"Did I really tell her I was going to go to the beach today?" Camila demands, horrified.

"Did you really just forget?" Dinah deadpans.

"I didn't forget," Camila snaps irritably. "I just – one minute we were almost kissing and the next I was agreeing to plans I would normally avoid. Forgive me for being distracted." Camila scowls, shutting her closet door.

"Jesus, Mila at this rate Lo can just look at you and you totally forget what your name is."

"Shut up."

"Or maybe you're just frustrated and fuzzy in the head from being vagected so many times."

Fate isn't playing a cruel joke on her. No. It's a rush of multiple, unending and unrelenting jokes. A rollercoaster lifting her up and dragging her down in a dizzying ride of fortunes and misfortunes. Because after she goes into a little frenzy of deciding what to tell Lauren and how to get out of these unwanted plans, an unexpected form of a reprieve comes to her: it comes as both a blessing and a curse when she goes to the bathroom and discovers that mother nature has indefinitely made her presence known.

Of course for obvious reasons, the curse comes in the form of cramps and well – you know – a Niagara Falls of blood coming out of her body. But despite the monthly hassle, Camila can't help the sigh of relief that escapes her mouth. Because now she has a valid excuse for not attending the beach festivities without feeling guilty.

"It's a good excuse," Camila tries to rationalize a few moments later.

Dinah shoots her a dubious look.

And then the knock on her window, the one that Camila's beginning to become accustomed to, forces their conversation to end.

Dinah's expression slowly shifts to an impish smirk. It makes Camila roll her eyes, but she doesn't offer anything more as a response.
She rises to her feet automatically and walks towards the window to find Lauren standing behind it. A nervous grin plays at her neighbor's lips as she slides open the window.

"Hi," Lauren greets. Green eyes dart down her body and Camila feels the building flush upon being under her gaze. It takes her another moment to realize that Lauren wasn't checking her out like she initially thought, but rather taking in her outfit.

Camila tugs at the waistband of her pj bottoms self consciously. Lauren stands before her in a pair of sinfully short denim shorts and a crop top, showing off the strings around her neck of what Camila assumes is Lauren's bikini top. It also, much to Camila's mortification, reveals a bit of a pale stomach.

Camila clears her throat and tears her gaze away. She didn't need Lauren to see her ogling. Not that she was. Because Camila doesn't ogle.

"Are you, uh, not ready yet?" Lauren questions uncertainly.

"Actually I was just about to tell you that I'm not going," Camila states.

The beach bag dangling on Lauren's shoulder falls.

"What?"

"Yeah, uh, I'm just not feeling it."

"What's wrong?"

"I just got my period."

"Wow, way to be subtle there Walz," Dinah snorts.

Lauren looks as if she wants to laugh, matching the derisive giggles coming from her best friend behind her. Instead, Lauren bends down to pick up her bag and moves to come inside. 

"Well we can work around that."

"No, we can't. I usually just end up cancelling everything the moment it comes."

This time Lauren does let out a laugh.

"You can't just avoid things because of your period." Lauren shakes her head.

"Watch me."

Lauren ruffles through her bag. Curiosity fills Camila...that is until she sees Lauren pull out a small package, and then the color promptly drains from her face.

It's happening again. Fate has once again pulled its rollercoaster bullshit and upturned this blessing into another damn obstacle.

"You can cross tampons off your list," Lauren says, dangling the offending object in front of her face. Camila glances at the package held out in front of her, only a few inches away, and Lauren's hopeful eyes.

Behind her neighbor, Dinah is biting her knuckles, probably to prevent another round of laughter threatening to come out. Camila almost wants to berate her for joking around about this unfortunate
circumstance, but really it would just result in more uncontrolled laughter.

"I did say I would teach you how to use it," Lauren continues, placing the tampon in Camila's hand.

"Right now?" Camila sputters.

Lauren smirks. "Yeah right now."

"Don't I need, like, proper preparation for this kind of thing?" Camila protests weakly.

"What, like lube?" Dinah teases. "Should I go to the store and get you some K&Y jelly? You'll probably need it later anyway."

"Oh my god."

Camila paces in tight, small circles in the bathroom. The tampon, with its bright ostentatious colored packaging, sits on the bathroom countertop. It's already opened, precariously ripped upon the left side. She had taken a quick peek at it, and then promptly shoved it back inside its packaging because the plastic freaked her out.

It's a lot bigger than she expected, definitely a lot bigger than what those cryptic Kotex commercials always portrayed.

Camila tentatively approaches the tampon again, fingertips gingerly opening the tear in the packaging. The excessive marketing coloring clearly extends to the individual hot pink plastic applicator inside, looking more like candy than a potential disposable torture device.

Camila glances helplessly at Dinah sitting at the edge of the bathtub, looking incredibly amused with this entire situation.

"Help me," Camila demands.

"With what?" Dinah counters. There's an edge to her voice, as if she's holding in a laugh.

"This," Camila exclaims, gesturing towards the tampon. "You've done this before right?"

"Of course I've done this before." Dinah rolls her eyes. "Did you really think I went out surfing with a saggy, diaper pad?"

Camila wrinkles her nose. "Thank you for that descriptive image."

"Hey you asked."

Camila scoffs, as she reaches in the package and pulls the tampon out. She thumbs against the plastic applicator, feeling the outlined shape of it.

"Are these like super absorbent or something?" Camila whines.

"Maybe Lauren just has a heavy flow and a wide set vagina."

"Fuck off," Camila snaps.
"No, these are actually the normal ones," Dinah giggles after inspecting the size over Camila's shoulder.

"You just have to put it in," Lauren's muffled voice calls from the other side of the door.

Camila's fingers tremble as she toys with the thin, pink plastic tube. The cotton string dangles limply out the end. It's quite the pathetic sight, but Camila still feels the surge of intimidation upon seeing it.

"I can't do it," she mutters decisively, tugging at the end of the applicator. After a few painstaking seconds of sizing up the small tampon, she sighs exasperatedly.

"Really? You're freaking out over a tiny little thing? And you think you're ready for a penis up there?" Dinah scoffs.

Camila scowls, feeling the blush flare up on her cheeks. "Yes, because Lauren has a penis," she snaps sardonically.

"Oh who said you were going to have sex with her?" Dinah says. "And what makes you so sure she doesn't have one?"

"Because she doesn't, Dinah," Camila responds heatedly. "Trust me I've seen what's down there."

"Whoa, what?!"

"That came out wrong," Camila sighs.

"Wait, wait so are you telling me you've seen her naked?"

"It's not like that," Camila hastily sputters. "We've just – like – taken baths together when we were kids."

"How come we've never done that?" Dinah demands pouting.

"Because you hated taking baths," Camila mutters flatly.

Their argument is broken up when a gently knock resounds through the bathroom.

"Are you okay?" Lauren's voice is muffled through the wooden surface. "You've been in there for almost a half hour."

"I'm fine," Camila calls out. "Just give me another minute."

She glances down at the tube in her hand, and then up at Dinah.

"Look away, perv," Camila snaps, thumbs already beneath the waistband of her pants.

"It's not like I haven't seen it anyway." Dinah rolls her eyes, but turns away.

She tries to find the best angle for this. Lauren had suggested having the end face up, but that just confused her, along with the other helpful tips.

"Not to rush you or anything, but what do I say if your parents happen to walk in right now?" Lauren asks.

"Tell them you're here with me."
"They'll be totally pleased about that," Lauren mumbles.

"Are you worried about them?" Camila laughs. "Is that why you came in through the window?"

"Your dad looked like he was thinking of ways to murder me last night," Lauren complains.

"You're exaggerating."

"No you didn't see the glare, Camila," Lauren huffs. "What did you end up telling him anyway?"

Camila chews her lip. "I told him that we're dating."

"Camila!"

"It's easier than explaining what we are," Camila responds diplomatically.

It's kind of a low blow and a poor attempt to convince Lauren. Camila doesn't even really mean it. But as soon as the words leave her mouth, a tiny flutter fills her stomach.

"And what are we exactly?"

She's thankful for the door between them. She's thankful for the wooden surface muffling the potential tremble in her voice. She's thankful for the visible barrier preventing her from seeing Lauren's face and vice versa. Camila doesn't have to see her face. She doesn't have to imagine how Lauren looks at this moment with that question clinging in the air.

She doesn't know how to answer it truthfully, and quite frankly a large part of her doesn't even want to.

"See I told you," Dinah says, gesturing towards the door. "Date."

Camila looks away from Dinah's accusing stare. "We're friends. Kind of."

Lauren is silent for what feels like a long time. It makes Camila immediately think she's said the wrong thing. What if they weren't friends?

It almost seems silly to describe their dynamic that way now. Perhaps in the past when they still spoke to one another but now? There was too much tension there. The lines were irrevocably blurred the moment Camila barged into Lauren's room at four in the morning.

"We're friends," Lauren repeats, though it sounds more like a question than a statement.


"Wow, smooth Walz," Dinah murmurs.

"What's that supposed to – how many times do I have to tell you I'm not going to sleep with you?" Lauren mumbles flatly.

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After a few more agonizing minutes, Camila's walking out of the bathroom. She finds Lauren on her bed, flipping through Camila's senior yearbook. Her long dark hair is fanned out on the pillow, the same pillow Camila's own head was on just a few hours ago.
A little flutter ripples through her stomach and climbs up her chest. She's not sure if it's the fact that it's Lauren inadvertently invading her space, or that it's Lauren invading an intimate space. She wonders idly if she'd still be able to smell her on her bed hours from now.

Green eyes lift up from the book, followed by an eyebrow quirk. Camila feels her face flush immediately.

"You have a yearbook?" Lauren questions.

"My parents also thought I should have one," Camila mutters, swallowing thickly. Lauren hums in response.

"So how do you feel?" Lauren asks, a small, slow smile growing on her lips.

"Like a changed woman," Camila responds, as she shifts her legs a bit. "I mean, it feels like something is shoved up there, because, well, something obviously is." She doesn't mean for this to come out suggestively or even remotely sexual, but it does and Lauren makes a disgruntled noise.

"I'm not sleeping with you today so you can get that out of your head already," Lauren says as Camila takes a seat. She's aware of the fact that Lauren scoots a couple of inches away.

"I'm not thinking about it."

Lauren shoots her a dubious look.

"Alright fine. I am thinking about it," Camila admits. "But, honestly, you should think about it too."

"I have actually."

"And?"

Lauren averts her gaze. "Maybe I just don't want to be the one to take your virginity."

"The whole virginity thing is just a dumb social construct. Who cares?"

"Says the girl who's got that under number one."

"You're deflecting," Camila says. "and you haven't given me a valid reason."

Lauren is silent. For a moment Camila is convinced that she's going to get an answer, but then Lauren turns back to the book in her lap.

"You didn't get your friends to sign your yearbook?" Lauren asks, suddenly changing the subject. Camila feels herself deflate at the question.

Camila watches Lauren out of the corner of her eye and sees that she's noticed the blank pages. Her neighbor is running her fingers along the pathetically empty interior of her book.

"People kind of avoided me at school," Camila admits.

"Because of what happened?" Lauren probes, as she softly flips the page.

Camila turns rigid. It was only a matter of time before Lauren brought the subject up. The subject that Camila keeps buried away from everyone. Her eyes meet Lauren's and for the first time in a long time she doesn't see that frustrating sympathy staring back at her. There's just an honest type of

Her eyes move away. "I wasn't exactly the most fun company back then."

Lauren doesn't respond for a while, instead picking up a pen from her desk and returning to her seat on the bed. Camila hears the screeching squeak of the Sharpie's felt tip scratching against the glossy page. The noise resounds around her room for a few seconds, before she feels the weight of her book falls down on her lap. She glances down at the freshly marked page. She holds in a snort.

'CAMILA, YOU'RE COOL! DON'T EVER CHANGE LOVE, LAUREN :)'

"You're such a dork," she murmurs, closing the book.

A light flush graces Lauren's cheeks, painting the pale curve of her face with a pink color. Camila brushes her hand against Lauren's face, feeling the warm heated skin against her fingertips.

Camila doesn't expect what happens next, which is almost laughable considering all of the previous close encounters and the anticipation that followed it. Then again, she never really expects the things Lauren Jauregui does. So, in retrospect, it really shouldn't be much of a surprise when Lauren kisses her.

It's a soft kiss; her lips barely touching Camila's that have begun quivering. She feels her move them against her mouth softly.

Camila doesn't really have much to compare to. The only other person she's ever kissed before was Austin, and even in her inexperience she's always known what kind of kisser he was. A selfish one.

And maybe that had distorted her feelings towards the act, in regards to everyone else.

Even down to the way Lauren's warm palm cups her flushed cheek, thumb stroking flushed skin gently.

Lauren's lips are warm and gentle, enveloping Camila's in a heated embrace. They part and close and part again until Camila feels the sharp brush of teeth again. A moan falls, and she isn't sure who it comes from.

She feels Lauren's teeth close around her bottom lip, sending a pleasant jolt down her chest, reverberating against her rib cage and pooling at the pit of her stomach. It flips and flops and dances some form of the Macarena as Lauren begins to suck. A low moan rolls out of her mouth, making Lauren pull away.

All the heat begins to build up in the blush across Camila's cheeks, as she blinks open her eyes from the flushed daze.

Lauren's eyes are dark, despite the bright sunlight, looking deceptively black. Like coals burning up in languid embers in a fire. Hot. Sparks. Lauren's glower drags across her burning face, half lidded eyes focusing intently upon her lips.

She licks them subconsciously, and watches as Lauren's eyes follow her tongue.

She wants to speak, but then Lauren is upon her again, kissing her with a new rigorous amount of fervor. Lauren's hands move into her hair, fingers tangling in a goading manner that earns another throaty moan. She feels it echo past her lips as Lauren's part.
And then she feels Lauren's moan. Low. Vibrating in a velvety tone, rattling against roof of her mouth, dancing upon her tongue.

She doesn't know quite what to feel. What the appropriate feeling to this is, given the circumstance and the state of their relationship. She's sure past Camila would be ecstatic, spontaneously combusting kind of ecstatic. Past Camila would kiss her again and paint their whole future together. The first date, their first time, marriage, kids. Because this was all past Camila had ever wanted for the longest time with Lauren Jauregui.

Present Camila feels just...confused. Like her feelings don't function properly with the physicality of it all. As if they're turned off or dismantled for repair, and the rest of her is running on the ends of gasoline in a tank.

Lauren parts her mouth again gently, taking in Camila's bottom lip with just the right amount of pressure that makes her head spin. A dizzy, delightful rush filters down her face, past her neck and spreads warmly in her chest. Her heart pounds heavily and she feels like she could just –

"Ow, shit," Camila curses, pulling back and attempting to straighten in her seat.

"What? Was it that bad?" Lauren asks, suddenly looking far too vulnerable than what Camila is used to.

"No, no, no, that was nice – better than nice actually – like really, really nice – it's just," Camila fidgets again. "I think the applicator pinched me right now."

"The applicator? You're still – you didn't take the applicator out?" Lauren exclaims incredulously. "You leave the cotton in and take the plastic out!"

Mortification sets in immediately.

All that Camila becomes aware of is Dinah bursting out into a loud, obnoxious round of laughter in the background, and the sudden urge she gets to reach over and strangle her.
Her eyes fall back down to her neighbor's lips. They're red and slightly swollen from their previous activity. Camila swallows thickly.

She wants to kiss her again, and it's scary how much she wants to. How primal and desperate the urge becomes deep in her core, burning like a low flame.

She licks her still tingling lips, and moves her hand to meet Lauren's. It's gripped tightly to Camila's duvet, knuckles white from strain, and suddenly Camila gets a heavy mental image of that same hand gripping the same sheets. Except, of course, both girls are in a much different position.

(And in less clothes).

Her eyes flicker back to Lauren's face who looks just about as flushed as she feels. She tries to gauge Lauren's expression. Tries to see if she can see the overwhelming feeling reflected in her green eyes.

Lauren's eyes are soft, as soft as her lips felt. It makes a warm sensation fan across Camila's chest being under the gentle gaze. Green eyes sweep over her, feeling like a delicate brush against her heated skin. She could get lost in them. If she wanted to. She wouldn't even have to try.

Their time alone is very short lived. After Camila gets over this embarrassment (and removes the stupid source of said embarrassment), they don't really have time for another kiss because then her mother walks in.

"Oh, Lauren," she exclaims.

Lauren immediately puts as much distance between them as possible, which both annoys and relieves her. She misses the absence of the warmth, but the same warmth was becoming relatively dizzy.

Lauren greets her mother sheepishly.

"I didn't know you were here. I would have made an another plate," she continues, eyes moving to Camila.

"I told you I was going out with Lauren today, Mami," Camila mutters.

"Mija, I don't think you should push yourself so hard."

"I'm fine." Her patience is wearing thin, and for the first time she doesn't think she can take any more of her mother's coddling.

Lauren glances down at her phone.

"I should probably head home," Lauren murmurs. "The girls are going to be here any minute."

"Well wait let me just pack a bag," Camila quickly says.

"I thought you said you didn't want to go," Lauren counters, surprising her with a sharp tone. Camila turns around to fully stare at her.
Wasn't Lauren the one who insisted upon her going? Going so far as to make her shove a tampon up herself?

(Incorrectly she might add).

She attempts to read her neighbor's expression again, but nothing is reaching out to her. It's a blank, pale slate, revealing absolutely nothing. Perhaps she had misread that or perhaps it's because of her deep rooted nature of seeing the negative of things. Camila dredges it up to that, as she moves to retrieve her backpack.

"You're the one that wants me to go," Camila starts, fumbling around for "beach"-y things. She tries to ignore the twinge in her chest as she realizes these "beach"-y things are stuff she hasn't touched in over a year. Sunglasses, sun block, bathing suit, beach towel.

She hesitates, packing her bag. A part of her wants to reach out and take the opportunity Lauren may have inadvertently given her – to cancel on the beach plans. But there's another part (an embarrassingly larger part) that wants to go, despite being in mixed company and despite being in the last place she'd ever want to be. And it's all because Lauren is going. That same part, she's beginning to realize, craves Lauren's presence so desperately.

She follows Lauren, and doesn't fail to notice that her neighbor isn't walking beside her but, rather, a few paces ahead. As if somehow trying to physically shake her off.

It's enough of a blatant distraction that the prospect of hanging out with Ally and Normani hasn't hit her completely. Not until they're in Lauren's yard with Normani's SUV parked out front. Both girls slip out of the car once they see them approaching and Camila immediately feels all of the suppressed nerves suffocate her at once.

"Girl relax, you're making me nervous," Dinah says.

It's the same awkward tension that falls over the two girls as they stop to greet Camila. Ally is too cheerful, and Normani is completely silent. Camila almost feels guilty at this point. She's probably ruining whatever little fun day they had planned without her mopey presence.

"We ready to go?" Lauren questions.

"Actually, small problem," Ally begins pulling out her phone. "Normani neglected to tell us that it was going to rain today."

"I always said Normani would be the worst weather girl," Dinah comments offhandedly. "She's more of a news anchor."

"It's probably better if we just cancelled-" Normani begins.

"No, we can still hang out," Lauren cuts in before anything else is said. She doesn't meet Camila's eyes as she says this, and Camila gets the impression that it's somehow her fault. "We can hang out at my house. Movie night?"

"We can bake," Ally adds in brightly. "We'd probably need to head to the store to grab some stuff first though."
"Done. Let's do it," Lauren answers. "Mani? You want to drive?"

Camila catches Normani's eye and finds that she looks just about excited for these new plans as she does. Normani's nods her head quietly, and they all head towards her car.

It all feels uncannily surreal, walking into the local grocery store. She can think back to days when they had done this. Had midnight runs to the store during sleepovers, being the target of sleep deprived employees' glares as they caused a commotion down the aisles. Though the source of the commotion was mostly due to Dinah and Normani's impromptu dance offs, followed by the embarrassed squeals at being caught by other shoppers.

She remembers one time that their twerking had gotten out of hand. Dinah had run into the Campbell's soup display, knocking over all of the stacked up cans. It had resulted in Dinah scrambling to pick them up and a round of laughter from the rest of them.

Camila glances at the rest of the girls. Ally is consulting a list she wrote down on the way over. Lauren is walking ahead, leaving a huge gap between the two of them, which would normally annoy her and make her want to pester her as to why she's suddenly acting so distant, but it's Normani who's currently captured her attention.

It's subtle, and Camila's sure if she hadn't been so intently studying the silent girl she may not have noticed the wistful expression on her face, as they walk down the aisle. And Camila gets the distinct impression that Normani is remembering all of it too.

That she's remembering Dinah too.

Camila averts her eyes, as a tightness forms in her chest, and an urge to run away grips her. She feels her pulse begin to race. A clammy sickness seeps from her flesh in cold perspiration, starting from her feverish forehead to each of her now sticky palms. Her lips tremble, despite biting down on them to keep them from moving. Her shaky fingers twist at the flannel sleeve, wringing roughly until it begins to squeeze her forearm.

The pressure hurts, but it's not nearly as agonizing as the familiar burning sensation enflaming her lungs that have slowly become exhausted from holding in the heavy pants.


No one has noticed yet that she's lagged behind. Her feet feel like lead as she drags them against the linoleum floor. The gap between them gets larger and larger, and she knows if she doesn't do something they're going to see. They're going to see her like this.

She glances at Dinah, who's matching her pace, staring at her with a sad frown.

"Mila," Dinah breathes out softly.

Camila stares at her helplessly. The ache in her chest becomes nearly unbearable. She doesn't realize she's been pressing a trembling hand to it until she feels the rapid pounding of her heart against her palm.

"Breathe," Dinah murmurs. "Just breathe."
"I – I can't," Camila rasps, curling her hand over her top, until she's fisting the material of the shirt.

"Camila," Dinah stops in front of her. Her dark eyes dart between Camila's, wide and sympathetic. Camila thinks she could also get lost in Dinah's eyes too. There was always something so genuine and open about them, as if Dinah willingly laid out all of her for everyone to see. And they were always so warm with that uncanny ability of making you feel like you were wrapped in an invisible blanket.

"Dinah," Camila chokes.

"Camila," she repeats in an even softer tone. "Look at me. You're good. You're fine."

Camila inhales deeply, and lets out a breathy exhale. She repeats the process, focusing entirely on Dinah's eyes, until she feels her body come down, humming into a calm exhaustion.

"You okay?" Dinah asks. Camila nods wearily. "Good. Because these hoes just left you. Let's go find them."

Camila's eyes dart around the aisle and she realizes that she is indeed alone. She's grateful for the moment to recompose herself, as she walks through the shelves of baking goods to find the girls.

She runs a hand through her hair and scoffs when she sees the Campbell's products to her left. Because it's stupid to get so worked up over a can of soup.

She finds the girls near the dairy refrigerators. Ally struggles to grab the carton of milk, so Normani reaches for it instead. Lauren looks up from her phone as Camila approaches them.

"There you are," Ally says, noticing her too. "Thought we lost you."

If anyone notices anything is wrong they don't say it. But Lauren gives her an odd look for the remainder of their shopping.

Ally doesn't waste time as she looks for the rest of the ingredients, and Camila secretly wonders if it's because being here makes her uncomfortable too.

They're at the checkout in no time.

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The sky has shifted into a murky grey as they arrive back at the Jauregui household. Despite the dark clouds, the temperature has remained in its sticky humidity.

Once they get inside the empty house, Ally immediately heads off into the kitchen, leaving the three (well four, Camila thinks grimly) in the living room.

"I should go help Ally," Normani mutters to no one in particular, before hurrying into the kitchen as well.

Lauren wrings her hands in front of her nervously, distracting Camila. Fingers interlock and tangle with one another, her knuckles white.

Camila wants to say something. Perhaps break this weird atmosphere that she hadn't realized
swallowed them up whole until now.

"Lauren," she begins uncertainly.

"I have to go charge my phone," Lauren states automatically, before darting up towards her room.

Camila watches her go, feeling an odd sense of bewilderment.

"So this feels like senior year all over again," Camila sighs.

"Go see what tweedle dee and tweedle dum are doing in the kitchen," Dinah suggests.

Camila raises a brow. "Alice in Wonderland? Really, I'm surprised."

Dinah rolls her eyes.

"The fucking cat's name is Dinah. Of course I'm going to remember that movie."

Camila snorts, before tentatively making her way towards the kitchen. She hesitates, as she hears the low murmuring beyond the entryway.

"I don't know what to say," Normani mutters in a hushed voice.

"And you think I do?" Ally responds desperately. She hears rustling and she assumes it's probably the shorter of the two rummaging through their purchased items. "I can't look at her without thinking of...

"I know," Normani sighs.

The sound of packages being ripped open echoes from the kitchen.

"We need to try. I want to try," Ally finally says. "I miss who we used to be."

"Me too."

"And I think Camila does too."

What strikes her as strange is the fact that she isn't at all insulted by what she's eavesdropped upon. She doesn't feel patronized by the gesture, in fact – dare she say it? – she's almost touched by it all.

Ally's words ring in her ears, enveloping her in what feels like a warm hug. They care. Genuinely. Not in the way Abernathy is paid to do. And not in the overbearing way her parents suffocate her with.

It's almost absurd for her to realize how much she missed them. Like actually missed them in all of their physical presence. Ally's bright smiles and Normani's warm, soothing voice.

Her eyes sting and she feels incredibly stupid for becoming this winded by conversation.


"Shut up. I'm not crying," she snaps, wiping at her eyes hastily.

She inhales deeply, exchanging a nervous look with Dinah, who gives her an encouraging nod towards the doorway. Camila exhales and straightens her posture, before moving to enter the kitchen.

The sight is another familiar thing that comes to her. Ally holding the large bowl in her small arm,
left hand stirring to an unknown rhythm that Camila's forgotten. Normani leans against the counter, chin resting in her palm, watching silently.

If this were a moment in the past, all of them would be squished inside the kitchen. Lauren would be the only useful one to Ally, considering she's able to follow cooking instructions properly. Camila would have been stuck in kitchen time-out for dropping something important. And Dinah would have been trying to eat the dough or batter before Ally was able to put it in the oven, which usually ended in a lot of scolding.

Something flops in Camila's stomach as she steps into the kitchen. Both girls immediately look up and freeze. Normani's expression turns stoic and Ally becomes pale.

"Camila," Ally greets, setting the bowl down on the counter. Normani pushes off from against the counter to stand up straight.

"Say something," Dinah urges from behind her.

Camila swallows the lump forming her throat. She plays with the ends of her flannel nervously, before inhaling sharply, ridding herself of the awkwardness.

"I was wondering if you needed help?" Camila asks tentatively.

Normani and Ally exchange a look.

"Actually I think we've got it." Normani promptly elbows Ally making her stop mid sentence.

"That depends," Normani continues, as if that little interaction hadn't happened. It's the first time Normani's directly addressed her with more than a one word answer. "Are you going to drop any eggs?" Normani's tone is accusing, laced with something else familiar. Something that provokes an immediate reaction out of Camila because she had become so accustomed to this kind of something from Dinah.

"That literally only happened, like, once," Camila snaps before she realizes what she's saying.

Normani's expression immediately softens.

"Do you mid sifting the flour?" Ally asks with a gentle smile.

"So I was telling Mani about my time in Texas earlier," Ally says cracking an egg into a smaller bowl. The first batch of cookies have already been in the oven for a few minutes. "I go to UT Austin."

"I remember," Camila says, sifting another cup of flour and handing it to Ally. "I was there while you applied."

"That's right," Ally responds quietly. A somber look passes over Ally's usually cheerful face. She hadn't meant for it to hurt her. That was the last thing Camila wanted. But after a moment, she realizes that comment must have stung.

"Tell her what you do, Ally," Normani speaks up.
Normani was always strangely attuned to Ally's emotions, and rarely did said emotions ever turn negative. However in the few occasions that it did, Normani was really the only one could console Ally in her time of need.

Even now, things haven't changed. Ally brightens up in an instant.

"I've got a little baking business from my apartment," Ally remarks, as she moves to open the oven, checking on the cookies.

"She brings in the big bucks," Normani mutters. Camila feels her lips tug into a small grin at this.

"Do you?"

Ally shrugs. "It pays the bills for the loft."

"Whoa, loft?" Camila presses.

Ally hums, moving to the next bowl. They all watch her as she mixes the ingredients for the dough.

Camila's forgotten how nice it feels to watch Ally bake. There was something therapeutic about it. Watching her hands break open the eggs, the dainty way she added ingredients. Kneading the dough between her small fingers, rolling them out onto the sheet.

Even a bit of salt was needed for something sweet.

A warm, soothing waft of the smell of pumpkin spice cookies filters through the kitchen as Ally takes out the tray from the oven. Normani is upon them at once, much to Ally's disapproval.

"Ugh I bet they smell so good," Dinah whines. "I miss Ally's cooking."

"I teach a dance class to kids," Normani says, blowing on a cookie she snuck from Ally's line of sight. "it's a program associated with the school."

"Mani's a great teacher," Ally adds proudly, making Normani avert her eyes sheepishly, muttering a flustered 'thanks'.

Camila almost smiles at the gesture. Some things never really change. Ally was always the one who was so supportive of every one of their endeavors. Of course, she had a special bit of favoritism when it came to Normani.

Lauren joins them in the kitchen a few minutes later, and this is the moment Camila becomes aware that there is definitely something wrong. Nerves suddenly spring forth, leaving in its wake a chilling frost throughout her body.

If Lauren was avoiding her, undoubtedly, it had something to do with her.

Thoughts of the kiss they shared earlier cross her mind. She remembers the warmth of Lauren's soft lips. The way they pushed and pulled and brought hers into a heated embrace. She remembers her tongue, fervid and wet tracing her mouth, and the gentle scrape of Lauren's teeth against her bottom lip.

Camila feels heat fan cross her face as she shakes the thoughts away before she gets ahead of herself. She had enjoyed it. She had enjoyed the physical feeling of kissing her, yet the thought of Lauren not reciprocating the same pleasure had not really hit her until now.

What if Lauren didn't like it? What if she didn't like it all? Oh god, what if she absolutely hated it?
And here she was prancing about over the fact that she practically forced her reluctant neighbor into a kiss. She is such an idiot.

"I need to use the bathroom," Camila blurts out. They all regard her curiously, except for Lauren. Lauren doesn't even meet her eye as she scurries out of the kitchen and down the hall.

Camila paces against the tiled floor, running a hand through her hair.

"Did I do something wrong?" Camila demands. "She hasn't even really spoken to me after we..." she trails off, feeling a flush form.

Dinah watches her frantic pacing with a raised brow.

"Maybe you slobbered all over her."

"Dinah, be serious."

"I am. People don't like to be slobbered all over. It's disgusting," Dinah says, faking a gag. "Okay, so like, when I was still with Siope-"

"I thought we agreed to never talk about that thumb-thumb again," Camila snaps, whirling around to face Dinah.

"Okay, listen I'm making a point here," she tries to argue.

"Lauren is not Soap in any way shape or form," Camila hisses.

"No I'm not talking about Lauren," Dinah retorts.

"Are you calling me a thumb-thumb?" Camila demands incredulously. "Take that back."

"I'm saying you might've slobbered like a thumb-thumb," Dinah explains, wincing.

Camila opens her mouth to respond but then someone else joins them in the hall. The very same someone that was occupying their current discussion.

"You know that's not the way to the bathroom," Lauren's voice breaks her pace. Camila's head snaps up to meet her neighbor's uncertain expression.

"I didn't slobber did I?" Camila bursts out, and then promptly cringes once she's realized she actually said that out loud. Lauren's blinks, perplexed and a round of laughter erupts from Dinah's lips.

"What?"

Camila brings a hand to cover her reddening face. "Nothing. It's nothing."

"Okay," Lauren begins slowly. "Anyway, the girls – they were worried."

"Were you worried?" Camila questions rather sharply. She doesn't mean for it to be an accusation, but the panic that was rising in her chest gives her an edge to her voice.

"What?" Lauren repeats.

"Nothing, nevermind."

"Wait no just say it," Lauren presses. "Don't feel like you need to avoid anything."
"I could tell you the same thing," Camila counters, almost heatedly. "You've been avoiding me all day."

"No I haven't," Lauren defends, weakly, which makes Camila scoff.

"You've been acting really weird after we kissed," Camila continues, dismissing her protest. "And I haven't even asked you to sleep with me yet."

"Oh god, here we go again," Lauren deadpans. "Don't you think it's kind of insensitive that you keep asking that considering, you know, everything?"

"Considering what?" Camila snaps. "That we kissed? That we're neighbors?" Lauren is silent, but she raises one brow skeptically, and then gestures to herself with one arm. "That you're gay?" Camila guesses. "So?"

Lauren promptly flushes. "What do you mean so? That's important!"

"I'd still want to sleep with you even if you weren't gay."

"That's not the point here. The point is that you're the one that's not even gay."

"Wow, rude, I could be. You don't know my life."

"Ooh tell her, Walz."

"Well, are you?"

"I mean what is gay anyway?" Camila questions offhandedly.

"Oh my god Camila!"

"Isn't sexuality supposed to be different for everybody?"

"You're totally deflecting right now," Lauren says exasperatedly.

"Why do we feel the need to label ourselves? People all don't fit into little categories that have set definitions," Camila exclaims. "Can't I just walk around and say hey I like that girl. And I totally want to do her without needing to explain my sexuality?"

"Our brains like to compartmentalize," Lauren answers wearily. "It comes naturally and – hey wait, what?"

"What?" Camila snaps.

"You like girls," Lauren stammers. It comes out as more of a question than an actual statement.

"I thought we established this already."

"Um no! I had no idea. All I knew was that you were going out with that Mahone loser I just figured."

"-how the fuck is Austin Mahone even relevant?" Camila demands. She's beginning to get annoyed now. "That happened a long time ago. And why are we talking about this? You never even answered my question."

"Which was?"
"Why are you being so weird?"

Lauren's pale face flushes an even deeper red if it's possible. Camila doesn't think she's ever seen Lauren this riled up. She's sure if Lauren were a cartoon character there would already be steam blasting from her ears.

"I'm not being weird," Lauren hisses.

"Why you always lying," Dinah sings.

"Yes you are," Camila counters.

"You know what that is so rich coming from you of all people," Lauren snarls. Her tone is biting and quick that it almost feels like a slap to the face.

She doesn't even have a proper moment to recoil or process what Lauren has just said, before her neighbor is spinning on her heel and walking away.

Camila stomps right after her, expecting to continue their heated argument, but then she remembers that they're not exactly alone. It's an annoying reminder as she follows Lauren right into the kitchen and sees Ally and Normani chomping on freshly baked cookies.

They glance expectantly between the two of them, chewing slowly coming to a stop.

"They know something's up," Dinah whispers. She wants to say who cares. Let them know what kind of insufferable person Lauren Jauregui is. Hell, they probably already know anyway.

Lauren doesn't say anything, instead roughly shoving a cookie in her mouth and leaning against the counter. Her face is pointed away from Camila's, even her body is angled away, which only infuriates her more.

Ally clears her throat awkwardly.

"So, uh, Camila, what have you been up to?" She asks, and she knows there wasn't much careful thought into the construction of that question. Normani elbows her in the stomach again, and Ally's expression is horrified. "Oh my god, sorry that was so dumb. I shouldn't have asked that."

"It's fine," Camila reassures.

"Completely fine," Lauren's sharp voice resounds through the kitchen. "Why don't you tell them about your list?" she adds sourly.

Camila glares at her, a wave of irritation forms, seemingly festering from their ill-timed conversation a few minutes ago.

"What list?" Ally probes before Camila can make a passive aggressive comment about Lauren's loyalty. Normani glances over at her, curious.

"Yes, Mila, do tell," Dinah encourages, holding back laughter. Camila shoots her a sour look.

"It's like a bucket list," she begins.

"I love bucket lists," Ally exclaims. "I'm not very good at actually doing them though," she adds as an afterthought. "But anyway tell us about it."

Camila flushes when all three of their gazes turn to her.
"It's just stuff I want to do," Camila murmurs thickly. "It's not entirely finished yet."

"What do you have so far?" Normani finally speaks up.

"What a great question," Dinah chimes in enthusiastically. "Why don't you tell them what's on your list, huh Walz?" Dinah's smile turns into a smirk. "Make sure you do it in order too."

_Ugh, fuck off Dinah._

She glances over at Lauren who is very conveniently turned away from her again. Her blood boils as she glowers at the back of her neighbor's stupid head. If she could just reach over and yank all of those perfectly ordered loose curls...

Camila pulls out the folded piece of paper and reluctantly slides it in Ally's direction. She watches, feeling her face flush as both girls scan over the list. Normani is the first one to break, hiding the laugh behind her hand. Then Ally turns away, sneezing, but Camila is more than positive it's a giggle she was covering up.

"Sex, huh?" Ally murmurs, handing the list back.

"Sex isn't that big of a deal," Normani adds. "I don't really get why people make it out to be huge."

"You're probably not having the right type," Lauren murmurs as Ally gives an affirmative laugh.

"Huh, wonder who Lauren's been screwing," Dinah says, making Camila's head snap up in her neighbor's direction. In fact all of the girls turn to look at her.

Lauren promptly flushes under the gazes, and clears her throat nervously.

"And you have?" Camila snaps. She doesn't mean to take it personally. It's incredibly stupid to feel that undercutting sense of betrayal upon hearing Lauren's snarky comment.

Lauren's expression falters when she meets Camila's accusing glare. Green eyes narrow defiantly.

"I might have."

"Don't be shy," Camila responds sharply. "Are you talking about Ashley?"

Lauren looks affronted, and two seconds away from chucking the cookie in her hand at Camila.

"Oh god, this is so embarrassing," Dinah whines. "Why are you so embarrassing Walz?"

"Who's Ashley?" Ally asks innocently, glancing back and forth between them.

"Why do always assume it's Ashley?" Lauren retorts.

"Oh so it's someone else now?" Camila questions, flustered.

"I didn't say that. You're putting words in my mouth."

"Is that all that's going in your mouth these days?"

"OH MY GOD GIRL FIND YOUR CHILL," Dinah shrieks.

"Uh it's getting late," Normani finally says. "We should, uh, probably leave."

"Yeah, yeah I told my grandma I'd help her send an email today," Ally mutters anxiously.
"My dad's coming soon," Lauren mutters, eyes never leaving Camila's. "You should all probably head out.

Ally and Normani don't hesitate to leave, offering hasty goodbyes, as they hurry out the door.

Lauren and Camila haven't moved from their spots. The atmosphere has fallen into a subzero zone, leaving an icy trail behind.

"Am I just completely repulsive to you?" Camila finally breaks the cold silence. "That you can't even kiss me without freaking out and acting like it was the worst thing ever?"

Lauren says nothing.

"Wow thanks for that," Camila mutters.

"No, no it's not you, Jesus Christ, Camila. You know not everything is about you!"

"It's hard to believe you when you say that," Camila counters. "You were the one that kissed me."

"Yeah and I clearly shouldn't have."

Ouch. Okay that hurt her ego more than it should have. Lauren must see it in her face because she drops the aggressive posture, runs a hand through her hair and sighs.

"Camila. I didn't mean that. I just... I'm trying to articulate this properly and it's not coming out right."

"Just say it," Camila responds impatiently.

"We've known each other for like a really long time and it's just - I mean it kind of seemed inevitable in the grand scheme of things. I wasn't very subtle about it and-."

"What are you trying to say?"

"I thought it was pretty obvious. I mean I used to be so obvious, I'm sure the rest of the girls caught on, and my parents, and siblings. Honestly I wouldn't even be surprised if Sofi knew —"

"-Lauren!" Camila interrupts again, hands curling into tight fists at her side.

Lauren chews her lip, and if Camila weren't so frustrated with this entire situation she would have become entirely engrossed with the action.

"It's nothing," Lauren begins.

"Clearly it's not nothing, if you won't even look at me," Camila snaps. That seems to rattle her, and in the next second Lauren's head whips up sharply in her direction followed by a glare.

"You're such a hypocrite," Lauren exclaims. "Where do you go demanding answers when I can't do the same thing to you? Every time I try to bring up our past you freak out."

"Because that has nothing to do with this," Camila hisses.

"It has everything to do with this."

Camila's clenched fists loosen as she notices the shift in Lauren's expression. The strained tension fades away, along with the crease of knitted brows. Lauren's lips part as if she wants to say something and then close in a defeated manner.
"You didn't see it, did you?" Lauren murmurs softly. Her eyes are glossy and Camila is beginning to become afraid that she's going to start crying. That's the last thing she wants – or needs. She tells herself its because she can't handle unnecessary crying, but deep down she afraid it's because the second she sees any hint of tears she's going to start with the stupid water works too.

"What are you talking about?" Camila's voice is shaky. It's quite possibly the most rehearsed oblivious question that she's ever asked in the presence of her neighbor. Her heart thumps loudly in her chest with each ticking second, waiting for Lauren's response. Her explanation. An explanation that Camila begins to understand before any words are uttered.

"What am I saying, of course you didn't notice anything," Lauren mutters.

The language is coming back to her, slowly, in bits and pieces. Lauren's face isn't so much of an enigma anymore. And Camila thinks it's probably the eyes. It's always the eyes that gave everything away.

"Camila," Lauren begins, her hand comes to run through her hair nervously. Camila watches absently as her dark hair tumbles over to one side, loose tangles trailing across the left side of Lauren's neck, down her shoulder. She tries to focus on the way the light reflects off of the dark shade, rather than the tremble in Lauren's voice as she continues.

It doesn't work.

"I had feelings for you," Lauren says, breaking the silence. "I mean, like, more than just friendly feelings for you."

Lauren's voice has faded, meshed in with the rapid pace her heart insists upon going. Pounding and beating to a rhythm that's nearly suffocating. She brings a hand to the back of her neck, anxiously brushing against the heated flesh.

She glances at Lauren. She's still talking, but for the life of her she can't understand a single word coming out. She relies solely on the expression painted on the pale face across from her. Eyebrows knitted again. Lips fluttering rapidly. Green eyes wide and shiny like a marble surface.

It's as if the world had been capsized and dragged down the water. Every sound is echoing like a radar signal in a ship.

"How long?" Camila finds her voice, as her head breaks through the sluggish surface. Lauren's mouth immediately stops moving. Sounds come back over the film.

Lauren blinks at her owlishly, and Camila gets the sudden urge to grab her by the shoulders and shake her.

"How long?" Camila repeats, tone turning sharp. "How long were you – your feelings how long did you have them?"

"Camila, I don't know."

"How long?"

"I don't know, okay? I can't just give you an exact moment. It wasn't like I woke up one day and realized I was in love with my best friend," Lauren nearly yells.

"You were in love with me?" Camila stammers out incredulously.
"Why are you so angry?" Lauren demands.

"I don't know," Camila snarls. And it's true. She doesn't know. She can't pinpoint the reason for the oncoming indignation humming throughout her body. But it's there, setting everything in its wake on fire. She's burning, flesh overheating and breaking out into a cold sweat despite the rising temperature.

She wants to hit something. Anything.

"Dude," Lauren starts. "don't freak out."

"I'm not freaking out!" Camila snaps. "It's just... it's all just so unfair."

The same confusion that followed their first kiss hits her. A distinct split between what she thinks she should feel and what she is trying to suppress. Indifference would be a lot easier to feel than the tumultuous mix stirring in the deep confines of her heart.

It almost feels like a backhanded compliment. She had to wait all this time to hear that, to finally get down to the truth of her relationship with Lauren. After all of those years of skirting across the blurred lines of their friendship. And she gets this when she's not even who she was before. She's not the same person. She's not the girl who hangs on to every word Lauren Jauregui says. She's not the girl who writes Mrs. Camila Jauregui all over the margins of her notebook. She's not the girl who pines after best friend and dreams up a future for them. Not anymore.

And it's painfully ironic to get everything she wanted handed to her when she doesn't know what to do with it now. It almost seems insulting to bring past Camila into this, like she doesn't deserve the fluttering in her stomach, or the smile begging to form across her lips. She isn't worthy of the flush threatening to spread across her face.

And maybe a part of her resents that past self. Because she gets to live in a memory untainted by everything Camila touches now.

"I'm sorry," Lauren says quietly.

"What are you apologizing for?" Camila sighs. "How completely fucked up my life is right now?"

Lauren's eyes narrow. "This is why I never told you anything. I was afraid you would just react badly."

"I'm not – it's not about you, I mean it is. I'm just mad at myself," Camila finally admits. "I wish I would have known."

"It wouldn't have really made a difference, Camila."

"You don't know that," Camila responds. "It would have," she presses gravely.

It probably would have made all the difference in the world.

She tries not to ponder on it – the alternative universe in which this piece of information may have shifted everything. They would've been dating. Maybe. Maybe Camila would have gone to the west coast with Lauren. Maybe Dinah would still be alive. Maybe she would've been okay.

Lauren's green eyes narrow in confusion, matching the befuddled sensation wracking through her brain and heart.
"What are you saying?"

Camila releases a breath she wasn't aware she was holding in. "I'm saying it would have mattered because," – she swallows thickly, bringing her gaze back up to Lauren – "because I had feelings for you too."

"Wait, wait back up," Lauren stammers. "You mean, this whole time you...?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"The same reason you didn't at first," Camila mutters.

"But after – after I came out and everything," Lauren slowly begins.

"Yeah and you hooked up with the first girl you could find," Camila remarks coldly.

She remembers it vividly. The girl had turned into multiple girls. And before she knew it Lauren was out of her grasp completely. It didn't take long for the cold, hard separation to ensue, and it didn't help with the heartbroken feelings after Lauren had left for college.

Things had just spiraled into a downward slope near the end of junior year. She spent the rest of it ignoring and being ignored by Lauren, while watching as her neighbor hooked up left and right with anyone who showed her interest.

It was torture seeing other people on the receiving end of Lauren's affections. Seeing some other girl in Lauren's lap during lunch time. Or having to watch someone hold her hand in the hallways.

She remembers the day. Lauren came to her on the verge of tears as she confessed her deepest, darkest secret. It was one of the scariest days of Camila's life despite it all. Because for the first time her feelings, feelings that she herself was coming to terms with, could be returned. The possibility wasn't so out of reach. It wasn't ridiculous for Lauren to potentially be in love with her too. It was a daunting realization once she heard the verbal doorway open from Lauren's confession.

She was thoroughly relieved the moment she figured that Lauren wouldn't reject her because she wasn't into girls. But it was an even worse confirmation when Lauren rejected her because she just wasn't into her.

"I didn't know," Lauren admitted miserably.

"Well it doesn't matter now does it? It's not like I feel the same anymore," Camila mutters.

"You don't?" Lauren asks.

"No," Camila answers honestly. "Do you?"

"No, no of course not. I'm just," Lauren hesitates, and then lets out a low sigh. "It took a lot to get over you, Camila. I was not okay for a long time. And I don't want..."

"You're afraid that your feelings are going to come back," Camila guesses.

"Well, I mean I was I guess. But now after hearing this, I think I'm more afraid of giving you the wrong idea about us," Lauren responds. "I don't want to hurt you, if you end up... you know."

She wants to be touched by Lauren's concern over her newly revealed feelings. But she knows it
isn't necessary.

"Honestly, I don't think I have anything left in me to feel, even if I wanted to," Camila answers in a low voice. "Not for you. Not anymore."

Lauren's expression is stoic. If that struck any kind of nerve she doesn't show it.

"If it's not about the feelings then why me?" Lauren presses, in a whisper. It's so faint Camila strains to hear it. "If losing your virginity isn't important, then why did you pick me?"

"Because I trust you."

Something flickers in Lauren's eyes. Camila wants to think it's satisfaction, but she still finds it troubling to read her face. It must be surprise at the very least, because she doesn't think Lauren expected that answer.

But then it's Camila's turn to hear the unexpected, when Lauren suddenly speaks up. There's resolve in her neighbor's voice despite the nervous tremble. There's finality in her tone that sends shivers down Camila's spine, as she utters the next few words:

"Okay I'll do it. I'll have sex with you."
"Tell me if you want me to stop."

She's lost count of how many times those words have been said to her at this moment. She isn't sure if it's because of the same repetitive answer or the fact that her mind has turned fuzzy.

She feels a warm wet tongue at the place where her shoulder and neck meet. It slides and flicks in a dangerous rhythm that make her head spin. And then she feels the sharp contrast of teeth scraping against her sensitive flesh. A low moan tumbles from lips like a broken plea. Her grip against soft fabric tightens until she feels the t-shirt material bunch in her curled fingertips.

Heat floods her thrumming body as she feels the sharp sensation of teeth closing around her skin. She tilts her head back further as if in a weak attempt to meld into the soft pillow beneath her. Or at least to balance the twisted mush encapsulating her mind.

She feels hands trail up her side, pushing her own t-shirt up each time a heated palm cups her waist. Nails drag against her abdomen lightly, matching an unspoken pace to the bites against her skin. More added pressure and the nails graze her stomach with more purpose making another sound escape. Though this sound is almost coherent compared to the previous unintelligible moan. Her strained voice forms a name, lips moving in a pattern she's familiar with even in this disheveled state.

"Lauren." It's a rasp that breaks when she feels lips move down the column of her neck, settling lazily on her left collarbone. Her hands loosen around fabric, and fall into denim back pockets. This action earns the first sound she hears besides her own huffing and moans.

"Fuck." It comes out as a hiss and then a groan. It's a low and husky voice, and Camila decides then this is one of her favorite sounds.

The biting relents, and all she feels is hot breath against her wet collarbone. A body arches into hers, fitting snugly despite the fact that all Camila wants to do is rip the barrier of clothes off.

The weight above her is relieved slightly, and a face comes into view. Dark green eyes glower down at her through half covered eyelids.

Something stirs within her. Something deeper than the arousal simmering in her core. It flourishes in her chest, which becomes a direct correspondence to the swelling of her heart.

The heavy green gaze is captivating, holding every bit of attention she can offer in this state. She feels vulnerable, naked beneath the piercing stare. And for once she doesn't mind it. She doesn't mind it at all.

Lauren has always had that power over her anyway. She's not really sure why she's surprised with it now.

Lauren's eyes darken Camila would be more focused on the blown out pupils if she weren't so distracted with the hand brushing against her abdomen again, sinking lower, and tugging at her belt loops.

And then Lauren's face moves closer as if she's going to kiss Camila, but her lips press against her cheek. The soft mouth moves along Camila's flushed face, lowering to trace her jawline. Lips part
and Camila feels the familiar warm, wet tongue and teeth upon her skin again. She shivers at the touch, despite her body feeling like it's on fire.

Lauren is at her ear before she realizes it.

"Do you want me to stop?" Hot, bated breath beats against the shell of her ear.

Camila feels fingertips dance across the button of her pants, pulling teasingly. She wants to say yes, but the words turn into a whimper. A desperate attempt to get her head back on its axis. Camila swallows thickly, before shaking her head in response. She doesn't trust her voice at this point.

"Open your mouth," Lauren whispers gently, bringing a hand to her face. Fingers trace her chin. Immediately upon request, Camila feels her insides throb feverishly as her mouth falls open.

Lauren's fingertips pad against her lips. Camila feels the teasing amount of pressure as Lauren pushes against her puckered mouth. Two fingers dip inside, gently brushing the edges of her teeth, sliding against her smooth tongue.

And then Lauren's hand is gone, until she feels her slippery fingertips maneuvering past the waistband of her underwear, and down, down, down into –

Camila wakes with a start.

Her legs are tangled in the bed sheets and an embarrassing layer of perspiration coats her flushed face.

It takes her a moment for her lucid head to come into focus. It takes her another moment to realize being about two seconds away from having sex with Lauren was just a dream.

An irritatingly vivid dream.

She feels her heart pound. She hears the beats loudly against in ears, running along with her uneven breathing.

Her body is buzzing with lingering remnants of the teasing arousal. Probably most apparent in the dull aching throb below her waist. She shifts her legs, and it inadvertently makes her thighs rub together. The throb only makes itself more apparent.

She sighs wearily when she feels the discomforting evidence on her underwear.

Camila brings a hand to rest on her stomach, pushes up the hem of her shirt and presses a warm palm against her skin.

It's not the same, she notes with a frustrated huff.

It's not the same as her fantasy-induced Lauren touching her. It's not the same hand running along her abdomen. It's not the same fingers toying with the drawstrings of her PJ bottoms.

But a part of her still clings to the dream. And to Lauren's touches. And her voice. And her uneven breathing. And her lips. And her eyes.

And Camila's hand moves away from the drawstrings, towards the waistband hugging her hips.
Camila hasn't had the urge to do that in such a long time. It would, however, be dishonest to deny ever having a sex dream about Lauren. If the many cold showers her high school year old self were an obvious indication.

Her fingers trace the beginnings of her underwear. Dream-Lauren vividly returning to occupy her thoughts. Imagination was clearly always her strong point. She can practically still feel Lauren's hot breath against her skin, along with the involuntary shivers the action prompted.

She stops before dipping her fingers past the elastic. A small torrent of shame wells up in her chest as she processes the situation.

She's going to get off at the thought of Lauren. And not even real-life Lauren at that.

Her hand curls and she brings the fist away, pressing it against the mattress.

This is stupid.

This is all so stupid.

Camila hits her mattress in frustration, before rolling over and burying her face in her pillow.

She'd like to blame it on a lot of things. But mostly she'd like to just blame it on Lauren herself. For being so difficult about this entire situation.

Camila knows it's irrational to blame her. It's no one's fault, besides her own treacherous body, for the lewd thoughts.

It still doesn't ease the frustration.

She scrambles out of bed before she attempts to do anything else. Her feet routinely take her towards the pill bottle on her dresser. She downs them, taking a swig of the half empty water bottle beside it.

She wastes no time in heading to the bathroom for a cold shower. It's a hasty attempt to distract herself from the thoughts threatening to spring forth upon her again.

She exhales heavily, listening to the sound of the shower. Trying to focus upon the noise to distract from the loaded images still coming in hot flashes.

She catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror. The dark rings beneath her eyes are still prominent. Her slightly hollowed out cheeks are still visible. Yet the normally waxy complexion is dusted with a bright pink flush. A flush that was starting to become more apparent as the days progressed.

Camila groans, averting her gaze quickly and moving towards the running shower.

