What is Left Over

by perfectlystill

Summary

Camila remembers being young, starry-eyed and nervous, hope spreading heat through her veins as she whispered jokes into Lauren’s ear during boot camp. She wasn’t very funny, but Lauren always laughed before whispering back. They made fun of other contestants a lot, a streak that was almost mean. She remembers how terrifying it was to open up to Lauren then, because Camila never had a lot of friends, and she wanted Lauren to be her friend so badly she spent her nights dreaming up cool things to say to her. But it was the moments when she was most honest, filter failing her, that she felt the best, the most connected, like she and Lauren were special.

Camila leaves, Lauren goes to college, and Camila comes back. Sort of.

Notes

I started writing this in the fall of 2015, came back to it in early 2017 before abandoning it, and now the draft is finished. It's the longest thing I've ever written, and it's surreal to think I'm almost done with it. I probably never would have finished drafting it without the encouragement and advice given to me along the way from Maria, who helped me sort through problems I had while writing, let me talk through the characters' headspaces, and read the most unedited version imaginable. Thank you, and your support means the world to me.

You can tell this is all lies for various reasons, most notably that Normani isn't a superstar selling out stadiums. Title from Captain Corelli's Mandolin by Louis de Bernières, chapter title from "I Don't Wanna Live Forever," by Zayn and Taylor Swift, and all mistakes by me.

Anyway, here's Wonderwall.
Bands like Fifth Harmony have an expiration date. They all knew this going into it, whether they thought about it or not. They didn’t know when, but Camila doesn’t believe she was the first person to think about it. She didn’t devote any effort to wondering about an *after* until Zayn left One Direction -- shut up -- and then she made some decisions.

Camila’s crime, as she sees it, was to be the first member of the band to plan for the After. To recognize its inevitability and be proactive about what it meant for her.

It wasn’t an easy choice.

She doesn’t get enough credit for that. She feels guilt wilting her at the edges, accusations turning to heavy stones in her stomach, making it hard to eat and sleep. Balls of anxiety keep her awake at night, make themselves known in the thinness of her bones and in the bags underneath her eyes that their makeup artists try to hide.

The other girls distance themselves.

Camila feels alone within the band, and it almost echoes the feeling she had at school, except she’s not invisible, just blamed. No one calls her a traitor, but they don’t have to, she can feel her name on their blacklist, see it in the coldness in their eyes when they deign to look at her.

It hurts.

She thought they were family.

She thought they’d understand, or at least give her a chance to explain her side of the story. The hows and the whys. Camila thought they’d try. Family is supposed to try. They don’t always have to like your choices, but they’re supposed to love you anyway.
Well, Camila’s not entirely being fair. There are conversations. Many with Dinah: some bad, and some okay, and some better. They share a bus that last tour, and Dinah is her best friend, and she tries to be kind and understand. Sometimes she does, letting Camila wrap her legs around her and lick a stripe along her cheek. Sometimes she doesn’t. Those are the worst days, when Camila can’t even find it in herself to cry. She feels empty on those days.

The one conversation she has with Normani devolves into a screaming match.

Normani wants her to apologize and take it back, to do something different. But Camila’s made plans, and Camila wants to sign on the dotted line. She likes the possibility, the opportunity, and the closest thing to reassurance that she won’t go back to being weird, sad, invisible Camila. She wants this for herself, and she has worked so hard, and she thinks it’s unfair of Normani and the girls to expect her not to take it.

Camila goes solo.

Camila turns 27 in some club in Vegas. She throws back a shot of something green that burns her tongue and down the back of her throat. Her fingers immediately itch for the lemonade she’s using as a chaser, but it turns out to be a disgusting combination, and she sticks her tongue out, sputtering. “Ew,” she says to nobody in particular.

This is her party, technically. She knows about a quarter of the people milling around, sipping cocktails and grinding on the dance floor. The other guests are here because they’re part of her management team or label, or simply because their presence will result in headlines. They tried to get Taylor Swift, but she’s busy working on new music.

They tried to get Taylor Swift, but Camila’s last album didn’t sell enough, her singles didn’t chart high enough, and she had to cancel a handful of tour dates. If Taylor liked her more -- if she was Selena or Karlie or a Haim sister -- it wouldn’t matter. Taylor would be here. But that’s just the way the cookie crumbles, and Camila has found herself here, in this nightclub, when she doesn’t even enjoy this sort of thing.

