With a Little Help (From My Friends)

by Elisacollette

Summary

After years of avoiding what was right in front of them, a friend's tragedy brings Beca and Chloe together. Can they move beyond preconceived perceptions and past anxieties to transition from friends to something more? Bechloe; Mother/Daughter type relationship between Beca and Emily. In chronological order, this will be the first in the "Beautiful Tree" series.
When I wrote Beautiful Tree and the two smaller stories that go in the same universe, I knew much of the backstory that makes up this piece. This is the story about how, in the universe I have created, Beca and Chloe become a family. Please do let me know what you think.

Chapter 1 - We Find Out

"We find out what we're made of when we are called to help our friends in need."

~Bruno Mars – Count on Me

Beca sighed as she finally arrived home after a very long, very tiring twelve-hour day. She had just finished her first full month working for DJ Khaled’s label. Although she would eventually need to move, she was beginning her work in the New York office. She was loving every minute of it, but it was exhausting to do something you were intensely passionate about. It was just after nine, so Chloe was home and sitting at the kitchen table, working on assignments for her first vet school semester. It was an extremely difficult set of courses – Beca didn’t want to know the anatomy of one animal, let alone all of them (or most of them). Chloe was doing well, but she was working for it. Beca barely saw her anymore without her nose in a book.

The brunette set her bag down and hung her coat next to the door before walking a few feet into the kitchen to pour herself a cup of tea from the pot still steaming in front of her friend.

"Hey," Chloe said absently.

"Hey, Chlo. How was your day?"

Chloe grinned. "Great. I got an A on my anatomy test – and a B on the paper in equine science."

"That's awesome," Beca answered with a bright smile. She sank gratefully into a chair across from the redhead and enjoyed the fragrant heat of the tea. It also warmed her hands, which she appreciated immensely. She was tired of winter – spring was right around the corner, but Beca wanted it to arrive faster. Having spent four years in Georgia before coming up north, she was not yet accustomed to New York winters. She didn't think she ever would be.

"How was your day?"

"Exhausting," Beca admitted. "I signed a new artist this morning – which was awesome. Then I spent eight hours working on my album – and I came to the realization that I suck – and I can't do this." Although she knew she was pandering, she really did need Chloe's reassurance after the day she'd had.

"Oh, Bec. You know how amazing you are. It's one bad day. Tomorrow will be better. And once that album drops – everyone will know what Barden University and the Acapella world already knows – that Beca Mitchell is amazing and talented – and incredibly hot."

Beca blushed deeply. "Too far on the pep talk, Chlo." Chloe laughed and winked at her.
"Seriously, Beca. You'll be amazing."

"Thank you," she said. "I needed to hear that." Before their conversation could continue, Beca's phone rang. She saw that it was Emily and showed the display to Chloe, who nodded that she should take it.

"Hey, Em," Beca said. At that exact moment, Amy came banging in the door, yelling at the top of her lungs.

"I've been robbed! I've been robbed! What a terrible, terrible city. It's like – "

Beca put a finger against her left ear to block the sound and moved as far away as possible in the tiny studio before she spoke again. "Em, you there? Sorry, Amy is being a drama queen."

"It's okay," Emily said, her voice sounding small and far off. "Do you need to go?"

"No," Beca said. "Amy can calm the hell down," she said, raising her voice so the Australian could hear her.

"Have some compassion, Beca!" Amy yelled. "I was robbed!" Beca heard her continue complaining – loudly, to Chloe – but she closed her eyes and continued holding her ear.

"She's ridiculous," Beca muttered. "What's up, Em?" There was a heavy silence on the line. "Em, still there?"

"Yeah," she said, almost whispering. Beca strained to hear.

"Emily, what's wrong?" Her heart began to race. This was odd. Emily was usually more cheerful than even Chloe. She had bad days, but even then she was optimistic about the next day – or even just the next hour.

"My mom died. She had an aneurysm," the younger woman said, spitting out the words before she could stop herself again. Beca could still hear Amy carrying on, which was distracting her from this devastating news.

"Oh God. Emily, I'm so sorry. Oh, sweetheart – " Beca was cut off by Amy's ranting. "One second," she said calmly to Emily. She muted the phone and turned to face Amy. "Amy, for God's sake – shut the fuck up, now!" Amy was silent as she and Chloe turned wide eyes to Beca. Her tone was not teasing, not in the slightest. She ignored their looks of confusion, and the slight bit of hurt feelings in Amy's expression, and sat down at the table, her hand over her mouth as she gathered herself. "Emily, honey, are you still there?"

Chloe knew something was wrong when she heard the term of endearment. Beca didn't use them often; she only pulled them out for certain people, in certain times. The redhead returned to her seat at the table and watched her best friend on the phone. She wanted to interrupt, to ask questions, but she could see how agitated Beca was and considered it a bad idea in the moment. Even Amy seemed to understand the tense change in atmosphere. She did not make any noise as she went about fixing herself what she occasionally termed "second dinner."

"When did it happen?" Beca asked. She listened as Emily sobbed on the other line. She waited patiently and finally received an answer.

"This afternoon. She was at work. She just fell over at her desk," Emily cried.

"Who called you?"
"Someone from the hospital. I'm the only family she had left. I don't know what to do," she admitted, breaking again into sobs.

"Em, you're going to get through this. I can't even imagine how you feel right now – but you're going to be okay."

"How?"

"We'll figure it out," Beca promised. "Who is with you right now?"

"No one," Emily said, sniffing.

"Do any of the Bellas know?"

"Yes."

"Are any of them home?"

"Yes."

"Is Hannah home?"

"I think so," she said weakly. Beca bit her lip. She knew Emily wasn't trying to be dense, but she was succeeding.

"Can you find her for me? I'd like to talk to her," Beca instructed. Emily whimpered and Beca almost told her to wait – but she needed to get a handle on the situation. That meant speaking to someone who could see Emily. It took just a moment before another voice came on the line.

"Hello?"

"Who is this?"

"Who is this?" The girl demanded.

"Beca Mitchell," Beca responded coolly.

"Oh, Ms. Mitchell. I'm sorry."

"Do not call me that," she said, sharply. She had helped Emily, each year since she'd graduated, with the set in some way. For two of those years, she'd actually made it back to Georgia to help with the last rehearsals before Nationals, so she knew most of the girls. They were mostly in awe – and slightly afraid – of Beca.

"Sorry. Sorry."

"Stop apologizing. And please tell me who I am speaking to."

"Sor-" The girl caught herself before apologizing again. "It's Courtney."

"Hi, Courtney. I need you to do me a favor. I need you to find Hannah, give her the phone, and then sit with Emily until Hannah tells you otherwise."

"And do what?"

"Keep her company," Beca almost snarled.
"She's been crying for hours."

"Good God," Beca muttered. "I know that. That's why I don't want her to be alone. So sit with her, let her cry, try your best to comfort her. But first, give the phone to Hannah." Beca sighed as she waited. She tapped her foot impatiently.

A moment later, someone she recognized answered the phone. "Beca?"

"Hi, Hannah." Beca heard a door close and then Hannah spoke to her again.

"Thank God," the girl said, voice rough from what clearly have been her own tears. "I don't know what to do. What should I do?"

"First, you need to stop crying."

"I'm trying."

"Try harder," Beca answered calmly. "Then, you need to take care of Emily. Make sure she eats something – try to keep her calm. Take a walk, watch a movie, sing songs, just sit with her, whatever. Take care of her. I'm on my way – but I won't be able to get in until tomorrow – mid-day at the earliest." She saw Chloe's head shoot up at the mention of her going somewhere, but she ignored the redhead and tried to focus on the phone call.

"What do I say?"

"That it sucks and you're sorry and you don't know how she feels. The truth."

"Ok," the girl said, uncertainly. "Should I tell her you're coming?"

"I will," Beca told her. "Call me if anything changes – or if you need anything. I'll text you details about when I'm going to get there. I think I have your number –” She had helped the year before with the Bella's songs for competitions. She had worked with Emily and Hannah over the phone and via video call.

"I'm glad you're coming. She'll be happy to see you," Hannah told her. "I'll take care of her."

"Thank you," Beca said. "Can you give the phone back to Emily now?"

When Emily was put back on the phone, she was sniffling but not crying. "Em, I'm going to come down. I don't think I'll be able to get a flight until morning – but I'll be there sometime tomorrow."

"No, Beca. It's okay," Emily said. "You have stuff to do."

"I do not have stuff to do that is more important than you, Legacy. Take care of yourself – and listen to Hannah. She seems partially competent." Emily giggled through her sorrow, which was precisely what Beca had been going for. "Love you, Em."

"Love you too," Emily whispered, before hanging up. When Beca set down her phone, Chloe and Amy were staring at her. Tears were already glittering in the redhead's eyes.

"What's wrong with Legacy?" Amy asked. "Did she go into the basement? You told her not to do that."

Beca rolled her eyes and took a deep breath before answering. "Katherine Junk died a few hours ago." Chloe shuttered.
"Poor Emily."

"That's a tough one," Amy said uncomfortably. She didn't do well with emotions that couldn't be solved with brash humor. Beca nodded and picked up her phone again.

She pressed a few icons, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath as she waited for someone to answer. She didn't want to do this, but her choices were limited. She lived in an extremely expensive city and had spent three years in a position that paid peanuts. She would be fine once the money started coming from her own album and her new work with Khaled's label. But until then, she was strapped. And flights to Georgia cost money. Money that Beca didn't have. And she really only had one person who both had money and would lend it to her with little question.

"Hi, Becs," her dad said. She could hear in his tone that he was happy to hear from her. Beca surprised them all when tears began to fall. The fingers of her free hand went to her temple, rubbing at the growing pain.

"Hey, dad," she said shakily.

"Beca, what's wrong?"

"I'm sorry," she said, forcing herself to take another breath. She accepted the tissue from Chloe and wiped her eyes. She blew out a heavy breath and steeled herself. "I didn't mean to start crying. That was –" She sighed in frustration at herself. "I should have waited a few minutes to call." She swallowed. "Um. I just got a call. Emily's mom – I don't know if you remember her – Katherine?"

"Oh. Yeah – she helped you organize the alumni for the performance in Copenhagen?"

"Yeah," Beca agreed. "She died earlier today."

"That's awful. She was kind of young for that."

"It was an aneurysm," Beca answered. "I don't think you have to be old for that to happen. But I'm not sure." She admitted. She paused and then lamented, "Emily is still in college."

"I know, Bec. She's in my senior literature seminar."

"I wonder why she never told me?" Beca said, almost absently. It wasn't the point of the conversation, but her brain wasn't exactly filtering conversation appropriately at the moment.

"Did you warn her not to take my class?" Warren suggested, softly teasing.

"Probably. Sounds like something I would do," she agreed.

"Then that might be why." Her dad laughed sadly. "I'm really sorry to hear about Katherine. How is Emily doing?"

"About how you would expect a twenty-year-old to react to something like that. She's devastated. Her mom was her only family."

"You need to get down here."

"I know," Beca said. "That's one of the reasons I called. I hate to ask – "

"You don't have to," Warren assured her. Since her bank account had been opened when she'd still been a teenager, he was a cosigner on her account. He knew how little money was there. He had wordlessly loaned her money through the years when her balance had been too low to pay her bills.
It didn't happen often, but every once in a while, it happened - and he was there. "I'll order tickets in your name and text you the details."

"I'm sorry, Dad –"

"Don't be sorry. You can buy me an expensive dinner when you're a big-shot music producer. Maybe I should call dibs on being your date to your first Grammy Awards." She laughed, smiling through her teary eyes.

"Thank you, Dad."

"Of course, Beca. Do you want to bring Chloe? Or Amy?"

"I can't ask you to do that," Beca said, knowing they didn't have the money either. Amy was supposed to be worth millions now, but that money hadn't materialized. Beca wanted one of them desperately – she was terrified to go alone. She didn't deal well with emotions- and she was walking in to an emotional hurricane. But asking him to cover two or even three sets of travel expenses seemed too much.

"You're not asking. I'm offering."

"One second," she said softly. She muted her phone and looked at her roommates. Chloe was wiping away her own tears and Amy simply looked at a loss. "Do either of you want to go to Georgia?"

"Gee, Beca," Amy said. "I would like to – but my business has been going so well lately—"

"I'll go with you," Chloe agreed softly, cutting off Amy's excuses. They would be long-winded and far-fetched if they continued letting her speak in her current uncomfortable state.

"You sure it's okay with your new classes?"

Chloe nodded. "She's family," she said, smiling as tears began to fall again. Beca nodded and bit her lip before going back to her phone.

"Thanks, Dad. Chloe will come."

"Good," he said. "I hate to think of you dealing with this alone. I need Chloe's full name and birthday to order the tickets."

"Yeah, I'll text you that stuff. Hold on a sec." She stood and walked to the bathroom, closing the door behind her, locking it, and turning on the water in the shower. "Thank you, Dad. I love you."

"I love you too, Beca. It's going to be okay."

"I know," she said, hoping he was right. "Thanks."

She hung up. She took a minute for herself, washing her face and sitting on the closed toilet for a few minutes, trying to remember how to breathe. When she returned to the kitchen, Chloe was smiling at her. "Did you really just go into the bathroom and turn on water to hide the fact that you said "I love you" to your dad?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Beca said dryly. Chloe smirked.

"Ok, Becs. We need to pack," she said, growing serious.
"First, text my dad your full name and birthday for the tickets. It has to match your license or passport."

"I know," Chloe told her. She winked. "I've traveled a few times before." She took Beca's phone and began texting her details to Warren Mitchell.

Beca walked to the closet and pulled out the suitcase she'd taken to Europe. She packed enough for a week, including several dresses for funereal type events. She had begun to pack for the redhead before she appeared by her side and took over.

It was almost midnight when Beca called Theo and explained what was happening. He was understanding about it – and told Beca to take whatever time she needed. He would reassign and rearrange studio time so it wasn't wasted.

They left the apartment before dawn the next morning, a time of day Beca was opposed to ever experiencing. The early hour, combined with stress and only a few hours of sleep, made her stomach roll and she skipped her normal cup of coffee. She sipped at a cup of mint tea while they waited in the airport. She listened to calming music while Chloe read a magazine in the seat next to her. They were called in the first round and had no trouble getting on the plane and stowing their luggage. Beca swallowed as she took her seat next to Chloe. "How in the world did we end up in first class?" Chloe asked.

"My dad is really good at talking people into upgrades," Beca told her. "Or, he might have bought first class. He has a lot of miles from his conferences and Sheila's conferences. They're both very important in their fields." Her voice was beginning to sound distant and listless and Chloe reached over to grasp her hand.

"It's going to be okay," she said, fighting to keep tears out of her eyes. Beca nodded. She took out her phone and dug in her bag for an audio splitter. She set the phone between them and hit play. Chloe plugged in her earbuds and Beca her headphones. They spent the rest of the plane ride in relative silence, listening to one of Beca's newest playlists.

Sadness abounds, but there will be happier times ahead. Please review and let me know what you thought, what you like, what you didn't, and if there's anything you're hoping to see in this story.
"Friends show their love in times of trouble, not in happiness." ~ Euripides

The Bella's house was frenetic. Girls everywhere – they had twelve members now. Beca and Chloe walked in as two girls walked out, arm-in-arm, book bags in tow. Beca set her own bag inside the door and looked around, rubbing her hands nervously against her jeans. A redhead – Chelsea, if Beca remembered correctly – stopped when she saw them. She had been walking from the kitchen on her way to the stairs.

"Hi," she said, uncertainly. Her hand clutched at her phone as she decided what to do. Then she studied them and it dawned on her; she looked relieved. "Hi, Beca. Chloe. We're so glad you're here."

"Thank you," Chloe said with a warm smile. "How is Emily?"

Chelsea grimaced sadly and gave a small shrug. "Not well. I don't think. She won't let anyone but Hannah in the room. And I think she's only allowing that because Hannah threatened to take her door off the hinges if she didn't unlock it – and Emily knows she will."

Beca pointed to the stairs. "We're going to go up."

"Sure, please," Chelsea said. "Do you guys want to stay here?"

"Do you have room?" Chloe asked.

"We can make room," the younger woman told her. "I'll figure it out and get something ready for you."

"Thank you," Chloe responded, offering her a bright, rewarding smile. Normally they wouldn't have considered putting anyone out of their own bed – but they certainly weren't staying in a hotel when Emily was at the Bella house.

They climbed the stairs and Beca gently pushed open Emily's door, which was already cracked. The younger woman was sleeping, curled into a ball, hunched around a pillow with tear tracks evident on her cheeks. Hannah was sitting on the other bed in the room, reading a book. She set it aside as soon as she saw Beca and Chloe in the doorway.

Hannah walked into the hallway with them, closed the door gently, and removed a phone from her pocket. "I'm glad you're here. The hospital has called three times. They need to know what to do about arrangements for Mrs. Junk. Someone needs to claim - her," she said uncomfortably. "Emily won't talk to them – she won't even touch her phone. She's barely moved since yesterday – she ate two apple slices in the past day." She looked pained and panicked. "I don't know what to do."

Chloe held out her hand and accepted the phone. She gave Hannah a reassuring and gentle smile. "We'll figure it out. Try not to worry." She looked at Beca. "I'll go downstairs and start making calls. You stay here. You should be here when she wakes up." Beca nodded and swallowed. She
agreed; she did. She knew she needed to be here, and that she should be here, but she certainly wished that were not the case. She watched Chloe and Hannah leave, then let herself back into the bedroom. She went to the bookshelf and found a copy of The Poisonwood Bible, one of her favorites. She secretly loved good literature. She blamed her father for that – he had read to her and with her almost every night before he'd left. And not just kid stories. Those - yes, but also Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte and Flannery O'Connor. It was his fault that her brain worked way overtime. From what she understood, she had gotten the tenancy from him. Books got her thinking and philosophizing. Music had long been a natural balm for her brain, soothing the anxiety that would otherwise overwhelm.

She climbed onto the end of Emily's bed and sat against the wall, trying to forget about her childhood traumas and relax into a comfortable position. She began reading and – two hours later – was still engrossed in the book when Chloe poked her head in the door. The redhead smiled at the sight; she loved that Beca read almost covertly. She found it adorable; especially how the brunette had a very specific scowl for when discovered with a book. She didn't scowl this time; she offered Chloe a weak smile and closed the book in her lap. The redhead mouthed the words "just checking," before ducking out again.

Beca did grimace, though, when Chloe left again, closing the door just a bit too loudly. Emily sprang awake, sitting up quickly as though it were a reflex. Beca remained in her spot but turned toward the younger woman, waiting for her to speak.

Emily's face crumpled as she clearly transitioned out of sleep and into the recent and painful memories that led to that moment. Beca hated crying. She was inept at dealing with it. It made her uncomfortable and squirmy. It was one of the many reasons she and Chloe had gotten along so well as co-captains. She could deal with keeping the girls focused and in line while Chloe could handle homesickness, sadness, and heartbreak. But this was not someone she could easily push off on Chloe. For reasons she did not comprehend, Beca felt more responsible for Emily than any of the other girls. Steeling herself for whatever awkwardness and melancholy was to come, Beca moved to sit on the edge of the bed next to Emily, facing her.

The taller brunette was studying her lap now, tears streaming down her cheeks. Beca had absolutely no idea what to say – and everything that came to her lips seemed stupid or ill timed. So she rearranged herself against the headboard of the bed and took Emily into her arms. The younger woman curled up against her, crying into Beca's neck. Beca didn't realize she was doing it until she had begun, but she was humming, then singing very softly.

_I took the supermarket flowers from the windowsill_
_I threw the day old tea from the cup_
Packed up the photo album Matthew had made
_Memories of a life that's been loved_

_Took the get well soon cards and stuffed animals_
Poured the old ginger beer down the sink
_Dad always told me, "don't you cry when you're down"
But mum, there's a tear every time that I blink

__Oh I'm in pieces, it's tearing me up, but I know_
_A heart that's broke is a heart that's been loved_

_So I'll sing Hallelujah_
_You were an angel in the shape of my mum_
_When I fell down you'd be there holding me up_
Spread your wings as you go
And when God takes you back he'll say Hallelujah
You're home

By the time she finished the song, Beca felt that Emily had relaxed. She was quiet, with just occasional hiccups left from all the crying. Beca continued holding her, humming and singing random assortments of songs that popped into her head. Before dinner, Chloe knocked softly and poked her head into the room. She smiled softly at Emily, who was snuggled up against Beca and – finally – dry eyed.

Chloe sat on Emily's other side and hugged her. "I'm so sorry," she whispered. Emily nodded. "Dinner is almost ready. Why don't you get cleaned up? You have time to jump in the shower if you want – you'll feel better." Emily shook her head vehemently. Her voice cracked as she spoke for the first time since Beca and Chloe's arrival.

"I'm not going downstairs. I don't want to see anyone."

"Oh, sweetie," Chloe said softly. "The only people downstairs right now are people who love you so much. On your best day and your worst."

"I don't want to," Emily said stubbornly.

"No one is going to make you," Beca said patiently. Patiently enough that it surprised them all. "But eventually, you're going to have to face them. The longer you wait, the harder it will be." She grimaced at her own wording; she sounded like her grandmother. But, her grandmother had been right about a lot of things.

"Fine," Emily said, eventually. She sighed heavily as she scooted to the end of the bed and grabbed her bathrobe from the back of her door. She disappeared into the bathroom and Beca sighed, sitting back against the pillows and leaning into Chloe.

"We don't know what we're doing," Beca said, running her hands through her hair. She fisted them close to her scalp, gently creating tension to relieve the coming headache.

"Nope," Chloe agreed. "But no one does. I think that's one of the secrets of life. Everyone is bluffing it." Beca smiled sadly. After she heard the water turn on, she got up and made Emily's bed, then walked to the closet and dresser to pull out clean, fresh clothing. "I'm going to help them finish with dinner," Chloe told Beca, hugging her from behind. "I take from what I know so far that Emily does much of the cooking. I'm not sure I trust the rest of them with our dinner."

Beca nodded and watched her go. Once Emily exited the bathroom, she wordlessly changed into the jeans, blouse, and sweater Beca had laid out. She towel dried her hair and then began brushing it. Beca held out her hand for the implement and Emily gave it to her. The smaller brunette sat behind the younger woman and gently brushed her hair, carefully twisting it into loose Heidi braids that were cute, soft, and would keep the hair out of Emily's way. She had done Emily's hair before. Although she was talented when it came to hair braiding, she never did any of the other girls' hair, save Chloe's, until Emily came along.

"Thank you," Emily whispered.

The rest of the evening went quickly. Emily ate and accepted the efforts the other girls made to comfort her. There were kind words, hugs, and offers of chocolate. Eventually, the tall brunette was finished with people. She disappeared into her bedroom and changed into a clean pair of pajamas.
"Do you need anything?" Beca asked her, setting a bottle of water on the nightstand.

Emily shook her head and sat on the foot of her bed. The smaller woman looked at the clock – it was barely eight. She knew that Emily was going to lay and think for hours before sleeping, especially after the length of her earlier nap. She didn't know what to do, so she turned and studied the room.

"Have you read all of these?" Beca asked, her fingers dancing across the spines lined up neatly on the bookshelf.

"Not all," Emily told her. "Most. I keep meaning to read The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings. Benji loves them. But other stuff keeps coming up." Beca grabbed the familiar green copy of The Hobbit and carried it to Emily's bed. She sat against the pillows and crossed her legs in front of her, watching her younger friend expectantly.

"What are you doing?" Emily asked.

"Reading," Beca responded easily. She nodded to the spot beside her and Emily climbed under the covers, situating herself comfortably in bed. Beca cleared her throat and began. "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort." Beca read for over an hour until her throat began to grow scratchy. Emily noticed and picked up, trading pages on and off with her for another hour until Beca's eye lids began fluttering closed. She realized Emily was having the same problem. She marked the book and set it on the nightstand. She reached over and squeezed Emily's hand.

"I'm going to bed – but I'm just down the hall. We ousted Anna, I think. If you need anything, we're here."

"Thank you," Emily said softly.

"You going to be okay for now?" Emily nodded. Beca squeezed her hand reassuringly once more before turning out the beside lamp and leaving the room.

In the bathroom, after washing her face and brushing her teeth and hair, Beca realized she'd somehow gotten a second wind. She knew that if she simply slipped into bed, she would be awake all night. It was just after ten and if she didn't tire herself out, it would be a long, frustrating night. "Hey," Beca said, standing in the doorway to the bedroom she was intended to share with Chloe. The redhead, sitting on the bed and doing something on her computer, looked up and smiled at her. "Can you keep an ear out for Emily? I'm going to take a walk – clear my head."

Chloe nodded. "I would offer to go with you – but from the clearing your head perspective, I take it you want to be alone?"

Beca offered small smile. "I appreciate that. We can go together soon. Maybe tomorrow."

"Sounds like a plan. Take your cell phone – and mace."

"It's Barden," Beca told her with a look of incredulity. Chloe leaned over to grab Beca's car keys from her purse and tossed them to her. The smaller woman removed the mace from the bunch and shoved it into her pocket. "I might be awhile."

Chloe nodded. "Just answer if I text."

Beca agreed and left, walking out of the house, grabbing the hide-a-key (that had somehow not
been moved since she'd been captain) and shoving it into her other pocket. She walked the campus in a circle for two miles before she found herself off into a neighborhood two blocks from the center of campus. The stood on the front step for several minutes before drumming up the nerve to ring the bell.

Before she could panic and run away, it opened and she found Sheila on the other side, smiling at her glowingly, despite the late hour. Beca squeaked and stiffened as the older woman pulled her into a hug. "Sorry," Sheila laughed as she let go. "I know you don't like that. I forget."

"It's okay," Beca assured her. "It's not you – it's just – surprise hugs. I'm not good at them."

Sheila smiled again and ushered her inside. "Can I get you a cup of tea? Cocoa?"

"I don't want you to go to any trouble—" Beca said. "I know it's late –"

"Tea?" Sheila offered again. She was not backing down in her hostess-ing duties. Beca nodded.

"Thank you." She followed Sheila into the kitchen and watched her move the teapot to the burner and light it. Her dad found them once the smell of fresh blueberry tea had wafted into his office.

He lit up as he took in the sight of his daughter in his kitchen. "Beca!" He offered his arms and she stepped in, allowing the hug. He understood after knowing her for her entire life that it needed to be her move. "How are you holding up?" He asked, stepping back and studying her. "You look tired."

She shrugged and took a deep breath, offering a grimace. "Today has now officially been going on for like 27 hours. I'm definitely tired – but my brain isn't. But I'm fine. Emily – well, she's what you would expect, I guess."

Her dad and Sheila listened to her fears as she admitted that she felt inept and lost. She wanted to help Emily, but she honestly had no idea what she was doing. They offered her kind, reassuring words and told her what they knew. Warren has lost his dad young – before Beca was two. Then his mother had died only eight years later. Sheila's parents were also gone – and with no siblings, she had arranged the funerals and viewings and everything in between.

It was late when they finished talking, so Warren insisted on driving Beca back to the Bella house, even though she promised him that she had mace. He agreed that although she sounded like she was covered, he would drive her anyway. He went to get his keys and jacket. Sheila handed Beca a neatly handwritten list. Beca studied it. It was a list of everything that needed to be done – in order. She looked up at Sheila. "Thank you."

Sheila smiled sadly. "We're here if you need anything."

It was after midnight when Beca crawled into bed beside Chloe. "Did you see your dad?"

"How'd you know?"

"Who else would you visit?"

"I could have been alone," Beca told her, her voice sounding slightly defensive.

Chloe smiled. "When are you going to admit you don't hate your dad?"

"He's far more tolerable now that I don't have to listen to what he says unless I want to."

Chloe chuckled. "I'm glad you're discovering that. How are you holding up?"
Beca nodded. "I'm okay. You?"

"Hanging in," Chloe responded. "The girls are lovely. Two fairly loud ones – but mostly sweet. I made some phone calls – and have a list of more that we need to make tomorrow."

"Sheila gave me a list of what we need to do to get the funeral and burial going."

"We work well, as a team," Chloe said softly. Beca felt a shiver run down her spine.

"We always have," she said, turning on her side to face the redhead. "That hasn't changed." Their eyes locked for a full minute.

"Do you ever—" Chloe stopped and shook her head, her eyes darting away. Beca's heart jumped to her throat in that instant and she struggled to prod the other woman for more. She could let this go – but it was an opportunity that she decided to take. Eventually, her voice croaked out,

"Do I ever what?"

"Never mind," Chloe said with an embarrassed smile. "It's silly."

"It's probably not," Beca argued with a strained, strangely pitched voice. "What are you thinking?"

"I don't want things to get weird," Chloe insisted.

"Dude, things are always weird. Who am I to judge you? And it might be something we're both thinking – you don't know until you ask." Her voice, she realized, was trembling.

Chloe wiped random tears from her eyes and gazed at Beca, who she could barely make out in the light from the moon outside their window. "What if it changes things?"

Beca shrugged. "Things change – we adapt." She very cautiously reached for Chloe's hand and slipped hers into it.

Chloe sighed before speaking, her eyes darting everywhere but unwilling to meet Beca's again.

"I love you," she said, her words both simple and yet filled with meaning.

"Oh, thank God," Beca said, sighing with relief. "I love you too." She snuggled up against Chloe and buried her head under the taller woman's chin. She froze as she realized the mistake she could have just made. "Please tell me you mean more than friends," she squeaked.

Chloe laughed loudly, but her voice was still laced with tears. Happy tears. "I did. You?"

"Yep," Beca responded, tensing in the arms that wrapped around her. "Oh my God," she said, panic evident. "What does this mean? How do we tell people? What do we do?"

"Beca!" Chloe said, sharply.

It forced Beca to take a deep breath and relax her muscles. "Yeah?"

"Calm down. We'll deal with all of that as it comes, together." The snuggled together, but said nothing else for a long time.

Half an hour later, Chloe cleared her throat. "Becs?"

"Hmm?"
"I can hear you thinking. Calm down. It's going to be fine." She pulled her arms around Beca and rubbed her back until they both fell to sleep.

Thanks so much for reading. Please leave a review - let me know what you thought, your favorite parts, what you're hoping to see or predicting you'll see. Do you think the way they admitted their feelings was too quick? Or just right after so many years of being friends and living together?
I was kind of proud of this chapter - hope you like it too. Thank you for reading - and extra special thanks to those who comment and review - it makes sharing this work extra rewarding!

Reminder - I starting writing this universe well before PP3. Most of it fits - Stacie's storyline does not. In my universe, Stacie went to medical school in Georgia and then went to LA to start her residency.

Chapter 3 – Somewhere in the Middle

Yesterday brought the beginning,
tomorrow brings the end,
and somewhere in the middle
we became the best of friends.

~ Anonymous

The next day dawned early. Beca heard her phone going off at seven, just as she'd begrudgingly set it. She groaned. Then she squeaked as she realized Chloe was straddling her – and leaning in to kiss her. Despite her surprise, Beca quickly relaxed and kissed her back, making the most of their official first kiss.

When Chloe finally pulled back, she grinned happily. "I've been waiting a long time to do that."

Beca smiled at her. "Couldn't even wait until we brushed our teeth?" She gazed at the redhead. "And Chloe? Why are you sitting on me?"

"I was a little bit afraid you were going to run away this morning."

Beca shrugged. It was a relatively fair assumption. "We're good," she promised. Her eyebrow raised when Chloe didn't budge. "But I really do have to get up. We have a lot of things to do. And Emily will be up soon." Chloe didn't even shift. Beca paused before continuing, a slight grimace flashing in her features. "And you're kind of sitting on my bladder." Chloe reluctantly tumbled to the side, lying on the bed next to her favorite brunette.

"What can I do?"

Beca considered the question. "Can you call any of the Bellas from the past three years who don't know yet? And find out from the current crop who Emily's other college friends are." Chloe nodded. "Maybe start looking into Katherine's years in the Bellas."

"No problem," Chloe told her with a soft smile. "I spoke to Stacie yesterday – she'll be here this evening. She's kicking herself that she couldn't get here earlier." Beca nodded. The brunette was doing her residency in LA; her schedule was a mess.

"I should get up," Beca said reluctantly. They kissed one more time and then she left – grabbing a change of clothing from her bag and heading to the bathroom. She exited ten minutes later, towel drying her hair as she walked back to the room. Chloe was sitting on the bed, sipping at a cup of coffee. She nodded to a tray on the desk that contained two coffee cups, a carafe, and two muffins. "Thank you," Beca said. She sat down and began brushing her hair, then used a small bit of
product to scrunch it into waves.

"You are thinking pretty hard," Chloe said softly, noting the other woman's intense silence and obvious preoccupation. "I'm afraid smoke is going to come out of your ears."

Beca gave her a small smile. "I'm fine."

Chloe shifted so she could look Beca directly in the eye. "We're not doing this," she said. "I'm fine is not an acceptable answer when you're clearly not." She wasn't angry, just insistent.

"What does this mean?" Beca asked, motioning between herself and Chloe. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes cast nervously around the room.

The redhead saw the fear in her eyes and her heart broke a little. She knew how much trouble Beca had with emotions – and this situation had already brought up so many. Them deciding to declare their love for one another – after never even dating – was clearly a lot to take in. Chloe set her coffee down and moved closer, taking Beca's hands. "You are my best friend. Am I your best friend?"

"You are," Beca promised. A slight smirk appeared. "But don't tell Jesse."

Chloe beamed. Joking was a good sign. "We are still best friends. We are going to spend the next few days doing everything we would have done anyway as friends. Now we just get to be a little more."

"Are you going to be more handsy?"

"Oh, you know I will be," Chloe grinned.

Beca blushed and shook her head. "Is it really possible that you can have fewer boundaries?"

"Oh, you better believe it," Chloe said, leaning close to kiss Beca deeply. Then she pulled away, her hand still caressing Beca's cheek. "But we can take our time," she promised.