"Someone's in a rush." The familiar voice makes her stop in her tracks. She whips around to find her best friend leaning against the sink counter, watching her with a raised eyebrow.

"Hello to you too," Camila greets her halfheartedly, turning back to the shower.

"What's wrong?" Dinah questions, as she moves to sit upon the counter. Camila glances at her from over her shoulder. She watches as Dinah swings her legs back and forth over the sink edge. Though, swinging would be an overstatement, considering Dinah's so tall that her feet touch the bathroom floor.

"Nothing's wrong," Camila answers shortly.
"Okay." Dinah drags out the word, and it only confirms her suspicion. "So this has nothing to do with you taking a cold shower right?"

"How would you even know if the water's cold anyway?" Camila snaps, turning to fully face her best friend.

Dinah simply rolls her eyes. "I don't see any steam. I'm not stupid, Camila."

"Could've fooled me."

"Rude!" Dinah gasps.

"What do you want?"

"Wow I feel so honored," Dinah remarks sarcastically. "Why you being so nasty?"

"I already told you it's nothing."

Dinah sighs. "Mila, your definition of nothing is obviously something." She gives her a sympathetic frown, and Camila begins to feel the conversation turn into something she really doesn't want to talk about. "Is this about Lauren wearing that vag-badge of honor and not getting it on with you yet?"

"You're ridiculous, you know that?" Camila stammers, flustered. "And this has nothing to do with that!"

Dinah's eyes narrow. She holds her gaze challengingly, until Dinah finally relents.

"No but seriously what is it? It takes a while into the day before you get that look in your eye."

"I had a weird dream," Camila finally admits.

"Weird dream, huh?" Dinah ponders. "I hate those dreams where it's not really a good dream or like, you know a nightmare."

"Sounds about right."

"Like one time I had this super weird dream about going to a party with Zac Efron and snorting coke off his stomach in the bathroom," Dinah mutters absently. "Vanessa Hudgens was hella pissed though when she found out."

"How does that even fall anyone near a potential good dream?" Camila demands exasperatedly.

"We sang We're All in This Together at some point," Dinah offers with a noncommittal shrug.

Camila scoffs, pushing past the shower curtain, and removing her clothes. She steps into the cool shower, letting the water trickle against her skin. A low hiss falls from her lips as her once heated skin breaks out into goosebumps from the cold water.

"Unless of course your dream was ...a naughty one." Camila can almost picture the evil smirk rolling out into her expression.

At Camila's silence, Dinah gasps. "Oh my god it was, wasn't it?"

"No, Dinah."

"Don't lie to me when you're taking a cold shower in front of my face."
Camila presses her forehead against the cool tile. She tries to focus upon the sound of water clapping against the puddle at her her feet. It's not as loud as Dinah's amused voice on the other side.

"I'm not really that surprised," Dinah continues. "These are probably like Lauren withdrawal symptoms. You know, considering she's been MIA for, like, the past couple of days."

Camila scowls, lifting her head from the wall.

It was true. She hadn't seen Lauren since that last Saturday. She hadn't spoken to her since Lauren finally agreed to the thing she had been so desperate to get over with.

And for once she wasn't all too eager to breach her neighbor's personal bubble. Especially after that heavy loaded conversation that was still plaguing Camila's mind.

Lauren probably needed space. She understood that.

But it still didn't lessen the gnawing discomfort from being away from her presence for so long, not after she was becoming so used to seeing Lauren frequently.

"It doesn't bother me," Camila replies airily.

"Jiminy Cricket would be disappointed in you and your dumb nose."

"Okay this Disney thing is getting old."

"So is your lying," Dinah presses. "Go talk to Lauren."

"Oh my god Dinah."

"Just hit her up and be like, hey girl Netflix and Chill?"

"I'm not a fuckboy!"

"I mean from the way you've been demanding sex from her..." Dinah trails off. "Besides you guys need to clear up the air. Uncomplicate the complicated."

"What's complicated about this? She said she'd have sex with me and now I'm just waiting on her to give me the okay."

"Yeah and how long do you plan on waiting?" Dinah asks, unimpressed.

She had a point, Camila admits begrudgingly. A week has been the longest they haven't spoken to one another since the summer began.

Camila shuts off the water, and reaches for the towel hanging on the rack. She wraps it around her body and steps out. She shivers, finally feeling the effects of the cold water; her skin breaks out into goosebumps, as she fumbles for her sandals.

Dinah watches her, almost thoughtfully. She can feel her best friend's gaze upon her and before she can make a sarcastic comment about it, Dinah is speaking.

"It's not going to work." Dinah hops off the counter, and follows Camila back into her room.

"What's not going to work?" Camila sighs, rifling through her closet. She is slightly pleased to note that she's broken the color coded organization her mother had developed.
Dinah moves so that she leans against the wall beside the closet door.

"I'm just saying this has bad idea written all over it."

Camila pulls out a collared top, inspecting it distracted. She hasn't really put this much thought into an outfit in a while. Her eyes glance over towards her best friend watching her. And from the slight smirk touching her lips, she thinks Dinah notices too.

"I don't like it when you're being all cryptic," Camila finally says.

"I'm just saying." Dinah shrugs her shoulders.

"What exactly are you saying?" Camila snaps. She's beginning to get annoyed.

"This is the worst idea you guys have ever had," Dinah remarks. "I've watched enough rom-com movies to know how all of this is going to end up."

"My life is not a rom-com. I'm insulted," Camila retorts.

"You both are going to do this and be all cutesy and then you're going to end up catching feelings. And you're going to get heartbroken Mila."

"Why does it have to be me?" Camila demands. "For all you know I could break Lauren's heart."

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Several hours later, after a session with Abernathy and after listening to Dinah's voice of reason (though she's more convinced it's the voice of annoyance), Camila finds herself standing outside of Lauren's bedroom window.

She's not really sure why it takes her this long to actually do something. It seems silly, considering how forward she's been in her interactions with her neighbor. One would think after their kiss, the past intimate confessions, and the numerous proposals for sex, it would bring them closer.

If anything, Camila feels miles apart from Lauren.

Even now, standing right beside the window pane, she feels the bout of nerves tangling in the pit of her stomach at the thought of seeing her.

"Get a move on, Walz," Dinah sighs impatiently. "We've been standing out here for almost five minutes."

"Don't rush me," Camila snaps. She fumbles with the window latch, and slides it open. Knocking doesn't occur to her at first, and she flushes in embarrassment at the thought.

She spreads away the curtains steps over the ledge, teetering off the edge, and stumbles inside.

Camila's eyes travel across the expanse of Lauren's room. She silently notes how Lauren's things are placed across the room. She thinks she even sees her sweater draped across the bed.

A tiny fluttering sensation appears in her stomach at the thought of Lauren wearing her sweater. She silences it before the feeling can become apparent on her face.
There's a homier feel to the bedroom. Traces of Lauren are scattered about despite the empty walls and boxes.

Her eyes then fall to Lauren's desk, which is quite a mess. Make-up clutters the wooden surface. Uncapped foundation and cover up, along with tubes of lipstick and eyeliner, and brushes of different varying sizes are strewn around the table.

She lingers upon the messy desk for a moment, wondering when Lauren developed a taste for the wide range of cosmetics, and why she's becoming so affected by this. It wasn't like Lauren was known for her neatness or her love for make-up.

It's not until a moment later she realizes why she becomes so invested in the messy desk.

It reminds her of Dinah. It reminds her of Dinah's room, and Dinah's desk, and Dinah's make-up, and Dinah's mess.

She wonders if it's intentional or not.

"I have a door you know."

Camila glances up at the sound of Lauren's voice. Her attention finally focuses upon her neighbor, and notices the usual make-up free face is in the process of being done.

"Are you going out?" Camila blurts out offhandedly, and then cringes. She hadn't seen this girl in a week and the first thing she states is the obvious. Typical.

Dinah giggles in the background, as if thinking the same thing.

Lauren moves towards her. Her posture is stiff, almost recoiled, as she slowly closes the distance. Camila's stomach churns in discomfort at the observation.

"Kind of." Lauren runs a hand through her hair, before averting her eyes.

There's a tense silence enveloping the both of them.

Camila likes to call it the big pink elephant in the room. The kind everyone opts to tiptoe around because anything is so exponentially better than running into that pastel mammal.

Except a part of her, an embarrassingly large part, wants to address it. The topic that has been under laying probably every conversation they've ever had since the beginning of summer.

"You can stay if you want. I still need to finish getting ready." Lauren shuffles towards her desk.

Camila shifts awkwardly on her feet. If it's possible the tension in the room has thickened. Words form in her head, bubbling to break free from the back of her throat but they stop short once they reach her tongue. Dying, like Camila's pathetic attempt to make things less awkward.

The last time she spoke to Lauren, she admitted she used to be in love with her. Along with the agreement that Lauren would have sex with her.

Those are probably the last two things that should be in her head, yet they're swimming persistently, threatening to fall from her mouth.

If there's anything she's sure of it's that her filter is practically nonexistent around Lauren.
But she isn't the one to break the silence thankfully. Lauren puts down her mirror, and carefully walks back towards her.

"You can sit down, Camila."

Camila chews her lip, contemplating her next words.

"I'll leave." She's already taking a step back towards the window, but Lauren lurches forward and grabs her wrist. A surge of heat ripples across the skin beneath Lauren's palm and fingers. It travels at a rapid pace up her arm, and blossoms in her chest feverishly.

Camila swallows thickly, glancing down at Lauren's pale hand wrapped around her wrist. The slight contrast of their skin makes her stomach flop, as she ponders where other areas of Lauren's skin are pale. A startling image from this morning's heated dream suddenly flashes through her mind, and she tries to draw her arm away.

Lauren, finally lets go at her tugging, her face matching the heat Camila feels.

"You don't have to go," Lauren says quietly. Camila tries not to notice the way Lauren brings her hands up to her chest, her left cradling the one that was holding onto her wrist. "Stay."

They hold each other's gaze for an uncomfortably long moment, long enough that Dinah begins to make inappropriate comments disguised as coughs.

Almost as if she's heard her, Lauren whirls around, facing her desk. And Camila tears her gaze away in time to catch Dinah proceed to pantomime gagging. She rolls her eyes, catching Dinah's eye. Her best friend winks.

"My third wheeling game is strong," Dinah snickers.

"I don't really see how that's something to be proud of," Camila murmurs through a stiff frown.

"Unless you have things to do or don't want to stay," Lauren continues her previous statement.

"No, no I'm good - I mean I'll stay, if you'll have me," Camila responds hastily.

"Heh, she'd like to have you in more ways than one eh Walz?"

_Shut up._

Camila makes her way to Lauren's bed. It's disheveled, and unmade, and it makes Camila's mouth curve into a furtive smile.

Lauren was always so messy, like her.

She takes a seat, watching as Lauren returns to her make-up. It seems as if the eyeliner comes naturally to her. And Camila remembers the times the girls would have make-over parties. She remembers trying to practice on Lauren, the accidental pokes in the eyes, the close proximity that allowed her to study every detail of Lauren's face, the bated breath that would come out in weak shallows against her lips as she attempted to make the eyeliner even.

She even remembers the rest of the girls laughing at her sorry attempt at symmetry.

Camila's eyes dart down towards Lauren's lips. They're bare and puckered, as Lauren brings a tube of something, coating them with a pale shade of red.
"If you want," Lauren murmurs slowly, after she puts the lipstick down. "You can come with me."

"What?"

"To Alexa's... my friend's house."

Lauren looks too hopeful, which Camila finds strange. For someone who'd been keeping her distance all week, she had a hard time looking like she didn't want Camila's company.

"I don't know. I don't know them," Camila responds weakly.

It's not an entire lie. She thinks the most she's ever spoken to Alexa Ferrer was an awkward *excuse me* in chemistry class.

Lauren puts everything down and makes a move toward Camila.

Her heart picks up immediately, as a distorted image of dream Lauren sauntering towards her fills her head.

She flushes, not meeting Lauren's eyes as she feels the bed dip beside her.

"It'll be fun. And they're really nice." Lauren's knee brushes against the side of her thigh, and she tries not to be so distracted with the skin pressing against hers.

She wants to say no. Every fiber in her being recoils from the thought of having to be around so many people of her age group up in her personal space. Much less the people who practically took Lauren away from her.

Lauren leans forward. "And if you come. We can talk about the arrangement I've made for us."

"Arrangement?"

Lauren's eyes flicker down to her shorts, and it takes Camila a moment to realize Lauren is inferring to the sheet of paper in her pocket.

"Oh," Camila whispers thickly.

"So you'll come?"

Camila's eyes glance towards Dinah's negative gesture in the background.

"Okay."

"Great. I'm going to change and then we'll head out."

Camila sits in silence, picking at the loose knitting in her shorts.

"Do you know what you're doing?" Dinah probes.

"I have no idea what I'm doing, Dinah." Camila falls back against the bed, legs dangling over the edge. Nerves spread throughout her limbs, enflaming her body. She glances up at the ceiling, becoming aware of the chipped glow-in-the-dark stars still taped up on the smooth white wall.
She remembers the day they put them up. Dinah and Camila had come over to help. In the end Lauren and Camila forced Dinah to climb the desk chair because she was the only one tall enough to reach the ceiling.

The memories of their childhood may still be evident, but Lauren herself was an entirely different case. It all seems to come back to the uncertainty of knowing yet not knowing her roommate. As if she's straddling the tipping point of familiarity and estrangement. And going to Lauren's friend's house seems to be just an opportunity for the gap to grow.

"You're so whipped it's kind of disgusting." Dinah cringes.

"I need to get out of this," Camila murmurs, completely ignoring Dinah's comment. "What should I say?"

"Tell her you have diarrhea," Dinah suggests.

"Gross."

"I used to tell the nurse that all the time so I could go home early right before math class."

"Not helping here, Dinah."

"Okay okay, sheesh suck all the fun out of here why don't you?"

Camila shoots her a withering glare.

"But, you know from your little arrangement, fun might not be the only thing you're sucking tonight."

Before Camila can respond, Lauren comes back into the room. Camila sits upright immediately.

Lauren stands before her, wearing leggings and an olive green, short sleeved jacket. Camila tries not to pay too much attention to how much the shirt brings out the emerald flecks in Lauren's eyes. She doesn't mean to stare. But she does. (If Dinah's sudden snickering is anything to go by).

"How do I look?" Lauren shifts her weight on her feet.

A plethora of words filter through her head in the form of different answers all with one synonymous meaning. Yet even the thought of settling upon one seems to fall short.

The thought embarrasses her. Because that's stupid. And she's not about to get all poetic when it comes to Lauren.

"You look beautiful."

Her resistance is only so strong. And it's better than nothing. She almost wishes she hadn't been pressured to say anything at all. Her face feels hot as Lauren stares at her unblinkingingly.

Something flickers in Lauren's eyes, but then it goes away as her neighbor's face falls. Camila is scared she's said something wrong because in the next second, Lauren is stomping over towards her.

"Okay no. No you can't do that."

"Do what?"
"That thing." Lauren plops down beside her, looking more and more aggravated.

"What? You mean compliment you?"

"Yes. No. I mean. Not the way you just did it."

"So what am I supposed to just never say anything nice to you?"

Lauren jumps from her seat and rushes back towards her desk. "Okay, now that we're on this subject, I've been doing a lot of thinking." She rummages through her scattered make-up until she pulls out a notebook from underneath the clutter. She rips a sheet out, and when she comes back Camila can see that the paper is not empty.

"I've also made a list." She pushes the notebook paper into Camila's hands.

Camila's eyes scan over the list, and then she momentarily feels her stomach lurch.

"You made a list of rules?"

"Guidelines," Lauren corrects.

"Same thing," Camila scoffs, as she begins to read Lauren's handwriting.

1. Absolutely no feelings
2. No dates (or anything that would be "romantic")
3. PDA is off limits
4. Everything about the status of our "relationship" is confidential
5. No butterfly-inducing declarations of affection
6. No more than platonic behavior (unnecessary kissing, handholding, cuddling, etc)

"No butterfly inducing declarations of affection," Camila reads. "You're the one who basically told me to compliment you."

Lauren flushes. "You didn't have to say it like that."

"Like what?"

"I don't know, like you want to kiss me or something."

"That's because I do want to kiss you." Camila rolls her eyes.

"Stop that."

Camila ignores her, as she continues to read on. "And what is with this No feelings thing? I thought we established we don't feel the same anymore."

"I know," Lauren mutters irritably. She runs a hand through her hair again, and lets out a frustrated sigh. "It's just so that we don't...."

"We don't what?" Camila presses. "Feel anything? I already told you I don't have feelings for you, at least not like that. But I am attracted to you," Camila responds rather stiffly. She hears Dinah cackle in the background.
"I guess I'm attracted to you too," Lauren mumbles, averting her gaze.

"What do you mean you guess?"

"I am. I am attracted to you."

"This is strictly platonic," Camila reminds her.

Dinah snorts. "Yes. Because sex is totally platonic."

"It's all just physical," Camila clarifies, resisting the urge to glare at Dinah.

Lauren looks as if she wants to say something, but then she shakes her head.

"If we're going to do this, we're doing this my way," Lauren mutters. "No kissing."

"Objection," Camila interrupts.

"We're not in court."

"No kissing is a stupid rule, Lauren."

"I'm trying to protect you."

"This sounds like you're really just trying to protect yourself," Camila sighs. "And No handholding? Is this even necessary?"

"It's just a precaution."

"You want me to sign this? This is written in crayon," Camila deadpans.

"It's actually colored pencil," Lauren snaps.

"I still don't see how that even makes a difference."

"Camila..."

"Alright alright fine I'll sign it."

Lauren hands her a pencil she wasn't initially aware she was holding. The fact that Lauren is so prepared irritates Camila more than she admits.

Her hand closes around the pencil; the point aimed towards the line Lauren had the courtesy of drawing beneath the list.

Camila frowns, silently scanning over the list again. The more times she goes through the numbers the more she wants to protest against Lauren's "guidelines".

Irritation floods her system at the thought of handing over this small victory to Lauren. As if she didn't feel even more out of place with the amount of control she has over her life.

Her fingers hesitate over the drawn line, before she huffs and scribbles her name.

"Before I give this back," Camila starts slowly. She brings her gaze back up to her neighbor. "Can I," she stops. Lauren's eyebrows furrow, and her red lips are twisted into a confused frown. Camila's stare lingers upon her mouth, eyes tracing the shape of her downturned lips. She swallows thickly, dragging her eyes back to Lauren's green ones. "Will you let me kiss you?"
The crease between Lauren's brows fades, as her eyes widen. The same unreadable emotion flickers through Lauren's eyes. The very same that both confuses and intrigues Camila. The uncertainty makes her stomach flip, and her heart pound in an uneven rhythm.

Lauren's eyes dip down to her lips.

"Camz." It slips out again. It always does when Lauren's resolve crumbles, Camila begins to realize.

She reaches forward and tucks a strand behind Lauren's ear, and let's her fingers run along the length of the dark lock. She hears Lauren breathe in sharply.

"You're breaking rule six." Lauren's voice trembles. Her green eyes dart between hers, as if trying to read the depths of her.

"No one is here," Camila whispers, leaning in closer.

"PDA is number two Camila," Lauren responds gently.

"I've already done what you wanted," Camila says, gesturing towards the paper. "Let me have this. Please."

"It doesn't work that way," Lauren mutters. "You can't just expect things without any kind of repercussions, Camila."

"I don't know why you're making this so complicated. I just want to kiss you."

"And there's no reason for it right now," Lauren counters. "I'm not going to have sex with you at this moment."

"So the only time you'll kiss me is when we're going to have sex? Do you hear yourself right now?" Camila demands exasperatedly. "And when exactly will that be?"

"When you've finished your list."

Camila's mouth falls open as anger begins to bubble in the place of irritation. Camila hates a lot of things, being placated is one of them. And if there's anything more she hates than being placated it's being forced into acceptance.

Her patience with her neighbor's terms is only so strong, and Lauren was proving to test the absolute limits of them.

Camila shakes her head. "No, no way."

"Camila," Lauren sighs.

"Canola," Dinah mocks dramatically.

She shoots Dinah a glare from over Lauren's shoulder.

*Not helping.*

"I don't understand why you're putting all of these restrictions on me. I'm pretty sure you didn't do this with anyone else. Did you give one of these to Ashley too?" She questions, gesturing towards the paper again.

"No I didn't," Lauren snaps.
"Then why-"

"Because it's you," Lauren blurts out. "We have too much history, Camila. I can't have sex with you like you're just somebody I met at a club."

The tension that was rising in the small space between them quickly fizzles out the moment the words fall from Lauren's lips. The familiar fluttering in the pit of her stomach begins its ascent, swelling the pounding in her chest. She tries to suppress the sensation. She tries to bite down the smile growing on her face.

Because it's stupid to get all swoony. Especially over Lauren Jauregui.

"Now look who's breaking the rules," Camila finally says, thrusting the list back into Lauren's lap. "What is that? Rule five, right?"

"You can stop looking so smug," Lauren mumbles as she folds the list.

Whatever smug look is on her face is short-lived, because Camila then feels the frown form on her face the moment the bed begins to vibrate. At this rate, it's as if she's conditioned to become moody every time Lauren's phone goes off.

Lauren fishes through her pocket, and pulls out her ringing cell phone. Camila catches a tiny glimpse of the screen before Lauren awkwardly shuffles it over to her other hand.

"Is that Ashley?" Camila snaps, peering over Lauren. Her neighbor merely pushes it further out of her line of sight.

"Jealousy isn't really a good look on you," Dinah mutters. "I'm getting, like, secondhand embarrassment over here, Walz,"

"Camila, please don't make assumptions."

"It's not really an assumption if I'm right."

Lauren glances up from her phone uncertainly. "It can wait."

It's not a confirmation. But she isn't denying anything either, which isn't exactly reassuring.

The vibrating noise continues to resound throughout the room. Camila attempts to reach over, but Lauren blocks her with her arm.

"Just answer it," Camila says, trying to reach for the phone again.

Lauren twists her body, holding the phone farther away.

"Camila I'm serious," Lauren exclaims.

They struggle over the phone, until Camila knocks them both over on the bed.

"What are you doing? Get off of me" Lauren snaps. "I'm not going to answer it. I don't want to make things weird."

"You're the one making it weird," Camila retorts. "Just answer the phone."

"This is like the beginning of a porno," Dinah comments.
Maybe it's Dinah's remark, or maybe it's being in Lauren's personal space that makes her suddenly aware of how closely pressed their bodies are.

The squirming beneath her stops, the arms raised above her head fall until she feels forearms rest against her shoulders. Uneven breathing puffs against the top of her head, and all Camila seems to focus in upon is Lauren's heaving chest against her arm and the swell of her breast against her cheek.

Images of this morning flash through her head. The tell tale signs of her body reacting to the memory of the dream comes back in heated waves. They pound and leave her body rattling, craving more of what little of Lauren's skin she feels against her.

If she just moves her head a bit, her face would totally be in Lauren's –

"Whoa what's this?" A voice breaks through her hazy thoughts. Lauren pokes her head from beneath Camila's arm, glancing at the phone screen.

Camila blows the strands of hair out of her face, and also turns her gaze towards Lauren's hand holding the phone.

"Ashley," Lauren splutters, wriggling out from beneath her. The name seems to wake Camila up from her dazed state because then she's registering that she's staring right at the infamous Ashley.

The girl in the small frame is pale, with a glossy dark bottle blue dye job curtain of hair that falls a little past her slender shoulders. Plum lipstick colors her upturned mouth, and the smile seems to brighten her face. There's a childlike type of friendliness in her almond shaped eyes, warm and welcoming.

The innocence in her face contrasts so sharply with the tattoos, piercings, dark clothes, heavy makeup, and unusual hair color.

Lauren blushed. Like actually blushes. Camila can't help but scowl. Because of course this Ashley would be attractive, and of course Lauren would go after someone like this. The predictability of it all is disgustingly aggravating. Lauren was always drawn to the unconventional.

"That's Ashley?" Dinah murmurs from over Camila's shoulder. "Ooh, Walz looks like you've got some competition."

"It's not what it looks like," Lauren hastily says, straightening in her seat.

Ashley's smile turns into a smirk. "Are you sure? Because if it is, please don't let me interrupt."

Camila blinks, glancing from the girl in the screen to Lauren's flushed face.

"Or if you wait a few minutes until my roommates leave, I'll totally join you guys," Ashley continues. "I'm kidding by the way." She laughs, and then as an afterthought adds: "Kind of."

"Keep it in your pants. She's just a friend," Lauren responds.

"That's what they all say," Ashley remarks. "We're just friends too."

"Ashley," Lauren begins, eyes flickering towards Camila again. She feels the mortification the moment she meets green eyes.

There's so much she wants to say. But what can she possibly say? Especially when the girl is still on the other end.
"Since Jauregui is pretty shitty at introductions," Ashley says, addressing Camila. "I'm Ashley. But my stage name is Halsey."

"Huh?" Camila utters out weakly.

"She's a singer," Lauren sighs wearily.

"Did you tell no one of my existence, Lauren?" Ashley demands affronted.

"This is Camila," Lauren responds, bringing a hand to her forehead.

"Camila? Wait, like, the Camila?" Ashley's eyes widen, as she leans closer to the camera.

"Huh?" Camila repeats. She watches as her hazel eyes run across her face. There's an intense focus upon her, reminding her eerily of a cat fixated on a moving object.

"You didn't tell me she was this hot. Jesus no wonder you've been so hung up on he-"

"Okay thanks talk to you later bye!" Lauren quickly cuts in, ending the call.

Ashley's disappears before Camila even manages to process what exactly Lauren interrupts. The line ends, and Lauren tosses the phone over her shoulder. They both flinch when they hear it bounce off the bed and clatter noisily on the floor. Neither of them make a move to pick it up.

Actually, neither make a move in general.

An awkward silence fills the room, spreading nerves and doubt in its wake. Though in Camila's particular case, it's a large bout of confusion that settles over her.

Dinah takes a seat on Camila's other side, looking far too smug with the entire situation. She lets out a low whistle, before grinning impishly in Camila's direction.

"Okay see, your life is definitely a rom-com now."
Nerves immediately spring upon her, like she knew they would, the moment Lauren pulls up to an unfamiliar house.

Camila recognizes the area for what it is – the richer side of town. Every lawn manicured (a result of routine sprinklers going off despite the potential drought threatening Miami), with a neat patterned walkway down the middle. Two stories follow the same mold as the rows upon rows of houses form the cozy neighborhood.

"Snob hill," Dinah mutters from the backseat.

Camila glances at Dinah through the rearview mirror, and catches the smug look on her face. Probably from making another Disney reference. Why someone thinks that's a noteworthy accomplishment, she doesn't know.

Camila rolls her eyes, and Dinah's smirk only grows.

Lauren shuts off the car, making the music come to an abrupt stop. The distant atmosphere the music created breaks, allowing the awkwardness and doubt to leak right through the newly created holes. It seeps through like water dripping through a make-shift cup of cradled palms.

Despite not recognizing the song (or any songs recently for that matter), Camila really wishes she would just turn the car back on.

She drums her fingers against her thighs to an uneven rhythm. She sees Lauren's eyes darting towards her hands, as if willing her to stop the nervous tick.

"We don't have to go," Lauren begins slowly, as if reading her thoughts. Though at this point, from the body language Camila is blatantly exuding, she's not sure mind reading abilities would make that much of a difference. "I can turn right around, and head back home."

"You were the one who invited me," Camila mutters distractedly. She tugs at the loose ends of her denim shorts.

"Looks like she's having second thoughts," Dinah murmurs from the backseat.

Camila doesn't acknowledge Dinah's comment with words, but exchanges a worried look with her through the rearview mirror. Her eyes then dart towards Lauren again in the driver's seat.

Her neighbor is tense, beginning to look as tense as Camila feels. And suddenly she begins to wonder if Dinah's observation is correct.

"I'm fine," Camila replies stiffly.

It's the last thing that's said between them before they're walking up the white steps to Alexa's house.

They pause before the door, and Camila takes a moment to study the intricate design of the wooden mahogany door. It looks too fancy to be in house that was practically identical to the next door neighbors'.

She clears her throat, attempting to say something before Dinah decides to make some kind of
dumb *Hunger Games* joke.

But the words fail make it past her lips when the door suddenly flies open.

Out pokes the head of a girl who looks vaguely familiar.

She swings the door open fully, and Camila gets the chance to see her from head to toe. The first thing she notices – because, well how could she not – is that the girl is pretty. Like ridiculously pretty. The kind of pretty that would swallow up the whole attention of everyone the moment she steps into a room.

"I saw you pull up," the girl says with a wide smile.

It's at this moment that Camila understands. She was one of those girls that had picked Lauren up that time Camila had approached her on her doorstep. The Jeep girl.

The girl runs a hand through her shiny tangle of brown hair, and it falls in an annoyingly perfect part as if her hand was some kind of sacred hair taming comb.

Camila frowns when the girl outstretches her arms and embraces Lauren warmly. Her frown deepens when Lauren returns the hugs.

Camila recognizes it. She knows those hugs all too well.

From the start of their friendship Lauren had always been the one with the best hugs in the group. Of course, Camila probably thinks it's just a bias that she would prefer Lauren's over anyone else's. Her arms always had the way of making you feel like you were being taken in, in all of your entirety. Wrapped up close and snug like she was trying to bring you closer than just the physicality of the act.

It started in the shoulders, then the press of her body against yours, then her face buried in your neck.

Yeah, Camila remembers.

Even though she hasn't been on the receiving end of one of those hugs in a very long time.

"Long time no see," the girl murmurs against Lauren's shoulder.

"I saw you like last week, Lucy," Lauren says sheepishly.

Another girl comes to the door, after the two break apart.

"Who're you?"

"Nice to see you too, Vero." Lauren rolls her eyes before also bringing her into a hug, albeit a shorter one. "This is my friend Camila."

Camila tries not to notice the way Lauren stumbled over the word friend. Instead she forces a tiny grin (that probably ends up looking like a grimace), and extends her hand.

They both look down at her hand, before looking at each other, and laughing out loud.

"No need for the formalities. Any friend of Lauren's is cool with us," the first girl - Lucy - says with a dazzling smile.

It unnerves Camila how shiny this girl's teeth are, and how pretty she is, and how she locks arms with Lauren playfully.
She looks away from their intertwined arms to notice Veronica studying her intensely.

"I feel like I've seen you before," Veronica says, pursing her lips.

"She was a grade below us Vero," Lauren sighs.

"I remember now." Veronica's eyes travel up and down her body. A slow smile spreads across her already rather mischievous looking face. "You're the girl with the bows right?"

It's something so trivial and meaningless now, Camila doesn't know how to respond to it. There's a disassociating feeling that grips her whenever she's reminded of her past self.

Her face flushes and she glances to Lauren for help.

"Oh my god, Vero, way to be creepy," Lucy interjects with an eye roll.

Camila feels her face burn and the flush deepen beneath their stares. She isn't sure which is having more of an effect on her sudden facial pigment change – their curious gazes or the fact that they bring up the bows.

"Don't worry," Veronica consoles, as if she notices the way Camila's face has turned crimson. "It was pretty fucking adorable."

"Okay, can we come inside or what?" Lauren huffs.

"Fine. Alexa's upstairs anyway," Veronica says turning on her heel, and heading back inside. They follow suit.

Camila sharply inhales before crossing the threshold, Dinah closely behind her.

She tries to take in her surroundings, the fact that everything inside kind of looks like someone hired an interior designer. Everything strangely matches with that overpriced, overrated rustic looking furniture someone would find at Living Spaces.

After a few more observations, she's beginning to believe it.

"I'm feeling a little out of my element," Dinah admits, letting out a low whistle.

"How do you think I feel?" Camila retorts, lagging behind the three girls.

"Awkward and probably a little jealous, you know, considering Lauren isn't holding your hand," Dinah says suggestively, tilting her head to the girl specifically. Camila's eyes dart towards the direction of the gesture and instantly feels her mouth tug into a sour frown.

Because Dinah's observation (no matter how grating it is) is correct.

They're holding hands now, fingers loosely intertwined that looks far too comfortable for Camila's taste.

Lauren looks over her shoulder, and catches her eye. Eyebrows pull together in confusion, before Lauren glances down at their hands and grimaces. The contact is broken in an instant. Not that Camila cares. Because she doesn't.

Lauren can hold hands with whoever the hell she wants to.
Alexa Ferrer isn't anything Camila expects.

Then again, her expectations were a bit distorted considering she didn't really know the girl. The one chemistry class they shared a table had only lasted on semester. And it wasn't like they shared any common interests besides – well – Lauren.

She expects someone unapproachable, edgy, hip, unfairly beautiful. Like one of those girls who wear flower crowns, with the shredded croptops and sinfully short denim shorts to a summer concert.

She's expecting someone shallow, someone with a knack for being a really good poser.

The assumption is especially strong after Camila steps into Alexa's room.

Which looks like some kind of aesthetic tumblr post that probably has soft grunge somewhere in their blog title. Bare white walls, adorn with dim Christmas lights lining the edges of the ceiling. It casts a soft glow across the large room, illuminating the clothed poster hung over the head of the bed. Camila glances at the intricate patterns of the poster, reminding her more and more of some antique looking carpet found in her grandma's living room. She wonders what it means. She wonders if Alexa even knows what it means.

But her initial judgements about Lauren's friend gets thrown out the window when Alexa looks up from her phone, and cracks a friendly half smile. "I see you brought company."

"This is Camila-"

"-Cabello. I know," Alexa says, eyes flickering to her. "We had chemistry together."

"Uh, right," Camila stammers.

Alexa sits upright and sets the phone down on her bed. "It's good to see you."

Camila's eyebrows knit together.

"Lauren's told me a lot about you," Alexa continues.

"She has?"

"Good things I promise."

"What? She doesn't ever tell me anything," Veronica complains, plopping on the computer chair.

"That's because you have a big mouth," Lucy quips, moving to sit on the bed beside Alexa. Veronica rolls her eyes at this.

"And she tells you things?" Veronica questions flatly.

"She tells me more than you."

"Only because you guys have hooked up. I bet if I slept with Lauren, she'd totally have no filter."

"Oh my god Veronica."

Immediately Camila's eyes fall to Lauren's red face. The accusation is on her tongue, but she bites it down.
"Oh wow this just got awkward," Dinah murmurs beside Camila.

Awkward is an understatement.

She feels incredibly stupid, as if she purposely set herself up. Which, in hindsight she supposes she kind of did. Of course this was a bad idea. What did she possibly expect walking into a house with fucking Victoria secret models?

(Camila wouldn't even be surprised if she found all of that fluffy angel winged lingerie in the closet).

"Still think your life isn't a rom-com, Mila?" Dinah giggles.

She's out of her element. It's another understatement. At least with Ashley, there was practically the middle of the fucking country between them to lessen the increasing feeling of inadequate in front of Lauren's hookups.

"Okay guys that's enough," Alexa's voice rings through her pity party. Veronica and Lucy's bickering comes to an abrupt stop, and Alexa turns back to Camila. "Sorry about that. My kids are normally better behaved," she teases, making Camila smile softly despite the situation and the newly revealed information.

She isn't sure what it is with Alexa. Perhaps it's the warm smile or the soft voice that puts her ease.

(Or maybe it's because Lauren is standing so close to her that the smell of shampoo is becoming increasingly distracting).

Oddly enough, Camila feels genuine comfort. A sincerity she forgot people were capable of. Alexa's smile is small and thin, but it immediately calms her. Because even though Alexa does dress like she stepped out of a weekend at Coachella there isn't anything fabricated about her.

It's a no brainer which of Lauren's friends she prefers.

She takes a seat at the edge of the bed, and the conversation resumes without her. She absently listens to them, gossiping about who they saw at the supermarket, the casual conversations about school, who they think is hot.

And then the conversation takes a turn as Veronica addresses her.

"What about you?"

"What?" Camila's head snaps up.

They all look at her expectantly. She hates this new recent development that's been with the newfound act of socializing. At least in a relatively normal setting catered to her age group.

They want an answer. What's her thing? What does she do? What is she?

She thinks she should learn to be prepared by now. Have a planned response to these sorts of questions. Because obviously the trust is far from what she ever wants to reveal.

Camila immediately falls back to the list. It baffles her how that comes to her and has come to her in the past. How was she so willing to share this? It's the only thing she's actually doing with her life. The only thing worth mentioning.

She's not sure if that makes her exciting or just pathetic.
"I'm actually, um, working on a bucket list," Camila begins, eyes flickering uncertainly between the girls.

Lauren stares at her almost incredulously, as if surprised with the fact that Camila has so willingly given up this piece of information. "I'm having some trouble trying to finish writing it though."

"Yeah you're having trouble actually finish it too, Mila," Dinah adds.

It doesn't take long before she's telling them about each and every item on the list. She leaves the important one for last, casting a furtive glance towards Lauren who has moved away from her during her brief explanation.

Lauren promptly averts her eyes, and pretends to fiddle with something on Alexa's desk.

Veronica sits upright in her seat as Camila's list comes to a close; it reminds Camila distinctly of a dog with their attention grabbed. Striking a close resemblance to an overly enthusiastic golden retriever waiting for the frisbee to be thrown.

"Wait you're a virgin? Dude sign me the hell up I'll totally sleep with you."

Camila flushes and Lauren drops whatever she's holding in her hand. It lands as a sharp clatter against the wooden desk making all heads turn to her.

Lauren scrambles to grab her phone, Camila realizes.

She wonders absently if Lauren's been texting Ashley. The thought makes her lips curl into frown.

"I kind of already made an – arrangement with someone." Camila forces herself to train her gaze away from her flushing neighbor.

It seems to be futile considering she catches Lucy and Alexa exchanging a look. Veronica remains oblivious, hanging over the back of the chair again, and pouts.

"Bummer, but you know, if you ever change your mind..." She smiles widely. "I can help you out with your weed problem though," Veronica continues with an appreciative nod. Camila watches as the girl rolls on the chair towards Alexa's desk. She reaches for the purse with the long strap dangling over the edge of the table.

"Are you gonna smoke a bowl now?" Lucy questions.

"We're helping bow girl with her list," Veronica retorts, digging through her bag.

"I don't want to go home smelling."

"You're not going to smell, Lucy," Alexa drawls from the bed.

"Excuse me. Tell that to my dad. He's like part bloodhound."

"I got a special delivery from my dealer's boss. She actually flew in from Texas with some new strains straight from Colorado."

Camila watches as Veronica pulls out various prescription bottles.

It reminds her of the pills on her nightstand. A cold chill falls down her spine when Veronica uncaps the bottle. She brings the edge of the rim up to her nose inhaling briefly. Her mouth curves into a mischievous smile. "Dank."
The other girls laugh. Camila's attention flickers to Lauren and catches her neighbor roll her eyes, making Camila wonders if Veronica is the type of person who wears weed socks.

Veronica passes around the bottles, allowing the girls to observe them.

Camila is too busy watching the exchange that she doesn't notice Lauren sidle up to her. There's a nervous expression across her pale face that Camila recognizes as embarrassment.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." I think.

The prospect of actually doing the smoking sounded a lot more appealing as she was writing it down. Now that it's finally presented before her. Well...

"This isn't your best idea, Walz," Dinah says. "Then again, I don't think you've ever had any good ideas." She adds with an amused smile.

"No one's going to pressure you," Lauren mutters, reminding her that her neighbor is watching her closely.

Despite the apprehension with the situation, Camila feels a twinge of annoyance at Lauren's concern. She's not a child. She doesn't need one of those stupid lectures they gave in excess in middle school about saying no to drugs.

Her mouth twists into a frown. "I know that."

There's a bite in her voice that she doesn't mean to come out. Lauren's tiny recoil is evident enough that her response was harsher than necessary. Immediately, the guilt comes to surface and she feels herself visibly deflate.

The apology is on her tongue, but before she can make words form, Veronica lets out a loud cry. Both of them turn to the girls to find Alexa shaking her head and Lucy roll her eyes as Veronica brings a hand to her forehead.

"I forgot Elda," Veronica whines.

Camila blinks, perplexed at the sudden outburst. "Elda?"

"Her pipe," Lucy murmurs exasperatedly. Camila pulls her eyebrows together, and glances from each girl even more befuddled.

"She bought a pipe," Alexa begins, patting the girl's head. "And according to Vero it reminds her so much of the Elder wand from Harry Potter. She calls it Elder, but then later changes it because it felt more like an Elda."

"She's beautiful," Vero mumbles, voice muffled by her hands.

Alexa sighs. "Joint it is then."

Music blares as Lauren and Alexa fiddle with the speaker sitting at her desk. Something with a heavy bass drop that makes Camila feel like she's in some club.
She watches silently, as Veronica twists the grinder a few times, then peels open the metal cylinder and pours out the unfamiliar substance.

The smell tickles her nose, and leaves an unsavory taste in the back of her throat. She makes a face before she realizes it.

"Don't knock it until you try it bow girl," Veronica says, with a wide smile.

"You can't roll a joint to save your life, Vero," Lucy sighs, reaching for it. The other slaps her hands away.

"And you think you can do any better?"

"I don't think, I know."

Vero ignores her and proceeds to fold the paper. The process takes a few tries, commentated by Lucy's snide comments and disgruntled scoff. But eventually Veronica holds up the rolled paper triumphantly.

"The way they praise it is like they're holding up simba or something," Dinah mumbles.

Veronica grabs the nearest lighter on the table. The flame flicks on, dancing dangerously close to the tip of the joint, until finally Camila sees the tiny embers, and the trail of smoke spark the end. She holds it out to her.

"You wanna do the honors bow girl?"

"She doesn't know how to smoke it, genius," Lucy snaps, snatching away the joint.

"I know that." Vero rolls her eyes. "That's why I offered, geez. Besides," she says slowly, glancing back at her. She feels Vero's gaze, heavy against her. Traveling up and down her body slowly. Camila shifts uncomfortably. "She looks more like a hands-on learner. Aren't you, bow girl?"

Her eyes dart nervously towards Lucy taking a deep drag, and Veronica smiling widely at her.

"We could always do blowbacks," Veronica suggests, taking the joint from Lucy. "Come closer."

She doesn't wait for Camila to move, instead scooting too close the already short distance between them. Veronica's fingers tangle into her hair. She feels her manicured nails gently scratch into her scalp. She brings their faces closer, as she goes to take a deep drag of the joint.

"Whoa whoa what are you doing?" Lauren's voice booms over the music. Camila directs her attention towards her. Lauren is glaring at Veronica, as she pulls Camila upright from the edge of the bed.

"She wanted to try blowbacks." Veronica shrugs.

Lauren then whips around to glare at Camila.

"Did you really? Or is she just saying that?"

"Glad to know you trust me," Veronica mumbles sardonically.
"Yes," Camila snaps, roughly tugging her hand away. "Now let me do my blowback."

"I'm liking you more and more bow girl." One of Veronica's eyebrows cocks upward.

"She has a name," Lauren scoffs.

"Unless, you want to do them with her, Lauren?" Veronica questions rather smugly.

At this Lauren promptly flushes. Veronica jumps from her seat and points an accusing finger at her. "I knew it! You guys are totally dating."

"That's not - no - we're not -"

"So you really don't mind if I try to hook up with her?" Veronica asks innocently.

"What the hell? Of course I fucking mind. I don't want you corrupting my friend."

"What if I want to be corrupted?" Camila finally pipes in when she gets the chance.

Lauren stops what she's doing, and stares at her. Something flickers in her green eyes, something that looks an awful lot like betrayal. And then her expression tightens, a wall comes up that leaves Camila forced to decipher her face.

She doesn't get much of a chance to read it because then Lauren turns on her heel and storms out of the room.

"Is she mad?" Veronica probes awkwardly.

"No shit Sherlock," Dinah scoffs.

Camila feels a twinge of annoyance at the question. If anyone who knows Lauren it should be these people, right?

She rises from her seat, and moves towards the door.

After walking around the empty house for several minutes, stumbling into multiple rooms just to find them empty, she finds Lauren downstairs in the kitchen. She's leaning against the kitchen counter, arms crossed and a frown on her face.

"What are you doing?" Camila is the first to speak.

"What's it to you?" Lauren snaps. Camila sighs wearily.

"Can you stop that?"

"Stop what?"

"Being so – I don't know – petulant."

Lauren immediately straightens her posture. "Me? Petulant? You've got to be kidding me. Who's the one that sulks every time Ashley gets potentially brought up?"

"I do not sulk. The only one sulking here is you."


"Are you sure? Because it really seems like you do."
"I don't care what you do."

"Really?"

"Or who you do it with. So go do your dumb blowbacks."

Anger begins to flare up in her chest at the turn of conversation. It's irritating how hot and cold things are with Lauren. If she isn't trying to kiss Lauren, she's arguing with her. And this whole thing could have been avoided had she not invited Camila to this stupid get together in the first place.

Camila begins to get the distinct impression that they're talking about more than just blowbacks.

"If you would just stop acting like your friends stole your toy you'd realize I want you to care," Camila snaps. "And I don't want to do blowbacks with them. I want to do them with you."

Lauren's rigid posture falls. Her green eyes widen, dropping any sense of bite. The longer she holds her gaze the faster the annoyance fades away. Because it's Lauren, and Lauren has this infuriating way of making the anger bubble inside of her while simultaneously making it fade away.

"You want to..." Lauren begins uncertainly.

"Yes," Camila murmurs softly. "With you."

"Me?"

"Only you."

"Camz."

The nickname rings through her ears, sounding soft and melodious at the same time.

"So will you come back and do a blowback with me? Because I'm pretty sure we're breaking about fifty rules on your dumb list right now," she mutters. That immediately breaks the tension because then Lauren scoffs.

"Camila there are only six rules."

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By the time they head back to the room, there's another joint going around.

Veronica hands it over, wearing a shit-eating grin, as her brown eyes dart from Camila to Lauren.

Camila tries not to think up of the ridiculous scenarios the girl has probably conjured up during their time away from the girls. Instead she tries to pay attention to Lauren holding the joint.

Camila has never been into smokers.

(She thinks it probably has to do with lung cancer or something).

Yet, she cannot deny the strangely satisfying feeling that comes with seeing Lauren hold the joint close to her face.
Then again, it seems as if everything Lauren does is strangely satisfying, as annoying as that is to admit.

"Come here," Lauren commands tentatively. If Camila weren't so close already she probably would have missed it. Green eyes lock upon hers for half a second before sliding down to her lips.

She feels Lauren grab her wrists, bringing their hands up between them.

Lauren turns her head, making Camila's nose brush against her cheek. She feels the flesh hallow out as Lauren brings the joint to her lips and inhales. She quickly turns to face Camila, cupping the tiny space between them. She barely feels the brush of Lauren's lips as she inhales deeply.

An earthy taste filters through her mouth, mixed with something she assumes is irrevocably Lauren.

"Now exhale," Lauren mutters.

"Blowbacks never work," Alexa mumbles. "She needs to actually smoke it."

Camila pulls off the scrunchie from her wrist, and throws her hair up into a ponytail.

"Alright, let's do this," Camila says, hoping the nerves aren't apparent in her voice.

"Don't think this is a good idea, Walz," Dinah chimes in. Camila gives her a look that roughly translates to 'I can do what I want'. Dinah then promptly shrugs.

Lauren holds out the joint, and she takes it with uncertain hands. She holds it between her fingers and brings it up to her mouth, glancing at Lauren who's eyes flicker down to her lips.

Camila inhales, instantly feeling the smoke travel down her throat, slippery and filling her lungs. The intake is too much, and she ends up coughing, except it comes out much more rougher than how it went down. Her throat burns. Thick white smoke rolls out in heavy puffs with each scorching cough. She heaves, a desperate short lived one before she another cough bursts out.

"Give her some water." She hears one of them say.

A water bottle with the top unscrewed is thrust upon her. She grasps it, taking a slow drink. The water cools her throat down, coating her windpipe in a soothing way.

The coughing subsides, and all of the girls laugh, along with Lauren.

She passes the joint back to Lauren, her burning throat being a living embodiment of regret of inhaling that. Lauren giggles, before taking another hit.

"Now you can cross this off your list, bow girl," Veronica says cheerfully.

"Right," Camila mutters, voice hoarse. Another round of laughter resounds through the room.

"I have an idea," Veronica states, abruptly rising from her seat and ambling towards the desk. She searches around the desk until she finds a notebook and pen, and heads back to the bed. "We can help you finish making your list."

"Okay."

"I say you put down stuff you really want to do but never got the chance to," Lucy suggests.

"That is literally what a bucket list is," Alexa deadpans.
"Okay listen, I don't need this kind of negativity," Lucy quips.

"Yeah like what about prom? Did you go to yours?" Veronica asks, ignoring the banter between the two.

"Um, no..." Camila frowns.

Veronica hastily scribbles something down. "You ever been to a concert?"

Camila shakes her head.

The girls continue to rattle off about the things she could be doing. Veronica writes furiously on the notepad, with Alexa and Lucy occasionally chiming in.

She glances around the room and finds Lauren sitting on the floor at the foot of the bed. Green eyes stare back at her, dark and wide, melding in with the black pupils. The grey hazy filter in the room circulates in lazy spirals, brushing against Lauren's pale face.

Camila's gaze is locked, entranced with the sight. Captivated with the way Lauren can be so effortlessly beautiful and make sitting on the floor look so attractive.

Lauren's red lips tilt into a small smile. It's the first time this whole night that she's smiled at her this way. The way that reminds her of the moment just before she kissed her that time in her room.

Camila's heart picks up, and she swallows thickly.

"Come sit next to me," Lauren says.

She doesn't need telling twice, moving to sit beside her. Her back presses against the mattress as she scoots closer, shoulders brushing against Lauren's.

She vaguely hears the girls giggling on the bed above them.

"Hi," Lauren says with a smile.

Camila bites down the smile forming on her face as she murmurs a shy: "Hi."

"You okay?"

"I'm good," Camila reassures. "I'm fine."

Lauren's smile grows, showing off pearly white teeth. They contrast sharply to the red lipstick across her lips. Camila's eyes dart down to her mouth, studying the white shiny surface, and ridges pressing against soft crimson skin. She suddenly begins thinking how nice it would be to feel the edges of Lauren's teeth with her tongue. Taste the lipstick smeared across her mouth, feel the soft, slippery touch of Lauren's own tongue.

She flushes at the thought, turning her head away abruptly. She's parched, and she isn't sure if it's just the drugs anymore.

Camila waits for something to come - anything besides the horrible smoky aftertaste lodged in the back of her throat. She sips on the water bottle they handed her, noticing glumly that it's already half empty. Yet the dryness on her tongue hasn't faded.

"Turn up the music." She hears Alexa command from the bed. "Put that playlist we were listening to the other day on."
Camila leans back against the mattress, relishing in the softness of the cushion. She feels the bed dip behind her, and watches as Veronica scrambles over towards the desk, searching through the iPod hooked up to the speaker.

A small snort falls from the girl as she holds the screen up to them.

"Puff the magic dragon. Very original Alexa."

A light, bubbly sensation builds in the pit of her stomach. Camila doesn't realize what it is until afterwards.

Laughter.

"What's so funny?" Lauren's voice breaks through her giggling.

She blinks slowly, realizing just how heavy her eyelids feel. Lauren's eyes are black, and Camila absently wonders if it's because of the dim lighting. Or maybe Lauren's always had black eyes, and she's just noticing now. Black like burning coals.

A dopey smile forms on her face as she leans closer.

"You were in love with a dragon," Camila says.

"What?" Lauren giggles again.

"You told me that once," Camila mumbles. She feels her face grow warm as the words roll out, slick and smooth. A delightful sort of word vomit. "You said you fell in love with a dragon."

"I said that when we were, like, five," Lauren laughs gently.

"So you still said it," Camila retorts.

Her head feels light, but she can't hold it up. There's an ache in her neck that she thinks probably came from trying to hold her head up. It's a fickle contradiction. The though brings a slow, dull smile to her face. And then a giggle threatens to erupt from her upturned lips.

Lauren catches it, and bursts out into a small chuckle.

Adorably half lidded green eyes study her appreciatively. She's sure her face would be burning....if it didn't feel so hot already.

And then she feels warm knuckles ghosting over nape of her neck, as Lauren twirls her ponytail between her fingers.

"I used to like it when you wore your hair up," Lauren mumbles, eyes cast down. "You didn't do it very often."

"Something about being exposed freaks me out," Camila responds thickly. "And I don't really like showing off my neck."

She hears Lauren inhale sharply.

"That's my favorite part," Lauren murmurs.

Camila suddenly feels a slow, tentative stroke of fingertips running along her neck. A shiver erupts, and she trembles beneath Lauren's touch.
Lauren was always the affectionate one among her friends. There always were physical words and phrases in the way she touched someone. As if she was speaking a simpler language across someone's skin.

The language was an easier one to understand. It was one Camila was actually quite fluent in. Or at least she used to be.

Because Lauren was always the affectionate one with Camila in particular.

And she relished in it, soaking up every opportunity in which Lauren would dote on her. Play with her hair. Pull her into hugs. Intertwine their fingers. Cuddle up during sleepovers.

She remembers being quite selfish when it came to Lauren's affection.

It's reminiscent now, feeling Lauren's hands on her. It's almost as if she's back to being in –

She isn't really sure how it happens, that Lauren is pressed up against her side, face buried in her neck. She feels Lauren's breath on her skin, warm, slow puffs beating against her neck.

"You smell nice," Lauren mumbles against her. The words dance across her skin, skimming the few stray strands of her hair. An involuntary shiver travels down her spine, causing a buzzing ripple effect down to her toes.

She idly wonders if it's the drugs or if it's just Lauren herself who makes her body react this way.

She feels Lauren's nose, and the nostrils inhale against her flesh, again. Long and deep. It tickles and makes Camila squirm, unintentionally cradling Lauren's face between her cheek and shoulder.

"You smell, like, really nice," Lauren sighs, lips brushing against Camila's neck.

"You already said that."

"I can say it again if I want to," Lauren exhales. Hot breath suffuses throughout her body.

And then she feels something. Something so distinctive, something she hadn't felt in this reality. But it was something that was plaguing her mind ever since that dream.

Lips. The softness of lips. The pressure of pursed lips. Lips puckered into a half kiss. A gentle pout against her warm skin.