She blinks and someone she doesn’t recognize says: “Happy birthday.”

“Thanks.” They lean in, kissing Camila on both cheeks.

She tries to smile, and it comes easier than expected. Camila doesn’t know if she’s gotten better at faking it, or if the alcohol working its way through her system is overriding her sour mood. She leans against the bar, takes another sip of lemonade, and watches the mass of people assembled because of her. Tapping her foot against the floor along with the bass, she recognizes the lead single from her second album that hit #2 on the charts. It makes her smile again.

Camila gets tipsy, and she dances with her bass player. They throw their hands in the air, and Camila sways her hips, almost ignoring the limbs that bump into her. She takes a selfie with Alessia Cara, makes a joke about “Here” that Alessia pretends to laugh at, the arc of her eyebrow giving away vague annoyance. Camila takes a few hits of a joint and screams the lyrics to “What Makes You Beautiful” when it plays. She’ll have to remember to thank Roger for making that happen.

The night turns out a lot better than she expected, and when she crawls into bed at the Palms, she tells herself she’ll make 27 great. She’ll record a killer album that’ll surpass sales projections, get
another single in the top 20 -- hell, the top 10. She’ll remember to tell her mom that she loves her more often, she’ll call Sofi every week, and she’ll snap Dinah back more than she does.

She refuses to stop moving forward. She refuses to stop dreaming.

The studios have only gotten smaller instead of larger, and Camila attributes that to two separate but related factors -- there aren’t multiple artists recording in multiple booths at the same time, just her and her run of the place; and she prefers it, avoiding the too large studio in Nashville this go around.

It’s cozy and warm, the thermostat set so she can wear shorts and a tank top, flip flops on her feet even when it’s cold and raining outside. Camila thinks it’s better for her voice, and she’s constantly fiddling with the humidifier in the corner. When she was in Fifth Harmony, she didn’t have this type of control. The producers and the A&R people didn’t want to be sweating, so they kept the place at an average temperature. It’s one of the perks of going solo and of the success she’s had: no one tells her she can’t make the place boiling hot. She can’t even begin to imagine the kind of freedom people like Rihanna or Beyoncé have, but she knows that freedom comes from hard work, more success, and clawing it away from the people who want to take it for themselves.

Camila’s got longer nails now.

The record company schedules producers and collaborators, and she gets a say in who she works with in a vague way. They ask her opinion, and she gives it, and Camila is not naive enough to think her responses really matter.

But she does get to write. She strums on her guitar -- the new one Shawn got her for her birthday -- and she’s got rough fingertips. It feels a lot like strength. She can pound at a piano, and she constantly etches out poems and lyrics and ideas in a notebook. More often than not, she gets to sing her own words, or words she contributed to, or words she wishes she would have strung together herself anyway.

If you ask Camila, she’ll tell you she’s happier now than she was before.

Before: eight years ago.

Before: in Fifth Harmony.

Before: in Miami, at school, when she told her best friends everything except who she really was, hiding the darkest and most vulnerable parts of herself.

None of those things are entirely true, but none of them are entirely false either, and Camila used to think it would be harder to avoid voicing her thoughts plainly, with finesse and clarity.

She was wrong.

It’s easier to wiggle around the honest truth.

The door cracks open and Shawn blinks. “Camila, you’ve got to be kidding me.”

“About what?” She strums her guitar a few more times, changing chords in no particular order, her fingers lazy and the notes blending together.
“It’s a million degrees in here.”

“85,” she corrects, smiling broadly. “29 in Canadian temperature.”

Shawn shakes his head, but there’s a shadow of a smile ghosting across his mouth as he plops down on the chair across from her. “I get it when you’re in the booth, but we’re just writing today.”

“Haven’t you ever heard of atmosphere?” She clutches the neck of her guitar, contemplates pretending to smash the instrument against his head, but decides to set it down on the stand next to her instead.

“I’ve heard being comfortable helps with focus.”

“Just get in the mood.” Camila flicks her shoes off her feet and sits cross-legged on the sofa. Her thighs stick uncomfortably because of the heat, but she wants to hold out a little longer.

“I didn’t know you wanted me to help you write a cheap knock-off of ‘Hot in Here.’”

Camila laughs, just a little thing. “What do you have against Sean Paul?”