"What are we supposed to say? If people ask? I'm assuming you're going to want to kiss me when other people are in the vicinity."

"You assume correctly," Chloe said with a chuckle. "Would you like to be my girlfriend, Beca Mitchell?"

Beca met her eyes. "I would love to be. With the understanding that I'm a mess. I'm not kidding, either. I'm a basket case. Have you met me?"

Chloe smiled. "Oh, I've met you. And I'll take the whole package – mess and all. If you are a mess – and I'm not agreeing to that – then you are a beautiful one. So, I guess we have our answer. Are we dating? Yes."

Beca moaned and leaned forward, collapsing against Chloe and several pillows. "Can we just avoid people?"

Chloe stroked her hair and was silent for a moment. "As much as I love you – and don't want to ruin this meaningful moment – think about where you are – and why we're here."

"Shit," Beca muttered. "You're not wrong." She sighed as she sat up. "It's fine."

"We're fine," Chloe agreed with a nod. "I'm going to get ready and go downstairs for breakfast."
These girls need some serious life skills. None of them but Emily and Hannah can cook."

Beca smiled. "You go whip them into shape, love." The both froze for a moment and then turned to one another as they realized she'd just used an endearment. A new one that she did not use for other people. Chloe winked, breaking the significant moment. Beca walked to the desk and peered at the muffins.

"What are these?" She asked, flipping one over to examine it.

"What do you think they are?"

"Please, be chocolate chip," Beca stage-whispered.

"Of course they're chocolate chip," Chloe teased. "I know better than to try to feed you something healthy."

Beca turned on her with a very serious expression. "If you ever try to feed me a bran muffin," she said sternly, "then this," she motioned between the two of them, "is over."

"I would never," Chloe said with a laugh. Beca picked up the tray and began walking to the door. "I would just sneak in the bran when weren't paying attention," Chloe said with nonchalance. Beca turned to glare at her and Chloe beamed right back.

Once inside Emily's room, Beca shut the door again and set the tray on Emily's desk. Lifting one of the lids, the fragrant aroma of hazelnut coffee greeted her. Beca poured in her preferred amount of cream and sipped, wrapping both hands around the mug as she gazed out Emily's window.

The town of Barden had not changed much in three years – not terribly surprising. Beca often thought – at first with irritation and then later with adoration – that they were living in a Norman Rockwell painting. The trees were bare of leaves and most houses on the street still had Christmas decorations up. Whether that was a result of cold weather or college students being procrastinators, Beca wasn't sure.

She'd been watching the morning hubbub on the outskirts of campus for twenty minutes when Emily began to stir. Beca gave her space until she sat up. Then she removed the cover from the other cup of coffee and handed it to Emily, who accepted it silently. The older woman set one of the muffins on Emily's bedside table, then sat at the desk and began pulling apart her own muffin.

"How are you feeling?" Beca finally asked, pouring herself another cup of coffee from the carafe.

Emily shrugged. "Numb. I guess it could be worse."

Beca nodded. "So, we need to talk about a few things." Emily watched her with big doe eyes, waiting. "Chloe spoke to the hospital yesterday. We need to go talk to the funeral home and they'll take care of everything with your mom." She paused. "Do you know if she had any will or funeral plans?"

"I don't know," Emily told her. "Probably. She was usually prepared for stuff."

"Do you know where she kept important papers?"

"There's a fireproof box under her bed."

"We need to go look," Beca said softly. Emily nodded. It took another hour to get Emily fed, out of
bed, into clean clothes, and out to the car. Beca drove to the house where Emily grew up – about half an hour from Barden. She parked in the driveway and got out, rounding the car to open Emily's door. The taller brunette shakily unlocked the front door and let them in. She went directly to Katherine's room and pulled a heavy-looking box from under the bed. She opened it and Beca saw there was a stack of file folders at the bottom, along with a few jewelry boxes.

Beca withdrew the stack of folders and closed the box again, offering her hand to Emily. She led the younger woman to the kitchen and they sat at the table. Emily was silent as Beca thumbed through the paperwork. "The stuff in the fridge is going to spoil," she said evenly, blankly staring at the large appliance.

Beca looked up at it and then back to Emily. "We'll take care of it. But not today." She continued going through paperwork. She found both a will and arrangements that had been made for a funeral and a gravesite. Katherine had wanted to be buried in the plot adjacent to Emily's dad. Beca put everything else back in the safe and locked it.

She stood in the kitchen, watching as Emily stared. She would occasionally change up what she was staring at, but she stared for long periods of time. "Em, do you need anything else while we're here?"

Emily looked up at her, confused by the suggestion. "Do you have things at Barden to wear to the funeral home and church, that kind of thing?" The younger woman shook her head and walked to another room that Beca immediately saw must have been Emily's bedroom. It was bright and cheerful – remnants of high school everywhere. Emily pulled several dresses from the closet and took a few sweaters from the drawer. They all went into a duffle bag, along with two pairs of shoes and several pairs of tights and stockings. Beca watched, her brain falling into another terrible thought.

"Em?" Emily looked up at her after zipping the bag closed. "Do you want to pick out something to take to the funeral home for your mom?" Emily's eyes widened, glazed over with tears, and she looked horrified. "We can come back later," Beca offered calmly.

But that sounded worse to her, so Emily walked into her mother's room and went into the closet. She came back with several dresses. She decided on one rather quickly and picked up a few pieces of jewelry from the dresser.

Beca drove straight to the funeral home. She could feel that Emily was losing steam, and fast. Beca was not far behind her. Empathy sucked – one of the main reasons she usually tried to hide hers and turn it off. They quickly found themselves whisked off to the office of the funeral director, who did a great job at looking both sympathetic and business-like, in Beca's opinion.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," the woman said sympathetically. "I know what a difficult time this is for anyone – we try to make it as easy as we can." She flipped through the file Beca had handed her. "It looks like your mom took care of just about everything." Emily nodded miserably. They spoke at length about the coffin, the wake, and a million other little things that fell into categories on Sheila's list. For the first time in her life, Beca really wished Sheila was with her. She felt that these discussion and decisions were too much for her, let alone Emily.

"It looks like she requested the funeral itself to take place in the chapel at Barden. You'll want to contact the minister. We can work with him to ensure smooth transitions that day."

"Do you have his contact information?" Beca asked. The woman wrote it down for her. Beca handed over her cell phone number, since Emily had almost completely check out now. She ushered the younger woman back to the car and they returned to the Bella House.
"I'm going to go lay down," Emily said, as soon as Beca pulled in front.

"Will you eat something for lunch first?" Beca asked.

"I'm not hungry," Emily answered.

"I understand that. But you need to – at least something small." Emily rolled her eyes but allowed Beca to direct her into the kitchen. Chloe was making soup and grilled cheese.

"Are you spoiling them?" Beca asked, eyeing the five Bellas who were already at the table, waiting patiently.

Chloe laughed as she glanced back at them. "I take out food – and they appear. It's like magic." Emily went to lay down after lunch while Beca and Chloe stayed in the dining room. Beca called the chapel.

"Hi, may I speak to Reverend Underwood?" She asked.

"He no longer works here," a bored-sounding college student informed her.

"Who is in charge, then?"

"Reverend Aldrich." Beca paused. It couldn't be. Aldrich wasn't an unusual name – was it? Because if it was the only person she knew from Barton with that name, then she was shocked.

"As in, Michael?"

"Yes," the girl said. "Do you want me to get him?"

"Please," Beca responded. Her head was reeling. She knew him. He had been a friend of Jesse's in undergrad. He was more the weed head type than the religious type.

"Hello, Minister Aldrich speaking."

"Hey, Mike. This is Beca Mitchell."

"Beca! How's it going? How's Jesse?"

"Jesse's fine," she promised, watching in amusement as Chloe's ears perked up from her seat at the table. "He's happy in LA with his girlfriend and their cat."

"Oh. Sorry to hear you're not together. You guys always seemed great together." He paused. "And Jesse always struck me as a dog kind of guy."

"We're still friends. And she likes cats," Beca responded. "Since when did you become the master of the chapel?"

"I like to refer to myself as a minister or the reverend. Master sounds too pompous," Mike said in a teasing voice. "I worked as an associate minister right out of college – led a few missions, then came back here when the full time gig opened up."

"So the guy who was smoked weed every weekend, all weekend, is now seeing to the spiritual needs of the students at Barden?"

"I have no idea what you're talking," Mike said. "But yeah, I run the campus ministry. We do retreats, have a few different youth groups, volunteer service, spiritual counseling, church services"
"Every weekend. It's a good time."

"None of that sound like a good time in my book," Beca assured him. "But I'll take your word for it. Hey, I'm calling for a reason."

"I figured as much."

"Have you ever met Emily Junk?"

"Of course," he said. "Emily comes to vespers most weekends. She and the Bellas do a lot of volunteer work. She usually drags the Trebles along with her."

"Sounds about right," Beca told him. "Unfortunately, her mom died a day and a half ago."

"I am so sorry to hear that. What can we do?"

"Katherine, her mom, was a Bella. She loved Barden. In the directions from her will, it seems that she wanted her funeral service in the chapel. Is that even a thing? It looks like she spoke to someone – but not someone recent."

Michael cleared his throat. "Yeah, I'll be honest – funerals aren't my usual gig. But I know we've done them for alumni in the past. I'd be happy to do that for Emily, if that's what she wants. I'll check with the pastor from First Episcopal. He can help since it's not something I've done." They spoke for another half an hour and traded a wide breadth of information before making an appointment to get together that afternoon.

The meeting with Mike did not go well – Emily was no longer in the mood to be nice. Beca was surprised at some of the snappy responses. But they worked around it and settled on details. Back at the Bella house, Therese and Ellie – two sophomore Bellas – served a dinner that Chloe had overseen the creation of. They were quite proud of themselves for accomplishing lasagna.

"We should practice tonight," Hannah said, gently, to Emily. Nationals were mere weeks away. Although she didn't want to be crass, she also knew that several of the girls would start to backslide on the routine if they took too much of a break. And they were getting antsy without Emily's usually cheer. They needed to do something.

"You should," Emily responded, not looking up from her plate – where she'd barely touched her food.

"Do you want to come? I know it's not important right now – but it might get your mind off things for an hour or two –"

"No," Emily said briskly. "Excuse me." She stood and left the table. They heard her ascend the stairs.

Hannah looked crushed. "She needs time," Chloe told her. "But you're right. It would help to get everyone's mind off of things. You should go." The girls did the dishes while Chloe and Beca sat in the living room, coffee cups in their hands.

Within half-an-hour, the girls were gone. Ten minutes after that, the doorbell rang. Beca glanced out the living room curtains and smiled before walking to the door. She allowed Stacie inside and the tall brunette insisted on hugs all around.

"Where's Em?"
"Upstairs," Beca said. "It's been a long day. She's tired and understandably grouchy."

Stacie nodded. "How is she doing, overall?"

"Better than I would be," Chloe said. "She's keeping it together." Stacie nodded.

"I'm gonna go up," she said. She left them and walked up the stairs. Chloe and Beca sat together quietly for another few moments, then went their separate ways. Beca wandered the house before going to the front porch.

Despite the chill in the air, Beca enjoyed her time on the porch. The swing had always been one of her favorite places to sit and think. In the days she had time to sit and think. That had mostly disappeared after Junior year. She watched the sky turn shades of pink and orange as the sun sank lower. After almost an hour of treasured solitude, the door opened and Beca watched Stacie exit with a blanket under her arm and two cups of coffee. Beca accepted one with an appreciative smile and moved over a bit so Stacie could sit with her and cover them both in the fluffy blanket. She slipped her headphones to her neck and paused her music.

"Decaf?" She asked, holding up the mug.

"I've met you before and it's nighttime. Of course it is," Stacie responded, settling in. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine," Beca said quickly.

Stacie offered her a half smile. "You're not good at taking care of yourself even when you're not focused on someone else. Try to remember to be good to you."

"I'm doing ok," Beca promised. "Are you using your six weeks of psychiatry rotation to study Emily?"

"Emily wears her heart on her sleeve. No need for a formal education to figure out that kid. She seems to be doing okay, considering the circumstances."

"She doesn't have anyone left," Beca said mournfully.

"She's a Bella," Stacie reminded her. "She has plenty of people. She has a house full right now." They fell quiet for several minutes, sipped coffee, and studied the night sky. "What's going on with you and Red?"

"How the hell do you know about it already?" Beca asked. "You've barely been in Georgia for three hours."

"You look different," Stacie told her, smirking.

"I do not accept that as an answer," Beca retorted. "Seriously, did Chloe tell you?"

"Seriously, I'm more observant than most. Just because you don't like it doesn't mean it's not true." Beca groaned and shook her head at her friend's words.

"You're impossible."

"So, you're official?" Beca nodded to answer Stacie's question. Of course, the leggy brunette moved right into territory that made Beca go bright red. "How's the sex going to work? Have you talked to Chloe about it?"
"No," Beca said in a huff. "And I'm not talking to you about it right now either. I'll figure it out."

"Tell her the truth," Stacie warned. "Don't play games. She's not going to care, as long as you're honest."

"I will figure it out," Beca repeated tightly. Stacie changed the subject until the conversation began flowing smoothly again and they were able to spend time catching up. It was dark – and getting almost too cold to be there anymore – when they saw a familiar car pull up in front of them.

They both set aside their mugs and stood up to greet Jesse and Benji, who exited the car. Hugs all around. Benji's eyes were rimmed in red. "How is she?"

"As good as can be expected, considering," Beca told him. "She's pretty calm. Why don't you go upstairs and check on her? I was about to do it – but you should see her."

Benji shook his head, offering a distraught expression. "I'm not even sure if I should be here. I don't want to be in the way – "

"Dude," Beca said firmly, "you are one of Emily's best friends. You should be here – no matter what the romantic relationship status is. This is not the time to second guess your friendship, got it?"

Benji nodded. "You're right. I just – if she has someone else – I don't want to complicate the situation."

"She doesn't," Beca told him. "And she's not going to, Benji. She's been waiting for graduation."

Emily had been heartbroken in her sophomore year when Benji had called off their long-distance relationship. He had done it out of a misguided attempt to give her freedom. He wanted her to spend time in college dating and being open to new guys. He didn't want her to regret not knowing her other options. Emily had not, at first, enjoyed the freedom. She had later appreciated his thoughtfulness and made him promise that – if she hadn't found another prince charming by graduation – they could stop the silliness and get back together.

"You think?" Benji asked.

"I know," Beca told him firmly. "Please, go upstairs before I smack you."

"She smacks out of love," Stacie teased. "Go on, Benj. She'll be glad you're here." Jesse gave him a hearty pat on the back. He looked anxious, but eventually went inside and up to Emily's room.

Thank you for reading! Please do share your thoughts. What did you like? Favorite moments? Least favorite? Any lines stand out? Anything you're hoping to see?
Benji knocked softly on the door and received no answer. He shifted uncomfortably on his feet, trying to decide what to do. Chloe appeared then, walking out of the bathroom. "Hi, Benji," she said, smiling brightly at him.

"Hey – hi," he said, looking between her and the door.

"Oh," Chloe said, understanding. "You should just go in," she said, before pursing her lips. He reached for the handle and then pulled back. Chloe opened the door and gave Benji a slight shove, propelling him inside. He stumbled, then turned to look at her almost gratefully.

"Thanks," he said.

Chloe nodded and continued walking toward the stairs. Benji gently closed the door and turned back to the room where Emily was curled up in her bed.

"Emily?" He said softly. She jumped at hearing his voice, sitting up quickly.

"You shouldn't be here," she stammered, eyes wide.

He stepped back, face falling. "I'll go. I'm sorry. I just wanted you to know how sorry I am about your mom –"

"No!" Emily cried, stopping him as he turned to go. "No, it's not that I don't want you here," she said, eyes filling with tears. "You just shouldn't be here. You have your own life. And work. And – other people." She folded into herself, bringing her knees up and resting her head against them.

Benji sat next to her and patted her on the back. "I don't need to be anywhere else but here," he said sincerely. She cried harder, but allowed him to pull her closer. She crumpled into his lap, sobbing hard. He rubbed her back and smoothed her hair, trying to think of something decent to say. There was nothing. So he was quiet and kept up his ministrations. Eventually, she was calmer. She sat up and blew her nose and went to the bathroom to wash her face. When she returned, she looked him in the eye.

"You're still here."

"I'm not going anywhere," he promised. She nodded, biting her lip.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No," she said, shaking her head and moving her hands to rub her temples.

"Do you want me to go so you can sleep? I'll come back first thing – "

~Hayley Greenwood
"No." She sat on the bed again.

"We can just sit here," he said calmly. She reached toward her nightstand and picked up a book. She handed him *The Hobbit* and his eyes lit up.

"You read it?"

"Started," Emily told him.

"You want to read?" She nodded. Benji kicked off his shoes and moved to the head of the bed. Emily situated herself beside him, leaning against his side. He picked up where she and Beca had left off. He read to her for almost two hours until he realized she was asleep. He nudged her gently and realized that she was completely zonked out. Marking their page, he carefully lay her under the covers and edged himself out. Softly pressing a kiss to her forehead, he picked up his shoes before moving to the door.

Downstairs, he walked into a living room occupied by Beca, Stacie, Chloe, and Jesse. Benji set his shoes by the door and walked over to the sofa, taking a seat next to Stacie.

"How's she doing?" Beca asked, her head resting against her hand. He saw his own concern mirrored in her navy blue eyes.

"Sleeping," Benji said. "I think for the night."

"It was good that you came," Chloe told him with a soft smile.

"I wasn't sure," Benji admitted. "I'm breaking my own rules."

"For an exceedingly good reason," Jesse said, roughly patting him on the back as he walked into the kitchen. He returned with his own coffee cup refilled, a cup for Benji, and the teapot to refill Beca's cup. Benji accepted his cup of coffee.

He looked around the room slowly. "Other than this, how is everyone?"

"Almost finished with my residency!" Stacie told him with a grin. Then it faded. "Then I need to do my internship."

"What's that entail?" Jesse asked.

"Same as residency," she said with a sigh. "But with more responsibility. But within the next two years, I will be officially able to practice without supervision."

"That seems quick," Jesse said, frowning at her. "Isn't there, like more time involved?"

"I was working on my medical degree at Emory while I was here at Barton," Stacie told him. "I went a thoroughly non-traditional route." She offered him a wink.

"Where are you going to practice?" Chloe asked.

"Not sure yet," Stacie said, picking lint from her yoga pants. "LA is nice."

"You will soon have quality company there," Beca informed her with knowing smirk.

"I know! If the hunter wasn't so active, I would so invite you to room with me," she responded with her own sultry smile.
"I think it's safer if I have my own place," Beca assured her. She looked at Chloe. "And I may not have my own place. We haven't really talked about it yet," she said, her voice trailing off.

"We have plenty of time for that," Chloe assured her, reaching for her hand. Jesse and Benji both looked surprised at the move, but said nothing. "Beca received a recording contract with DJ Khaled's label."

"I'm aware of that amazing fact," Jesse said with a grin. "And I've filled in Benji, obviously."

"That's exciting," Benji said.

"It's terrifying," Beca responded with a laugh. "But I'm looking forward to it." They spoke well into the night about their current lives – all in flux, all with limitless potential. Eventually, the yawning started.

"Do you need help with anything tomorrow?" Benji asked. Beca shook her head.

"No, thanks. The plans are all made. People are traveling tomorrow – if they need to travel. The viewings are Thursday – 1-4 and 6-9."

"That's a long day," Jesse remarked.

"One long crappy day seemed better than two shorter crappy days."

"You're not wrong," he said. "We're gonna go to the hotel. But call if you need anything – and we'll stop by tomorrow to check in." They hugged goodbye – Beca even allowed it willingly, which was unusual for her. She clung to Jesse for just a moment longer than was normal.

"We need to talk," he whispered to her. She nodded. Once they were gone, Chloe, Beca, and Stacie said their goodnights and went to bed. Beca checked on Emily first and then got ready for bed. When she crawled under the covers, Chloe flipped out the light.

She scooted close to Beca and put an arm around her. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm okay," she answered honestly. "You?"

"I'm good," Chloe promised. She kissed Beca's forehead and allowed her fingers to wander. She felt Beca stiffen when she gently grazed the size of her breast and stopped. "Come here," she said, physically flipping Beca so she was the little spoon, pulled firmly against Chloe's front. The smaller woman's heart fluttered, then she calmed down.

"You are seriously too strong for my own good," Beca informed her in a whisper.

"Noticing that?" Chloe whispered teasingly into her ear. She felt the smaller woman shiver. "I promise to only use it for good." She pressed a kiss at the nape of Beca's neck and relaxed. "Good night, Becs."

"Good night, Chloe." Despite her racing mind, Beca found herself lulled to sleep fairly quickly. It helped that she had no option but to remain where she was.

Wednesday crawled. No one knew what to do. The current Bellas went to class and even had a practice – but the visiting Bellas were going stir crazy. Until around one when Beca received a text message from one of the women who had gone with them to Copenhagen. She showed it to Chloe and Stacie, who smiled. Benji stayed with Emily while they rounded up the Bellas – new and old – and handed out a few sheets of music. They planned for two hours before parting ways.
They didn't need to be awake early on Thursday, but they were. When Beca went to check on Emily before 8AM, the younger woman was already awake and crying. Beca sat next to her and rubbed her back. "Oh, honey," she said softly, not knowing that to do. "I'm so sorry." The morning crept along. It took much longer than usual to get everyone ready. Girls running around looking for tights, stockings, sweaters, necklaces. Beca focused on herself and Emily.

Around eleven, Beca finished deftly crafting a waterfall braid and curled the rest of Emily's hair. The younger woman allowed her to do it, but did not speak with her. She hadn't spoken much that morning. Beca was finishing with the last curl when someone knocked on the door. She spritzed Emily's hair with finishing spray and walked over to open the door. Tears threatened when she saw Benji standing on the other side. He was just always so sincere that his emotions were almost painful. He was so, so sad for Emily and worried about her. Beca offered him a small, sad smile. He returned it with one of his own. Beca stepped aside, letting him in.

"We need her downstairs in thirty minutes," Beca whispered to him. He nodded and she left, closing the door. In her own borrowed room, she wiped away tears before changing into her black dress and slipping into silk stockings. Chloe, who had returned from the bathroom, appreciated that show a bit too much. Beca looked up to realize that the redhead was staring at her and blushed. "Don't you have anything else to do but stare?"

"This is much better," Chloe informed her. "You look beautiful."

Beca blushed, then shook her head slightly. "I look like a raccoon," she informed her, going to the mirror and gently touching the bags under her eyes. She could fix them well enough – but with makeup that might run if she cried. She did the best she could with what she had in waterproof versions. Eyeliner, mascara, light foundation and blush. After she finished her lipstick, she turned to see that Chloe had also finished her makeup. It was subtle, as it should be for the occasion, but it made her eyes pop.

They grabbed purses and walked together to the living room, where Stacie and many of the Bellas were already waiting. Beca saw the gathered crowd and shook her head. "Yeah, this isn't going to work," she said decisively. "This is overwhelming. You guys need to head to the funeral home now – only those of you driving with Emily need to wait – and that only includes me and Chloe." She paused, looking at the room full of people not moving. "Go," she said more forcefully, making a shooing motion. Stacie smiled and sauntered past, grabbing Jesse's arm. Once they walked out the door, everyone else did too.

Cynthia Rose, who had just arrived that morning, stopped long enough to hug Beca. Aubrey, who had also arrived that morning and spent most of it with Chloe feeding the Bellas, looking unhappy to be dismissed. She looked about to argue – but then she met Beca's eyes – and stopped. She greeted the small brunette with a hug and followed the rest. Emily descended the stairs ten minutes later, her arm in Benji's.

Emily was allowed a private viewing before the official one. And since she had no interest in seeing her mother this way for the first time in front of so many people, she took advantage. They entered the funeral home and the director caught her just inside the front door.

"Hi," she said softly. "Everything is all set. What do you need?"

Emily shook her head. There was nothing that could make this moment ok. She let go of Benji's arm and followed the funeral director through a hallway and into a small room. It would be opened to a larger room very soon – but right now, it contained little more than a few flower arrangements and a coffin. Beca and Benji both stayed back, not knowing what to do. Emily had let go and walked ahead on her own, so she might have wanted that moment. They and Chloe watched as she
stopped in front of her mother's coffin. Her expression crumpled immediately and her hand came up to cover her mouth to muffle a cry none of them had heard before. Benji caught her before she fell, lowering them both to the kneeler. Beca and Chloe stepped in closer, both kneeling as well. Beca put a hand on Emily's back and rubbed gently, feeling her eyes grow wet. The weight of the moment – of the situation – was suffocating. Emily's emotions rolled from her like boulders and Beca felt like each one was hitting her square on. She felt her breath quicken and her chest tighten. She shut her eyes and willed herself to calm down. She struggled to control her breathing and it only took Chloe a moment to realize something was wrong. She pulled Beca up and out of the small room, into the hallway. She studied her, hands clutching Beca's arms loosely.

"Honey, you're not breathing right. You need to slow down." Beca nodded. She slid down to the floor, doing breathing exercises as the tightness in her chest battled to win. She didn't realize Chloe had disappeared until there was another figure kneeling before her. Stacie was trying to get her attention. She could hear them – but it was cloudy – muffled.

"It's a panic attack," Stacie told Chloe.

"She doesn't have panic attacks," Chloe argued.

"Uh-huh," Stacie replied non-committedly. "Can you go and get an icepack? I'm sure they have them somewhere. Can't be the first panic attack in the funeral home." Chloe reluctantly left and Stacie sat next to Beca and took her hand, squeezing it gently and then releasing it again. She calmly, quietly, walked Beca through breathing exercises, squeezing her hand on the intake and letting go on the exhale. It took Beca's frazzled mind a moment to catch on, but she did – breathing when instructed. Her eyes were closed and she relaxed more heavily against the wall.

Chloe returned with two icepacks and Jesse. "Honey, you're gonna be fine," Stacie assured her. "But Emily is about to come out of this door and she can't see you like this. Jesse's going to pick you up, okay?"

Beca nodded listlessly. Jesse did as he was told, lifting her bridal style and carrying her to a room one of the employees had opened upon seeing their conundrum. It was a small carpeted office. There was no furniture other than hard chairs and a desk. At Stacie's direction, Jesse placed her carefully back on the floor, against a wall. Stacie knelt next to her again, reminding her to breathe. She looked up at Chloe.

"I've got this. I know you want to be here – but Emily needs you right now." Chloe reluctantly left with Jesse. Once the door was closed, Stacie guided Beca to lie down and placed a rolled icepack under her neck. She took the other and worked it under Beca's dress – to rest under the base of her spine. Her breathing evened out after a few more minutes of gentle reminders.

The fog began to lift soon after and Stacie watched as her friend's glazed look was replaced with a freshly panicked one. She tried to sit up quickly, but was stopped by a hand on her abdomen. Stacie was leaning over her. "Calm down," she said softly. "Do not get up yet. If you're not careful, it's going to start again." Beca remained where she was and continued breathing. After another ten minutes, she spoke.

"How much did Emily see?"

"Nothing," Stacie assured her.

"Is she okay?"
"Benji and Chloe are with her. I'm sure she's as fine as she's going to get today. How are you feeling?"

"Chloe," she said in a whispered sigh, her cheeks reddening. "Oh, god—"

"It's fine," Stacie reassured her. "You have every reason to be overwhelmed today. It's surprising it hadn't happened before this."

"I'm excellent at hiding them," Beca said bleakly. "They're not usually this bad."

"I know," the other woman answered. "And that, my friend, is what we call a sign. You need to talk to someone."

"I can't talk about this right now," she said softly.

"To be continued, then," Stacie said with resigned sigh.

"I need to get up."

Stacie removed the hand that was mostly pinning Beca to the ground and instead helped her sit. Beca grimaced as her head swam. Fifteen minutes and three ibuprofen later, Beca was walking into the viewing room. It had been opened to the larger audience. Emily was sitting to the left of the coffin with Benji at her side and Chloe standing just behind her. Classmates, Bellas, Trebles, professors, community members, coworkers – dozens of people who had been touched by Katherine or Emily – or both – had gathered to pay their respects.

Beca and Stacie walked up to Jesse, who was watching from one of the corners.

"You okay?"

Beca nodded curtly. "Can we not talk about it?"

"It is what we do best," Jesse responded under his breath. But he ran a reassuring hand up and down her back. After being in the room for a few moments and acclimating herself to the fact that she was surrounded by so many overemotional people, Beca made her way to Chloe's side.

"I'm so sorry," Beca whispered.

"Are you okay?" Chloe asked. Beca nodded stiffly. "We need to talk about this later." Another nod. Beca remained next to Chloe, standing guard behind Emily and Benji. A line formed as each person viewed Katherine, prayed, whatever they needed to do, then moved to speak with Emily.

Emily nodded and offered weak smiles. She spoke occasionally. She didn't cry much. The first time was when a family she'd spent most of college babysitting for showed up. It was towards the end of the first viewing and the kids had probably just come from school. The mother was teary eyed and offered the usual condolences.

The two little girls – one about four and one about six – stood close to Emily and leaned in, almost in her lap. "I'm sorry your mom died," the six-year-old said. "It's really sad." Emily nodded. "But it's kind of cool that your mom is in heaven."

"Gracie!" Her mom said, softly but in a tone of admonishment.

"It's okay," Emily assured her. She looked at Gracie. "I guess, in a way, it is kind of cool, huh?" The little girl nodded.
"Memaw said the more people who love you from heaven, the more people there are to be angels and protect you."

"She sounds like a very smart memaw," Emily told her. "Thank you, Gracie." She hugged both little girls and they scampered away.

"I am so sorry," the mother said, clearly embarrassed.

"It's really okay," Emily said, wiping her eyes. "The way she meant it – that's all that's important. Thank you, for bringing them." The woman nodded and squeezed Emily's hand before following her girls out. Within ten minutes, the room cleared out. It was 4:30 – they had an hour and a half before the funeral home opened the doors again. Only Emily, Benji, Beca, Chloe, Jesse, and Stacie remained in the main room.

Beca broke away from them and found the nearest ladies room. She washed her face and touched up her makeup – which had done exceedingly well through a panic attack. She smoothed her curls and walked back into the hallway, where Chloe was waiting, leaning against a wall.

"Hi," Beca said softly.

"Hi," Chloe responded, moving closer. She pulled Beca into a hug and held her there for a long moment. When she let go, she still retained one of Beca's hands. "That was not your first panic attack," she said, as though informing Beca instead of asking.

"No," Beca admitted.

"That was not the first of your panic attacks that Stacie has witnessed."

"No," she agreed.

"Jesse?"

"He knew," Beca said with a nod.

"How long?"

Beca shrugged. "As long as I can remember. The panic attacks started when I was 11."

"What else don't I know?"

"A lot," Beca responded, turning to face Chloe and meet her, eye-to-eye. Her voice rose as anger edged into her exhaustion. "And I was honest about that. I told you I was a mess. I can't apologize for something I can't help."

"I don't want you to apologize," Chloe said. "I want you to tell me things," she said, drawing out the words to emphasize them. Beca cast her eyes down. "Why do you keep things from me? I am supposed to be your best friend."

"You are!" Beca cried. "And I need you to be you – cheerful and sunny and – Chloe-like. I can't deal if you start worrying about me all the time. I just – I can't be looked at like a porcelain doll."

"I have always worried about you," Chloe said gruffly. "And I have never treated you that way. So cut the crap. Why haven't you told me?"

Beca spun around, throwing her head back and sighing. She paced for a moment before stopping in front of Chloe again. "It's harder when people know. I hide it a lot better when they don't know."
My dad – it's the reason he's so overbearing sometimes. It's the reason Stacie like – watches me all the time. I can't deal with you being different too. I don't want you to see the anxiety when you look at me."

"I don't," Chloe said calmly. She moved closer and lifted a hand to cup Beca's jaw. "I see someone who is incredibly strong. More than I knew before. How hard it must be – to keep this bottled up inside all the time."

"It's fine," Beca insisted, trying to cast her eyes downward.

"No, it's not," Chloe said firmly, forcing their eyes to meet. "But that's clearly a conversation for another day." They stayed together for another few minutes, standing silently in the hallway, Chloe with her arms around Beca.

After the viewing, those from out of town came to the Bella house for a dinner. Jessica and Ashley rushed around, putting out food that had been given by friends, neighbors, and professors. Sheila, who along with Beca's dad had been invited to join them, helped. She looked unsettled and Beca knew she sensed something – but Beca did what she was best at – and avoided being alone enough with her step-mother to have any type of conversation.

By ten that evening, Emily was ensconced in her bedroom with Benji. Most everyone else was gone. Those few who remained helped clean and were sitting around with drinks, talking about things that people only truly spoke about deeply when intoxicated. Jesse handed Beca a bottle and she accepted it, smiling in thanks.

She looked around her and her eyes darted to all of the people who were still surrounding them. Jesse used his own bottle of beer to point toward the side door. Beca started walking and he followed close behind. She sighed in relief as she stepped into the cool evening. "There are way too many people in there," she told him.

"Yeah," he agreed. "Kind of glad Benji and I ended up in a hotel instead of trying to crash at the Treble House."

"That, and the Treble house is probably gross," she said, wrinkling her nose.

"You're not wrong," he agreed. "It's hard to get a group of college aged guys to do chores." They wandered towards the driveway that saw between the two houses and stood under the light of the moon. "So, panic attack?"

"We're not talking about it."

"No, no," he agreed facetiously, "we wouldn't want to have a possibly productive conversation. What about you and Chloe?"

"What about it?" She asked defensively.

“How did it happen?” He asked, his voice mellowing, deescalating the tone.

Beca shrugged and shook her head slightly. "I honestly don't know what else to tell you. It just happened. Kind of weird, actually." Jesse barked out a laugh and Beca looked slightly startled.