Camila's body stiffens, as Lauren's mouth moves without rhythm, without cause or reason, parting and closing around the all too sensitive flesh.

Lauren's mouth parts again and Camila feels the brief sensation of a smooth, hot tongue. And then she feels it again as Lauren abandons any notion of pressing her lips closed.

She begins leaving open mouthed kisses moving closer and closer to the nape of her neck.

Her teeth are gentle. It's not like Lauren's never bitten her before, but now the context is so inherently different. It's – well – hot, if Camila is being completely honest. And beneath this hazy high, honesty seems to be the only thing that's registered from her brain to her mouth.

She feels the tip of Lauren’s tongue softly trace a small circle against her skin. Camila swallows hard, hoping it doesn't derail her from her ministrations.

Somewhere between the dizzying sensation of Lauren's sucking, Camila's hand finds its way into her
neighbor's hair. Her fingers get caught; unintentionally tugging and making Lauren pull away with a soft grunt.

An apology is already forming on her lips, because really the last thing she wants is for Lauren to stop, but before she can so much as say anything, Lauren bites down hard on her already sensitive neck.

The preconceived words fall out in a strangled sound, a cross between a frustrated cry and a suppressed groan. Her fingers curl into Lauren's hair, mirroring the pain of the bite with a sharp yank. Lauren sighs against her neck. Feverish breathing falls in short puffs, dancing between the miniscule trapped space of her raw neck and Lauren's warm lips.

Camila feels her mouth begin to move up her neck, trailing her jaw line. The kisses turn sloppy again as they come closer to Camila's mouth. Lauren's uneven breathing beats against her lips, her nose brushes against hers. She knows this routine. She'd been craving it ever since Lauren gave it to her that moment that feels so long ago.

Her hand tightens around Lauren's hair, as she pulls her closer, and crushes their mouths together in a searing kiss. Lips part immediately, sucking, tasting, pulling, dipping, sliding. She feels Lauren's moan against her tongue, arousing every part of her senses. Putting everything, every touch, every sound on hyper sensitive alert.

Camila's other hand trails down Lauren's waist, fisting the material of her shirt before coming across Lauren's skin. Her fingertips push the hem of Lauren's top higher until –

"Well this just got infinitely more exciting."

Somewhere Camila registers Veronica's voice, but for the life of her can't bring herself to care. Lauren on the other hand, pulls away immediately.

She blinks, eyebrows pulling together. Camila takes in her appearance. Hair disheveled from Camila's tugging, mouth red and puffy, lipstick smudged. It takes nearly everything in her not to pull her back into her space.

"Um, I – I need to use the restroom," Lauren blurts out, rising from her seat before Camila can offer some sort of protest. She scrambles out of the room and the door shuts loudly behind her.

The girls all glance down at Camila on the floor. At least Alexa and Lucy have the decency to try to hide their smiles, but Veronica full on grins.

"You've got a little..." she trails off, gesturing wiping something off her mouth. "And Lucy you owe me five dollars."

"I'm not giving you five dollars. This didn't prove anything!"

"They were literally, like sucking face right now. How does that not prove anything?"

Lucy turns to her. "Camila, are you guys dating?"

"No," Camila mutters.

"See?"

"Camila, are you guys fuck buddies?" Veronica interrupts patiently.
"Guys, come on," Alexa interjects wearily.

No but she agreed to have sex with me.

And apparently she said that out loud.

They all burst into laughter. A flush graces her cheeks, as she leans back against the mattress, head tilted back up towards the ceiling. For some reason this all isn't bothering her as much as it usually would. It's actually kind of – dare she say it – funny.

"I kind of really want to have sex with her," Camila continues.

"Same," Veronica responds sagely.

"I already did," Lucy snorts.

"Me too," Alex adds.

"What the hell why am I always the one left out?" Veronica snaps.

She then expects Dinah's sassy inappropriate comment. Perhaps a tasteless orgy joke.

She waits for the crass teasing, followed by the roll of laughter. She even anticipates the smug "I told you so". Except none of these things come. Not one.

She lifts her head up, glancing blearily across the hazy room. Her eyes flit around the girls in a similar daze, looking for the familiar smile, the bronze complexion, and the golden mane of hair. And when none of these features focus in on the girls sitting before her, something inside her brain clicks.

"Where's Dinah?" Camila questions abruptly.

"Dinah?" Veronica probes languidly. "Who's Dinah?"

The grin on Alexa's face falls.

"That sounds so familiar," Lucy comments from beside her. "Like I heard it in a dream," she adds wistfully.

"You claim everything you hear is from dreams," Veronica retorts.

"Guys..." Alexa begins.

"Wait, didn't she go to our school too? She was that hot shot surfer, right? The one that died last year. My brother told me the school had this big memorial service for her."

"Wow, that's so sad-"

"-Guys-"

"-Yeah apparently she got caught in a riptide or something."

"A riptide?"

"You'd think a surfer would know how to swim out of one though."

"Dude that's fucked up. She totally died."
"Sorry, you're right."

"Guys!" Alexa nearly shouts. She gestures to Camila pointedly, and the others fall silent.

"Bow girl, where're you going? You're going to miss my favorite song," Veronica calls, but Camila only half listens. The other half is acutely aware of the heavy pounding her heart makes against her chest.

On her way out she thinks she might've heard their hushed voices beneath the music. She might've heard Alexa.

"Guys, she was their friend."

Camila slams the door behind her before she can hear anymore.

Her breathing is loud and uneven, as she stumbles out into the hallway. Pictures upon pictures of Alexa and her family adorn the painted walls.

She pushes through the hallway, her feet catching on the carpet. Her hands grasp at the wall, blindly looking for something, a door, an exit, anything. Her fingertips feel the cool wall; it contrasts with her feverish skin. For a moment she considers pressing her face against the wall, in an attempt to cool down, but the thought is dashed away when her fingers find a doorknob. They latch on to the metal surface and turn.

She stumbles into the doorway without so much as glancing up. She lets out a shaky breath when she spots the overly shiny floor and realizes she's in the bathroom. A tiny sense of relief trickles down her chest, before it is completely washed away by the tidal wave of panic. It recedes, pulling away like a straining elastic band before crashing back down upon her.

Her chest constricts as her breathing becomes heavy and laborious. Each breath comes out in painful huffs.

She slams the door shut behind her, and slumps heavily against it. The back of her head hits the wooden surface, but the pain goes ignored. It's nothing compared to the tightening of her throat, and the feeling that her lungs are filling up.

"She's not here," Camila mutters, pacing around the bathroom in a frenzy. Her shoes screech against the shiny tile floor, her speed increases. A hand runs through her hair, fingers get tangled within locks, and Camila ends up pulling. "She's not here. I don't know where she's at. She doesn't do this. She doesn't just leave."

The sound of rushing water muffles her ears. Hard pressurized liquid beating against a hard surface. It runs through her ear canal, twisting in rapid motions in her head.

Stop it. Turn it off. Turn it off.

It feels almost as if the water is rattling through her skull, before completely submerging her beneath the surface.

She makes her way toward the running sink, catching a brief hazy glimpse of the white rush stream down the shiny silver faucet. Trembling hands already reaching for the sink.

Her eyes take in her disheveled state in the mirror. The stranger is frantic, dull brown eyes blown out black. Mouth twisted into a pained grimace. The pale skin looks grey, cheeks hollowed out.
Camila glances down the face, past the trembling chin covered in smeared lipstick, and down the neck. That's when she notices it, bright red, shaped in a crooked, slanted over just in the spot where Lauren's mouth was a few minutes ago.

She glances at her reflection again, and that's when she barely comes to the realization that someone is already there.

_The water was on..._

She sees Lauren behind her, white-faced, as if she's seen a ghost.

"Camila?"

It snaps Camila out of her split attention.

It shatters the panic, piercing it right down the middle. It crumbles around her. The remnants of the panic attack become clear as she blinks weakly. The death grip around the sink loosens and her hands ache from it.

"Camila," Lauren starts tentatively, but she's not listening. In fact, she's less than half aware of Lauren even being here. "What did they do?" Lauren's tone turns defensive.

And Camila feels absolutely disgusted with herself. Ashamed that she still lets this get to her. Mortified that this affects her so heavily at any given moment. That she is still susceptible to even the slightest of triggers – the mere mention of her best friend's name.

It comes out dirty as it rolls out of the mouths of people who never knew her, who probably can't even put a face to a name, who most likely never spoke to her.

It strikes a nerve. It makes everything about her entire situation blatant, and vulnerable.

It makes everything obvious that the residue Dinah left behind is still very much inside, and coated in the inner walls of her heart. A perpetual stain that she can't physically see, but she feels. God does she feel it. Twisting, stabbing, aching, and suffocating.

It's a disturbing sensation that makes her feel irrevocably weak. Terribly below the average line of sanity. *Not normal.*

Nothing about her is normal at this point. And nothing ever will be.

She wants to scream. She wants to cry. She wants to do anything besides remain silent and let the tension build like a brewing storm.

It feels like swallowing down a dry pill. One of her pills. Bright, vibrant blue. Harsh and out of place sliding down her esophagus, leaving a trail of the taste of manufactured chemicals in her mouth.

_You're good....you're fine..._

Camila blinks away the tears she was unaware were building. They spill over her, leaving a hot, treacherous trail down her cheeks. She brings trembling hands, to wipe at her face, attempting to hide the evidence from the girl before her. But it's too late.

Lauren is in her space, encroaching upon what little oxygen seems dispersed around her. Camila inhales, but it turns into heaving.

_Leave me alone. Please just go. Please please._
"Mila, breathe."

Her head snaps up, and she sees her over Lauren's shoulder. She sees her over Lauren's worried face. She hears her over the frantic voice questioning her.

Dinah steps closer.

"Just breathe. You're good. You're fine."

Camila inhales sharply against Lauren's shoulder, and lets out a shaky exhale. The process repeats until Camila finally feels her breathing come out in steady, even puffs.

"Please," Camila utters out in a trembling voice. "Please – I need to – I want to go home."

Camila isn't sure what Lauren exactly said to the girls or if she even said anything at all. One minute she's leaning against the sink, silent beside Dinah, and the next they're inside Lauren's car.

The ride back home is silent. The music between them fills in the empty, distant gap that grew after the bathroom. Camila is thankful for it. She's not sure how she could explain what happened. She's not sure she even wants to.

The thought of having to reveal that part of herself fills her with an oncoming sense of dread.

At this point, Lauren is the only person that makes her feel almost normal. Hanging out with her friends – it was almost normal. She behaved almost normally until –

Shame wells up inside of her as she turns to study the side of Lauren's face. Thick eyebrows are pulled together, green eyes dark and focused upon the road ahead. But even from this side profile, half illuminated only from the stereo screen of the car, Camila can see the look on her face.

It's a look that hasn't really left since they've left Alexa's house.

An expression she's not used to, and immediately makes the self-loathing more apparent. Because Lauren isn't reflecting the look people usually do in regard to Camila. It's different.

Not that fragile tea-cup look.

The normal one that equates to people being scared for her.

It's a different one that makes Camila feel like Lauren is scared of her.

They pull up into Lauren's driveway. The front porch light is off, and they're submerged in complete darkness when Lauren turns the keys in the ignition.

She hears Lauren swallow thickly. She hears the nervous breath and the soft sigh fall from her lips. Anticipation floods her system. Because she knows what's coming next. She had anxiously waited for Lauren to question the entire thing from the moment it happened.

Lauren turns to her. Camila can't really see her face, besides the gleam of her eyes. But even that is unreadable.

"It was just the drugs, right?"
It's not what Camila is expecting at all. In fact it's the complete opposite.

Lauren never brushed things away. She was always so straight-forward in her confrontations. She never was one to beat around the bush, nor one to avoid things entirely.

It takes her a moment to realize that she's giving Camila a choice. She's not demanding anything from her, no explanation. In fact she's giving her an easy out.

For some reason, this makes everything all the more worse.

"I'm not..." Camila hesitates; she averts her eyes attempting to focus anywhere besides the darkness engulfing Lauren's face. Her heart sinks.

And then she decides to meet Lauren halfway in the middle ground she put before them.

"I'm not – okay," she murmurs. She hears her voice shake. She feels her throat clog, and her heart pound painfully in her chest. "But I think that you already knew that."

She glances back at Lauren. She is silent, and Camila desperately wishes she can see her face at this point.

"I thought that maybe I could be, because when I'm with you I kind of forget that I'm not fine."

Lauren moves in her seat. Camila catches the outline of her arm moving forward. A click resounds through the confines of the car, and suddenly light filters around them. Lauren's hand moves from the light switch above the rearview mirror and settles down into her lap.

"Camila," she begins, her voice wavering. Green eyes narrow and Camila is almost sure she's going to refute her statement. Or challenge it at the very least. What surprises her is that Lauren falls back to being quiet.

She takes it as a silent encouragement, though the distressed pinch of her eyebrows says otherwise.

Camila swallows thickly.

"What I mean is... don't expect anything from me, from this." She gestures between them. Lauren eyes lower to her moving hand, before meeting her imploring stare. Camila pauses again, struggling to articulate it the right way.

Lauren reaches forward to take her hand, but she brushes it off quickly.

"I'm not the same person," Camila stops, looking away. "I'm never going to be the same person. So don't expect that from me. Don't expect anything from me because I'll let you down."

Camila waits for the argument. She waits for Lauren's willingness to fight for what she believes in. She waits for Lauren to say something against her. It never comes.

Instead she's met with another middle ground.

"I'm not the same person anymore either, Camila."
It's been three days since Alexa's house.

Three days of silence.

Camila doesn't talk to Lauren the first day.

She doesn't talk to anyone – *living*.

She thinks the sudden relapse in her reclusive behavior makes her mom panic.

No, she knows it does. She's behaving more overbearing than usual.

The first day goes by, and Sofi questions the hickey on her neck during dinner.

Something that she completely forgot about, and clearly neglected to hide from everyone else. She wondered why Dinah didn't say anything to her about it, and when she saw the smirk on her face, Camila didn't even know why she questioned it in the first place.

It didn't matter anyway. Camila didn't really have it in her to be embarrassed the moment her parents glanced up at the mark and exchanged a look.

She was approached after dinner by her father. He had tried giving her an uncomfortable talk about feelings and urges.

The second day, her mother had tried to talk to her. It was more of a plea to stay away from bad influences, which Camila roughly translated to Lauren. She became defensive and the desire to reach out to her neighbor overcame her initial avoidance.

The conversation then turned into an argument. The argument turned into a forced session with Dr. Abernathy.

And Abernathy's brilliant solution was to cut down on her medication dosage. Which only served to irritate her more.

She equated the cut of grams to more therapy. More talking.

And she was very tired of talking.

The third day, Camila wants to be left alone. Which was something her mother had a hard time understanding as well.

But she's never really alone anyway. Not with Dinah ghosting around her.

Except things between Camila and Dinah had been – *strange*.

Camila doesn't bring it up. Not at first.

But it lingers in the back of her mind like the patches of wet pavement after a rainy night. She soaks in the hazy, damp morning beneath the omnipresent clouds, precariously avoiding the puddles.
The largest – Dinah.

Camila sets down her medication bottle after she takes her pills, and makes her way back to bed.

Her lap top is propped, already booting. She crawls beneath the blankets, and places the computer in her lap.

The little library of video recordings presents itself, as she opens the folder. Her eyes glance over the dated files, hovering over the thumbnail, before she clicks on one.

It plays, and three seconds in Camila immediately remembers the time and place, as if it were yesterday.

The sharp pang in her chest reminds her that she does wish it was only yesterday.

It was a day they were all at the beach. Nothing completely out of the ordinary. She and the girls had an unspoken tradition of bumming around on the sand, watching Dinah master a new trick.

The sun was already beginning its slow descent as the day came to a close in the old footage. Camila can see the captured scene in the frame of the dwindled number of beach goers still present.

The camera moves, focusing in upon someone paddling with the oncoming tide. Camila recognizes Dinah even at the distance.

She studies the video mindlessly. Her eyes follow Dinah's figure, as Dinah treads out of the water, clutching her board underneath her arm. The setting sun darkens the camera's lighting, making Dinah look more like an outline.

Camila hears herself giggling behind the camera.

"Wipe out."

Dinah comes close enough in the frame to make her disgruntled expression apparent.

"Shut up, Walz."

The camera swivels, getting a brief glimpse of Ally and Normani laughing.

"You know she's right." Normani's voice interjects.

"Who's side are you on?" Dinah's voice then demands.

"Obviously mine." Camila hears herself say.

The camera then pans to Lauren, sitting back upon a foldable beach chair, sunglasses perched on her nose and a book open right down the middle.

"Hello beautiful."

Lauren looks up briefly, before pressing her open book to her mouth, probably to hide the growing smile.

"Hey Camz."

"Did you put enough sun block on?"
“You made sure before we even got off the car.” Lauren stares up over her sunglasses flatly.

“Haha, I was being careful. I know how delicate your skin is.”

“Gay!” A distant voice that sound suspiciously like Dinah echoes from the recording.

“Right.” Lauren returns back to her book.

“Actually, I think you did get kind of red around your neck.”

Lauren drops her book, mouth twisted into a pout. “Dude shut up.”

“I'm kidding! Your skin is perfect.”

“Camz.”

“So what's a hot tamale like you doing reading all by herself?”

“I'm gonna throw this book at you.” Lauren raises the offending object above her head in the video.

“Ooh, feisty.”

The footage cuts off, and then promptly comes back into view.

Camila catches herself in the distance, standing beside Lauren. There's a hand going through her hair, as the recording version of herself fights back a smile. Lauren is grinning shyly down at her feet.

“And as you can see here, we have the wild Walz coming in to mark her territory.” Dinah's voice, disguised with a horrible Australian accent, is loud behind the camera. Muffled giggles and snorts come next, followed by Normani's voice.

“Mila's gonna kill you.”

“Shhhhh, after countless rejections of the male mating call, Lauren has accepted the clumsy swag-less Camila Cabello. See how she chooses her mate.”

Camila watches as the recording version of herself pushes her hair back again, only for it to flop over her forehead again. Recording-Lauren leans forward, and tentatively tucks in the stray hair behind her ear.

It's almost stupid how Camila never understood it before. It's stupid how she didn't see, when that's all she can see now.

She sees it in the way their body language used to move. So intricately in sync with even the most miniscule of things. It's the little things that matter, she supposes. The way Lauren's shoulder brushed against hers, or the lingering touch of fingertips. The way they both stared at each other when the other wasn't looking. Camila might as well have had 'heart eyes motherfucker' glued to her forehead.

A loud shout resounds through the computer screen, sounding an awful lot like Dinah's shriek that's a cross between a laugh and a yell.

“What are you guys doing?!” Recording-Camila demands, stomping over towards them. “Give me that!”

The video ends, leaving Camila silently staring at the empty window for a moment.
And then she's back to opening the nearest file because suddenly she's trying to push a thought from forming in her mind.

A thought that's been forming in her mind these past couple of days.

But after watching the brief clip, it becomes undeniable.

She *misses* Lauren, and it's completely absurd because it's only been *three* days.

Yet the thought of tearing herself away from Dinah's presence, and the memories flooding through the computer screen terrifies her. It grips her insides, twisting, and holding residence in the depths of her heart.

Her eyes follow Dinah's movements on the screen, as the new video plays. The girls' laughter filters through the speakers. It sounds distant, despite it being on her lap. It feels muffled against her hollowed out heart.

She catches a glimpse of her past self, as someone takes the camera away from her, and she feels a bubbling sense of resentment.

There's a silly grin on her face, followed by a shrill laugh that overpowers the voices in the recording. Dinah comes up behind her and wraps a long arm around her neck, knocking Camila off balance.

"How did I know you were going to be doing this?"

Dinah Jane stands at the foot of her bed, arms crossed and a smirk on her face. Her voice is loud and amused over the laughing in the video.

A stream of relief filters from Camila's system the moment she hears her best friend's voice. She didn't realize how on edge she was before now.

Dinah steps forward and settles in beside Camila on the bed.

Camila regards her briefly, before returning to the video.

She keeps her eyes trained to the computer screen, watching the waves pull and crash. The golden gleam reflecting off the water's body frames recording-Dinah's hair, creating a glowing effect. She didn't even need a filter, Camila thinks bitterly.

"Are we gonna talk about it?" Dinah asks softly beside her.

Camila watches as recording-Dinah laughs, long manicured fingers coming to hide the large smile and deep set dimples above her bronze cheeks.

Camila feels a sharp twisting pain in her chest at the sight.

"Mila," Dinah addresses her again.

"There's nothing to talk about," she answers shortly.

Camila lets out a sharp breath before pushing her computer off of her lap. She flops back against her mattress and curls away from Dinah.

"I know you're upset I don't even know why you try to hide from me." She hears the teasing in Dinah's voice and it infuriates her.
"Can we please talk about something else?" Camila asks in a small voice. She turns, watching as Dinah furrows her eyebrows.

The silence gives her time to study Dinah. Something that she had caught herself doing frequently over the past few days.

She gazes at the smooth bronze forehead, taking in the small scar above her eyebrows. She remembers Dinah being so self conscious about it, and Camila tracing over it sometimes even pecking it when she was feeling particularly affectionate.

It's almost funny how even in this supernatural state, Dinah is still imperfect.

Camila reaches out, but then stops short before making it to Dinah's face.

Dinah notices and the playful pull at her lips fall into a frown.

The grim expression is brief, but it shifts into something that worries Camila more. A glazed placated look flashes across Dinah's face as the girl cracks into smile.

"Hey what do you think about heaven?"

Camila recoils from the abrupt subject change. She's slow to recover because now she's concerned about the implications behind Dinah's statement.

Immediately she feels her defenses rising. The urge to curl away again becomes strong, but Dinah's expectant. Dark eyes searching hers as if honestly curious about Camila's answer and not at all attempting to bring up the very thing Camila has avoided since -well- forever.

"What do you mean what do I think?"

"Well do you believe in it?"

She hesitates, as she always does with this. She was never a religious person, only going to Christmas mass because her mother would force her, or the few occasions she'd join Dinah and her family because she had nothing better to do. The subject of faith had always left her uncertain and shaky, as if balancing upon a narrow ledge.

She had an uncertain relationship with the belief of God. And it decidedly became worse after Dinah. Because if there really was a god why would they let that happen?

Camila swallows thickly, feeling a large lump in her throat. Her eyes narrow and she sinks further into the pillow. Only half of Dinah's thoughtful face is visible behind the fabric of the pillowcase.

"What's there to think about?"

"Well, do you believe in an afterlife?"

Camila inhales sharply as her chest tightens.

"I believe in reincarnation."

It's not the answer Dinah wants, she knows that. But Dinah accepts it.

"That's a good thing to believe in."

Silence envelopes them. It's uncomfortable. Camila holds her breath for most of it, suddenly afraid of
the consequences of breaking the lack of noise. But Dinah is the first to speak.

"I think I would come back as a fish. Since I practically lived in the water in this life." Dinah smiles, as she turns to look at Camila. "What about you?"

"I'd want to be a bird, but really I think I'd probably be a sloth or something."

"You can be anything you want to be, you know that right, Mila?"

She gets the feeling the Dinah is talking about far more than potential reincarnated lives.

"If you're a fish then how are we supposed to hang out?" Camila questions.

"Then you'd have to come back as a fish, duh, Walz. Lauren would probably need to come back as a fish too. I don't think I could handle your moping."

At the mention of her neighbor's name, Camila's face falls. The memories of their last conversation drifts through her mind sluggishly.

She was humiliated. Ashamed. Every piece of her exposed for Lauren to see. The thought of ever having to face her again makes her want to shrivel up in on herself. Yet at the same time she can't shake that yearning she feels deep in her core to see Lauren.

"I know you're thinking about what happened at Lauren's friend's house," Dinah begins.

Camila head swiftly turns towards her best friend, and before Dinah can continue Camila interrupts her train of thought.

"You left me."

Dinah turns to regard her. Something flickers in her dark eyes, something that unsettles Camila because it's not exactly reassuring. She'll take anything, even an eye roll. But not this unreadable glance.

"Please don't do it again." Camila swallows thickly.

"I wouldn't leave you alone, Mila," Dinah whispers softly.

Camila doesn't know what she means, and she doesn't want to spend the next few minutes trying to decipher it.

But she doesn't have to because there's an unexpected knock on her window. She knows who it is immediately, and feels the blood drain from her face. A part of her, a very large part, wants to ignore it. She wants to bury herself in the bed, close all of her outside environments away.

But there's still another part, a reluctant part, that's dying to see Lauren.

It's either the worst or the best timing, Camila thinks as she heads towards the window, pulls back the curtain, and sees her neighbor standing behind the glass nervously.

She takes it as a blessing in disguise anyway.

Camila lifts up the latch of the window, and pushes it open.

"What are you doing here?" Camila blurts out. She cringes instantly as she realizes she's said that out loud.
"Oh, um, well I came to give you something..." Lauren begins awkwardly. "But I can just go." She takes a hesitant step away from the window, but Camila immediately reaches forward and grabs her wrist.

"Wait no, no come in." Camila lets go, making space from Lauren to climb in over the ledge.

Camila watches anxiously as Lauren comes inside.

"Lucy, Alexa and Veronica wanted me to give you this." Lauren reaches into her pocket, and pulls out a folded piece of lined notebook paper. Her eyes thoughtfully stare down at it, before holding it out to Camila. "It's the list they were making for you."

At the mention of the three girls, Camila's stomach flops. Memories of her hazy induced night come in flashes. She's not sure what her face gives away, but it must show something because Lauren pointedly averts her gaze.

Camila sees the uncertainty and doubt hover over her neighbor, and she isn't sure if it's because of the impromptu making out that happened or the fact that Lauren had witnessed the beginnings of a panic attack.

Camila sighs, taking the paper from her and offering a feeble thanks.

A prolonged silence disperses among the nervous space between them. She wants to say something, anything, to relieve that distressed expression on Lauren's face. But the words die before they can form in her thoughts.

"I'm sorry," Lauren speaks up suddenly. Camila tears her gaze away from her shoes and focuses in upon Lauren.

"Don't do that," she responds thickly. "Don't apologize."

Don't apologize for me, she thinks grimly.

Lauren looks as if she wants to say more about it but doesn't and Camila doesn't know why. Nothing has really ever held Lauren back from speaking her mind.

It comes to a slow realization that it's because of her. Guilt seeps through, making her look away from her neighbor's awkward posture.

"Um," Lauren begins, and Camila whips her attention back to her. "Are you doing anything tomorrow?"

"Why?"

"I was hoping you'd look at the list," Lauren offers in a small voice. "Some of their ideas are actually pretty good."

Camila brings the paper up to her face, eyes scouring over the writing.

"Buy a strap on at the nearest adult store?" Camila reads out loud.

"I said some of their ideas," Lauren grumbles, cheeks turning red.

Camila thinks she hears Veronica's name uttered scathingly among Lauren's grumbling. It almost makes her smile. Almost.
"Anyway, they've suggested going on a roadtrip. I thought that idea was pretty cool?"

"You want to go on a roadtrip?" Camila deadpans, lowering the list.

"Well not exactly. More like a day trip," Lauren says quickly. Camila can hear the nerves in her tone. The similar pitch shift in her voice that denotes to anxiety.

A small part of her wants to reach out and calm her down.

But that's stupid, so Camila keeps her hands to herself.

"I'm not following."

"Well Ally and Normani invited us to go with them. Ally needs to do some deliveries. I'm not really sure what she meant by that. But anyway, they thought it'd be nice if we went."

At the mention of the other girls Camila's eyes fall back upon Dinah. There's a tight frown on Dinah's face. One that becomes ingrained in Camila's mind.

"Come with us," Lauren urges. There's something in her tone that makes Camila's stomach flip, like the feeling one gets right at the steep drop of a roller coaster.

Her eyes flicker to Dinah, and she sees the solemn expression on her friend's face. It tugs at her heart, the pressure momentarily overriding the light sensation pulsing through her belly. She feels herself visibly deflate, as she returns her attention to Lauren.

"I don't think it's a good idea," Camila mutters in a low voice.

Green eyes darken. There's a pull, tugging her eyebrows together as the frown on her face becomes apparent. Camila can already see the questions upon her face. She can already hear them falling past her neighbor's lips.

The questions she doesn't have answers to, at least not without revealing too much. And it all seems so redundant anyway because at this point Lauren knows exactly why.

But then something flickers in Lauren's face, her expression shifts as if she's noticed the apprehension on Camila's features.

There isn't a question or a demand for an explanation. She's not being pushed into a corner and prodded for answers. Instead, she bows her head, breaking the eye contact.

Camila can breathe again.

She exhales silently, and watches as Lauren shifts.

Lauren's voice is low. Camila has to strain to hear it. "I miss you."

It's not what Camila expects. And she's not sure if it's because of the actual statement or the honesty behind it. She feels her chest swell and ache at Lauren's words, as they brush across her face leaving a trail of warm rose colored smudges.

Lauren's eyes dart up, and a matching blush spreads across her cheeks.

"I don't want you to take it the wrong way. I didn't – I mean I don't want you to think I expect anything from you because I don't Camz – Camila," Lauren corrects herself before Camila can say anything. "I know that we're not the same – our relationship isn't the same. But I still miss spending
time with you. Even if this is just a diluted version of what we used to be. I still miss you."

Camila's eyes widen. Her pulse quickens, matching the hasty pace of her beating heart.

There's something there – lingering softly in the space between them, deriving from Lauren's gentle voice, her gentle expression, her gentle eyes.

Hope.

It spreads thickly in lukewarm lava movements, enveloping Camila in a languid embrace. It rises within her, fluttering from the pit of her stomach and bursting in her chest like a series of fireworks.

It's dumb and absurd, and almost wholeheartedly pointless to consider it, to even acknowledge it. The hope welcoming Camila into Lauren.

For the first time in a long time she doesn't feel the condescending urge to look down upon it, to reject it. She doesn't see it and immediately see it as a reflection of her own faults like she does with her mother and everyone else around her.

It's almost like she wants to accept it. From Lauren. Because it's different with her. It's always different with her.

Her voice quivers as she tries to voice her answer. Her gaze returns to Dinah.

Dinah smiles gently and tilts her head in Lauren's direction. "You better go with her thirsty ass."

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.  

The next day, Dinah watches as Camila prepares her things before meeting up with Lauren at her house.

Dinah is silent, which Camila notices immediately. She whips around, and finds her frowning. The usual mirth reflected in her dark eyes is nonexistent. Camila feels her stomach flop suddenly.

"What?" Camila questions, lowering the top in her hands. "What is it? What's wrong?"

Dinah's eyes flicker up to her, the frown still staying in place. Fear twists its way into Camila's body, dipping and turning into every vein. She knows that whatever Dinah is going to say, is not anything good.

"I don't think I should go with you."

Camila drops her sweater. "What?"

Dinah looks away, even going so far as to shift her body in the different direction. A flicker of frustration hits her at Dinah's reluctance. She steps over her sweater and walks towards her best friend.

"What did you say?"

Dinah sighs. "Mila, I really don't think it's a good idea for me to go."
"And why exactly isn't it a good idea?" Camila snaps.

"I don't know." Dinah looks as if she wants to say more, but Camila's attention is stolen by the buzzing of her phone. Camila glances down at the screen.

"Look, they'll be on their way soon. Please, I just want this to be a good day. Just stay with me."

"Fine."

When Camila joins Lauren, it serves as a distraction from Dinah's behavior. Whether or not this is a good distraction is something Camila questions.

"Are you good?" Lauren asks, as they sit on her front porch steps.

It feels like she's asking if Camila's going to be okay. If she's going to be alright around the girls. If she's feeling like she's going to have some sort of incident similar to the one at Alexa's house.

Camila tries to write it off as her overanalyzing the situation. And perhaps her conversation with Dinah had been making her paranoid.

But Ally and Normani arrive early, which Camila is thankful for. She hasn't really wanted to spend so much time around Lauren alone. Despite Camila's self-reassurances, things were beginning to feel a little weird, and she could have sworn Lauren was looking at her differently now. And she hated it.

She noticed it in the small gestures. And perhaps this is all put on hyper sensitivity after she had watched old recordings of their past selves and how they used to be.

It's a stark difference to what their relationship is now. Where they used to balance each other out. Now they're teetering over the peak of a high point. And Camila isn't sure if she's pushing Lauren over or herself anymore.

But if it's possible things are even more different now. Which is ridiculous because it hadn't even been a full day that she was craving Lauren's presence. That she was resigned to accepting Lauren's invitation and she wasn't questioning anything about it.

Today was different. She noticed it in Lauren's eyes. Guarded and clouded with something Camila has become accustomed to over the year. Though seeing it in the green depths hurts her more than she personally will admit.

Lauren is hovering. It reminds her of her mother. Overbearing, treating her like that fragile tea cup.

Lauren holds the door open for her, as the girls enter the SUV. Lauren constantly asks how she's doing, which grates her.

She can hear Dinah huff from the backseat. She can only imagine what kind of comments are going to come out of her mouth this time.

The ride is initially very quiet, and Camila knows it's because of her. She knows that her presence probably drains the outside world. She spends the majority of the silence glancing towards the back seat to make sure that Dinah is still there. And when Dinah notices what she's doing, she rolls her
eyes.

It's not until they stop for gas, that Camila gets the opportunity to finally hear Dinah's commentary that was lacking for the duration of the ride.

Camila leans against the side of Normani's SUV, as the rest of the girls head inside the convenience store for a snack and bathroom break.

"You're acting like a kid on their first day of pre-school," Dinah mutters.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Camila responds.

"If I remember you cried when your mom left you at the school gate."

"That only happened on the first day."

"Nah, more like the first week."

"Well what do you want me to do?"

"I don't know, stop being so weird."

"I'm not being weird."

Camila scoffs, but puts the conversation to rest once the girls return to the car. Lauren sidles up to her. She sees the uncertainty in her green eyes. Camila almost expects the question to fall from her lips. The concerned one. But then Lauren holds up a red freezer pop in front of Camila's face.

"They had your flavor," Lauren says.

Camila's not sure what it is. Maybe it's the way Lauren's been acting all day. Maybe it's the ice cream thing all over again that gets to her. Or maybe it's the fact that Lauren doesn't outright hand it over, but goes so far as open it for her first that makes the inadequate feelings come full force – recycling back into her body and making her snap.

"What are you doing?" Camila blurts out.

Lauren's eyebrows pull together in confusion, as she holds out the ice cream for her to grab.

"What?"

"You're looking at me like – like that," Camila exclaims, raising an accusing finger in Lauren's face.

"Like what?" Lauren questions innocently.

"Don't do that. Everyone always looks at me like that. Like I'm going to break or something."

"I don't understand what you're talking about."

"I don't need you to take care of me," Camila snaps.

Lauren's green eyes widen, as she lowers the held out freezer pop. Camila watches as the melted flavoring drips down out of the opened package.

"What the hell? I'm just trying to give you ice cream," Lauren responds defensively. "This isn't some kind of sympathy gesture. I literally saw this in the store and thought of you, okay?"
"Jesus Mila just take the poor girl's Popsicle," Dinah whines.

"I can just give it to Ally if you really don't want it," Lauren continues.

"Fine, do what you want."

"Okay then."

She's embarrassed, and she feels like a child for rejecting Lauren's ice cream. The feeling of Lauren bringing out the irritation within her comes, and she hates that. She hates how easily she can flip like a switch. On and off in a series of negative emotions. Especially over something so stupid as an ice cream popsicle.

The guilt hits her as it usually does when she realizes she's said or done something she immediately regrets. It's starting to become a gross habit around Lauren.

"Wait, no," Camila calls out, making Lauren stop in her tracks. Her neighbor slowly turns back around and shoots her an expected glance. "I, um, I actually want it."

Lauren eyes her for a moment, before handing it over to her.

"Thank you."

She hears Dinah making a distinct gagging noise in the background.

Ally and Normani return a few minutes later, and Camila slips inside the car after throwing away the empty wrapper.

She feels her phone buzz. Thinking it's her mother, she almost ignores it, but when she catches a glimpse of the screen and sees Lauren's name she opens it.

L : I'm sorry

C: dont apologize

There's something strangely secretive texting Lauren while sitting next to her. Like passing notes in class. Stuck in their own intimate bubble of private conversation. Camila finds it easier being honest as well. Almost effortless to be free of the angst and complicated conflict within her emotions.

C: I was being a jerk and taking it out on you

L: you were right though

Camila turns to look at Lauren with a questioning rise of her brow. Lauren frowns, before gesturing back towards her phone.

L: I didn't mean to treat you differently

L: I don't mean to do that

Camila looks up from her phone again and meets Lauren's gaze.

Green eyes are warm and forgiving and understanding rolled into one.

Camila's chest aches, as if her heart is swelling to its maximum capacity, seeping through her bones.
She tries to quell the feeling by looking away, but there's an irrevocable draw to Lauren's expression. And each time she tries to avert her gaze, it always ends up getting dragged back again.

She figures she looks like an idiot, especially with Dinah's snickering in the background.

Lauren turns away, as if she's been called. It takes Camila a moment to realize that it's actually herself who's being called.

Camila moves her attention towards the front seats and finds Ally peeking over the shoulder of the passenger's chair.

She looks at Camila expectantly. Camila turns back to Lauren confused.

"Your list," Ally's voice pulls her back. "How is it going with that?" Ally shifts, adjusting her body halfway in her seat. Camila watches as the seatbelt slaps Ally in the face, earning a loud snort from Dinah.

Camila purses her lips to prevent joining in Dinah's laughing.

"Oh, um it's going," Camila murmurs. Ally looks hopeful for more information, and it makes Camila guilty for her lack of response. "Uh actually some people suggested more ideas to add."

"Really? Anything good?" Ally presses. Camila wants to be a little irritated with Ally's questions. It's not really any of her business, and after the whole fiasco that happened at Alexa's house she's not exactly as willing to over share anymore.

But it becomes increasingly more difficult to even be annoyed with the questions when Ally stares at her with hopeful eyes over the shoulder of the seat.

Camila exchanges a look with Lauren, before digging into her pocket. She pulls out the list with the unfamiliar handwriting (writing she assumes belongs to Veronica) and quickly scans it over.

It's probably the first time she's actually reading it. Like reading reading it. She scans over them, slowly becoming impressed with their ideas.

The suggestions almost make her snort. Almost:

1.   Go to prom
2.   Go to a concert have fun, let loose, take some x don't do any of that cultural appropriation shit
3.   Kiss someone in the rain or something equally cheesy
4.   Get a tattoo or a piercing or fuck it get both
5.   Go clubbing
6.   Streaking!!! And invite me when you do that
7.   Roadtrip
8.   Go to a strip club...and get yourself a lap dance for me
9.   Play spin the bottle or some other dumb drinking game
10. BODY SHOTS invite me for this too tho...here just have my number actually text meee
11. Midnight margaritaaaaaaaaas
12. Eat every fried thing imaginable at the fair
13. Go camping for the sexy times
15. Summer loooooove?
16. ADOPT A PUPPY

And then the other side almost makes her choke on her own saliva:

· Buy a strap on from the nearest sex shop
· Fuck Lauren with said strap on I hear she likes it rough
· Get some nipple clamps too trust me on this one
· Buy yourself a vibrator and use it until lauren puts out
· Dirty talk with someone or like, you know me or I guess lauren whatevs (Lucy and Alexa say Lauren likes to be called Daddy btw)
· Have sex in a public place be wilddddd
· one hand on the wheel and the other on the thigh you know what I'm saying

Lauren notices Camila's expression.

"I just want to reiterate that I said some of these were good ideas," Lauren murmurs beside her.

"I actually kind of like Veronica's ideas," Camila whispers back. Lauren promptly flushes and turns away.

Camila glances down at the list again, hesitating. She pointedly refrains from speaking about Veronica's inappropriate suggestions scribbled on the back to Ally's eager face.

"Going to a concert would be nice," Camila finally murmurs. "And the prom thing is kind of cool. I don't know about clubbing..."

"Those sound like great ideas," Ally continues in an encouraging manner. "And actually Normani and I were talking about it the other day and we want to help you. With your list I mean."

Camila's eyes search Ally's face for any sign of insincerity or at least apprehension but this is Ally and she's not sure Ally even has a grain of insincerity in her.

She catches Dinah's eyes through the rear view mirror to find her smiling wistfully at the exchange.

"Right Normani?" Ally nudges the girl driving.

"Yeah definitely," Camila catches Normani's reassuring smile through the rearview mirror.

The warm feeling settles back into her stomach. It's pleasant, lulling her previous anxiety and nerves into a gentle sleep.
Their presences are familiar. And the familiarity doesn't make her want to run as it usually does.

She's touched. Their kindness isn't fabricated or made out to be an obligation like it usually does with practically everyone. It doesn't come with any expectations. It doesn't even seem like they are tolerating her just for the sake of their friendship.

It's almost as if they're in high school again.

Almost.

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The girls make their first stop. Camila watches as Ally consults a tablet she pulled out of her purse. She looks through what appears to be a spreadsheet, before grabbing a box.

They all watch as Ally makes her way to the front door, straightening up her posture before knocking.

An older man answers. Then the two exchange words before the man hands Ally cash. And then Ally is skipping back to the car.

It gets even stranger with every delivery. Especially when Camila begins paying closer attention to the people buying. Customers of different age groups and different social circles, ranging from a conservative looking old man using a walker to a guy looking like he stepped out of a Bob Marley collection shop.

"I guess she really is bringing the big bucks," Dinah comments, as Ally rattles off the next address as Normani types it into her phone GPS. They're on the outskirts of town by this point. The next destination being the local community college apartments.

"So what's in all of these boxes, Ally?" Lauren questions, as she reaches down to pick one up. There's a sticker over the pink box, a promotional label with Ally's name over it.

"That one you're holding up is a batch of fudge brownies."

"Brownies? I bet I could eat all of them in one go," Camila remarks, attempting to warm up to the conversation. Lauren glances at her appreciatively, before rolling her eyes.

"I honestly don't even doubt that," Lauren murmurs.

"She did that one time, didn't she?" Normani speaks up from the driver's seat.

Dinah bursts out laughing. "Oh my god I remember that. You had diarrhea that entire night. Totally destroyed my bathroom, Walz. My mom had to bring out the plunger? You remember that?"

"Oh my god." Camila buries her face in her hand.

Of course she remembers that. Not one of her finer moments. Besides it was partially Dinah's fault as she was the one who coerced her to sneak in some spoonfuls of Ally's uncooked cookie dough right before the dare was given to eat the entire brownie batch.

Not exactly the best combination in the world. Dinah's toilet was a living testament to that.

"I don't think you'd want to eat all of them, Mila. At least not these kinds of brownies," Ally
responds rather cryptically. Her lips twitch as if she's fighting a growing grin.

The subject is put to rest, as Normani puts the car in gear and heads off.

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The day is breezy, matching the uplifted mood in the car. Occasional chatter, mostly from Ally's end, occupies the discussion. Camila even finds herself responding to certain things and providing an attempted conversation.

In the midst of Ally's recent story-telling (a rather intriguing one about an argument she had with her landlord back in Texas), Camila turns and stares at Lauren beside her. The window is rolled down, breeze blowing in her hair.

Camila watches the dark tresses dance in the wind, looking like water rivulets in a stream. The strands lick across Lauren's pale face, tracing a soft smooth cheek, and wrapping along the frame of her black sunglasses.

She's beautiful, Camila thinks. But Camila's always thought Lauren was beautiful. Unfairly so. For as long as she could remember, Lauren was always beautiful.

Camila's eyes travel along the curve of Lauren's cheek, drinking in the way the sunlight bathes half of her face in an orange glow. It creates a dim outline around Lauren's hair.

Lauren's head tilts in Camila's direction. And even after being caught staring, Camila's gaze remains intact. Lauren's mouth quirks, as if on the verge of questioning her.

Camila can't see her eyes, but Camila can feel them, burning into her skin. Prompting the lucid warm flush to spread across her cheeks.

She feels her own lips tug into a grin. Her hair tickles her face, getting caught in the corner of her mouth. The action makes Lauren's smile turn into an amused laugh. And then Lauren leans forward, brushing the strands of hair out of her face and tucking it behind her ear.

Camila's face heats up upon the contact of her fingers. It creates a delicious contrast against the cool breeze filtering through the window. Her stomach dips and dives.

The moment is cut short when Ally decides to turn the air conditioner on, and Lauren has to roll the window up, blocking the orange glow and the soft breeze.

There really isn't an excuse to stare anymore, so Camila tries not to. But it becomes increasingly difficult as the ride continues and she doesn't know why. Her eyes frequently dart in Lauren's direction, briefly studying her side profile through her peripheral vision.

Lauren shivers capturing Camila's full attention. She watches as Lauren rubs her arms, sinking further into her seat.

Camila's hands reach to unzip her hoodie before she even fully realizes what she's doing. She stops midway when she hears Dinah snort.

"Such a married couple," Dinah murmurs in her ear, making her zip her sweater back up. She feels
the annoyance at being called out. She's even more annoyed for feeling the need to even feel that way to begin with.

It was just a sweater. There wasn't anything romantic attached to the gesture.

*That's not what every movie and couple in history have said!* A voice that suspiciously sounded like Dinah counters in her head.

"I don't think Lo is wearing a bra," Dinah comments amusedly.

Camila's eyes flash down to the area in question, and then promptly feels herself flush an angry red at the sound of Dinah's booming laughter.

"Made you look."

Camila stuffs her hands in her pocket and fully turns away.

"Aw come on, don't do that," Dinah cooes. "Who's gonna keep Lauren warm now?"

Camila peeks over at Lauren again, hyper aware of the fact of the arms around herself. Camila lets out a huff, before she unzips her sweater again.

"Here." She shrugs the hoodie off her shoulder and hands it over.

Lauren blinks at her owlishly.

"It's okay."

"Just take it." Camila drops it in Lauren's lap.

"But-"

"I'm fine," Camila lies, resisting the urge to rub her own arms.

Lauren stares at her for a moment. Camila gets a small feeling that she's going to bring up her dumb list of rules (something that she's surprisingly neglected to do all day). But then Lauren accepts the gesture, and slips on the sweater.

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The day trip, as Lauren described it, goes by faster than Camila realizes. Ally is finished with her deliveries shortly after the afternoon hits.

The sun has already begun sinking on their way back way back home.

The excitement and conversation has faded into a sleepy lull when dusk falls across the summer afternoon.

Lauren is sleeping beside Camila, faced press against the seatbelt. Ally is in the passenger seat in front of Camila softly snoring.

The draft of the cool gentle AC makes Camila shiver. She runs her upper arms, distractedly.
"You're cold," Normani speaks up, breaking Camila out of her reverie. She sits up, shocked at the sound of the girl's voice, considering she had rarely heard it during their entire trip.

She can feel Normani's eyes through the rearview mirror expectantly, and Camila stammers for an answer.

"Uh, I'm fine, good, I'm good." Camila trips over her words, desperately grappling to make the situation less awkward. This is the first time Normani's directly addressed her with more than a polite greeting today. It would be a shame for her to ruin it so quickly.

"I saw you give your sweater to Lauren," Normani continues knowingly. "I'll turn the air off."

Camila can hear her fiddling with the knobs at the front. And then suddenly a melodic sound rips through the car, echoing across the confines in a rhythmic tune. It startles her, especially when it cuts off so abruptly.

Normani's hand returns to the wheel after she turns the stereo off. Her posture has stiffened from the relaxed position at the driver's seat. The hands at the wheel tighten, making a brief squeak as Camila can imagine Normani's palms creating friction against the plastic cover.

Camila isn't meant to see that. She can tell from the way Normani glances at her through the rearview mirror, eyes illuminated by the light coming from the console screen.

She knows because she's had moments like this. Moments that she realizes she's not immediately in her own company.

Normani breathes deeply through her nose. A resigned atmosphere inadvertently seeping between them.

Camila wants to say she doesn't need an explanation. She doesn't have to have one. But then Normani speaks up again.

"I don't really like music," Normani mutters softly. She sounds sad, Camila thinks. "Not anymore."

And Camila gets it. She understands. It's the same reason why she stopped listening to music. Why she was so out of touch with nearly everything she used to have an interest in.

Because everything somehow always came back to Dinah.

Dinah used to like music. The Hansens had a reputation for being quite the musically inclined family. It always turned into a mini concert every time they'd go over Dinah's house with the occasional impromptu jam sessions they'd have holed up in Dinah's room. Fiddling with the camera, and goofing around with their singing. Making covers of their recent favorite songs.

Camila feels silly that she's just realized there hasn't been any music playing throughout their entire car ride.

It's startling yet not all together unexpected. Because how could she think Dinah was only ever affecting her?

Her eyes flicker over to the back of Ally's head, leaning against the car window, and then over to Lauren huddled pressed against the seatbelt.

She feels her heart begin to sink.
This isn't right. It will never be right. It would never ever be all five of them. There would always be that heavy weight lingering above them, resting along their shoulders.

What did they even have in common besides their friend being dead?

Camila begins to fear that they have nothing to relate to besides the burden. The pain. The unrelenting bitterness of the memory tainted by reality.

A suffocating sense of claustrophobia grips her entirely, as if her insides are closing in on the other.

Does the grief ever go away? Or has it sunk its fingers around her heart in permanent residence?

She almost calls out for Dinah as an automatic reflex, but she catches herself. Instead her eyes flicker about the car searching for the girl.

And when she comes up short, she feels something in her snap.

The despair that was initially seeping into her system like a languid trail of warm blood from an open wound vanishes. Leaving in its wake a twisted building rage. It uncoils from the tangle of emotions simmering in her body.

Her hands curl into tight, rigid fists, as her hands close over the end of her t-shirt. She wants to hit something, anything to get the desperate anger out.

Dinah isn't here.

Dinah isn't here.

Dinah is gone.

She shifts in her seat, swallowing down the lump in her throat. She pulls at the collar of her shirt, hoping to relieve some of the suffocating feeling.

She's afraid she might scream.

She's afraid she might do something stupid again.

But then she feels the gentle pad of fingers against her strained knuckles. Her eyes fly open to find Lauren's hand cupping hers softly.

Camila lifts her focus to Lauren. She can only see the outline of her head through the small light of the street lamps passed. And for that Camila is thankful because she isn't sure how she could take Lauren actually seeing her completely. Undone. Again.

Shame wells up in her chest when Lauren's hand flips Camila's fist. She feels soft nimble fingers attempt to break her own curled fingers. And then Camila releases her hold, allowing Lauren to take her hand.

A part of her wants to push Lauren away, and simmer in her dirtiness, soak up the filth of embarrassment and guilt. But then Lauren begins to trace small patterns on her palm.

She feels the delicate scratch of Lauren's nails against her skin, and then the gentle pad of her fingers.

Camila tries to discern the shape. She tries to understand the slow, loops Lauren's fingers make. It becomes distracting.
She soon realizes this as she feels Lauren's fingertips trailing higher to rest upon her wrist. Immediately, a surge of heat manifest itself directly beneath her touch. As if every place Lauren's touched previously has melted over, spreading backwards up her body.

Camila shifts in her seat as Lauren adds a bit more pressure to her wrist. The anger subsides without her even realizing it. The calm has washed over with every stroke of Lauren's hand.

The wrist rubbing is overwhelmingly intimate. Camila feels it in the pang in her chest, she feels it in the butterflies in her stomach. She feels it in the growing ache below her waist.

It's simultaneously annoying and pleasant at the same time. She wants to resist because a part of her wants to hold on to the anger.

But Lauren's hand slides into hers, and she interlocks their fingers. And Camila kind of forgets the anger momentarily, because she's suddenly remembering how nice it feels to hold Lauren's hand.

Camila glances up to find Lauren's head turned away, though her hand remains firmly interlaced with hers. Camila finally reciprocates, and leans her head against the window.

It's almost as if the moment she lets go of Lauren's hand all of the pent up and abandoned frustration comes filtering back. Perhaps it's also the sight of her house. Which brings another reminder to her lack of routine. To the lack of Dinah in her presence.

She leaves in a hurry, offering a hasty goodbye. She doesn't miss the uncertain look on Lauren's face as she slips out of the car and scrambles inside the house.

She won't think about the disappointment until later.

Camila bursts into her room, eyes frantically taking in the empty mess. Her eyes fall upon the closed laptop on her disheveled bed. Her thoughts scramble to yesterday morning. The languid day spent watching old videos over and over. Hearing the doubt in Dinah's voice in their reluctant conversation. And seeing that unreadable expression upon Dinah's face.

It's all too much.

"Someone was in a hurry."

Camila whips around at the sound of the voice. Dinah leans against the doorframe of her bathroom entrance, arms crossed over her chest.

There's a purse to Dinah's usual smirk. A dullness to the gleam in her dark eyes.

The panic that flooded Camila's system immediately manifests into a bubbling frustration, tangled in an intricate mess with the fear gripping her heart.

"You're a liar," Camila rasps out.

Her hands curl into tight fists, nails digging into her palms, as she tries to quell the rising anger. As she tries to catch her breath. As she tries to bite down the accusations dancing upon her tongue.
It's too late.
It's always too late.
"You lied to me."
"I didn't lie," Dinah murmurs softly.
"Shut up. Stop doing that. Stop patronizing me, I'm not – don't treat me like everyone else does."
Camila tosses her bag harshly, and they both watch as several things fall out. Chapstick tube rolling hastily beneath her bed as if to find cover.
Camila kicks her bag in the same direction.
"Can you calm down?" Dinah questions incredulously.
The question does the opposite. Camila moves to her table, and wipes everything off the surface. The items, ranging from pencils, to make-up clatter on the floor loudly.
Normally, Camila would be concerned with the noise. Worried, that her mother would hear the commotion and come rushing upstairs. But it becomes the last thing she thinks of as she moves forward to kick the chair at her desk.
It topples over between them.
She turns her glare upon Dinah in a challenge.
She catches one last glimpse of Dinah's face crumpling before she turns to find something else to hit. Camila lunges forward, yanking out all of the drawers in her desk.
"Stop it, Mila."
Finally, Camila thinks, turning and swiftly closing the gap between them.
"No. You stop it." She wipes her eyes angrily with shaking fingertips. "You lied to me. Why did you lie?"
"I didn't..." Dinah stops herself. "I thought you would've understood."
"Understood what?" Camila spits out. Her glare hardens. "You left me."
"Camila if you let me explain I –"
"-Where did you go? I thought – I thought you wanted to spend time with them."
"I did – I do!" Dinah reassures, her voice rising above Camila's.
Dinah suddenly gives her a dejected look.
"You said you wouldn't leave me. You said that and you just – you just me here alone!"
"You're not alone."
"Then why –"
"Jesus, Mila you're probably the smartest person I know, but damn, you can be so freaking dumb,"
Dinah sighs.