“What?” Shawn’s eyebrows crinkle, and he really is very cute.

Camila and Shawn are friends. Have always been friends. He’s one of the most genuine people she knows in this business, and she admires the way that hasn’t changed with his success. He chose to alter his music -- not drastically, but enough, enough to downsize the venues and sales, enough to garner him critical acclaim and Grammy nominations. He still sings “Stitches” at every show, and the crowd still yells the words back at him, and Camila is lucky enough to have experienced it a handful of times.

She and Shawn did the PR relationship thing last year, more for her benefit than his, and it was good.

It was undoubtedly the best one she’s ever done (Total PR relationships: 4). Going to dinner with him was nice because the conversation was easy and entertaining. Holding his hand on the walk back to the car, cameras flashing and paparazzi chanting, calmed her anxiety more than produced it, and gushing about him to people was simple because she likes him. It’s all about how to find the truth, and finding it with Shawn came naturally.

They never officially “broke up,” but they don’t go out of their way to be seen together any more. She figures the label will schedule the drama right around the time her fifth album drops. Clockwork.

“Well, woman, the way the time cold I wanna be keeping you warm, I got the right temperature to shelter you from the storm,” Camila sings back around a laugh.

Shawn laughs, too. “You really think that song’s better than ‘Hot in Here?’”

“Considering you’re not even pronouncing it right…” Camila raises an eyebrow.

“Hot in Herrrrrrre,” Shaw replies, dragging out the R’s.

Camila grabs a pillow and tosses it at his head. “Fine, I’ll turn down the thermostat.” She peels herself off the sofa before adding: “But it’s not my fault you don’t have the right temperature to shelter me from the storm.”

Instead of laughing, he rolls his eyes and says: “Thank you.”
Camila feels really good about this album. She’s recorded almost a dozen songs that have promise, and the scratchy itch at the back of her throat makes her feel accomplished instead of overworked. She’s found there’s a marked difference in the way she feels when it’s her words she’s singing over and over again, trying to get right, rather than somebody else’s.

It’s still hard and exhausting, and she tries not to speak too much when she goes home each night, settling into her bed with a mug of tea and Netflix -- tea and a good book if her brain can take it, but she finds herself using similar turns of phrase in her writing if she’s not careful, and it’s less inspiration than plagiarism. So, it’s mostly Netflix, anything with a laugh track. Her feet hurt, and there’s tension between her shoulder blades, but it’s good.

Camila loves the studio.

She loves recording and creating, the messy guts of her heart spilling out in lyrics and melodies and adlibs. It’s like therapy. And she finds she needs it more than she remembers every time she comes back to it.

She cries a lot during the album creation process. It scared Camila at first, because she didn’t know this about herself. Because it started when she was working on her debut, but she had figured she knew already the nitty gritty of recording from Fifth Harmony. She thought maybe the tears were regret, or guilt, or some bad omen. Turns out it was catharsis, a purging of emotional build-up from press and touring and all the things in life she has no control over.

She did her best to find herself in the group’s material, and often she could, but this is even more personal. Most of the time, the most personal material doesn’t make the album, and sometimes Camila is relieved. There are things she doesn’t want to share with the world, because she doesn’t think her skin is thick enough. But sometimes she wants to fight. She thinks if she’s allowed to tell this story or that story, it could help someone, at least one person, or connect her to another, and she wants that more than anything. Losing those battles are the hardest, but Roger always reminds her they can come back to the song another time, on another album. Maybe then they’ll rework it, or maybe then she won’t even want to share it. They have never put something she wanted to revisit later on a subsequent album -- Camila doesn’t forget this. Camila doesn’t begrudge it, either.

Regardless, she always feels more like herself after a good writing session and after a good cry. Centered and refined, distilled into her purest form.

She cried an hour ago, and now she’s smearing mustard onto a piece of wheat bread: her mom still keeps trying to force the grainy stuff on her, but wheat’s as far as she’ll go. She doesn’t want seeds getting stuck in her teeth, thank you very much. There’s a package of deli ham in the studio’s fridge and bunch of lettuce she’ll pile on, along with low fat cheese -- another compromise -- and then this afternoon she has a session with a producer she’s been dying to work with.

“Camila,” Roger says, rapping his fist against the doorjamb quickly -- one, two, three.