"Becs, that is not something that just happened. It's been happening for years. You can just see it now. Welcome to the world the rest of us live in,” he said, making a toast motion towards her with his beer bottle.
"It has not."

"You were in more of a relationship with Chloe senior year than you were with me," he teased.

"And you didn't think to mention it? Or be bothered by it?"

Jesse shrugged. "I'm an easy-going guy. Seriously, Becs – I'm happy for you."

"Thank you," she said in a small voice. "But I don't know what this means. I don't know what this looks like."

"It looks like the same way you've been living for the past seven years – except maybe – hopefully – minus as much Amy," he said, "and plus some bedroom action." She gave him a look of irritation and walked away a few steps, running the fingers of her free hand through her hair. "So, how do you feel about the bedroom?"

"I'm not talking to you about this," she said, shaking her head furiously and pacing back past him to the other side of the drive.

"Who are you going to talk to about this? Because, Bec, Chloe is eventually going to notice being constantly rebuffed in the bedroom."

Beca made a pained-expression. "It can take her a while to catch on sometimes, right? I should have some time. Maybe." He gave her a sympathetic grimace. "Oh god," she muttered, walking and running fingers through her hair. She stopped and let out a deep breath. "I think," she said, turning towards him, "I mean – it'll be fine – right? It can't possibly be as bad as it was. It's been years since I tried."

He offered her a sad look that made her huff. "Bec, this is the kind of thing that doesn't usually get better until you get help for it. I don't know what's going on. I'm not a doctor. Maybe you just weren't into me – and with Chloe, it will be completely different."

"Fuck," she muttered. He couldn't hear much, but he heard the words, "when we tried," and "Stacie tried."

"You slept with Stacie?" He asked, his eyes lighting up in both amusement and curiosity.

"Kind of," Beca said, making a face and throwing her hands up in the air. "As much as I've slept with anyone. It got a little further – but then it got bad again."

Jesse stepped in her path of pacing and put his hands out, catching her shoulders gently. She looked up at him. "Hey. This is surmountable. But you've gotta be honest with Chloe. Either you need to get it checked out and figure out how to get past whatever it is – or, if you're not going to do anything – she needs to know that."

She squinted at him, pained expression fixed. "Were you miserable, when we were together?"

"No," he said, laughing at the idea. "No, Becs. I love you. And I always will. I was never miserable – I loved the time we spent together." He paused and his voice edged a bit higher. "But I also had blue balls a lot. And I mean, a lot. Because in addition to not sleeping with me, you were hot. It was a difficult state of being for a college guy. But I made it work. Lots of – alone time."

"Gross," she said, wrinkling her nose.

He laughed. "It's not like I made you watch. Seriously, Becs. It's going to be fine. But only if you're
upfront about it." She groaned and finished her beer, setting the bottle on the wall next to the drive.

"I'm going to take a walk. I can't go in like this," she said, shaking her hands out.

"You actually look fine," Jesse told her. She held out her hand. It tremored. "Or maybe you should go for a walk. I'll go with—"

"I need time to clear my head."

"And it's almost midnight. So, you clear your head while I walk next to you, saying nothing."

"Fine," she muttered. Thankful for the flats Chloe had convinced her to change into, she began walking the circuit. She took them all the way around the pond – more than a half-mile. When they reached the drive again, he looked down at her.

"You okay?"

She nodded. "Thanks," she said, reaching to squeeze his hand. "You are my favorite ex-boyfriend, you know that, right?"

He smiled and brought her in for a hug. "I also believe I'm your only official ex-boyfriend," he told her. "But I'll take it. Love you, Becs."

"Love you, weirdo." She paused and smiled at him. "Hey, how's Heather?" Beca asked, trying not to intone the name in any way. She failed and it came off a little pointed.

Jesse laughed. "I never understood why you didn't like her. I knew you weren't jealous."

"She's fine," Beca said flatly. "She's just not – interesting."

"Well, we broke up," he said, smiling at her.

"Oh, dude. I'm sorry."

He shrugged. "It's no big. She was kind of a gold digger."

"A boring gold digger," Beca agreed. "Not at all subtle or imaginative." She frowned and raised her brows. "What about the cat? Was there a custody dispute?"


"You deserve better than her. Aim higher."

"I did," he said, eyes cast down at her. "I'll have to try again with a new target."

"When I get to Hollywood, maybe I can find you someone. Actually, screw that. Chloe can find you someone. She lives for this kind of stuff." They both admitted they were freezing and decided to go in.

They walked back into the house together to find that Benji was the only remaining person who wasn't sleeping at the Bella House that night. Chloe was watching, Beca realized, as she hugged him goodbye. She bid Jesse a terse goodnight and he and Benji left together.

The small brunette smiled as she approached her girlfriend. "Being jealous of Jesse is beyond unnecessary. He's totally team Chloe." Chloe's expression softened.
"Well, he's always had good taste." Beca laughed and pecked her on the lips. "Where's Em? What up?"

"Everything is cleaned up, most of the girls are in their own rooms. Emily is pretending to sleep, I think. Benji only left her about five minutes ago. Stacie is upstairs, in bed already."

Beca nodded. Chloe picked up her hand and grimaced. "You're frozen."

"It's a little colder outside than anticipated," Beca told her. "I think I'm going to make a cup of tea. Want one?"

"I'll make it," Chloe offered. "You check on Emily and get ready for bed. It's been a long day."

"So fucking long," Beca muttered, before breaking away from her and walking to the stairs.

Thank you for reading! Please take a moment to leave a review. This was a difficult chapter to write - I would love to have feedback on it.
Though I Have to Say Goodbye

Chapter 5 – Though I have to Say Goodbye

"Remember me
Though I have to say goodbye
Remember me
Don't let it make you cry
For ever if I'm far away
I hold you in my heart—"

~ Remember Me from Coco

The morning of the funeral, Beca woke at four – with no alarm needed. She shifted slightly, which caused Chloe's eyes to flutter open. They were barely open long enough to see the time. "It's early," she said softly. "You should try to sleep a little more." Beca rolled back closer to her, snuggling into Chloe's embrace. She slept fitfully on and off for the next hour and a half before deciding to just get up.

Chloe tried to keep her in bed by pulling an arm around her, but Beca was quicker and escaped, then leaned back in to kiss Chloe. "Come back," Chloe said, almost whining.

"Sorry. My brain is totally awake," Beca told her. "I'm going to find coffee. Try to get some more sleep." Chloe was sleeping again before Beca had pulled on a pair of slippers and thrown a sweater over her pajama top. She stopped at the bathroom and groaned. This was one thing she did not miss about living with 8 other women. Waiting for the bathroom took up way too much time.

She flipped through news articles on her phone for a moment before she realized what she was hearing – someone was sick. Beca walked down the hall to Emily's room and saw it open – and empty. She went back to the bathroom and groaned. This was one thing she did not miss about living with 8 other women. Waiting for the bathroom took up way too much time.

She flipped through news articles on her phone for a moment before she realized what she was hearing – someone was sick. Beca walked down the hall to Emily's room and saw it open – and empty. She went back to the bathroom and groaned. This was one thing she did not miss about living with 8 other women. Waiting for the bathroom took up way too much time.

"Close the door behind you," Stacie called. Beca opened it and slid inside before closing it again. Emily was, predictably from the noise, on her knees in front of the toilet. The retching seemed to have stopped momentarily and her face was buried in her arms against the porcelain rim. Stacie sat behind her on the floor, gently rubbing her back.

"How long has this been going on?"

"Since around three," Stacie told her. "It's starting to settle down." She touched Emily's shoulder. "Honey, you want to try to go back to bed?" Emily shook her head miserably. Beca ran a washrag through freezing water and rang it out, handing it to Stacie. She exchanged it for one that had warmed up. Stacie lay the cold rag against Emily's neck. Beca sank to the floor next to Stacie and leaned against the wall.

"Food poisoning – or nerves?"

"For all our sakes, I hope it's nerves. I think it is." The continued trading out the cold cloth for another twenty minutes before Stacie stopped taking no for an answer, and dragged Emily to her feet. She helped her rinse her mouth at the sink and tucked her back into bed. Emily was too exhausted to argue. The tall woman slid in next to her. "When do we have to leave?" Stacie asked Beca.

"9:30."
"Don't wake us up until at least eight." Beca nodded and left them, turning out the light and closing the door. She used the restroom, washed her face, and went down to the kitchen to find that Aubrey was also awake.

"Hey," Beca said, pouring herself a cup of coffee.

"Morning," Aubrey answered. "This is early for you," she noted, setting aside the newspaper she had been perusing.

Beca shrugged. "It's not a normal day, is it?"

"Beca, I like you. I mean, originally, I never thought that was possible."

"This is starting out well," Beca said with uncomfortable sarcasm. Her heart began beating too fast and she sipped her coffee, forcing herself to slow her breathing. This was Aubrey. She was fine.

"Not your turn to talk," Aubrey said, snapping enough to make Beca do a double take and jump back a bit. It was not something she was thrilled about – but Aubrey could still make her jump. The blonde smiled brightly. Overly so. "You make Chloe extremely happy. Continue that trend," she said warningly.

"That was the plan," Beca said carefully.

"Make it a promise," Aubrey answered swiftly.

"I'm not in this to hurt her. I love Chloe."

"I'm aware. And I appreciate it. But I still remember getting phone calls from a crying Chloe during your senior year because you were avoiding her and cutting her out when things got stressful. And you weren't dating then."

"Aubrey, what is your point?" Anxiety caused by Aubrey had always come to Beca in waves of frustration and anger. She was feeling her blood rising to boiling now – and she needed to end the current trajectory of the conversation.

"Don't hurt Chloe," she said simply.

Beca nodded slightly, clutching her coffee cup harder to hide her slight tremor. "I will try my best, every day." Aubrey seemed content with that, and began asking questions about Beca's first days under her new contract. Things calmed down exponentially.

The remainder of the morning went smoothly. Beca helped Aubrey with breakfast for quite a few people – then got herself ready. She was only slightly hampered in her preparations by the fact that Chloe was particularly clingy that morning. But they were all ready and out the door before 9:30. When they arrived at the chapel, the coffin was already at the front. Emily walked in on Benji's arm but kept her other hand clasped to Beca's.

They sat in the front pew on the right hand side and waited as the chapel filled with Bellas, Trebles, friends of Katherine's, friends of Emily's, professors, university employees, and many others who had been touched by these two cheerful, vibrant women.

The funeral service began at ten. Michael did a good job, Beca thought, for never having run a funeral before. He made it personal. He knew Emily – and he was able to make meaningful statements.
Katherine had, not surprisingly, wanted music at her funeral. When Maggie, Katherine's best friend and Emily's godmother, had gotten into town on Wednesday, she had spent several hours with Beca and Hannah, working out songs, arrangements, and assignments. She had, much like Katherine had before worlds, worked with several generations of Bella to assign parts. After the first reading, Michael invited anyone who wanted to say a few words to come forward.

Maggie stepped forward and walked to the microphone. She stepped up to the microphone and offered a sad smile to the audience. "Katherine Junk was one of my very best friends. I can't begin to tell you the light that she brought to my life – in college and after. I regret that we didn't spend more time together these last few years." She paused and bit her lip, then choked out a tearful laugh. "We talked a lot about all the time we'd have when we retired." She paused again and gathered herself.

"But," she said, taking a deep breath. "If I stand up here and talk about how heartbroken I am for Emily – for everyone who loved Katherine – and how much we will miss her; she'll kick my ass over it when we meet again." There was a soft chuckled that rippled through the audience. Emily nodded slightly as she wiped away tears. "So, in honor of Katherine – several Bellas – some who were lucky enough to know Katherine – others who are dear to Emily – would like to share a song. When John died, Katherine sang Danny Boy at his funeral. We thought she might appreciate this suspiciously similar tune."

As she had been speaking, Beca had gone to the piano. Aubrey and Hannah stood near behind the piano. Maggie and two others of her generation stepped in beside them. Beca took a deep breath and began playing, trying to focus on the notes and keys and chords, not the meaning. After the piano entrance, she began singing.

"When I am down and, oh my soul, so weary/ When troubles come and my heart burdened be," she smiled softly just before Aubrey joined in on the next lines, "then I am still and wait here in the silence, until you come and sit awhile with me." The six of them sang the chorus together, in six parts that Beca had painstakingly reworked on Wednesday morning.

"You raise me up, so I can stand on mountains
You raise me up, to walk on stormy seas
I am strong, when I am on your shoulders
You raise me up to more than I can be,"

After a second round of the chorus and a piano bridge, Maggie and the older Bellas sang. "There is no life - no life without its hunger, each restless heart beats so imperfectly / But when you come and I am filled with wonder, sometimes, I think I glimpse eternity."

Beca took the opportunity during their verse to quickly wipe her eyes. When they finished the song, she stood from the piano and returned to the pew where she took her place between Emily and Chloe. The church was quiet, except for occasional sobs, sniffles, and shifting in seats. Beca leaned in close to Emily. "Are you sure you don't want to say something?" She asked gently. Emily nodded. Beca squeezed her hand and they watched three more people stand to speak. Someone from Katherine's generation of Bellas – Andrea, if Beca remembered correctly, delivered a thoughtful, sweet eulogy that seemed to end those wanting to speak.

About fifteen women joined Andrea at the front of the church. The remainder of the Bellas – there were about twenty more from Emily's generation and those in between – remained in the pews, but joined in singing a beautiful, haunting version of In My Life. Beca, holding Emily's hand and clutching Chloe's with the other, took a deep breath and joined in singing halfway through the first verse. She listened as Bellas, old and new, harmonized. She could hear Stacie, Aubrey, and
Cynthia Rose behind her. Somewhere to the left and farther back she could make out Flo, Ashley, and Jessica. Even Amy and Bumper were back there somewhere. Emily had tears in her eyes, but she wasn't crying. She joined in eventually, her voice growing stronger with each word.

She sounded like herself in the end,

"Though I know I'll never lose affection
For people and things that went before
I know I'll often stop and think about them
In my life I love you more

In my life I love you more."

Michael finished with a few prayers and invited friends to join Emily at the Bella house for a luncheon after the burial. Six men – all trebles from Emily's years – served as pallbearers. Emily attempted to hold them back, but a sob let loose when they lifted the box.

Her tears stopped as she watched in concern and then curiosity as Benji left her side. She tried to stop him, but Beca held her and Jesse moved in to fill the spot created. The boy – man – she'd loved for so long went to the front of the church and picked up a guitar that had been set in the choir stall. He put the strap over his shoulder and went to stand in front of her mother's coffin.

"What is he doing?" Emily asked, Beca, then Jesse. Beca just squeezed her hand as Maggie spoke from her pew. "Katherine wanted to go out dancing," she said. "We should give her that honor. If you know the words, please join in. If you don't, they're on the back of the program – join in!"

Benji started strumming a familiar melody then, causing Emily to burst into tears again. Jesse held her up and she tried to calm herself as she listened as Benji began singing. She and her mother had seen the movie Coco in her freshmen year of college during Thanksgiving break. She had told Benji how much they had both loved it. That was four years before.

"Remember me
Though I have to say goodbye
Remember me
Don't let it make you cry,"

Beca and Chloe joined in, holding hands as they led Emily to walk behind the coffin – which was now being carried toward the exit. Jesse remained on Emily's other side, holding her hand. She couldn't help but smile when she realized almost the entire church was singing and – as promised – beginning to dance.

"Forever if I'm far away
I hold you in my heart
I sing a secret song to you
Each night we are apart
Remember me
Though I have to travel far
Remember me
Each time you hear a sad guitar
Know that I'm with you
The only way that I can be
Until you're in my arms again
Remember me"
Beca smiled sadly to see her dad and Sheila, in a pew with a few other professors, following along on the back of the program, singing. Flo took the lead on the Spanish words, but most of the others joined in after the first few lines.

"Que nuestra canción no deje de latir
Solo con tu amor yo puedo existir (recuérdame)
Que nuestra canción no deje de latir
Solo con tu amor yo puedo existir (recuérdame)

Si en tu mente vivo estoy (recuérdame)
Mis sueños yo te doy
Te llevo en mi corazón
Y te acompañaré
Unidos en nuestra canción
Contigo ahi estaré
Recuérdame
Si sola crees estar
Recuérdame
Y mi cantar te irá a abrazar
Aun en la distancia
Nunca vayas a olvidar
Que yo contigo siempre voy
Recuérdame"

"If you close your eyes and let the music play
Keep our love alive, I'll never fade away
If you close your eyes and let the music play
Keep our love alive, I'll never fade away
If you close your eyes and let the music play
Keep our love alive, I'll never fade away

Remember me
For I will soon be gone
Remember me
And let the love we have live on
And know that I'm with you the only way that I can be
So, until you're in my arms again
Remember me."

The coffin had been loaded into the hearse and a large group of Trebles and Bellas stood around it, finishing the song with a strange mixture of sadness and joy.

It was a fair situation for a funeral – because it pretty much left everyone ugly-crying. Emily was still wiping her eyes with the damp handkerchief she had been clutching all morning when she and Benji found themselves alone in the crowd. While Bellas and Trebles and other friends arranged rides to the gravesite, Benji stood in front of Emily, the guitar hanging on his shoulder, leaving his hands free.

"I hope that was okay. I really didn't want to surprise you – but –"

He was stopped when Emily leaned into his arms and kissed him. Beca, Chloe, Jesse, and Stacie stood at the end of the sidewalk, watching. "That went as well as can be expected for a funeral," Jesse said. Beca and Chloe smiled and leaned in to one another. Stacie smiled as she clasped her
hands around her purse.

"Good idea," Chloe whispered to Beca. Benji had brought it up, but it had been Beca who had convinced him to do it.

The gravesite was still somber, but hearts were slightly lighter. They had been given rose petals to scatter over the coffin instead of dirt to sprinkle. The petals were in every shade Beca had personally ever seen – from orange and pink to turquoise and yellow. It was a gorgeous sight, even with the permeating sadness. Once the service was over, she walked to Emily, who was sitting on a stone bench not far from the grave.

Beca sat next to her. "Polite convention would have me ask you how you're doing, but under the circumstances, that seems asinine." Emily smiled at Beca's bluntness. "So, alternatively, is there anything I can do?"

"I'm not ready to go yet."

"We're not in any hurry. You can stay as long as you need to." Emily glanced at the waiting crowd – Benji, Jesse, Stacie, Aubrey, Cynthia Rose – and so many more.

"I don't want them to stay. I need some space. I can walk back when I'm ready."

"I'll wait with you. I promise I won't be in the way. I'll even hide from you if you prefer." Emily smiled again and Beca considered that a win. "I'll have Chloe leave the rental."

Emily gave her an apologetic expression. "I'd really like to walk." She would do just about anything for Emily – and she suspected that was about to be proven.

Despite her head throwing out objections such as, "heels," "dress," and "miles." Beca just nodded. "Give me a minute, okay?" She rubbed Emily's back lightly before standing and walking to her gathered friends.

Jesse looked back at Emily, still sitting. "She's not following you."

"She wants to stay for a little while," Beca answered. "I'm going to stay with her."

"We can wait," Chloe said.

"She doesn't want you to," Beca said apologetically. "Just go back to the house – we'll get there eventually. She wants to walk."

"That's at least a mile," Chloe said, looking down at Beca's shoes. They were lovely kitten heels with dainty bows. They were not walking shoes.

"I'll be fine," Beca promised.

"Take these," Flo said, toing off her black flats. They were patent leather and also had pretty bows – but they were much more practical for walking. Beca inwardly sighed in relief and accepted them, giving Flo her heels. They had discovered long ago that they wore identical shoe sizes. This time, it was a lifesaver. Stacie, who wore Emily's size shoe, had flats in her car. She brought them out and handed them to Beca, who thanked her.

Almost two hours later, Beca stood with Emily in front of the Bella house. It was hopping. It wasn't loud like it would have been in the case of a party, but it was busy. "Do I really have to be social?" Emily asked quietly, sighing in exhaustion and defeat as Beca put an arm around her and began
nudging her up the sidewalk.

"Only for a few minutes," Beca told her. There was a relief to the ceremony being over and you could feel it in the atmosphere in the house. No one was gleeful, but the tidbits of conversation were brighter and happier. Some of the older Bellas were entertaining with stories of some of Katherine's most daring deeds (or misdeeds) in college. Emily went to the kitchen with Benji, where Beca knew someone would make sure she ate. Jessica had been trying to feed everyone – in gluttonous proportions – since she'd arrived late Wednesday.

Beca herself felt her muscles loosen a bit as she watched Emily walk away. She had barely two minutes to herself before her Dad and Sheila were in front of her, smiling. Her dad offered his arms and she allowed him to hug her – and surprised them all by following that with an unrequested hug for Sheila.

"Bec, you should be very proud."

"I didn't do that much," she said uncomfortably. "But thanks. I think it turned out well, as far as funerals go." She looked him in the eyes and spoke in a dry tone. "Where's the booze?"

He laughed and put a hand on her back, leading her to the living room where a makeshift bar had been set up. After her second Scotch, Beca was feeling much looser. Chloe, who had been flitting around checking on everyone and everything, finally found her. She sat next to Beca in the window seat in the upstairs hallway. It was a good spot. Beca could see down into the living room, so she wasn't completely cut off – but there was no space for people to gather around her and try to converse.

"This is a fairly good hiding spot. It even gives the appearance that you might not be trying to hide," she said, using a hand to smooth Beca's hair behind her ear.

"Faux social participation, at its finest," she said, mock toasting with her empty glass. Beca leaned into Chloe's side and rested her head against the other woman's shoulder. The redhead stroked her hair and rubbed her back. They sat in silence for several minutes.

"What happens now?"

"Fuck if I know," Beca said sharply. Then she sighed and took a deep breath, soothing herself. "Sorry. I don't know. I feel guilty being away from work for so long when they just hired me – but Khalid is being really cool about it. I can probably stretch it another few days. But I still think I need to be back by Tuesday. But maybe I can come back down for a long weekend at the end of the month?"

"Not a bad idea," Chloe agreed. "Ashley doesn't live far – and she's willing to stop in occasionally. Sheila and your Dad seemed up to it as well. She's not going to be alone." Beca nodded against Chloe's shoulder.

"What are we going to do?" She asked softly.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm scheduled to move to LA in just over a month. You're in school in New York. How does that work?"

"How do you want it to work?" Beca said nothing and Chloe tilted her chin up so their eyes met. "What do you want?"
Beca blushed. "What I want isn't fair."

"I'm not asking you what's fair. What do you want, Beca?" Beca tried to cast her eyes down, but Chloe held her chin so their eyes continued to meet.

"I want you to come to LA," she said, pained. "But that's selfish and –"

"Then I will come to LA."

"What about school?"

Chloe shook her head. "It's still early enough to withdraw. Honestly, I'm not as excited about it as I was originally. Animals are cute. But they're also kind of gross."

Beca smiled, holding back a full-out laugh.

"I love you, you weirdo," she said, hugging Chloe and snuggling more comfortably into her side.

Thank you for reading! I hope you liked the chapter. I wasn't sure I would get it up so quickly – but I wanted to – because I'm leaving in the morning for a week-long conference. So there probably won't be any updates until next Sunday or early that week.

Please let me know what you think, what you liked, things that stood out, things that you're wondering. Feedback helps immensely!
Every Step of the Way

Sorry for the delay - I was out of town for a bit. Hope this lives up to the wait. Please share your thoughts!

Chapter 6 – Every Step of the Way

"And so I'll go, but I know/ I'll think of you every step of the way/ And I will always love you."

~ Dolly Parton

That night, Beca could not sleep. It was around two in the morning when Chloe, frustrated that it was also keeping her from sleeping, rolled over and peered at her. "Why are you awake?" She asked in a tired, scratchy voice.

"Can't sleep. It's nothing – I'll be fine. Sorry."

"What's wrong?"

Beca was silent for several moments before speaking. "We need to talk about something before you decide you want to drop out of vet school and come to California." Chloe, completely awake now, turned on the bedside lamp and sat up, looking down at Beca in perfect seriousness. Beca squinted.

"I actually preferred the light off," she said. Chloe turned it back off and slid back down under the warmed covers, pushing herself up on one elbow so she could see the smaller woman. "Yeah, that's not going to work either," Beca said. "Can we just – not look at each other right now?" Chloe lay back and stared up at the ceiling.

"Is that better, weirdo?"

"Yes," Beca responded, her voice shaky. "I'm sorry – it's just – this is hard."

"What is going on, Beca? You're scaring me."

Beca let out a sigh. "It's not anything scary, it's just hard. And it's important. I dated Jesse for four years."

"I'm aware," Chloe said dryly. "I was there."

Beca continued her admissions before she could talk herself out of them. "We successfully had sex like three times. Maybe four. It depends on what you could as –"

"What?" Chloe asked, turning her head in surprise. Her heart broke as she realized that Beca was crying.

"And by success, I don't mean that it was good," Beca said softly. "At all."
"Did he?" Chloe stopped – not even knowing what to ask. "What happened?"

Beca shook her head. "He didn't do anything wrong. He didn't hurt me on purpose – or even just by not being careful or attentive. He was saint, really." She took a shuddering breath and wiped away tears. "I just need you to understand that something's wrong – and I honestly don't know what to do about it. Sex freaks me out – and even when I can get further without a panic attack, it hurts. Even without anything going inside. And you deserve to know that before this gets any more serious. Because if you need to walk away right now, I get that. I hear sex is something most people enjoy," she adding, trying to joke. It fell very flat.

Chloe was silent for several minutes. Beca closed her eyes and prepared herself to stay calm, fully expecting her heart to be shattered. She opened her eyes when she felt weight. Chloe was sitting on her, leaning over close. "Is that all?"

Beca's eyes bulged. "What do you mean – is that all? It's a big deal."

"I know that," Chloe responded. "But it's not a deal breaker. In case you haven't noticed, I don't need to be having sex every five minutes to be happy. I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself."

"Ew," Beca said, wrinkling her nose.

Chloe kissed her cheek. "I always figured there was a reason for your prudishness. It's fine – we'll work on it – when you're ready. We'll go slow and we'll figure it out."

"This isn't a "maybe still" problem," Beca told her softly. "It's a "definitely still" problem. I don't think it's gotten better. The idea –" She paused as she took a deep breath and tried to even her breathing. "The idea of intimacy is still causing me major anxiety."

"Okay," Chloe said calmly. "We don't want that." She lay back down beside Beca and lifted herself up on one elbow, watching her. "Of course it would cause you anxiety if you've never been able to have sex without pain." They were quiet for a long time, Beca carefully wiping away tears as they fell. Chloe finally spoke again, gently. "Is this something you're willing to work on? Because I can be patient. I'm not sure, though, that I can be celibate for the rest of my life."

Beca wiped away more tears. "I'm willing to try," Beca admitted. "But I'm afraid it's not going to be enough." She tried to bit back sobs, but failed.

"We'll cross that bridge if we come to it," Chloe assured her. She lay down completely and pulled Beca into her arms. "We're not going to worry about it right now. We have plenty to worry about in the meantime."

Beca tried to fight it, but she shuddered with tears. "How can you just change your life – your plans – when you don't know how this is going to turn out?"

"I've loved you for years – no sex involved. That hasn't changed. Would I like to have sex with my girlfriend? Absolutely? But I'm not an impatient person. We'll take our time and figure it out together," Chloe promised softly. "Just take a deep breath," she said, calmly. She rubbed Beca's back and lulled her into a calmer place until she was finally sleeping. Chloe fell asleep quickly after.

Fully guilty of trying to avoid another conversation so soon, Beca slipped quietly out of bed very
early the next morning. She washed her face, brushed her teeth, and dressed in jeans and one of her favorite, most-comfortable flannels in black and red. She left a note for Chloe, checked to see that Emily was still sleeping, and slipped out the back door.

It was a seven-minute walk to her dad's house. He didn't seem surprised to see her – and actually saw her approaching from the breakfast nook window. He opened the front door and invited her in before she had the chance to reach the door. Sheila was already awake – and they had been in the breakfast nook, sharing coffee and tea and an egg casserole.

"Sit down," Sheila said, pointing to one of the empty seats in the window-filled and sun-filled room.

"I don't want to interrupt –"

"You're not," Sheila said, insisting. "We don't usually have breakfast visitors. Coffee or tea?" Her dad had already plunked a mug in front of her and taken his own seat again.

"Coffee," Beca answered. Sheila poured it and Beca added in the creamer, lifting the mug in both hands to appreciate the warmth before she began sipping. "Do all old people wake up this early? Because I'm not feeling it."

Sheila laughed and Warren chuckled. "These old people do," he told her. "But not everyone does. I'm sure your mother doesn't open her eyes before noon, now that she's retired." The room grew uncomfortable for a moment and Beca could see that he regretted bringing her mother into the conversation. Anna Marie Mitchell was not anyone's favorite topic.

"How long can you stay?" Sheila asked, finally breaking the silence.

Beca shrugged slightly. "I think I should head back Monday – be at work by Tuesday morning. Theo has been in touch and keeps telling me to take whatever time I need – but I haven't been there long – I don't want to rock the boat more than I need to."

"Aren't you Theo's boss?" Her dad asked, with an amused smile.


"I look forward to meeting him," Warren said. "But you're not telling me that because you're dating —"

"God, no," Beca said quickly, making a disgusted face that caused Sheila to laugh and her dad to smirk. Her smirk. That's where she got it from. She blushed before answering. "No. I – um. Well, it's brand new – so I'm sure I'll find a way to screw it up – but I'm actually dating Chloe."

"How nice," Sheila said sincerely. "Chloe is lovely."

"You'll have to forgive me for not noticing," he dad said with an amused smile. "Since you and Chloe seem to have been dating since you met."

"Dad," she said with a groan.

"What?" He asked, chuckling. "Just being honest. Or- what is it the kids are calling it – woke?"

"No," Beca said seriously, shaking her head at him. "No, dad. You're not allowed to use a word unless you understand it 100% and you've already heard someone your own age use it without
"Just trying to stay up on the times," he teased.

"Don't," Beca assured him. "Stay middle aged and professor-y," she advised. "It works for you." He grinned from amusement and went back to his coffee.

Sheila had cut a piece of the breakfast casserole and placed it on a plate in front of Beca, who now began to nibble at it with the fork her dad had slid over. She saw her father and his wife exchanging looks. After eating part of her breakfast, she set her fork down again and looked at them. "I don't really know what to do, now that the funeral is over. Not like I was working with a ton of information before – but now I really don't know how to help. I have two days to somehow make things okay."

"That's a big order. Not a fair responsibility to put on just you," her dad told her. "Emily knows you care. But she also knows you have a life to get back to. People move on. You have to support her however you can – sometimes that means from a distance. She has other friends here." He wasn't being callous, just trying to make his daughter understand that this wasn't just her responsibility.

"We would be happy to help," Sheila told her.

"I appreciate it," Beca answered. "It would be nice – If you could check in with her every once in a while." She paused. "What do I do – while I'm still here?"

They sat in silence for several moments before Sheila made a suggestion. "The house. It's too early to make a decision. You're not supposed to do that right away. But it still needs to be tied up and closed up – since no one will be living there – at least for a while. Someone needs to keep up the lawn –" She reached into a small drawer in the table and pulled out a pad and pencil and began making a list of everything that came to mind as she spoke. Beca realized, when she was done, that it was a long list.

"We can help you ladies," Warren said, "if you wouldn't mind the company of middle aged professors."

"You don't have to do that."

"We don't mind," Sheila added.

"I would really appreciate it," Beca said with a nod, biting the inside of her lip to keep tears at bay. Once she had finished her second cup of coffee and a whole piece of the delicious breakfast bake, Beca thanked them again and excused herself to walk back to the Bella house.

She had been gone for over two hours – it was almost 8:30 and it seemed that everyone was awake. Stacie, Aubrey, and Cynthia Rose were headed to the airport that morning. Jesse and Benji had to start driving before lunch. They all sat around the kitchen and dining room, along with Emily and several of the current Bellas. Beca accepted a fresh cup of coffee from Jesse and sat down beside Chloe.

When breakfast ended, Hannah and Caroline did dishes while the older Bellas said goodbye to Emily. The young woman looked shell shocked, more than anything, and was quiet as Aubrey, Cynthia Rose, and Stacie all said their goodbyes. Beca walked to the front yard to hug them as well, leaving Stacie for last.

"Call me if you need me," Stacie told her.
"I always need you," Beca told her with a small smile. "Keep LA interesting until I get there."

"Oh, you know it," Stacie responded, winking. She squeezed Beca one more time before letting go, blowing another kiss to Emily, and heading for the taxi where Aubrey and Cynthia Rose were already waiting. Beca and Emily sat on the porch steps, watching the car pull away. Chloe stood behind them, shivering slightly with her arms crossed in front of her.

"Come on, ladies! It's cold out here." Emily looked at Beca, who raised an eyebrow and shrugged.

"Love, you're the only one cold," Beca said, turning her head to view Chloe over her shoulder. "Go ahead inside. We'll be in soon."

"You're both crazy," Chloe said, but the door closed quickly after. They sat in silence for several minutes. After Beca had been sitting in silence for ten minutes, she began to feel the chill Chloe was complaining about. It came out when the sun fell behind the clouds.

"I don't know what to do," Emily said softly, after those minutes of quiet. Beca reached over and took her hand, squeezing it. She turned slightly so she was facing Emily. She wasn't sure either, big-picture wise. But minutia, she understood.

"First, look at the syllabi for your classes and figure out what was due this past week – or in the next few weeks. Make a list. I'll help you figure it out with your calendar." Scheduling was something Beca was – surprisingly to her – extremely talented at. From years of keeping track of nine other girls and her own life, she knew exactly how much time Jessica needed to put aside to study before a chemistry test or how much time Stacie needed to dedicate to writing a 10-page paper. Emily was not an efficient planner. It had been something that she'd needed and wanted Beca's help with – almost every Sunday night in her Freshman year – and later by phone or email. Emily didn't respond and Beca squeezed her hand. "Do that now," she suggested with a soft tone.