The comment breaks the boiling tension rising between them. Her anger melts into a languid puddle. And when the calm hits, she begins to realize how exhausted she feels.

Camila sinks onto the edge of her bed, her shoulders feel heavy with the blatant burden of Dinah's words.

Dinah perches herself on the opposite end, and it's quiet for a long moment. Camila wants to say something. She wants the anger to come back. It's easier than having to deal with the residual state her emotions have left her in. The emptiness clawing at her heart.

"You think this is fun for me?" Dinah's voice comes back before she's prepared for it. Sharp and demanding. "You think I like being here all the time without really being here?"

"You want to leave me?" Camila asks in a low whisper. The lump in her throat is painful. Her chest aches, sharp and twisting.

"No."

"Then what do you want?" Camila mumbles wearily, she looks over her shoulder to witness Dinah's answer firsthand, despite the gut feeling inside telling her to look away.

Dinah bows her head. Silence envelopes them again. Thick, wrapping around Camila like an uncomfortable layer of clothing.

"I just want you to be happy, Mila" Dinah answers softly. A small frown mars her tan face, and it makes her look away. It was always a painfully unusual sight seeing anything but a smile upon Dinah's face.

"You make me happy."

Dinah sighs. "I think we both know that's not true."

She wants to deny it. She wants to lay out her argument piece by piece proving the wrongness in Dinah's statement. But the moment she begins to the words die out in her throat.

And suddenly the answer that she demanded doesn't seem so important anymore, or worth acknowledging. Deep down, a part of her recognizes that she's scared of Dinah's answer. She's terrified of what Dinah wants to really tell her.

Camila turns in her seat, and crawls on her bed. She moves the blankets around, unbuttoning her jeans and wriggling out of them, before curling into a ball beneath the duvet.

Dinah doesn't question her. She doesn't say anything for a long time. Neither of them do.

Camila glowers at the pills on her desk, eyes pouring over the orange body of the bottle. And then Camila finally finds her voice.

"They were right."

"Who?" Dinah asks, next to her.

"Lauren's friends. They were right," Camila whispers. "It was a stupid way to die."
It pierces the silence of the room, leaving a painful after effect in the gut of her stomach. She hears Dinah scoff beside her.

"Rude."

Camila tears her eyes away from the bottle and meets Dinah's face. She feels the familiar sting building up and blurring her vision before she can stop them. Crying was so redundant. Especially to a ghost.

"I'm serious, Dinah," she says fiercely.

Immediately Dinah's smile fades away. The playful teasing in her eyes has simmered into guilt.

"I know you are."

"I'm so angry with you," Camila blurts out, as she turns in her position to fully face Dinah.

Dinah exhales shakily. Camila watches blearily as the girl runs a hand through her hair. A habit she probably picked up from Lauren, no doubt. The thought pains her. She's sure that there would have been more habits Dinah would've picked up. Lauren's influence was evident on everyone.

"I'm angry – and sad – all the time and it's because of you. I just – how could you do that? Everyone left me. You left me. You should have known. You should have known better."

"Everything is temporary, Mila," Dinah murmurs, shifting in her position. She moves and leans her elbow against the pillow. Dark brown eyes meet Camila's in a serious gaze. "Nothing is permanent. Not even this."

Dinah's words resonate deeply within her. She feels them soothe and provoke her. It's everything and nothing she wants to hear at the same time. The mixed feelings that come with the connotations leave her lost. As if grasping for something in the dark.

Her defenses flare up immediately, and she scoots away from Dinah to scrutinize her fully. Her eyes harden into a steely glare, and her lips twist into a frown.

Camila pushes her tongue against the roof of her mouth, a feeble barrier from the sound begging to fall past her lips and clogged throat. The lump is heavy and painful, feeling like blood coagulating in her esophagus. Her eyes burn, stinging relentlessly, pierced tears ripping over the rims of her eyes.

Her vision of Dinah has blurred over but she can still make out the anguish – the guilt and agony expressed in those dark eyes.

Her lips are heavy, stubbornly tucked into a frown, making the words hard to form. She feels her voice quiver, and it only makes the cry that much harder to suppress.

"What," she stops, nostrils flaring as she tries to make her voice steady. "What are you even saying?"

"I think you know exactly what I'm saying."

"You want to leave," Camila accuses. She feels her voice tremble.

Dinah's expression slowly falls into a contemplative one. It's one that Camila has rarely ever seen, because even in this state, Dinah is always bursting with energy.

Her best friend's eyes glaze over in a way one does when suddenly the sight before them is really what they're looking at. As if their surroundings have suddenly blurred over and zeroed in on one
specific moment.

Dinah's lips form into a tight line, and then a sad frown.

Camila feels her chest begin to tighten at Dinah's face. It seeps into her head, leaving its miserable tracks within the confines of her memory. And she knows that she'll obsess over this expression for hours and hours in the middle of the night.

"It's not that," Dinah begins, voice softening. "It's just sometimes...recently things have been coming up. And they're nice things like hanging out with the girls, and seeing you smile and stuff, but then I remember that – well I'm not really here. You take a picture and I won't be in the frame. It just – sucks."

"You're here with me-"

"It's not the same," Dinah shakes her head. "I miss Normani and Ally, and Lauren. I miss my mom. I miss my family. You know, I won't even be there to see Seth grow up? It really – like sometimes I think about that all of the time, and I just get sad."

"Dinah..."

"And I miss the beach. I miss surfing, Mila. I miss having a board under my feet," Dinah murmurs quietly. "I miss the feeling of sand between my toes and the knots in my hair after being in the water. I even miss putting on the dumb wetsuit. I miss it all so much sometimes it hurts."

"Sometimes?"

Dinah's teary eyes move to her. She watches as Dinah wipes at her face, and then a tiny smile tugs at her lips. "Yeah, sometimes. Because then I remember that I have you, and I think I'd miss you more than anything. You're my best friend, Camila." Dinah hesitates. "But, I don't want to be the one holding you back from living your life."

"You're not."

"Camila," Dinah murmurs pointedly.

"I don't know how to do this without you," Camila finally admits, her voice falling out in a vulnerable whisper.

"You'll learn, Walz."

Camila shakes her head, feeling like her chest two seconds away from caving in. A feeling that hadn't really gone away the day she got called into the counselor's office at school. The words crashing down her as she tried to pick up the shriveled up pieces of her world.

Camila wipes at her eyes, frustrated. "That's the thing, Dinah, I can't. I won't."

"Some time I have to..."

"No," Camila interrupts firmly. "No don't say that."

"Camila."

"No, promise me. Promise me that you won't go. Promise me Dinah."
"I'll be here for as long as you need me to be."

It's not satisfying. It's not enough.

*I need you, always.* She wants to say.

But Camila doesn't get to argue or press further.

In the next few seconds, there's a familiar knocking on her window.

And it pains her to say that Lauren Jauregui is the last person she wants to see right now.
A part of her – a very large part – wants to ignore the knocking at her window. She wants to remain buried in her bed and soak in her misery. She wants to hide in her fears and curl into her sadness, and create a barrier from what Lauren has to offer.

What the offer is exactly Camila isn't so sure herself. But the thought of considering leaves her hesitant.

And yet, the other part – the part that urges her to open up the window – still relishes in the excitement from hearing the knock. The desire to see her neighbor is still there. She still yearns for her presence. Even in this wretched state.

And at this point, Camila doesn't know which one is worse.

She pushes the blanket off her body, feeling Dinah's eyes on her. She waits for Dinah to speak; nothing comes but the strained silence.

Her body protests as she rises from the bed. She bends over the edge, and reaches for her pants, tugging them on.

The knocking falters, and for a hopeful moment Camila thinks Lauren has left. But then it continues. And so does the perplexing mix of disappointment and elation when Camila pulls back the curtains to reveal Lauren standing behind the window.

Camila opens the latch, and instantly Lauren speaks up before she can offer any sort of greeting.

"You left your sweater," Lauren says holding up the hoodie. "Well, technically I guess you didn't leave it. I was the one that took it from you. I mean I forgot to give it back. I tried to, but you kind of just booked it. I didn't even get a chance to say goodbye or, I don't know, say anything."

Camila silently watches as Lauren rambles. An overwhelming surge of emotion hits her upon studying the girl before her.

She sees Lauren, flushed and speaking so animatedly, and sees the same Lauren she had been so pathetically in love with. She can see the same Lauren smiling sheepishly. She can see the soft green gaze, and feel the gentle touch of her hand. She can even see the annoyingly adorable habit Lauren had of running a through her hair.

In fact, the present Lauren does so as if reading her thoughts.

The act creates a twinge of bitterness, heightened by the recent conversation with Dinah, which seeps into her veins like poison, coagulating her thoughts and turning her mind into sluggish disarray.

Camila feels her lips fall into a heavy frown as Lauren continues to talk completely unaware of how unreceptive Camila is to the one-sided conversation.

Memories begin to flood languidly through her inflicted mind. Recollections of specific details pertaining to Lauren. To the feelings that she felt whenever she was around her.

Lauren had always been her favorite person – right after Dinah.
The nostalgia hits in the most unpleasant way, as the past comes in perfectly, and the moment she reacts to one particular memory it becomes diluted in grief. Like the pages of her favorite childhood book had been torn and don't fit properly into their binding after being taped back up.

Now it seems as if Camila is just lost in translation, trying to flip back to the beginning chapters of their story. But she's detached from the beginning, as if someone kept the middle pages away from her. Jagged, ripped empty gaps.

Lauren is so far away, despite only physically being a windowsill away from her. Lauren, untainted by the permanent grey clouds hovering over Camila, dampening everything within a five foot radius. Lauren, who suddenly has Camila grasping desperately for a time when everything wasn't so damn shitty.

A time when she was still in love with the girl talking a mile a minute before her. A time when she was close enough to confide in Normani and Ally. A time when her best friend was still alive.

Lauren's ramble comes to a dying close, as she peers around Camila's frame.

"Whoa, dude your room is trashed." Her eyes finally meet Camila's face and then promptly widen.

Camila takes in Lauren's appearance. Her face has gone pale. The shine in her green eyes darken as eyebrows knit together worriedly. The outstretched hand, gripping Camila's hoodie, lowers.

"Camila," Lauren says in a hushed tone. "You're crying."

Camila blinks out of her thoughts, and brings a hand to her face. She wipes at the hot tears, and it leaves a sticky trail across her heated skin. She knows she can't hide the evidence.

She doesn't know when it started again. But it comes in a long endless break down. It's as if the moment the tears fall it opens up a relentless sob.

She cries. And she doesn't know why she's crying. Maybe it's seeing Lauren, and perpetually seeing her as an almost. Maybe she's crying for the missed chance. Maybe she's crying for a time she was happy. Maybe she's crying for the happiness that seems unattainable, just like Dinah is unattainable in her unreal state.

Maybe she's crying for the part of herself that died with Dinah a year ago.

Through the blurry vision, Camila can see the hesitancy as Lauren takes slow tentative steps towards the window. She can see the apprehension as Lauren climbs over the ledge, green eyes never once breaking contact. She feels the reservation when Lauren brings both hands to Camila's shoulders.

A part of her foolishly wants to turn away, and bury herself beneath the shame that's built up. But Lauren's hands are warm.

Camila feels the gentle squeeze on her shoulders, and then Lauren tugs her in closer.

Their bodies collide in a soft press. She's immediately overwhelmed with Lauren's scent, and the hair brushing against her cheek. Arms come around her frame, wrapping her in a snug embrace.

Camila's resolve crumbles. She feels the pressure dissolve and melt away, and any resistance of hiding fades as another round of tears develop.

She hides her face in Lauren's neck before she realizes what she's doing. Her hands come around and fist the material of Lauren's t-shirt. Her breathing comes out in a hushed shudder as she tries to
muffle the cries. Camila bites down on her trembling lip and unintentionally strengthening her grip upon Lauren's shirt.

Lauren's embrace tightens, securing around her trembling frame. Warming up the cold that's crept around her heart. She feels her fingers dig into Lauren's shirt again, grasping for something. Anything to prevent the warmth from seeping away.

She feels Lauren's hands trace soothing circles on her back.

Camila delves herself further into the warmth, letting her mind run. If she closes her eyes she can pretend.

She can pretend that Dinah is cradling her. She can fool herself into believing the comfort is coming from someone no longer there. The warmth that she had been so desperately deprived of is encircling her, building a wall around her.

But it's not Dinah. It's Lauren.

Lauren who used to make the butterflies form in her stomach, and the flush rise in her cheeks. Lauren who used to make her heart swell twice its size and beat like crazy.

The realization frustrates her more. Because Lauren should be good enough. Lauren's arms, and her kindness, and her warmth should be enough.

But it's not.

It's not enough to fill the emptiness swallowing up her insides. It's not enough to quell the feeling of inadequacy in the pit of her stomach. It's not enough to stop her from yearning for Dinah.

Guilt fills her system as she clutches on to Lauren's shirt.

Her body trembles against her arms. She feels her lip quiver against Lauren's neck. A small voice in the back of her head is scolding her. Telling her off for being so exposed. For being so pathetic and weak to allow Lauren, of all people, to see her like this again.

She doesn't know how long Lauren holds her. It could've been all night. A couple of hours, or merely a few minutes. It doesn't matter because she feels the sense of dread fall over her at the thought of breaking the embrace.

She feels her hold loosen, fingers unclenching from the tight fist around Lauren's tee. She blinks rapidly, feeling her eyes ache from crying. Lauren's arms slide into a loose grip, allowing Camila to pull back slightly.

She can feel Lauren's eyes on her, and it pressures her to speak up.

Her eyes burn as she moves them from Lauren's expression. She keeps her attention focused upon the floor.

"Sorry that was..." She stops, bringing a hand to her eyes. She rubs them, feeling the soreness behind the black vision, and brings her hand back down to a fist. "That's embarrassing." Camila's voice is hoarse, sounding harsh and unfamiliar against her ears.

Lauren's hand covers her white knuckles, cupping her closed fist. Camila glances up hesitantly. Lauren's eyes are glossy.
"You don't need to apologize, Camila," Lauren murmurs softly. A thumb traces below Camila's knuckle, moving in calming shapes. Lauren's hand is warm and soft against her skin. "And it's not embarrassing."

Lauren's expression is just as soft as her voice. It makes something inside Camila melt. Something thaws out seeping through her insides like a trickle of icy water.

Camila lets out a sigh, letting the warmth of Lauren's hand seep into her. She almost has half a mind to hold it in place when Lauren lets it drop away. She already aches for the warmth again before she realizes it.

Camila eyes avert again, moving away from the gentle gaze.

She meets Dinah's eyes from over Lauren's shoulder.

She feels her chest tighten upon the exchange. And the desire to curl away from the world hits her again.

Her body is drained like the tears dried up across her cheeks. She inhales shakily, and lets out a weary sigh.

Lauren's eyes haven't left her face. She can feel them studying her closely. "I feel stupid," Camila mumbles, bowing her head. Her eyes flicker to Lauren's hand and she feels a spasm of shame for even wanting to be touched again. "I didn't mean for you to see that," Camila explains anyway.

"Oh, Camila," she sighs. She hears her stumble over her name, hesitation to complete it. And she just knows the nickname was burning to come out. Lauren's hands encircle her fists again, cupping her white knuckles. "You make it sound like I've never seen you cry before."

Camila feels a humorless chuckle fall out in one exhausted breath.

Lauren is right. It's not like she hasn't seen Camila cry before. It's not like Camila's never cried in her arms before.

But those instances were different. That kind of sadness wasn't held with the deep sense of contempt ingrained in the feeling. Camila was never the person to hide her crying. She wore her feelings out on her sleeve – never ashamed of crying or laughing or being happy.

It's different now. Everything feels so dirty and impure.

Lauren's hands uncurl Camila's fists. She intertwines their fingers and gives Camila's hands a comforting squeeze.

"Is...is this about what happened in the car?" Lauren hesitates.

Camila's eyes immediately dart up.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Lauren presses, chewing her lip, uncertainly.

A chill falls before her. Camila glances towards Dinah again, feeling her insides freeze over.

"Do I look like want to talk about it?" She doesn't mean for that to come out so harshly. She doesn't mean for the spite to drip from her voice. Nor the defensiveness in her tone.

She immediately regrets it the moment she catches the hurt expression on Lauren's face. "Oh, right. Um yeah I get it. Maybe I should just go." Lauren's hands untangle themselves from hers, and the
loss of contact feels like she's just been burned.

"No, no I'm sorry, I didn't mean that, I mean I really don't want to talk about it, but..." Camila stammers, reaching out to grab one of Lauren's hands. "I don't want you to go."

Camila's eyes flicker back to Dinah. Her eyes meet Dinah's from over Lauren's shoulder again. Dark eyes are sympathetic matched with a sad frown.

Camila wants to reach out to her. She wants to lock herself in her room, and resume her activities. She wants to surround herself entirely and exclusively with the pain. Because even though it feels like she's dying, Dinah is still here.

But Lauren is here too. And she's warm and familiar, and Camila craves her presence. She wants to immerse herself in the feeling of her company and let it fill the emptiness inside. Even if the feeling is conflicted and tumultuous. Even if it is accompanied with confusion and frustration.

She chooses it anyway.

"I don't want to be alone," Camila mutters.

Lauren looks at her for a long moment, as if she's assessing her.

"You're not alone Camila."

"Can you just – stay?" Camila mutters. "I mean, just for a little. It doesn't have to mean anything."

There's a long pause, and then –

"Okay."

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It's an implied sleep over. At least that's what Camila thinks as she maneuvers her way in her bed and beneath the covers.

Camila glances at Lauren from over the covers, and then her gaze swivels to Dinah leaning against her desk with an eyebrow cocked upward.

"You're not going to just stand there, are you?" Camila questions.

Lauren's face turns pink. "I can just sit here," She gestures towards the end of her bed. She hesitates as she moves to sit at the edge of the left side. A nervous hand spreads along the comforter, before curling into a fist.

Camila rolls her eyes, and undoes the blanket on the empty side of the bed. She holds it open for Lauren.

"Just get in. It's not like we've never slept together before."

"Ha ha, I know that," Lauren mumbles sardonically as she moves in under the covers. The bed dips when Lauren shifts inside.
Camila feels her nerves pick up as she watches Lauren get comfortable from her peripheral vision. She then notices Dinah hide the smile with her long manicured fingers. She doesn't have to say anything.

Camila's face burns hotly at Dinah's pointed stare, and she scoots away to her end of the bed, leaving a large gap between them.

Lauren doesn't notice. If she does she doesn't say anything.

"Don't make it weird." Camila's not sure if she's speaking to Dinah or Lauren at this point.

"I'm not," Lauren responds, affronted by the accusation.

Camila rolls onto her back and lets out a soft huff.

"I already told you it doesn't have to mean anything." She tilts her head against the pillow in Lauren's direction.

Green eyes dart up towards her, almost as if in a challenge. And despite everything, Camila feels a twinge of alertness.

Lauren turns on her side, leaning against her elbow.

Camila tries not to focus so much on how much more intimate the space becomes. Not that it wasn't intimate before. Lauren is in her bed.

She clears her throat, and glances up at warm green eyes.

"So how is that list of yours going?" Lauren asks, breaking the silence.

"You should know. You're the one that's going to help me finish it," Camila quickly counters.

Lauren's eyes narrow into a playful glare. Her lips twitch into a smirk, one that begs to form on Camila's own lips.

"I only meant if you were going to keep any of Vero's ideas," Lauren elaborates. Camila shrugs.

"They're good ideas."

Lauren's glare turns into a real one. "I'm not talking about her obscene list. I meant the other one."

"Oh, yeah, those are okay too I guess."

Lauren is quiet for a moment, as if taking in her words.

"So you would seriously consider getting a tattoo?" she asks.

"Why not? I think it'd be pretty cool to get like a bow on my pinkie toe."

Lauren's mouth twitches, and Camila just knows she's probably two seconds away from laughing.

"Nothing. Just you and a tattoo. I never would have thought."

"You're right. To be honest I think it's from all of those years you kept saying you wanted one. Maybe we could go together to get one."
"Actually..." Lauren trails off awkwardly.

"You already have one?" Camila deadpans.

Lauren's silence is enough of a confirmation.

She already can feel the scowl forming on her face as she demands that Lauren show her.

Lauren turns away, holding her hair up as if she's pulling it into a ponytail, and that's when Camila sees it. Simple, thick and black protruding from beneath the back collar of her shirt. Wings extend along the nape of her neck, the body of the dragonfly trailing downward until Camila can no longer see the tail.

Camila's hands outstretch towards Lauren's neck without even thinking. Her fingertips press against the warm skin causing Lauren to flinch away suddenly.

"Sorry," Camila murmurs, pulling away. "It's pretty." She hears the thickness in her own voice. She doesn't know where the bitter tone comes from. And she can't explain the small unsettling feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Camila frowns, and turns away, unable to meet Lauren's eyes. She doesn't know why she's getting so upset over a tattoo. It's stupid.

Lauren must sense her mood because she's then clearing her throat and moving on from the subject

"So going to a concert is also on the list if you remember," Lauren states. "You down?"

"Why? You're going to take me to a concert?"

Lauren flushes and averts her eyes. "Well I was planning on asking you when we were alone. I only have two tickets."

"And you want to take me?"

"Yeah why not?"

"What if I don't like the artist you're going to take me to see?"

"I don't think that's possible," Lauren reassures.

"Uh, yeah, if this happens to be, like, a Wiggles concert."

"Why would I take you to a Wiggles concert? Honestly Camila."

"I don't know. The weird hipster thing you've got going on would probably try to make them cool again or something."

"Wow, I'm kind of offended. The Wiggles are still cool. The blue one was hot."

"You're disgusting," Camila snorts.

"Relax, it's not a Wiggles concert, I promise. So will you come?"

"Are you sure?"

"Oh my god, Camila, yes," Lauren laughs breathlessly. "Why is that so hard to believe?"
"I don't know. Don't you want to go with Lucy or Alexa? I don't think I would be much fun."

"Don't be stupid." Lauren rolls her eyes. "I got these tickets for you anyway." Lauren flushes, adding hastily, "I did it for your list."

As if that made much of a difference. Camila isn't stupid. She knows how quickly tickets sell out. And from the way Lauren won't meet her eye she gets the distinct feeling that Lauren's had them for far longer than she would ever admit.

"If you put it that way..." Camila responds, hiding her growing smile by pulling up the blanket to cover half of her face.

The conversation moves in the similar light manner. Mindless banter that expertly dances around the heavy subject in the room. But soon the talking dwindles, until Camila and Lauren lay in comfortable silence.

Her eyes are heavy as she turns to look over at Lauren.

"You look really tired," Camila yawns, burying herself beneath the blanket. Lauren blinks away the droopiness that has fallen over her expressions. But it doesn't help much because in the next few seconds, her eyelids become hooded.

"I'm fine."

Camila raises a brow, skeptically. "You know when I asked you to stay, I thought it was kind of a given I meant for you to actually sleep over."

Lauren looks away, chewing her lip. Camila's eyes immediately focus in on the action. Suddenly being under the covers is too hot.

She pushes the blanket away, and twists on her side, subtly putting more distance between them.

"I don't really sleep much."

Camila feels her stomach sink at the tone she's beginning to comprehend in Lauren's voice.

"Why not?" Camila asks in a whisper.

Lauren's eyebrows tug together as she stares up at the ceiling. "Bad dreams, I guess."

"Nightmares?"

Lauren hesitates, as if she's being cautious with what she's about to say next. Her eyes flicker to Camila, before she also flips to her side to fully face her.

"Not exactly," Lauren mutters in a matching low voice. "Sometimes the dreams are a lot better than what's going on in the real world, you know? The real world can just feel so – empty."

Lauren sighs, and Camila waits for her to continue. The moment is so fragile; she even holds her breath without realizing it initially.

Lauren clears her throat awkwardly. "I don't know. They're just weird I guess."

"Oh, then I see Queen Mab hath been with you," Camila mumbles absently.

Lauren's expression softens almost immediately, and amusement flickers through green depths. And
something else. Something Camila has recently become familiar with because it's evoked the same
heart fluttering reaction.

Lauren looks at her like she's thinking of kissing her. Like she wants to kiss her. Like she's going to
kiss her.

Or maybe Camila's projecting her own desires on to her because - holy shit - she really wants to kiss
Lauren now. And it's stupid and ridiculous because not too long ago she was crying like an idiot.

Her eyes move to Lauren's lips. She studies the curve of them, the unintentional pout formed from
Lauren pressing the side of her face on the pillow. She soaks in the pink texture, eyes tracing the
slightly rough edges from being too long without Chap stick.

Camila feels herself gnawing her own bottom lip. Almost as if she were pretending it was Lauren's
bottom lip.

The moment is ruined when a loud yawn falls from Lauren's mouth.

"You're sleepy," Camila accuses playfully.

And then Camila yawns.

"Look who's talking," Lauren responds. "If you're feeling sleepy, don't let me keep you up."

"I can't. You're distracting," Camila yawns again. "Wouldn't you be distracted having someone in
your bed?"

An uncomfortable expression crosses Lauren's face.

"Actually never mind, don't answer that," Camila hastily interjects. She feels her eyelids fall closed,
and Lauren's image blurs over until it's completely black.

"Camz," Lauren stops abruptly. "I mean Camila-

"it's okay," she interrupts, before Lauren can finish her stumbling. She exhales softly, burying
herself beneath the covers again. Her words are slightly slurred, and her mind has become a little
fuzzy as she continues. "I was lying when I said it was stupid. I really do like the nickname."

She thinks she hears Lauren say something. But the words get drowned out as an oncoming slumber
embraces her.

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The next morning, Camila wakes up to an empty bed.

She continues with her routine, feeling an absurd surge of disappointment. What made her think
Lauren would actually –

She shakes her head, taking a large gulp from her water bottle.

She walks back towards her bed, rustling through the strewn sheets, looking for her phone. And
that's when she comes across a folded paper, wrinkled, probably from rolling over it in her sleep.
She picks it up, and unfolds the paper, recognizing Lauren's writing in colored pencil immediately. The recognition comes almost as quickly as the butterflies in her stomach.

Good night, good night! Parting is such sweet sorrow
That I shall say good night till it be morrow.

"This is so gay, even for you guys," Dinah's voice comes from behind her.

Camila whips around, holding the note up to her chest.

Dinah rolls her eyes. "Well too late to hide it now I already saw it."

Camila's face falls, as she stares at her best friend. All of the thoughts and words and feeling from last night spill over and ruin the pleasant warmth building in her stomach from Lauren's note. Dinah must notice the expression that falls over her face because Dinah's teasing smirk fades away.

"Camila," she begins.

"Don't," Camila pleads.

Dinah looks as if she wants to say more, but the potential conversation is interrupted by the sound of a vibrating phone.

Camila returns to her bed, and shuffles through the sheets until she finds her phone. She unlocks the screen and almost smiles when she sees Lauren's name in the notification box.

She opens the message and finds a picture of two ticket stubs with The 1975 printed upon them, dated for tonight.

Another message comes in.

I'll pick you up at 5.

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Camila takes back whatever negative thing she's said about spontaneity. In fact, she can kiss spontaneity's ass with how excited she suddenly becomes.

The thought of actually going to a concert is exhilarating itself, but it becomes infinitely more appealing when she realizes she's going to be spending the whole evening with Lauren.

It could not have come at a better time, she thinks as she scrambles around her room looking for something to wear.

"How does this look?" Camila asks, holding up a pair of shorts.

"I don't know why you didn't do this earlier," Dinah sighs. "If it were me I would be spending the entire day just planning for a date."

"It's not a date," Camila responds, tossing the shorts over her head.

"Uh huh," Dinah mutters skeptically. After a few more minutes of watching Camila struggling
through her closet, Dinah sighs and rises from her seat on the bed. "Wear that shirt – the one you're about to throw – with the red skirt you have on the floor."

"A skirt to a concert?" Camila asks.

"You want my opinion or not?" Dinah snaps.

Camila huffs, complying with Dinah's choice, and grabbing the discarded skirt.

As soon as she finishes dressing, she receives a text from Lauren. It prompts her to gather her things at an even more frenzied pace. She feels Dinah's amused gaze on her as she scurries around her room looking for her bag.

She flies past her mother, hastily answering her questions and promising to text her once she arrives at the venue. Dinah tails behind her laughing at the fish-gaping expression on her mother's face.

Nearly tripping over her shoes, she rushes to the door, slams it behind her, and finds Lauren staring at her wide-eyed from the first porch step.

"Hi," Camila says breathlessly.

Lauren's expression softens. "Hi, Camz." Her eyes then trail down Camila's body. "You look nice."

Camila looks down and then quickly towards Dinah who smirks, beside her. "Um, thanks. You look good too. I mean you always look good," Camila fumbles out stupidly.

She almost slaps herself as she hears Dinah snickering.

Lauren purses her lip, looking as if she's hiding a smile. "You ready to go?"

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On the way, Lauren excitedly fills her in on the band's recent music, going through the set list that she's probably already memorized.

Camila listens anyway, half ignoring and half agreeing with Dinah's laughing in the background.

They reach the venue with little to no traffic surprisingly. She lets Lauren guide her to the lines outside the entrance. She watches as people hold out their tickets for scanning.

The venue is stuffy and hot from the close proximity of the stage and lights. The bar brightens up the otherwise dark room with neon lights, highlighting the various shaped bottles on the shelf. The bartenders are styled, looking exactly like the type of guys that would go after Lauren. Camila thinks back to her previous boyfriends and finds herself frowning.

A layer of thick smoke tangles and unfurls around the people milling about. Camila tries to find the source of the smell tickling her nose, but between all of the plastic cups filled with alcohol and the close bodies, she gives up.

"This place looks sketchy as fuck," Dinah mutters, glancing around wide-eyed.

Lauren's hand is suddenly at the small of her back. She feels the shape of her palm through the thin
material of her t-shirt. Her body warms over, and her stomach flutters as Lauren presses further.

"We're up in the balcony," she murmurs in Camila's ear. Camila stays close to Lauren, as they weave through people. The strong stench of smoke clings to her nose. A familiar scent to that of the last time she hung around Lauren's friends.

Camila wrinkles her nose, and continues forward.

She tries not to focus too much on the fact that Lauren's hand hasn't moved, not until they find their seats up in the balcony.

They make it in record time because as soon as they sit down, the opening acts begin their set list.

A band that she's never heard the name of introduces themselves. Lauren seems to know them, considering how attentive she is once the music begins.

The audience claps once the band leaves and the next opening act comes out on stage. Another band she doesn't recognize. Dinah sighs tiredly beside her.

"So when are they coming out?"

Camila shrugs a shoulder, peering over at the stage.

She listens absently, bopping her head and glancing down at the band from over the rail. But she catches herself turning to look at Lauren.

Her face is bathed in the bright, neon stage lights.

She feels a strange sense of anticipation, and she tries to chalk it up as nerves. She tries to quell the butterflies in her stomach as the stage lights finally shut off. She can feel the tension suffusing throughout the overly hyped crowd in the small venue.

And then the light flickers back on, followed by the loud prolonged note of an electric guitar. Lauren tugs her up from her seat before she can fully process the band at their places below on the stage. She recognizes the mop of curly hair from the lead singer, and for a moment a chill runs down her spine. An out of body experience filters through her system, as she watches Matt Healy pull the mic off its stand.

It's one thing to constantly have listened to his voice in Lauren's car, or watched videos with Lauren in her room most days, and an entirely different experience seeing it all happen in person.

Her eyes flicker back to Lauren. Their eyes meet, and Camila knows Lauren is feeling the same way. Warmth blossoms in her chest at the feeling of connection simmering in her bloodstream. It's intimate and close, and she's never felt this close before to someone else. A silent exchange is enough. A look is enough. The squeeze of Lauren's hand is enough.

The music pounds its way back into her ears, rattling against her head deliciously. The opening of a song Camila's never heard before comes in a wave of synthetic pop. She barely hears Lauren singing beside her. It's almost ridiculous how she can even hear her considering how loud all of her surroundings are. Perhaps she was always attuned to anything Lauren related.

Dinah stands on her other side, glancing down at the band uncertainly. She leans closer to Camila.

"How do you understand what this guy is singing?" Dinah nearly shouts in her ear. Camila cringes away, accidentally bumping shoulders with Lauren. "What is he saying?"
The music shifts to more upbeat rhythms, some of which Camila begins to recognize from Lauren's iPod. She suspects the set list has included some of their old songs. A flutter of pleasure swoops in as she mouths some of the lyrics, at least the one she remembers. And when Lauren notices and begins singing along with her, the flutter manifests into a surge of pride.

Matty croons into the mic, occasionally surprising them with a bit of ad-lib. The drink in his hand sloshes sloppily.

The back screens fizzle out into a somber, static white. It immediately mellows out the mood among the crowd. Lauren and Camila's dancing fades into a soft rock, until they stop.

A thin layer of sweat beads at her forehead, becoming more apparent once they've stopped. She feels her hair sticking to her forehead. She pushes the stray stands away, adopting a similar hair push that Lauren does.

The music falls into one calming note as the song transitions. Dinah suddenly bursts out.

"I know this song!"

Camila shoots Dinah an amused glance, when she notices her best friend's excitement. It fades just as quickly as it spring up, and the next thing Camila knows is Dinah frowning.

"Ugh from all of the times I've heard Lo blast this stuff..." Dinah mumbles, crossing her arms.

Camila feels a small chuckle fall past her lips. It dances against the soft melody, and Matty's melancholic voice.

She recognizes the song, she discerns the lyrics and let's them wrap around her in a soothing embrace. The song reminds of her Lauren. Not necessarily because of the words, which admittedly make it a love song, but because Camila associates all of this with the girl beside her.

She can picture it, being in Lauren's room, while they're supposed to be doing homework. Heads dangling off the edge of the bed, and feet bare painted toenails outstretched towards the chipped glow-in-the dark stars on the ceiling. Soft touches, and gentle pads of fingers, and being pleasantly overwhelmed with everything Lauren. The fruity smell of her shampoo lingering against the pillows of her bed (the only discernible scent because she knew Lauren never wore perfume). Talking of nothing and everything, and getting high off of the thrill of childhood and adolescence.

Camila feels a pang in her chest as the image becomes even more apparent. As Lauren's presence herself becomes more apparent. Her eyes glance back towards her again.

Lauren is singing along softly to the song, entranced with the singer on stage. Her face is washed out with the bright white screen fizzling in the background. Her long sweater is slipping off from the beginnings of the sleeve, revealing a creamy, smooth shoulder. Her dark hair is tousled from the numerous times she's run a hand through it.

It's almost unreal. It's almost as if she's watching this scene from a different pair of eyes. An out of body experience.

Camila feels herself sigh heavily.

Lauren's head suddenly turns to her, finally noticing her staring. She looks confused at first, but then her face smoothes out when she leans in to Camila.

"I love the lyrics," Lauren mutters, lips close to her ear. Camila feels the chill run down her spine,
and she knows it has nothing to do with the slow melody coming from Matty's voice.

She swallows thickly, turning to face Lauren. Their lips are only a few inches away from each other, and Camila finds herself increasingly distracted with Lauren's mouth.

Red stains her lips, reminding Camila of that night at Alexa's. She feels herself lick her own lips without realizing it, only becoming half aware of the action when she catches Lauren's eyes dart down.

Camila feels Lauren's lips graze her cheek as she moves to Camila's ear again. "This song reminded me of you. Back when I..."

Camila grips the rail tightly. She swallows thickly as a surge of excitement ripples through her body. The feeling is only prompted with the music. She feels the melody and rhythm pump through her veins, adding to the dizzying effect of Lauren's words and Lauren's face so close to hers.

She listens to Matty's crooning, soaking in the lyrics. They comfort her in a soft caress as his voice slow dances against her eardrums.

And she's prompted with an images of Lauren in the past. Lauren in high school listening to this song with clonky headphones in her room. Lauren showing Camila a new song in her parent's car. Lauren humming the melody in her ear during sleepovers.

She feels her chest swell at the thought.

Her head whips around again to find Lauren close to her. Close enough that if she moved forward a bit she'd be able to brush her nose against Lauren's.

She wants to kiss Lauren. She isn't sure she's ever wanted to kiss Lauren more than this moment.

Panic creeps up on her when she realizes it. And she begins to backtrack almost immediately.

"I need to use the bathroom," Camila blurts out.

Lauren's eyebrows tug together, and then she turns down to the band on stage. "Do you want me to go with you?"

"NO, no, it's okay you stay. I'm good," Camila stammers, as she pushes her way down the aisle of chairs. She ignores the disgruntled expressions of girls as she presumably stepped on their toes to get out.

She lets out a shaky breath once she finds herself alone. The music pounds, muffled in the close confines of the bathroom.

Camila closes the door and locks it behind her. She glances around the small confined space, absently taking in the dinginess and inscriptions of graffiti. Few words have couples etched into the edges of the mirror. The thought of any couple in this tiny room suddenly makes her sick to her stomach.

She approaches the sink and lets the water run. The sound of the running water sloshing against the metallic surface is far from comforting. Instead she shuts it off, and breathes out a shuddering sigh.

Her heart is still beating like crazy. Her stomach is still in a flurry of stupid butterflies. And the surge of arousal simmers deep in her core waiting for some kind of release.
She swallows thickly, and glares at her reflection. Dinah's voice breaks through Camila's frustration.

"You're losing your cool," Dinah teases, as she leans against the dingy wall. Camila glances at her from the chipped mirror. Her eyes narrow into a glare. Camila whips around to find Dinah standing right behind her.

"What do you mean?"

Dinah shrugs a shoulder. "This whole catching feelings thing."

Camila's body stills. As the fear comes to light. She feels a flood of dread overflow and drown her senses upon Dinah's words. Dipping, and diving, and contorting into something she doesn't want to hear.

Dinah always had a knack for that, Camila thinks bitterly.

"I'm not."

"Camila, you both have been pretty much breaking every rule on Lauren's list."

"That list is stupid. None of it means anything."

"Just because you say it doesn't make it any less true."

She's beginning to get frustrated with Dinah's accusations. Because they're unfounded, and farthest away from the truth. Yet a small part of her wonders. A part is curious. An annoyingly small part hopes for it. It infuriates her for feeling this way.

"I don't know what you want me to say. That I like her? That I'm suddenly in love with Lauren again?" Camila asks sharply. "Because that's not going to happen."

Dinah's amusement begins to fade; instead it is replaced with a frown. "I'm worried about you."

"I'm not catching feelings," Camila responds. "I just want to have sex with her."

A serious expression falls over Dinah's face. The dim lighting accentuates the crinkle between her knitted eyebrows.

It sounds harsh and crass to her own ears after it comes out. She feels her chest sink and a wave of guilt crash upon her.

Dinah's eyebrows knit together and her eyes narrow. "You both are friends."

And Camila can hear it – the accusation. The confirmation of her harsh words. She bites back the bubbling shame implied and slowly feels her frustration begin to crumble. There's no use in fighting with Dinah. And if anything this has become the most exhausting.

"We're just friends," Camila mutters wearily. "And even that is too overwhelming."

Dinah's face softens. "Then maybe that's all you should be."

"It's not that simple anymore. We're not – it's not the same," Camila admits. She hesitates, holding back from explaining it further. She holds back and it feels strange because she used to be able to tell Dinah anything.

"You're going about this all wrong," Dinah sighs. "You were doing great so far I thought-"
"You could just hand me off to Lauren?" Camila's voice is sharp, as anger flares back up in her chest.

"No, that's not what I meant," Dinah responds defensively.

"What are you just prepping me up before you decide to abandon me?" Camila presses.

Dinah looks away. "I'm not abandoning you. You just don't see it, what you're doing to yourself, do you?" Dinah questions suddenly. Tension falls between them. "You don't see where this is all going to end up? Camila, I don't want you to get hurt."

Camila turns around and leans against the edge of the sink. Dinah meets her gaze. Dark eyes stare back at her dolefully. Camila studies her expression, feeling something like her insides twisting.

"Well, it's too late for that, isn't it?" Camila mutters thickly.

There's a knock at the door that makes her jump. Dinah shoots her an unimpressed stare, before the sound of a muffled voice echoes from the other side.

"Camila? Are you still in there?" Lauren calls out.

Dinah's words still bubble in the back of her mind as she throws the door open, and walks right into Lauren.

Her stomach flutters when she looks up to find Lauren staring down at her with a worried expression. The fluttering gets dampened by the irritation formed from Dinah's words.

No one was catching feelings. And she certainly wasn't.

The look is soft and patient. It irritates her, it angers her, and it makes her feel guilty for even wanting to consider them.

The music buzzes around them, sounding muffled around the cramped hallway.

Without thinking, she reaches out and grasps the collar of Lauren's sweater and yanks her down to meet her in a rough kiss.

Her lips move almost angrily against Lauren's mouth. The kiss is rough and short-lived because Lauren pulls away almost immediately.

It's clumsy, and Camila bumps her forehead against Lauren's before the kiss can properly deepen.

So much for spontaneity, she thinks sourly as she rubs her forehead.

Camila doesn't know what possesses her to throw herself at Lauren like that, but she knows Dinah is watching. And for some reason that spurred her on as a challenge. She was trying to prove something, she rationalizes. She was trying to show the detached physical attraction that Dinah had been so adamant on pegging as feelings.

Yet the moment they break apart, Camila becomes more angry and confused especially with the treacherous butterflies fluttering about merrily in her stomach.

Dark green eyes widen. Lauren takes a step back, and then another, creating a tense distance between them. She stumbles backward until she hits the wall, and settles there almost awkwardly. She brings a hand to her lipstick smudged mouth.
Camila flushes.

No words are spoken. The only sound filtering through the cramped, dingy hallway is Matty's muffled voice.

She wants to apologize. It's the first thing that comes to her mind watching Lauren touch her mouth. She feels the familiar sting burn her eyes. Her lips pull down into a frown, as Lauren continues to stay silent.

"Lauren," she begins thickly. The apology is on the tip of her tongue, along with the taste of Lauren's mouth. It twists and intermingles until all Camila feels is a conflicting and confusing sensation in the pit of her stomach heightened by the flight of butterflies.

Lauren's expression shifts.

Camila studies the scene, hoping to capture it and store it for her own personal memory.

The dim light casts a dark red glow between them. Lauren's pale face drinks up the crimson shade. Dark eyes lock on to her, keeping her rooted to the spot.

The music pounding down the hallway is muffled against the heavy beats of her heart. They drum against her ears, making her feel as if she's submerged under water.

Lauren pushes herself off the wall, and closes the short gap between them in two long strides. She's in front of Camila before she can even let out a shaky breath.

Hands come to her neck, fingers brushing away stray locks of hair, before coming to cup Camila's face.

She kisses her, slow and tentative, matching the soothing music in the background. Camila's lips part as a small gasp tumbles out, falling into Lauren as she moves her mouth against Camila's.

She feels the graze of teeth on her lips gently. And then the smooth flick of tongue. Lauren's hands move from her neck, cupping her shoulders, then her arms, and settle upon her waist. Fingers dig into her hips, pushing her until her back hits the wall again.

Lauren pulls away, breath beating against Camila's tingling lips. She pulls away just enough that Camila can see her face fully. The red light washes out any kind of flush that may be on Lauren's face. Camila is grateful because she's sure her own face has adopted a strong resemblance to a tomato.

Lauren's grip loosens, as her fingers begin to play with the hem of Camila's t-shirt. A slow smile stretches on her painted lips. One that distracts Camila because she notices a smudge at the corner of Lauren's mouth. And suddenly she begins wondering how much of Lauren's lipstick she's wearing.

Her stomach flips at the thought. Another tingle of excitement bubbles over in her chest, as she feels Lauren's fingertips dip beneath the material of her shirt.

"I've wanted to do that all night," Lauren says against her lips.

Her chest swells, and she fights back the smile from forming on her face. She bites down on her lip and Lauren's eyes immediately follow the action.

She doesn't wait to see if Lauren would close it. She tangles her hands in Lauren's hair and brings their lips together again.
Camila feels Lauren's nails against her abdomen, scratching indistinguishable patterns along her skin. And then she feels her hands flatten against her flesh, palming her constricting stomach.

Lauren's mouth moves away from Camila's lips, kissing down her chin. Camila glances up blearily at the red light. Lauren's lips fall along the column of her neck, alternating between wet kisses and sharp nips. She feels the sharpness of teeth, and the softness of lips tracing shapes and images into her skin. Marking everything her mouth touches. A particularly painful bite makes Camila's hands tighten in her hair.

A soft moan vibrates against Camila's throat, caressing the sensitive flesh of her neck. The bites against her skin become more frequent, tantalizing every single one of her senses. She becomes aware of her labored breathing and the rapid pounding of her heart, and the growing ache below her waist.

It all becomes hypersensitive when Lauren finds a spot just below her ear that has her squirming and slumping against the wall pathetically.

Lauren's hands move up against her waist holding her in place while Camila finds her footing again, and then they move higher, feverish hands palming up her abdomen, over her ribcage, until Camila begins to feel Lauren's thumb brushing up against her bra.

Her hands stop, almost as if freezing in place. As if Lauren begins to realize what she's about to do. Her hands slither down her back into a more appropriate place.

And Camila finds herself wanting Lauren to continue. She wants fingers to unsnap and continue their trail upon her heated skin.

Lauren murmurs something unintelligible. But it sounds like she's embarrassed, as she slips her hands out from beneath Camila's top. She pulls away, not quite meeting her eye.

Camila wants to tug her back in, yank her back into her space and continue from where they've left off. She feels her own hands tremble with the urge to grasp on to Lauren's top and pull her close.

But then Lauren is absently fixing Camila's rumpled shirt, and stepping away.

"Sorry," Lauren finally mutters.

"You don't need to apologize for that," Camila steps forward.

"That was moving too fast."

"So you're telling me you've never felt up a girl on the first date?" Word vomit.

Lauren's eyes flicker between hers. Another sense of an unreadable look flashes in her expression. Camila thinks the whole dingy black light adds to the mystery. And it's kind of frustrating how attractive Lauren looks at the moment.

Every rational thought seem to fly out the window. Forget they're in a public place where anyone can see. Forget the fact that they're breaking probably all of Lauren's rules. Camila just wants to be close again.

"We're on a date?"

The question immediately pierces a hole through the intense and intimate bubble. It pulls her back from the arousal entangling itself in her body and thoughts. And it brings Dinah's words and
accusations back to the forefront of her mind.

A dizzying spell hits her, and suddenly she can't look Lauren in the eyes without feeling sick.

Camila leans back against the wall, her hands slip from Lauren's hair, making the space between them larger. Distancing herself yet again.

Her chest is heavy with a reproachful weight of guilt and frustration. She lets out an even sigh through her nose, and looks down at her shoes, before finally responding.

"No," Camila mutters, shaking her head. "No we're not."
but you're a flyer, not a faller

Camila shifts in her chair. The sharp sound of the barely cracking cushion seat accompanies the running stream from the waterfall decoration on the table stand.

Camila's eyes dart toward the waterfall, feeling her hands curl against the edge of the seat. It makes the squeak of the cushion louder. More deafening.

She shifts again, trying to find some sort of comfort in the empty doctor's office. The receptionist went off to break about five minutes ago.

For once she had convinced her mother to drop her off alone for her weekly sessions with Dr. Abernathy.

Camila leans back, slumping against the hard cushion, as thoughts from this morning filter into her head.

Breakfast in the Cabello household became less of memory occurring a mere half hour ago and more like a dizzying, dragged out nightmare.

The morning had started off simple enough. Her mom made breakfast for both of her daughters. Her sister had mostly brushed off Camila's almost desperate attempts at conversation. Which was something that, to Camila's despair, was beginning to seem like the new norm in their relationship.

It wasn't until Sofi heard that Camila had an appointment today that things just kind of spiraled down south.

Sofi had broken a dish, locked herself in her room for an hour, refusing to let anyone inside. After several threats from their mother, Sofi finally budged, but not without sulking the whole way over.

Camila frowns, trying to think of something else. Her eyes then drift towards the waterfall again. But the splashing noise immediately gets disrupted by the buzzing going off in Camila's pocket.

The frown turns into a grimace at the sound. She moves her hand over the outline of her phone in her pocket, trying to stifle the vibration.

So much for distractions.

Maybe this was karma, Camila thinks helplessly. Maybe it's for her inability to interact with anyone anymore. Maybe it's what she deserves for how stupidly she behaved at that concert.

Camila's eyes trail back down towards her phone. She pulls it out of her pocket. The notification bubble flickers on her display as if sensing her attention.

Camila feels another sigh roll out as the situation between the two of them unravels in her head. It's something she's tried not to think about since yesterday. Another dejected huff threatens to fall out of her mouth at the thought.
"If you sigh again, the receptionist is gonna start thinking you have a breathing problem," Dinah's voice breaks through her bout of self-loathing.

Dinah tilts her head in the direction of the lady behind the desk before them. Camila glances up to the lady in question (who has finally returned from her break) and notices her peering over the desk with narrowed eyes. But once she catches Camila's gaze the receptionist quickly shuffles back to her computer.

She only waits a few more minutes before Abernathy is ready to see her.

It doesn't take long for the incessant vibrating to become more than just a minor annoyance.

Camila feels her phone buzz in her pocket again. An unsettling reminder of what she had been avoiding since yesterday. Mortification simmers in her system as she abruptly remembers that night in very detailed, steamy flashes.

She doesn't have to look at the screen to know who it is.

She'd seen the notification flash across the lock screen since earlier this morning. New message. Unopened. And it had buzzed every now and then to remind her that she has not opened it yet.

A part of her thinks she should just scroll through her settings and turn off the notification.

It wouldn't really solve her avoidance. No. Not avoidance. She's not avoiding Lauren.

*Just failing to meet her expectations.*

Lauren isn't the only one expecting a talk, she thinks offhandedly as she glances up to meet Dr. Abernathy's eyes across from her.

It's the same position she's in every week. Except now the reluctance to reveal anything is a lot stronger than it was last week.

"How are things with Lauren?" Abernathy asks.

Camila figures it was only a matter of time before she brought up her neighbor. Lauren had an annoying habit of worming her way into the conversation.

Still, it doesn't stop the blood draining from her face at being caught.

"What?"

"Your acquaintance – Lauren? You mentioned previously that you'd been spending time with her."

And then Camila feels the blood rush back to her face. If Abernathy notices the abrupt blush she doesn't comment, but Camila gets the distinct impression that she's suddenly hyper focused to her facial expression.

Sometimes she wonders if Abernathy is a mind reader. Able to sift and shuffle through her brain as if her thoughts were marked folders in a filing cabinet.

*I wish my thoughts were that organized.*
"Um," Camila begins awkwardly. The phone in her pocket suddenly feels heavy. "Well I hung out with her yesterday."

She can almost see Dinah's pursed lips of her doubtful expression. But she wisely refrains from making a comment, as Camila struggles to answer the question.

"Oh, and what did you both do?"

Camila feels her face turn a deeper crimson, as very explicit images flash through her head. Images of Lauren's face extremely close. Moans and kisses and heavy touches.

Camila's posture shifts into rigidity. She clears her throat, trying to rid herself of the awkwardness that has suddenly overcome her.

"We, uh, went to a concert."

"Who did you go see?" Abernathy continues.


Abernathy's smile widens. "I can't say I've ever heard of them."

"Be glad that you haven't. Saves you from your ears bleeding," Dinah comments, earning a light, indignant huff from Camila.

"Did you have fun?"

The immediate answer is yes. Camila did have a lot of fun...that is until she epically ruined the night with her stupid comment.

The rest of the concert had gone by without any fuss. The two had rather awkwardly made their way back to their seats and listened to the rest of the band's setlist without any other distractions. No more accidental shoulder or hand brushing, no secret whispers or furtive glances. Camila had kept her sole attention on the mop of hair crooning on the stage.

The drive back home was filled with a tense silence. The high from the concert had irrevocably been swallowed whole the moment Camila pushed Lauren away in the bathroom hallway. And it had promptly remained dormant for the rest of the night.

Dropping her off was worse.

Awkward perhaps might have been a severe understatement when they said their goodbyes. Lauren had come in for what looked like a potential kiss when Camila dove in for a hug.

She'd offered Lauren a hasty goodbye and stumbled back into her house mortified.

Camila feels the dejected sigh build up in her chest again, pushing its way up her through and rolling off her lips before she can stop it.

Abernathy picks up on this. "What happened?"

Camila prickles.

"Nothing," she retorts staunchly.

A few moments later, the double meaning behind her response hits her. She promptly flushes again,
tearing her gaze away from Abernathy's calculating stare.

"I mean, we just listened to music – obviously."

She could slap herself, she really could. And Dinah for that matter, if she doesn't keep from giggling beside her.

"Did you want something to happen?"

"No, of course not. We're just friends," Camila snaps. She doesn't realize how badly she's implicated herself until the words are out.

Abernathy makes a noise. Something like a hum in the back of her throat. It makes Camila's ears perk up instantly.

"You know, I think that's the first time I've heard you call Lauren a friend."

Camila shrugs a shoulder, unaffected by the observation (and slightly relieved that the comment didn't go into a different direction). But the way her pulse begins to jump at an increased speed tells her otherwise.

It almost feels like she's hiding a secret from Abernathy. Which, in hindsight, Camila supposes that she is. But the reluctance to talk about Lauren is still there. Burning deep in her chest, flourishing across her cheeks in a fervent blush.

She thinks Abernathy is going to continue, but instead she asks a different question.

"What about the other people in your life? Friends? How are things with them?"

_I don't have any friends._

"I'm not sure," Camila murmurs. "Things are different now."

"Describe how it used to be," Abernathy suggests. Her tone is soft and smooth, encouraging. Camila even feels gently pried out of her shell with the doctor's voice.

Camila hesitates. Her eyes narrow as Abernathy continues to stare at her expectantly. Finally, after a few moments of the silent exchange the doctor exhales, breaking the tension.

"What about your family? How are things at home?" Abernathy asks.

Camila thinks back to just this morning, grimacing.

"That bad?" Abernathy questions.

"No," Camila responds sharply. But quickly amends her words. "I mean, I don't know. They're different."

"How so?"

Camila simply shrugs. She knows she's being frustrating. But she thinks she's used up all of her conversations abilities for the session.

"You've mentioned before that you have a younger sister," Abernathy says, startling Camila out of her hesitation. "How would you say your relationship is with her?"
Once again, Abernathy's knack for sifting through her thoughts proves to be absurdly accurate.

Camila's eyes narrow into a glare. That seems to steer that topic away because then Abernathy is closing her notebook. She sets it aside, and leans forward in her armchair.

"I have another exercise for you, Camila. One outside of these walls. I want you to play close attention to your relationship with your sister. Reflect. See if you can come up with your own solutions. Actually, why don't you try with the relationships around you. Friends, acquaintances?" Abernathy suggests. There's an excited lilt to her tone. One that Camila recognizes because she hears it in her mother's tone often.

It roughly translates to: *it'll be so good for you.*

She feels an exasperated kind of annoyance at Abernathy's request. What had she spent the past few minutes *not* explaining to the doctor? She had been studying. She had been noticing. And the conclusions with everyone had roughly been all the same.

People were different around her. People treated her differently. Because she *was* different.

But she lets Abernathy continue explaining as if she's understanding in this method for the first time.

"Only if you're comfortable with it, Camila, I'd like the next few sessions devoted to sharing your observations within the time frame."

Camila leaves the office hyper alert of the invisible barrier between her and the rest of the world. As if she needed that reminder, considering it was something she was readily self conscious of for a while. It almost seemed Abernathy's intention was to exacerbate the loneliness.

When Camila returns home, she immediately flops on her messy, unmade bed, unbothered to kick off her sneakers.

She finds the nearest pillow and props her chin on it, eyes glancing across the phone screen. The notification still lights up on her display. Taunting. Teasing. Titillating.

There are two messages now.

She feels her stomach clench uneasily against the bed and flips over onto her back, tossing the phone. It bounces against the mattress before landing with a heavy thud on the floor.

She flinches at the sound.

Dinah stretches out beside her, head leaning against her hand.

"You know, instead of abusing your phone you could just answer it."

Camila stares at her flatly.

"You can't avoid her forever," Dinah continues in a sing-song tone. Camila rolls her eyes.

"I'm not avoiding her," she argues, burying her face in the pillow. "I'm just taking my time to
respond.” Her voice is muffled and she's unsure whether Dinah hears her or not.

The derisive snort is enough of an answer.

Camila lifts up her face defiantly. "Wouldn't you want a well thought out response?" She challenges.

"Yeah I guess. But you haven't even opened any of her new messages," Dinah points out.

It was true. She can't admit that as soon as she saw Lauren's name flashed upon the display her stomach dropped. Plummeted, really, into the dark abyss of worry and shame.

She doesn't have a proper retort for Dinah's smugness. So instead, she pushes herself away from her belly flopped position.

"Whatever."

"Abernathy asked you to observe your relationships. She wants you to work on them," Dinah says.

"Yeah. I plan to," Camila responds shortly.

"So maybe this thing with Lauren-"

"I'm not worried about Lauren. I am so far from worried about that. We're okay. For now."

"Girl, you literally threw your phone when you saw that she sent you a message."

"I barely tossed it. The phone bounced off the edge of my bed and – okay I don't know why I'm even trying to explain this to you," Camila huffs. "And what's it to you whether I talk to Lauren or not? Last time I checked I thought you wanted me to stop hanging out with her."

Dinah's face darkens. "I never said that."

"You didn't have to."

"You know that's not what I meant, Camila."

Camila moves away from her with another huff. "I don't want to talk about it anymore."

Dinah's frown curves into a pout. But she relents, scooting over as Camila returns with her laptop.

They sit in silence as the computer boots up, Camila's thoughts, despite her words, flutter towards her next door neighbor. She catches Dinah staring at her from her peripheral vision, and when Camila challenges her with a glare, Dinah looks away pointedly.

It seems that her thoughts are just as transparent.

When the desktop screen flickers on, Dinah scoots closer. "What are we watching today?"

Relief floods her chest at the subject change. Camila grasps it eagerly.

"I don't know," she responds. "I think we've finished this folder."

Camila opens a file that's labeled with just the date. The thumbnail reveals nothing. As it plays, the screen shows someone shuffling with the camera. Music filters from the computer, as whoever is holding the camera straightens their shaky hold (Camila has a suspicious feeling it's Dinah recording).
The camera finally evens out, revealing Normani posing. Then a recording version of Camila, herself, steps into the frame, holding a speaker (one that she recognizes as Dinah's) in one hand. She also strikes a pose beside Normani, albeit a goofier one.

"Mani move in closer." She hears Dinah's voice from behind the camera. "Half your face is cut off."

The girls break out into a fit of giggles before recording- Camila loops her arm through Normani's, and tugs her closer. It makes recording-Camila lose her balance, freeing Normani of their tangled arms, and falling out of the frame.

Camila can hear Ally and Lauren's laughter behind the screen as well.

"Wow, klutz," Normani says incredulously.

"Save me," Camila cries from outside the video frame. Only her hand reaching out is shown, grasping at nothing.

"I swear you're a mess, Mila." Normani shakes her head, extending a hand to pick her back up.

"Okay, for real this time," Dinah's voice says. "You guys are interrupting my selfie sesh."

Recording-Camila glances at the camera with a frown.

"Are you kidding me? Selfies my ass. You're the one always making us take pictures of you."

She then hears Dinah in the video scoff. "Because I'm cute. Look at me."

"True," Dinah, beside her, agrees.

At this the camera promptly swivels around until Dinah's face appears. She poses several times, flipping her hair, lips puckered before her eyes widen in shock.

"Oh crap, I think I've been recording the entire time...aha."

"Dinah I swear to god, if you drain my battery I-"

The video cuts off.

"I guess I drained your battery huh?" Dinah mutters sheepishly beside her.

Camila rolls her eyes, before quietly agreeing.

Her mood hasn't gotten better. If anything it has gotten worse and she's not sure the video watching is helping anymore. In fact, it seems to do the opposite.

Abernathy's words ring in the back of her mind as she shuffles to the next video. When it plays, the distraction doesn't serve its purpose well. It makes the jarble of her mind worse, especially when she sees Lauren's face on her computer screen.

This version is slightly younger. Happier, Camila notes.

In the video, Lauren is smiling, looking away from the camera as Camila's voice comes in loud.

"First day of school! How does it feel?"

"Literally like the beginning of every other school year," Lauren deadpans.
"But this is your last year of high school!"

Lauren rolls her eyes. "That doesn't mean it's the end of everything, Camz."

"Nooo, but it's the end of your high school life as we know it." She sounds painfully dramatic. It makes Dinah snort beside her.

Camila's voice in the recording has quieted. "And that means after all of it, we won't walk to school together anymore. I won't get you those sour gummy worms you like from the student store during fifth period. We won't be able to goof off in the back of Mr. Cowell's class anymore. I won't have softball games to obnoxiously cheer for," Recording - Camila's voice trails off. Her tone softens, turning warm suddenly. "You won't be there waiting for me by my locker. Hugs and all."

Lauren's smile falters. "You're gonna make me cry, you dummy."

"Also who am I gonna trade lunches with? Dinah? You know that girl would eat both of our lunches in one sitting."

"Uh, rude!" Dinah snaps beside her.

"Camz."

"What? It's true."

Lauren looks straight into the camera now. Something flickers in her expression. Something that makes Camila's heart clench right now because she's pretty sure she's seen it before. Recognized it in her own reflection the past few months.

"I guess you're right," Lauren finally admits. "But I'm glad I'm starting the end with you. Right now."

Camila can already remember the butterflies in her stomach erupting in that moment. Fluttery and light, brimming at the surface. Because Lauren always had that way of making her feel like she was the most important person.

"Why are you recording this early in the morning? We're all ugly right now," Dinah's sleepy face comes into the frame a moment later. She shoots the camera a glare.

"And with Dinah too, of course," Lauren adds immediately with a smirk.

Camila stops the video before it continues any further. She feels a pang in her chest as she remembers the rest of that day.

It was probably the last time Camila thinks things had just been – easy.

As the semester progressed, it became more and more difficult for the five of them to all be together at the same time. Especially when the other three had begun to focus on their college applications.

The stress was imminent, like the end of her friendship with Lauren.

Camila remembers the first semester, she and Dinah being pushed to the sidelines by their friends. Unintentionally, of course. The conflict with Lauren only solidified the separation since it became next to impossible to all hang out together.

In hindsight, Camila thinks the loneliness really started then. Little did she know that it truly had been the beginning of the end.
After a few minutes of staring at the blank computer screen, Camila sighs, closing the lap top. She turns to find Dinah staring at her sadly. As if she can read her thoughts. As if she understands exactly the feelings she's trying to suppress.

And maybe she does.

A headache begins to form as Camila enters the kitchen, hours later.

The same daily sight greets her: her mother at the stove, her sister at the table. Everything is normal. And she's the unwanted abstract object infringing upon the perfect picture.

She forces the thoughts away, settling down in the seat beside her sister. Sofi doesn't make any acknowledgement that she's joined them in the kitchen. The thought comes back to nag at her.

She swallows thickly and tries to distract herself with the plate set in front of her.

Her eyes roam the side of Sofi's face, focusing in on the concentrated pull of her sister's eyebrows.

The weird sense of estrangement overwhelms Camila as she continues to stare at Sofi. A stranger sitting at the dining table that refuses to warm up to her sad attempts at a connection.

Camila comes to the humiliating realization that she doesn't really know Sofi at all anymore. Not like she used to. It's even more prevalent in the awkwardness and shame that hits her, as she timidly fiddles with the stray ends of her shorts for a moment.

The lack of connection becomes even more apparent when their mother leaves the kitchen and forcing her into an even more awkward atmosphere.

"Take a picture it lasts longer," Sofi finally mutters without looking up from her writing. Dinah lets out a loud giggle, and Camila flushes.

Camila blinks uncertainly, unable to form words in front of her younger sister.

"Um, what are you doing?" Camila tries a different approach.

Sofi huffs, putting her pencil down and drawing her eyes up to meet Camila. Brown eyes, so similar to her own, narrow in annoyance.

"Writing a letter."

Something, Camila begins to recognize as bitterness, swirls in her stomach as her eyes take in the letter. Sofi angles her body away, blocking the words from her vision.

A fleeting memory sneaks up on her, triggered by Sofi's actions.

And suddenly, Camila is remembering the silly letters she and Lauren used to send each other.

Paragraphs upon paragraphs of things ranging from dumb knock, knock jokes to stupid gossip to incredibly intimate conversations that would probably have Camila in complete denial of ever happening.
The letter writing faded out once they both got their own cell phones. But picked up again, after she and the girls watched *The Notebook*. And Camila thought Noah writing Allie 365 letters was the most romantic thing ever. She even remembers making a silly vow to write Lauren everyday for a year.

The plan didn't work out too well, considering after about a week she began to slack with the writing.

Yet despite the failed plan, Camila remembers every birthday a letter slipped into her folder from Lauren. *Every* birthday.

Except this last one. Nothing. Not that Camila expected anything like that anymore.

She suppresses the memory, feeling that annoying ache in her chest again.

"So, uh, who are you writing a letter to?" Camila asks, returning her attention to Sofi. "Santa?"

Her sister makes a noise of dissent.

"Santa isn't real."

"Who told you that?" Camila questions abruptly.

"Maya," her sister responds shortly. "She's in my class."

A wave of protectiveness flares up in her chest. She grits her teeth and wonders if it's ethical to beat up her seven year old classmate.

As if reading her thoughts, Dinah says, "We'll send Regina after that little asshole."

"Do Mamí and Papí know about this?" Camila finally asks.

Sofi shrugs. "They don't care."

She thinks she's misheard at first. Perplexed, Camila leans forward capturing her sister's undivided attention.

"What do you mean?"

Sofi gives her an even look. One that sends a slight chill down her spine. The nonchalant shrug is disturbing. The casual way in which Sofi mutters the statement disturbs her even more. And it all comes back again. The dissociative sensation that feels as if she's outside looking in. Sofi's admission doesn't feel real. The person sitting beside her looks like her sister, but Camila can't shake the alienation. The fear that she doesn't really belong here at all.

"They don't care."

Camila's hard gaze hasn't left the ceiling in the past half hour. She's back in her room, falling into the same familiar pattern. It seems almost inconceivable that not too long ago she was out in the world. She was around people. She was beginning to feel like herself again.
The emptiness inside seems exacerbated by the silence. Yet she can't find it in herself to move from her position.

Abernathy's words still ring inside her head. Forcing her to acknowledge the very things she's tried to avoid.

"Not that watching you breathe is like the highlight of my day." Dinah begins, shifting in her position on the bed. "But are we gonna, like, do something?"

Camila turns to look at her. "What did you have in mind?"

"I mean there's always..." Dinah trails off, before giving a pointed stare towards the phone she left flopped on the floor.

Camila purses her lips. "No. No way."

"Oh come on," Dinah urges. "You said it yourself. You're not catching feelings."

Camila feels a surge of shame well up inside her at Dinah's condescending tone. She'd made such a fool out of herself that night.

"I think Abernathy is right," Camila murmurs.

Dinah readjusts her position against the headboard to peer down at Camila.

"What is she right about? 'Cause you know she's right about a lot of things. Namely Lau-"

"-About my relationships with everyone," Camila corrects before Dinah can finish. "Lauren is the least of my worries right now."

Dinah shoots her a flat look. Camila purses her lips, turning her head to look up at Dinah.

"I'm on speaking terms with Lauren," Camila elaborates. Dinah's expression shifts into an unimpressed stare. Camila flushed. "Well I'm working on it."

"Mmhmm. Ignoring that text is really working on it."

"Look, compared to literally everyone else it's something," Camila says. "I don't have any friends. I can't talk to my parents about anything and – and I'm pretty sure Sofi hates me right now."

"She loves you, Mila," Dinah murmurs softly.

Camila shakes her head.

"She does," Dinah repeats firmly. "She adores you. I don't even like my own siblings as much as you guys like each other."

Camila sighs. "Maybe this is it, Dinah."

Dinah sits upright. Her gaze turns sharp. "What do you mean?"

"I'm not – it's not getting better." Camila feels a lump in her throat as the words fall out in a weak voice. "I'm a liability to my family. And things with Lauren – okay, they're not fine. I'm pretty sure I've ruined whatever common ground we've come to." Camila brings a hand to rub at her eyes, feeling the wetness spread against her fingertips. "It's not getting any easier."
"No one said it was easy, Mila," Dinah reassures.

Camila remains silent, expectantly waiting for Dinah to continue. But when she's met with equal silence, Camila allows the disappointment to crawl its way in.

The moment of vulnerability fades much to Camila's relief. She's had enough emotional grappling the past few days. And bringing up the heavy subjects, however indirectly, isn't something Camila is too eager to do.

Yet the foreboding feeling, riddled with guilt, sits heavy on her back. Its presence dull and nearly unnoticeable like a shadow formed beneath a dying lightbulb.

"Start small." Dinah finally breaks the silence. Her voice is colored with optimism. Camila can't help but feel some semblance of hope stir deep in the recesses of her heart. However watered down it feels.

She perks up slightly. "Small?"

Dinah shrugs. "Small. Like Sofi."

Camila stares at Dinah critically. Unintentionally, letting her eyes fall to her face as her mind begins to work out the cogs. As her gaze focuses on the scar on Dinah's forehead (which, upon noticing her stare, Dinah slaps a hand over the scar), inspiration strikes.

"I have an idea." Camila sits upright. She throws the blankets off, and scrambles out of the bed. "Come on. We're going out."

Dinah watches her with a dumbfounded expression. "Um, what?"

"To the post office," Camila continues.

"I said start small."

"This is starting small," Camila says impatiently. "I'm gonna get stamps. I would just mail her letter myself but I don't think she's done with it and maybe that's being too pushy? It's still a peace offering. That's - that's good, right?"

Dinah's expression furrows into even more befuddlement. And then a split second later, she shrugs, rising from her spot on the bed. "Okay. I'm in."

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Convincing Dinah was easy. Getting her mother on board was an entirely different story.

"It's literally just a few blocks off the main street," Camila had protested after being quickly denied. "I know how to take the bus. The dollar goes in. I take a seat."

If it weren't for the fact that her sister was also present while she made the request, Camila was pretty sure the conversation would have turned into more than just a hard no.

She knew she was playing dirty asking in front of Sofi. She could see her mother backing up into a metaphorical corner. But she was desperate. And perhaps, in hindsight, the resentment she was
beginning to feel towards her parents had also governed her motives.

In the end, they had come to a compromise. She could go to the post office – if her mother drove her there.

The ride to the post office happens in a blur. One of Sofi happily singing along with the radio from the backseat and her mother’s curious gaze.

It’s an obscurity of muffled music, dusky clouds, and sweaty palms reduced down to a bundle of nerves.

By the time Camila steps out of the car, the clouds have spread, dark grey brushed across the muggy sky. A humid breeze leaves her face flushed and sticky with perspiration.

Camila runs a hand through her hair, feeling the thin layer of sweat beneath her fingers. She catches Dinah’s amused smile, before rolling her eyes.

They make their way into the building and Camila relishes in the fleeting rush of air hitting her face as the doors slide open.

She makes a beeline for the stamp dispensary.

"Get the one with the dinosaurs on them," Dinah says immediately, peering over her shoulder.

"Those cost more," Camila mutters.

"Sofi likes dinosaurs," Dinah says. "We used to watch The Land Before Time together. Remember?"

"Yeah and who had to console her every time Littlefoot’s mom died?" Camila deadpans.

"That’s beside the point." Dinah waves a dismissive hand.

Camila relents, sliding the money through the machine and choosing the dinosaur stamps.

After the purchase, she lingers about the post office.

Camila drifts towards the envelopes, ignoring the curious look a few other customers give her. She spend a few minutes contemplating whether it’s worth buying the pricier envelopes, or run the risk of not having any at home.

It’s at this moment that Camila glances around the aisle, distractedly peering between the large manila envelopes, when she sees someone she’s not expecting.

The small box of envelopes in her hand tumbles to a stuttering crash against the linoleum floor.

Any chance of ducking away or hiding get thrown out the window the moment Normani lifts up her head and regards Camila with a surprised expression.

There’s an awkward pause in which Camila stares dumbly at the girl, silently taking in her appearance.

The tight yoga pants and loose fitted long sleeved shirt immediately makes her think that perhaps
Normani has just come out of being in the gym... or something as equally energetic before stumbling upon her idiot self.

Not that it's surprising.

Of the five of them, Normani was by far the most disciplined when it came to exercise and all of the physical activity Camila tended to avoid. She remembers a few summers ago she tried to fill in for Lauren as Normani's morning, running partner. She should have known the mistake she'd made, especially considering the activity included "morning" and "running".

Camila doesn't realize she's been gawking until she hears Dinah cough loudly behind her.

"Sofi was right. Taking a picture does last longer."

Camila blinks out of her stupor and turns to glare at Dinah. She's actually on the verge of telling her to shut up when she notices Normani bending down to pick up the fallen boxes scattered across the aisle.

"Oh, I got that," Camila fumbles out thickly. She moves too quickly and ends up bumping her forehead into the side of Normani's head. "Oh my god! I'm so sorry."

Other than the fact that's now rubbing her head gingerly, Normani looks unharmed, if not a bit disheveled suddenly.

Camila takes a moment to notice the stamped envelopes in Normani's hand.

"You're going to mail something?"

"Generally, that is why people go to post offices," Normani mumurs, rubbing her head gingerly. "The parents of the kids in my class like having physical copies of guidelines."

"Oh," Camila offers weakly. She wants to ask about it. That's what friends do right? Ask about each other's lives? For some reason, Camila feels out of place asking something like that. Not without Normani volunteering the information first.

"You're mailing something too?"

"Uh, no. My sister," Camila stammers after realizing Normani is addressing her again.

She feels an awkward moment pass between them. "She's just going to mail this to her friend down the street actually."

Normani's mouth quirks as if she wants to smile.

"I know it's a waste of money," Camila continues. "And a little a stupid now that I think about it..."

Normani shakes her head, and the grin forms. "I'm pretty sure I remember you and Lauren trying to mail each other's letters before."

At the mention of her neighbor, Camila feels her face flush. But the statement isn't a lie. How Normani even remembers that is beyond her.

"You remember that?"

It's a brief, but Camila catches the unimpressed stare. She almost waits for the sassy remark, but the look is gone in an instant. Normani's face is impassive.
"Of course she remembers you dummy. How could anyone forget how disgusting you and Lauren acted back then?" Dinah groans.

At this statement, Camila's mind seems to run a mile a minute, as she suddenly begins to question the nature of Normani and Lauren’s friendship.

Were they close anymore? Why wouldn't they be? Normani and Lauren almost did everything together.

Camila distinctly remembers Lauren referring Normani as her therapist.

Something that was hilarious at the time, makes Camila wonder exactly how much Normani knows and what she's willing to reveal.

Nothing probably, Camila thinks sourly glancing at her clean slate of an expression. She tries anyway.

"Have you spoken to Lauren recently?"

Normani’s stare turns calculating. Camila backtracks immediately.

"Not that I want to know anything that you guys talk about. That's totally not my business. She just – uh..." Camila struggles for a response, glancing towards Dinah for help. Her best friend shrugs helplessly. "Just – uh – we're supposed to go out driving. She supposed to teach me and yeah that's why I'm asking. No other particular reason." She finishes rather lamely. Dinah cringes, bringing a hand to cover her face.

"Wow, way to be convincing Walz," Dinah whines from behind her hand.

Camila knows Normani doesn't believe that poor excuse in the slightest. She almost looks like she wants to laugh. Instead, she clears her throat, and hands back the box of envelopes to Camila.

The conversation seems to be at an end, which Camila is grateful for. She's not sure how much more she could possibly embarrass herself.

(A lot more, if Dinah's amused face is anything to go by).

But just as Camila is going to say her goodbyes, Normani speaks up again.

"Lauren is a terrible driver," Normani mutters, crossing her arms over her chest. "She's really teaching you to drive?"

"Yikes," Dinah exclaims.

"Well, I mean we've really only gone out once," Camila supplies weakly.

Normani nods in acknowledgment, falling silent again. And Camila wonders if now is the appropriate time to say goodbye.

"Ally and I said we'd help you with your list." Normani's eyes sweep over her face. The distinct impression that she's being studied under a microscope is prominent. A warm flush dusks across her cheeks, as she looks away.

"If you want," Normani starts hesitantly and Camila hangs on to every word. "I can help with the driving?"
Camila blinks, perplexed. She searches the girl's eyes for any kind of doubt or insincerity and when she's met with nothing of the sort, the anxiety slips away.

It takes her a slow moment to realize that maybe this is Normani's peace offering.

And that's more than enough for her.

"Yeah, uh yes yes that sounds good. Nice. Cool."

One of Normani's eyebrows rises. "Cool. So how does seven sound?"

"Yes! I mean, good." Camila clears her throat, trying to force her shaky tone into one of nonchalance. "Yeah. Sounds good."

"Wow. Queen of making plans," Dinah deadpans.

The stamps prove to be some sort of progress. Sofi doesn't outright jump into her arms and rejoice in the attempt at the relationship mending. She appraises Camila with a look that doesn't unsettle her for once. But, instead, spreads faint warmth in her chest.

The dinosaurs did the trick.

The following morning, Camila wakes up earlier than usual, hoping punctuality would leave a lasting impression on the slow tentative budding relationship with Normani.

She gets through her morning routine hastily.

And at exactly seven, Camila finds herself standing outside Normani's doorstep.

The only car she sees in the driveway is her SUV. She notes silently that her parents must be at work. Not something out of the ordinary. The Hamilton's were always punctual.

"Just knock," Dinah says, after a few minutes of Camila's awkward pacing. "You're acting like that time we waited in line to get on the whirl-n-twirl 5000 at the fair."

"If I remember correctly you were the one that forced me on that ride."

"If I didn't you wouldn't have gone on anything."

"I threw up after getting off."

"Yeah, but did you die?"

Camila lets out a short indignant huff before knocking. The door remains shut. She knocks again, only for the door to still remain shut.

She glances at Dinah, who purses her lips thoughtfully.

"Open the door?"
"I am not opening the door," Camila retorts.

"Just open it."

"No."

"It's just Normani's house," Dinah reasons.

"Even more reason not to."

"We used to barge in all the time."

"Correction: you used to barge in all the time. I'm not going to just intrude on someone's home."

Dinah's expression shifts into annoyance. "Like climbing through Lauren's window is any different."

Camila glowers at her for that remark. Before sighing, ultimately, defeated. "Fine. Point taken."

She reaches out to pull the handle, but comes up short when the doorknob stays in place. She wriggles it, thinking perhaps it's stuck. But the thought goes away. The Hamiltons were always very meticulous about their upkeep.

"Maybe she forgot I was coming," Camila murmurs.

"Nah, she probably penciled you in her planner," Dinah snickers. A slight jab to Normani's typical schedule back in high school. "Check out the shed."

The shed, otherwise known as Normani's small, private dance studio. Her father had it built for her fourteenth birthday. After the beach and Dinah's house, this was the place the five of them spent most of their time.

"Um no," Camila protests. Dinah ignores her, walking off the porch and darting around the house. Camila scrambles after her, nearly tripping over the cement ledge that led off to the driveway. "Dinah come back here."

"Stop being so scared jeez," Dinah says flippantly, waving a dismissive hand over head for good measure. Camila grits her teeth, following her best friend.

"What if she really isn't home?" Camila seethes.

"Then we wait for her in here," Dinah responds.

She's not a stranger to the house. She knows she's capable of finding her way to the garage because she knows this house.

She remembers the closed door of the garage. An indication of Normani's practice time. She remembers the times Dinah would completely disregard the closed door and barge in, before demanding to flip Normani's dance routine to the latest Beyoncé song. Not that Normani would object. They were short lived forms of resistance before Dinah and Normani were performing the "Single Ladies" choreography.

Camila thinks she may have a recording of that saved in her computer. She makes a mental note to rifle through her files later.

She stares at the door. Feeling the sensations of nostalgia sit at the bottom of her stomach uncomfortably. A part, a very large part, wants to turn on her heel and head back out the way she
came in.

"What are you waiting for?" Dinah questions, tilting her head towards the doorframe.

"I'm nervous," Camila mumbles, staring at it numbly. Her hand comes to curl in a slow fist. She wills herself to reach up and knock, but she stops at the last second. "Maybe she's busy."

"Nuh uh, you better get your ass in there. We did not come all this way just for you to chicken out."

"The door is closed." Camila gestures towards it exasperatedly.

Dinah rolls her eyes. "That's never stopped us before."

"Emphasis on the before," Camila hisses.

"Okay, but we know Mani probably needs the break anyway."

Camila glances back towards the door. There's truth to Dinah's words.

For as long as Camila could remember Normani was the friend that overworked herself. Dinah always used to refer to her as the rubberband. Mostly because she was stretched into different areas of extra curricular activities. If she wasn't busy with dance, she was in gymnastics or cheerleading or leading the booster club or part of the yearbook staff, or loading up her schedule with college classes. The amount of clubs made Camila's head spin.

She remembers Dinah would often tease Normani to lighten up her crazy schedule.

Camila sucks in a deep breath before reaching forward and pulling the door open. Relief floods her system as she sees Normani.

The sight is almost the same as the countless past intrusions.

Normani's back is turned, arm outstretched to its fullest span towards the ceiling. Camila has walked in on this before. She has seen the same sight over and over again. Except this time instead of the soft flow of music she hears nothing. Nothing but the slow breathing of the girl before her and the clap of her feet against the wooden floorboards.

She tries to make a gesture or noise to alert her presence, but the more Camila stands silently the more she feels the urge die. There's a subdued desperation to Normani's movements. Something that keeps Camila frozen to the spot.

Normani's arms fall and rise gracefully at her sides, a gentle fluidity flowing from her fingertips to the working muscles straining beneath her dark skin. The tension extends down her thighs and to her feet, toes curled into a sharp point. Before one taut leg is brought up, flexing in a way that has Camila winded for a moment.

Camila can barely catch Normani's face in the reflection of the wall of mirrors. Normani's eyes are closed, eyebrows knitted together.

It's one of those things Camila remembers with a fondness – Normani's dancing. She remembers back in middle school when Normani still was in ballet with the hyped up dance recitals.

Camila remembers one year she, Lauren, Ally and Dinah accompanied Normani's family to one of them. The girls had spent all of their combined money to buy Normani an overpriced bouquet at the concession stand. But near the end, Dinah had insisted that throwing the flowers on stage was the
appropriate thing to do because she had seen in it in a movie once. So when all of the dancers lined up to do their bows, Dinah had chucked the bundle of flowers, miscalculating the power behind her arm, and hitting Normani square in the face.

"At least she has good aim," Lauren had commended later that evening, which had earned an eye roll from Normani, an exasperated sigh from Ally, and a sheepish laugh from Dinah.

The memory sinks itself around Camila's heart, making her chest suddenly feel heavy and suffocating. She swallows thickly, and takes a tentative step backwards towards the door.

At that precise moment, Normani's eyes meet hers through the reflection of the mirror. It catches both of them off guard, and Normani stumbles over her left foot, falling into an abrupt skid against the floor.

"Wow what a klutz," Dinah scoffs, breaking Camila out of her shocked state.

Immediately, she rushes forward to Normani's side.

"Are you okay?" Camila blurts out. "I didn't mean to scare you. The door was open I just."

Normani's head tilts upward, she blows a few loose strands of hair out of her face, and meets Camila's gaze sharply. Camila feels her face boil. The same urge to backtrack from their run in at the store hits her. But Normani's questioning gaze is petrifying, rooting her to the spot.

"What are you doing here?" Normani finally breaks the silence.

Confusion filters into her system as she realizes Normani is genuinely confused as she feels.

"Aren't we – um – you know – gonna go drive? You said seven." Camila asks, feeling the awkward nerves seep into her body. Of course, this was exactly what she wanted – to feel like a complete idiot in front of her. Was it too late to turn back and run?

"Yes," Normani says slowly. One of her sculpted eyebrows arches. "Seven in the afternoon."

Oh.

Oh well that could have been a common misinterpretation, Camila tries to reason. But the more she tries to rationalize the situation the more embarrassed she becomes. Why would Normani mean seven in the morning?

She hears Dinah's snickering

A voice in her head, one that sounds suspiciously like Dinah, scolds her referring her to a number of obscenities.

Camila huffs, glaring at Dinah beside her for good measure, before returning her attention to Normani. She fights the blush that demands its presence to be known up on her cheeks.

She takes in Normani's stance. The stiff posture she's familiar with. It's the one Normani falls into when she's around new people. People she's uncomfortable with.

People like Camila.

Saying she feels completely stupid is a massive understatement. It comes crashing down in a tidal wave of stupidity. Beginning with the rapid pace of her nervous pulse, up to the flourishing, hot flush gracing her cheeks.
Camila steps back, feeling an ugly cough burst out in discomfort.

Suddenly this all seems very much like the worst idea she's ever had. And that's saying a lot. Considering she's pretty much filled with bad ideas, according to Dinah.

The next thing that happens makes her feel like even more of a colossal idiot. She stammers, and visibly sweats and stammers some more.

"I didn't - I mean - my mistake - I'm just - wow - I'm ok - like sorry for disturbing - I'm confused you know morning night - I can't tell time." She'd give Kristen Stewart's twilight hospital scene a run for her money with the amount of stumbling over her words she's done.

At the very end, Camila hangs her head, giving up with her long winded explanation.

Beside her, Dinah shakes her head wearily, face palming.

Camila is about two seconds away from excusing herself and calling this all off when Normani breaks the silence.

A flicker of hope coming in the form of an exasperated laugh.

Camila glances up uncertainly when the laugh filters into an amused chuckle.

Something cracks, probably the thick layer of ice separating the two. The fissure spreads warmly and something that feels like relief settles into the pit of her stomach.

Camila feels her chest ache dully as Normani's laughter tapers off. For a moment. Everything is back to normal. For a fleeting moment, she and Normani are back to goofing off in Ally's kitchen, forcefeeding each other the ridiculous food concoctions Camila had come up with.

She catches a glimpse of familiarity. An innocence that she didn't realize she wants to cling to until Normani is already laughing.

She remembers the silly days. Normani was always the first on who would entertain her goofiness. From volunteering to try Camila's outlandish food concoctions to randomly breaking out into broadway show tunes.

She would watch music videos over and over with Normani, cheering as Normani tried to teach herself the choreography. She even tried to learn along with Normani in disastrous attempts to replicate the Pussycat Dolls routine. Something she couldn't do in front of Dinah because it would probably be spent the entire time laughing.

And yet they could sit in silence for hours, doing homework (or forcing Dinah to do her homework) without so much as a mumble for an extra pencil.

Normani relinquishes the small bit of giggle in the form of a soft sigh. Her lips curves into a gentle smile that lets an abrupt sense of familiarity wash over Camila.

She feels the tug of her lips as a sheepish grin spreads across her face. She brings a hand to her face and lets out an exasperated breath.

"Sorry I'm dumb," Camila finishes her ramble.

Normani tilts her head to the side, tucking a stray strand behind her ear.

"You're a mess, Mila."
Despite the morning traffic, Normani decides that they probably should use the time to actually go out and drive.

Not having much experience with being behind the wheel, Camila expects Normani to drive them to an empty parking lot. Similar to Lauren's thinking. And then let Camila cruise around the lot.

She doesn't expect Normani to toss her the keys, and settle into the passenger seat so nonchalantly.

"Um, what the hell?" Dinah laughs nervously. Camila feels similar to Dinah's incredulity.

"You're letting me drive?" Camila asks, as she climbs into the driver's seat. The leather free from any cracks, steering wheel cover still fresh and squeaky. If Camila concentrates she's sure the new car smell would creep up her nose any second. She doesn't know why she's suddenly noticing how disturbingly new the car is. It isn't her first trip in it.

Normani's eyebrows pull together in confusion, before she nods slowly. "That's what you wanted."

"That sounds a lot creepier than what really happened," Camila quickly amends. "I meant to say that I don't have a lot of practice. Like zero in a setting where I actually have to – uh you know – drive?"

"It's okay. I trust you not to crash," Normani replies.

"I don't," Dinah chirps from the backseat.

"I'm a good teacher too," Normani continues. "So that helps."

Camila takes her word for it, nervously sticking the keys in the ignition and turning the car on. It rumbles beneath her fingertips as she grips the steering wheel with sweaty palms.

Normani nods her head, which Camila roughly translates as: well, go on then.

She adjusts her mirrors, before putting the car in gear and slowly rolling out the driveway.

Surprisingly, starting seemed to be the hardest part. Once she's actually on the streets, Normani, true to her word proved to be an excellent teacher. The initial nerves that flooded Camila's thoughts melt away as Normani instructs her.

"And here I thought we were gonna crash and burn," Dinah sighs, dramatically.

It's smooth sailing for almost a good half hour, much to Dinah's surprise.

"Wow, Walz, we found something that you're actually – dare I say it? – good at?"

The instructions also became an incredibly focused distraction. Pulling her concentration from things she didn't want to think about. It also served to make the atmosphere less awkward than Camila
expected. With Normani calling out instructions they didn't need to have the radio playing in the silent car. Nor was there a need for conversation. Not that it was entirely awkward.

But it was evident that whatever good place they'd reached was fragile.

Soon Normani's supervision fades as Camila begins to drive on her own accord. After the morning traffic has died into a gentle lull, the instructions stop, allowing Camila to completely take the reins. They drive around the city for a few minutes, long enough for Camila to notice their old familiar hang out spots.

The Mexican restaurant they used to frequent comes into her line of vision, as she comes to a slow stop at the nearest red light.

It feels like such a long time ago that she and Lauren spent the lunch hour sitting inside the familiar booth. It feels like an even longer time when it was all five of them sitting around the same table.

She glances over to Normani and sees that her attention is also on the restaurant. A frown pulls at her lips, before a pensive sigh rolls out.

It makes Camila's chest ache dully. Because now she gets it. Her thoughts have drifted to the same thing Normani's face reveals.

Camila grips the steering wheel, tearing her eyes away before she does something stupid.

It's not appropriate. It's unfair. Despite whatever brief familiarity she felt earlier, Camila wouldn't even know how to bring the subject up with her because Camila doesn't know Normani. At least not this version. She doesn't know her friends like she doesn't even know her own sister. Not anymore.

A year ago, she and Normani would've already been blasting the stereo with the windows rolled down. They would've been singing "Defying Gravity" off key (to Ally's horror), and laughing as the people driving beside them gave them strange looks. They would've stopped at their restaurant and Normani would've been entertained watching Camila stuff her face.

Eventually, they probably would've called up the rest of the girls to join them. Lauren would've swung by after softball practice. Ally would've strolled in with fresh frappuccino in her hand. Dinah would've still had sand stuck in her hair as she bullied Camila into giving her the rest of her burrito.

It's a pretty picture. The five of them laughing in the booth of a dingy hole-in-the-wall restaurant. She wonders how off kilter it would be if they ever tried to do it again.

Four strangers sitting together in a familiar place.

Is this how it feels when they look at her?

"It's green."

"Huh?" Camila sputters, pulling out of her thoughts immediately. Normani points a manicured finger up to the traffic lights. A car horn behind her, startling her into motion.

She tries to shake the feeling away, instead pouring more focus into her driving. Yet her thoughts stray back to her own inadequacies. What is she even doing here? Does she really think this is going to help?

Normani doesn't care, she can just drop her off once all of this is over, and resume the rest of her
day-to-day activities. She doesn't have to deal with Camila's shortcomings or her inability to make any kind of positive connection.

She doesn't have to pretend to be her friend.

"I don't mean to freak you out," Normani's voice pulls her from her thoughts again. "But if you keep going down this road, we're going to end up at the beach."

Camila's first reaction is to slam down on the brakes.

She feels stupid for not noticing the highway or the way the road fell into a narrow canyon. Why Normani took her here was beyond her. She placed far too much trust in her driving abilities – which kind of seemed nonexistent after this little stunt.

Both of their bodies jolt forward, restrained by the seatbelts. Though Camila feels her chest hit the wheel abruptly.

Wincing, she turns to Normani and offers a weak apology.

Normani's fingers flutter to her tousled hair to fix it before glancing at her warily.

"Just keep driving."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Camila blurts out, hands letting go of the wheel.

"You can't just stay here in the middle of the road," Normani responds calmly. As if Camila hadn't made the brand new tires of her SUV screech horribly. "Cars come zooming by here at 80 all the time." As if she isn't scared of the incoming traffic and a potential accident.

Camila's eyes dart around the empty road, thank her usual ill fated luck for being nice today. It's shortlived as she remembers the grand scheme of the situation.

She did stop on an empty highway, heading towards the beach.

The thought twists its way into her already racing mind. She wonders if Lauren's set her up to do this.

A surge of anger courses through her as the thought settles. Shame, anger, and guilt form in its familiar dance across her chest whenever her neighbor invades her mind.

This wasn't Lauren's fault. Lauren wasn't even here. She hadn't spoken to the girl in a whole day.

Camila becomes frustrated with the fact that she cannot even control her misplaced anger. It's even more infuriating trying to quell the emotions down because now she very much feels like being anywhere but in the presence of Normani's observing eyes.

"I want to go home," Camila mutters abruptly.

"Put your foot back on the gas," Normani continues. "Look. There's a turnout up ahead."

Camila blearily glances up in the direction that she points to. She's right. It's only a few feet away.

She heaves another breath before lifting her foot off the brake. The car lurches forward in a smooth, slow roll until hitting the end point of the pavement and onto the gravel.

"Just pull up right here," Normani instructs.
Camila puts the car in park. The adrenaline and panic simmers down into a smolder of worry. Her knuckles, white from strain, return to their normal color as Camila's fingers loosen their tight grip around the steering wheel. The pads of her fingertips slide down the rubber surface until they rest against her lap.

She slumps against the driver's seat, with a heavy sigh. A million and one things filter through her head, but her lips remain pressed in a trembling frown. She trains her gaze away from Normani's stare.

She doesn't want to see the judgment in her eyes.

But then Camila hears the click of the door opening, the soft thud of it closing. She glances back to find the passenger seat empty, and Normani walking around the front of the car.

Camila quickly scrambles to unbuckle her seatbelt. She nearly trips out of the driver's seat on her way out. She lands with a muffled crunch against the gravel, and stumbles around the car. A small cloud of dust follows her dragging sneakers.

Normani slips into the driver's seat before Camila climbs into the passenger's. Normani is already readjusting her mirrors and fiddling with the seat controls as Camila buckles in.

The silence is thick. Camila is guilty. Guilty for her indiscretions. Guilty for her inability to just be normal for once.

A lump forms in her throat, and the recognizable sting on the bridge of her nose betrays her. She blinks away the build-up, eyebrows furrowing.

"I didn't – I didn't mean to freak out," Camila begins, pathetically apologetic. Normani shakes her head, effectively cutting her off before she can continue with her response.

Normani's fingers hesitate on the keys in the ignition, as if toying with the idea of turning the car back on. Eventually, Normani drops her hand back into her lap.

She's not looking at Camila, which Camila is slightly thankful for. She's not sure she can handle Normani talking to her while studying her as if she were beneath a microscope.

"You don't have to explain yourself," Normani's voice is a quiet murmur. "We don't have to talk. Not if you don't want to. I'm not going to judge you, Camila."

Normani moves the keys again. Her hand turns it in the ignition and the engine rumbles back to life.

"I know I don't talk very much. Especially now," Normani says almost wistfully. There's almost a tangible ache in the way she finishes the statement. It almost makes Camila want to cry. "I didn't for the majority of last year at school. You know – talk. Most people thought I was weird. They didn't realize that I was just..."

Sad.

Camila stares up at Normani who is still looking ahead. She sees her eyebrows pull, and her mouth purse into a frown.

"People always say talking about your feelings is important," Normani pauses. She tilts her head in Camila's direction and their eyes meet. "But sometimes, silence helps too. More time to think, I guess."
Camila swallows the lump down. It's like she's forgotten - how comforting Normani's presence can be. She's forgotten how patient and gentle she is. She's forgotten how easily Normani understands.

"Thank you."

Normani's lips pull into a small grin, as she moves the car into gear. Then she throws a U-turn, and comes back around the way Camila first drove down the road.

"I swear this girl should write fortune cookies or something," Dinah murmurs from the back seat.

The car ride is silent on the way home, but it's a comfortable silence. One that doesn't require effort or unnecessary words. It allows her mind to wander. And for once, she is not resistant to it straying towards the person she had tried avoiding.

It's her own fault, really. She should have known better. Who was it that ruined whatever deal they had? Guilt seeps through her system at the thought. But along with it, came a newfound sense of determination.

She goes home with every intention of marching over to her neighbor's house and make amends. Or at least makes sense of whatever the hell happened between them.

But when they pull up to Camila's driveway, she realizes that she doesn't have to.

Lauren is already there, sitting upon her front porch steps. When she notices the car, Lauren rises to her feet.

"Did she dead ass sit out here in the sun all day?" Dinah questions flatly.

Camila verbally ignores the comment. But questions it, internally, as well.

Normani gives Camila a curious look.

"Do I even want to know?" She tilts her head in Lauren's direction.


Normani's lips tilt into a smirk.

"Again next week?"

"Okay, but this time actually seven in the afternoon."

"Right," Normani says with a playful eye roll.

Camila shuts the passenger door. She spares the car a short glance and wave, as Normani pulls out of the driveway and takes off.

Camila then returns her attention to Lauren. They meet each other across the middle of the crosswalk.

Lauren looks away sheepishly as Camila appraises her. Camila takes in Lauren. Gaze sweeping over pale skin, concerned green eyes, and a tangle of long dark brown hair. A dull ache in her chest
sprouts as she realizes just how much she has missed her. Even just looking at her. As creepy as that's beginning to sound in her head.

"Your mom said you weren't here," Lauren's eyes move past her shoulder, presumably to watch the car drive away. "Hanging out with Normani?"

"Yeah," Camila mumbles. "She took me out driving."

"Did she say I was a terrible driver?"

Camila's eyes widen, which inadvertently answers Lauren's question.

"I side swipe a bus one time and I'm forever labeled as the worst driver in Miami," Lauren sighs.

"How the hell do you sideswipe a bus?" Dinah exclaims incredulously.

They're talking about nothing. She isn't sure if it's just down to nerves why Lauren isn't cutting the crap and getting straight to the point. The fact that the usual straightforward trait is apparently dormant at this moment does nothing to ease the nerves that suddenly grip Camila.

*Rip it off, like a band aid.*

"I have a feeling you weren't sitting outside my porch to tell me you sideswiped a bus." Camila feels her stomach flutter as she says this.

"I swear I just got here," Lauren says. Dinah snorts derisively beside Camila.

"Yeah, and I'm gonna live to be a hundred years old," Dinah laughs. Camila's mouth twitches into a frown, but other than that, does not give that comment much of a reaction.

"I'm glad you're here," Camila confesses. Lauren blinks back in surprise.

"You are?"

Camila nods. "Yeah."

Lauren's full attention is back on her. Camila feels the heavy stare sweeping across her face, gauging her reaction. Beneath the intense gaze, she can't help but let her mind wander back to the night of the concert. How Lauren's eyes were smoldering beneath the black light. And her red lips hot and wet at her neck. The feel of her fingernails grazing her abdomen beneath her shirt. The sounds that of their uneven breathing dancing against the muffled music.

Camila clears her throat. She feels the blush spread across her cheeks and prays that Lauren doesn't notice how hot her face must look.

She shifts her weight between her feet, choosing her next words carefully.

"About the night of the concert," she begins. Her face is not giving her any sort of reprieve, as she's sure she resembles a tomato by now.

At this, she notices Lauren's face promptly burn into a blush as well. It offers a little encouragement, knowing that whatever is going on, it's also affecting Lauren.

She grasps that brief surge of self assurance, and sucks in a deep breath.

"We should probably talk... about that."
"The whole *making out* bit or the date comment?" Lauren asks bluntly.

"Yes," Camila answers too quickly. "I mean, um, both, yes."

"Both?"

"Yes, *both.*"

Lauren lets out a heavy sigh, nodding her head. "Right. Okay. Both."

Dinah crosses her arms over her chest and stares between the *both* of them, unimpressed.

"If this is how y'all plan to make up, maybe you should pull a Mani and *not* talk."

And for once, Camila is beginning to entertain Dinah's sarcastic remark.

Chapter End Notes

sorry for those of you expecting the Camren™.... it's coming. things are gonna get a lot more...um physical soon where explicit tags may or may not be needed ¯\_(ツ)_/¯

anyway, look i'm sorry if this chapter might seem a bit underwhelming. it was the hardest chapter i've had to write. normila did me so dirty by up and dying i just :( 

and tbh i haven't written in like a year and i'm really rusty and ugly and lowkey i'm kinda self conscious about all of this bc it's been so long . this was also just me trying to get my mojo back.

but anyway, on to better news. i've heard your suggestions and i have indeed made an instagram account for the weekly edits. my user is: "hwucstuff" .... in fact next chapter's edit is already posted (along with the previously made ones). but like don't do anything dumb like tag the girls.

come say hi: handle-with-utmost-care.tumblr.com
There really isn’t a point to sneaking Lauren inside her room because her mother lingers behind them every step of the way. Not that there would be any reason for sneaking around, Camila thinks feebly. She didn’t bring Lauren inside her room to start anything… like that.

As if reading her mind, Dinah shoots her an annoying smirk that she chooses to firmly ignore.

Her mother seems to share the same thought, considering she hasn’t moved an inch from her position near the doorway.

She eyes them both skeptically. And Camila almost has half a mind to tell her she and Lauren were going to have a marathon of hot, wild sex right under her roof. But Camila’s lips remain shut.

“The doors stay open,” her mom finally warns as she backs away from it cautiously.

Camila’s gaze narrows. She waits until her mother is out of her line of sight, before moving to close the door with a loud snap.

Camila almost expects her to come running back, but when the door remains shuts, Camila lets out a relieved sigh.

She locks it for good measure.

When she turns around she finds Lauren standing awkwardly in the middle of her room, shifting her weight between her feet, looking beyond uncomfortable.

It’s such a stark difference to the last time she was in here. They were on the precipice of at least some form of intimacy.

The last time Lauren was in here all she did was sleep in your bed, you loser.

She catches Lauren glance at the bed as if she, too, is remembering the night she spent in this room. Camila feels a slow blush begin to spread.

“You probably should’ve left the door open,” Lauren mutters offhandedly. She runs a nervous hand through her hair, letting the long locks tumble over her left shoulder. Camila becomes distracted with the action that she doesn’t answer. “Did you really tell your parents we were dating?”

“What?” Camila asks abruptly, eyes snapping to meet Lauren’s uncertain expression. Green eyes dart away.

“You said – a while back – you said you told your dad that we were – uh – you know… dating.”
“I was only kidding,” Camila responds indignantly. “Of course I didn’t tell them that.”

She scrutinizes Lauren. The way she refuses to meet her eyes and the way she keeps fidgeting with her hair. “My mom didn’t give you a hard time, did she?”

Lauren’s silence is telling.

“Oh god,” Camila groans.

“It wasn’t bad I swear,” Lauren defends hastily.

Camila scowls. The prior resentment towards her parents simmers testily.

Lauren steps closer as if noticing her sour expression.

“Honestly, it’s fine. My parents probably would’ve done the same thing if they weren’t…” Lauren stops herself mid sentence. Something passes over her expression that captures Camila’s attention. Something she can’t easily discern. It’s even more frustrating when Lauren averts her eyes.

The atmosphere becomes stifling. The little spark of motivation Camila felt slowly melts into anxiety.

“Wow, this talk is so amazing. I can’t believe you guys made everything so crystal clear. Relationship goals,” Dinah comments, clapping her hands.

This isn’t going how she intended.

The subject is clear. Getting there, unfortunately is a different, difficult, story.

Lauren struggles to continue the conversation. Camila impulsively takes that as an opportunity to grasp the reins of the subject.

Camila grits her teeth, resisting the urge to make a snarky comment. Dinah’s amusement isn’t helping. Neither is Lauren’s sudden mood change and uncharacteristic timidity.

“So the concert was…interesting?” Camila begins cautiously. Lauren’s eyes dart up to meet hers sharply. Expectantly. Relieved. The conversation is in motion, regardless of how painfully cringe worthy Camila is beginning to feel. “I’ve never seen The 1975 live.”

Nailed it.

“Wow, that was a fail,” Dinah yawns.

Lauren’s expression falls. And Camila has the distinct impression that Dinah is right.

“Oh yeah,” Lauren mutters. “It was – fun.” The statement comes out more as a question than an actual statement.

“Yeah. Fun.”

The silence that falls between them is terse, exacerbating the nervous atmosphere.

“So about this talk…” Camila trails off. She moves to plop at the edge of her bed.

There’s an awkwardness that grows amid the silence. One that Camila had secretly dreaded the moment she made the decision to finally talk to Lauren.
It’s weird and strange. And Camila has the sudden urge to kick Lauren out of her room. The urge vanishes the moment Lauren turns to looks at her intently.

It isn’t her fault, Camila reminds herself. It isn’t Lauren’s fault in the slightest. She didn’t ask for this kind of messy reunion.

“Um, so when we were at the concert things got kind of, uh,” Camila hesitates. “Intense?”

Whatever was suddenly bothering Lauren before seems to dissipate as she jumps on the chance to change the topic.

“I wanna apologize for that,” Lauren begins quickly. “It got out of hand and it was my fault.”

“What? No, I’m the one who should be apologizing,” Camila responds incredulously. “I practically threw myself at you.”

“It’s not anything I didn’t want,” Lauren admits sheepishly.

Camila remains rooted to the spot, stilling upon hearing the words fall from Lauren’s mouth. Heat flourishes through her chest, climbing feverishly up her neck and spreading across her face.

The easy manner in which Lauren confesses does something to Camila. Something that has her avoiding Dinah’s all too amused smirk and refusing to acknowledge her racing heart.

“Okay, um, good? Because, uh, same.”

Lauren opens her mouth, but Camila quickly interjects.

“And still,” Camila says, trying to suppress the flustered feeling. Lauren glances up at her. She averts her eyes, hoping that looking at anything but Lauren’s hopeful expression would make this easier to get out. “I initiated it. I’m pretty sure I broke, like, all of the guidelines that night.”

Lauren lets out an exasperated chuckle. “I’m pretty sure those rules are useless now. Which is why we really do need to talk about this. Us.” She stresses the last word.

Panic immediately bursts into her system, poisoning the bashfulness until it becomes mortification.

Lauren sighs noisily, before coming to join her on the bed. It’s almost ridiculous how the first thing Camila becomes aware of is how close Lauren decides to sit next to her. Their knees touch.

She feels stupid for noticing something so small. She feels even more stupid for the way her body immediately responds to the touch and wants to move in closer.

“I’ve been really…” Lauren pauses, as if searching for the words. “Difficult. About all of this. And your feelings.”

“Hm, there’s that word again,” Dinah says unhelpfully. “Feelings.”

Camila wants her to stop. Both of them to stop as a matter of fact.

“My first time wasn’t that great. I wasn’t ready. I was pressured. And it was probably one of the most awkward experiences I’ve ever had,” Lauren pauses, before adding. “Also he was kind of a dick now that I think about it.”

“Yeah, Luis was a real charmer,” Camila mutters sardonically. Lauren stops in the middle of her speech to regard Camila curiously.
“You remember him?”

“Is she for real?” Dinah exclaims incredulously.

Of course Camila remembered him. Vividly. In excruciating detail. To the point that she memorized that dumb, toothy smile after defacing the framed school soccer team picture that hung up in the main hallway the morning after. The goofy mustache and random dicks were some of her best work. According to Dinah (which wasn’t really saying much), who was right beside her supplying the different colored Sharpies.