Emily did get up then – and headed back to the house and then up the stairs to her room. Beca followed her into the house and went back to the kitchen to refresh her cup of coffee. Third for the day. She should probably slow down with the caffeine, she knew. Hannah was cleaning up the kitchen.

"Hey," Beca said calmly. "Can you grab the practice schedule for the rest of the semester? Can I see it?"

"It's kind of messed up now," Hannah told her.

"Want help?" Beca asked dryly.

Hannah's eyes lit up. "Yes, please. I have no idea –"

"Just go get it," Beca ordered, cutting her off. She could deal with no additional emotions in that moment. She sighed and sat at the dining room table, waiting. Jesse made faces at her from the living room and she glowered back. Hannah brought the practice calendar and the master calendar – still made in the template Beca had always used – that showed all the girls' classes and other activities. Together, they figured out how much practice had been missed and tried to add it back in to the coming weeks.

By the time they finished, Emily appeared with her computer. Her eyes gave away already-shed tears. Beca looked at the list of assignments and then opened Emily's personal calendar. She, Emily, and Hannah figured out Emily's schedule and double checked the Bella's rehearsal schedule for the rest of the semester.
Beca synced the finished calendars to Emily's phone and handed it to her. "You can do this," she said, softly, so that only Emily heard. The taller brunette nodded. Jesse and Benji began shuffling around, preparing to leave. Beca found herself dwarfed by a Benji hug, then embraced by her ex. She smiled into his shoulder.

"Where are you living in LA, now that you're single?"

"Interested?" He asked, faux flirting.

"You wish," Beca responded. "Seriously, dude, where are you staying?"

"With Benji, while he finishes his last semester of grad school," Jesse said. "His plan is to stay until at least the end of May – but I can take over the lease if I want. It's a nice place. You were there, once."

"I remember," Beca said. "It is a nice place. Take care of yourself, Casanova. Choose your ladies wisely. Maybe we can have drinks, once we're both of the west coast?"

"It's a non-date," Jesse said with a smile and a nod. He squeezed her one more time and pulled away to say goodbye to Emily and Chloe. Emily was a slight problem. She was sobbing, painfully – and Benji had no idea how to extricate himself. Nor did it look like he wanted to. Finally, Chloe stepped in and pulled Emily away – and it took actual strength to do it. Benji told her he loved her and – looking absolutely heartbroken – allowed Jesse to lead him away.

Chloe let go and Emily collapsed to the sofa, hiding her face against the pillows. Beca sighed softly and sat down next to her, stroking her hair and exchanging concerned looks with Chloe. Once she was settled down, Beca decided to suggest going to the house. Things couldn't exactly get worse.

"Legacy?" Emily, who was now sitting in the corner of the sofa, looked at her in response. "Why don't we go up to your house and make sure everything's ok to leave for a few months?" There was silence but Emily eventually nodded. "Is it okay if my dad and Sheila come? They know stuff about houses." Another nod. "OK- why don't you go get ready? We'll leave in a few minutes."

Emily walked up the stairs and Chloe turned to Beca.

"Who are you and what have you done with Beca Mitchell?"

"They know stuff about houses," Beca insisted.

Chloe smirked and teased, "you like your dad and step-mom."

"You're weird," Beca said, making a face at her before leaving the room. Chloe smiled with amusement in her wake. Warren and Sheila were just ahead of them, so Beca pulled in next to them in the drive. She flipped her sunglasses into her hair and shoved the car key into her pocket. Sheila was carrying a basket and Warren a toolbox.

"Did you eat lunch?" Sheila asked. Chloe and Beca both looked surprised and then looked at their phones.

"No," Beca responded. "Kind of forgot about that."

"I have sandwiches."

"Of course you do," Beca said, not unkindly. They sat in the kitchen and ate lunch together. Sheila had made several types of sandwiches, cut up fresh fruit, and made lemonade. Beca felt it was irritating that she was making herself so likeable.
After eating, they took a walk through the house. Warren showed them how to turn off the gas, how to shut down the main water valve. They opened every faucet and emptied the toilets. Emily unplugged all the electronics while Sheila and Chloe gave everything a once-over cleaning and Warren went outside to check the gutters to make sure they weren't blocked. Beca went to make sure he didn't fall off the ladder.

"Sure you should be doing this, old man?" She asked, slightly teasing, slightly nervous. Warren ruffled her hair before starting up the ladder. She swatted at him, straightening it again with her fingers.

"Who do you think puts up the Christmas lights every year?"

"I think you have enough money to pay someone to do that!" Beca called after him.

She breathed easier when his feet were on the ground. "Seriously," she told him. "Have you no fear?" Warren laughed and took the ladder further down to check that part of the roof. Once they were finished, he placed it back in the garage. They found a few things to unplug there – and then walked through the house, checking each room.

When they reached the living room, Warren closed the chimney flu and then they joined the other three women in the kitchen. Sheila was going through the refrigerator and cabinets, packing some things into a cooler, others into a box, and still others into the garbage.

The whole process took less than three hours, which Beca found terribly depressing. They were carrying things to the car, preparing to go, when Emily disappeared. Beca found her sitting in her bedroom, staring.

"I won't live here again," Emily told her.

"You don't know that."

Emily met her eyes. "Yes, I do. I should just sell it now."

"This isn't a good time to make that decision," Beca told her. "Wait a few months – it's not going anywhere – see how you feel."

"I won't change my mind."

"Then you'll have the added bonus of telling me, "I told you so,"" Beca grumbled. "Come on, let's go." She reached for Emily's hand and waited for the younger woman to stand and take it.

Chloe, Warren and Sheila were waiting for them in the drive. Warren addressed Emily first. "I spoke to one of your neighbors – Mr. and Mrs. Greeley?" Emily nodded. They had been at the funeral. "They'll take care of the lawn until you decide what you want to do. They won't take any money for it – but you can always buy them a giftcard or something if you want."

"Thank you," Emily responded. She turned to Sheila. "Thank you, both. You didn't have to do this." Sheila hugged her.

"It's not a problem, dear. You know where we live – stop by any time. Don't be a stranger like this one," she said, pointing to Beca.

"In fairness, I live well out of walking distance," Beca said dryly. Emily smiled and thanked them again. She climbed into the backseat on the rental car and – a minutes later - watched as her childhood home – the place where she had been raised – the foundation made home by her mother
- disappeared into the distance.

Thank you for reading! Please do take a moment to let me know your thoughts - what you liked, what you didn't, what you wonder, what you're hoping to see. Thanks!
Chapter 7 - The World at Her Feet

"There's the Whole World at Your Feet." ~ Mary Poppins.

The night before she left, Beca asked Emily to join her on a walk. They wandered together in the same circuit Beca had walked with Jesse – through campus, around the pond. They were almost directly across from the Bella House when one of them spoke. "I wish I didn't have to leave tomorrow," Beca told her honestly.

"But you do," Emily said calmly, offering a brave semi-smile. "And that's okay. You have to get back to work. And you and Chloe deserve some alone time."

"Yeah, well – we live with Amy, so –"

Emily laughed. "Maybe Amy will locate her millions and move out."

Beca made a playful shrugging motion that indicated that she'd believe that when she saw it. They were silent for a few moments until Emily assured her friend,

"I'll be okay."

"I know you will be," Beca answered with a soft smile. "And you know that if you need anything. Anything – you can call me. I don't care what time of day – I don't care if you think I'm busy – if you need something – even just to talk – you call."

Emily nodded. "I will. And I know. I can't thank you for everything you've done. For just being here. I felt so lost. I still do, really. My mom was my world for so long. I just – I can't believe she's gone. But you made the past week bearable. And that's saying a lot. Thank you."

"No thanks needed," Beca said, reaching over to squeeze her hand. "We're family." They walked in silence for several more minutes before Beca continued. "So, I have to get back to work – but I'm moving at the end of the month – so I thought – after we got the moving truck packed up, we could come down to visit you for the weekend before meeting the moving truck in LA."

"I don't want to add to the stress of moving – "

"You're not," Beca promised. "I think it'll be nice to have the distraction. Otherwise, we'll go to a furniture-less apartment and get there at least a day before the furniture. What will we sit on? Where will we put things?"

Emily laughed. "Well, if that's the case, then I guess you have to come here."

The next morning, Emily woke with them at four – their flight left from the airport at 6:30. Beca was not a fan of these early morning flights. From what Theo had already told her, she needed to get used to them. She accepted a travel cup of mint tea from Chloe, silently blessing the woman for knowing that her stomach was already a mess from waking up so early. They had said their goodbyes the night before, but Emily walked with them to the car and hugged them each one more time.
"Love you, Legacy," Beca said.

"Love you too," Emily responded. "Safe travels."

Beca winked. "We'll see you soon. Take care of yourself." Emily nodded. Chloe blew her another kiss and they got into the car and drove away.

"You okay?" Chloe asked as they drove to the airport.

"Not really." Beca admitted. The bit back the desire to simply say that she was fine. She was beginning to learn - finally - that Chloe needed the truth more than she needed platitudes. And she needed to stop pretending she was as cool and aloof as she appeared at first sight.

"What's going on in that head of yours?"


"Try me," Chloe suggested. She knew that talking out problems wasn't Beca's favorite hobby - but it might help to clear some of her anxieties.

Beca was silent as she merged onto the highway. Once she was in the flow of traffic, she spoke again. "I'm worried about Emily. I kind of miss her already – and we literally just saw her. She's going to be fine - I know that. But she's still so sad. And I hate to think of her alone like that." She barely took a breath before moving on. "I liked spending time with my dad – and even Sheila - and that is not something I ever thought I would say. It's really messing with my head. I'm worried about the sex stuff – and I'm worried about screwing things up and losing you when I've only just stopped being stupid long enough to find you."

Chloe reached over to gently rub Beca's shoulder, trying to chase away some of the stress that has settled into her muscles. "That is a lot," Chloe said gently. "Maybe I can help."

"First, you are not stupid – and you never were. Stubborn as hell, yes. Stupid, no. And stop insulting my girlfriend. I won't allow it." Beca failed at biting back a smile as Chloe continued. "Emily is going to be fine. She has a lot of support here in Georgia – and we're going to see her again in a few weeks. Your dad loves you – and you love him. You always have – you're just growing up and realizing that – flaws and all – he's a decent guy. And you know what? You don't have to be a stranger. I can almost guarantee you that if you call him once – or even a few times a week, he'll be thrilled."


Chloe smiled. "You know, you never talk about why you're so negative about your dad. He's a little overprotective – pushed you in a direction you didn't think you wanted to go a few years ago – but other than that, what's the deal?"

Beca shrugged. It was silent. Beca actually looked at the clock – and after five minutes, she realized that Chloe was literally going to wait for an answer. Patiently, at that. It unnerved the smaller woman and got her talking again. Exactly what the redhead had been going for. "I don't really understand completely myself," she finally admitted. "I was pissed at him for leaving. But I think I was angrier at him for leaving me behind."

"He didn't get shared custody?"

Beca shook her head. "My mom was - loud - during the divorce. She complained, she accused. She always told stories about him. The judge believed her. She got full custody, child support,
alimony – everything she wanted." She sighed. "Some of what she wanted was just to spite him. It took me a long time to realize that. My dad moved away not long after. He was supposed to get some visitation, but she never let that happen." She swallowed. "She sent me across the country for two weeks every summer so she could take a vacation - and sometimes for a few days at Christmas or Thanksgiving."

"You don't talk a lot about your mom."

"And I'm not going to," Beca said firmly. "Let's not go there." Her voice was filled with enough anger and pain that Chloe allowed her curiosity to dissipate.

"Back to your list of current worries," Chloe said, almost cheerfully. "Sex. Stop worrying about it. Would it help if we just put a moratorium on it?"

"What do you mean?" Beca asked, shooting her an amused expression.

"Like, no sex for three months – no matter what."

"Why would you agree to that?"

"Because you need time to get comfortable with the idea – to look into whatever issues you might be having physically – and you don't need the pressure. So," Chloe said with a sweeping voice of finality, "I refuse to sleep with you for at least three months."

Beca laughed and shook her head. "You are such a weirdo." She wiped tears from the corners of her eyes.

"I'm your weirdo."

"Yes, yes you are," Beca agreed, reaching over to squeeze her hand for a moment before letting go and putting both hands back on the wheel.

The next few months were nothing, if not hectic. Beca spoke with Emily almost daily. On the nights when she worked too long in the studio, Chloe would make the call – and fill her in the next morning. Her dad and Sheila invited Emily to dinner at least twice a week – and Ashley kidnapped her for fun on the weekends.

At the end of the month, Beca and Chloe moved to LA. The company helped with and paid for the move. They financed a realtor to take them around and show them housing options. Eventually, they moved into a nice little townhouse with a small garden, open floor planning, and a beautiful balcony.

When in LA, Beca worked insanely long hours – but sometimes only a few days a week. If she worked three 12 or 14 hour days, she would be encouraged – or sometimes directly ordered - by Khalid or Theo - to take four off. So although her time with Chloe wasn't traditional, they did have time to spend together. To decorate their new home – which was their first project together. Chloe hadn't thought Beca would have many opinions on what she wanted. She was wrong. They spent Beca's days off painting walls, choosing and then rearranging furniture, buying decorative Knick-knacks, and settling in to a space that was beginning to feel like home.

In late April, they were packing for a trip back to Georgia for Emily's graduation. In that instance, Chloe was doing the packing. Beca was sitting on their bed, working on her computer. She finished
the file she was working on and moved her headphones to rest around her neck. She closed the computer and turned her attention to her girlfriend. Chloe held up a dusty pink sleeveless dress with a flowy skirt and eyelet detail along the neck and hem. Beca tilted her head at it and then gave it the thumbs up. She didn't personally love the color, but she knew it looked nice on her. The dress was then rolled neatly and packed into the suitcase. Several pairs of jeans, t-shirts, her favorite flannel, and several dressier blouses followed, along with two different jackets.

"I don't get a say on those?" Beca asked, eyeing the suitcase.

"You didn't really have a say on the dress, now did you?" Chloe asked her, teasingly. Beca rolled her eyes but smiled.

"Did you put underwear in there?" Beca asked, peering again at her suitcase. "Because some people prefer to wear it all the time. Whatever you think is personally appropriate, double it."

"There is a pair for each day," Chloe assured her.

Beca made a face and Chloe went to the drawer to pull out two more pairs. "Thank you."

"No problem, my darling weirdo."

"You're the one who prefers to go commando," Beca said with a shrug. "I'd call you the weirdo," she added in a muttered voice. She watched as Chloe chose her own clothing and packed it into the open case. "What are we doing, about Emily?"

"Are you going to ask her again to come to LA?"

"Are you okay with that?"

"Of course," Chloe said. "At least until she decides where she wants to go. Has she talked about it?"

"No," Beca responded. "The last time I asked if she'd thought about what she wanted to do about grad school, she started crying. Sobbing." She paused. "I can't do that again."

"We'll have plenty of time to talk about it if she comes to LA," Chloe told her. "And when we get back – I can show her around. But I was also thinking about applying for my teaching license in California."

"Oh?" Beca asked, interested. They had spoken, at length, about what Chloe wanted to do now that she was on the west coast. Vet school was not something she was still interested in, although Beca still wondered about that. Education has been something suggested to Chloe before - something she'd rebuffed in the past.

"Yeah," Chloe said with a shrug. "I loved student teaching. I think I would like it. It doesn't pay as poorly as it did in Georgia – and I'm already certified in Elementary and Music Ed. Most everything will be transferable. I just need to figure out copies of transcripts and all that."

"If you want to do it, you should do it," Beca assured her. "But if you're doing it because you're worried about money – "

"I'm not," Chloe said honestly. "I just would like to do something meaningful again. And I think that would be."

"Of course it would be. Where would any of us be without teachers?" Most of her teachers had been pains in the ass, but a few had steered her in the right direction. She stood and walked over to
Chloe, hugging her close and kissing her. "I'm very happy for you. But promise me, you'll only do this if it makes you happy."

"I promise," Chloe agreed. She kissed her again before breaking away to finish packing.

They arrived in Georgia two days later, along with Stacie, Aubrey, Jesse, and Benji. Graduation was a few days away – Nationals a few days after that – and if their phone calls were any indication – Emily was freaking out. When Beca and Chloe arrived at the Bella House, they were told that Emily was in the library – where she had been sequestering herself for days. Beca helped Chloe make lunch and then dutifully carried the small bag to the university library. There, she politely – then less than politely – asked where she could find Emily.

The student on the desk eventually gave her the study room number, after Beca assured him that, otherwise, she would knock on every door until she found Emily. Reaching the correct floor and the correct study room, Beca knocked lightly. Emily took a moment, but opened it. Beca's frown deepened upon seeing her red eyes, lined with deep bags indicating little or no sleep.

"Hi," Emily said. "I wasn't expecting you."

"It's Wednesday," Beca said, edging past her and into the small room. "I told you Wednesday." She paused as she considered the short time since she'd spoken to her friend. "I told you I was coming today – yesterday. Less than 24 hours, Em."

"I've been busy, studying for finals."

"I see that." Beca sat in the chair that wasn't in front of the table strewn with books, notebooks, and rainbow of highlighters. Emily closed the door and sat in the other chair, sinking into it with a tired sigh.

"I'm sorry. I lost track of time."

"You don't have to apologize," Beca told her. "But I have to say, it doesn't exactly look like you're taking care of yourself. Which I very clearly remember you promising me you would do."

"I'm trying," Emily said, voice edging on frustration and maybe anger. Beca's expression softened. She knew she wasn't the only one pointing these things out to the tall brunette.

"Okay," Beca said evenly. "Chloe, being Chloe, assumed you hadn't eaten and made lunch." She opened the lunch bag and withdrew sandwiches. After studying them, she tossed the peanut butter and banana one to Emily while keeping hers that paired peanut butter with strawberry jelly. She handed Emily a bottle of water and a small glass dish of nuts and dried fruit.

Emily sighed and began eating, understanding that she wasn't really being given a choice. Once they finished their respective meals, Beca stood and stared out the window. People were lounging on the quad, playing on the grass. Finals were almost over – and that spirit of freedom was in the air.

"When is your last final?" Beca asked.

"Tonight," Emily answered.

"Okay. Do you need anything?"

"No. Thank you for lunch. Thank Chloe for me."
"Will do. You're coming right home after the test?" Emily nodded. She was home by nine that evening – and with very little urging from everyone – went straight to bed.

The next day, most of the girls were scattered by the time Emily woke. She dressed and made her way to the kitchen to find Beca making French Toast. There were a few pieces of bacon left on a platter in the center of the table. "Good morning," she said, without turning.

"Morning," Emily responded. "Have you been up long?"

"I sleep next to a human alarm clock," Beca told her. "Most days I can roll back over and go back to sleep. Today was not one of those days." She split the slices of French toast between two plates and turned off the burners. She handed one plate to Emily and they sat at the table together.

"How are things going with Chloe?"

"Surprisingly well, considering how busy it's been. Transitions are stressful."

"Tell me about it," Emily muttered. "How do you like LA?"

"So far," Beca told her, "the studio - and our townhouse – both are great. I've seen very little else." She paused and set her fork down to pick up her coffee cup with both hands. "Have you thought about what we talked about last week?"

Emily nodded. "Yeah – and I can't come to LA. It's not fair."

"What's not fair about it?"

"You're going to be cutting your first record – having fun – and being busy. You just started dating Chloe. You don't need me to be moping in the corner."

"So don't mope in the corner," Beca told her. "Come stay with us for a bit. Stay until you decide what you want to do next."

"I can't just take over your life." They had had this conversation before. This conversation had turned into an argument more than once. Beca was finished with it - and didn't have the heart to allow it to escalate again.

Beca sighed heavily. "Emily, what are you going to do on May 5th if you stay here?" She alluded to the day after Nationals, which caused Emily to begin sobbing.

"I don't know," she admitted, finally.

Beca rubbed her back. "Then come with us. If it doesn't work out, we'll figure out next steps. It doesn't need to be permanent. If nothing else, it will be a vacation in California for a few months. But I really think it will be good for you." Emily nodded. It seemed to relieve her of a bit of stress – to know where she was going after graduation and the Nationals competition. She had been accepted – with full fellowships – to several university PhD programs in psychology. But she had asked for extensions – and hadn't yet accepted one of the offers.

Graduation started the next day with a Baccalaureate ceremony. Beca sat between Chloe and Stacie as they watched Emily in her crowd of friends and classmates. The large university graduation followed, with the school-specific ceremonies and celebratory luncheons the next day.

Warren and Sheila were there as well, smiling as proudly as they had when Beca had graduated. Warren had insisted on taking Emily to a nice dinner, so that night they dressed up again and
headed to a nice restaurant in Atlanta - complete with table cloths and candles. Benji was also invited and he rode awkwardly in the back of Warren's car with Emily while Beca and Chloe followed in their rental.

The dinner was delicious and the service perfect. After their meal, they sat with coffee and tea and desserts. "Emily," Sheila asked, "what are you going to do this summer?"

"Nationals is next week," Emily said. "So there's still a lot of practice for that. But then I'm going to stay with Beca and Chloe for a little while – until I decide where to go for grad school."

"That's a nice idea," Warren answered. "What are you think about, for grad school? You have a lot of great options." Beca's eyes widened and if she wasn't afraid of hitting Benji or Sheila, she totally would have kicked her dad. But Emily's composure didn't fray.

She smiled politely and nodded. "I do," she agreed. "I still don't know how to decide."

"Is there anything that helps you make your decisions? I always find that writing helps me – I just write about it until there's nothing left to say – and usually I find my answers."

Emily nodded and swallowed. "I used to talk to my mom. I just knew – after talking to her – what I needed to do. I'm kind of lost without that. But there are other ways to decide," she said softly.

"Of course there are. Do you know what you want to study, yet?" Sheila asked, trying to gently guide the conversation forward. Emily dove into an explanation about the course of study she was considering for her doctoral thesis. She would gain her Masters degree along the way, but her doctoral degree was the goal. No tears were shed during that conversation about the future - and for that, they were all grateful. If felt, for the first time in a while, that Emily understood that the world was at her feet.

Nationals was a whirlwind that ended in Emily leading the Bellas to their sixth national championship trophy in seven years. Two days later, most of Emily’s belongings were in storage in Georgia and she was on a plane to LA with Beca and Chloe.

Thank you for reading! Please do leave a comment to let me know what you thought, what you liked, what you didn't, what you hope to see - anything you'd like to share. This was a transition chapter, so I hope it read smoothly.
As soon as they returned to LA, Beca had to get back to work. She felt guilty leaving at seven Monday morning, but Chloe would be home, so she grabbed her lunch and her laptop, kissed the redhead, and left. When Emily woke up in the guest bedroom, she could smell bacon from down the stairs. She washed her face, quickly got dressed, and walked to the kitchen. Chloe was in workout clothes, hair in a messy bun, frying bacon and dancing to music piped over the room's sound system.

"Good morning," she said cheerfully.

"Hey," Emily said with a smile. "I'm sorry I slept in – I hope I didn't mess with your plans—" Chloe cut her off by ordering her phone to lower the volume. The music faded and Chloe shook her head at Emily.

"Of course not. No worries!" Chloe assured her. "I did my normal thing – I ran this morning and had coffee with Beca before she left for work. I was just making breakfast – omelet sound good?" Emily nodded.

"You don't have to go to any trouble."

"It's not," Chloe told her. "Can you grab the eggs? And a pepper and the container of spinach? And whatever else you like in yours." Emily did – and then watched as Chloe made omelets for them both. They were soon sitting at the kitchen table and Emily gratefully accepted the cup of coffee Chloe poured for her. They ate in quiet contemplation for several minutes. Once the older woman made it through her meal, she began speaking.

She smiled at Emily. "What would you like to do today? There are a gazillion touristy things – but there's also a pool in the complex – the beach isn't far away –"

Emily bit her lip and paused eating. Finally, she spoke softly. "I don't really know," she admitted. She had been incredibly indecisive since her mother's passing. It was something they all worried about.

"Well, then, we'll go with my plans," Chloe said with a warm smile. To Emily's bewilderment, she had been set up. That realization struck an hour later when Chloe pulled up in front of a medical arts building.

"What are we doing?" She asked, eyes wide.

"You know how people have been suggesting that maybe it's a good idea for you to talk to someone?" Chloe asked, waiting for Emily to nod slightly. "We're doing that," she said firmly. "If you don't like this person, they have like twenty more in the same practice. The practice comes highly rated."

"Don't I get an opinion on this?"
"I just told you, there are about twenty people to choose from – just in this building –"

"No! The whole thing!" Emily cried. "What if I don't want to talk to anyone?"

"You've tried that method for about two months," Chloe said gently. "How's that been working for you?" Emily burst into tears and leaned forward, hiding her face in her hands. Chloe gently rubbed her back, allowing her to cry. She handed Emily tissues and waited. Eventually, the younger woman calmed down. "You don't have to do anything you're not comfortable with," Chloe told her. "But I think you should try this. If it doesn't work out, you can try something else. But it might help. And I think that's worth the risk. You need to figure out how you keep living your life – because that is what your mom would have wanted. And that's the least of what you deserve."

More tears trickled, but Emily eventually calmed down. "I'll try," she said, with a heavy sigh. "Am I late?"

"No," Chloe said softly. "I made sure we were early. You have twenty minutes. What do you need?"

Emily shrugged. They went inside fifteen minutes early, giving Emily time to fill out paperwork and use the ladies room to wash her face and attempt to hide the signs of crying. Once she was inside the office with the therapist, Chloe went outside to walk around the block, all the while hoping she had done the right thing. Her own stomach was a bit troubled over the choices she'd made to get them to this point.

Emily was sitting in the corner of a large sofa, a pillow pulled into her lap. The therapist was a woman who introduced herself as Charlotte. She was not much older than Chloe – and had pretty brown hair done in soft waves. Her dark blue dress and jewelry coordinated perfectly, which Emily liked.

"What brings you here today?"

"A manipulative redhead," Emily answered. The woman smiled.

"Tell me about that." Emily told her about how she was staying with friends – and gave a brief description of Chloe and Beca.

"And why are your friends worried about you?"

"My mom died two months ago," Emily said, hastily wiping at the tears that flowed immediately with those words. The woman handed her a box of tissues and Emily took two and wiped her eyes.

"I'm so sorry to hear that," the woman responded. "How did it happen?" They spent the next hour discussing what had happened, how close Emily and her mother had been, and how Emily had been coping – or not coping – since her death.

The woman told Emily that she would be happy to work with her – to help her through her traumatic grief – if that was what she wanted. "This kind of work has to be your choice," she told Emily. "Something you're ready to face – not just something you've been convinced to do by someone else." They talked for a few minutes longer and – eventually – Emily made another appointment for later in the week.

When she exited the building, Chloe was waiting for her, looking very concerned that she'd overstepped. "Are you okay?" Emily nodded. "What do you think?"

"Talking to someone is probably something I need to do," Emily told her as they got into the car.
"But I don't like how you got me here. It has to be my choice."

"I'm sorry, Em. I just know the first step can be hard to take – but I shouldn't have done it this way. I am sorry. I hope you can forgive me."

Emily nodded, tears filling her eyes. "Of course I do. I know you're trying to help. I just – I need to be in charge of me."

"I understand," Chloe said gently. "Do you want to talk about what happened?" Emily shook her head. "Want to go out for lunch? There's a really pretty café where you can sit right on the beach. I found it a few weeks ago."

"Maybe tomorrow?" Emily said softly.

"Of course," Chloe responded. She drove home and Emily went directly to the guest room, locking herself in. Five hours later, she hadn't come out – but Beca had returned home. She found Chloe in the kitchen, setting out dinner.

Beca set down her bag and keys and toed off her boots before crossing the room to kiss Chloe. She knew something was wrong when the other woman simply pecked her lips and pulled away quickly. Her dark blue eyes darted around the room, then back to assess Chloe, trying to figure out what was amiss. "What's up?"

"I think I messed up," she admitted, her face scrunched in a way that indicated tears could be coming. Beca turned off the oven and dragged her to the table to sit.

"What happened?" Chloe explained what she'd done and Beca looked at her, unimpressed – but also not overly angry.

"That should have been Emily's decision," Beca told her calmly.

"I know! But she was avoiding it – and you were avoiding talking to her about it. So I just thought I would help get the ball rolling. And I feel awful. I knew I was being manipulative – and that's not usually who I am – but I just want everyone to be happy-"

"Hey! Hey," Beca said, loudly, then softly was Chloe stopped. "I think calling it manipulative is a bit strong," she said evenly. "It was wrong – and you should apologize to Emily – but your heart was in the right place. She'll forgive you. But you need to give her space when she asks for it," she said sternly, eyes piercing Chloe's. The redhead nodded. "And things can't always go at your pace, Chlo. Other people need time to adjust."

"I know," Chloe said softly. "I do know that. And I am sorry. I've tried to apologize – but she won't come to the door –"

Beca rolled her eyes and ran her fingers through her hair, dislodging several pins that held back two braids. She used her fingers to loosen the braids as she spoke. "How many times were you up there today, trying to talk to her through the door?"

"Not many," Chloe said. Beca stared at her, waiting as she continued freeing her hair. "Probably more than I should have been. Can you fix it? I'm so sorry –"

Beca cut her off with a soft kiss. "You need to calm down," she said, as she pulled away. She stood and walked to a kitchen drawer to remove a key on a Ravenclaw keychain. "And to think I'm the one who has the fucking panic attacks," she said, grousing.
"You don't express your emotions enough," Chloe told her, sniffling.

Beca walked back over to her and pecked her lips, cupping her cheek for a moment and watching her adoringly. "I think you're handling that well enough for both of us," she teased. She pulled back and pressed her lips together before speaking again. "I'm going to try and talk to Em. Not sure how that's going to go or how long that's going to take," she said carefully. "Eat," she said, looking over at the stove, "before it gets cold. I'll heat mine up later." She patted Chloe's shoulder, swung the key from her fingers, and started up the stairs.

The upstairs wasn't large – it contained the master and two smaller guest rooms. Two bathrooms – one in the master suite and one between the two guest rooms. Beca went to the larger of the two guest rooms where Emily had been installed. They had called it the blue room before Emily's arrival because the flowers on the bedspread were blue – and the few knickknacks they used to decorate the room were similarly hued. Beca walked up to the door and knocked, listening carefully. There wasn't even movement inside.

"Em, it's Beca. Can you please open the door?"

"I'm fine! Please go away!"

"No," Beca said calmly. "Open the door." After receiving no response, Beca sighed and then slid the key into the lock, turning it and opening it in one smooth motion. Emily was sitting on the bed, knees tucked under her chin, watching slack-jawed as Beca walked in. The small brunette dangled the key for Emily to see before sliding it into her pocket and closing the door behind her.

Beca pulled the reaching chair from near the window and sat near the bed – but not too close. Emily said nothing. The sat in silence for over ten minutes as Beca examined her nails and Emily kept her eyes trained on her toes.

"Chloe overstepped," Beca finally said. "She regrets it. And I'm sorry I didn't know enough to intervene."

Emily shrugged. "She wasn't wrong."

"Doesn't mean it was the right thing to do," Beca responded. "Emily, you take whatever time you need — "

"I feel like I'm drowning," Emily said, lifting her head but still hugging her legs to her. "And I want time and space – but I'm afraid that too much space is just going to give me more room to disappear."

"That's not what we want," Beca said softly. She moved to the bed and sat next to Emily, reaching over to grab a hand. "What do you need us to do?"

"I don't know," Emily said, tears beginning. "I have no idea."

"Fair enough," Beca said with a nod. She let go of Emily's hand and turned her attention to the younger woman's hair, which had become a tangled mess during what had probably been several crying jags. She ran her fingers through, carefully working through any knots she encountered. "How did the session go today?"

Emily shrugged as Beca began working her hair into a fishtail braid. "She seemed to know what she was talking about," she admitted. "A lot of what she said made sense. And I do need help figuring out what's next."
"Nothing wrong with accepting help," Beca said. "Did you like whoever it was? I've been dragged
to a series of shrinks in my life – some are great. Some are not. You want to part ways quickly with
those who suck."

"She seemed decent," Emily said. "I was kind of surprised by the whole thing – so part of the time
was just trying to grapple with the idea."

"Are you going back?"

"I think so," she answered. "At least one or two more times – to get a clearer picture of whether or
not it'll help."

Beca nodded and finished off the braid, rolling the bottom into a knot and securing it at the base of
Emily's neck with two bobby pins. "Why do you always play with my hair?" Emily asked.

"Not sure," Beca answered with a shrug. "Probably a nervous habit. Stacie pointed out senior year
that the more stressed out I was, the fancier and more complicated my braids got. Up until then, I
never made the connection."

"So she was right?"

"She wasn't wrong," Beca responded with a soft smile. She met Emily's eyes. "How are you
holding up? Will you come downstairs for dinner with me?"

The younger woman's eyes clouded over. "I kind of just want today to be over," she said, softly.
Beca nodded, understanding that desire. "I'll bring up a plate." She saw Emily begin to argue and
rolled her eyes. "Dude, you have to eat." Emily didn't argue any further. Beca motioned to the door
as she was leaving. "Do not lock this again." She walked back to the kitchen where Chloe was still
picking at her meal.

She looked up as Beca entered, expression hopeful. "Is she coming down?"

"Not tonight," the brunette responded, giving her girlfriend a small smile. "She'll be fine. She's not
mad at you – more upset about the whole situation, I think. She's overwhelmed." She rubbed
Chloe's shoulders in reassurance and then walked to the stove, carefully moving a portion of the
thick chicken stew to a clean bowl. "I'm taking this upstairs," she said. "I'll come find you once
she's settled. You ok?"