“We had, like, over ten Luis’ at our school,” Camila deadpans. “Just a wild guess.”

Lauren looks at her uncertainly, as if she doesn’t believe her. And maybe she doesn’t. It wasn’t exactly a secret Camila hated the guy. Especially after their messy breakup. Camila had spent the entire weekend with Lauren trying to cheer her up. Going down the list of creative insults for her ex. Even going so far as taking one for the team by subjecting herself to a night of horror movies. Camila’s pretty sure she didn’t get a wink of sleep that weekend.

Lauren’s lips quirk into a smile. “Like I said, it sucked. And the more I thought about it the more I realized that it doesn’t have to be that way for you.”

Lauren leans in closer. Camila swallows thickly, already beginning to feel the familiar tell-tale signs Lauren had always managed to evoke within her.

“I know I already agreed to having sex with you, but I haven’t given you a choice in the whole matter,” Lauren says softly. “I want you to have a better experience than I did. And I want to be the person to do that for you.”

“You do?” Camila whispers.

Lauren bows her head and laughs shyly. “Yeah, Camz.” The laughter sends a nervous, but ultimately pleasant, flutter in her stomach. “Is that – do you want that?”

“I actually want that so much,” Camila hears herself say.

Lauren moves in closer to the point that Camila feels the side of her thigh against hers. It’s so obviously distracting that Camila goes out of her way to pointedly stare down at them.

Seeing their skin so flushed together makes something churn in her stomach and travel uncomfortably down below her waist. She tries to cross her legs but at the very moment she tries to move them, Lauren’s hand falls to her thigh. And Camila pretty much forgets the point she was trying to make in this whole conversation.

“I want to do things your way,” Lauren continues, as if she doesn’t notice how strongly the sudden physical contact is affecting her. “Whatever you want.”

Camila glances up to find Lauren’s face a lot closer than it was a few seconds ago. She licks her lips unconsciously and catches Lauren’s eyes dart down to follow.

“Yeah,” Camila agrees quite stupidly.


Camila turns her head abruptly to glare at Dinah. She feels Lauren’s nose brush against her cheek.
The comment yanks her back into focus. Tearing down whatever sexual tension that was building up by the second. Camila lets out a small huff, pointedly glaring at Dinah’s nonchalant shrug.

Lauren pulls back, slightly miffed. “Did I completely misread that?”

She’s still in Camila’s personal space, and Camila has half a mind to go back and tug her closer again. But she shakes her head, frustrated.

“No, no you didn’t,” she sighs, frustrated.

“What is it?” Lauren questions.

“Can you, um, back up a bit? It’s just – my head – and you’re – like you know – you,” Camila mutters, gesturing up and down to Lauren.

Lauren tilts her head in confusion. It takes her a moment to understand what Camila means. And then she promptly flushes.

“That’s probably a good idea,” Lauren replies. “Your mom is probably two seconds away from barging in.”

She’s embarrassed. That's an understatement. She's developing an unhealthy habit of embarrassing herself in front of her neighbor.

Not that Lauren is too far off from her. If the way her pale face has reddened is any obvious indication.

Dinah's snort is enough to break the silence. Camila clears her throat.

“Um, about what you were saying,” Camila stammers, glaring down at her lap. She twists her fingers, the very same that were about five seconds from getting lost in Lauren's hair. "Does this mean we're throwing out your guidelines?"

Lauren perks up. "Only if you want. They were kind of dumb anyway."

“I think they're great,” Camila protests listlessly.

She knows she's said the wrong thing immediately. Lauren scoots away, creating enough distance for her to scrutinize Camila fully. The intense look makes Camila shrink in on herself.

"What?" Camila asks defensively. Lauren's eyebrows knit together and her lips pull into a dissatisfied frown.

“I don’t understand," she begins. She scours Camila's face. And Camila gets the distinct impression she's looking for the gag or punch line. When she comes up short, Lauren's eyes narrow.

"You've literally spent weeks trying to get me to have sex with you and now that I’m giving you the green light, you don’t want to anymore?"

Camila’s hands curl into tight fists in her lap. Lauren continues.

“Are you getting cold feet? Because that’s totally okay too," Lauren reassures in a much softer tone. But it comes off as more patronizing than patient. And it irritates the hell out of Camila. “We can call this whole thing off-"

“-I’m not getting cold feet,” Camila cuts in hotly. “I still want to have sex with you.” It comes out
with more bite than she means to. Which immediately shuts Lauren up.

This clearly isn’t going the way she wants it to.

Her eyes move to the hands resting on her neighbor’s thighs. Thighs that probably would have been covered with her own hands a mere minute ago. Camila feels the frustration towards herself grow as she looks away.

"I just think we shouldn't just throw away the guidelines so easily," Camila reasons tentatively.

She glances up to meet Lauren’s skeptical eyebrow raise. Camila takes a deep breath and powers through.

"Actually I kind of have another rule to add on," Camila continues.

If it’s possible Laurens eyebrow raises higher.

Camila sighs heavily. “I just think we need to set some boundaries.”

“Boundaries,” Lauren responds stiffly. Her expression turns suspicious, before she leans back further to survey her. ‘I’m listening.”

Camila coughs awkwardly. She fiddles with the ends of her t-shirt in some sort of sad attempt to prolong the inevitable. Lauren’s unimpressed stare makes her stop immediately.

“Um, well, okay so I was thinking we should probably figure out how we spend our time. Whether we're hanging out or you know...” Camila’s voice lowers. "Hanging out."

Lauren’s eyebrows knit together in confusion, causing Camila to rush to an explanation.

“We’re friends now, right?” Camila looks up at Lauren questioningly.

Lauren nods.

“And our friend time should be separate from all of the other stuff. Do you get me?”

“I think so,” she responds slowly.

"Lauren this can’t really be the first friends-with-benefits arrangement you’ve had? You’re – like – experienced.” Camila says. She tries to keep her tone nonchalant and unaffected because it’s unproductive to get herself worked up over Lauren’s hookups. But she grudgingly can’t help the way her chest twists in discomfort as the words leave her mouth.

Lauren huffs petulantly, revealing just how excited she is to broach the subject. As if Camila is having the time of her life bringing up her neighbor’s past flings.

“That's different.”

“I don’t really see how it’s any different.”

Lauren shoots her a very flat look.

"We've already talked about this,” Lauren whines. "The rules are there because it was you. We’re friends. The people I’ve had sex with weren’t friends.”

“Alexa, Lucy, Ashley?” Camila recites mechanically.
Lauren promptly flushes. “The situations are completely different. We didn’t become friends until after we had sex. And then it didn’t even last with any of them. They could all tell I wasn’t really…” Lauren stops suddenly, as if just realizing how much she’s said.

“Wasn’t really what?” Camila probes.

“Nothing. Never mind. The point is that I’m not really equipped for this kind of situation. I have about as much experience as you,” Lauren mutters hastily.

Camila glances over at Lauren again, studying her reaction, searching for any type of dishonesty. Not that she would really find anything. Lauren was an annoyingly honest person.

For some reason (one that she’s too exhausted to overanalyze), this feels like a small victory. Despite everything, this is new for Lauren too. The thought reassures her. It restores that tiny spur of confidence that faded away.

“I just don’t want you getting the wrong impression,” Camila continues. “We’re not, like, dating or anything.”

“Me? I don’t want you to get the wrong impression,” Lauren counters, offended.

“Trust me, that’s not happening,” Camila deadpans.

“You don’t know.”

“Yeah, I do know. You don’t know.”

“You’re the one that jumped me at the concert,” Lauren snaps.

“You weren’t exactly complaining,” Camila retorts.

Dinah watches the two bicker back and forth like a tennis match, which makes Camila even more frustrated with the turn of the conversation.

When Lauren opens her mouth in protest, Camila holds up a hand to stop her.

“Look,” Camila interjects heatedly. Whatever surge of confidence deflates as she tries to grapple some semblance of harmony. Or civility at the very least. “All I’m saying is that we should make time exclusively dedicated to friend time. Hang out one day-“

“-We all know what friends mean,” Dinah says sardonically.

_Not helping, Dinah._

“And we can have time spent with, you know, the other stuff…” Camila trails off awkwardly.

Her heart pounds as she finishes her request.

Lauren stares at her pensively, before looking away. Camila can only guess what the millions of thoughts are. Thoughts that she’s not privy to because Lauren chooses now to be a closed off asshole of a book.

Camila begins to panic.

Maybe this was a bad idea. Maybe this was all just completely pointless.
"I mean who puts this much thought into a friend's-with-benefits set up?

"Is this the time we’re going to have *that* talk?" Lauren asks quietly, lifting her head to meet Camila’s gaze.

It all happens rather quickly. The awkward, petty tension gets sucked dry, leaving the atmosphere devoid of anything.

Camila feels herself shutting down and closing off. Without any clarification, she knows what this is going to be about. The desire to continue the conversation disintegrates into a pile of adamant refusal.

“What do you mean?” Camila asks testily.

Lauren gives her a look of disbelief. One that allows the irritation to slowly seep in.

“About everything that went down,” Lauren says hesitantly, as if she, too, knows she's treading on thin ice. The observation serves to aggravate Camila even more. “Back in high school,” she adds. "Between us."

Camila feels something stir in the deep recesses of her heart. Something she had told herself she was locking away for good. She suppresses it. Letting the irritation come forward.

“We don’t need to talk about that,” Camila responds shortly.

Lauren looks as if she wants to argue. And immediately Camila thinks back to when they first had argued about this topic. So long ago in Lauren’s car. It felt like years when it was no more than two weeks.

“I told you we should just stop,” Camila begins sharply. “You can’t change what happened.”

“What *even* happened, Camila?” Lauren presses. She’s goading Camila. She knows it. And it isn’t going to work. As much as the anger begins to pull back in preparation for a large wave of ire, Camila contains it.

“I could ask you the same thing,” Camila snaps, frustration coloring her voice. Lauren recoils, as if the sudden emotion her tone has taken invisibly slaps her.

“I don’t even –“

“-It doesn’t matter” Camila interrupts shrilly.

They fall into a chilly silence.

A silence that’s unnaturally different than the nervous energy from before. It’s different from the warm, comfortable silence she had been associating with Lauren as of late.

It’s cold and sullen and ugly, sneaking up and clearing the delightful haze that drew her in.

It’s the long year spent in isolation, away from her social circle, away from her friends. It’s the sleepless nights spent staring at Lauren’s name on her phone after she left for UCLA. It’s the shallow indifference thrust upon her near the end of junior year, manifesting into a warped grudge.

It’s the way everything is *still* eating up at her inside.

It comes as a nasty reminder that Lauren was right. There *was* too much history.
The argument has undertones of maliciousness. It has resentment bubbling in the pit of her stomach. It has conflicted feelings smothered in animosity deep within her heart.

The oblivious confusion in Lauren’s expression hardens into stone. Green eyes scour her face, calculating, gauging the shift in her mood, as if searching for an explanation.

Camila tries to keep her face impassive. She tries to bury the rising anger from being interrogated so intrusively.

She thinks that Lauren will continue pestering. If there’s one thing she is, it’s persistent. But surprisingly, Lauren’s wary gaze turns away. She runs a hand through her hair.

Camila’s eyes find Dinah from over Lauren’s shoulder.

She gives her a disappointed shake of the head.

And Camila feels the disappointment shoot right through her. A stab of guilt wells up from the wound, expelling the rush of negative emotions until it all trickles out into emptiness.

Shame crawls its way inside to replace the guilt. And Camila can’t meet Lauren’s eye. Not like this. She knows the drop in mood is her own fault.

A part of her resents herself for ruining whatever common ground they’ve almost come to. Another part wants to recoil away from Lauren. The larger part pleads with her to fix this before it gets worse.

She chooses the latter.

Camila exhales loudly. Defeated.

“Can’t we just say we’re friends now and leave it at that?” Camila pleads.

Lauren gazes sharpens.

“I just don’t want to get into it,” Camila continues when she doesn’t verbally respond. “Not now.” Probably not ever, if she’s being honest.

“Why not?”

“It’s just,” Camila pauses, searching for the words. Everything feels disturbingly fragile. Camila wonders how things took this sudden turn from their awkward tension. “I want to be your friend, Lauren.”

Lauren’s eyebrows pull together in confusion.

“I think it would be pointless to bring up all of the stuff that happened because it doesn’t matter anymore,” Camila says. “And whatever we have going on now – it’s good enough for me. I don’t want to ruin it.”

Whatever Lauren looks like she wanted to say disappears the moment her gaze softens. Camila’s chest aches.

“Me either,” she murmurs gently.

“We’re on the same page, right?”

Lauren doesn’t say anything for a long moment. For a second, Camila fears that she’s gone off and
said the wrong thing again. And whatever mutual understanding they are in is completely shattered with her childish request.

It’s all the more nerve-wrecking because Camila can’t read her. She can’t read Lauren’s expression. She can’t discern the knit of her eyebrows or the firm straight line of her lips.

There’s much she wants to say, Camila knows that at the very least. She feels it deep, down in her aching chest.

Lauren finally heaves out a sigh, offering a reassuring smile. It calms her anxiety immediately. “Yeah, we’re on the same page, Camz.”

Lauren returns home shortly after their much needed conversation. Though she says everything is fine, Camila still has that nagging feeling that she did something wrong. Which is stupid. Because Camila is pretty sure she did a damn good job reining in her frustration the direction of the conversation was going.

“I did the right thing,” Camila mumbles, eyes following the mouse on her computer screen. It’s been hours after Lauren has left. Dipping out before her father arrived from work.

Camila still finds it kind of amusing how Lauren developed such an irrational fear of her father.

Dinah hums beside her. “If you say so,” she replies, making Camila side eye her.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she demands.

Dinah gives a noncommittal shrug. “If you say so,” she repeats, irritating Camila further.

Camila doesn’t engage in an argument. Despite the day barely falling into its afternoon descent, she’s absolutely exhausted. She feels pulled and all too emotionally wound.

Waking up at the crack of dawn to go to Normani’s house certainly was a contributing factor, but Camila really thinks it’s the heavy exchange of conversations.

Her eyes scan over the folder of videos on her computer. She clicks on a random video file, watching as the camera catches a shot of waves crashing. She hears Dinah’s laughter flutter in the background. But as the video continues to play – finally showing Normani lounging beneath a beach umbrella and Ally applying sun block – she finds it disturbingly difficult concentrating on what’s playing in front of her.

Lauren comes into view, rifling through her beach bag and pulling out her book. Camila’s mind strays to her neighbor.

Unable to sit still. Unable to focus upon anything for more than a few minutes. She considers texting Lauren. But the thought seems almost silly.

She had literally just seen her only a few hours ago.
Her eyes flicker over to her phone beside her. The urge becomes more tempting as the minutes tick by. Camila’s sure she would’ve already sent a text had she not been under Dinah’s pointed stare.

With a huff, Camila shoves her phone beneath the nearest pillow and crosses her arms over her chest. Dinah lifts an eyebrow, almost accusingly.

“I wasn’t gonna text her,” Camila protests.

“Mmhmm.”

The video on the screen continues playing. She watches for a few seconds distractedly. Before sighing, and closing the laptop shut. She flops down against the nearest pillow, feeling discontent.

“Again with the sighing,” Dinah mutters as she inspects her nails.

“I’m bored,” Camila admits which immediately causes Dinah to stop what she’s doing and look up at her incredulously.

“You know that’s funny, considering what an eventful day you had,” Dinah responds.

“Today was exhausting,” Camila replies wearily. “I wanna do something fun.”

“Fun like stealing the shopping carts and racing down the street type fun or tearing off Lauren’s clothes kind of fun?”

“Dinah,” Camila whines.

“This is a serious question.”

Camila’s eyes narrow into a glare. “What are you insinuating?”

“I don’t know what that means,” Dinah responds airily.

“That was literally your favorite word in fourth grade,” Camila deadpans. “You used it against our teachers all the time whenever you got into trouble.”

Dinah shrugs a shoulder, seemingly unaffected by the fact she drops. Camila frowns.

“You think I messed things up with Lauren, don’t you-”

“I think,” Dinah says loudly, overpowering Camila mid question. “that denial ain’t just a river in Africa.”

Camila’s frown deepens into a pout. But she chooses to ignore that comment. And not give a response.

“Anyway,” Camila mutters, swift to change the subject. “I wanna do something fun like crossing something off my list kind of fun,” Camila snaps.

“Hm, so the second one.”

She scowls at that response. But again, chooses not to answer. Instead, she reaches into her pocket, and pulls out her original list. It’s crumpled, and some of the ink has smudged. She then pulls out the list Lauren’s friends had made.
“I need to make another one,” Camila murmurs, unfolding the paper.

“Oh god please no more lists,” Dinah complains dramatically. “I already forgot what exactly you even wanted to do.”

“I did too,” Camila sighs, reading over the bullet points. She feels she’s probably talking about more than just the things on the list.

Camila glances over to her pillow, the one currently hiding her cell phone. She chews her lip, feeling her hands ache to grab it.

“Oh my god just text her already!” Dinah snaps.

As it turns out, Lauren was also on the verge of texting her as well. Or at least that’s what she claims as she replies to Camila’s invitation to hang out. Again.

Relief floods into her system as Camila darts around her room, getting ready. She throws her shoes on, grabs her cell phone, and heads out the door.

“Whoa, where are you going this late?” Her dad’s voice stops her in her tracks.

Camila turns on the spot. “Oh, I’m just going next door.” She indicates a thumb towards the house over.

Her mom and dad exchange a look. One that sets Camila on edge.

“Mija,” her father begins in a tone that already begins to irritate her. “It’s late.”

“It’s seven,” Camila deadpans.

“We noticed you’ve been spending a lot of time with Lauren recently,” her dad continues, ignoring her comment.

“So?” Camila demands.

Her father looks suddenly uncomfortable. A blotchy blush, one that Camila recognizes because she’s inherited this unfortunate side effect, forms on his face. “You can talk to us, mija. About anything.”

She’s mortified as she begins to realize where this is going.

Camila groans, bringing a hand to her forehead. She rubs at her eyes, frustrated. “Lauren and I are just friends.”

Her parents exchange a look. Camila gets the distinct impression that they must have rehearsed this approach because then her mom is speaking.

“I want you to be careful,” she says.

“What is it that you think I’m gonna do?” Camila asks incredulously. “It’s not like I’m going out and doing drugs or getting pregnant or anything crazy like that.”
“Aha, that they’re aware of,” Dinah remarks, amused.

“We’re just hanging out. Isn’t that what you guys want me to do? Have friends?”

“Of course, you’re right. It’s just…” her mom trails off. She struggles for a moment. “We saw how things with Lauren turned out in the past. I don’t want you to get your hopes up if she happens to… disappoint you again.”

Camila blanches as she process the words her mother is saying.

_God, was she that fucking transparent that her parents knew about her stupid crush?_

Her eyes dart to Dinah. The pointed stare is enough of a confirmation.

“Lauren is a nice girl,” her mom continues. “We will always love her and all of your friends. We just don’t want to see you hurt again, mija.”

“It’s not like that,” Camila says exasperatedly.

But before she can continue, Sofi walks in clutching her freshly enveloped letter. Her eyes move from Camila’s to their mother’s.

“Camila’s not allowed to go to Lauren’s house?” She asks aloud.

Her father clears his throat awkwardly. Another annoying habit Camila’s picked up. “Of course she can go to Lauren’s house.”

Camila smiles at Sofi warmly. Her sister is her saving grace. She almost resists the urge to pick her up and spin her around.

“Good. I miss Lauren,” Sofi continues. “She should come over tomorrow.”

Her parents’ demeanors change at the suggestion. “That’s a great idea. Bring her over for dinner tomorrow,” her mother says brightly.

Camila grimaces. She could literally wring Sofi’s neck at this moment.

“Dinner with the in-laws,” Dinah sings teasingly, moments after Camila escapes the further interrogation. In her frustration, she struggles to hop over the fence. “I mean it could be worse.”

“How could it possibly be worse?” Camila huffs, gingerly touching the splinter that’s now lodged in her palm. She picks herself up from the floor, feeling a disturbing sense of déjà vu as she dusts herself off.

At least it’s not four in the morning this time, she thinks to herself.

“They could’ve caught you in your lie,” Dinah says finally. Camila rounds on her. “It’s not like they haven’t seen the hickey.”

Camila slaps a hand over neck, but remembers she doesn’t have a hickey… that high up neck.
“We’re just friends!”

“Oh my god, calm down crazy. I meant you guys could’ve been caught in a compromising position,” Dinah snaps with an eye roll. “How would you explain that?”

Camila grimaces. “I don’t know.”

“Exactly.” Dinah grins impishly.

Camila pauses by the window, shifting her weight between her feet. Dinah glances at her curiously.

“Are you gonna do this every time you sneak inside her room?”

Camila glares at her. But moves to knock. Camila’s knuckles rap against glass surface. Lauren approaches the window, and tugs it open.

“Hey,” she greets. Camila looks up at her. She takes in the outfit change, noticing with sudden acute attention that Lauren is wearing her hoodie. It shouldn’t matter. It really shouldn’t. But if it did matter and if Camila cared enough, she’d realize that this is the second sweater Lauren’s stolen from her.

And if she ever gave them back, Camila’s sure they’d more than likely smell like her too. And if they smell like her –

Lauren realizes what she’s looking at so intently. “Sorry I never gave it back,” she says, as she begins to unzip it.

“It’s fine. Keep it,” Camila interjects abruptly. Lauren stops mid-zip, eyeing her warily. “Can I come inside?”

Lauren moves aside to let Camila climb in through the window.

Camila’s eyes do a once over of the room. She notices Lauren’s touches have lingered in a way that wasn’t present before. The boxes are still stacked up against the wall. But Lauren’s mess is scattered about. Clothes. Make-up.

She notices that she’s put up stringed lights on her wall, leaving the room in a soft warm glow.

“I like the lights,” Camila comments, gesturing towards them.

“Yeah, I put those up yesterday,” Lauren responds.

Lauren rocks before on her feet and Camila stands beside her awkwardly. Lauren clears her throat suddenly, capturing Camila’s undivided attention.

“So, uh, what did you wanna do?” Lauren asks.

“I need you to help me,” Camila states. Immediately Lauren’s expression shifts into concern.

“Help?”

“Yes.” Camila digs into the back pocket of her jeans and pulls out the crumpled lists. She unfolds the paper and holds them out for Lauren to see. “With rewriting my list.”

Lauren sighs in relief. “Oh my god, you made it seem like it was something terrible.” Lauren chuckles nervously. “You’re not gonna say you need me to have sex with you now, right?”
“What? No,” Camila stammers. “I was thinking we could have some PF time.”

“What?” Lauren supplies dubiously.

“PF Chang time?” Dinah perks up. “That place is so boujie. I’m down.”

“Platonic Friend time,” Camila affirms, ignoring Dinah’s comment.

“Right,” Lauren nods slowly, looking on the verge of laughter. “So what did you have in mind for… PF time?”

Camila gestures at the lists in her hand, still held out for Lauren to take.

Lauren grabs the lists, looking over them, before running a hand through her hair. “I thought you were just gonna do what Veronica wrote down.”

“I mean yeah they’re good ideas. And I’ll probably steal some of them,” Camila murmurs, taking the lists back as Lauren hands them over. “But I think it’s kind of important that I finish my own list.”

“I agree.”

Lauren gestures for her to take a seat and Camila does at the edge of her bed. Lauren moves to sit beside her. And similar to their earlier encounter, Camila is hyperaware that Lauren sits a little too close.

“Are you just saying that so I can throw out all of the sexual items on the list?”

Lauren flushes. “You weren’t really considering that, were you?”

It’s Camila’s turn to flush. “Of course not.”

“Mmhmm,” Dinah hums doubtfully, eyes darting between the two.

Lauren looks just about as convinced as Dinah, but she doesn’t comment further. Instead, she rises from her seat, putting a considerable amount of distance between them. Camila feels like she can breathe properly again.

Lauren fiddles around her desk and when she returns, she comes with a notebook and a blue colored pencil.

Camila holds the pencil up with narrowed eyes.

“Really?”

“All of my things are back in LA,” Lauren huffs. “Forgive me for only having colored pencils on me.”

“I’m not criticizing that,” Camila murmurs, flipping open the notebook. She recognizes Lauren’s scrawl as she briefly reads over her MicroEcon notes. She keeps flipping until she finds an empty page. “You gave me the blue one. You know my favorite color is green.”

Lauren plops down next to her, leaving a respectable gap between them. “To be fair this is Blue-Green.”

Camila rolls the pencil until she can see the words. “I never understood why someone thought this was a good name for a color. Like, way to state the obvious.”
“Maybe that’s the charm of it,” Lauren reasons. “It’s so obvious that it’s kind of genius.”

Camila writes down the number one against the margins. “Yeah. Still not a good argument.”

“Okay, well what about people who combine last names? It’s kind of the same concept.”

“Still dumb,” Camila mutters.

Lauren sits up straighter. Immediately, Camila recognizes this posture as Lauren prepares for a debate. Some thing she was all too familiar with.

Lauren was always the more outspoken of their friends. Ready to let her convictions be known.

Camila remembers once in middle school Lauren sat them all down and gave them a power point lecture exposing the unfair treatment Fleur Delacour suffered and the blatant internalized misogyny she faced from the other characters throughout the latter end of the series.

Normani had been on her sidekick the entire time (the first of the group to actually get a phone). Dinah had fallen asleep half way through the lecture. Ally was the only one diligently taking notes and asking questions. While Camila had been too busy ogling the teacher.

“What? Are you kidding?” Lauren demands.

“Um, no.”

“So you mean to tell me, you’re one hundred percent okay with taking your future hus –” Lauren stops, as if remembering herself. “- whoever’s last name?”

“I don’t want a mouthful for a last name,” Camila responds airily. “And don’t you think it’s more like – I don’t know – romantic taking your partner’s last name? It’s like sealing the deal. Tying your soul permanently to your match that it’s evident in something as simple as who you identify as? Like leaving a romantic declarative footprint everywhere you sign your name.”

“Like combining last names doesn’t reinforce that,” Lauren says sarcastically. “Camz, there’s literal evidence of tying your souls together with a hyphen.”

“You know nobody even reads past the first name anyway. Think of the couple’s potential kids. They’d be the kid with their name cut off because it would be way too long.”

“Hey,” Dinah snaps, affronted.

Lauren rolls her eyes.

“Oh come off it,” Camila snaps. “Does Camila Jauregui-Cabello even sound that nice? No, it’s weird. Just leave it at Jauregui and we’re done.”

Camila doesn’t even realize what she’s said or the implications at first. She expects Lauren’s heated retort, welcomes it in fact. But when she’s met with absolute silence is when she begins to realize how very much in the wrong she is.

Camila looks up to find Lauren with a deer in headlights expression. Crimson face.

She glances over to Dinah, who has stuffed her fist in her mouth to keep from laughing.

Camila backpedals hastily. “I meant, like, as an example,” She stammers, her face boiling over. “Not that I want to marry you. Because I don’t.”
“Okay,” Lauren supplies weakly. “Um, yeah, me either.”

“Cool,” Camila says stiffly.

“Cool.”

Dinah sobers, wiping the tears from the laughter. “Congratulations you played yourself.”

Camila doesn’t comment. Too embarrassed to meet Lauren’s eye.

“I’m gonna get back to the list,” She announces, hoping to dispel the awkwardness that, for some reason, feels ten times worse than the one they were in earlier.

“Good idea,” Lauren mumbles.

Camila coughs nervously, returning to the notebook in her lap. She trains her gaze upon the lined paper. But she watches Lauren through her peripheral.

Lauren scoots away, moving her legs up on the bed, until she’s reclining. The new position gives her more leeway to glance at her without being so obvious. Not that she wants to.

Camila reads through the list aloud, pausing over potential ideas.

“Alright so I think it’d be pretty redundant to write the ones I’ve already done,” Camila mutters, as she flattens the first list against her thigh.

“Maybe it’s better to include them. It shows you’re completing it,” Lauren suggests.

The next hour is spent going through both lists. She makes sure to rewrite the things she’s already done. Seeing the crossed out ones do serve to give her a sense of accomplishment.

It’s amiable. Camila had doubts of that being entirely possible especially given their almost fight earlier. Lauren is helpful. And the distance between them isn’t distracting. She almost sticks her tongue out at Dinah. Just to prove her wrong.

With the music softly playing in the background, Camila almost thinks this could be happening a year ago. She could picture them on Lauren’s bed hatching up this silly summer bucket list, and giggle and blush over the different ideas. She could picture them painting each other’s toes after this. She could almost see Lauren insisting upon trying to do her make-up at some point.

It’s all painfully familiar.

The excitement of completion dwindles by the next half hour, after adding and vetoing ideas, Camila struggles.

She drums the colored pencil against the notebook, as the thoughts run up blank. Lauren stares up at her from her position on the bed, chin propped up against a pillow and legs stretched out against the headboard.

Lauren looks incredibly young, lying on her stomach staring up at her with an expectant face. Her cheeks squish together slightly from leaning against the pillow, and Camila feels the sudden urge to pull at them.

It’s a stupid urge. One that she hasn’t felt in such a long time, even after becoming reunited with Lauren.
Lauren leans forward, peering over Camila’s hand.

“Why not just cut it at twelve?” Lauren asks.

“Twelve is such a weird number to end it,” Camila huffs.

“As opposed to thirteen?”

“Thirteen is a lucky number,” Camila replies.

“Thought that was seven,” Dinah mumbles beside them.

“Does it really matter?” Lauren asks. Camila makes a face. “Okay, give me the old one,” Lauren says. Camila gives her the crumpled list Veronica wrote out. She watches as green eyes scan the wrinkled paper. “We’ll just go down the line again. What have you got so far?”

She hums thoughtfully after reading each one. Camila watches her carefully.

“It’s not dumb, right?”

When Lauren is finished she glances up at her, eyebrow raised. “No. Not if these are things you really want to do,” She says.

“They are things I want to do. But the more I think about it, the more I’m beginning to wonder how the hell I’m gonna manage to do them,” Camila admits.

“Well that’s what I’m here for. To help with the execution, duh,” Lauren replies playfully. She shifts, moving to lean her head against her hand. The new position lets Lauren angle her face up towards Camila. And Camila gets a better view of her expression.

Camila takes in her appearance. The easy smile adorning her lips. The soft crinkle of her green eyes. The way her wavy hair tumbles over the side of her shoulder. Camila sees a few strands tucked beneath the elbow Lauren is leaning against. And she knows that when she moves her hair is going to get caught.

As if noticing her sudden acute focus, Lauren moves to sit up, elbow snagging the ends of her hair.

It’s almost unfair how Lauren casually looks so attractive. How effortless it all is, even when Lauren is wincing and gingerly rubbing her head.

Camila clears her throat and returns her attention to her list, before any more non platonic friend things run through her mind.

“You’re gonna give me a tattoo then?” Camila asks sardonically, glancing over her list and spotting number twelve.

“No,” Lauren responds. “But I can help figure out what you want exactly. The bow, right?”

“I was kidding about that,” Camila laughs. “No. I want something …” Camila pauses. Her eyes travel to Dinah, sitting cross-legged on the floor. She shoots Camila a cheeky grin, to which Camila rolls her eyes. “More personal.”

Lauren looks thoughtful for a moment, before nodding.

“Maybe you should try drawing it out before picking a tattoo artist.”
“You know I can’t draw for shit,” Camila sighs, thinking briefly back to dick doodles and dumb mustaches.

“I can confirm,” Dinah chimes in cheerfully.

“Aw, Camz I thought your drawings were abstract,” Lauren teases.

Camila rolls her eyes, choosing not to respond to either of those comments.

“Well have you decided where you want it?” Lauren asks.

“Not really. Wherever it hurts the least, I guess,” Camila mutters.

“We should practice.”

“Practice?”

At this, Lauren immediately springs from her seat. She hurries over to her desk, rifling through several drawers before pulling out what she’s looking for. When she comes back to the bed, Camila recognizes what Lauren’s found.

“You had markers this entire time and you’ve been making me write with unsharpened colored pencils?” Camila demands incredulously.

Lauren ignores the question, moving to sit beside her.

“We’ll start…” Lauren trails off with a hum, giving Camila a once over. A small blush blooms across her face from this sudden attention. “Here,” Lauren says, grabbing Camila’s wrist.

Lauren uncaps the marker with her teeth. And honestly, Camila shouldn’t find that even remotely sexy. Lauren is literally just chewing a piece of plastic.

But it draws Camila’s attention to her mouth. And when she thinks of her mouth she thinks of what she could be doing to that mouth. And suddenly everything about this activity feels incredibly far away from just platonic.

She barely feels the wet tip of the marker gliding against her skin. She becomes more focused on the way Lauren’s fingertips press firmly against the inner part of her arm. She idly wonders if they’ll leave a mark. Then promptly flushes when she’s realized what she’s thought of.

Lauren pulls away, bringing the cap in her mouth to snap against the back part of the marker.

“How’s that?” she asks.

Camila swallows thickly, tearing her gaze away before Lauren realizes what she’s looking at exactly, and stares down upon Lauren’s drawing. It’s a tiny green heart, filled in indefinitely.

“Looks good,” Camila sputters.

“But you know, I’ve been thinking of getting a tattoo here,” Lauren says, moving up her arm. She marks that part of skin with another heart. “Maybe just my birthday or something.” She adds thoughtfully.

“Maybe,” Camila replies thickly.

“Or you could get it where I got my tattoo,” Lauren says, not noticing the way Camila’s mood has
shifted. “Just – uh – lift up your hair for a moment.”

Camila does so mechanically. As if she’s already lost the function of her limbs that are starting to feel like jelly. She grabs at her hair with both hands, holding it up in a half formed bun, and exposing the back of her neck.

She feels Lauren’s fingers first, padding gently across her skin, making her shiver involuntarily. She knows Lauren’s noticed, if the sharp intake of breath isn’t an obvious indication it’s probably the way Lauren seems a lot closer than necessary to draw a fake tattoo.

“There,” Lauren sounds farther away. Camila is thankful because now she feels like she can breathe.

“What else?” Camila turns around to face her.

Everything is charged. There’s a hum in the air that demands to be recognized. To be acknowledged. To be indulged.

“I mean you can get a tattoo on your forehead if you really want,” Lauren says with a small chuckle.

“Well where else have you seen people with tattoos?” Camila knows it’s a stupid question. She just feels a desperate need to keep the tension afloat.

“I know Lucy’s got a tattoo on her rib,” Lauren responds after a moment.

The answer annoys Camila more than it entices her. The fact that Lauren would even know that Lucy had one in that particular spot does nothing but remind her that they’ve had sex.

“I want it there,” Camila says abruptly.

That snaps Lauren’s attention immediately. “What?”

“I mean, I want to see what it looks like here,” Camila says, gesturing to her right rib. Lauren looks at a loss for words. Her mouth hangs open slightly. Then she looks as if she shook out whatever thought she’s had. And if Camila had any doubts that Lauren didn’t feel the titillating buzz growing between them, the way Lauren’s eyes focus in sharply upon her face shatters those uncertainties.

Camila flushes, averting her gaze. Something like the list, the rules, the guidelines runs through her head.

“Lay down,” Lauren instructs.

And maybe this was moving faster than Camila could keep up with.

“What?” Camila blanches. “Why can’t I stand up?”

“It’s just easier that way,” Lauren responds. “You gonna lay down or not?” She nudges Camila’s shoulder.

Camila huffs, but allows herself to be gently pushed down on her back. The moment Lauren hovers over her is when she realizes that perhaps this may have been a lapse of judgment…of epic proportions.

But she lifts up her shirt without being told, just below the edge of her bra.
Lauren’s fingers are warm as the gently pad against her skin. Goosebumps immediately prickle up on her flesh the moment she first feels Lauren’s fingertips brush against skin.

Involuntarily, she sucks in a sharp breath, making the muscles of her stomach contract. Lauren’s focused gaze darts up to meet her flushed face when she lays a palm flat against her rib.

“Hold still or I’m gonna draw a mustache on your face,” Lauren chides. But her voice is so soft and velvety, she could be saying absolutely anything and Camila would think it would be so far from a scolding.

Camila swallows thickly. Her fingers play with the sheets of Lauren’s unmade bed. It doesn’t help that it smells just like Lauren.

Why wouldn’t it smell like Lauren it’s her fucking bed you idi –

“That tickles,” Camila responds shakily, as Lauren moves her palm away.

Lauren’s lips form a smirk. “Sorry. I forgot how ticklish you were.”

“I’m not ticklish,” Camila huffs. “And no that wasn’t an invitation to prove me wrong,” she adds hastily.

Lauren lets out a soft laugh. “I wasn’t going to. But seriously hold still.”

Camila tries. It’s a valiant effort really, but the moment Lauren’s hands are back on her, she feels her heart beat pound. And the urge to fidget becomes incredibly distracting. As distracting as the way Lauren’s fingertips press into her flesh.

And she can’t help it. Her mind running away with images that make it difficult to even look up into Lauren’s concentrated face.

Nails digging into skin.

And then Camila feels the cold tip of the pen, dragging against her flesh in what Camila hopes is something good. She can’t discern the shape entirely. But it doesn’t exactly feel like a heart.

She tries to focus on something else besides the dirty thoughts that occupy her head. And funnily enough the next thing that comes into her gaze is Lauren’s face. Her attention narrows in upon her features. Studying the soft pull of her thick eyebrows. The roundness of the curve of her cheeks, pale and clear of any blemishes.

Her eyes sweep over the bridge of her nose, and falling quite unceremoniously on her mouth. Lips tucked beneath a set of straight teeth.

“There,” Lauren says happily, pulling away. Camila feels a stab of mortification with the way her body betrays her. Almost begs her to pull her back in. Grab her wrist. Bring her close –

Camila blinks rapidly.

It’s stupid how much her body hums beneath Lauren’s hands and she’s not even really touching her. It’s ridiculous – being this affected not even a full day after establishing their boundaries. It’s almost as if her fate has decided to screw her over in the most internal way. Hormones.

Lauren’s eyes meet hers and they widen. She must look like an idiot, Camila thinks vaguely. A dopey, stupid look on her face. It must be red. She expects Lauren to laugh. She expects a teasing
remark and for the mood to lift into something humorous at her expense.

In fact she welcomes it. Anxiously waits for it.

She doesn’t expect Lauren to freeze.

“Is this still PF time?”

“Huh?” Camila rasps out, not realizing how dry her mouth has become.

Lauren’s eyes narrow, distracting her with how they’ve darkened over the span of a mere few seconds.

Something stirs within Camila. Something heady and primal. Something with heat that flares its way across her body from the very spot Lauren’s hands rest.

Maybe they’re exchanging that rapid body heat. Perhaps the same feverish energy, Camila begins to feel boil in her core, has derived from some place within Lauren as well.

The thought sends a thrill of excitement through her. It pumps in her chest, sparking a dance along the beat of her quickening pulse.

“Platonic friend time,” Lauren clarifies at Camila’s confusion.

The fact that the ridiculous title doesn’t seem to make either of them react is telling. Enough for Camila.

Lauren’s fingers curl. Camila nearly lets out a groan when she feels fingernails dig into her skin.

“Platonic friend time,” Camila stutters shakily. “Right. That was fun.”

Lauren’s fingers uncurl, and then she feels the press of her hot palms against her stomach.

What did she want to say again?

Her gaze transfixes upon Lauren’s lips. The way the bottom lip tucks beneath her teeth, blatantly glowering at them, uncaring of how obvious she’s being.

Before she knows it, Lauren shifts moving up closer to her face. An arm stretches out, and through her peripheral vision Camila sees Lauren rest her hand near her ear.

Lauren’s hair creates a soft half curtain around their faces. The stray strands tickle Camila’s heated cheek, distracting for a moment. A moment is enough time for Lauren to lean in even closer.

“Is this okay?” Her voice has lowered, making the goose bumps erupt on Camila’s flesh. She shivers involuntarily, letting the tingling slither down her spine and pool down to her toes.

Lauren’s palm on her stomach clenches slightly, unintentionally urging Camila into an answer.

Her head is fuzzy now. Something that suspiciously sounds like the rules, the guidelines fades out into the back of her mind as she feels the brush of Lauren’s nose.

“Yeah,” Camila breathes.

She doesn’t get the chance to say anything more because then Lauren’s lips are upon hers. Moving with a fervor that makes her stomach flutter beneath Lauren’s warm palm.
And Camila wonders why it took them so long to get to this part again. Why she was even worried in the first place. Why she didn’t talk to Lauren sooner so that they could be doing this. Platonic friend time what?

Her hands come up to card through Lauren’s hair, fingers tangling almost aggressively in the long locks. She tugs at them helplessly when Lauren sucks on her bottom lip and pulls away with an absurdly provocative, wet pop.

A short-lived reprieve, before Camila is tugging her back in for another one. A deeper one. One that has her toes curling and her heart pounding loudly in her chest.

Camila sighs into the kiss, expelling all of the pent up energy into the way her mouth moves. In the way her teeth graze Lauren’s bottom lip. In the way she lets Lauren’s tongue find purchase to the contours of her mouth. Shifting and sliding against her own.

Lauren’s hand moves, until she can feel fingertips against her ribcage.

It’s overwhelming and not enough at the same time. She wants … she wants …

She knows she hears the bedroom door open, but it isn’t until she hears Dinah’s loud voice yelling: “Abort abort! Operation sexy times is a no-go!” that Camila reacts.

She breaks the kiss, head swiveling to the door and the sight makes her blanch.

Standing at the doorway, with her arms crossed, is Lauren’s mother.

Immediately Camila feels her face boil over, and not in the good way.

Lauren scrambles off of her, and Camila uses that time to hastily pull her shirt back down.

“Mom,” Lauren stammers out. She runs a hand through her hair, fixing the strands out of place.

She’d never exactly been on the receiving end of one of Clara’s stern expressions. Always watching on the sidelines whenever Lauren would get scolded. But it’s something she can safely say she never wants to receive. Camila pretty much feels like shriveling up and dying under Clara’s steely glare.

For as long as Camila remembers, Clara has always kind of been – intense.

_probably where Lauren gets it from._

Camila thinks it probably has to do with the fact that she was a high school teacher. She was the type of lady that walks into a room and demands that kind of utmost respect. Not that Camila blames her. High school kids could be such little sh*ts sometimes.

Camila would rather take on the Mikeanator with his baseball bat over Clara’s stony silence.

Clara’s gaze focuses in upon Lauren.

“Outside. Now.” She gestures to her daughter.

Lauren heaves a little sigh as she extricates herself from the bed and follows her mother out. The door snaps shut behind them, leaving Camila a disheveled mess on the bed.

Dinah peeks at her through her covered eyes. “Can I look now? Is everyone dressed?”

Camila doesn’t even have the effort to respond sarcastically. Her heart is hammering, and for once it
isn’t because of that arousal slip up. Panic seeps into her veins as she moves to sit up from the bed.

A part of her – an embarrassingly large part – wants to jump out the window and run back home.

Camila lifts her shirt up; she glances down at the fake tattoo Lauren drew. It is a heart, but Lauren went so far as to intricately draw an arrow piercing through it.

It’s after she pulls her shirt down that she decides to stay.

“I’m psychic,” Dinah exclaims. “Didn’t I say that something like this would happen?”

“More like a jinx,” Camila groans.

“Ouch that hurt.”

“What? No clapback? Who are you and what have you done with Dinah Jane?”

“Who am I?” Dinah comes to sit beside her. She crosses her legs with a dramatic flair that Camila doesn’t fully register. “Who am I?! I am the guardian of lost souls! I am the powerful, the pleasurable, the indestructible Dinah!”

“Not that I don’t appreciate your Disney references,” Camila begins exasperatedly. “But, Lauren’s mother just walked in on us making out and I’m pretty sure Clara is scolding the shit out of Lauren because they’re taking way too long.”

She starts to worry when it’s been more than five minutes. She remembers how bad the scolding could get.

In fact she remembers on a few occasions she would try to take the blame so Lauren wouldn’t get in trouble. Of course Clara never exactly believed her. Always assumed she was a good girl who never participated in bad behavior.

A wave of nausea hits her as she begins to realize how badly the whole thing must have looked.

She almost has a sudden urge to run up and convince Clara that she was still a good noodle. Maybe a little dry, and broken, and roughed up a bit but still good.

The thought, however stupid it begins to sound, vanishes when Lauren steps back into the room. Camila notices the immediate drop in mood. A grimace mars the lips Camila was just moments ago kissing.

The thought of kissing wilts pathetically when Camila realizes Lauren’s eyes are glossy.

She startles when she sees Camila, as if she’d forgotten that she was in here in her room. Quickly, she brings the sleeve of her sweater to wipe at her eyes.

“Um,” Lauren stammers thickly. She averts her gaze, and Camila feels a stab of rejection. “Did it dry yet?”

It takes her a few seconds to understand what she’s said. She lifts up her shirt to show it. Lauren spares her rib a brief glance before averting her eyes completely.

"It looks good," Camila offers.

"My mom said you have to go home now," Lauren blurs out. And the way she says it - so
petulantly. Camila can't help but be reminded to the child version of Lauren telling that play time is over.

"Oh," Camila mutters awkwardly. "So I should probably go? It is kind of getting late."

She checks her phone and sees that it's already 10.

"I told her that you can go home whenever you want to."

Camila gasps. "Oh my god why would you tell her that!"

"Because she can't tell me what to do. Not anymore."

"I mean she did catch us in a compromising position," Camila reasons. She expects Lauren to get embarrassed, or do that cute little chuckle she does.

She doesn't anticipate Lauren getting angry. A few profanities fall out, along with scathing murmurs under her breath. Camila thinks she might hear the words *insufferable* and *hypocritical* among them. But Camila gets the distinct impression that Lauren isn't talking to her anymore.

Camila is frozen. Rooted to the spot. A million and one questions filter into her head. As if finally noticing her, Lauren relents.

"Sorry, my mom is just being…" Lauren trails off, huffing.

"It shows she cares."

"She does not care," Lauren interjects harshly. The sudden aggressive tone startles Camila, which makes Lauren visibly soften. "Sorry. It’s – nothing."

Lauren looks as if she wants to say more, but instead she shakes her head, and seemingly drops the subject. “Do you want to get pancakes or something?”

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They agree to meet up at Lauren's car - well Lauren's father's car - around midnight. It wouldn't raise any suspicions if Camila looked like she was going home and *staying* home. And it gave Camila an opportunity to play pretend to her own parents.

So when the hour came, Camila quietly crawled out of her window, turning to close it with a crack open. Then she quickly sets out to the car.

Lauren greets her with a silent wave, before unlocking the car.

"Does your dad know you're leaving?" Camila asks as she closes the door after settling inside.

"No," Lauren admits. There's a tone of mischief in her voice.

"What? Won't he get mad?"

"If he finds out I took his car without telling him," Lauren responds nonchalantly.
Camila eyes her critically. Lauren had always had a bit of a wild streak to her, but directly defying her parents was something new. She watches as Lauren turns the car on, wondering if this is a new trait she missed out on during their year separated.

Lauren quickly pulls out of the driveway and zooms down the street. She eyes Camila.

"Relax, I've done this before."

"That doesn't sound very reassuring," Dinah says from the backseat. Camila silently agrees, saying no more to the comment. Instead, allowing the music from the stereo to gently fill the conversation.

The muggy temperature has dropped into a cool, night breeze. Lauren leaves the windows rolled down as she drives. The wind whips at Camila’s face. A welcome change from the heated flush that graced her cheeks for the majority of the day.

Camila leans against the headrest, closing her eyes. She lets the music flow in her ears and dance around her, reverberating inside and flowing out into the night air.

Warmth permeates the confines of the car. It thickens and spreads, wrapping around Camila snugly. It’s familiar and soothing, settling the nerves she’s felt bundling up.

They’re at the restaurant before Camila fully snaps out of her melancholic mood.

Camila glances up at the sign and feels a frown forming, as she steps out of the car.

“Really? You took me to IHOP?”

“I already feel my wallet crying,” Dinah says with a whine.

“Ally would probably kill us if she knew we were in here,” Lauren says as she holds the door open for Camila.


The restaurant is empty, save for a few couples, and what looks like a table of slightly inebriated girls. Camila feels her lips tug into a smile as she watches the girls laugh. It’s a complete coincidence that there are five of them.

A waiter quickly guides them down the aisle to an empty booth. Menus are distributed and drink orders are taken.

“I hate this place,” Dinah mutters, peering over Camila’s menu book. “If I’m gonna waste eight dollars of my hard earned money for a fucking pancake...”

Camila scans the breakfast items, falling to an ostentatious stack of sugared, red velvet pancakes.

The one thing she hated about coming to restaurants (besides the wait time). The fact that there were always so many different options and none of them made her choices any easier.

Camila remembers all the times she and her friends went out to eat. Camila would always be the indecisive one, staring up at all of them menu items. She could spend over ten minutes picking and choosing, much to the annoyance of her friends.

Once she’d spent twenty minutes at Baskin Robbins stressing over the different flavors. She probably would’ve spent even more time with her face pressed against the glass had Dinah (completely fed up,
impatient and with an overwhelming craving for chocolate because of her period) pushed her aside and chose for her.

Needless to say, Camila left the ice cream parlor incredibly pissed off and with a pathetic scoop of plain Vanilla.

“I already know what I want,” Lauren announces.

Camila looks up over her book, eyebrows rising. “You barely even looked at it.”

Lauren shrugs. “I already know what I want.”

Camila’s lips purse. Her eyebrows narrow suspiciously as she regards Lauren.

Lauren simply smiles prettily as she closes her menu book and interlaces her hands together.

“Decided yet?”

Camila returns her gaze to the menu. “No.”

When the waiter returns with two coffees, he pulls out his pen and waits for their order.

Lauren must read the panic on her face, because then she leans across the table. “If you want we can just share,” she suggests.

Camila jumps on the chance. “Yeah, let’s do that.”

Lauren’s lips quirk into a smile, as she leans back into her seat. “Alright. The red velvet pancakes then,” Lauren addresses the waiter. When he leaves, Camila takes the opportunity to fix her coffee.

She takes a sip of it, and wrinkles her nose. She reaches to grab another packet of sugar and dumps it into her cup.

Lauren also takes a long sip and winces. “This coffee tastes like ass.”

Camila chokes on her drink. Dinah snorts beside her.

“Why are we here if the coffee is so shitty?” Camila asks.

Lauren fiddles with the empty sugar packets. Camila watches as the few extra grains come spilling out against the table.

“I used to come here a lot when I didn’t want to be home,” Lauren mutters. “Mostly during senior year.” Lauren seems to realize what she’s implied because she quickly apologizes.

Camila knows that comment isn’t unintentional. There’s an unspoken comment beneath it. Because Camila knows if they were still talking in high school, Lauren would have come to her.

Camila chooses not to comment on that. Instead, she picks up on something Lauren’s said.

“Why didn’t you want to be at home?”

“Well who really does want be to at home?” Lauren shoots back playfully. Camila knows she’s deflecting.

“You can talk to me,” Camila says.
“Can I?” she asks, tilting her head.

Lauren regards her curiously. Green eyes scour her face, as if looking for any insincerity. She tries to keep her face impassive, tries to not react to the sudden intense gaze.

Lauren’s eyes track the movement. Camila lets out a short sigh in relief of the focus being taken away from her.

But then Lauren’s gaze returns to her face.

It feels like a jab. And from the way Lauren is looking at her, Camila probably assumes it isn’t meant that way.

Camila sputters for a moment, choking on her coffee again.

*It really does taste like ass.*

“Of course you can. We’re,” Camila hesitates. “*Friends.*”

Lauren’s expression shifts into skepticism.

“Surprising coming from the person who never wants to talk about anything ever,” Lauren remarks sharply. It stings. The honest truth. It’s a blatant blow to their earlier conversation she knows. And for a fleeting moment she begins to think this is going to become one of those things that never goes away.

“Lauren,” Camila begins wearily. She feels her hand curl up into a tight fist. “I’m trying.”

Camila doesn’t expect Lauren’s hand to reach out. She doesn’t expect her to gently pry her fist apart, nor does she expect the way Lauren’s palm comes to cup the back of her hand.

“I know you are, Camz,” Lauren says softly.

A gentle squeeze captures Camila’s attention, and her eyes dart down to their hands over the table.

But before that potential subject can get brought up, the waiter returns with their food.

She’s thankful for the interruption. Unable to face Lauren’s, albeit gentle, accusation.

The food is enough of a distraction, pulling the topic away completely. Lauren watches as she takes a bite of the pancake.

“What’s the verdict?” Lauren asks as Camila chews.

“Good.”

Lauren smiles, as she brings a forkful of pancake into her mouth.

They sit in comfortable silence. Breaking only when Lauren clears her throat.

“So any thoughts on number thirteen?” Lauren asks after she takes a sip of her coffee. Camila takes out the new list she ripped out from Lauren’s notebook. She spreads out against the table, and glances down at it. She feels a tug in her chest. A dull type of ache.

“I think I’ll save it.” Her eyes fall down to the last number with the empty space next to it.
Camila smiles down at the paper, before folding it up. She rises from her seat and sticks it in the back pocket of her jeans. Right next to the inappropriate list Camila claims she threw out.

“Please,” Dinah says exasperatedly. “No more lists.”

1. Sex
2. Graduate properly
3. Learn to drive
4. Tampon
5. Go to a party
6. Clubbing
7. Alcohol
8. Weed
9. Concert
10. Go to Prom
11. Go on a roadtrip
12. Get a tattoo
13.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I felt that the bucket list needed to be said already. For visual and context aesthetic things are hopefully gonna pick up from here. Angst fluff. . . all that good stuff.

Also, I have this headcanon that Dinah is really into Disney idk (so those Disney references aren't just placed there for no reason other than my personal enjoyment). It must be the Simba she carries around. Kind of funny that Lauren carries around a Nala too. (I'm Laurinah AF)

I'm trying to get a consistent updating routine down but I don't think it's working. Originally I was gonna have this posted last weekend but I'm trash and it didn't happen. So the idea of posting every other week on a specific day has kinda gone out the window.