Chloe nodded, watching as Beca poured a glass of sparkling water and balanced a small plate of
biscuits on top of the stew. She disappeared back up the stairs and Chloe finished her meal before
setting aside a portion for Beca and then cleaning up the room.

Emily ate quietly while Beca read aloud from *The Fellowship of the Ring*. They had finished *The
Hobbit* long ago – and Beca was only slightly miffed that she missed part of the re-read due to
Benji's involvement in the ritual. After about an hour, she set aside the book and they sat together
quietly.

"How was work?" Emily asked, once finding her voice again.

Beca smirked. "In addition to loving the work, I find great job in driving Theo nuts." Emily giggled
and Beca beamed. "Yeah, he's fun to mess with." She went on to tell Emily about the songs she'd
worked on that day, until the younger woman started yawning. "I'm working tomorrow and
Wednesday," Beca told her, standing and pulling several decorative pillows off the bed to sit
instead of the reading chair. "But I should be able to work from home on Thursday – and likely be
off Friday. Emily nodded. "Call me if you need anything." Emily nodded again. "Good night, Legacy."

"Good night," Emily answered.

The next morning, Beca left early again – and Chloe waited nervously for Emily to rise. When she did, Chloe had breakfast waiting. "Thank you," Emily said softly. She watched Chloe – who was quieter than usual in both her movements and her words. "I'm not mad at you," Emily told her. Chloe beamed with relief – and they went about their day.

Three weeks later, they had fallen into a pattern. Beca worked three days from the studio, a fourth day from home, and had long weekends to spend with Chloe and Emily. Chloe and Emily spent their days investigating LA. Chloe worked on finishing her teaching certification and – while she was busy with that – Emily started investigating possible dissertation topics for her graduate degree.

Towards the end of the third week, Benji visited. Emily took him out on the town, leaving Beca and Chloe with an evening alone. A few tentative kisses led to more – and eventually they were making out on the living room sofa.

Chloe was stunned when Beca moved things to the bedroom. The small brunette was leaving Chloe breathless. Her kisses and caresses weren't the least bit tentative. It wasn't until she was about to orgasm that Chloe realized what had happened – Beca hadn't allowed Chloe to touch her – at all. Beca had done all of the touching, teasing, and coaxing. Chloe felt this was something that needed to be rectified.

Once she rested for a moment, Chloe moved so she was on top of Beca and began dropping feather-light kisses along her neck and down her chest. Her hands brushed down Beca's arms and back up again, wandering to gently caress her breasts. She felt Beca's breath hitch – she was holding it. Then Chloe noticed that she was trembling. Not in a good way. Chloe sat back a bit and saw that her eyes were shut tight and there was tension in her jaw; it was severely clenched. "Oh, honey," she said softly. Chloe stopped her ministrations and moved back up so their eyes would meet. She moved her right hand to gently caress Beca's face. "Sweetie, open your eyes." Tears streamed as soon as she did – and Beca looked embarrassed and horrified at the same time.

"I'm so sorry. I thought—"

Chloe took a deep breath and held her close. "Beca, you don't have to be sorry. We're not doing it this way. I'm not forcing myself on you."

"You're not," Beca insisted. "I want you to do it—"

"This isn't the way," Chloe insisted. She pressed a kiss to her temple.

Beca shook her head. "This is ridiculous," she spat, between heavy breaths.

"Hey," Chloe said softly. When Beca didn't look at her, she gently grasped the other woman's face and tilted it so she had no option but to make eye contact. "It's okay," Chloe repeated firmly. "We are taking our time." Beca wiped at tears that had come without her permission.

"I don't know what to do," she said, finally.

"What about finding a therapist?" It had been discussed before – but nothing had come of it.

Beca closed her eyes. "I've been to several. They sucked."
"Then let's find one that doesn't," Chloe said softly. "Please. Let's try. I don't know how to help you – and it's breaking my heart. Let's find someone who can get us moving in the right direction."

Wiping away more tears, Beca eventually nodded. Despite feeling slightly calmer, she was too far down the spiral to pull back – and a panic attack was on her heels. Her breathing became more erratic and her tears turned to sobs. Chloe ran to the kitchen for ice packs and made her lie with ice along her neck and back. She eventually fell asleep and barely roused when Chloe climbed into bed with her.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, eyes barely fluttering open.

"You have nothing to be sorry about," Chloe told her. "It'll be okay. We're going to figure this out. For tonight, can I just hold you?" Beca nodded, relaxing more. She turned to face Chloe and snuggled in under her chin.

Please share your thoughts! Thanks for reading:-)
Chapter 9 – Paper Tigers

"The most difficult thing is the decision to act, the rest is merely tenacity. The fears are paper tigers. You can do anything you decide to do. You can act to change and control your life; and the procedure, the process is its own reward."

~ Amelia Earhart

Two days after Benji left, they sat at the table eating dinner. It was late, as Beca had worked a twelve-hour day. The meal was finished and they were chatting about their days while finishing their drinks. Beca and Chloe each had a beer – Emily a glass of white wine.

"I think I'm going to move back to Georgia," Emily said suddenly. She sipped furtively from her wine glass, giving her something to do other than look at them.

Beca's eyes grew wide. "Dude, why?" She set her drink aside, eyes moving to Chloe, then back to Emily. Emily watched as she began to worry the edge of her sweater with nervous fingers.

"I got a call. In addition to the other offers, I got one to do my PhD at Barden," Emily explained. "A full fellowship – including a small living stipend. University faculty housing. And Benji – he was just offered a really good job at a software development company about twenty minutes outside of Atlanta."

"I knew we shouldn't have let Benji visit," Beca declared.

"Beca," Chloe chided, her voice and eyes soft. She looked at Emily and reached to grasp her hand. "Oh, Em. That's an amazing opportunity. But are you sure?"

"As I'm going to be," Emily said with a nod. Her expression was still nervous and distraught. "I know that if it doesn't work out, I can come back. But if I don't go – I might regret it. Please don't be mad."

Beca shook her head quickly. "No, no. Em. We're not mad - I'm not mad. Oh god, no. It's – this – it's a great opportunity. I'm so happy for you." She swallowed. Her eyes shined with tears. "I would be lying if I said I wanted you to go. But you need to do what's best for you. And of course you can always come back – no matter what happens. You have a home here."

Emily nodded, tears also sparkling in her eyes. Two weeks later, Emily was moved into an apartment on campus in faculty housing. Beca and Chloe took a long weekend to help her move in – as did Benji and his parents.

The apartment was quieter without Emily. Not only did Beca miss her friend, but she also found that it gave her way too much time to reflect on herself, her relationship with Chloe, and her issues with sex. She promised Chloe she would look into getting help, but she didn't know where to start, so the redhead researched therapists until she found one she thought might work.

Beca had tried several times to get this appointment cancelled, but her girlfriend was intelligent and persistent. Chloe had actually bypassed Beca and called Theo to make sure no work was scheduled
for that afternoon.

Beca picked at imaginary lint on her jeans as she kept an eye on Chloe, who was talking quietly to the receptionist. She returned a moment later with a clipboard full of papers. She filled out what she could – insurance, contact information – and then handed it to Beca. "You have to do the rest," she said softly. Beca's eyes fought to focus on the questions. There were detailed medical history questions – three pages of them. She filled it out carefully, knowing that Chloe would stop her if she tried to jot down simple or nonsensical answers. On the last page, she was faced with a whole list of symptoms that she had to check off if she'd suffered from them in the last three months. Depression. Anxiety. Insomnia. Loss of Appetite. Fear of Intimacy. With each check of the pen, Beca felt herself falling further away from reality. She had just finished when one of the office doors opened and a thirty-some-year-old woman in a pretty blue dress stepped into the room. "Beca?" She asked, looking directly at the brunette.

Beca nodded, her mouth immediately zapped dry. After a delayed response, she stood and picked up her bag before walking toward the woman. She turned back to look at Chloe, who was still sitting in one of the chairs. The doctor smiled at Chloe. "You're welcome to come back, if it will make Beca more comfortable." Chloe stood and followed, her hand resting lightly on Beca's arm as they followed the older woman into her office. Beca handed her the clipboard and the woman accepted it with a smile.

"I'm Dr. Wells," she said, closing the door behind them. "But please, call me Maggie."

Beca nodded and attempted to smile in greeting. It came out more like a grimace.

"Who is with you today?"

"Chloe Beale," Beca said simply.

"Nice to meet you," Chloe said with a warm smile. She had spoken to the doctor over the phone – she had spoken with dozens of them, actually – but Beca didn't need to know that.

"Please, have a seat," the woman told them. "Can I get you anything – water, tea, coffee?"

"Water would be great," Chloe agreed. She looked at Beca, who seemed to have fallen into a state of panic. "For both of us." They sat together on the large leather sofa and Chloe ran her hand up and down Beca's back, rubbing gently. She spoke softly so the doctor – who was across the room looking over the paperwork Beca had completed – could not hear. "Sweetie – just breathe for me, okay? This is not a big deal. If you don't like her, we never have to come back. Just take a deep breath and give it a chance. Please?" Beca took a deep breath and nodded.

When the doctor returned to them, she handed them each a bottle of water and sat down in a chair across from them. "Beca, what brings you here today?"

Beca looked at her, eyes wide. A gentle squeeze from Chloe bolted her back into the moment. "We. Um – Chloe and I. We've been friends for seven years. And – together – for almost five months." The doctor nodded but remained silent. "I can't sleep with her. I want to, but I can't."

"Have you ever had intimate relations together?"

Beca shrugged slightly and looked at Chloe for help. "We've gotten close a few times. They've mostly ended in panic attacks – or me feeling like I'm forcing myself on her – and I don't want that. I love Beca so much – I want her to be comfortable – to be excited about what we're doing. And that's not happening."
"Beca, have you had intimate relationships before this?" Beca shook her head.

"Not really. Kind of, I guess. I had a boyfriend in college – we kissed. Made out some. We had intercourse maybe three times. I'm not even sure if you can call it that – we didn't ever finish."

"Did he ever try to push further?"

"No - he never pushed – when I panicked, he stopped."

The woman nodded. "Anyone else?" Beca shook her head.

"Stacie," Chloe said softly. Beca looked at her, eyes wide.

"She told you?" She asked, a hand going to her heart as her breathing rate increased. She opened her water bottle and took a large gulp, alleviating the anxiety-induced dry mouth a bit.

"No," Chloe insisted. "I knew. It was all over your face, Bec. It's okay," she said softly. "It's nothing that needs to be a secret."

Beca nodded and let out a deep breath, rolling her shoulders several times to alleviate the grown tension. She finally looked in the vicinity of the doctor. Not right at her; that was too much to ask. 'I slept with a friend in college," Beca told her. "I think I actually orgasmed a few times when we were doing that – but it hurt – and made my anxiety worse. We stopped after about a month."

The woman nodded. She was jotting down occasional notes on the pad in her lap. Instead of delving deeper, Beca was surprised when the therapist changed the subject.

"What do you do for a living?"

"I work for a major music label. I have my own contract as an artist – I'm working on cutting an album right now. And I'm working as a producer with two other artists." They talked for several minutes about Beca's new job – the move to Los Angeles – and the formalization of her relationship with Chloe.

"Can we speak for a few minutes without Chloe?" The doctor asked, after about thirty minutes of conversation that flowed, then stopped, then flowed again. Beca's eyes widened and she looked at Chloe, who was smiling encouragingly.

"It's fine. You're doing great," Chloe said whispered. She squeezed Beca's hand. "I'll be right outside – I can be back here in less than a minute if you need me." Beca nodded her reluctant permission and Chloe stepped out of the room.

Once Chloe was gone, the doctor focused once more on Beca. "Beca, do you want to be able to have an intimate relationship with Chloe?" The brunette froze, a lump forming in her throat. This was technically an opportunity to get the hell out. She was tempted, but she didn't want to lose Chloe. Her fear needed to take a back seat to what she wanted. So she nodded.

"Can you tell me that – using words?"

"I – I do. I love Chloe. I don't want to lose her. And I want that kind of relationship – "

"But?"

Beca ran her hands nervously through her hair. She sighed heavily. "The idea of it is terrifying. And it keeps getting worse. When we first were together, I could make out with her and never have
a problem until she got handsy – now sometimes I panic when she just kisses me."

"Why do you think that is?"

"I know she wants more – and I don't think I can give her that."

"What are your general thoughts and feelings about sex?"

Beca chewed her lower lip as she considered the question. "It's great," she said, "for other people. Other people seem to like it. My friend Stacie, she's a big fan."

"But it makes you uncomfortable."

"A lot of things make me uncomfortable. If being awkward was an Olympic sport, I would definitely place."

"What makes you uncomfortable about sex?"

"It's not just sex – it's unnecessary touching – and PDAs."

"Why?"

"That should be private."

"Why is that?"

Beca scrunched her nose in distaste. "I don't know. It's not something you need to flaunt." The therapist was silent, waiting for more information. "It's kind of gross –"

"And? You can say whatever you feel. No judgement. Trust me, I've heard it all."

Beca took a deep breath and closed her eyes. "It's wrong. Something to be ashamed of."

"There we go," the other woman said softly. "It's okay to feel that way. It's not your fault. Those thoughts and feelings were instilled in you – and many girls – at a very young age. Our society shames women for having sexual thoughts and feelings, but then reveres them for being sexual beings on screen, the stage or in the bedroom. It's a very confusing set of messages and expectations."

Beca nodded, eyes open now but carefully studying the beaded fringe on the pillow she hugged in her lap. "Beca?" she looked up hesitantly to see the therapist studying her. "We have a few more questions to get through today so we can discuss treatment possibilities – is that okay? Do you need to take a break?"

"It's fine," Beca said, wiping away tears she hadn't realized were welling in her eyes. She nodded, encouraging the woman to continue.

"Were you raised in a particular religion?"

Beca shook her head and shrugged. "Not really at first. My mom was a lapsed Catholic and my dad is agnostic. He doesn't not believe in a greater being, he just doesn't know – so he chooses not to presuppose. My mom would take me to church sometimes – and I did the whole catechism classes, communion, and confirmation." She took a deep breath. "When my dad left, my mom fell back into the church pretty heavily. She got a lot stricter. Had a lot more to say about what I wore, who I spent time with, that kind of thing."
"What kinds of things did she say?"

Beca shook her head. "It's not important." Her face was flushed and her heart racing.

"If it stuck with you this long, it's important."

Beca took a deep breath and shuttered as she released it. She was dangerously close to breaking down into tears and spiraling into a panic attack. "She picked on what I wore a lot. I wore dark makeup. I wasn't goth or emo, by any stretch, but I wore dark eyeliner and had more piercings and tattoos than she thought were appropriate. She would say stuff, kind of under the radar." She paused, her teeth tearing lightly at her lips as she considered her next words.

"It's safe here. Whatever she said can't hurt you anymore." Beca took another deep, hitched breath before continuing.

"I was invited to the freshman formal. By a guy who was a friend of mine. Not my boyfriend. My mom was mad because he wasn't my boyfriend, so she thought it was inappropriate for me to go with him. My dress — I picked it out and bought it myself — with babysitting money — because she seriously wanted me to dress like a nun. I really liked that dress. It was pretty; feminine. Black with a lace overlay. Kind of fitted at the top and then an A-line skirt. It ended about an inch above the knee and I wore black heels without stockings."

"It sounds lovely. Perfect for a young girl."

Beca shook her head. "The lining didn't cover my arms, so the sleeves were kind of see-through, it being lace and all. And my mom thought the skirt was too short. She told me that I—" She took a deep breath. "She called me a slut and told me that I would be lucky if I wasn't raped because I was going out looking like I was offering myself up for sale." Beca wiped away more tears, eyes trained on the floor as she gulped in breaths.

"You know that she was wrong, yes?"

"I do now," Beca responded. "When I was fourteen? Not as much. I ended up not going to the dance. I was sick to my stomach and threw up a few times — so it made my excuse plausible."

The woman nodded. "When was the next time you wore a dress?"

Beca shrugged. "I guess my high school prom. My dad had a new wife — and they came to visit a few weeks before. She was really excited about the prom dress shopping idea — so they dragged me out." She paused. "I was really awful to her."

"You were in pain," Maggie responded. "It's not an excuse — but it does mean that you have to give yourself some slack. Do you still speak with her?" Beca nodded. "Someday, when you feel up to it, apologize. You'll be surprised at how much she doesn't hate you for it. You were a teenager. Adults expect a certain amount of pushback from their beloved teenagers."

Beca continued answering questions about her general health, her relationships with her family members and friends, her sexual history and experiences, her religious experiences, and more. She was close to a panic attack when the therapist asked her about touching that made her uncomfortable throughout her life. She found that most of it did. Even hugging and innocent touches — when not from someone she was comfortable with — made her squeamish.

After an hour had passed, the therapist looked at her. "I'd like to talk about my thoughts — and possible treatment plans. Do you want to invite Chloe back in or speak about it privately?"
"Chloe can come in," Beca responded. The doctor stood and went into the waiting room. Chloe reentered the space with her and sat next to her girlfriend, taking her hand.

Maggie sat back on the chair across from them and smiled gently. "I have some thoughts. I'd like to share them with you, then we can discuss and you can ask questions. Sounds like a plan?" They both nodded.

"Sexual behavior is wrapped up in everything from physical and mental health to societal customs and expectations. It's a bear. So getting you to a place of comfort in intimate relationships is going to take time and a multi-faceted approach. The first step is to work with Beca on trust issues and past traumas. Those need taken care of first before you can consider moving toward a healthy relationship. I would suggest 2-3 sessions a week for the next two months. We'll reevaluate as we go."

"Am I seriously that screwed up?" Beca asked, almost breathless. Even her bipolar second-cousin only went to see a therapist once a week.

"You seriously have that much potential – that I think you're going to make quick progress with intensive cognitive behavioral therapy. Stretching it over long periods of time doesn't work for everyone. I think more intensive therapy in a shorter time frame will work for you."

Beca nodded but still looked concerned. "In the meantime, I suggest you go to a specialist – and make sure that, physically, there are no problems. The kind of pain you're describing doesn't sound psychosomatic. Have you done that yet?" Beca shook her head. "I know it's scary. But it's necessary." Beca bit her lip but nodded.

"Then we will bring Chloe back in to discuss some limits and some practical activities." Beca's eyes shot wide open and the therapist laughed gently. "To be completed at home – here, we just talk." She clasped her hands gently in front of her. "How does that sound?" Chloe smiled brightly and Beca bit her lip but nodded.

"Can you come back on Thursday?" The doctor asked, after looking through her book and then eying Beca. "I promise I won't keep you for two hours – normal sessions after intake is 50 minutes."

Beca groaned lightly and rolled her eyes up to the ceiling. "I have to do this again?"

The doctor laughed. "I have a feeling you're going to be a handful, Beca."

"It's one my best skills," Beca assured her.

"We'll work on it. I'll see you Thursday at 6?" Beca nodded. She followed Chloe to the car and handed over the keys, allowing the redhead to drive. They were silent for a long time and eventually, fell asleep. She woke when the car stopped and she saw that they were home. She reached for the door handle and was surprised when the lock engaged. She looked over at Chloe, who had hit the child locks on her door.

"We need to talk," Chloe told her. "You're not going inside and hiding behind your headphones."

"I just talked for two hours," Beca reminded her, almost whining and definitely offering puppy dog eyes and a pained expression. Chloe was not falling for it.

"Not to me, you didn't," she responded. "We don't have to talk for long – but we do need to talk. No running away." Beca nodded and waited for Chloe to open her door. She then followed the redhead to their bedroom. She was tired to the bone, so she changed out of her jeans, blouse, and
jacket and into yoga pants and a long sleeved t-shirt. Chloe exited their bathroom and smiled sympathetically. "You look tired."

"Understatement," Beca said. She went over and crawled into bed, turning to her side. Chloe kicked off her shoes and joined her so they were facing one another.

"How are you doing?"

Beca shrugged. "I'm okay. Overwhelmed, but okay."

"What did you think about Maggie?"

"She seemed like she knew what she was talking about. It's worth giving it a shot."

"Are you going to see a doctor, like she suggested?"

Beca rolled her eyes. "Chloe –"

"Sweetie, it might be something serious. You need to get it checked out. I'll go with you, if you want." Beca eventually agreed – and they spent another twenty minutes talking about the events of the appointment. After that, Beca shut down. She curled into Chloe and refused to say anymore. The redhead held her until she, emotionally exhausted, fell asleep.

Stacie had been working for four days straight, so she was delighted to get out and meet Beca for dinner. They met at a small Italian restaurant that had cozy nooks that made you feel like you were dining privately. The taller brunette ordered a bottle of wine and waited for her friend. Only five minutes late, Beca appeared.

"Sorry," she said, sliding into her seat. "I got stopped three times trying to leave the studio."

"No worries," Stacie said, nodding to her glass. "But I did get started without you."

"Oh, thank God," Beca said, lifting her own full glass to her lips. She drank a good bit before returning it to the table.

"Should I take that as an indication of how you're doing?" Stacie asked.

Beca shook her head, turning to the menu. "No. I'm fine. Just a long week." They ordered their food and Stacie went right back to the topic she intended to investigate.

"Chloe told me that you started seeing a therapist." Beca nodded. "How's it going?" Beca shrugged.

"I've only been there three times. She seems to know what she's talking about – but she's kind of screwing with my head – untangling things that were better off uninvestigated."

"That's her job," Stacie reminded her. She raised an eyebrow. "Chloe also told me that she suggested you see a doctor. Funny," she said. "Sounds familiar." Beca glared at her.

"Yes, I know, things you've been telling me for years."

"I just worry, cap. You've got to take care of you. Do you want a suggestion? The doctor I work for right now is awesome – I think you'd be comfortable with her."

"Why can't you just do it?" Beca whined.
"Because I'm not allowed to practice without supervision yet. And, honestly, I have no idea what you have going on. But I can be in the room, if that would help."

Beca sighed. She bit her lip and concentrated on the candle flame between them before reaching out and taking another swig of her wine. "Dude, I don't even know if I can do it," she admitted. "I haven't been to the doctors in years – and the idea just makes things start to go blurry."

Stacie considered this. "The woman you're seeing – psychologist or psychiatrist?"

"I don't know," Beca told her. "Why?"

"Do you have her card?"

Beca showed Stacie the copy of the card on her phone. Stacie pointed at the letters after the woman's name and showed them to Beca. "MD. She's a psychiatrist. She can prescribe medication. Ask about anti-anxiety meds – at least just to get you through an appointment with a gynecologist."

Beca let out a deep breath and nodded. She studied Stacie over her wine glass. "Did you tell Chloe about the summer before Sophomore year?"

Stacie's eyes widened. "No. I wouldn't do that. Why?"

"She knows," Beca responded.

"We didn't do anything wrong – you weren't dating anyone yet –"

"I know," she agreed. "It's just weird. She said she figured it out on her own – but I didn't think we were that obvious."

Stacie smiled sympathetically. "Beca, it took you two months afterwards before you could look at me without blushing. Most of the girls might not have noticed, but Chloe saw everything you ever did – so, it makes sense that she would have at least suspected something."

"Please don't talk to her about it. I really don't want to be discussed – in that way."

"Of course I won't," Stacie assured her. "It's going to be fine. But I am glad you're getting help. You deserve to be comfortable." She grinned. "Trust me, sex is great."

"So you keep telling me," Beca responded with a small smirk. They spent the remainder of the meal chatting about their jobs, how Emily was doing, and simply catching up.

At her next session, Maggie asked her if she'd made the appointment with a specialist yet. Beca admitted that she hadn't – and that she was terrified. Maggie offered anti-anxiety medication before Beca even had to ask for it. She took the prescription and promised to make an appointment. She texted Stacie, who fit her into the doctor's schedule for the next week.

The angels of her better nature kept bugging her, reminding her to inform Chloe of the plan. But the little voices of anxiety told her that she'd be better off on her own, so she kept quiet about the appointment and the medication and decided to face it alone.

This was a heavy chapter - hopefully not too much so. Let me know your thoughts. Thanks for reading!
This was a difficult chapter to write. There is lot of detail about an uncomfortable subject; you've been warned. I hope there is enough levity to balance. I hope you enjoy - please share your thoughts!

Chapter 10 Strength and Courage

"Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength,
while loving someone deeply gives you courage."

~ Lao Tzu

The following week, Beca walked up to a glass door – then away again – three times. Finally, a familiar brunette exited the suite and grabbed her by the wrist, dragging her into the waiting room. "It's going to be fine," Stacie told her. "Come on – you're late." With a hand on her lower back, she nudged Beca through the waiting room and down the hall to an exam room.

A nurse was close behind and took Beca's vitals and asked basic questions – reason for being there, birth control, smoking, drugs, alcohol. Beca answered as succinctly as she could. The nurse finally reached into a cabinet and removed a cotton gown and drape and handed them to Beca. "Everything comes off – including bra and panties. Gown opens in the front."

Beca watched with wide eyes as she left. Once the door closed, Stacie rolled her eyes. "Yeah, she sucks. Bedside manner of a witch. You okay?"

"No," Beca told her forcefully with a shake of her head. "I don't think I can do this."

"Yes, you can," Stacie assured her. "Dr. Beasley is awesome – if anyone can help, she can. It'll be over in a few minutes – and then you'll at least possibly have answers." Beca swallowed, eyes still wide. "Did you take anything to help with the anxiety?" She nodded. "Do you want me to stay? Or go? I don't have any more appointments today – so if you want me, I'm here."

"Stay," Beca said shakily. "I don't know if – " She felt her heart go into overdrive and her breathing follow suit.

"Hey," Stacie said calmly. "It's going to be okay." She held Beca's hands and tried to walk her through breathing exercises, but Beca could barely hear her – she felt like she was in a fishbowl. She hardly registered a knock on the door.

She heard Stacie speaking with the new intruder and suddenly a stranger had replaced her friend – and was trying to get her attention. Finally, Beca broke out of her own head long enough to realize it was the doctor. "Squeeze my hand if you can hear me." She did, relieved that she wasn't expected to talk. The doctor spoke in a calm, measured voice, ordering her to breathe.

Once she was slightly calmed down, the doctor smiled at her. "Okay – I know we just met – but
how about some drugs? Sedative?" Beca nodded – anything had to be better than this. She listened partially, but half of the doctor's words were lost on her. Luckily, Stacie seemed to be answering the necessary questions about medications and allergies. She barely flinched when the medication was delivered by needle to the muscles in her right glute. "We're going to give that a few minutes to kick in," the doctor told her. "Have you ever tried grounding?"

Beca shook her head numbly. She had no idea what that even was. "Okay," the doctor said calmly. "Look around the room – and tell me five things you can see." Beca was silent for a moment until she realized that the doctor was waiting for her.

"Now?" She finally croaked out the question.

"Now," the woman said with a soft smile. Beca named five things she could see in the small room. "Now, four things you can touch." Beca named those. "Three things you can hear. Two things you can smell. One thing you can taste." Beca responded to each question – and was relieved to realize that her ears had stopped buzzing. "Good job. Now try it again – this time with adjectives." Beca went through the five steps again, with brief prompting from the doctor. And then twice more.

"How do you feel?"

Beca blinked. "Better," she answered. "Does that really work? Or is it the drugs?"

"I'm sure the drugs don't hurt," the woman answered. "But it really works. Panic attacks happen when we get stuck in our heads – grounding helps you get out of that mindset. You do it as many times as you need to – until you feel like you can focus again."

Beca nodded. She closed her eyes; she was exhausted. The doctor backed up and stood against the counter, giving her space. "Beca, I'm Dr. Beasley."

"I was hoping," Beca responded with an uncomfortable laugh. "Sorry – about that."

"Not a problem," the doctor answered. "Let's talk about what you're doing here today – and see what our options are. Do you feel up to a conversation?"

"Honestly?" Beca asked. "No. But it seems like a waste of good drugs to avoid it now." The woman chuckled.

"Okay. Dr. Conrad – in or out?"

"She can stay," Beca responded.

"So, what brings you in today?"

Beca took a deep breath and explained that she was seeing a therapist and was trying to have an intimate relationship with her girlfriend – but every time she tried to have sex, she was in pain. "Pain can definitely cause anxiety – even when it dissipates."

"It has not dissipated," Beca assured her, studying her fingernails carefully so as to avoid all eye contact.

"Where is the pain? Inside? Outside?"

"Both," Beca said, flushing. She truly did not want to talk about this, but she continued taking deep breaths and forcing herself to focus.

"Is one worse than the other? And what does the pain feel like?"
"Outside – where the clitoris is, I guess – sharp pain – sometimes aching that radiates out. Burning. It gets worse when it's touched – or if I wear anything too tight. Inside – it's just too tight. It feels like I'm being skewered – even if whatever is going inside is small."

"How small?"

"A fingertip," Beca responded, her face now flushed completely red. The doctor nodded.

"Well, we'd certainly need to do an exam – but it sounds like you have two separate problems going on. So here's the deal – we can do an exam today – if you feel up to it. We can reschedule if you prefer."

Beca closed her eyes. She considered her options and shook her head. "No offense – if I leave – I'm probably not coming back."

The doctor laughed gently. "I appreciate honestly. Ok, then. Let's get it over with. I'm going to step into the hall. You don't have to undress entirely – just waist down – and use the drape. I'll knock in a few minutes." She exited the room and Beca took a few deep breaths before beginning to remove her boots, jeans, and underwear. She folded them and placed them on the chair, hugging the drape around herself and scooting back up on the exam table.

The doctor knocked for permission to come back and did a thorough – but quick and efficient – exam. After Beca almost blacked out when the doctor merely touched her clitoris with the tip of a cotton swab, she brought out Beca's new favorite thing – numbing cream. It allowed her to finish the external exam without causing too much pain. During the internal exam, Beca almost lifted off the table when the speculum was opened. She grabbed her hair close to the roots and bit her lip, trying to distract herself with alternative pain. The doctor gently reminded her to relax – and although she found that laughable, Beca focused on trying to relax those specific muscles. It helped slightly and - with a bit of maneuvering, the doctor was able to take the samples she wanted and finish the exam. When she was finished, she threw her gloves in the garbage, covered her tools, and scooted them to the side.

With Stacie's help, Beca sat up, wiping away tears that had – against her permission – leaked from the corners of her eyes. "I think we have some answers," the doctor told her. "I would like to talk to you about the diagnosis and treatment options- but we're running a little late and I have someone who has been waiting longer than I'd like. If you can wait half an hour – I can come back after my last patient." Beca nodded; it would give her time to collect herself. She was overwhelmed, to say the least. "Okay – go ahead and get dressed. Dr. Conrad can show you to my office – I'll be with you as soon as I can be." She stopped. "Do you want a pain reliever?" Beca nodded – and the doctor looked at Stacie and indicated that she could get it. The door closed and they were alone.

Beca shook her head and wrung out her hands, blowing out deep breaths to try and calm herself. She tried to stop crying – she did. But it was a losing battle. Stacie continued handing her tissues and she kept wiping at her damp eyes. "Oh, god. I feel like such a wimp," she sobbed.

"Nope," Stacie responded, patting her back lightly. "You're not. You're clearly in pain. I've seen women much more experienced than you weep over things much less painful. You did fine." She paused. "Are you sure you don't want to call Chloe? She can probably get here by the time Dr. Beasley returns."

Beca shook her head. "I don't need her to see me like this." She was flush and sweaty from pain, her eyes puffy and red from crying, and everything below her belly button hurt, making her feel nauseous and very short on temper. She was anxious, but the sedative was still trying to work – leaving her feeling very odd and off-balance.
"Alternatively, calling her means you don't have to explain whatever this is," Stacie said gently. "She can hear it directly from the doctor." Beca bit her lip and then nodded.

"Go ahead and call her." Stacie left her to get dressed and found her a pain reliever – and called Chloe. Within twenty minutes, Chloe was there, being led into the office by a nurse and looking particularly concerned. Stacie stood to pull over another chair and Chloe took her vacated seat, sitting down directly next to her girlfriend. She took Beca's face in her hands and studied her.

"What happened? Why wouldn't you tell me you made an appointment? I would have come with you." Beca tried to answer, but couldn't. She dissolved again into tears and Chloe gathered her in her arms, trying to comfort her. She didn't ask any more questions. They were silent for the fifteen minutes it took the doctor to join them. Beca sat up as she heard footsteps in the doorway.

Dr. Beasley knocked, then entered, and greeted them with a smile. "Thank you for waiting." She cocked an eyebrow at Chloe. "We have a new addition? I'm Dr. Beasley."

"Chloe Beale," Chloe said, shaking her offered hand.

"The girlfriend?" Chloe nodded. "It's nice to meet you." The doctor sat at her desk and opened a file.

"Well, Beca, you have the most right to cry out of anyone I've seen today," the woman said sympathetically.

"Do I get a prize?" Beca asked sarcastically.

"No. But I might have some answers for you. I believe you have two different problems going on – both of which are painful – as you well know – but that have little if anything to do with one another. Both physical, but very tied up with psychology."

"As in, it's in my head?" Beca snapped angrily.

"No." The doctor said quickly. "I'm sorry. No. That's not what I mean." She folded her hands over the paperwork. "No. It's very real pain. The clitoral pain – which is a rarer occurrence than the internal – or vaginal - pain – probably caused the anxiety – which caused the vaginal problem – called vaginismus."

"Is there a way to fix whatever's causing the pain?" Chloe asked.

"The condition I believe we're dealing with is called vulvodynia – in short, it's nerve pain in the labia or clitoris. We still don't know what causes it, but we can treat the symptoms. I would suggest trying a steroid cream. Give that two weeks – and if it doesn't help, we can try a few other options."

Beca nodded. Chloe waited to see if she asked any question – when she didn't – Chloe spoke up. "Will it solve both problems?" She asked.

"Unlikely," the doctor said. "The vaginismus is usually caused by anxiety and stress. Probably – once the nerve pain started – the vaginismus kicked in – the anticipation of pain causes the muscles to contract, which causes more pain, especially if penetration is a factor. Once we figure out how to stop the nerve pain, there are things you can do to help with the vaginismus. But one step at a time."

She talked about sending the pap smear and cervical biopsy to the lab – just in case – but indicated that she really thought they were dealing with vulvodynia and vaginismus. She also mentioned
Beca's blood pressure, in passing, and indicated that it was probably a good idea to monitor it at home in a less stressful place and make sure it wasn't normally as high as it was in the doctor's office.

Chloe had taken an Uber to the office, so she drove Beca's car home. Beca was incredibly uncomfortable. Although the numbing cream had helped, all of the jostling during the exam had left her nether regions burning. The biopsy had hurt like hell – and had left her with cramping. Not to mention, her emotions were all over the place. She took ibuprofen and lay down in bed as soon as they reached home. Chloe brought her an icepack and lay down on the bed next to her.

"How are you holding up?" She asked softly, brushing a curl of brown hair behind Beca's ear. The smaller woman adjusted the icepack to where it needed to be and sighed in slight relief.

"Sore," Beca told her. "But the ice helps."

"I don't want to upset you right now, but I need you to stop keeping things from me," Chloe told her gently.

Beca nodded. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I thought it would be easier alone. I didn't want you to see me like that – I was a mess. But you saw me that way anyway –"

"You're not a mess," Chloe insisted. "Beca, you are in pain – and that kills me. I know there's not much I can do to help – but I can at least support you. Please, let me do that much." Beca nodded.

"I'm sorry."

"You don't need to apologize," Chloe told her. "Just let me in." Beca nodded and snuggled closer into Chloe's arms. Thanks to the sedative, the anxiety medication, and the lingering effects of her panic attack – Beca slept for the rest of the day.

For five nights, every time Beca used the cream – she had to lie down afterwards with an icepack for at least half an hour, or she was in miserable pain. On the sixth night, she realized she didn't need it. "Do you need an icepack?" Chloe asked. "I'm going to get a glass of water from the kitchen." They were both in their pajamas, getting ready for bed.

"No," Beca said slowly. "I think it's okay."

Chloe turned quickly to look at her, eyes bright with a hopeful gleam. "No pain?"

"No," Beca said, standing stock still as she inventoried and realized that she was, indeed, not in pain.

"It's working?"

"Let's not jump to conclusions yet," Beca told her, holding her hands up. "I was able to put on a cream – with almost no pressure – and it didn't cause me blinding pain. It's a start – let's not get ahead of ourselves."

"Okay," Chloe said with a smile. "But it's a good sign, crazy lady." Beca nodded in agreement.

After the two week course of treatment, Beca could touch her clitoris, which frankly freaked her out – a lot. The absence of pain was - and the newly discovered tingles of pleasure were – new and frightening. She found herself, to her own disbelief, telling her therapist about it.

Maggie smiled. "I would be surprised if it was joy at first touch," she teased. "After years of pain,
it's normal to be unsure of what to do with this newfound freedom to explore that area. So do it at your own pace."

"I feel like I'm freaking thirteen again."

"Most girls start to explore then, if not before. If you were in pain, you wouldn't have gotten very far. Take your time with it. Do whatever feels right." Beca gave her a grimace and she laughed. "Not what the evil little voices society has planted tell you – what you feel is right."

"That sounds very hippy-dippy," Beca replied dryly.

"Oh, it is. Embrace spontaneity and exploration once in a while, Beca. You might like it." Beca grimaced again, indicating her lack of belief if this advice.

"We'll see," she said, finally.

One month after the initial appointment, Beca had a follow up. Chloe was in attendance. Beca was not having a panic attack when Dr. Beasley entered the room, which was a nice change of pace – and a much less embarrassing way to say hello to a person. "Hello, Beca, Chloe."

"Hey," Beca said.

"How did the steroid cream work?"

"I think it worked," Beca said.

"You think?"

"I'm still trying to wrap my mind around the lack-of-pain – you'll have to let me catch up." The doctor smiled in response.

"No pain?"

"No," Beca said.

"What about with pressure applied?"

Beca turned red to her ears. "It's fine," she said with a nod.

"How much pressure did you put on the area?"

"Do we really have to talk about this?" Beca asked, making a face. "I didn't measure it by pounds per square inch," she added dryly." The doctor smiled at her sarcasm. Beca's expression straightened. "How long will it work?"

"Unfortunately, there's no way of knowing right now. It may do the trick for good – you may need to do more treatments in the future. Keep an eye on it, and if it starts to cause pain again, call and make an appointment." Beca nodded.

"Have you tried penetration?"

"Closed for business," Beca said with a sigh. "It's extremely tight."

"Your body is braced for pain – it's still expecting it to come, so that's not terribly surprising."

"When will it get the message that we're good now?"
"It might take some time. You need to relax. There needs to be a lot of foreplay and lubrication."

"Oh, God," Beca said, a hand rising to cover her eyes. "I can't believe we're talking about this."

"Just breathe," Chloe said calmly. She looked at the doctor and nodded for her to continue.

"Take your time – try going slowly, using lots of lubrication. If you're still having trouble after that, I would recommend you try kegel exercises, along with dilators."

Beca closed her eyes again. "I seriously don't even want to ask –" she muttered. The doctor rummaged through a cabinet and came back with a small box. She opened it and pulled out the set of five pink silicon tips, each one a bit thicker than the last, with a handle. Beca gasped. "That's a sex toy!" She said, scandalized.

Chloe and the doctor both burst out laughing. The doctor stopped quickly, hiding her smile behind her hand.

"No," Chloe told her. "It was totally appropriate." She looked at Beca and she was still grinning at her girlfriend's reaction. "Sweetie, what do you think we're doing here?"

"Oh, fuck it," Beca said with a sigh. "Fine." She pointed. "I know generally what you're supposed to do with those – but what's the catch? Even that small one probably isn't going to happen right now."

The doctor showed her the box, where three even smaller dilators were still sitting. "If the smallest one is too big, you can start with a cotton swab. You insert it and do kegel exercises. Do you know what those are?" Beca nodded. "Have you done them before?"

She moved her hands around to indicate her pelvic area. "I don't really like to think about this – so no."

"Well, they're not difficult once you figure out which muscles to target."

She reached into another cabinet and Beca groaned. "Dear lord, there's a model."

"There is a model," the doctor answered. She showed Beca which muscles she was supposed to be targeting – and recommended how many of the exercises to do each day. "Once you feel comfortable with the smallest size, move up to the next one. Once that feels loose, move up again. Use lots of lubricant." If you have trouble, call me. There are physical therapists who specialize in pelvic floor issues and can help with vaginismus –"

"Oh, hell no," Beca said quickly. "There is a line here, people." Chloe and the doctor both smiled.

"Why don't we just start with this," Chloe said, indicating the dilators.

"I'll write you a prescription," the doctor told Beca. "They're cheaper that way – you can have your very own."

"Thanks," Beca said flatly.

"Any other questions?" The doctor asked, looking at Beca, then Chloe. Beca shook her head but Chloe looked curious. Once Beca remained silent, she spoke up.

She seemed hesitant to ask, but she was Chloe, so eventually she just spit it out. "Can we play – with her clit?"
"Dude!" Beca cried, turning the same shade as a ripened strawberry.

"It's a valid question," Chloe said with a semi-apologetic expression.

"Carefully – and as long as there's no pain – have at it," the doctor said. "With consent, of course."

"Of course," Chloe repeated.

Beca glared. "You're lucky I'm even considering getting back in the same car with you right now. Let alone consent for that…"

"I'm sorry, sweetie. I'm excited."

"I know," Beca said, still slightly irritated. "Please try to remember I am on the other end of the spectrum – much closer to terrified."

"We'll go slowly," Chloe said softly.

"Any other questions?" The doctor asked. When she received two shakes of the head, she held out her hand to shake with both of them – and wished them well – reminding Beca to call if she had any questions, concerns, or if the pain came back or the dilators gave her any trouble.

"You are picking those up at the drug store," Beca told Chloe, as they approached the car.

"Sure thing, honey. Do you want to drive?" She had been too nervous to drive there – but since there had been no exam of any kind to cause her physical discomfort, Chloe thought she want to drive home.

"No," Beca said. "My nerves are frayed." She collapsed into the passenger seat and closed her eyes. They were driving for several minutes when she spoke again. "Thank you, for coming with me."

Chloe didn't answer, just reached over and squeezed her hand for a moment. Chloe did go to the pharmacy for her later to pick up the dilators and lubricant. Beca hid them under the bathroom sink until she was ready to face them. The weekend after the doctor's appointment, she decided to try. Mostly the delay was because she refused to try them while Chloe was around. In this case, Chloe was going out to dinner with Jessica, who was in town to interview for a new job. Beca was invited, but she begged out – and was surprisingly allowed to do so. She thought Chloe could probably see that she needed time to unwind. Between work and therapy sessions, she was overwhelmed.

After Chloe was gone, she locked her bedroom door and pulled out the offending objects, turning them over in her hand. She finally sighed and lay a bath towel on the bed before lying down to dry the exercises. The lubricant was messy – and she was immediately squeamish about it – but it certainly made things easier. The smallest one slid in effortlessly and she was able to do the exercises. Since it was so seamless, she tried the next size up – and found that it was a bit tighter, but still went in. She did the exercises with that size, too, before washing everything and hiding it back away under the bathroom sink.

When Chloe arrived home, she found Beca in bed, reading a book. While she was getting herself ready for bed, Beca slipped into the bathroom with her and pulled out the bottle of lube. "Does this come in less gross varieties?"

Chloe laughed. "So, you tried it?"

"I tried it," Beca said with blush. She placed the bottle back in its spot and washed her hands,
grimacing.

"And?"

"It didn't kill me."

"I'm so glad. What would make that less gross?"

"Less sticky would be a start," Beca responded, still making a face.

"I'll see what I can do," she said, leaning over to kiss her girlfriend. Beca kissed her back, then pulled away and got back into bed. She continued to read while Chloe did her nighttime rituals – and then put her book away when Chloe crawled into bed. Chloe settled in next to her and pulled Beca close after turning out the light. "Thank you," she said, before pressing her lips to the smaller woman's head.

"For what?"

"For trying," Chloe said softly. "I know this is very uncomfortable for you – and I know you're mostly doing this for me. And I want you to know that I love you for it – and I'm here, no matter what you need."

"Don't get sappy, now," Beca teased lightly. "Just hold me and go to sleep." Chloe laughed and kissed her once more before snuggling into a comfortable position to do just that.

This was an interesting - but kind of graphic chapter to write. Please share your thoughts! Thanks for reading!
Four months after Emily's departure, Beca was bone-tired. Her job, as much as she loved it, was keeping her busy. Living with Chloe – without the distraction of Amy or Emily – left her with very little alone time. Despite her love for Chloe, as an introvert, that was painful and sometimes maddening.

On top of that, going to therapy sessions three times a week would have been emotionally and mentally strenuous for anyone. For someone whose very nature rebelled against being so open with her thoughts and emotions, it was worse. Her Friday afternoon therapy appointment that week had ended with her crying in thick, hard sobs that left her physically and emotionally drained. Maggie had been concerned enough to make her lie down in one of the smaller therapy rooms for an hour before she would allow her to drive. So, by the time she left her appointment, Beca wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed – preferably alone – for the entire weekend. Chloe had other ideas for their weekend plans. She was giddy and excited when Beca got home.

She bounced into the entry as soon as Beca opened the door. "Bree is in town! She's interviewing at a fancy law firm on Monday – so she'll be there until Tuesday."

"That's great, Chlo," Beca said with very little enthusiasm. She vaguely remembered that Aubrey was going to be in town, but the details were incredibly fuzzy. She set her bag by the stairs, ready to be carried up, and stepped out of her shoes, leaving them on the little carpet by the door. She walked over to the living room sofa and sat, pulling a pillow into her lap. "Are you going out with her tonight? Please say yes, please say yes was the mantra that went over and over in Beca's mind.

"We are!" Chloe said gleefully.

"Not the pronoun I used," Beca groaned, her head falling back against the sofa.

"Oh, come on! You love Aubrey as much as I do."

"Not nearly as much," Beca argued. She looked Chloe in the eye, begging with her expression. "I do love Bree, but I can't do this tonight, Chloe. Please, leave me out. I want you to have a great time with her – but I need to stay home." Chloe looked like she was about to cry and Beca thought she might join her if it happened that way. "Please don't be upset with me. It's not that I don't want to spend time with you - or Aubrey, even. I'm just really tired. It's been a crazy week at work – and I had three appointments with Maggie – and I'm emotionally and mentally burnt."

"I'm sorry," Chloe said, shaking her head and offering a sad smile. "You're right. We can go out and have fun – we want you there, but if you can't be, that's okay too." She leaned over to peck Beca on the lips. "But are you sure you want to spend all evening alone?"

"I'm positive," Beca said with a half-smile.

By the time Chloe finished getting ready, Beca had moved only enough to lay on the sofa and pull
a blanket over herself. Music played softly from her Spotify profile on their smart television. Her eyes were closed, but she opened them when Chloe reappeared, dressed to go out in jeans, boots, a pretty green blouse, and a sharp leather jacket. Her expression fell a bit when she saw Beca.

"I feel terrible leaving you here alone."

"Love, please believe me. I want to be alone. I'm fine. I'm just really tired and I need some time to myself to get my brain in order."

Chloe sighed and sat on the edge of the sofa, brushing a lock of Beca's hair behind her ear. "I worry about you," she said, softly.

"I'm okay," Beca promised, offering an honest smile to back up her claims. "I just need some time."

"Will you eat something?"

"Eventually," she answered. "I had a late lunch. And there are leftovers in the fridge – I'm good."

Chloe pecked her cheek. She checked on Beca three more times before finally leaving to meet Aubrey. Beca sighed with relief and rolled to her side, facing the back of the sofa. She slept most of the evening, waking up long enough to shower, listen to Chloe's happy retelling of her night, and fall back asleep in her bed.

Beca did not get an entire reprieve from Aubrey – they met her for dinner on Saturday night and had plans to see a musical afterwards. Beca, fully made-up and in a stylish dress, perfectly curled hair, and relatively expensive shoes, felt completely put-together for the first time all week. She was surprised to see Jesse when she and Chloe arrived at the restaurant. "What are you doing here?" She asked, eyeing her friend suspiciously. She sat next to him while Chloe settled in next to Aubrey.

"I had four tickets," Aubrey informed her. "Jesse was interested."

"Gotta love Book of Mormon," Jesse said brightly.

She studied him warily. "Weird," she finally suspiciously. "But okay." She did enjoy the dinner, especially with Jesse's company. She missed him. They had grown apart after their break-up, but now that they'd reunited when Emily had needed them, she realized how much she had missed him. He talked excitedly about the movie he was working on. He was on the sound team. Not quite scoring the movies yet, but on his way there.

Aubrey told them about the high-powered law firm she was interviewing with on Monday. She had met several partners on Friday, but the full-day of interviews was still to come. Chloe exuded happiness at the mere idea of her best friend ending up in LA.

The musical was well done. Although Beca had seen that particular show at least half a dozen times at that point, she still enjoyed it thoroughly. She was still humming some of the music when she and Chloe prepared for bed that night.

"I think Jesse and Aubrey are cute together," the older woman said, as she sat on their bed, moisturizing.

"What?" Beca asked, turning to her in alarm. She was at her jewelry box, removing the pieces she'd worn that night and putting them back where they belonged. A ring dropped from her fingers and clattered against the dresser.
"Jesse and Aubrey. I never would have considered it – but they work. He's good for her – being so laid back."

"They're dating?" Beca asked, eyes wide, voice moving towards shock.

"They're considering it," Chloe said. "You didn't pick up on that?"

"I'm fucking exhausted, Chloe! I'm lucky I realized Jesse was there." She disappeared into the bathroom to brush her hair, teeth, and change into her pajamas. When she returned to the bedroom, she was still seething. She ran her hands through her hair and let out a deep breath.

Chloe was watching her, looking both concerned and a bit upset herself. "I didn't realize you would care so much."

Beca rolled her eyes. "I am not jealous, if that's what you're trying to insinuate. I'm just surprised – and tired – and honestly, Aubrey is kind of mean for Jesse."

"Hey!"

"Oh, come on, Chloe – she's even mean to you sometimes," she said, gesturing to her girlfriend. "She gets all uptight and forgets about the right way to treat people."

"She's gotten better at it," Chloe reminded her.

Beca nodded and took a deep breath. "You know what? It's not my business. If they're happy, that's what matters." She ached to disappear with her laptop and headphones for a few hours, but she knew that would upset Chloe – and she didn't have the energy to make it up to her. So, she finished getting ready and crawled into bed. They didn't mention Aubrey and Jesse again that week.

A week and a half later, Beca was on the verge of a panic attack. They had arrived for their first joint therapy session since the initial meeting. Beca knew that meant she was expected to move forward - and that was terrifying. They spoke for twenty minutes, going over the things that they'd discussed in previous sessions, with Maggie filling Chloe in on some of what she saw to be the psychology of the situation.

"Now, for the part that Beca is dreading," Maggie said, teasing gently. "We're going to talk about some exercises that I want you to try at home." Beca flushed but nodded. Chloe clutched her hand.

"The exercises are called sensate focus. The main idea is that there's no pressure. The goal is not sex – it's not arousal. It's to build comfort and trust – to experience touching one another simply for the sake of doing so. No sex."

"How does it work?" Chloe asked.

"The ground rules – no touching breasts or genitals for the first few sessions. Verbal feedback is limited – but you must speak up if you're in pain or uncomfortable. You're not trying to elicit sexual response. If it happens, no worries. But it's not the goal and you shouldn't be trying for it. After each session, you need to take time to process. Are those rules pretty clear?"

"Why no talking during?" Chloe asked.

"It's usually more comfortable that way – and less pressure. There's no need to explain what you're doing, or put anything into words. Except, of course, if someone is uncomfortable or in pain. Then, something needs to be said." They both nodded.

"Okay. You want to set aside at least an hour each time. Uninterrupted. Phones, computers, smart
watches – leave them in another room where you cannot hear them. Light candles, dim the lights, whatever makes you comfortable. A warm bubble bath is sometimes a good way to get started. Once you're comfortable in bed, you start with one person exploring the other for about ten minutes – head to toe, front to back, using enjoyment – not arousal – as a guide. You want to notice texture, contours, warmth. Then switch places. Once you've done that and you're comfortable, do a twenty-minute massage – avoiding genitals and breasts. Again, switch. Then spend another ten minutes exploring one another together, simultaneously. Usually the best way to wrap it up is to cuddle quietly for a time." Beca, who was pretty sure she couldn't blush any deeper, did.

"Questions?"

Beca looked like a deer in the headlights. "I can barely breathe thinking about that."

Maggie offered her a sympathetic smile. "It's not going to be easy. It's going to be uncomfortable to start with. But remember that there are no expectations. It's just spending time with someone you love."

"With excessive touching."

"With touching," Maggie agreed. "With your situation, I would recommend that Beca, you start out by exploring Chloe, then allow her to the same to you." She eyed Beca. "And if you need to take an anxiety pill the first few times you try it, that would be okay. Do you still have some?"

Beca nodded. Beca then promptly had a panic attack when they got home – but once she recovered, she was determined to try it that evening.

Chloe made herbal tea and carried it into the living room, where Beca sat absently on the sofa, her laptop on the table in front of her, the screen having gone dark. Chloe handed her one of the mugs and Beca accepted it, offering her a weak smile. The redhead sat next to her, sipping her own tea. "We don't have to do this tonight," she said.

"Yes, we do," Beca said softly. "I want to. I'm just nervous."

"That's okay," Chloe promised. "No matter what happens, we're going to be fine. No pressure."

Once their tea was gone, they went upstairs to their bedroom and Chloe began running a bath in their Jacuzzi tub. Beca calmed down considerably as they soaked in the dimmed room and the jets massaged her muscles. The herbal tea and anxiety medication probably also helped.

Beca began, tentatively, exploring Chloe with the tips of her fingers. She became bolder as she went, offering caresses that – while not necessarily intending to be sensual – certainly were to Chloe. Once she slowed her ministrations, having gone over all of Chloe's skin except for the parts they'd been told to avoid, Chloe took charge.

Chloe flipped them so that Beca was on her back. Beca let out a small yelp at the speed and unexpectedness of the move, but regained her composure quickly. The redhead picked up one of the neck roll pillows and slipped it under Beca's knees, creating a more comfortable position. Beca closed her eyes as her girlfriend slipped to the bottom of the bed and began gently rubbing her feet. Chloe slowly worked her way up, paying attention to each and every curve and expanse of Beca's skin. Beca stiffened when her girlfriend's hands reached her lower abdomen. Chloe felt it and leaned up to kiss her gently.

"It's okay. Take a deep breath." After a moment, once Beca was calm, Chloe continued her attentions. Beca was almost blissfully lost once Chloe began a massage. When they finished, Beca curled into Chloe's embrace and, surprising them both, began to cry. Chloe held her close and
rocked her gently, allowing her to cry herself out. Once she calmed down, Chloe continued to hold her, rubbing her back.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Chloe whispered, before pressing a kiss to the top of Beca's head.

"Not yet," she responded softly, turning and snuggling in, her back to Chloe's chest. An hour or so later, once Beca felt like she wasn't going to explode if she spoke, she turned so she was facing Chloe.

"How do you feel?" The redhead asked, after kissing her gently on the lips.

"Safe," Beca told her softly. "I'm okay."

"I'm glad," Chloe whispered. "Honey, why did you cry?"

Beca shook her head and pursed her lips, thinking before she shrugged. "I honestly have no idea," she admitted. "I think it was just overwhelming. I've never allowed someone that close to me before – for so long."

"Thank you, for trusting me with that," Chloe said softly, her fingers stroking Beca's hair. They fell to sleep soon after – and Beca never budged from Chloe's arms.

Having gone through the motions one time, Beca figured the second night would be easier. Her anxious stomach and quickly beating heart informed her otherwise. She stood in the bathroom, staring at the small orange bottle in her hand, trying to decide if she wanted to take one or two. There were only four shaking around in the bottom of the bottle and she had another day a half before her next appointment where they would talk about dosage and she could have more.

Chloe walked in to remove her makeup and saw the pill bottle. At first, she said nothing. After Beca continued not to move after several seconds, her girlfriend spoke. "Why don't we try it – without?" She motioned to the bottle when she suggested it.

"I think it's a little early for that," Beca told her with a wry smile. "Unless you want to deal with a panic attack."

Chloe swallowed. "I just don't want you to have to take a pill if you don't need to."

"I do need to," Beca said evenly. "Hence the prescription."

Chloe studied her and bit her lip before speaking. She turned Beca so their eyes met. "Just promise me, you'll stop taking those as soon as you can."

Beca was slightly taken aback. Chloe had supported everything she'd tried to do to work through therapy and the doctors' appointments – and this was not the most supportive of conversations. It took her a moment to gather her thoughts. The instant drying of her mouth and the echo of her heart in her ears made concentrating difficult. She closed her eyes and was able to breathe and get herself out of the spiral before it started.

"I honestly don't know when that will be," Beca told her simply. "This is the first time in my life that my panic attacks are kind of falling under control. They're not there yet – but it's closer than it's ever been. I don't really want to mess with something that works."

"No," Chloe agreed. "Of course not. It's – Sorry – I was just being silly." She finished removing her makeup, washed her face, brushed her teeth, and went back into the bedroom. Beca stared after her, trying to make the words make sense. She failed in that aspect – and was disturbed enough to
set the pills aside.

When she walked back into the bedroom, she took a deep breath and crawled into bed. "Do you want to try, tonight?" Chloe asked.

"Not tonight," Beca said simply. Chloe did not push – and nothing more was said about it.

Two days later, Beca had an appointment on her own with Maggie – and Chloe was scheduled to come in for the second half. "You look upset," Maggie said. "What's up?"

"I've been thinking about what you suggested - the daily anti-anxiety medication for awhile." Maggie nodded. "I was thinking about trying it - since the as-needed stuff has been helping. But I think Chloe doesn't want me to take it."

"What makes you think that?" Beca described the situation in the bathroom. "How does that make you feel?"

"Pissed off," Beca said, not realizing how true it was until she spoke. "I'm trying! I'm doing the best I can. I am fighting every urge to work 80 hours a week and ignore all of my personal problem in lieu of a faster career trajectory – and avoiding my personal fucking problems - because that is my automatic setting. But I'm trying. And she's upset about one of the things that's making that possible."

"Not everyone understands psychiatric medications. You need to talk to her – calmly – and find out what her thoughts are. Maybe it's just a misunderstanding. Would you like to talk about it here? I can answer questions if she has any."

Beca shrugged. They spoke about the medication and dosage – and Maggie gave her a prescription for the next month - for the as-needed medication - and asked her to continue thinking about the daily pill. They spoke about several more things that Maggie brought up to poke her about. By the time Chloe was invited into the room, Beca was feeling particularly prickly.

Once they were settled, Maggie turned to Chloe. "I was hoping we were going to talk about the sensate focus activities today – and we still might. But I think there's something more important to tackle first." Chloe looked confused and her eyes searched Beca's, trying to understand. "Beca?" The woman prodded.

Beca explained that Chloe's words about the pills had upset her – and had stayed with her. "I need your support. I know that none of this is fair to you – but I can't do this without you. And I can't do it if you're judging one of the things I need to make it possible."

"I'm sorry," Chloe said sincerely. "I didn't mean to upset you - or be judgemental." She swallowed and took a deep breath, her eyes locking with Beca's again. "But I have to be honest, I hate the idea of you taking those pills."

"Chloe, some days, those pills are the only thing keeping me from having multiple panic attacks. Hopefully it won't always be this way – it probably won't. But when I'm putting in all of this work that's bringing up things that honestly, were hidden away been walls for some very good reasons, I need the help."

"I don't want you to go without something that helps. I just don't trust those drugs," Chloe said. "They can do things to people. Isn't there an increased risk of suicide?"

"In a small percentage of people," Maggie told her softly, inserting herself. "Mostly in people who have a history of suicidal ideation; which Beca does not have."
"So it's completely safe?" Chloe challenged.

"Nothing is completely safe," Maggie responded. "But the prescription Beca is taking – and is finding success with – is as innocuous as possible while still being effective. Even the more normal side effects that could happen, she doesn't seem to be suffering from. And in the end, it is her choice."

"I know that," Chloe said. "I just worry. I don't trust them."

"Do you trust me?" Beca asked.

"Of course," she responded.

"Then trust me to tell you if something goes wrong – or at least to see a doctor. I've never been suicidal – and I don't plan to start now. If thoughts like that start to pop up – trust me, I'll do something about them." Chloe's eyes teared up and Beca realized that this wasn't her girlfriend being slightly overprotective – this was a woman who was terrified. "I can't stop taking them right now," she said, her expression pained. "I need you to accept that."

Chloe nodded. "Of course. I want to support you – and I will. But you promise me – if anything changes –"

"You will be the first to know," Beca promised. Chloe didn't become more comfortable with the medication, but she did her best to hide her worry about it from her girlfriend. And she did not speak ill of the treatment again. Beca calmed down about it in another day - and they were able to try again the exercises recommended by Maggie.

Please take a moment to review or comment. I wanted to end on a happier note - but if I go much further - this chapter will be much too long. I don't want Chloe to come off as being negative or judgemental - but she does have a problem with the medication (for a valid reason that she won't share with Beca for another 10 years). I hope Chloe didn't come across as too difficult; that was not my intention.
Music That Brings Harmony

Chapter 12 – Music That Brings Harmony

"In family life, love is the oil that eases friction, the cement that binds closer together, and the music that brings harmony." —Friedrich Nietzsche

The next week, they had another appointment with Maggie, this one specifically to discuss the progress of the exercises. "How did it go?" Beca flushed red to her ears.

"I don't need details," Maggie promised with an amused smile. "But how do you feel?" Chloe was silent and both she and the therapist waited while Beca gathered her thoughts.


"Safer is good. And you have nothing to be embarrassed about. So you were able to go through the entire exercise?" Beca nodded. "Maybe between now and Monday you can try to do it twice."

Beca's eyes bulged. "We did it three times."

"In a week?" The therapist asked, surprised.

Both Beca and Chloe nodded. "Were we not supposed to?" Chloe asked.

"No, that's fine," Maggie said. "That's amazing, actually. That's just a lot to process in less than a week. Are you sure you're okay?" She asked, eying Beca. Beca nodded. They spent the rest of the session talking through the things Beca was still nervous about – and how to move forward.

At home, they continued with the exercises, which were now sometimes turning into heavier make-out sessions than Beca had ever before been part of – and she wasn't freaking out. At least not completely. They weren't having sex – but it was more intimacy than Beca had ever shared with anyone else in her life – and that meant something to them both. Chloe knew what a big deal it was for Beca to trust her – and she cherished and protected it as they worked through the small brunette's fears.

Two weeks later, Beca met Stacy for dinner at one of their usual spots. The drinking started immediately. So did Stacie's questions. "How are things going, in the bedroom?" Stacie asked.

Beca shrugged. It wasn't a question she would have even considered answering the year before. Now, she was getting better at talking about it. "Improving at a glacial pace."

Stacie smirked at her. "That's alright. With climate change, you'll get there in no time." Beca rolled her eyes at her friend. "How are things going with the therapist?"

Beca shrugged. "Okay, I guess. She makes me think too much – which really sucks sometimes."

"You already thought too much," Stacie reminded her. "She's helping you channel those thoughts into useful things."

Beca nodded and took another gulp of her wine. "Most of it is stuff I'm happier not thinking about. So it's – hard."
"You want to talk about it?"

Beca was silent for several minutes. Their drinks were refilled and the waiter told them their food would be ready soon. They thanked him and watched him walk away. Finally, after another swig of wine, she sighed before speaking. "I always was angry with my dad – for the divorce – for my shitty childhood following – for his lack of visits – for wanting me to come to Barden after he'd practically abandoned me." She bit her lip and paused. "But the more we talk about what actually happened, the more I realize that it wasn't all – or even mostly- his fault."

Stacie nodded. She was intuitive – she knew there was more in there – and that Beca needed the space to talk through her thoughts. "My mom – she's not very nice. She never was, I guess. But I never really blamed her for it. Not that I'm blaming her for it now – that would be a total waste of energy. But she really was awful. And my inability to appropriately process emotions as anything other than anxiety – mostly comes from growing up being afraid of her." She scowled. "As you can see, I'm learning fancy new psychobabble to describe being screwed up."

"You're not screwed up," Stacie said softly, smiling sadly at her. "At least, no more than any other human."

Beca's stormy blue eyes were glassy with tears. "All I ever heard growing up, was how much I looked like her. I never liked it – but now – "

Stacie nodded, understanding what Beca was trying to say. She was discovering that she didn't like her mother very much – and was comparing herself to this woman. "I only met her once. But I've seen pictures – you do look like her. But that doesn't mean you behave like her. I know for a fact you don't. Because you have never – in the seven years I've known you – treated a person in a way that would make them feel how she has made you feel."

Beca wiped away tears and laughed. "I feel like it's a cop out, blaming my mom."

"You're not blaming anyone. You're acknowledging what happened – and how much some of those things hurt you – so you can let them go. And you're allowed to do that." They changed the subject eventually, and Beca calmed down before the waiter brought their meal.

They spoke of Emily over dinner. Emily had been doing well back at Barden – living with Benji in university faculty housing. She was comfortable in the setting, and she loved the work. She was taking three classes and working as a teaching assistant for two undergraduate courses. Sheila and Warren invited her and Benji over for dinner – every Wednesday and Sunday. They talked about Aubrey - she had received the job offer in LA - and was moving in less than a month. Beca admitted to Stacie that she felt like she would lose a piece of Chloe when the blonde arrived full time in their lives, but she was also happy for Chloe - and Aubrey. And possibly Jesse, despite still questioning his sanity. The evening whiled away quickly with plenty of wine and two kindred spirits.

Two months after they began the exercises, Beca felt ready to go for it. She thought about trying to make it extra romantic with flowers and candles or even going to a nice resort for the weekend – but then she realized that would simply be creating pressure that she didn't need. Not until she got a handle on the situation.

So, it was a normal Friday evening when, during what had become normally-occurring make-out sessions, Beca guided Chloe's hand somewhere new - and previously in the "no-go" zone. "Are you sure?" Chloe asked, after pulling away from the kiss she was placing against Beca's neck.
"Yes."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No," she said. "I just – we should do it," Beca told her. "It's time, I think." She kissed Chloe deeply before pulling back. "I want to do this. I want to be with you." Chloe grinned slyly.

"Well, then, who am I to argue?" She abruptly flipped Beca so she was against the mattress, causing the smaller woman to giggle, breaking the tension and lowering her stress level. And they continued caressing, kissing, and eventually making love to one another.

The next morning, Beca woke to the sun streaming through their bedroom curtains and Chloe watching her with a contented smile. Beca smiled back and turned to face her girlfriend. "You shouldn't watch me sleep. It's a little creepy."

"It's romantic," Chloe corrected her.

"Creepy," Beca teased. They kissed and grew quiet again.

"So."

"So."

"How are you doing?"

"Good," Beca said honestly.

"Good enough to consider doing that again?"

"Definitely," Beca said with a blush. "You're very good – at that."

"Well, thank you, my love. You're not too bad yourself." Chloe kissed her, and pulled back to watch her blush brighten. She ran fingers against Beca's cheek. "Don't ever stop blushing – it's adorable."

"I'm not adorable," Beca grumbled. "And I don't think you have to worry – I don't think it's physically possible for me to stop blushing." They spent a long time in bed, snuggling and talking softly, before finally deciding to start their day. A normal Saturday filled with chores, errands, dinner reservations, and tickets to a show. Nothing – and everything – had changed.