Here's to hoping the next update is a lot sooner. Thanks for reading! I love you all :) <3
Next chapter edit (it's wild) is posted up on my ugly Instagram: hwuestuff

also come say hi: handle-with-utmost-care.tumblr.com
The rest of the week goes by without any of those *more than platonic* hiccups. Thanks to Camila's strict and disciplined boundaries.

Or at least she likes to think so.

(Dinah had an annoying habit of reminding her that she and Lauren hadn’t really had the opportunity to be alone – *completely* – to test out said boundaries.)

Not that Camila voluntarily decided to keep her distance.

No. She had been uncharacteristically busy. Which was saying a lot considering she felt she had wasted the majority of her summer doing nothing.

("*Especially not Lauren!*")

Her mom had put her to work doing chores. Some of which didn’t exactly seem necessary.

Like reorganizing the DVD cabinet. Dusting out the garage. Throwing out the cat's litter box.

They didn’t even have a cat.

Camila hadn’t protested much. Despite the new irritating intrusion on her Lauren time, it was oddly comforting having her mom boss her around. There was a sense of normalcy that hadn’t been present in a very long time.

Instead of the dreary mornings of staring up at her ceiling, Camila had been shaken awake with the sound of Celia Cruz blasting throughout the house and the smell of Fabuloso invading her nose.

Her dad had also requested her help with the car in the afternoons. Not that she did much. She had an irrational fear of the sound of the rumbling motor. And anyway, his definition of helping was literally just handing over the tools while she sat and watched him hunch over the engine.

Additionally, with the onslaught of housework, her sister had also provided a new daily ritual. Every morning during breakfast she’d have Camila read over her letters to make sure she was spelling everything correctly. It became something to look forward to as she was eating her plate of eggs. Recently Sofi had taken to considering her opinion on the variation of stickers on the stationary
To say Camila was pleased was an understatement. She had never felt more useful around the house. Dinah had picked up on her attitude as well, teasing her relentlessly.

“You look all glowy,” Dinah comments when Camila returns to her room after the morning spent raking up the leaves in the backyard.

They didn’t even have a tree back there. And it was Summer.

“Glowy?” She questions as she heads towards her closet to pick out an outfit. Her eyes scan the unorganized rack of clothes hopefully.

“Yeah, glowy,” Dinah repeats in a pointed tone. “And I’m kind of wondering why.”

“No reason really,” Camila replies, focus landing upon a very familiar flannel. She hears Dinah pad over next to her. She feels her skeptical eyes studying the side of her face. Heat rushes up to her cheeks as she moves her attention over to the next shirt before Dinah realizes what she’d been looking at exactly.

Of course, Dinah notices everything.

“You’re going to see Lauren today.”

Camila huffs and turns to regard her sharply. “So?”

At the first sign of Dinah’s signature smirk, Camila flushes angrily.

“Normani and Ally will be there too,” she adds. “We’re meeting at Lauren’s for driving.”

“Right, meeting.” Dinah’s grin turns impish.

Camila frowns, returning back to her perusing. “Whatever. Shut up.”

She ends up settling for Lauren’s flannel.

Though, Dinah’s assumption isn’t too far off. As much as she hates to admit it, she does feel a little surge of anticipation at the thought of seeing Lauren.

Even though they had kept up the constant communication it was an entirely different experience seeing one another in person.

The frequent text messages and late night calls hadn’t been enough. The conversations had been easy and pleasant, but always underlined with enough sexual tension. As if any moment the tone could turn into something suggestive. It left her in a never ending loop of wanting more.

It’s like she’s in some kind of roller coaster. The loopy ones Dinah would’ve forced her to get on.

The tension between them rises unbearably slowly, only for it to fall abruptly with the shattering moment.

She might go crazy. She really just might.

To make matters worse it seems as if Lauren is completely unaffected by the surge of hormones. She keeps her distance. A platonic distance, that makes the heat simmer low in her belly at the potential of an encounter.
The fact that both their parents suddenly required their assistance around the house seemed more than just a little suspicious.

So later, as she's approaching Lauren's house, the thrill of reunion sparks another round of excitement and apprehension. It's silly. Stupid, really, how worked up she’s getting, the nerves in her behaving as if she hasn’t seen Lauren in years when really it’s only been about a week.

_A really long week._

She finds Lauren sitting out on the porch. Unaware of her staring.

Camila takes the opportunity to watch her for a moment. The sight is a familiar one. Then again Camila thinks everything regarding Lauren is so distantly familiar.

Lauren looks up, as if sensing her presence.

Camila inhales sharply, hesitating near the driveway. She hears Dinah groan exasperatedly behind her.

_It’s been a stupidly long week._

When Camila nears, Lauren stands up with a smile, posture visibly brightening that Camila can’t help but feel herself slowly warming up to the feeling.

“Hi,” Lauren greets, almost shyly.

“Hey.”

She waits expectantly, both of them standing before each other awkwardly. Camila almost has half a mind to pull her into a hug, but before she can do anything stupid; she promptly takes a seat on the porch step.

Lauren follows suit.

“Normani says she’ll be here soon,” Camila murmurs.

An outing that was exclusively a driving day had inevitably turned into an impromptu group hang when Lauren invited herself after Camila mentioned it. Then Normani promptly invited Ally, claiming that they might as well include the older girl. Though according to Dinah, it was really because Normani refused to be the third wheel.

And despite reconnecting with her friends, Camila can’t help but feel a little disappointed. That they won’t be alone. That their time together has been so sparse. That she inevitably has to share her Lauren time with others.

As if sensing her thoughts, Lauren nudges her on the arm. “I think it’s better this way.”

Camila had waved the third wheel thoughts away, convinced that Dinah was full of shit. But the more Dinah teased, the more Camila had begun to truly question it.

_How did_ people perceive her and Lauren’s relationship?

Outwardly they could just look like a couple of friends.

_We are_ friends, Camila thinks stubbornly. And Normani and Ally? _Friends._
Camila supposes she doesn’t mind it, in the end. What did it matter in the long run? People didn’t have to know or understand the nature of their relationship. It was between them.

And it wasn’t like it was anything to be worried about. It wasn’t like they had absolutely no self control She was more than capable of resisting temptation – if you could even call it temptation.

Though, admittedly she’s beginning to feel that perhaps resisting may be easier said than done.

Especially because she immediately notices the frustrating fact that Lauren chooses now to wear a thin, tank top with a plunging neckline.

And Camila comes to the conclusion that:

A). she’s been reduced to a horny teenage boy that can’t keep their eyes in appropriate places and

B). this is some ploy Lauren’s created to steal another one of her sweaters

Jokes on her, Camila thinks smugly, tugging at the flannel that she had stolen from Lauren.

“What do you mean?” Camila asks keeping her eyes trained away for safe measure.

“Having more hangouts with the girls,” Lauren says. Camila hears her clear her throat. “You know, as a buffer. Keep things PF-y. Resist the urges.”

“What the – what urges?”

“Camila, I’ve caught you literally staring at my chest for the past five minutes.”

Her face boils over as she finally glances up at Lauren. There’s already an awaiting smug grin across her lips that should aggravate Camila, but all that disperses is a frustrating surge of excitement.

She hadn’t seen Lauren in a week. How could she possibly be mad?

“I wasn’t staring,” Camila stammers.

“Ok not staring,” she amends. “Leering.”

The frustration is stupid. It’s even more stupid when Camila begins to realize that she’s not exactly as frustrated as she’s trying to be. In fact, whatever this is it’s almost – amusing. And she wants more of it. More of the light, playful energy that’s beginning to make her stomach flutter.

“Yeah well, I saw you checking out my ass before I sat down.” Camila’s grasping at straws here really. But from the way Lauren suddenly turns an angry red makes her wonder. “Wow, I was only kidding, Sir Mix-A Lot.”

“What?” Lauren blinks, perplexed.

“Or were you lying about liking big butts?”

It takes a moment for the joke to sink in, and Camila expects the deadpan (especially from Dinah), but Lauren bursts into laughter. It’s loud and corny and it makes Camila’s chest ache.

Lauren ducks her head bashfully. Camila’s eyes follow her smile, feeling her own lips pull into a silly grin. She drinks in the soft blush spread across pale cheeks, eyes dipping down to trace the little curve of her smile.
“You’re so dumb.” Lauren nudges her with her arm.

Camila inhales sharply at the brief contact, looking away before she does something dumb like call Lauren beautiful. Which wouldn’t be so terrible because, like, yeah, okay, Lauren is beautiful. She’s always thought Lauren was beautiful. From the moment she learned what the word meant, probably.

It’s not like she hasn’t refrained from calling her beautiful before.

And from the way the laughter still lingers on her happy expression, it’s not like Camila’s opinion on the matter is changing any time soon.

But it’s weird. Especially after the whole incident at the concert. Things between them had still been tentative. Whatever fragile confidence Camila was beginning to feel towards the nature of the relationship was so easily dismantled.

Lauren sober, finally noticing her sudden silence. Her smile turns into a worried frown. “What is it?”

Camila stammers incomprehensibly, even to her own ears. She hears Dinah snort from somewhere behind them.

“You’re so…” Camila’s voice dies in her throat. The lump already forms, clogging anymore words from making it past her lips for a moment.

Lauren lowers her head, trying to meet her eyes. She stares at her for a long moment, studying her, trying to read her. Camila trains her expression into impassivity, only meeting Lauren’s intense gaze when necessary.

“I’m so what?” Lauren looks at her as if she knows exactly what she wants to say. It’s the air of the confidence that she used to remember Lauren possessing. The very same kind that used to leave boys wrapped around her finger back in high school.

It’s an entirely different experience being on the receiving end of said behavior. And the more she thinks about it, the more she starts to feel like an idiot. Was she as obvious as those dumb boys falling over their feet just to get some sort of affection from Lauren? Was she as desperate for the attention?

Camila feels a stab of bitterness at the thought, before letting out a small chuckle.

“You’re the dumb one,” she says. “not getting my reference. Who doesn’t know that song?”

Lauren blinks. Something flashes behind green eyes that offers Camila what seems to be a little glimmer of relief but it’s quickly shut down by an unreadable iron curtain. The drastic divide leaves her dizzy and confused as she tries to grip one emotion with certainty.

Lauren looks away. It makes Camila burn with embarrassment.

She wishes she hadn’t said anything. Why couldn’t she just keep her big mouth shut? Why was she cursed with such a loose filter?

“Camz,” Lauren begins. Her tone is soft. The way her nickname sounds is even softer. It’s weighted with something – something more. Something riddled with a kind of secret meaning that has Camila frustrated with her lacking ability to solve it.

Lauren’s hand comes to cover hers and immediately, Camila’s attention darts down to their joined
hands.

Her eyebrows pull together in frustration. For once something recognizable flickers in the green
depths. She looks like she’s dying to say something.

_Say it._

Lauren opens her mouth to speak again, but before she can, the sound of a throat clearing interrupts
her.

Both of them turn to see Normani standing there nervously, as if this is the last thing she wants to
intrude upon.

Her eyebrow rises as she regards them both. Camila suddenly feels worse than the time she’d been
cought by Clara (which she didn’t think was even possible).

“You guys don’t know the meaning of discretion,” Dinah comments idly.

_Do you?_

“Um.” Normani presses her lips together and plays with the keys in her hands. “Your dad’s blocking
the driveway, so I parked next door.” She juts out a thumb in the direction of Camila’s house, and
sure enough, Normani’s SUV is perfectly parked in the driveway.

Though Camila has a feeling that they still probably would’ve been caught up in their own bubble
even if Normani had parked a few inches from them.

Lauren coughs awkwardly, drawing both of their attention. “I’m ready. We’re ready. Where’s Ally?

Camila’s swears Normani’s expression almost turns smug, before the polite smile graces her lips.
“She wasn’t ready yet. I told her I’d pick her up after you guys.”

They waste no more time. Camila takes the driver’s seat as Normani moves into the passenger seat.
Lauren slips into the back.

The drive to Ally's house is quiet. Normani doesn’t make a comment about what she walked in on
thankfully. And for the umpteenth time Camila feels a wave of gratitude towards her friend.

(She can’t say the same for Dinah and her teasing).

As they approach Ally’s house, Camila takes in the notable renovations. The broken fence that had
been there since she’s known Ally is replaced with intricately designed wooden planks. The roof’s
been redone with terra cotta tile. The expensive kind. The one she remembers her father raving about
wanting. House repainted an earthy brown.

Camila’s interest piques as she takes in the fixer upper, noticing how brilliantly it stands out
compared to the neighboring houses.

Ally’s grandparents’ house, she should say. As soon as Ally found out she was accepted, the family
made plans to move out to Texas. Though her grandparents decided to remain in Florida.

“Grandma Hernandez really outdid herself,” Camila mutters, not realizing she’s spoken out loud.
Normani glances at her from the passenger seat. Her smile tightens.

“Ally paid for the remodels,” Normani answers quietly. There’s a pregnant pause, one that Camila
expects to be filled, but Normani remains silent.
Camila returns her attention to the house, staring at it thoughtfully. Eyes running across the trim hedges. Camila doesn’t really feel anything to the changes. For the longest, Ally’s house had been the least visited place to hang out.

Camila remembers Ally insisting that her place wasn’t that suitable for guests, what with her grandparents and her mother constantly suffering the injury sustained a couple years back. Camila remembers Ally always dipping out early during their hang outs to go back home because her mother wasn’t doing too well.

Camila feels a pang of guilt as she realizes she hasn’t once asked how Ally and her parents were doing with that. The subject had never been brought up. But truthfully, the thought hadn’t even crossed Camila’s mind.

A sour feeling settles into her stomach as Ally come bustling out the front door. She takes in Ally’s hasty stride and bright smile, as she waves to them in the car. Her eyes flicker down to the large bag hanging over her right shoulder. And Camila feels the guilt fade as Ally’s familiar presence pushes it away.

Some things never change.

She remembers Ally and her compulsive need to over pack whenever they went out. Anything any of them could have possibly needed was stuffed into that bag. Hand sanitizer, lotion, an extra pair of sunglasses, first aid kit, granola bars and snacks for later. Dinah used to often tease her and call her a mom of four with her huge diaper bag. In fact, Camila wouldn’t have been surprised if there actually were diapers in Ally’s bag.

Ally was a natural care taker and she relished in babying them. If any of them were sick, Ally was always the first one to spoon feed them homemade soup. If they were in an argument, Ally would try to be the peacemaker between them.

She had a comforting, accommodating presence. A solid form of stability that their group needed, from Normani’s reserved demeanor, Lauren’s stubborn individualism, and Dinah’s outlandish antics.

Perhaps it just was an inherent trait in being the oldest. Camila isn’t sure.

“Hey guys,” Ally chirps, as she slides in.

Despite the lack of music and the prolonged silence, Ally seems to brighten the atmosphere. It spreads and coils warmly along the confines of the car, making a fluttering feeling settle in Camila’s stomach. She catches Lauren’s eye in the mirror again to find a smile mimicking the way she’s feeling.

She doesn’t feel so alone.

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They drive around as Ally fills in the chatter, creating a warm fluffy buffer zone between them. Camila answers when addressed and when she can’t, the excuse to concentrate on her driving proves to be sufficient enough for Ally to accept.
Not that that really became an issue. Ally got the hint whenever the words felt like too much. Most of the talking was held between the two in the back, anyway.

Camila tunes the conversation out, inhaling and exhaling briefly, focusing in on Normani’s occasional suggestions of directions.

It isn’t until Lauren lets out a loud gasp, which causes Camila’s focus to split. Her eyes dart to the two in the back.

“You’re a drug dealer?!” Lauren sputters, and Camila almost slams on the brakes reflexively upon hearing that. She glances over to the girls in the back. Ally is flushed, looking out the window and away from them.

“I prefer the term cannabis wholesaler,” Ally mutters sheepishly. “Why? Do you want some?” She pushes her face between the passenger and driver’s seat. Camila blanches.

“I’ve never taken a weed,” Camila splutters awkwardly. Dinah scoffs from the back seat.

“Hello, did you forget that everyone and their mothers’ have seen your dumb list?” Dinah rolls her eyes. Camila winces, as she catches both girls’ unimpressed stares. “I mean I’ve already crossed it off my list.”

“Darn,” Ally sighs, slumping back against the backseat. “I had a few extra snickerdoodles at home. They’re some of my best sellers.”

Lauren clears her throat, fiddling with the ends of her shorts. “I mean, Camila hasn’t tried edibles. She just smoked a bit from Veronica’s supply. And really, it would be beneficial to get the opportunity to try another form of consumption. Purely for the sake of Camila’s list though,” Lauren adds brightly.

“This bitch just wants edibles,” Dinah deadpans.

“Veronica? As in Veronica Iglesias from English?” Ally questions.

Lauren groans, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Ally, please don’t tell me you’re the dealer she’s been raving about.”

“She’s one of my best customers in Miami,” Ally defends.

“If you heard the things she wants to – actually nevermind you probably wouldn’t want to know,” Lauren mutters offhandedly.

“So, this is like illegal right?” Camila asks.

“Like half the things on your list are legal, Mila,” Dinah pipes in from the back seat.

Ally’s expression falters. For a moment Camila wishes she hadn’t opened her mouth.

She feels a pang in her chest as she studies the shadow that passes over Ally’s face. It unsettles her, leaving a disturbing chill trail down her spine as she watches. It’s gone as quickly as it appears.

“Oh my gosh guys, I’m not gonna go, like, Walter White or anything.” Ally laughs it off, waving a dismissive hand, and then smiles brightly. One of those bright ones that used to make Camila feel warm inside, like slipping on a pair of fuzzy Christmas socks.
Ally and Dinah had that in common – the ability to brighten up a room with the warm tilt of their lips. It was a selfless kind of smile that one couldn’t help but return.

And maybe Camila would have still felt the same way if the smile didn't look so different now.

It's still comprised of the same qualities she was used to. The same curl at the corner of her lips. The same dazzle of white teeth, and roundness of upturned cheeks. But it all falls short because it doesn’t quite reach the now absent sparkle in Ally’s brown eyes.

It’s startling the moment Camila recognizes what’s wrong.

And immediately she feels a small upset in the pit of her stomach the more she studies Ally through the rearview mirror. The pang turns into a tightness.

She steels herself away from looking so blatantly. But it drips down upon her, sticky and thick like blood oozing out of an open wound.

She’s run out of bandaids.

Because if there’s one thing she knows, it’s that Ally is not a disingenuous person. It’s not in her to be insincere with her actions. Or dishonest in her words.

Yet Camila knows the look plastered across Ally’s face all too well, having spent the remainder of her high school life trying to appease the people around her with a fake smile.

They drive in relative silence. The cool air wafting through the half open windows.

The carefree mood has subsided, dropping as quickly as Ally’s smile, shifting into something awkward. Something Camila was afraid of with being in their mixed company.

Ally uncharacteristically falls silent. And Camila could slap herself for opening her big mouth. She doesn’t know what to say. The silence permeates past the seats, settling uncomfortably between them all. She wants to apologize immediately. She wants to just disappear right through the driver's seat.

It isn't until Lauren clears her throat the nervous energy finally breaks.

"We should hang out next weekend."

Ally takes the bait, visibly brightening in the next second.

“Why don’t we do something from your list Camila?” Ally adds in.

She doesn't know if she should feel annoyed or relieved with Lauren's save. That weekend she had...other plans. Plans that would just involve Lauren.

The girls all turn to Camila and she feels her face burn with the sudden attention. They wait, expectantly for a response. Camila sighs, before finding somewhere to pull over.

Once she sets the car on park, Camila digs into her back pocket and pulls out the freshly folded list.

Lauren reaches over the headrest and pulls the paper out of Camila’s hand. She and Ally both huddle over the list after she unfolds the paper. Even Normani peeks over the seat curiously.

“Tattoos?” Ally asks brightly.

“I know a guy,” Lauren adds.
Camila shoots her a flat look, making her shrink away.

“Okay, no to the tattoo then.”

“What about a party?” Ally suggests, but then immediately frowns. “Not that I know of any parties happening this exact weekend.”

“We could try to get some alcohol,” Normani finally speaks, which makes them all burst into nervous giggles. Normani has the decency to look a little chagrined. Camila glances at her curiously, but Normani rolls her eyes. “Not to get drunk.”

“I don’t have a fake I.D,” Camila mutters.

“Clubbing?” Lauren suggests. They all sort of look at her silently. Dinah lets out an excited yelp, making Camila flinch. Lauren’s gaze lands on her. “What?”

Camila shakes her head. “On second thought, I think alcohol sounds like the better idea.”

Again, she meets Normani’s eye, and she notices how apprehensive she is about these plans as well.

“What’s the point of making a bucket list if you don’t want to do anything on it?” Dinah whines from the very back seat. Camila glances at her through the rearview mirror, taking in the mocking expression.

Camila sighs in defeat, before silently agreeing.

And so whatever driving plans they had originally made immediately deviate in favor of looking for outfits.

The decision to head to the mall is out of her hands, and with a very feeble protest, Camila moves from the driver’s seat, and allows Normani to take the reins again.

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The mall is packed. Not that she would expect anything less on a Saturday. Yet Camila still feels slightly worried upon seeing so many people in one place. It’s been so long. Too long.

She thinks back to the very few times she went to the mall with the girls.

It was more of Dinah and Normani’s thing back then. Dinah was a fiend for the mall, window shopping, getting her eyebrows done, flirting with boys in the food court. And it was normal occurrence to see Normani strolling out from each store, shopping bags dangling from her wrists.

Sometimes they’d even bribe Camila with the prospect of free food if she’d hold their bags for them the whole day. Well, Normani at least. She distinctly remembers Dinah saying she would buy her Mongolian BBQ but never actually doing it.

She catches sight of the BBQ stand, watching the workers fry up the prepared bowls for the eager customers.

Camila feels a painful twinge in her chest as she catches a whiff of the familiar scent. Remembering the times Dinah would compete with her stuffing their bowls up with as much food as they could.
She remembers Normani’s wrinkled nose of disapproval and Ally’s nervous laughter, trying to distract the employees from reprimanding Camila and Dinah. She remembers Lauren offering half of her bowl (after Dinah’s inevitable victory), claiming that she wouldn’t be able to finish it anyway.

Even though Camila had known that wasn’t entirely true.

People walk by them. Groups of friends. Families.

She takes them in and the same disconnect filters towards her. Outwardly, she thinks that perhaps their group does fit into this scene. Four friends hanging out on a Saturday at the mall.

She can’t even remember the last time she did something this normal before summer rolled in. The teenaged kind of normal, like going to the mall. It so typical. The very same typical that she’s missed in her life.

But the more she looks upon the groups of people she can’t help but feel like a recluse.

It’s the same thing all over again. The same ostracizing feeling that somehow creeps its way deep inside her heart every time she hangs out with her friends. The same doubt plaguing her thoughts. That maybe it’s too soon to say friends. That maybe they’re doing all of this out of pity, and really would rather be on the other side. That maybe she’s just forever going to be on the outside looking in.

“You okay?” Lauren asks in an undertone, nudging her on the arm. Camila blinks away from her thoughts. She sees the concern forming in green eyes. In the pull of her eyebrows.

But Camila wills it away, swallowing down the discomfort. “I’m good.”

Dinah doesn’t share the same concern. Instead, choosing to press her face against the nearest window. “That top is cute. I need it.”

Camila inhales sharply, holding in the deep breath. She clears her head, trying to take in the moment for what it is. A hangout.

It’s like she’s looking at the world from underwater. Being in some kind of see through water tank, and she can’t break the transparent glass barrier.

But then Lauren loops an arm through hers, effectively pulling her away from her thoughts in one sweeping motion. Her attention instantly zeroes in on the press of their arms together.

She glances up to find Lauren looking straight ahead, so all she gets is a profile view.

She can’t read the expression. Or the look in her vibrant, green eyes. Nor the way her bottom lip tucks snugly beneath her teeth.

It’s distracting enough that Camila doesn’t realize that she’s broken up to the surface.

She lets out a shaky breath, turning her attention to the two walking beside her. Ally and Normani avert their gazes, but she doesn’t miss the look they exchange with one another.

She questions it again - what Normani and Ally think of them. Do they suspect anything? Would they mind?

It’s several minutes later, after deciding what store to go to, that she realizes she doesn’t really care.

They enter the shop Dinah had been hungrily staring at.
Ally chatters away, gushing at nearly every clothing rack while Camila hangs back. She watches the girls scour the store.

Before she knows it, they’re scurrying her over to the changing room.

Camila feels a fond smile form on her face. Normani had visibly brightened. And Camila wonders how long it had been for Normani too. To just be – normal.

It feels good. So good that perhaps she can forgive them for stuffing her inside the fitting room to fight with this dress.

She gets back to her struggling. Huffing, as she slips the dress up into place. The zipper gives her more trouble than what it’s worth. After a few minutes of arm aching reaching she stops, slumping against the wall and glowering at herself in the mirror. She pushes her stomach out for good measure, watching as the fabric strains against her belly.

“Wow, so attractive,” Camila snaps at her reflection.

She lets herself wallow in self pity, until she hears Dinah’s voice from the other side of the cubicle.

“Are you done yet?”

She sighs deeply, before poking her head out of the changing room. Dinah looks at her impatiently, gesturing to the pile of dresses beside her.

“You still have these to try on!”

Camila groans, two seconds away from ripping off the dress she’s wearing and throwing it at Dinah, when Lauren shuffles by carrying another pile of dresses.

“Can you help me?” Camila asks.

Eyebrows knit together for a moment, before Lauren sets the pile down.

The door closes behind her with a loud snap. It’s startling but not as much so as the feeling of Lauren's hands on her. She feels fingertips brush against her exposed skin as she fiddles with the zipper.

“It’s stuck,” Lauren murmurs.

Camila rests her forehead against the mirror, an exasperated chuckle falls from her mouth. “Well yeah, that’s why we’re here.”

She lifts her head and catches Lauren’s eyes roll in their reflection.

Lauren’s lips tilt into a soft smile. When she feels the brush of her fingertips again, she shivers. It doesn’t go unnoticed by Lauren.

“How does it look?” Camila asks, watching her expression with rapt attention. She catches Lauren’s
eyes dip down to her ass.

She squirms a little under the attention, feeling the heat pool across her cheeks.

Lauren glances up at her and flushes when she realizes she’s been caught.

“Good,” Lauren mutters. “You look good.”

“I look like a stripper.”

This seems to break Lauren’s awkwardness as a soft chuckle falls out. “That’s a bad thing?”

“No,” Camila responds quickly. “I mean I don’t know. I don’t want to know.” She adds at the smirk on her face.

Lauren hovers behind her. Encroaching up on her personal space, making the room stuffier than before. Yet Camila doesn’t seem to mind. Not when her heart is beating in an encouraging manner and her stomach is fluttering in anticipation.

She doesn’t actually feel Lauren’s body pressed into hers, but there’s a tug deep in her belly that lets her know that they’re nearly touching. The miniscule gap only further deepens the urge to lean back against her. She feels the pull, like some stupid kind of magnetic pull and the delay is only intensifying the urge.

A trembling sigh falls from Camila’s lips

The atmosphere in the room slithers into a familiar one. A painstakingly familiar one. One that’s lingered in the back of her mind since the last time she and Lauren had alone time. Proper alone time.

It’s a slow foggy moment before Camila realizes that this is the first time they’ve actually been alone since –

“I’m still on your mom’s shit list aren’t I?” Camila breathes out shakily.

It doesn’t look as if Lauren registers what she’s saying. But then she blinks, and pulls away slightly. The subject change serves to clear Camila’s mind (though she really thinks it has more to do with her irrational fear of Lauren’s mother).

Neither she nor Lauren make any further comment, as she steps out of the room.

Camila blushes, adjusting the top part of her dress, making it ride up. After a while she gives up.

Normani actually smirks.

“It fits!” Ally exclaims, clapping her hands.

That’s an understatement.

Camila begins to get the sneaking suspicion that this whole trip was an elaborate ruse to coerce her into shopping. If the fact that the rest of the girls have neglected to purchase anything wasn’t an obvious indication, it’s the fact that Ally had insisted on buying her outfit.

Maybe it should bother her. That it can be construed as them babying her, holding her hand through this process, but it doesn’t feel that way.
They’re trying.

And it’s good enough for her.

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Next Saturday approaches faster than Camila would have liked. She’d spent the remainder of the week chastising herself for even including something like that on her list. Something completely out of her comfort zone.

At the mention of it, her parents’ eyes nearly bulged. She was waiting for the refusal. She anticipated the lecture. But when she dropped the fact that Normani and Ally were also going, it was as if she had said two angels had descended from heaven to guide her on a holy journey.

It’s a little weird knocking on Lauren’s door now, after spending so many days climbing in through her window. But when Clara answers the door, Camila is grateful for her decision.

"Big brother is watching,” Dinah murmurs, as Clara calls Lauren down from her room.

“Hey,” Lauren greets with a flash of a smile. It’s bright, teeth gleaming that all Camila manages is a returning lopsided grin.

Clara clears her throat behind them. At the sound, Lauren freezes. The smile immediately falls and is replaced with tight purse of the lips. Without saying a word, Lauren reaches forward to grab Camila’s hand. Before she can even offer a greeting, Camila is tugged away, stumbling over her feet to keep up with Lauren’s rapid pace.

She can feel the frustration oozing before Lauren. She can see it in the way Lauren stride turns more into a stomp.

Once they reach her room, Camila feels like she can breathe.

“I didn’t know your mom was gonna be home,” Camila says. Lauren rolls her eyes, falling into her bed with an indignant huff.

“Yeah she’s had someone else cover the detention shift all week,” Lauren grumbles.

Camila tries to picture Clara overseeing afterschool detention in high school. The chilling intense gaze that Lauren has so beautifully inherited filters into her mind. It reminds her of the day she and Lauren were caught in that uncompromising position.

A memory Camila is actively trying not to remember.

“So more mother-daughter time?” Camila probes as she takes a seat next to Lauren.

Lauren falls back, arms outstretched against the bed, reaching to grab the nearest pillow and pushing it into her face. A gesture that clearly gave the kill me now impression. Something Camila was all too familiar with.

But she takes advantage of Lauren’s covered face, as her eyes travel the expanse of Lauren’s body in
this new position, lingering a few moments on the exposed sliver of her pale stomach. Camila swallows thickly, before stretching out to adopt a similar position, leaning her weight on her elbow.

“Please.” She hears Lauren’s muffled scoff. “She’s just slowly trying to ruin my life.”

“I doubt that.” Camila moves to grab the pillow.

“She’s has me on a short leash,” Lauren huffs.

“How short?” Camila teases.

Both of their attention turns to the wide open door.

The comment finally snaps her out of the playful mood as the realization of how Clara could just walk in any second and misconstrue this as another uncompromising position.

Camila immediately clears her throat and shuffles away. Lauren snorts at the growing gap.

“I guess it shouldn’t matter,” Camila mutters awkwardly as she returns to her spot. Though now she realizes there’s an uncomfortably distracting, short distance between them. One that she probably should’ve been more aware of from the beginning. “We’re not doing anything inappropriate right now.”

“No,” Lauren agrees.

“And friends lay in each other’s beds all the time,” Camila continues. Her tone turns defensive when she hears Dinah scoff in the background. “Waiting for their friends to arrive. To get ready..”

"Have fun explaining that to her,” Lauren says, rather sourly.

Camila blanches.

"I'm kidding. Kind of. It's not her I'm entirely concerned about. She’s threatening to tell my dad about what she walked in on,” Lauren mutters. “If my dad finds out it’s just gonna turn into this big thing.”

Camila hums. She folds her arm, and leans down upon it like a pillow. Her eyes roam Lauren’s face, taking in the upsetting crinkle between her eyebrows. She feels her heart tug at the upset tension that has fallen over Lauren at the mention of her parents.

It’s a surprisingly sore subject and Camila wants to ask. It’s surprising how much she wants to know. She wants to know why Lauren, who used to speak so fondly of her mother and father, visibly recoils from the mere mention of them. But she’s gripped in silence, staring at her friend and the disappointed pull of her lips.

And she remembers the years they’ve spent laying beside each other just talking. Venting. About what a stupid boy did or didn’t do. Or the first F’s they got on a test. Or the way their parents had scolded them for something they’d done.

Camila doesn’t even really realize what she’s doing until her fingers are already upon Lauren’s face, thumb smoothing out the knit of her eyebrows. She lingers there, fingertips moving to trace the arch of her eyebrow. The warm skin flushes beneath her touch, inviting another gentle caress, as her finger traces down the length of her nose.

She feels Lauren’s slow breath against the palm of her hand.
Lauren’s eyes flicker up to her and the look makes her still in her movements.

Camila’s hand falls away at her cheek, pulling it away abruptly. She already feels herself scooting away.

“Sorry,” Camila mutters, her cheeks run hot. She suddenly feels out of place laying beside Lauren. The room is too hot. The space is too confining.

Her heart is pounding heavily. She knows Lauren is staring at her; she can feel her eyes burning holes into the side of her already hot face.

Camila coughs awkwardly, scooting even farther. “Old habit I guess.”

“It’s okay,” Lauren responds softly. “I used to like when you did that. It’s – nice.”

Camila gets the distinct impression that it’s anything but just nice. Especially when Camila glances down at her to find Lauren staring up at her with a mixture of confusion and apprehension and something else Camila can’t quite distinguish (and doesn’t exactly want to spend so much time trying to distinguish).

“So, when you say a big thing…” Camila averts her gaze again, glowering up at the ceiling. She swallows thickly, hoping that Lauren gets the hint. “How big is big?”

Lauren’s scoff makes Camila feel safe enough to turn back and look at her.

She still seems upset, but more annoyed rather than angry. Camila bites the inside of her cheek to hold back the smile.

“Like the whole interrogation disguised as a family dinner kind of big,” Lauren says with sigh. “I wouldn’t be surprised if he tried to do some kind of intimidation tactic.”

Camila laughs nervously. “What’s the worst he can do? Scare me with one of your baseball bats?”

Lauren’s scowl turns into a smirk as she meets Camila’s gaze. “I forgot about that.”

Camila shrugs. “Your dad’s gonna have to get a little more creative to scare me away.” Camila pauses as she suddenly remembers something. “Now that we’re on the subject of dinners, my family also kind of wants you to have dinner with them – us. I’ve been avoiding bringing it up.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re embarrassing,” Camila snaps.

Lauren rolls her eyes. “I’ve known your parents for years, Camz. You think they’re going to pull out the baby pictures? I’ve already seen them. In fact, I’m pretty sure I’m in some of them.”

“Married,” Dinah mumbles from the computer chair.

Camila ignores the comment, but not before shooting a withering glare in her direction.

“It’s not that,” Camila sighs, moving so that she lays on her back. “I’m pretty sure my parents are worried you’re going to, like, break my heart or something,” Camila mutters offhandedly.

Lauren is quiet for a long moment. It unnerves Camila and suddenly she begins to feel that she’s said too much. With an awkward cough, she sits up, moving away from Lauren’s intense stare.
“They do that a lot,” Camila goes on, trying to feign nonchalance. “Worry too much.” Camila sighs. “Worry all the time, actually.”

At the somber tone in her voice, Lauren sits up beside her.

“My parents don’t worry enough,” Lauren whispers. Green eyes glued to the carpeted floor. “At least not for the right reasons.”

Camila wants to say something. She wants to reach out, clasp her hand in the same easy manner that Lauren does the second Camila is upset. Her hand curls into a tight fist at her side and she hesitates.

She doesn’t know why she hesitates.

Her phone vibrates in her pocket before she can continue with her internal debate. Camila glances down at the display after opening the message.

“Ally and Normani are here.”

Whatever residual tension that lingers between them dissipates when they join them in Lauren’s room.

They arrive to the club in one piece. Dinah is buzzing with excitement beside her. But Camila can’t exactly reciprocate. She’s nervous. Almost two seconds away from feeling like throwing up.

Camila eyes the entrance skeptically, watching as the girls pull out their ID’s. She remembers the last time she felt this way – this mixture of fear and adrenaline. Dinah had forced her to walk through the haunted maze down at school. And with whatever little pride and courage she had left, she’d entered the haunted house. She promised never to do so again, despite Dinah’s constant teasing.

She flashes her very real ID the attendant, before he gives her the okay to pass through.

Camila doesn’t really know what to expect, but once she steps inside she begins to think that perhaps the movies really did get it right with how the idea of clubbing is supposed to go. She watches with wide eyes, feeling like she’s just stepped into an episode of Jersey shore.

The music is loud, with a heavy bass rattling against her skull. She can feel the vibrations of sound against her body, thrumming through her veins.

The room is dark, strobe lights flickering against the walls and people, creating an almost kaleidoscope effect. The lights become blinding after Camila finds herself staring at one for too long. She blinks rapidly, turning her attention back to the crowds of people.

She thinks that maybe she would enjoy it had she not been feeling so incredibly lost in the atmosphere.

She glances up at the screen and sees the typical sexualized pop video. She watches the music video for a moment, watching the singer dip and dive.

This was the type of song she could picture Dinah bumping her speaker to in her room. She could picture Ally humming to the background noise as she kneaded cookie dough in Dinah’s kitchen,
Normani dancing to it when it comes on the car radio on their nightly snack runs. Lauren listening to it on her iPod while they all studied, denying she ever liked it.

Camila’s chest twists slightly as the images flicker like an obscure, dusty old viewfinder.

Her gaze shifts over to Dinah, head already bopping to the beat, looking around in excitement. Camila can almost feel it.

Almost.

“Come on, let’s go upstairs,” Lauren shouts in her ear, shaking her out of her thoughts. She gestures to the foot of a staircase that Camila barely makes out in the dim lighting. Ally and Normani are already waiting. “More room,” Lauren adds at her confusion.

Lauren’s hand is at the small of her back, guiding her up the stairs. She can’t help but think back to the concert. Lauren did the same thing then. Perhaps it was an unconscious thing. Or maybe Lauren did this to all the girls.

She follows them up the stairs. There are less people but not much compared to the downstairs floor. The bar is larger with bright neon backlights, highlighting the different liquor bottles on the shelf.

Camila lets out a sigh of relief, as she settles closer to her friends.

She sways on the spot awkwardly, eyes flickering over to Normani who has naturally picked up the beat of the song.

Ally holds their hands up in the air as she attempts to spin Camila. Having to stretch on her tippy toes and Camila having to crouch beneath her outstretched arm. After a successful spin Camila stumbles into Lauren who laughs near her ear. She feels hands at her hips, steadying her.

A shiver trickles across her body as she feels the vibration of laughter against her hair. Hot palms over the thin material of her dress become more than distracting that she has to push herself away.

She turns to Ally, finding her friend throwing her head back and giggling at Camila’s wobbly recovery. Normani looks upon them, the sporadic lights dancing across her amused face.

Though Camila tries to pick up the upbeat rhythm from the dancers beside her, she can’t help but let her attention linger on Lauren moving beside her.

She’s beautiful, Camila thinks dimly, frustratingly so. In that kind of way that one can’t help but just stop and stare for a moment.

And Camila thinks that maybe she should care that she’s stopped dancing to just stare at Lauren. That it’s stupid and someone is going to notice her inept ability to just fit in like a normal person. But she can’t help it.

The desire to voice her thoughts have burned in the back of her throat since she suppressed them on Lauren’s porch step. And it’s even more difficult to restrain her inappropriate thoughts when Lauren can just do the whole beautiful thing so effortlessly.

She’s alluring beneath the dark lights, reminding Camila briefly of the night of the concert. How dark Lauren’s eyes were bathed in the neon lights of the hallway. Casting that attractive shadow across her pale face.

It all sort of comes back in slow, heavy waves. The memory of Lauren so close. The heat of the
moment. The taste of her lips.

Camila swallows thickly, averting her gaze. A short-lived attempt because in the next second she’s transfixed again.

Lauren’s hips sway to the beat sensually, dipping and swerving in a languid rhythm that leaves Camila breathless. Lauren runs her hands across up waist, trailing around her breasts, caressing her neck, until fingers tangle into her hair.

She’s mesmerized with the movements, eyes tracing every curve Lauren’s hands have stroked. Suddenly wishing the sweaty palms at her sides were the ones touching her.

The song noticeably changes, dipping into something with a heavier, sensual bass. The air around them shifts into something sexual. And perhaps that’s the reason Camila finds herself tuning Ally, Normani and even Dinah out, as her attention focuses solely in on Lauren.

Green eyes finally lock on to her. They’re dancing beneath the strobe lights. Camila’s sure Lauren’s got other people captivated. She doesn’t know how she does it. How she manages to make something so small as a dance so sensual.

Lauren is up close before she fully registers what’s going on.

“Are you going to stand there or dance with me?” Lauren asks. There’s a teasing bite that snaps Camila into abrupt focus. She blushes and is thankful for the darkness of the club so that Lauren can’t see just how red her face feels.

“Uh, yeah,” Camila stammers. She steps closer into Lauren’s face eagerly. “It’s just – I don’t really know what I’m doing.”

Lauren snorts. “Most people here don’t know what they’re doing.” She gestures to those around them. Camila takes a moment to observe. With an embarrassing realization, she notices that many couples around them are grinding.

“Dancing, right,” Camila murmurs. She reaches out hesitantly. Lauren grabs her hands, and plants them upon her waist.

“Like so,” Lauren says with a laugh. She steps closer. Camila secretly thanks Dinah for the coercion to go with the heels because now she’s about the same height as Lauren.

Camila follows her lead. It isn’t until Camila’s knee accidentally brushes Lauren’s that she twirls her around and presses into Camila’s back. She feels hands trail down her arms until they grab her own hands, interlocking their fingers as they rest upon her waist. Camila feels herself quake, the fiery contact makes a wave of arousal flare up and down her body.

_OKay, okay, calm down, breathe._

She feels Lauren’s face near her ear.

“Fun right?” Lauren asks.

Camila swallows thickly. “Fun.”

“Or,” Lauren continues. The sudden movement leaves her dazed, still trying to grasp the feeling of Lauren’s body so close to hers, that she’s not prepared for Lauren to spin her around again and press her back into Camila.
Her arms are like jelly when Lauren pulls them around her, making Camila hold her in a snug grip. She gets a face full of Lauren’s hair. It’s almost suffocating. She’s drowning. Senses on such high alert that she can’t even concentrate fully on the fact that she can feel Lauren’s ass through the stupidly thin material of her dress.

This is Lauren in her element, Camila slowly realizes. Confident Lauren. Charming Lauren. Seductive Lauren. Some kind of black widow version that slowly reels in her prey before making her attack.

It’s a sluggish thought when she finally acknowledges that she isn’t ready.

She was never ever really ready.

As if sensing her sudden blunder of infatuation, Lauren tilts her head to peek back at her.

“Don’t think so hard. Just go with the music. Just…” Lauren pauses, putting her hands on top of Camila’s and moving them to her waist. “feel.”

It’s all too much. It shouldn’t feel this nice. It shouldn’t leave her desperately wanting more. To feel more. To touch more. Lauren’s hands linger on her waist and she wills herself not to move her hand lower. It’s hardly appropriate. And the girls were right there. But Lauren is there, and she’s so close to her, so willing. So encouraging.

Heat pools in the pit of her stomach, urging her to just touch. To just – feel.

Her hands move on their own accord, skimming along Lauren’s sides, tracing the curve of her hip, drifting dangerously lower. Her fingers rake against the thin material of her dress, catching on the seam.

Lauren doesn’t make any further comments. And for a moment, Camila thinks that maybe she’s doing this whole thing wrong. That maybe her touch is too clumsy and Lauren is just too nice to say anything. But when Camila flattens her palms against her the planes of her stomach, Lauren sinks further into her embrace.

Lauren’s hand comes to tangle itself in her hair, coaxing her closer until Camila buries her face in the crook of her neck. She inhales deeply, lips nearly brushing the soft skin. If she moved closer, she could be kissing her. She lets out a ragged breath at the thought, but refrains from moving her mouth.

Yet the more the dance went on, the more Camila begins to question her decision to keep her mouth to herself.

Lauren spins around until they’re facing each other again. Pressed so tightly their foreheads flush. She can feel Lauren’s heavy breathing against her face. it’s all together too overwhelming and not enough.

She swallows thickly, attempting to focus in on the lyrics of the song. Which doesn’t really help, considering how repetitive it is. It isn’t a song meant for deep lyricism and witty wordplay.

It definitely doesn’t help that with every hit of the beat, Lauren grinds closer.

It’s not until several songs later that Camila gets some sort of reprieve. Lauren had pulled away to go use the bathroom.

Her body is humming, and she knows it has very little to do with the actual dancing. But rather the
feel of Lauren's body so close, from the hairsbreadth gap to the flushed press against her.

She still feels the sting of fingernails digging into her scalp, the soreness of her hair being tugged around Lauren's deft fingertips.

Camila swallows down her building arousal, trying to focus on looking for Lauren.

She had told her she'd be back, told her wait for her. But the dark look she shot Camila told her otherwise. Her stomach twists as she pushes open the bathroom door.

Her eyes take in the muted light, flickering from the strobe above the wall mirror. She glances at herself in the mirror, studying the flushed fade and ruffled hair.

As the last few club goers stumble out, Camila turns to look around the stalls. She waits until the doors close after the girls before calling out Lauren's name.

Perhaps she had misread this entire situation and Lauren hadn't wanted to initiate some sort of sexy times. Maybe she just needed to pee.

_God I'm starting to sound like Dinah._

As if remembering, Camila spins around to find her best friend watching her with a judgmental face.

"Y'all are nasty," Dinah snaps. "Have you seen this bathroom? I'm sure there are STD's all over this place."

Before Camila can respond, one of the stalls opens, and a hand grabs her, yanking her inside.

She might've screamed had she not been pressed up so roughly against the wall of the stall by the very person she'd been looking for.

Relief floods her system. But it's soon diluted by the previous thick tension throbbing throughout her body.

"I told you I'd be back," Lauren scolds. But it sounds too teasing, too playful, too _sexy_ to just be admonishing.

Camila feels her lips tug into a smirk as she leans back more comfortably against the wall. "Really? That seemed more like an invitation to follow you."

Lauren's eyes dart between hers. The stare is too much for her to hold so she lets her gaze travel lower. Tracing the firm press of Lauren's painted lips. The clench of her jaw. Down to the vein along her neck as she swallows audibly.

Camila finds herself mimicking the action.

Her heart is still hammering from the dance floor. She’s sure she looks a sweaty mess. As does Lauren. Her cheeks are flushed and there are a few strands of hair stuck to her forehead.

All Camila can think below the hazy breath of lust sweeping between them is how beautiful she is. And how much she wished she had voiced it that day. Today. Tomorrow. Every day.

Lauren’s arms come to trap against the door on either side of her head. There’s a significant distance between their faces but Camila still feels completely towered over. And that…does things to her.

She swallows thickly, watching as green eyes scour her face, drinking in her face the same way
Camila is. Heavy intent, sharply focused.

An electrifying sensation surges from her beating chest, to her flopping stomach and down to the ache she’s been feeling since the dancing.

She bites her lip, warming the dry flesh, catching the way Lauren’s eyes fall down to the action.

Hot, shallow breaths fall against her face, making her swallow again. It tastes like Lauren and Camila can safely say that she knows what Lauren tastes like. She knows the way Lauren’s lips move against hers. How soft they are. What her tongue feels like.

It’s all catching up to her as she presses her palms flat against the wall. They curl into tight fists, itching to touch. Begging to tangle in Lauren’s damp hair or dip beneath the hemline of her dress.

“We shouldn’t be doing this.” Lauren’s strained voice sends a tingle down Camila’s spine.

Camila’s fist tightens against the door.

“No,” she agrees in a shaky whisper. “we shouldn’t.”

“I shouldn’t have pulled you in here,” Lauren murmurs thickly.

“I shouldn’t have followed you,” Camila adds. Lauren comes to chew her bottom lip, and it’s Camila’s turn to be swayed. She watches as Lauren’s lip is pulled by white teeth, stretching in such a delicious way that Camila makes a soft noise.

Lauren notices because then she leans closer. So close that Camila can practically hear the weighted breathing falling from Lauren’s nose. Brushing against her face, caressing her reddened cheeks.

And when Lauren speaks again her tone is rough. “I shouldn’t want to do these things to you. Not now. Not during PF time.”

The stupid name fizzles out into the background. And all Camila is aware of is that growing ache between her legs and the urge to kiss her.

“What do you want to do to me?” Camila presses.

Lauren moves in closer and for a blissful moment Camila expects a kiss, but Lauren’s lips brush against her cheek. Her nose traces against her cheekbones, inhaling, dragging a trail to her ear.

“Everything,” Lauren husks, lips brushing against her ear. Camila sighs, sagging against the door slightly. Lauren’s hair tickles her face and Camila is overwhelmed with her scent. She’s ridiculously turned on. Her body hums with arousal, urging her to look for some kind of relief.

Camila’s hands move away from the door she’d been unconsciously scratching. They come to seek refuge upon Lauren’s waist.

Lauren inhales sharply at the contact.

The heavy bass pounds in the background. A muffled reverberating matching her hammering heart.

Laurens arms create a barrier, hiding them away from everything. Forcing them inside an intimate bubble within the bathroom stall.

They’re so close that it’s hard to not look at Lauren. Her green eyes are smoldering, hot melting into a dark emerald liquid that makes Camila shiver. It’s captivating, drawing her in away from it all.
Away from the dingy walls of the bathroom stall and the obnoxiously loud music. Away from the click of heels and the door opening and closing.

It’s so distracting she barely notices the tension in Lauren’s hands against the stall. White knuckles straining against her fist.

“Is this okay?” Lauren asks. Camila almost doesn’t hear her at first because her voice is so low.

Her arms bend as she leans in closer. Camila feels her body press up against it.

“Yes,” Camila sighs, feeling slightly delirious.

It feels reminiscent to the night of the concert – this insatiable hunger humming throughout her body. Dancing throughout her bloodstream to the beat of her rapidly drumming heart.

The ache below her waist is insistent and demanding, dragging her thoughts away until all she can truly think about is relieving it. Settling it down. Dousing this heat enflaming her.

Lauren’s eyes are on her, glowering unabashedly at her mouth.

She licks her lips in response and promptly feels her core quiver when Lauren’s heated gaze tracks the movement.

And then it happens. Lips crash into hers. Hunggrily. Overwhelmingly. She feels herself inhale sharply as Lauren moves with intense fervor against her. It’s dizzying and hot and Camila almost loses her balance but Lauren presses her body against hers, pinning her to the wall. Securing her.

The pace seems to build tenfold the moment Lauren shifts, until one of her thighs slots between Camila’s. A low groan falls between them. She’s too caught up to care from who exactly. It could have been either one of them in their shared space. Sharing the same heavy air. An exchange of pants.

Lauren’s mouth falls away, as she moves to kiss along her jaw, before lips trail down her neck. A deliciously familiar routine, one that has Camila wilting against the stall and tilting her head to give Lauren more access.

Her hands tangle in Lauren’s hair, fingers already tugging the long locks. She feels the rumble of a groan against her skin, before the wet kisses shift into rough sucking.

An embarrassingly loud moan falls from her lips. Loud enough that she’s pretty sure someone outside of the stalls can hear and know exactly what was going on.

“We’re in a bathroom stall,” Camila mutters.

It's dirty and sloppy. And Camila is sure under normal circumstances she’d be opposed to a quick hookup in a public bathroom of a club. She feels, rather than hears, Lauren making a noise of affirmation against her neck. For a moment she gets lost again in the feeling of Lauren’s mouth, of her hands, of her body so flushed against her, of her thigh so snug between hers. For a moment, she doesn’t even care.

“Take me home.”

Lauren’s lips still on her neck and then she’s pulling away.

Camila runs a hand through her hair, leaning back against the stall wall. She takes Lauren in, sweaty
hair, flushed face and red lips. And it was all the result of her.

Lauren meets her eye and it seems as if she’s thinking the same thing.

She catches Lauren’s eyes drop down to her neck and she knows there’s bound to be a bunch of bite marks.

Green eyes flicker back up to her.

“Are you sure?” Lauren’s voice is gravelly. Her toes curl in her shoes at the sound. They stand there, for a few more moments sizing up one another.

She nods once.

“Ohkay.”

Camila yanks the door open, stumbling out with Lauren hot on her heels.

“Please tell me you didn’t just lose your virginity in the bathroom,” Dinah whines as she meets Camila. “That’s so tacky.”

She’s only half listening. Too distracted by Lauren’s hand in hers. Too fixated on the ache simmering below her waist. Too concerned with getting home as soon as possible.

“Let’s find Normani and Ally,” Lauren says in about as much as rush as Camila feels.

They scour the club together. And though it proves to be a troubling feat to distinguish people beneath the neon lights, they collectively come up with nothing. Which is beyond frustrating and Camila begins to get agitated with the fact that when she wants the two to pop out of nowhere they choose now to vanish.

Lauren fishes out her phone and the brightness of the screen reflects both of their frustrated expressions.

“Allie just texted,” Lauren says, squinting at her phone. “She says they’re outside.”

She bubbles with excitement.

Lauren intertwines their fingers, before pulling her through the crowd. They maneuver their way around the dancers, some more sloppier than others, across the bar and head straight for the exit.

They find the girls near the entrance. But the sight doesn’t exactly bring any sort of relief to Camila. Whatever anticipation that had been buildings is effectively expunged the moment she sees them.

Normani’s head is bowed, leaning against the brick wall. Ally beside her is in tears.

Normani sighs heavily through her nose, before looking up to meet their eyes. She glances at Camila and almost looks guilty. Which makes Camila feel guilty for even catching it.

Normani’s eyes then flicker to Ally. Her eyebrows knit together softly and she makes a soft noise as
she reaches out to grab Ally’s hand.

“Don’t do that,” Normani mutters. More tears brim in Ally’s eyes and Camila suddenly feels uncomfortable standing before the two of them. “I’m okay.”

Ally had always been the crier of the group. Always the one to blatantly wear her heart on her sleeve. It was very clear whenever things were bothering her. Her face was always open and welcoming.

Camila remembers one time she had burst into tears when she realized that she had accidentally stepped on her dog’s foot. Not that was completely unusual. Camila’s sure she’d probably cry too.

Ally blinks rapidly, trying to brush away the glaze, before clearing her throat. She glances over to Camila and Lauren, finally notice them. She raises her chin stiffly.