The rest of the summer moved quickly as Chloe prepared to teach her first class – she had been hired to teach first grade at a private school about twenty minutes from their home. She was thrilled – and spent the month leading up to the first day preparing. She prepared lessons, created decorations, and began to stock her classroom. Beca and Stacie went with her the Saturday before school started to help her put the finishing touches on her room. It was adorable – cozy, colorful, and warm.

Beca was insanely busy – she was working on her own album and producing on albums with two different artists. She worked longer and longer hours, but tried to make sure that she and Chloe sat down together for dinner at least half of each week. On the first day of school, Beca woke early and made a nice breakfast – and was putting it on the table when Chloe appeared, ready to go and brimming with enthusiasm and nervous energy. She went to work after that, but reminded Theo four times that she was leaving by 3 – she wanted to be home when Chloe got there.

And Beca was thankful that she was home to greet her girlfriend. Chloe was ecstatic – and spent
the evening telling Beca about each of her eighteen new students. She met the challenges of teaching with a truly kind and gently heart and a vibrant personality. Her students adored her, as she did them.

The fall progressed, dotted by a visit from Emily during fall break, and a quick trip back to Georgia for Thanksgiving.

They were torn – Chloe wanted to go home for Thanksgiving – but they didn't want to leave Emily alone for the holiday. And for the first time in her life, Beca kind of wanted to take advantage of the invitation to join her dad and Sheila. All was settled when Lydia Beale found out about the dilemma. Beca, Chloe, Emily, Benji, Warren, and Sheila were all attending the Beale family thanksgiving.

Beca questioned that decision a lot leading up to the day. The logistics, the number of people, the number of people she would be expected to talk to and interact with. She continued questioning it as she sat on the piano bench, sipping hot – and thankfully spiked – apple cider as she watched Chloe's nieces and nephews chase one another around the first floor. Alice, Alex's wife, finally put a stop to it when she exited the kitchen and saw the commotion. "That's enough!" She called. "Go in the playroom – and play! That's what it's for!" She reminded them cheerfully. They did go, but Beca was sure the mayhem was simply being transferred from the entire first floor to a small room. She hoped the walls were padded.

"I hear peace and quiet," Ben Beale said, stepping into the room. He had been on the front porch with Warren and both of Chloe's brothers, discussing some sport or another.

"They've been banished to the playroom," Beca said, nodding in that direction.

"That usually lasts for a few minutes," he said with a chuckle. Beca was surprised when he sat down on a chair by the fire. Close to her. Not too close – but close. She didn't know him well – he was a relatively quiet man in a family of not-quiet people. "This family of mine – they're great. But they're a bit overwhelming at times."

Beca smiled. "Not in a bad way."

"No, no. But it's nice to have a moment or two in quiet company every once in a while." Beca nodded. Beca felt like he might be subtly understanding - and telling her it was okay - that she was overcome by all the company. And it was okay to be quiet, in a house that didn't often experience it. And then he did something to distract her that those who knew her best might not have even considered in that moment. Ben motioned to the piano behind her. "Am I to understand you play this thing?"

Beca laughed. "Would you like me to play something?"

"Yes," he said cheerfully. "I would. Only Chloe ever played it – and since she's been gone – the grandchildren practice on it every now and again, but it could probably use a good workout." Beca smiled.

"Any requests?" She turned on the bench and lifted the fall before glancing over her shoulder, waiting for his answer.

"Do you know Bach?" Beca began playing – and after a second, Ben laughed. She played *Penny Lane*, in the style of Bach. "You also know John Bayless, I see." She simply smiled and continued playing. When she moved on to *Let It Be*, the other men from the porch had come in – and sat
down to listen. Imagine, Blackbird, and Eleanor Rigby soon followed. Then, Beca needed a break. She had been focused on playing, and blushed when she turned around to realize that everyone was in the room. Everyone. She shook her head and pursed her lips as they began clapping. She glared playfully at Ben.

"You set me up."

"No," he promised. "They interrupted my private concert; how do you think I feel?" Chloe, eyes shining, was grinning from her place next to her mother, just inside the doorway to the kitchen. Beca blushed again when she realized no one had moved - and they were still watching her.

She waved her hand at them all. "Show's over. Go back to what you were doing." Most did – but she soon found herself faced with the youngest of the nieces, Ava. She stared at Beca.

"Hi," Beca said uncomfortably.

"Hi," Ava responded, her slight movements ruffling the skirt of her navy-hued party dress.

"What's up?" Beca asked, after Ava did not continue.

The little girl scrunched up her nose, seeming to be thinking through whatever it was she wanted to say. Then she pointed at the piano. "Can you show me?" She asked politely. Beca smiled and scooted over on the piano bench, patting the space. Ava sat next to her – and Beca spent the next hour before dinner teaching her the notes and a few basic songs. She found a beginning piano book in the stool and showed the little girl how to follow along. They were engrossed enough that Beca jumped when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

Chloe stood beside her, smiling. "Ava, honey, go wash your hands – it's time for dinner." The little girl moved to do that, then turned back and threw her arms around Beca, startling the woman.

"Thank you," she whispered, before pulling away and going to do as she was told. Chloe smiled as they watched her go.

"You seem to be enjoying yourself," Chloe said, leaning down to kiss Beca.

She offered an embarrassed smile and shrugged. "It has been a nice day," she said with a nod.

"Good. Now, let's get in there before my brothers try to get us banished to the kids table."

"I might like the kid's table," Beca argued, standing and straightening the flared skirt of her cranberry colored dress. Chloe laughed and dragged her to the kitchen. They washed their hands and walked into the dining room, which had been turned into a thanksgiving wonderland.

It was a tight fit, but soon they were all seated and passing along the delicious looking food. The conversation was light and happy – lots of giggles and laughs. After dinner, after being told that there wasn't room for her to help with the dishes, Beca took her coffee, found the thick cashmere wrap that matched her dress, and wandered onto the back porch. She settled onto the wooden swing. She could hear the happy bustle from inside, but had a view of the quiet November sunset.

The light brightened for a moment as the door opened and someone joined her. She looked up as her dad sat next to her on the swing. "You could get used to this," he said kindly. His eyes sparkled with happiness - something she was thankful for.

Beca nodded in agreement. "I know I could."

"So do you, dad." They sat in companionable silence for a few more minutes – until Sheila found them and asked them to come back inside – for dessert and games. The children were in pajamas in the playroom with Disney movies playing while the adults gathered around the dining room table. Beca found herself on Chloe's team for a cut-throat trivia game.

"Is this really fair?" Beca asked. "There are like five PhDs in this room."

"I'm sure you can keep up, honey," her dad said dismissively. That was also what he usually said before their Scrabble games - where he beat her every damn time.

"It's all for fun," Lydia told her.

"O-kay," Beca responded. She and Chloe did manage to keep up – and Emily and Benjy were a close second - but Sheila and Warren beat them all in the end. But Lydia was right, it was all in fun – and there was lots of laughter. (And shared reading glasses among the older generation as they tried to make out the tiny type on the cards).

The night ended late, with the house cozily packed to the rafters with satiated, happy, cheerful, and sleepy people.

Thanks so much for reading. I do apologize for the delay. I am back to writing - and hope to have the next chapter up this week. Please do let me know what you think - what do you like? No like? wonder? what do you still hope to see it this story? (There are approximately five chapters remaining, give or take one-two).
Chapter 13 – A Beautiful Start

"My whole heart/ Will be yours forever/ This is a beautiful start/ To a lifelong lover letter." – Sara Bareilles

Two weeks after Thanksgiving, Beca surprised Chloe with a weekend getaway in the mountains. Very much surprised her. She had suitcases packed and in her car when Chloe arrived home from school. Usually, if Beca was home when Chloe arrived, she was in the kitchen working on her laptop or taking a walk in the nearby park, listening to music. It was odd to find her in the living room, waiting. She was playing a mindless game on her phone – and that wasn't really normal for Beca. "Hey!" Chloe said, cheerfully.

"Hi. How was your day?" Beca shoved the phone into her pocket and smiled up at Chloe.

"Kind of nuts," she admitted. "The kids are getting antsy – really excited about Christmas. It's hard to get them to focus – especially after lunch. We ended up singing Christmas Carols for the last half an hour. It was the only way I could save my sanity."

Beca smiled. "I think you can be forgiven for forgoing one half hour of – what should it have been then – math?"

Chloe nodded. "The last part of the math block." She set her work bag and purse on a chair and flopped onto the sofa next to Beca and leaned against her, sighing in contentment. "Can we just stay in bed all weekend?"

"No," Beca said simply. "I have a surprise. And we have to go now if we don't want to miss it. I promise, it will be worth it. And we can spend all day tomorrow in bed if you want."

"What kind of surprise?"

"The kind of surprise that I don't tell you about until you see it," she responded with a smirk. "Come on, please? Trust me."

"Well, it does sound like you went to a lot of trouble," Chloe said sweetly. "Okay." She stood up, grabbed her purse, and they headed for the car. The drive was scenic and gave Chloe time to vent about her school day – week, really. She formulated plans for how to split lessons up the next week to maximize the attention she could get from her six-year-old pupils. It was almost two hours into driving that she seemed to realize they were traveling far. "Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise," Beca responded, quite surprised it had taken her that long to ask.

"How far?"

"Another half-an-hour," her girlfriend answered. Chloe tried to pepper in more questions, but Beca simply changed the subject to Chloe's classroom, her own work, or their friends' lives. Before long,
they were in the mountains – and pulling into a resort. A very expensive looking resort.

"Beca," Chloe said with a gasp. "This is too much –"

"No," Beca assured her. "We're good." She smiled at Chloe's still-stunned expression. The place oozed luxury and expense; but that was not why Beca had chosen it. It was a side bonus. "If it makes you feel better, I'll let you talk to my financial manager on Monday and he can tell you why this is okay."

"You have a financial manager?"

"I do," Beca told her with a shrug. "I wasn't sure what to do – we're barely living on a third of my income – I knew I should start investing – so I did." Chloe looked wide-eyed. Money was not something she often thought about – so this was a surprising development.

Beca pulled up to the valet and looked at Chloe again. "So this is okay?" The redhead asked, looking at the entrance to the stone lodge in awe.

"This is okay," Beca promised with a grin. "Come on, it's amazing." The doors were opened for both and the luggage Beca had placed into the trunk was whisked to a waiting cart.

"What made you decide to come here?" Chloe asked, eyes moving quickly to take in the beautiful front lounge while Beca checked them in at registration. She knew her girlfriend was not taking her skiing. That, Beca would not do.

"That will ruin the surprise," Beca told her. She accepted a keycard from the woman at the front desk, signed a piece of paper, and took Chloe's hand. Their room was beautiful – rustic wooden finishes, a fireplace with two cozy chairs, and a huge whirlpool tub in the bathroom. The room was decorated for the holidays with wintery greens, frosted pinecones, and red berries. Chloe opened huge curtains and discovered a balcony that offered a gorgeous mountain view.

"How many more surprises do you have?"

"Just two," Beca said, after considering the question. They took a few minutes to settle in – and Beca changed into warmer clothing, suggesting Chloe do the same.

"Why?"

"We're going outside."

"Why are we going outside?" Chloe asked. "It's thirty degrees out there."

"It is," Beca agreed with a sly smile. "But out there is where the big surprise is."

"Beca – you know I hate being cold."

"I brought your winter coat," the other woman said, lifting the cranberry wool from the bag, along with coordinating pink gloves and a scarf. Chloe put them on and Beca pulled on her own black houndstooth patterned wool coat, black scarf, and soft, fitted leather gloves. Inside the lobby, Beca spoke with the concierge and motioned Chloe to follow her to a side door. They walked down several well-swept paths until they came to a spot where – to Chloe's amazement – a man waited with a horse-drawn carriage.

"What is this?" Chloe asked.
"This is our ride," Beca told her, smiling – her expression both excited and nervous. Chloe was too preoccupied to see the nerves. Beca helped Chloe into the carriage and then the driver helped her. Beca pulled a heavy lap blanket over them and smiled and nodded at the driver, who climbed into the front of the carriage and got the horses moving.

Chloe watched in amazement as the scenery unfolded before them. The lodge and its grounds were decorated decadently. White lights, red ribbons, pine and berries. "It's beautiful," Chloe whispered. Beca took her hand and squeezed it, watching as the winter scenery passed by. Within a few minutes, Chloe could see them approaching a paved pathway – wide enough for the buggy or a car.

"It's one of those light shows that you can drive through," Beca told her. "It opens to the public in another hour or so – that's why I was kind of in a rush."

The lights had come up upon their approach. Beca smiled and looked at her phone, tapping a few things. Music began to play from speakers in the carriage and Chloe watched in awe as the lights danced to the music. It was a seven-mile stretch of lights, perfectly choreographed.

"How did you get them to let us in early?" Chloe asked as she watched in awe.

"I might have redone the music for them," Beca told her softly. Chloe grinned. She should have known – the music was perfect for each section they moved through. The lights pulsed in time with it. She snuggled in against her girlfriend, watching the magical show unfold.

Chloe's eyes bulged as they approached a tree bathed in white, blue, and green lights. Flowers surrounded it – some real, some made of lights. The carriage stopped and the driver opened the door and helped Beca out. She reached for Chloe, who happily obliged. Beca took her hand and began walking toward the tree, snow crackling under their boots. The tree was large enough that they could walk under it. Beca looked up and Chloe did the same, gasping at the sight. Lights spiraled above them in a myriad of colors and sizes, creating a breathtakingly beautiful display.

When she looked back to Beca, she realized that her girlfriend was on one knee. Chloe gaped. "What are you doing?"

Beca's spoke quickly from nerves, but her words were firm and sincere. "Chloe, you make me happier than anything in my life ever has. As my friend, as my partner, as my lover. I know this is quick – but I don't want to spend a day without you for the rest of my life. Will you marry me?"

Chloe felt tears escaping and she sobbed once before sinking to her knees. She embraced Beca, holding her close, then pulled back enough to kiss her passionately. "Is this a yes?" Beca asked, once they had pulled apart.

"Yes, you dork," Chloe said with a laugh. She looked at the beautiful ring in Beca's hand. It was an oval cut blue topaz, the same deep color of Chloe's eyes. The platinum band was encrusted with oval cut diamonds. "Where is yours?"

"We can pick one out this weekend," Beca promised. She shrugged. "It seemed weird to just buy one for myself." She slipped the ring onto Chloe's finger and they kissed again. The rest of the evening was spent in bed and in front of the fireplace. They did go to a local jeweler the next day and find a ring for Beca. A dark marquise-cut sapphire on a scalloped platinum and diamond band.

They didn't discuss keeping it private, so Beca should not have been surprised when, after lunch, she began getting insane amounts of text messages from friends – and family. Apparently, Sheila and Chloe were friends on Facebook – and she'd seen the picture Chloe had posted of both rings artistically settled inside a decorative arrangement of holly, poinsettias, and candles.
While Chloe showered Saturday afternoon to prepare for a nice dinner in the fancy restaurant in the lodge, Beca called her Dad. "Hey, Beca. Congratulations are in order, I hear."

"Thanks, Dad," she said. "Is Sheila with you?"

"She is."

"Could you guys go on speaker?"

"Sure. We're here."

"Hi, Beca," Sheila said. "Congratulations, sweetie."

"Thank you," Beca said. "I just wanted to call – I'm sorry you guys found out on Facebook. I didn't think about it – it just happened last night – and I apparently wasn't keeping Chloe busy enough to keep her away from social media." In her defense, Chloe had taken the picture and posted it while Beca was taking an afternoon cat nap.

"No apologies necessary," her dad said. "We are very happy for you."

"Thank you," she said sincerely.

"How did it happen?" Sheila asked, barely containing her obvious excitement.

Beca explained about the lights – and how she'd taken a drive up in October to see them and help plan out the music. "It sounds amazing, Bec."

"Are you thinking yet about dates?" Sheila asked.

"We haven't been engaged for 24 hours yet, so – no," Beca said. "But I will keep you in the loop. I'm hoping Chloe agrees to something small. Probably in Georgia, though. That's where most of our friends and family are."

"There are plenty of nice places around here," her dad told her. "And Bec – we would be honored to help pay for some of it."

"I appreciate that," she said. "Let's talk about it later – in person – maybe. I'm making good money – and I don't want you to go spending your retirement or anything unnecessary like that."

"As my only daughter, I have set aside some money for this day," he told her. "I promise, I won't dig into my retirement fund to pay for flowers and cake." Chloe exited the bathroom, smiling as she towel-dried her red hair. She wore a fluffy white robe. Beca returned her smile. "Dad, Sheila, I have to go get ready – we have dinner reservations in about an hour. But do you want to talk to Chloe?" They did, so Beca handed over her phone and went into the bathroom to prepare herself.

Beca was now questioning her timing on the engagement. They were engaged just in time to face their families in person. They traveled to Georgia for the Christmas Holiday, spending half their time with Warren and Sheila and half at the Beale home. Everyone wanted to talk about the wedding. Only the wedding. Beca drank coffee on the morning of Christmas Eve, barely listening as Sheila, Lydia, and Alice discussed the pros and cons of spring vs summer weddings.

"What do you think, Beca?" Lydia asked. Beca arched an eyebrow at her.

"Sorry, about?"

"The wedding," the woman said, clearly fighting the tiniest bit of irritation.
Beca shrugged. "I really just want to be married," she told them. "The fancy party part – whatever Chloe wants is fine with me. Well, actually—" she considered. "Damn it," she muttered. She couldn't allow Chloe to call all the shots – the wedding day would be more ostentatious than Beca could take. "Fine," she groaned. "What were we talking about?" Sheila smiled in encouragement.

"The location," Lydia told her. "An outdoor wedding would be lovely, don't you think?"

Beca tried not to make a face. Chloe walked into the room with her cup of tea and saved the moment. "Mom, Beca burns in about ten seconds flat – so an outdoor ceremony is probably not our best bet. Besides, you never know what the weather will be like. Inside is probably a better deal. I would like to look at Barden's new facilities," she said, sitting next to Beca. "They just built a new ballroom – and they marry alumni in the chapel all the time."

"Wouldn't you like to get married in our church?" Lydia asked.

"Maybe," Chloe said. "But I think I would prefer it if Reverend Joe could come to the chapel at Barden," she said, referring to the pastor at her family's church.

"We can go talk to Mike this week," Beca told her. "And at least look." She loved the idea of having it at Barden.

"Make sure to ask if there's an employee discount," Sheila said with a wink. Beca smiled. The conversation moved on to colors. Chloe wanted colors that matched their engagement rings – sapphire blue and teal. Beca was content with that and Lydia didn't hate it – decision made.

They moved on to flowers and Beca stopped them. "Before this goes any further – I want a wedding planner and a budget."

"Wedding planner?" Chloe asked.

"We can still make all of our own decisions," Beca promised. "But you're working full time – as am I – in a different state. It only makes sense." Chloe nodded – it did. "And no one is bankrupting themselves for this," she said. It was a reasonable request, so it was eventually agreed upon. Lydia and Sheila went about making plans for them to meet with potential wedding planners before they returned to California.

Christmas flew by in a flurry of wrapping paper, carols, and family gatherings. Beca enjoyed herself but spent a lot of time with people in the span of a few days. Much more than she usually did. By Tuesday, their last full day in town, she was running out of energy and needed time to herself to recharge. Chloe wanted to spend some alone time with her mother, so Beca told her dad and Sheila that she was going to work – and went to the guest room to do just that. She spent hours with her laptop and keyboard until she realized that her back was in knots.

She got up and stretched and wandered into the kitchen for a drink. Her dad was there, pouring over textbooks with a cup of coffee at his side. "Hey, Bec."

"Hey," she said, pouring herself a cup from the still-warm pot and sitting across from him. She nodded at his work. "I thought you were student free between semesters."

"Planning syllabi for the upcoming semester," he told her. "Nothing that can't wait," he said, closing the laptop to his right and sitting up a bit straighter. "How's your work going?"

She nodded. "Good enough. Just needed a break – The setup isn't quite ergonomically sound."

"No, I don't suppose it would be," he said with a laugh. She pulled her feet up on the chair next to
"Can I ask you something?"

"You just did," she teased. Then nodded.

"Have you told your mom? About you and Chloe? The engagement?"

"That would require us speaking in the past four years," Beca told him with a tilt of her head and a sarcastic smile. "So no."

"Bec –"

"You know how she feels about "alternative" lifestyles," Beca said, using her fingers to make the quotation marks.

"Maybe she'll surprise us?" Beca gave him a side look and he sighed. They both stared out the windows for a bit, studying the cold but not-quite barren landscape.

"Can I ask you a question?" She asked, after several moments of silence. Warren nodded.

Beca stared into her coffee cup and spoke softly, not quite wanting to voice her question. But she eventually spit it out. "Why did you cheat on mom?"

Her father sighed. "Bec, are we really going to rehash this? I thought we were past this."

"I'm not asking to get on your case. I want to know what happened. What made you go elsewhere?"

Warren sighed. "There's no excuse for what I did," he said. "But at the time, I guess I was lonely. Your mom was always emotionally unavailable – and I needed more than that. I needed someone who wanted me around."

Beca must have given off an unintentional look of dejection, because her father immediately started soothing her. "No, Bec. You are not like that. You are kinder and way more open than your mom ever was." She nodded, somewhat listlessly. "What's bringing this up?"

Beca shrugged. "The engagement. And- um - I started seeing a shrink. Still not sure it was the best idea – it's kind of turning things on their head."

"Depends on what those things are," Warren responded. "Sometimes they need to be turned."

Beca took a sip of her coffee before staring out into the yard. It was mostly barren now, but she could imagine how it usually looked in the summer with Sheila's and her Dad's careful tending. "I never really thought about it, before. I never wanted to. I really wish I could just avoid thinking about all of it – but apparently keeping everything bottled up is screwing with my head more." She paused and looked back at her dad momentarily before staring back outside again. "My therapist has suggested that mom wasn't a good – mom. Or person, really. That terrifies me, because I grew up being told how much I was like her."

"Hey," Warren said, almost sharply. Beca looked at him, eyes widening a bit. He was usually good natured and passive. Rarely, if ever, did he speak sharply. "I don't like to say negative things about your mother."

"She never held back on what she said about you," Beca told him.
"I know. But that didn't make it right. Bec, you look like your mom. Every day, you look like her more. And for that, you're lucky. She's a gorgeous woman." He paused. "You're prettier." Beca eyed him suspiciously, trying to decide if was just saying that to make her feel better. " Seriously," he continued. "You get your looks and about half of your wit and sarcasm from you mother. The rest of your personality, not so much. She wasn't always a bad person. She wasn't. But she didn't go out of her way to help other people, to comfort other people, to even understand other people. I don't see any of that in you."

Please share your thoughts. Thanks for reading!
Chapter 14 – Because of You

"I find it hard to trust not only me, but everyone around me. Because of you/ I am afraid." ~ Kelly Clarkson

Wedding planning went smoothly through the spring as the consultant emailed them information, they talked it over and then made a decision. Most of the time, unless it would put her in an uncomfortable position, Beca allowed Chloe to decide. Chloe would then share the decision with her mother and Sheila. Sheila, bless her, praised anything they chose. Lydia was more difficult. More than once, Beca had to reassure Chloe that whatever she'd picked out would be perfect after her mother – while meaning well – gave her doubts.

It was well into the spring before Beca stopped mulling the topic of her mother and came to a decision. She was staring at a spreadsheet the wedding planner had sent, requesting her guest list. Next to mother of the bride, there was a blank space. Weeks and months of anxiety and deep though exploded – and she decided something needed to be done to answer the questions and solve the problem once and for all; no matter the outcome.

Beca took a deep breath before walking into the kitchen to sit at the table. Chloe was sitting there as well, focused on her computer screen. She was planning for school. "What's up?" She asked, eyes darting away from the screen to focus on her girlfriend.

"What are you doing this weekend?"

"Nothing special. Why?"

"Want to go to Portland?" Beca asked. "It could be terrible," she said, using a faux-enticing voice and offering a pained smile.

"What?" Chloe asked, smiling suspiciously. "Portland, Oregon?" Beca nodded. "You want to introduce me to your mom?"

"Want is a strong word," Beca told her, pointing. "And it's not because of you. She's a bitch. I've told you this."

"You've told me," Chloe said, still looking thrilled.

"You're going to get excited – and she's going to be awful – and then you'll be sad. I don't want you to be sad. Please lower your expectations. I feel like i need to give her one more chance before I just cut her out - but I don't want to get my hopes up - or yours."

"Oh, come on, Beca. This is your mom. Maybe you just need to have a nice, open conversation. I'm sure she loves you and wants you to be happy."

"Oh," Beca said, grimacing. "She's just going to crush your rainbow-filled dreams. This is probably a bad idea. You know what – it's stupid. If she doesn't want to come here, then she doesn't get to meet you."
Chloe's eyes widened and her smile fell. "No! Come on, Beca. I want to meet her. I promise, I will lower my expectations and I will try very hard not be sad if she turns out to the raging bitch you make her out to be."

"That's all I ask," Beca said. "You sure you want to do this?" Chloe nodded and squealed, grabbing Beca in a strong embrace.

"This is a terrible idea," Beca muttered to herself. But, the next morning, they were both awake at four in the morning to get to the airport in time. They each had a small carryon and a purse. Beca's body was so confused about the time of day – and she was so nervous about the whole situation - that she handed the keys to Chloe and asked her to drive.

Once they reached the airport, Beca's stomach was rolling. "Honey, you look green," Chloe told her. Beca nodded. She swallowed hard. "Let's get to our gate – I have Dramamine – it may help with the nausea." Beca didn't answer. She was concentrating hard on breathing through her nose and keeping last night's dinner where it belonged. Once they reached their gate, Beca took the medicine her fiancée handed to her and drank a few sips of water.

Somehow, her stomach settled before they boarded. They were in first class – so they were able to get to their seats and relax while everyone else was boarding. Beca put in her earbuds and lay against Chloe's shoulder, willing herself back to sleep. It worked – she slept through takeoff and most of the flight. She woke when the descent began.

A rental car was waiting for them at the airport. Although Anne Marie had offered to pick them up, Beca needed to be in control of this trip. She needed a car. She was feeling better, so she got behind the wheel and drove them the forty minutes to the suburb where she'd grown up. It wasn't the house where they'd lived before the divorce – but it was only a few neighborhoods away.

They were still ten minutes away when Chloe asked her to pull over in a shopping center parking lot. Beca did, placing the car in park. Chloe took her hands, waiting until Beca looked at her. "It doesn't matter what happens this weekend," she told her calmly. "No matter what she thinks, says, or does – good, bad, indifferent. None of it changes what we have. I love you."

"I love you too," Beca whispered, squeezing her fiancé's hands. She pecked her lips gently and momentarily rested her forehead against Chloe's. "Thank you."

There was a florist in the plaza and Chloe made her stop. "Flowers are not going to impress her," Beca warned her beloved.

"Flowers are beautiful. Whether she is impressed or not, I will be happy having them."

"Okay," Beca agreed hesitantly, following and watching as the older woman worked with the florist to build a gorgeous, bright bouquet of wildflowers. Native to Oregon, of course. Chloe happily carried the beautifully wrapped gift to the car.

Beca parked in her mother's driveway – toward the street so there was slim to no possibility of anyone blocking her in. She lifted her purse to her shoulder and stepped out. "We'll leave suitcases here," she told Chloe softly. "We might stay at a hotel." She shook her head as she rephrased. "We will probably stay at a hotel."

"It's going to be okay," Chloe reminded her. She walked over and squeezed Beca's hand before letting go again. She followed the small brunette up the stairs to the tidy craftsman. It was a lovely little house that made Chloe smile. The gardens around it were neat and pretty and the decorations were tasteful, if understated.
Beca took a deep breath before lifting her hand to knock on the door. Her mother answered in under a minute. She was a few inches taller than her daughter, but she was still tiny. Small boned, delicate, and very pretty. She had dark hair cut into a neat and tidy bob. She wore gray pants and a dark blue blouse that matched her eyes perfectly.

She smiled tightly as she opened the door. "Hi, Mom," Beca said – neither enthusiastically nor impolitely.

"Hello, Beca. Welcome." She stepped aside and let them both into the foyer.

"Mom, this is Chloe. Chloe, my mom – Anne Marie Mitchell." Chloe shook her hand and smiled brightly as she offered the flowers. The older woman accepted the vase of flowers and offered a stiff smile. "Thank you, dear. These are lovely. Let me put these in the kitchen – would you girls like a drink?"

"Coffee, please," Beca said. She looked at Chloe, who nodded. They followed her mother into the kitchen and watched as she set the flowers in the center of the vintage white table. Beca dropped her purse inside the doorway and sat at the table. Chloe followed her lead, sitting next to her. "How are you, mom?"

"Fine," she answered. "Just fine. I'm organizing a charity event for the church next weekend – so it's been a bit busy. But mostly the same old things. Garden club, a few lectures here and there, my book club. I volunteer three days a week at the church."

"What do you do at the church?" Chloe asked.

"Whatever needs done," she answered with another stiff smile. "Mostly preparing the weekend bulletin – planning fundraising events – some work with the annual appeal to donors." She made a pot of coffee and brought it to the table with three mugs, cream and sugar. Beca laced her cup with a heavy dollop of both and began drinking. She felt the caffeine and sugar hit her bloodstream and bit back a sigh of relief.

"That sounds nice," Chloe offered. "My mom volunteers with her church. Not every week – since she still works full time. But on the weekends – and in the summer between school years. She always helps with vacation bible school."

"What type church does your family belong to?"

"I grew up Roman Catholic," Chloe told her. "But my parents and both my brothers and their families joined a lovely Lutheran Episcopal congregation a few years ago."

"With a religious background, how does your family feel about your living arrangements?"

"Mom," Beca growled lightly. "We haven't been here five minutes."

"I'm just curious," her mother responded, looking genuinely so. Her raised eyebrow was very much like the one her daughter used when being sarcastic or pointed.

"They want me to be happy, that's all. They moved churches because the new one offered a more welcoming and accepting community," Chloe said. "With everything in the world changing – they wanted to embrace the differences in people, not judge them for it. The church really fits that philosophy."

"Sometimes unchecked change is a challenge to tradition. A challenge the devil sends to lead lesser believers astray –"
"Yeah," Beca said quickly. "Sounds about right. Moving on. Mom, I have a new job."

"Yes," her mother said coolly. "I was fortunate enough to read about it in Rolling Stone – goodness forbid I hear about it from my own daughter."

"It's been busy," Beca told her. "A good friend lost her mother – I started a new job – and moved 3,000 miles." Her voice was growing testy. "But I'm here now. I was planning to tell you now. And since when do you read Rolling Stone?"

"A friend recognized your name and sent the article," her mother answered, tapping her fingers lightly against her mug. "It sounds like a good opportunity."

"It is," Beca responded. "I've already begun working with three different artists at the label. And I'm working on my own album."

"I didn't realize you intended to perform professionally. You always said you wanted to produce and be behind the scenes."

"I get to do both," Beca said with a forced smile. "I don't know that performing was part of my initial plans – but after years with the Bellas, it seemed possible. And after I was scouted by DJ Khalid's talent manager, it seemed that possibly they saw something they thought should be shared."

"They did," Chloe said, moving to grasp Beca's free hand under the table. "You're a breathtaking performer. You were meant to be on stage. The music you make in private is amazing. But when you perform live – it brings in a whole new dimension. And that should be shared."

"Do you also plan to perform?" Anne Marie asked Chloe. The redhead grinned.

"No. I loved performing with the Bellas – but it was a hobby. But I'm teaching. First grade this year – and I give my students plenty of opportunities to sing."

"How lovely," Anna Marie answered. "How does your family feel, having you so far away? I'm certain they must miss you."

Chloe shrugged. "We miss one another. But my family is happy when I'm happy – and they adore Beca."

"So, they're comfortable with you choosing to drop everything to follow another woman across the country?"

"It's not their place to be comfortable or uncomfortable with whoever I choose to share my life with. Luckily, as I said, they love Beca – and she seems to care for them. So, if I had to guess, I would say they are comfortable with it," Chloe said, her voice only slightly more tense than before. Anne Marie stared out the window for a moment before responding. "I suppose they needed to change their belief system, in order to indulge your choices."

"That's enough," Beca said briskly, standing and pulling Chloe with her. "This was a bad idea. Mom, thanks for the coffee. Let's not do it again."

"Rebecca!" Her mother called, just as Beca reached down for her purse to fumble for her keys. "What?" Beca cried, turning to face her. "What can you possibly have to say that I would be crazy enough to entertain? You can't spew these lines laced with hatred towards the woman I love – and
our life together – and then expect me to listen to it."

"It's not too late for you to change your ways and repent."

"Oh, yes it is," Beca assured her with a vigorous, eyes glaring. "We've already slept together many times. Used the lord's name in vain during the act, in fact. Bye, mom."

"You ungrateful little whore –" Beca's eyes widened in shock at how quickly her mother had turned. Usually it took her a bit longer to go from judgmental and belittling to outwardly hostile. Beca felt like she was going slightly crazy – because she actually smiled. She was relieved that her mother wasn't pretending. There was no frail veil of civility. It freed her from any future responsibility or obligation to the woman. Chloe wasn't so happy. Her temper had finally reached the boiling point and flared.

"How dare you," Chloe said, stepping in between Beca and her mother. "Your daughter came here to try and salvage a relationship with you – to include you in her life – which is a very rich and happy life – and it will only get better from here – because she works her ass off for her career - and for everyone she loves."

"I know you both think you're in love. But you're young. What could you possibly know? And once this – thing – is over," her mother said, gesturing to Beca and Chloe. "What man would have either one of you? You're ruining your entire life over a fling."


"Do not use the lord's name in vain in this house!" The woman cried.

"Just pretend I'm praying for you – because really, you need it! Christianity is not intended to be used as a weapon against people who are different than ourselves. People like you warp it – The Jesus you supposedly love – from what I know about him, he would be less than thrilled about your turning people away because of something as simple as who they love." There was silence. "No answer?"