“I’m gonna go get the car,” she states. There’s finality to her tone. Camila slowly realizes that Ally’s cutting their night early. Not that she minds. But Ally stares at them almost challengingly, as if waiting for some kind of dissent.

“I’ll go with you,” Lauren volunteers, breaking the strange tension. She shoots Camila an apologetic look. But she understands.

“I’ll wait here,” Camila offers, eyes flickering over to Normani.

Once the pair of them leave, Camila sidles up to Normani. She gives her a once over, studying the pained expression riddling the crease between her eyebrows.

Normani looks shaken.

“Sorry,” Normani mutters, but it’s so low Camila has to crane to hear it. “I didn’t mean to ruin your night.”

“You didn’t.” Camila reassures quickly. She fidgets with her fingers, watching as Normani continues to shake like a leaf. Camila wishes she had a sweater to offer her.

“Are you hurt?” Camila asks finally. Her heart hammers in her chest and it’s a completely different reason that the one in the bathroom stall.

Normani doesn’t answer right away, instead stares at the passing cars.

“I just thought for a moment I saw…” she trails off, but then shakes her head. “The music was just too loud.”

Camila feels her heart sink. She looks up at Dinah and sees the frown forming on her face.

Normani shakes her head again. “Never mind. It’s nothing.”

She doesn’t say anything more, instead slumping against the brick wall. A long sigh falls from her frowning mouth. They stay in relative silence, the only noise coming from the chatter of the club goers walking by.

She brings a hand to her forehead.

And Camila recognizes her face. She knows the deep pull of her eyebrows like the back of her hand. She understands that lost, far off look. Because it’s one that she’s felt at her very core. She’s lived it for the past year, searching for something and coming up empty.
Camila studies Normani, eyes roaming across the tightness in her face. The frown marring her stained lips. The pinched pull of sculpted eyebrows.

Her eyes are closed. And for a moment Camila thinks back to the morning she had caught Normani dancing. The same closed off expression shows itself. An impenetrable glass.

She doesn’t know how long she stares, but it must be for a noticeably long time, because then Normani inhales sharply and glances up at her.

Camila tries to convey her understanding. To mold her face into something of reassurance. But her lips feel too heavy. Her eyes feel too watery. Everything feels too much.

Normani’s eyes narrow as they scour her face. Studying. Taking her in. Camila lets her.

“I’m fine, Camila.”

Camila flushes.

Normani’s face clears over, rapidly turning into a blank slate. It’s so fast Camila thinks she would have missed it had she blinked.

She watches Normani leaned up against the wall. She takes in the dark make-up around her eyes, wondering how much is covering up the bags beneath her eyes. She wonders how many times Normani’s hidden her expression. How she’s developed the art of concealment.

Normani’s words ring in her ears. And Camila can see it. Normani in college. Normani alone in the classroom. Thoughts and feelings bottled away.

It would be admirable if it wasn’t so sad. Camila realizes it hurts. And not in the way she’s been so accustomed.

“Grab her hand,” Dinah instructs.

Her eyes fall to the hand curled up into a tight fist at her side.

The car pulls up, snatching up Camila’s chance. Normani gives her a wistful look before rising and heading towards Ally’s car.

Camila follows, feeling like she’s slowly fall back into herself again. The longing ache deep in the pit of her stomach. The doubt creeps in as she watches Normani hold out the door for her with a sad smile which Camila feels carving into her chest. The out of place sensation hits her, making her feel more and more estranged the more she watches.

It was too good to be true.

She knew the productive feeling could only be short lived.

Everything in her life is so short lived.

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A/N: i’m gonna keep this short bc i’m late af rn.
thank you for reading and still reading and still sticking with me and my inconsistencies.

next chapter is coming soon!!! heres the preview: (x)

come say hi: handle-with-utmost-care.tumblr.com
It’s silent for the majority of the car ride home. The only sound that permeates the quiet atmosphere is the low hum of the engine. Each soft purr matches the slow breathing that falls from Camila’s lips.

Her mouth is sore, still buzzing from the feel of Lauren’s kisses. But she barely registers the sensation, too preoccupied with the way everyone is actively avoiding eye contact.

Lauren doesn’t turn to look at her from the passenger seat, instead she continues to stare out the window. They all seem to follow suit. The occasional flash of street lights hits the sides of their faces each time they pass, exacerbating the somber mood.

Camila feels her heart sink. The inadequacy spills over in her chest, building in the same way the tears threaten to. She didn’t mean for this to happen. She didn’t mean for any of it to happen.

It was supposed to be a good time, a check off her list. It was supposed to be a way for them all to reconnect. To be friends - finally.

Her eyes trace over the small view of Ally through the rear view mirror. There’s an uncharacteristic crease between her brows that feels like a personal offense. Like Camila is the exact cause of its existence.

She should have known. She should have known better.

Guilt wells up inside of her as she then glances at Normani sitting beside her. Her face is turned away, but Camila notices the rigid posture. She sees the way Normani’s hands curl into tight fists in her lap. She can only imagine the nails digging into her palms.

Dinah’s voice echoes in the back of her head at the sight. Take her hand.

But she hesitates. It’s a long and difficult struggle, trying to force her own hands to move. But they don’t. They remain weighted and frozen in her lap.

The shame washes up on her the moment the startling realization hits her. She’s still that person with the unfathomable inability to connect to anyone. Even those who were her friends. Especially those who were her friends.

Who was she kidding? A night out? A good time?

She’s still submerged looking at everything underwater.

Camila blinks rapidly. Her eyes burn, as she tries to force the tears from building.

No.

No. This time - it’s different.

She’s not submerged anymore. She’s just sucked up into the cool tide just to be spat back out again because the sea’s finally realized she doesn’t belong here anymore.
Jettisoned for her helplessness.

Abandoned for her failures.

Rejected by everyone around her.

Camila swallows thickly, feeling the painful lump form deep in her throat. It’s suffocating suddenly - the silence. She hates it more than the negativity stirring inside of her.

*Say something. Anyone.*

It isn’t until Ally asks who she’s dropping off first that prompts noise. Camila releases a long breath she didn’t realize she was holding in. Instead, she focuses on the wavering timber of Ally’s low voice. It’s shaky as she suggests a sleepover.

Judging from the lack of response, Camila figures it’s one of the last things anyone wants. But the more the idea hangs in the air, the more Camila understands that anything is better than going home alone. And she probably isn’t the only one to feel that way.

The realization slightly eases the trepidation looming inside of her. It’s further placated when Lauren comes forward to volunteer her house.

Camila finally turns to stare at the side of Lauren’s face. The expression is pinched, closed. And really, this should be an opportunity for her to decline the sleepover and offer a different solution. But the melancholy is heavy, suppressing any effort that begins to bubble in Camila’s stomach.

When they arrive at Lauren’s house the same cloudy silence befalls them. The porch light is on and Lauren makes a sound of displeasure. But other than that, there isn’t any more signs of objection, and soon the four of them are making their way inside Lauren’s house.

They encounter Clara grading papers on the dining room table. She regards them all curiously and when Lauren gives a snappy explanation, Clara falls back. But those familiar green eyes lock on to Camila, making her freeze in her tracks.

“Remember. Open door,” Clara says.

Lauren simply rolls her eyes at this but doesn’t protest. She guides the girls to her room. Wordlessly, she begins rifling through her boxes, pulling out things for each of them to sleep in. She hands Camila an old softball tee shirt. One that Camila distinctly recognizes because she had been there to help pick out the varsity team’s design. Lauren must not realize what she’s giving her or just doesn’t really care as Camila takes the proffered clothing.

It seems so long ago. The print on the jersey has long faded, leaving behind a chipped reminder of her happier times. Sprawled out across Lauren’s bed, rifling through the different fonts and letter sizes. She remembers thinking about the name *Jauregui,* boldly printed across the back of the tee, hoping one day Lauren would let her wear it. So she could parade it around school as if she belonged to someone.

It was a silly outdated high school fantasy. One that leaves Camila wishing Lauren had offered her
anything else to wear.

They set up their sleeping places robotically before taking turns using the bathroom.

When it’s Camila’s turn, she glances at herself in the mirror. The dress Ally had so graciously paid for is rumpled. She straightens it out a bit, staring at her reflection and feeling an alarming disconnect. She catches the way her hair is disheveled, the lack of lipstick, and the eyeliner Normani had spent so long carefully applying. It still lingers on her face, standing out like a silent beacon. She doesn’t know if that’s supposed to be something significant or that just means that Normani has good taste in eyeliner.

Her gaze falls lower, eyeing the freshly marred skin along her neck skeptically. She knows that’s going to be difficult to hide.

It feels like a distant dream, holed up in that bathroom stall with Lauren. It had been a thrill. Her adrenaline had sky-rocketed in a way she hadn’t been privy to in such a long time. It was as if the whole world was held precariously between them in that fragile moment. How easy it was to break. How effortless it was for it all to tip over.

It was some kind of exhilarating escape that left her dizzy and nearly delirious. It was worrying how easy it was to just forget about her surroundings for a moment.

A moment was more than enough however.

She sighs, feeling a wave of guilt for that short lived moment. She remembers the distressed state they had found their friends in.

How could she even afford that kind of happiness at the expense of others? Even if it was just fleeting?

Camila sighs again, finally pulling the dress off. Feeling dirtier than she normally would. She slips the t-shirt over her head and moves to wash up.

When she returns to the bedroom, she immediately crawls under the blanket of the makeshift bed Lauren’s set up on the floor, leaving a respectable distance between them.

Lauren throws on a movie that they all don’t watch. It just takes up the stillness as they wait for sleep to come. Another silence falls between them, not dissimilar to the one in the car. It’s a discomfiting one that is loud and unnerving despite the lack of sound.

Ally and Normani are the first to drift off in Lauren’s bed.

Camila finds little comfort in the blankets she swaddled in. Her thoughts are running a mile a minute now that she has the time to think.

It was a stupid idea. This whole thing was an entirely stupid idea. The club. The list.

The whole reason for making the stupid list was to convince her parents - everyone - that she was fine. She was okay. She was leading a normal life. And now?

Now it all just seems like she’s taken about five steps back because of it.

What happens when she actually does finish her list? What if that’s really the only reason her friends are all sticking around?
She’s sure they must have realized it already. The truth. That she really isn’t okay. That once this is over they can go back to their lives and pretend this summer never happened.

Why would they even want to remember? Why would they even want to be around her more than they have to?

She’s just a constant walking reminder of -

Camila shifts abruptly, turning on her side, glancing at the girl beside her. Lauren has her back to her so that all Camila sees is her tangled head. There’s so much she feels like she has to say and yet…

Camila finds that she craves that closeness again. Craves the closeness of reaching out for Normani’s hand or meeting Ally’s eye.

Aches for that closeness with the girl laying only a few inches away from her. But it’s different. It lacks any of the heady energy that captivated her in the club. Instead, it manifests itself into a dull pain, simmering deep within her chest.

Turn around, she thinks. Look at me.

But Lauren remains with her back turned. And before Camila can help it her eyes begin to feel heavy and she’s soon drifting off as well.

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It’s a restless sleep. One that has Camila tossing and turning until she finally wakes to find that Lauren is missing.

She sits upright, fishing around the blankets for her phone to check the time.

3:05 AM flashes across the display screen. Along with a number of missed calls and angry text messages from her parents.

Camila winces, before switching the screen off. It was only to be expected. After they had decided they were spending the night, Camila had only given her mother a flimsy text message notifying her of their plans.

She’s half surprised her parents didn’t march right up to the Jauregui’s door and demand to see her.

Camila tosses her phone back into the tangle of blankets before standing up. Her feet drag against the floor, as she slips out of Lauren’s bedroom.

She’s not really sure what possesses her, except perhaps this nagging worry that something’s happened to Lauren. Which, admittedly is stupid, considering they were all safe and sound in their beds moments ago.

Camila almost forgets this whole thing and returns to bed like nothing happened, but a faint noise stops her in her tracks. A voice, that suspiciously sounds like Dinah, chants the list of horror flick villains in her head, that keeps her rooted to the spot. But the fear is short lived because then she sees light spilling into the hallway.

Relief suffuses through her chest once she steps slowly around the corner and finds Lauren. Her eyes
glance towards the glow of the TV screen flickering – the only visible light in the house.

Lauren is slowly approaching a lump propped on the armchair. It takes Camila a moment to realize that that lump is Lauren’s father, passed out, remote dangling precariously in his loose grip. The TV washes over him, casting an eerie glow on his sleeping face and Lauren’s stony expression.

Camila lingers by the doorway, watching as Lauren nears her father’s sleeping figure. She bends down to turn the TV off and reaches for the throw on the couch. She places it over her father, tucking it around his shoulders.

There’s a routine to her movements. To the way she fluffs her father’s pillows and removes his shoes.

When Lauren finally realizes she’s being watched, she steps away from the scene. The darkness that’s encroached upon them from the lack of TV light shrouds them. And suddenly Camila is uncomfortable with the inability to see Lauren’s expression fully.

“I heard noises,” Camila explains, painfully aware of exposed she is. Lauren doesn’t respond, just simply stares. Or what Camila assumes is staring considering she can’t see her face. It’s unnerving, and she wishes she had just stayed in bed.

“He sometimes falls asleep watching TV,” Lauren offers finally. But from the tone of her voice, Camila guesses it’s untrue. The same urge from that night at IHOP what feels like so long ago grips her. She doesn’t know why it feels so imperative that Lauren open up to her.

Lauren doesn’t say anything for a long time, instead she steps forward, into the strip of light cast by the gleam of the moon through the window. Camila almost feels as if she’s really just dreaming, standing here watching Lauren. The moonlight glints off the side of her pale face. It illuminates the lines of her cheekbones, creating a haunted picture. And yet, even with this new vision of her face, Camila can’t read the iron wall.

She wants to approach her. She wants the reassurance and warmth that Lauren provides. And maybe that’s the real reason she outstretches her arm and grabs Lauren’s hand. Her own selfishness. Her own desperate desire for intimacy.

Because Camila’s ability to comfort has failed her.

Lauren looks up the moment Camila interlocks their fingers.

“Come back to bed.”

It doesn’t take much to tug Lauren away from the doorway. It’s no effort really, shuffling in after her beneath the covers.

Lauren’s back is facing her again. An emotional barrier drawn between them, irrevocably closing whatever private moment they shared at the club.

Camila turns on her back and sighs. She stares up at the ceiling with furrowed brows.

Lauren shifts in her position, and Camila knows that she’s facing her. She can’t make out her expression in the darkness, but her eyes glow from the little light peeking in through the window.

She looks – sad. Exhausted. Echoing the same sort of exhaustion Normani and Ally displayed back at the club. It hovers over them, lurking and sinister like rolling rain clouds.
A hand crawls beneath the blanket, finding its way to her own hand. She almost sighs in relief the moment she feels the press of Lauren’s fingertips.

“Can I tell you something?”

It’s faint. Camila almost has to strain to hear it.

“Yeah.”

She can see the struggle in Lauren’s expression now up close. Lips pursed. Eyebrows furrowed. Camila almost has the urge to smooth over the wrinkle between her brows.

“I’m kind of…” Lauren hesitates. “I’m kind of afraid to fall asleep.”

“Because of your weird dreams?” Camila supplies gently. Lauren suddenly looks at her as if she can’t believe she remembered something that minor mentioned in passing.

“Yeah,” Lauren replies in a small voice. And for a moment Camila is back to being six years old sleeping over Lauren’s house, cuddled in her bed and trying to comfort her after a nightmare.

It’s a strong nostalgic feeling that seizes her. That compels her to move forward and try to comfort her. Wrap her arms around her frame. Pull her in close.

But it’s a distant memory that still feels strange, and she hesitates.

“I just thought being back here would – I don’t know – help? It’s probably made things worse,” Lauren mutters. And Camila doesn’t know exactly what she’s talking about. But something deep inside her turns cold. It’s a chill that creeps up like the subtlety of a conversation she avoids.

A topic that she dreads.

A subject that feels like death.

“My parents aren’t making things any easier,” Lauren continues.

“Are your parents getting a divorce?” Camila asks abruptly, desperate to keep the flow of words moving in the right direction.

Lauren blinks rapidly, pulling her hand away from Camila’s.

“What makes you say that?”

Her face flushes immediately, as she tries to back peddle.

“Sorry, I just - I mean it seems like things aren’t the same anymore.” Camila winces.

She expects the iron wall to go back up. But then Lauren sighs, and it seems like everything gets poured out in that small breath.

“Nothing’s the same anymore.”

Camila watches her silently, thoughtfully. Trying to decipher the pull of her eyebrows.

“Do you wanna, like, hug or something?” Camila asks. Lauren blinks, out of her stoicism and looks at her incredulously. A soft giggle pierces through the quiet. The broken spell brings her back down to reality and a warm blush fans across her face. She clears her throat awkwardly, averting her eyes.
“I just meant, like, I don’t know, maybe it’ll help?”

“You just want an excuse to spoon,” Lauren mutters.

“You know I was always a good cuddler.”

Lauren’s face softens at this, and she stares at Camila for a long moment.

“Yeah, you were.”

Camila slowly lifts the blanket as she outstretches her arms. She chalks it up as being extra sensitive after the night they all had. Or maybe she was returning the favor of being comforted. But it comes again, this time so painstakingly natural – the urge to comfort. To wipe the distressed crease between her eyebrows with the pull of an embrace.

But Lauren doesn’t make a move to get any closer. The hesitation leaves a small sting in the middle of her chest. She briefly wonders if this is the kind of rejection Lauren must have felt earlier during a time that felt so long ago. Lauren moves to turn her back to her again.

She’s half a second from lowering her arms back down, but then Lauren shifts, nudging closer until finally falling back into her embrace. Camila’s arms fit around her loosely.

The proximity is reminiscent to the dance floor back at the club. Having Lauren pressed up against her, the smell of her hair so close to her face. But it feels different. The ache settles in her chest, deeply, twisting in a dull way.

Camila lets out a breath she didn’t realize she was holding in.

“This isn’t too weird right?” Camila asks, feeling a small surge of anxiety when Lauren presses further into her.

“I don’t know.” Lauren’s response is muffled.

Her heart pounds heavily. She’s reminded back to the old days. Back in high school when the prolonged touching and cuddling left her heart racing and hands sweaty. Trying so hard to fight down the nerves from being so close to Lauren and suppressing the infatuation.

Her fist unclenches, shakily and she rests them upon Lauren’s hand.

“I’m not usually the little spoon,” Lauren says thickly.

“Um, that’s not what I remember.”

She feels the rumble of Lauren’s quiet laughter against her chest.

“You’re so full of yourself.”

“Yeah but you love it.”

Lauren is quiet for a long moment. And it takes Camila that moment to backtrack and realize what she’s said.

“I’m sorry about tonight,” Lauren finally says. Camila’s grip loosens and she almost pulls away, but Lauren’s hand keeps her in place.

“What are you sorry for?”
“I don’t know. For it being cut early? For our – uh – plans being derailed.”

Camila rolls her eyes.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Camila says slowly. “It wasn’t anyone’s fault. Things…happen.”

She doesn’t know why it feels easy. To talk about this kind of thing. Perhaps it’s because it’s late. Or because it’s dark. Or maybe because she’s not looking Lauren in the eye. That the words come easy to her. That it almost feels like it used to.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

And Camila doesn’t know why that suddenly feels like a loaded question.

“Of course I’m okay. Are you?”

Lauren sighs heavily.

“Yeah.”

Somehow she knows she isn’t. She can feel it deep down in her bones. In the very blood pumping through her veins. But she doesn’t say anything more. Instead she finds herself doing the same thing Lauren has done in the past. She finds her hand and intertwines their fingers. She squeezes tentatively.

Lauren sighs again, softer this time. “Thanks.”

“Like I said, I’m the best cuddler.”

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Camila wakes the next morning to find that she can’t move. She stares up at the ceiling blearily, slowly coming to the realization that this isn’t her ceiling. The glow-in-the dark stars are a dead giveaway.

She tries to sit up but finds the action impossible with the weight of another body on her. Alarmed, she glances down to find Lauren sprawled out across her, face nestled upon her chest, arms keeping her in a snug grip.

She runs through her brain for answers, and they come to her in slow flashes. The club, the dancing, the sleepover, the conversation with Lauren.

Camila is almost convinced that Lauren will wake up any moment, as if sensing that she’s awake, awkwardly lying beneath her, but Lauren’s soft snores continue on. Well past the next twenty minutes. And Camila doesn’t have the heart to move. Not when she plays with the ends of Lauren’s hair, twisting a strand between her fingers.

The nostalgia seeps through the more Camila’s hand cards through Lauren’s hair. It’s not an unfamiliar position to wake up to. They had countless sleepovers in the past. And perhaps that’s the real reason why Camila was so ready to comfort because maybe she too longed for it as well.

The safety of having another warm body so close. The solidness of it. The assuredness of touch. And
what way to make it better than with someone she used to be so intimately familiar with?

But she has to get home. It’s pressing. The urgency settles in the pit of her stomach like a sour belly ache. And with a little effort she wriggles out from beneath Lauren. She leaves the warmth, but not before looking over her shoulder.

Lauren stirs, hand blindly searching for her. Camila suppresses the small flop in her stomach, before turning away to grab her clothes. She gathers her things hastily, tiptoeing around the room, before heading towards the door.

But at the last minute, she thinks better of it. She turns to the window instead, slowly prying the rest of it open. She looks back to scan the room one last time. Ally and Normani are both sleeping soundly. Lauren has curled in on herself, holding the blanket up to her chest.

Her heart twists at the sight, before she finally heaves a short sigh and climbs out of the window.

Camila's hands fumble with the pill bottle on her dresser. She swallows them dry, wincing as they slide down her throat. She nearly jumps when she catches her mother sitting at her computer chair. She clutches her chest as a heavy sigh falls from her lips.

“Mami,” Camila mutters, sinking into the foot of her bed. “What are you doing in my room?”

“Why are you sneaking back into your room?”

“I wasn’t sneaking,” Camila responds stubbornly.

Her mother watches her skeptically. Camila holds her gaze defiantly.

“Where have you been?”

It’s not what she expects and yet, it’s everything she does at the same time. Camila feels the anger prickle, deep in the pit of her stomach. She inhales sharply, trying to reign in the surprisingly overwhelming urge to scream.

“I told you,” she begins evenly, looking away, down at the sandals she stole from Lauren. “I was sleeping over.”

She expects the verbal backlash from her tone. In another world, she would have. Past Camila would have really had her ass handed to her. Her mother was never known for letting her attitude fly. The chancla wasn’t a joke when she was younger. And perhaps it’s reflex when Camila winces internally and is on the verge of apology. But her mom surprises her when she leans back into her chair and sighs softly.

“Mija,” she says gently. In a tone that alarms her immediately. It’s shaky, trembling with each syllable that falls from her mouth. The hairs on Camila’s arm prickle. “I think you should sit down.”

“What is it?”

“We need to talk.”
“About?” Camila presses, feeling suddenly defensive. Her eyes dart back towards the window. She didn’t even shut it properly. If she booked it, she’d probably be able to make it to the window and back to Lauren’s room before anyone woke up.

As if sensing her thoughts, her mother speaks up abruptly. “Please don’t do that.”

Camila’s attention returns to her mother. “Do what?”

“Leave,” she answers simply. “I don’t know where you go.” She points up against her temple. “Up here.”

Camila averts her gaze, shame wells up in her chest. This wasn’t what she intended to walk into. A shame session. She already knows she can’t relate to her mother – people in general -- like she used to. She really doesn’t need the reminder.

“And it kills me,” her mother continues.

Camila’s head snaps up at the sound of her mother’s suddenly watery voice. The tremble in her tone doubles, shattering against her eardrums.

Camila swallows thickly. The atmosphere drops. Whatever frustration had been building up in her system has dispelled faster than it was created.

“I don’t know what I’m doing. I’m failing as a mother and I don’t know how to help you,” she says. And Camila already knows. She can feel the tears from across the room.

It’s different – seeing a parent cry. Feeling so helpless with the sudden role reversal. And in just a moment, Camila feels like she’s seven years old again watching as her mother sobbed after her grandfather died.

Tears begin to prickle, hot and stinging, before she can stop it. They build embarrassingly fast. She wishes she’d stop. She wishes her mom couldn’t see them welling up. She wishes her mom would stop.

She meets her mother’s own bleary eyes.

Camila forces the lump down her throat and pushes herself to hold the stare.

She feels the marks on her neck burn beneath her mother’s heavy gaze.

“I know how much Lauren means to you,” she starts. And it’s not what she expects.

“That’s not…” Her mother holds her hand up.

“Let me finish,” she interrupts softly. “I know how much she means to you. I know that you’re an adult now, mija. But – you’re always going to be my little girl and I’m always going to want to take care of you. This past year has been so difficult. It’s – hard – to watch you hurt. It’s so hard. I feel so helpless. I feel like I’m just doing something wrong here. If there was some way to take your pain I would – for you.” She pauses to wipe her eyes. “I don’t know how to help you and it kills me.”

The words make Camila break the teary gaze. She wipes at her eyes, burning with the lingering residue of her pent up guilt from the night before.

This wasn’t what she wanted to wake up to. This was the last thing she wanted to see. She nearly tells her mom to stop.
But the sound of her voice again makes the demand die in Camila’s throat.

“I want to protect you from the world,” her mother continues solemnly. “And it’s just been so cruel to you no matter how hard I try.”

There’s a long, fragile pause. One that grips Camila in a deathly silence. She’s holding her breath, holding herself back from tipping over the edge of a precipice.

And Camila realizes it as she studies the way her mother bows her head. The way she refuses to meet her eyes. It’s the familiar shame Camila, herself, had become so accustomed to. But somehow, seeing it from the outside, makes her feel ten times worse.

Her heart aches. An unbearable longing fills her chest. A desire to comfort holds her captive. The very same kind of pull that prompted her to comfort Lauren, except now she’s at a loss of what to do. Back to square one. What can she even say?

Camila thinks of her mother encircling her in a soft embrace whenever she’s fallen or hurt herself as a child. She thinks of the warm words of ‘sana sana colita de rana’. And suddenly she thinks of Sofi next.

Sofi, who’s had to begin to endure these pains of life on her own.

Camila blinks back the hot tears forming again, feeling the sting behind her eyes. She swallows thickly, before clearing her throat.

“You can’t,” she finally says as evenly as she possibly can. “You can’t help me, Mamí. Not with this.”

Immediately, her mom raises her head to look up at her with uncertainty.

“And I think that’s okay,” Camila continues, her voice coming out more firmly. “It’s okay. It’s okay.”

She feels a sense of release as she breathes out the words. As if it’s some kind of invisible source falling upon her mother’s frame. And she can see it – the immediate relief affect her mom.

Her mother stares at her with watery eyes. There’s desperation in her expression that breaks her heart. And for a brief moment Camila thinks she may understand a fraction of what her mom had been talking about.

It’s not her burden to bear. No matter how much she wants it to. No matter how much it pains her.

Before she can say anything more she feels a deep vibrating in her pocket. She reaches down to pull her phone out and catches Lauren’s name flash up on the screen.

Lauren: Where’d you go?

Camila feels a small surge of warmth bloom deep in her chest. She fights the growing smile as she types out her response and tries to ignore Dinah’s knowing glance.

She looks up to find her mother staring at her almost critically. She already anticipates the questions. She expects the lecturing. But then her mother does something uncharacteristic: she offers a tentative smile.

“Lauren?”
Camila blanches at the knowing expression. “Uh, yeah actually.”

“If being with Lauren is making you happy, you know that I would support you,” she implores. Camila feels her stomach churn at the thought. Something inside of her twists and she knows it has nothing to do with the expression on her mother’s face.

She contemplates answering but hesitates when she glances back at her mom.

“Go ahead,” she says. “Go be with your friends.”

“Mami,” Camila begins.

“Go.”

Camila shoves the phone back in her pocket and runs to hug her.

She wipes at her eyes as she walks the rest of the way back to the Jauregui household.

“Well that was sweet,” Dinah teases as she matches Camila’s footsteps.

Camila blows out an exasperated shaky breath.

“Please don’t tell me you were there the whole time to hear everything.”

“And see everything?” Dinah adds brightly.

Camila groans in embarrassment, bringing a hand to cover her face. But Dinah’s smile doesn’t falter, if anything it softens.

“I mean it. It was sweet. It’s nice to see you talking to your mom again,” Dinah continues. “She really cares about you.”

Camila feels something lighten in her chest. Like something heavy she’d been carrying around all day.

“I know.”

“And she’s super understanding. Can’t say the same about my mom. She’d probably beat my ass from here to China if I yelled at her like you did.”

“Okay, Dinah.”

There’s a bit of apprehension as she comes up to the front door. She doesn’t quite know what to expect when she crosses the threshold.

More avoidance? Awkwardness.

But a slow sigh of relief falls when she’s greeted happily by the three, and that something light only flourishes deep within her belly.

Lauren meets her eyes, and for the first time in a while, Camila feels like she understands. She
recognizes the intimacy, keeping them in their own little bubble. They all decide to keep things low key. The club may have been too much too soon. No one makes any mention of their night. Any trace of upset among them is not apparent.

“What should we do today?” Camila asks. It surprises her that she’s the first to ask, and if the others are just as surprised they don’t show it. Which she’s thankful for.

“Well we can stay here,” Ally suggests.

And then an impromptu movie day is created. It’s nice. It kind of reminds her of the old days. The spontaneity at least.

Clara is gone for the day, and all evidence of Mike sleeping on the couch is gone by the time they set up in the living room. Which Camila finds slightly relieving.

Normani smiles at her softly when she takes a seat beside her.

Ally looks around for her “diaper bag”, and once she finds it she proceeds to rifle through it.

“So I brought something that might make things interesting,” she says, pulling out saran wrapped brownies. Lauren quite literally cheers which makes them all kind of look at her pointedly.

“Is there really a difference?” Camila asks inspecting the brownie. She brings it to her mouth, but Ally quickly snatches it out of her hand.

“I’d start with half for now,” Ally warns, before splitting the brownie. She hands them each a piece. She catches Lauren eye and a small giggle falls out before she eats it.

“Alright,” Ally says, clapping her hands together. “Camila and I are going to make something before this starts to kick in.”

“We are?”

“Yes,” Ally laughs.

“Please don’t burn down my kitchen,” Lauren says, directly towards Camila.

She feels her face flush, on the verge of a counterargument, but Ally gently pushes her into the kitchen.

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They spend a good twenty minutes looking through the Jauregui’s kitchen cabinets and fridge.

Camila digs through the different spices, pulling out some ingredients with a questionable expiration date, on the counter.

“I don’t know how long they’ve had this,” Camila says, eyeing the package of flour skeptically.

Ally sifts through the ingredients thoughtfully.
“I think we’ll be fine. As long as it doesn’t smell weird. Rancid flour starts to smell like play dough.”

After finding half a bag of peanut butter chips, she declares that they’re going to make cookies. Which seems like a bit of a stretch with how few ingredients they’ve collected.

But Ally is resolute, pulling the trays out from the oven before preheating it.

Camila toys with the bag of flour, letting the powdery texture sprinkle down her hand. There’s a wistful affection at the feeling of the flour suddenly spread beneath her fingernails. Caked across her palms as she rips apart the package. She brings her hand up to her nose, taking a quick sniff. She gives Ally a thumbs up, before handing it off to her.

She’s done this a million times. Stood in this very kitchen, opening packages of flour for Ally. It’s almost reminiscent of the times they all spent in the kitchen, watching Ally create something out of nothing. Camila remembers the days Dinah would start impromptu food fights. The days Lauren would help Ally bake batches of cupcakes after a bad break up. The days Camila and Normani were left to their own devices to create their concoctions. Only to have Ally watch in horror as they force fed each other something completely inedible, just to fix said dish in to some kind of five course meal.

Ally was sort of like magic in that way. She had this ability to make something out of nothing. It was the epitome of sunshine and rainbows and it used to quite literally light up everything within its axis.

If Dinah was the sea, then Ally was the sun.

“Sometimes I feel like she’s some kind of windup toy,” Dinah comments amusedly, as she presses her hip against the kitchen table.

Camila holds in the smile.

“But you know, those toys don’t stay that way forever,” Dinah continues, inspecting her nails. Camila’s lips fall into a frown as she turns to look at her. Dinah doesn’t meet her eye, instead tilting her head in Ally’s direction.

She’s telling Camila something about some intricate galaxy cookie recipe she picked up in college. But Camila’s attention begins to waver the more Ally goes on about getting the glaze perfectly sweet. And perhaps that’s really what’s unnerving.

Everything is sweet. Too perfectly sweet.

There’s a divide now, so blatant that Camila steps back away from the scene to lean against the counter for support.

Ally’s rambling isn’t so amusing anymore. The topic isn’t distracting enough. The smell of flour isn’t as soothing. Discomfort slowly spreads the more she listens to Ally rattling off. There’s a fragility behind the smile she can sense it. As if one wrong move could let the grin crumble away.

She’s reminded of Normani’s stoicism. She’s reminded of Lauren’s indecipherable expressions. It’s all the same. Except Ally’s isn’t as direct. It’s more deceptive in its existence. The wide spread grin serving as an overt distraction to the real suffering beneath it all.

But Camila doesn’t say anything. She lets Ally ramble away. Because despite the apprehension rising in her chest, there’s something almost relieving having the space filled with Ally’s chatter. With not having to make the effort to converse. As if Ally already knows this about her.
And maybe she does.

And Camila forgets that she’s not the only one with eyes.

Her thoughts drift towards last night. Admittedly she had been too preoccupied with the fact that she couldn’t comfort Normani that she had completely neglected Ally.

What did Ally even think about all of this? Was she even okay? Does she - does she think about - Camila inhales sharply, making a snap decision.

“How did you get into the business?”

The abrupt question makes Ally jump, almost as if she’d forgotten Camila was there. But she sobers quickly, offering a gentle smile.

“It wasn’t always like this. You know if you’d asked me back in high school where I saw my life turning out it would not have been this.” Ally chuckles humorlessly.

She’s solemn for a moment.

“It’s crazy! I mean I knew next to nothing about it. I just googled videos. It’s actually a bit concerning how easy it is to find out how to prepare weed for baking. It’s really in the oil,” she says. “Or butter. I prefer butter but, well, desperate times.”

“She acts as if we’re in a cannabutter crisis,” Dinah murmurs.

“Once you have all that prepared, the rest is a piece of cake. Which coincidentally I did have a special order for someone’s birthday. Chocolate cake,” Ally finishes on a serious note.

“A weed birthday cake?”

“I didn’t say it was completely rational.”

Completely rational. Yeah, Camila gets that.

She watches Ally for a long moment, observing how she pours the ingredients into the bowl without measuring. There’s a natural fluidity to her movements. One that leaves Camila so envious of her assuredness.

Ally was always so sure about everything. Someone so self knowledgeable, the confidence oozed out of her presence. There was a reason everyone kind of liked Ally at school. She was a radiant personality that had you feeling so good about yourself after spending a few minutes around her.

“I guess the question I really meant was – why?”

Ally pauses in her stirring. Camila almost backtracks, silently scolding herself for bringing up a touchy nerve.

Ally sighs, setting the spoon down.

“At first it was about the money,” she says softly. “My mom – well she kind of got worse. To the point that she needed surgery. I started off trying to do a bit of baking on the side but it’s not like very many people are willing to buy cookies from the girl down the hall. At least… not regular cookies.
“My roommate at the time was dealing and she was the one that had given me the idea. After one of her nights out testing the product,” Ally rolls her eyes at this. “She bought a whole tray of my snickerdoodles.”

Camila continues to stare, half amazed with the story and half bewildered by the fact that Ally was so ready to open up. But that was the thing about Ally, she was so willing to offer anything and everything. Even the personal information.

The origins of her weed dealing isn’t really an exception.

“And now I guess… I just needed something to do.” She shrugs her shoulders half heartedly. “Keep my mind off of things. Keep busy. Every time I even have a moment to relax it all just comes back to…” She stops suddenly. The atmosphere turns thick as Ally’s mood drops.

Camila feels her chest twist at the expression on her face. And she already knows where the conversation was alluding to. Her eyes drift towards Dinah’s somber face.

“I thought it was easier to get lost in the business instead of having to deal with everything else,” Ally heistates. Her eyes remain glued to the mixing bowl, as if searching for some kind of unknown answer. Camila likes to think she knows the feeling.

“I mean things aren’t terrible,” Ally concedes, snapping her attention up to Camila. An uncertain smile trembles across her lips.

“Things aren’t exactly fabulous either. It’s hard to remember when you have so much going on. It’s like…” she pauses, frowning. “It’s like having cake without the sugar. I mean there’s like different kinds of sweeteners. Splenda. Stevia. And – like – they work. They do the job but it’s not quite the same, is it?”

The words echo against her chest. Drumming to the beat of her anxious heart. Ally smiles. But it’s not quite the same either. It’s everything Camila feels. Everything that’s kept her watching old videos on her computer every night. It’s all of the unproductive therapy sessions that’s left her wracked with guilt. It’s the way she aches for a friendship she feels she doesn’t deserve.

Camila swallows down the lump thats formed in the back of her throat. She releases the edge of the counter, not realizing how tightly she’s been grasping it. Her eyes travel down to the spoon in Ally’s hand. Her knuckles are white with strain, clutching on to the wooden handle as if her life depended on it. Camila feels the throb in her own hands.

And maybe that’s what prompts her into action. What compels her to move forward. What urges her for that gratifying release.

“Ally, let me help with this.”

Camila reaches for the spoon and at that exact moment, Ally lifts her hand. It slips out of her grasp and flies across the kitchen, leaving a doughy trail after it.

Camila stammers, sputtering on the spot as she tries to pick up the fallen utensil. But it’s slick with cookie dough and it slips through her hand again. It takes a mortifyingly long time of fighting with the spoon, before she properly grabs it again.

There’s a very long, awkward pause as they both try to comprehend what just happened. After what feels like an unbearable amount of time, Camila gingerly holds out the spoon.
Ally looks down at the spoon, the dough on her fingers and then finally at Camila for a moment, before breaking out into tears. Her shoulders shake, as another round of tears come out, and Camila blanches.

“I’m so sorry,” Ally cries. “This wasn’t supposed to happen. It’s just – I missed you so much. I feel really terrible about all of this and where we’re at now. But seeing you turn into an awkward mess kind of makes me feel a little bit better but still sad. I don’t know. It’s all so confusing to be honest.”

When Camila doesn’t respond, Ally flushes again.

“Oh gosh I’m so sorry if that was TMI, my therapist says that I should verbalize what my feelings are so I can correctly identify them,” Ally mutters distractedly.

At the mention of therapist, Camila feels something inside her slowly melt. Something she only vaguely recognizes as familiar. Warmth trickles through her veins the more she listens to Ally’s voice. She almost feels like saying I have a therapist too. She nearly does.

But she refrains from doing so. Instead, she watches her quietly. Taking in the weepy eyes and a nose that has turned a bright, shiny red. Ally’s wiping her face with her apron, not realizing she’s spreading flour across her cheeks. But when she looks up at Camila, a pleasant grin forms.

Whatever melted is completely thawed at this point. A wave of affection hits her at the sweet smile across Ally’s tearstained face.

Maybe it isn’t sugar sweet anymore. But whatever it is now, it’s definitely an acceptable alternative.

“Thank you for listening.”

Before Camila can give any kind of response, Ally grabs the spoon from her hand, washes it quickly, and resumes her stirring.

Camila blinks, feeling a bit of whiplash at the sudden action. She glances at Dinah beside her. Dinah who had been so unusually quiet throughout the entire exchange and is still rather quiet. There’s a small smirk dancing across her face. She wriggles her eyebrows suggestively, and Camila understands immediately.

She inhales sharply, before reaching out and placing a hand over Ally’s.

“Let me help,” Camila says again.

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When they return to the living room, Normani studies them critically, glancing at Ally before looking at Camila inquisitively.

Camila catches Lauren also looking at them curiously.

But no one makes a comment on their entrance or if Ally is still puffy eyed. Instead, Ally squeals at the title selection.

Camila plops down beside Lauren on the other end of the couch. Almost immediately, Lauren accommodates her sudden presence, angling her body closer.
Camila blinks at the closeness, heart thumping faster at the feel of Lauren’s arm pressed against hers. She tries not to ogle so much, trying not to scare her off. Perhaps this was a direct result of last night, an intimate line that was clearly crossed the moment Camila decided to follow Lauren.

Or maybe Lauren’s just already high, Camila thinks flatly.

Either way, Camila leans back against the cushion and watches as the opening credits of Breakfast at Tiffany’s rolls on the screen.

“Of course,” she mutters, not realizing how loud she is. The other’s snicker, while Lauren stretches her arm up, to flick her on the side of the head.

“Hey, shut up.”

Camila is on the verge of a retort, but stops short when Lauren, instead of returning to her original position, leaves her arm resting against the back of the couch. Directly behind her. Something flops in the pit of Camila’s stomach and for the second time she’s brought back to the night being spent in Lauren’s arms.

Her eyes flicker to the other girls. They don’t seem to notice, however she catches Dinah’s smirk from over Normani’s head.

She plays with Camila’s hair, throughout the movie. It’s distracting enough that she senses it through her foggy head.

She suspects the weed makes her even more of a touchy-feely person. But it’s fine. It’s almost pathetic how much Camila submits under her ministrations. Acting more like a touch starved cat than anything. It wouldn’t be so far fetched if she sprouted a tail and started purring.

“I forgot how racist this movie was,” Camila murmurs, trying to focus on the screen before her. Lauren groans.

“I don’t remember it being this bad.” Lauren’s nails rake through her hair, hitting particular sensitive spot.

“This was before you were like, uh, enlightened.” Camila clears her throat abruptly, feeling her face burn.

She’s not sure if she’s turned on or ready for a nap. It’s only slightly embarrassing that she’s unsure of the two. What’s more embarrassing is the fact that Ally and Normani are literally right next to them.

If Ally and Normani notice they don’t say anything.

Thank god, Camila thinks.

Dinah on the other hand has a lot to say. Ranging from the most absurd teasing remarks to the rather obscene gestures.

Camila ignores them, settling comfortably against the couch.

Her attention scatters the more Lauren touches her. She focuses in on the way Lauren’s fingernails scratch lightly through her hair, gently tugging through the tangle.

It’s about thirty minutes into the movie before she realizes she’s high. Like properly high. The kind
that makes her feel as if five hours have flown by when it’s only just been a minute. Her eyes search
the room for Lauren and she finds a similar awareness.

Her eyes are a vivid green, a brighter contrast against her pale skin than Camila is normally aware of.
As if she put on some HD glasses that suddenly turned her surroundings into a 1080p video. She
snorts at the stupid thought.

When Lauren catches her staring and half laughing, they share a knowing glance before they both
burst into a fit of giggles.

The movie continues on, with Camila only half paying attention. One minute Audrey Hepburn is
dodging her landlord and the next she’s sat on the windowsill of her apartment singing the opening
lines of “Moon River”.

Camila peers around to find Ally fully concentrated, looking more like she’s trying to solve a
complex math equation than watching a movie. Normani is slumped against the couch, chin firmly
tucked against her chest. Her head must feel heavy, Camila thinks, and suddenly her head begins to
feel too heavy to hold up.

Her face prickles with heat before she realizes it. Her cheeks feel heavy with a weight she’s confused
about. Her eyes feel incredibly droopy and with the slow horror she recognizes the fact that it’s
because her eyes are dry. She laughs to herself at the thought.

“What’s so funny?” Lauren’s voice breaks through her fuzzy chuckle.

“It’s heavy but kind of floaty at the same time,” Camila responds. When Lauren still doesn’t
understand, Camila points to her head. Lauren snorts.

“Watch the movie, you dork.”

But Camila finds it increasingly difficult to do just that. She keeps getting distracted. While Camila’s
attention span goes haywire as do Lauren’s hands. As if they agree with her mind.

It’s sort of reminiscent to the time she spent at Lauren’s friend’s house except the touches are more
languid. As relaxed as the sleepy high that has befallen the group. At some point between Ally’s
cookie runs, Lauren’s head ends up on her shoulder, forehead pressed against her neck.

She hears Lauren sigh gently, before she feels the soft vibration of her voice hum out the notes of the
song. Camila swallows thickly, hyper aware of the breathy words beating against her collarbone.

The heaviness creeps upon her again slowly, suffusing throughout the rest of her body like weighted
clouds on the streets of a foggy morning. The more time ticks by the less she begins to pay attention
to the television screen in front of them or even the fresh cookies Ally brings out of the oven. Instead,
all her lethargic focus seems pressed upon the feel of Lauren’s fingertips tracing her forearm. The
touch is warm, soft, soothing, creating gentle ripples of heat down the length of her arm. It crawls up
to her shoulder, diving below her collar bones and pools at her belly.

Lava, she thinks dimly.

Lauren’s hand slides down her arm, fingers encircling her wrist loosely. She feels the gentle pad of
fingertips against her wrist. There’s a slight pressure that is wholly distracting and altogether
frustrating.

Camila squirms in her seat, and peeks at her through the corner of her eye.
It continues this way for the duration of the movie. Eventually Lauren pulls away, near the ending, though her hand remains firmly planted along Camila’s palm.

She absently watches as the scene on the screen unfolds. Audrey Hepburn is looking for her cat, it’s raining, the music is swelling and eventually it ends in a passionate kiss.

Camila watches Lauren. She watches as tears well up in her green eyes and it’s so silly. Because Camila’s sure they’ve all watched this movie hundreds of times. Yet each time, Lauren becomes so invested in the closing sequence.

Everything around her is constantly changing, and yet absolutely nothing has changed at the same time.

There’s a gentle tug, pulling her forward into this sense of familiarity. It’s warm and entirely all-encompassing - this feeling - pulsing through her veins. It begins languidly, spreading exactly like the same trickling lava she felt just moments ago. Filling her up to the brink that the moment everything spills over, she fears she’ll do something stupid.

Like kiss her or call her beautiful.

And she can’t help it. Now all she can think about now is kissing Lauren.

The end credits roll in before she can do anything impulsive. Ally lets out a cheer and claps her hands. Normani simply yawns and offers a lazy smile. But it’s enough of a reaction for Camila to stand up abruptly. The sudden movement jerks Lauren away and she stares up at Camila, confused.

“Do you have any popcorn?” Camila stammers. She glances around the room, watching briefly as Dinah holds in a snort. There’s a delayed reaction from everyone. One that would probably make Camila laugh, if she wasn’t feeling overwhelmed.

“Come on,” Lauren finally says, rising from her seat. She turns to the other two, who haven’t really moved since the movie started. “You guys pick the next one.” She tosses the remote to Ally.

Camila follows Lauren into the kitchen, feeling like she has two left feet. She watches numbly as Lauren digs through her cabinets to pull out a box of Oroville Redenbacher. The crinkle of the package is the only noise between them, filling up the empty kitchen. She focuses on the sound, distracting from the heavy drum of her heart.

Lauren sets the microwave up and soon the kitchen is filled with popping sounds. She leans back against the counter, watching Camila steadily.

“You good?”

“Hm?” Camila pulls away from the slow spins of the popcorn bag. “Yeah of course. Are you good?”

“Yeah.”

“You were crying.”

Lauren’s expression immediately narrows. “I was not.” Camila raises her eyebrows and Lauren promptly flushes. “I was not.”

It’s petulant and stupid and it just makes all of the pent up affection overflow within her.

Impulsively, Camila moves forward and pecks her on the cheek. Of course it catches her completely
off guard, pulling her away from the bag spinning in the microwave. She turns to look at Camila with wide green eyes and brings a hand to touch the spot on her face.

*Well that was stupid.*

Camila flushes. Whatever feeling had swelled up in her chest, immediately fizzles out into a bundle of nerves. She clears her throat and averts her eyes, distinctly aware of Lauren’s eyes on her.

Until finally she can’t handle the flustered feeling. She whips her head around abruptly, two seconds away from demanding that Lauren not stare, but the words are lost. Before she even gets the chance, Lauren closes the distance between them, muffling her voice with soft lips.

She panics at first, suddenly very aware of the girls in the next room. But then Lauren disconnects their hands and brings palms to cup her cheek. A calmness settles upon Camila at the touch and she falls into the kiss eagerly.

It’s startling how much she’s craved this. It’s even more startling how she doesn’t realize it until the moment their lips touch. Lauren’s mouth is soft and pliant, moving without any urgency, but it captivates her. Grounding her to the moment with every tentative part of her lips.

Camila sighs against her mouth, feeling the slow pull of a smile form.

It all feels so much like a first kiss that for a moment Camila forgets that it isn’t. For a moment she can just imagine that they’re back in high school. Back when she was that fifteen year old doofus hopelessly in love with her best friend.

She would’ve told her how beautiful she was. She would’ve told Lauren how she felt. She would’ve kissed her in the Jauregui’s kitchen with hope in her chest and the smell of popcorn and cookies in the air.

The fog from earlier fades, as Camila’s hands come to tangle in Lauren’s hair, gently raking through the strands in a similar.

Lauren pulls away first and Camila blinks blearily back into place. She feels so incredibly soft and dazed. A part of her wonders if this is still the weed. If it’s still the drugs that’s making her feel weightless. She almost has a mind to ask, but then they’re kissing again and Camila draws a blank.

She’s too caught up in the kiss to really register the sound of the kitchen door squeaking open. Or maybe she does hear it, but the very small part of her brain that hasn’t been reduced to mush simply does not care.

She hasn’t exactly decided.

“Guys, I think the popcorn is burning- *oh my gosh!*”

Camila recognizes Ally’s shrill voice, before turning to look up at her. She blinks again, trying to regain her composure.

(Shes leaning more towards not caring.

Considering she should’ve realized Ally was dipping into the kitchen every half hour to check on her cookies.

Because that was like - uh- a *thing*).
Ally gapes at them and Camila realizes that she and Lauren are still very firmly entangled in each other’s space. Slowly, she removes her hands and pulls away until she’s leaning against the counter again. It doesn’t really help much because it seems as if Lauren has lost all function of her limbs and just follows her movement.

Behind Ally, she can see Normani peering at them from over the back of the couch. There is an identical wide-eyed look on her face that just makes the situation all the more ridiculous. Camila almost feels like laughing. But Ally beats her to it, surprising them all when an overexcited giggle falls from her lips.

“Oh my gosh! You guys,” she squeals.

“Wait,” Camila begins, sobering up.

“I can’t believe it! I mean I can, but gosh, I thought it was going to be another few agonizing years before this happened!” Ally claps her hands together. Normani looks a little embarrassed but amused. “That will they, won’t they phase was torture in high school, wasn’t it Mani?”

“Absolute torture,” Normani confirms with a wince.

“Hold on-”

“And then having to constantly go back and forth between the two of you when you guys weren’t talking. I can’t tell you how stressed out we were,” Ally continues.

Normani flashes them a pointed look, but nods her head in agreement. Lauren has the decency to flush.

“We’re not -”

“-Can I just say? I’ve been waiting since, like, the seventh grade for you guys to get together,” Ally bursts out. “Right, Mani?”

“More like the sixth grade,” Normani admits with a shrug.

“You guys..” Lauren tries again.

“I know it seems silly but it’s just - it’s really nice that at least something went right -”

“-We’re just friends,” Camila blurts out.

Ally looks between them, confused. Camila holds in a small chuckle at the perplexed expression.

“But you guys were…” she trails off with uncertainty, gesturing between the both of them. “And the hickies?”

Camila promptly slaps a hand over her collarbone. “Uh, I ran into the bathroom cabinet last night.”

Ally looks at her in disbelief, mouth opening and closing repeatedly. It’s almost as if Camila can see the cogs gradually turning in her head. She’s not sure if that’s a good thing because suddenly Ally looks horrified.

She blinks rapidly, slowly backing away.

“I’m just gonna…” she gestures over her shoulder, failing to come up with a proper excuse before she’s turning on her heel and darting out of the kitchen.
Camila drops her head on Lauren’s shoulder, letting out a low sigh.

“Well that could have gone worse.”

“How?”

“She could’ve had us all sit in a circle and talk about our feelings.”

Camila snorts, lifting her head. It’s at this moment she remembers the close proximity and immediately puts a safer distance between them.

“What do we tell them?”

“The truth?” Lauren suggests. “that you’re just using me for my body.”

Camilaflushes. “What? No I’m not.”

“I’m kidding.” Lauren leans back against the counter. It gives Camila a better look at the calm expression on her pretty face. That small tug in her chest pulls at her. Aching dully. The one that makes her want to hide the slow smile that’s forming on her lips.

“I think they’ve already figured out exactly what’s going on if you ask me,” Camila says.

“You’re okay with that?”

“The real question here is whether or not you’ve ruined Ally’s plans for your wedding,” Dinah interjects mockingly.

Camila scoffs. “Are you okay with that?”

Lauren simply laughs in response. It gives her a moment to just stare again. To appreciate the way her laughter peters out into a soft sigh.

She feels the smirk grow on her face before she can stop it.

“I’ll survive.”

The energy between feels charged with residual effects from the kiss. Camila’s eyes dart down towards her mouth. More distractions. She clears her throat, before glancing up. Lauren catches the small action. Perhaps it’s the fact that the high is slowly fading or that it’s just been minutes after she’d been well acquainted with those lips that Camila doesn’t flush.

She’s not worried. And it’s such a refreshing new feeling surging through her chest. Liberating, even. Not to have the familiar stress and anxiety coursing through her veins. For once, she lets all her reservations go, as she settles against the counter, matching Lauren’s posture.

It’s the first time in a long time, she doesn’t feel the worry. Doesn’t care about the thoughts of others regarding her tentative friendship with Lauren.

For the first time in a long time she feels herself just - be.

And that’s enough for her.
A/N: it was so hard to get back into writing. it took around a year, on and off, to write it. i’m soooo rusty and clumsy with my words it’s a bit disappointing right now, but i figure this is just a hurdle i have to get over. practice makes perfect or some shit. i know a lot of you constantly wonder whether or not this fic is discontinued or on hiatus or whatever. look, unless i say otherwise, i plan to finish this fanfic. so there’s that lol.
anyway, things are probably gonna get a bit spicy next chapter. have fun!

i wasn't sure if i should include all of my previous A/N’s...so i didn't. i'm probably sparing readers/rereaders from that cringefest.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!