"I think you should go," Anne Maria said quietly.

"We haven't agreed on something so strongly in years," Beca said. "Goodbye, mom."

The drive to the hotel was in silence. When they pulled in front of a beautiful hotel, Chloe finally said something. "Bec, this looks expensive."

"It is," Beca said. "It's supposedly the nicest spa hotel in Oregon. I figured we deserved a treat for not killing my mom." They were in line for the valet.

"I can't – we can't –" Beca opened the bank app of her phone and turned it to face Chloe. It showed her last paycheck. "Wow. Oh."

"We're fine," Beca told her calmly. "It's not like we can go nuts on spending – but we can certainly afford a day or two of pampering."

"Are you sure?"

"I am positive," Becca assured her, inching the car up to where the valet was motioning. She stopped the car, parked, and allowed the man to open her door. Someone else was already opening Chloe's. Within ten minutes, they were in their hotel room, having touched nothing but their purses.
The concierge sent them a tea tray, so Chloe was focused on pouring herself a cup while Beca perched on the bed, flipping through a binder of spa services. "Bec?"

"Uh-huh?"

"Can we talk about what happened?"

"We can," Beca responded. "But I don't see the purpose right now. Chloe, I'm not upset. At least, not about what my mom said. I knew what she thought about us before I took you there. I'm mad at myself for taking you in to that situation."

"It's not your fault."

"No, it's not," Beca said. "It's hers. So, let's try to salvage something fun out of the weekend, okay?" Chloe nodded and handed Beca a teacup before lifting her own from the tray and moving to sit next to her fiancée on the bed. They flipped through the descriptions of the difference services, trying to decide what they wanted to do.

Chloe was, unsurprisingly, far more adventurous than Beca. "Why not the vichy massage?"

"Because I don't want to be completely naked under a shower head with a stranger."

"Oh, they still keep you draped."

"No," Beca said. "They don't. I checked." Chloe looked back at the page and saw that she was correct. The redhead giggled.

"Okay, then, Ms. Moneybags, what do you want to do?"

"Swedish massage, manicure, pedicure," Beca said.

"You're boring."

"I like that about myself," Beca assured her. "You can get really interesting colors on your nails – how about that? Or hot stones with the massage?" Chloe laughed.

"I will be perfectly happy with a normal massage and mani-pedi-, I just like to tease you." Beca called the concierge, who made their appointments and called them back with the times. An hour later, they were being led – while wearing the softest bathrobes either had ever touched – to a beautiful, simplistic room arranged for couple's massages.

After two hours, they were both relaxed and comfortable – but Beca was completely blissed out. Chloe redressed in her robe and walked over to wrap her arms around Beca. "You look extremely relaxed."

"I don't think I knew this level of relaxation existed," Beca faux-whispered. She turned around in Chloe's arms and kissed her. "Thank you," she said softly, resting her head against Chloe's shoulder.

"I didn't do anything."

"Yes, you did," Beca assured her. "Thank you for being here with me. I –" She stopped. "I'm going to lose this really nice feeling if I get into my emotions right now, but just thank you."

"You are ever so welcome," Chloe told her. She hugged Beca closer. The rest of the weekend wasn't spent reconnecting with Beca's mom, but it was spent with family; the chosen kind.
Chapter 15 – I Will Become Yours

"I choose you/ I will become yours and you will become mine" ~ Sara Bareilles.

The weeks and months leading up to this day had prepared her; she knew what to expect. And one extra dose of anxiety pills never hurt anyone. So Beca was calm when she looked down at her cell phone. She read the display and took a deep breath before answering. She considered leaving it go to voicemail, but then she would wonder all day. "Hi, Mom." She knew the answer. If her mother were coming, they would have known by now. This was just her mother's way of punishing her emotionally.

"Hello, Rebecca." She sounded as cold and unmoving as ever. Beca steeled herself and kept her voice level.

"What's up?"

"I've thought and prayed about this for months. I regret that I'm unable to come today. I can't condone what you're doing." Rage simmered at the condescending tone, but quickly dissipated as she reminded herself that this was not a surprise. This was par for the course; normal for her mother. And she didn't need it. Not one bit.

"It's a damn good thing I don't need your permission," Beca told her coldly.

"I'm sorry you feel that this is the way to live your life," her mother said, her voice pained and far too calm for the blow she was delivering. "I hope you don't regret it. But I believe you will." Beca hung up before her mother could utter another word. She didn't want to cry. She didn't want to care what her mother thought. But tears came anyway.

Once finished, Beca wiped at her eyes, trying to ignore the words that were echoing through her head. "Fuck," she said softly, realizing that her eye makeup was running – badly. She walked back to the vanity and pulled a makeup wipe from her bag, cleaning the smudges under her eyes. A knock sounded on the door – and before she reacted – the door opened. Her dad and Sheila stood in the doorway, beaming.

"I need a few minutes," she told them. "I ruined my makeup."

"No hurry, Bec," Warren said, closing the door behind them. "This whole shindig will not start without you. You look beautiful," he said, stopping behind her at the mirror. She met his gaze and gave him a little roll of the eyes.

"I just ruined my makeup. I look raccoon-like."

"No," he said, leaning down to press a kiss to the top of her head, curls and all. "You're always beautiful to me, Beca."

She scoffed playfully. "Don't get sappy on me, now."
"Isn't that what weddings are for?"

"Not my wedding," Beca answered sternly. She worked in silence for several minutes, fixing her makeup – this time making sure what she used was waterproof. Finished, she wiped her hands and turned on the bench, crossing her ankles to the side as she took in her dad and stepmother, dressed for the big day. Her eyes almost teared again and she rolled them up to the ceiling to stop it from happening. She focused on her breathing and almost missed the beginning of her dad's question.

"Are you just having wedding day emotions, or did something happen?" Warren asked gently.

"I don't really want to talk about it," Beca told him. She had a tissue between her fingers which she used to dab carefully at her eyes. "But so you know, Mom's not coming. That's – cool. Whatever."

"Oh, Bec."

"I really don't want this to be a big thing. We knew it was a good possibility. Seriously, if she were going to come, she would have made a big production out of it. It's actually probably for the best that she decided to stay away."

"What did she say?" Warren asked with a sigh.

Beca shook her head, looking at him with an expression that begged him to change the subject.

"This day isn't supposed to be about this kind of crap. Can we – not?" Warren nodded.

"Yeah," he agreed. He sat on the vanity bench, brushing her dress out of the way, and hugged her. "You deserve better, Bec. I'm sorry. That's the last I'm going to say about it." She sniffled and allowed him to hug her for another minute or so. When he went back to his seat on the sofa, Beca stood and walked to the full-length mirror. She studied her reflection, her hands going to brush imaginary lint from the perfect waist of her simple but elegant tulle and lace gown. Her sprig-shaped gold antiqued rhinestone earrings twinkled under the soft lights.

She turned to face her father and his wife. He looked very handsome in a light grey tuxedo. Sheila was a classic beauty in a navy gown with grey embroidery and delicate silver jewelry accented with grey pearls. "You guys look great," Beca said. "Thank you for being here." She continued quickly. She pointed to them sternly. "Please don't respond, it will just make me cry again." They both smiled and nodded. Her dad's eyes began to water and she threw up her hands.

"Well, you can't cry either! That's going to make me cry!" Before he could answer, or she could cry, a knock sounded on the door. "Who is it?"

"Your favorite ex," a voice called. "And Stacie."

"Come in!" Jesse and Stacie entered the room and closed the door again. Stacie was grinning widely and looked far too sexy in the demure navy-blue bridesmaid dress they'd chosen. Jesse wore a gray tux – and carried a small but bountiful bouquet of blue and white flowers. He lay them on the vanity.

"Those are for you," he said, nodding to the flowers. Beca smiled weakly. Jesse hugged her close.

"You look gorgeous," he whispered into her ear.

"Having second thoughts?" Beca teased. Jesse laughed and cocked his head while looking down at her.

"I love you – and I miss you. But I think I'll marry someone who both loves me and is attracted to
me."

"Whatever," Beca said in mock annoyance. "Your loss."

"Definitely my loss," Jesse said as he pulled back and grinned down at her.

Stacie gave out a sound akin to a shriek and Beca jumped, doing a little hop away from her. "You ruined your makeup!"

"Dude, this is all very stressful. Don't yell at me. My doctor worries about my blood pressure," she added cheekily.

"You're hilarious," Stacie said dryly as she shook her head and deposited Beca back at the vanity table. Within five minutes, she had Beca's makeup back to her specifications — and waterproof, as demanded by the bride.

Another knock sounded as she was finishing and Jesse allowed the photographers inside. Beca tried not to groan. She had refused to allow cameras while she was getting ready, but they'd caught up to her now. The cheerful woman and her assistant led them to the church garden and took a wide variety of pictures. Many with just Beca — but also some with her father, Sheila, and all three together. There were some with Stacie and Jesse. More would be taken after the wedding. Beca's favorite set of photos came from Jesse deciding it was wise to deposit her in a tree. The photographer took several of her, in her perfect white gown, relaxing on the low, thick tree branch among the fragrant green leaves and pink flowers.

Then her dad stood at the foot of the tree, teasing her about how she was going to get down. The photographer caught a perfect shot of the father and daughter beaming at each other, him looking up, her gazing down, teasing and laughing. Jesse and Warren helped her out of the tree and she walked, arm in arm with her best friend, back into the church.

Emily was waiting for them in the bride's room, looking anxious in her navy dress. She carried a bouquet that matched Stacie's — filled with lush blue and teal flowers. "They're ready," she said.

"Then, let's go," Beca said, smiling softly. "You look very pretty, legacy." The last time she had seen her, Emily had her hair and makeup done, but was still in jeans. Aubrey had ordered her into her dress moments before.

Emily blushed and took in Beca's entire ensemble. "Wow. You look — perfect. Chloe — well, you'll see — " She dabbed at her eyes with a tissue that had been clenched in her hand.

"No tears, Emily," Beca ordered. "Do not make me cry." Emily nodded and widened her eyes, trying to stop herself.

"It's just so nice. I'm just so happy for you." She moved close and Beca put up a hand.

"No hugs. I will hug you later. Right now, it would just make me cry. Okay?" Emily nodded. The photographer, upon seeing Emily in her blue dress, dragged her — along with Beca and Stacy — back to the garden for a few more photos. Benji caught up with them in time to be included.

Despite the detour, Beca's side of the bridal party arrived at the back of the church just in time. The guests were inside. Chloe was on the far side, ready to walk down the right-side aisle. Beca wouldn't be able to see her, thanks to the floral explosion between them, until she stepped foot in the church.

Beca stood at the very back of the church, on the left-hand side, and watched as Emily started
down the aisle on her side with Benji, Jessica with Chloe's oldest brother on Chloe's side. Beca couldn't see Chloe, but she knew she was on the other side of the vestibule. Stacie turned and pecked a kiss on her cheek before grabbing Jesse's arm to lead her down the aisle. Beca could see Aubrey on the other side, only once she entered the church. She was led to the front by Jason, Chloe's younger of two older brothers.

She looked up at her dad. "I'm really going to do this," she said softly.

"Yeah, you are," he said, smiling. "You're happy, Bec. I can tell. I couldn't ask for more."

"I am," she said, smiling. She heard the cords change and they took a few steps toward the entry.

"Ready?" Her dad asked, squeezing her hand and looking down at her with excitement.

She smiled up at him. "Ready," she agreed, taking his arm. They stepped into the church and Beca tried her best not to look at the aisle to her right. Chloe was walking down that aisle with her parents, radiantly smiling. Beca tried, but she couldn't help stealing glances. At the front of the church, she and her dad turned right while Chloe and her parents turned left. They met in the middle and finally saw one another in their wedding finery. Beca's eyes teared but she held back the heavy crying by biting her lip as she smiled at her soon-to-be-wife. Warren kissed Beca, then Chloe, then stepped back. Chloe's parents did the same.

"I now invite Chloe and Beca to exchange their vows, which they have chosen to write themselves."

"Completely forgetting right now why we did," Beca said, nervously, gaining a soft laughter rippling through the church. Chloe just beamed at her.

"Beca Mitchell. Where do I even begin? You have made my life richer every day just for being in it. I haven't looked at another person since you entered my life – there was no reason to search for more than I already had. Thank you for being you – for being smart and funny and snarky – and for being sweet and kind and caring. You try to hide those parts sometimes, but I hate to break it to you; I'm on to you. Thank you for challenging me to find myself – to be the best possible version of myself – and for helping me build a beautiful life."

Beca wiped tears away with the tissue that was now sopping wet in her hand. Her voice shook slightly as she began to speak, but quickly strengthened and settled. "I'm not much for speaking," she said, looking Chloe in the eye. And I thought there was probably a better way to let you know how much I love you – and how happy I am to be facing the future with you." Surprising very few, Beca took Chloe's hand and started walking until they reached the piano. She sat, inviting Chloe to slide in beside her.

Let the bough break, let it come down crashing
Let the sun fade out to a dark sky
I can't say I'd even notice it was absent
'Cause I could live by the light in your eyes
I'll unfold before you
Would have strung together
The very first words of a lifelong love letter

Tell the world that we finally got it all right
I choose
you
I will become yours and you will become mine
I choose
you
I choose
You, yeah

There was a time when I would have believed them
If they told me that you could not come true
Just love's illusion
But then you found me
And everything changed
And I believe in something again

My whole heart
Will be yours forever
This is a beautiful start
To a lifelong love letter

Tell the world that we finally got it all right
I choose
You
I will become yours and you will become mine
I choose
You
I choose
You

We are not perfect we'll learn from our mistakes
And as long as it takes I will prove my love to you
I am not scared of the elements I am underprepared,
But I am willing
And even better
I get to be the other half of you

Tell the world that we finally got it all right
I choose
You, yeah
I will become yours and you will become mine
I choose
You
I choose
You

I choose
You

Any dry eyes were completely gone by the time Beca finishing singing, including her own. Her tissue was completely sodden by that point and Chloe handed her the lace handkerchief her mother had given her.
After taking a moment, they made their way back to the altar and the rest of the ceremony flew by. They exchanged rings with steady hands and listened as the minister extolled whatever wisdom he chose. "By the power vested in me by the Episcopal Church and the State of Georgia, I pronounce you married. You may kiss your bride." Beca blushed her deepest shade of pink but they did kiss, as chastely as could be managed with Chloe involved.

"I am happy to present the newly married, Mrs. Chloe Beale and Mrs. Rebecca Mitchell." The church full of friends and family cheered.

Photos flew by – and before they knew it, they were in the reception hall, being introduced and waltzing into the first song. Beca led for about half the song, then Chloe took over seamlessly. They hadn't spent years choreographic together for nothing. Since their feet knew what to do, they were able to focus on one another.

"How are you holding up?" Chloe asked, gently pushing a wisp of hair behind Beca's ear.

"I'm very happy," Beca promised her. "You?"

"I'll do," she said, smiling gently. "I love you, Beca."

"I love you too," she said, leaning into Chloe as they took the last spin around the dance floor. The song ended and their guests applauded.

The DJ grinned as he announced the father-daughter dance. The song "Close to You" by the Carpenters began to play. Beca and Chloe each found their dads and began dancing. "Ready for this?" Beca asked her dad with an amused grin, as they swayed gently to the song.

"No," he said with a laugh. "But for you, I'll try."

"I'll help you," she promised. "It's a few bars away from changing." The song shifted, the tempo changed, and with a quick transition, she and Warren – and Chloe and her dad – were dancing to the upbeat mix.

Shake it off, Cotton Eye Joe, Shake Your Groove Thing, Love Me Do, and several others that Beca had expertly mixed. Her dad was able to keep up, but she did most of the leading. Chloe was definitely leading Ben – who looked like he was having a ball.

After cake had been served, guests had been greeted, and at least bites of food had been consumed, Beca found her way to one of the balconies. Chloe found her a moment later and she rested her head against the taller woman's shoulder.

"This was nice," Beca said. "But can we leave yet?"

"Our families are still here," Chloe reminded her with a patient smile. "Not yet."

"Fine," Beca said, teasing with her grumbling. "Then I'm going to find the cookies." Chloe wrapped her arms around Beca and she leaned closer. "In a minute." They continued to stand together, looking out into the tranquil night, leaning on one another.

It was after eleven when things began to wind down. Beca excused herself to the ladies room. It took quite the effort – but she was not allowing anyone to help her go to the bathroom. Finished, Beca washed her hands and left the ladies room. She was slightly startled when she saw Sheila sitting on a plush sofa in the lounge. "What's up?" Beca asked, eyeing her carefully. Shelia stood and walked over to her, offering her hands. Beca hesitantly took them and Sheila squeezed. She spoke, close to Beca, but not too close.
"I didn't want to upset you earlier – I know crying was on a hair-trigger. But I wanted to thank you for allowing me to be involved today. I know we haven't always been the best of friends. But I love you, Beca. And I am so happy for you."

Beca smiled and leaned forward a bit, whispering in Sheila's ear. "Thank you. For not saying that before. I would have sobbed." They both laughed and Beca extracted her hands to hug Sheila.

"Thank you for putting up with my crap for a long time."

"You were entitled to a good portion of that anger," Sheila allowed. "I never faulted you for it."

"Then you're way too nice," Beca said, smiling apologetically. "Thank you for being there, for me. And for my dad. I'm really thankful that he has you."

The two women walked together to the main hall and saw that, blessedly, very few people remained. Chloe's immediately family was bidding Warren goodnight. Beca joined her wife and said goodnight to the Beale's. Then Warren and Sheila hugged them and told them to go to their room; they would see that everything ended up where it needed to be. Beca and Chloe thanked them. They walked through to the hotel and were surprised to find Benji sitting in the lobby.

"Everything okay, Benji?" Beca asked, her hand clasped in Chloe's.

He stood up when he saw them. "Oh, yes," he said, flushing. "I – um – I know you probably want to go to bed – or –" he blushed brighter. "Or whatever. But do you have a minute?"

Chloe gripped her hand tighter, but Beca couldn't turn away. Benji didn't ask for much. And he was so damn honorable and sweet.

"What's up?" Beca asked, sitting on a bench nearby. Chloe sat next to her and Benji sat back down.

"I would like to ask Emily to marry me," Benji said.

"Dude, you don't need my permission," Beca told him.

"I know," Benji said. "But you're the closest she has to family. She cares what you think."

Benji offered him an adoring smile. "Benji, you're wonderful to Emily. She's lucky to have you. I'm not going to get in the way of that – nor would I want to." She waited. They stared in silence at one another. Her eyebrows arched and her eyes widened. "Well, are you going to show me the ring?"

Benji flushed with happiness and reached into his pocket, withdrawing a ring box. He offered it to Beca, who opened it to see a gorgeous platinum ring. Chloe gasped as she grabbed it to take a closer look.

"Whoa," Beca said, taken aback. "Benji, this is gorgeous. But dude, you're still going to be able to – like – pay the mortgage and buy food, right?"

He blushed. "I kind of got a patent bonus at work and decided to spend it on this and the honeymoon."

"She will love it," Beca assured him. She gazed at the perfectly rounded diamond and the smaller ones that circled it. Chloe handed it back to Benji, who looked both pleased with himself and also a little sick to his stomach.

"Benji, why did you need to know now?" Chloe asked, smiling with amusement.
"I talked myself out of the conversation a few times – and I really wanted to ask her tomorrow. It's the anniversary of the first time we met. After brunch, we're planning to take a walk. I thought the waterfall would be a nice place."

"That's awesome," Chloe said. "Good luck. I'm sure you won't need it, though." She stood and pecked his cheek. Beca did the same. "We are going to bed. Goodnight."

"Goodnight," Benji called.

They walked together to the room and Chloe slipped the key card from the pocket hidden in the seam of her gown. The room was lovely – dim with the fire lit. They stood inside the door and embraced. Beca stood on her toes and kissed Chloe deeply. She blushed as she pulled away and made an apologetic expression.

"How much will you hate me if we don't sleep together on our wedding night?"

Chloe pulled her close again and then met her eyes. "You don't ever have to worry about that. You never have to apologize or feel embarrassed or like you're keep something from me. If you're not feeling up to it, we can just cuddle.

"You are amazing," Beca told her.

"You're pretty great yourself," Chloe returned with a grin. "Come on – I'm pretty sure the tub has jets – and I don't know about you – but I'm sore."

"Yeah, what is that?" Beca agreed. "I've had days where I've been on my feet more – but seriously, everything hurts."

"Stress, probably. Let's see what we can do about that." They helped one another out of their gowns and had a lavender-scented bath in the jacuzzi tub. The crazy, busy, dizzying, perfect day ended with them cuddled up together, slipping into peaceful sleep.

For those of you still reading – thank you! Thank you for your patience and thank you for coming back. I hope this was a worthwhile addition. This particular story has two more chapters. Let me know what you think. Thanks!
Thank you to everyone who has reviewed or messaged me - I appreciate the feedback. Let me know your thoughts on this installment. This was a chapter I wrote early on in the story.

Chapter 16 – I Hope You Dance

"Livin' might mean takin' chances, but they're worth takin'/ I hope you dance" ~ Lee Ann Womack

Warren Mitchell was not expecting his daughter when he answered the door. "Beca!" He said, slightly taken aback, but still happy. He opened his arms and she allowed him to hug her.

"Hi," she said solemnly.

"Come on in," he said, backing up to let her in. She only had her shoulder bag and there was no car in the driveway. "How'd you get here?"

"Uber," she said. "I'm sorry – I should have called."

He shook his head. "No, it's fine. You can always come here. Coffee? Tea?"

"Decaf of either," Beca said with a sigh. She followed him into the kitchen and watched as he made a pot of herbal tea. Within minutes, the scent of her favorite – blueberry – wafted to her. She accepted a cup of it from her father and began to sip. "I'm sorry," she said, offering a half smile. "I don't even know what I'm doing here," she admitted.

"Let's start simple," Warren said. "Did you come here right from the airport?" Beca nodded. "Does Chloe know where you are?" A shake and a shrug. She looked at her watch. "She still thinks I'm at work."

"You are thousands of miles away from work, so maybe you should call her?"

Beca shrugged noncommittally, still looking anxious. "I don't know what to tell her. I'm not even sure why I'm here – how can I explain it to her?"

"Can I just let her know that you're here and safe – we can fill her in on details later?" Beca nodded and Warren walked to the living room to call Chloe. When he returned, he moved a small plate of cookies to the table along with his own cup of tea.

"Bec – what's going on?" He asked, after she remained silent for ten minutes.

She hadn't been paying attention, so his voice jolted her. "I'm pregnant," she told him, unceremoniously blurring it out. He was immediately unsure of how to respond. Normally, his married, successfully employed daughter announcing a pregnancy would be a reason to congratulate her. But, in addition to sounding despondent, his daughter was also married to a woman. Unplanned pregnancies were not in their realm of possibility.

"Oh," he said softly. "How did that happen?" He didn't really want to know, but it seemed as though the conversation called for that question.
Beca realized what he was thinking and shook her head. "No, it wasn't anything like that. I didn't cheat. It was on purpose. It's just that it worked the first time – and I was expecting a little more time to get used to the idea. But it just worked," she said, staring at her hands.

"Bec, that's wonderful," he said softly.

She nodded, but a sob soon escaped, and she dropped her face to her hands while she cried. Warren was at a loss, so he simply moved closer and awkwardly patted her back until she calmed down. "Bec, if this isn't what you wanted – how did it get this far?"

"I do want it," she said, wiping away tears. "I just don't think I can do it. I mean, I don't know how to be a mom! I don't know anything about kids. And what if I just – ruin a perfectly good human being," she said softly, with a terrible desperation in her voice.

"Oh, kiddo," he said softly. "You are not going to ruin anything." He laughed and pulled his arms around his daughter. He whispered. "The crazy thing the universe doesn't want you to know – is that no one knows what they're doing – especially the first time."

"This is a very inept way to bring humans into the world!" She told him. "I mean, there should be more requirements for raising human beings than there are for driving a car or buying a house. Some people are awful parents. And I'm terrified that I'm going to be one of them."

"You're not," Warren said simply, patting her shoulder and moving back to his seat.

"How do you know that?" She asked. She accepted the tissues he passed to her and wiped her eyes, then her nose.

"Because I know you," Warren said with a soft smile. "And you want everyone to think you're aloof and distant – but you've been taking care of other people since you were little. Do you remember when we lived in Portland? We had the neighbors with two little girls? They were three and four when you were ten." Beca nodded. "You spent every day of your summer break with those little girls – at first I thought you were bothering their mom, so I told her I would call you back home. She told me to watch. So I did. You were playing with them, sure. But you were keeping them safe – and taking care of them. Honestly, Rachel should have been paying you to babysit. You were devastated when they moved away."

"The memories were returning to Beca. She remembered those little girls. They had curls the color of sunshine and adored singing songs. They would play in the backyard all day, begging Beca to sing for them and with them. She pushed them on swings, chased them around the yard, played hide-and-seek, and helped them pick wildflowers."

"I think it's a little harder when you're the adult," Beca said.

"It is. But you have the heart for it. And that's the only part you can't really fake. The rest – you'll figure out as you go. And don't be afraid – or too proud – to ask for help. Hire a nanny to help. Let your friends help." He paused. "Not the Australian one, though."

Beca laughed. "No," she said, shaking her head. "I didn't even trust her with Emily when we were at Barden – and Emily was seventeen."

"Another indication that you've got this, Bec. You spent four years leading the Bellas, another three helping Emily. It may have started with music, but you made a family with those girls. You helped take care of them."

Beca shook her head. "Chloe was there. She did all of that."

"You don't give yourself enough credit. But if that's the way you want to look at it," Warren said,
"Then I guess it's a good thing you married her." Beca laughed at his expression.

"Thank you," she said softly. She sighed and then admitted, "I think hormones were a slight factor in my decision to fly across the country."

"I think that's probably a safe bet," Warren told her. "But Bec, you're going to do great. This baby is incredibly lucky in so many ways." She offered him a tentative, hopeful smile. "Why don't you call Chloe? Plan to stay for the night – you look exhausted. I'd feel better if you get some rest before you hop on another plane. Stay. We'll have dinner – you can invite Emily over, if you want."

"I don't want to mess with your plans."

"You're not," he told her. "You're always welcome. Sheila will be happy to see you. Go, call your wife. Explain your craziness. I'm sure she'll get a laugh out of it."

"Thanks, Dad," Beca said sarcastically, but she was smiling. She poured herself another cup of tea, walking to the guest room and pulling her phone from her pocket. Chloe answered before the first ring ended.

Beca closed her door. "Hey," she said softly.

"Hi," Chloe said, her voice tight. "Please don't scare me like that."

"I'm sorry. I just panicked. I guess having anxiety along with a platinum card and a hormonal imbalance isn't always a good thing. I'm okay now, though. I'm sorry I left. I know this is cliché – but I really do think it's the hormones." Chloe laughed.

"I love you so much, crazy lady."

"I love you too."

"You're sure you're okay?"

"Yeah," Beca said. "I was just having some really bad thoughts about my mom this morning. And I started panicking about how I was going to be a decent mother when my own mother was pretty shitty. My dad talked me down from crazy to slightly quirky."

"Slightly quirky is my favorite type of Beca," Chloe assured her. "And Beca, you're going to be amazing."

"I have you to make sure of that," Beca told her calmly. "That is the most important thing." She paused. "My dad asked me to stay for dinner."

"Do you want to?"

"I think I do," Beca answered.

"Then stay," Chloe said. "I'm good. I'll invite Aubrey over for dinner – maybe even to binge movies and spend the night. It's probably better if you don't fly back tonight anyway. You're probably exhausted."

"I'll be home tomorrow."

"Call me when you know the time – I'll pick you up."

"You're sure you're okay?"
"You don't have to –"

"I'll pick you up, Beca."

"Ok," she agreed. Love you."

"Love you too. Have fun. Tell everyone I said hi!" Beca laughed. She was sitting on the bed when she finished – and she realized how right her wife was – she was exhausted. The baby was – according to science, the size of a sweetpea and - already kicking her ass. She looked at her watch and saw that it was almost three – six in LA where she'd woken up that morning. Kicking off her shoes, Beca climbed into bed and pulled the quilt over her. She was sleeping in moments.

She slept soundly, not waking until someone actually touched her. She jumped at the feeling and opened her eyes. Sheila sat on the edge of the bed, looking apologetic. "I'm sorry. I would let you sleep – but dinner is almost ready."

"It's okay," Beca assured her, sitting up. She brushed hair behind her ears and she flushed. "I'm sorry for just showing up and napping in your guest room."

"You can show up anytime," Sheila told her with a doting smile. "I'll give you a few minutes. Just come down when you're ready."

"Thanks." Beca watched her leave and took her time, stretching and then going to the bathroom to freshen up. By the time she walked downstairs to the kitchen, she felt much more awake. She found Sheila taking a beautiful beef roast from the oven. She slipped it onto an oval decorative plate, sliced it thinly, and surrounded it with roasted potatoes and vegetables. Beca hadn't even known she was hungry until her stomach growled.

Sheila laughed at the sound. "It sounds like you're hungry."

"Sorry about that," Beca said, her hands flying to her stomach. "It doesn't usually make sounds on its own accord." Sheila brushed off her apologizes and began drizzling a glaze over the meat. "Can I help with anything?" She looked at the strangely empty table. "I can set the table."

"We're good," Sheila told her. "And it's already set. Your dad is in the dining room. If you want to take something, you can carry the rolls." Beca picked up the little decorative wicker basket lined with a cloth napkin and filled with warm rolls. She nearly dropped them when she walked into the dining room and was almost bowled over by Emily rushing her for a hug.

"Oh, god. Okay. Em, I love you and I'm really happy to see you. But you're way taller. This gets claustrophobic." Emily let her go with a giggle and took the rolls.

"I'm so happy you're here!"

"Me too," Beca said, hugging her from the side. "You look great." Her eyes shifted to the table, where Benji was already seated, looking only slightly uncomfortable. Beca knew her dad and Sheila had been inviting them over for dinner most Sundays, so he was not completely out of his element. "Hey, Benji."

"Beca," he said, smiling warmly. "Thanks for the invite."

"Hey, I'm glad my dad thought to do it. I was sleeping all afternoon." She motioned to the table. "If any of this were left up to me, I'd be eating pizza, probably alone." Her expression changed to one of longing as Sheila walked behind her to place dinner on the table. "And this smells so much
better." Beca sat next to Emily at the table, across from Benji and on the other side was her step-mother.

She was not surprised when both Emily and Sheila reached for her hands. She held their hands and listened as her father offered one of his non-religious blessings. She had thought the practice hypocritical and annoying when she was a teen. Now, she was thankful for the kind words.

*We receive this food in gratitude to all beings*
*Who have helped to bring it to our table,*
*And vow to respond in turn to those in need*
*With wisdom and compassion.*

"Why didn't you tell us you were coming?" Emily asked, once they had dug into the savory meal. "I would have totally left the library earlier to see you."

"It was a very last-minute decision," Beca told her. "But I'm so glad you were available for dinner."

Emily shrugged. "I'm so wrapped up in my dissertation that I'd forget dinner half the time if Benji wasn't around to remind me."

"Then I'm extra glad he is," Beca said, smiling at the squirming man. His cheeks had flushed, as they normally did when he was being spoken about.

After dinner, Beca took a walk with Emily while Benji helped her father with something to do with his car. Beca didn't pretend to know what they were talking about; she and Emily simply began walking down the street. The traversed almost an entire block in the neighborhood before either spoke.

"Are you happy?" Beca asked, her tone indicating her absolutely sincerity.

"It's not the same kind of happy as I used to be," Emily admitted. "But yeah, I am."

"Good for you, Em." The walked a bit further in quiet contemplation before they came to the neighborhood park. Since it was dusk, there weren't any children around – which was exactly how Beca liked it. Emily giggled as the smaller woman broke immediately for the swings. Once she tired herself out, Beca sat on the swing, boots on the ground, allowing it to sway slightly.

"What brings you to Barden?" Emily asked. She had asked earlier – but when Beca had avoided the question, the young woman had gracefully dropped it.

Beca's cheeks flushed as she considered how to answer. "I kind of freaked out," she admitted. "You can't tell anyone. It's too early – but I found out this morning that I'm pregnant."

Emily immediately brightened. "That's awesome!" She cried, jumping up to hug her friend. "That's amazing. Why would you freak? You are going to be the best mom."

Beca sighed in frustration as tears flooded her eyes. She wiped them away. "That you, Legacy. I really needed to hear that."

"I would be happy to remind you at any time," Emily promised.

When they returned, Benji and Emily said their goodbyes and left. Beca curled up with a soft blanket and a cup of tea and watched an hour of old rerun of The Andy Griffith Show with her dad and Sheila. Once the clock struck nine, she was ready for bed. "Thank you guys for putting up with my crazy today."
"You can come here anytime, Beca," Sheila repeated. "Truly."

"Thank you. Did my dad tell you?" She nodded.

"I'm sorry if he should have waited – "

"No, that's okay," Beca assured her. "Just be discrete about it. Chloe's parents don't know yet – and I really wasn't going to tell anyone until we got through the first trimester. And Lydia is going to have a cow if she finds out that you knew weeks before her."

Sheila and Warren both laughed. "Your secret is safe with us, Becs," her dad said.

"Thank you," she said. She bid them a goodnight and went to the guestroom where she changed into a pair of pajamas loaned to her by Sheila and slept like a stone until morning.

That afternoon, Chloe was waiting just outside of the secure part of the airport. She wore a dark teal dress covered in coordinating flowers. She smiled indulgently as she caught sight of her wife. "If you run away every time you're feeling hormonal, we might want to look into leasing a spot in the nice airport garage." Beca swatted at her playfully and offered a pained look.

"You are never going to let me forget this, huh?"

"Never," Chloe agreed happily.

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