“Oh, hey!” She turns to look at him. “I got some really great stuff in the books this morning. That high C we didn’t think I’d be able to hit? Nailed it!”

“That’s wonderful.” He takes a deep breath.

Camila bites at her lip. “What?”

“The record company’s slashing your budget.”
“What?” Camila furrows her eyebrows and drops her knife onto her plate. A glob of mustard lands on her shirt. “But we already approved it.”

“I know.”

“Then why did they change it?”

Roger scratches at the back of his neck. “They looked over the numbers for Melody again, and with the way the tour went, well. It was either lose 250 or lose creative control.”

“What?” Camila fumbles for the roll of paper towels, tearing a piece off, not quite finishing along the perforation, and wiping at her top. “Creative control?”

“Yes. There are plenty of songs they’ve put aside with you in mind, many of which you’ve rejected in the past. And they have a producer they’d like you to meet with.”

“How does that make sense? That’d cost less?”

Roger sighs. “Camila. They just want to make sure you’re not wasting their time. They aren’t too thrilled with the direction of your first demo.”

“Oh.” She swallows. She likes Roger. Roger has been good to her. She considers him an ally, but she wants to ask him why he didn’t try harder. “But we’ve already planned for the original budget.”

“Yes, I know. I came to tell you that they cancelled the meeting with Sonja. You should still try to work this afternoon, though. You only have the next two weeks. They’ve given the studio space away.”

“Oh. Okay.” Camila’s stomach drops. “You don’t have to say it so nicely.”

Roger’s eyebrows tilt. “What do you mean?”

“They don’t believe in me anymore.” Her cheeks feel dry, and her eyes are still puffy. She tells herself she’s not going to cry again, not over this. “That’s fine.”

There’s a wobble in Roger’s stance, and he shakes his head. “No. But that doesn’t mean I don’t. Prove them wrong. I’d stay, but I have a meeting. Now,” he pauses. “I’d give you a hug, but this suit is expensive.”

Camila almost laughs. “Thanks.”

“I’ve emailed you the new budget information.”

“Okay.” Camila chews on her bottom lip. “Yeah, I’ll look it over.”

“Screw it.” He holds out his arms, and Camila steps forward, hugging him tightly.

When he leaves, she finishes her sandwich and pulls up the email. It’s direct, but not cold. She has two weeks. She doesn’t have to finish the album in that time, but there’s no guarantee she’ll get more studio space to record in. There’s no guarantee everything she’s done thus far won’t be scrapped. There’s no guarantee the label won’t send her other people’s songs to record, and there’s no guarantee they won’t take back complete control over the production.

It’s a punch to the gut, and Camila feels her breathing shallow. She wants to cry, and she wants her
mom, and she wants to take a nap. Her stomach rolls, and she wishes she hadn’t eaten her sandwich at all.

She thinks if she was stronger, she’d write an angry song in response, and it’d be a massive hit. It’d be that easy: prove them wrong. But she isn’t, and she doesn’t have that much confidence in her abilities or her instincts. She lies down on the sofa, blasts Ed Sheeran and stares at the ceiling.

Camila doesn’t write another word or sing another note. She stays at the studio until 11, and when she gets home, she tosses and turns, her stomach churning.

She wakes up the next day and goes back to the studio.

This, she reminds herself, is the important part.

Camila is good at focusing on the positive and being optimistic when everything is going her way. When she can feel that the higher-ups believe in her. When Roger is sending her encouraging emails and texts. When her songs chart high and the crowd knows all the words. Camila is better at focusing on the bad when things start going wrong. Then, the good seems out of reach, and her anxiety repeats the negatives.

“You’re off,” Jeremiah says.

Camila inhales and shakes her head. Her lips are chapped, her throat is dry, and she’s freezing. She pulls her sweater down over her palms and reaches for her water, untwisting the cap and taking a few gulps, letting it swoosh around her mouth and giving herself chipmunk cheeks before swallowing. “I know,” she answers.

“Let’s go again.”

Camila stretches her arms above her head, reaching up to the ceiling on her tiptoes. “Let’s take a break.”

“If you can manage not to slip down a half-step during the bridge, we can take five.”


Things she’s been reminded of lately: she is not in charge here.

She hates this song. It’s trite and boring and lyrically simple in a way that passes right by relatable into something else entirely. It’s lazy, and the worst part is that the pre-chorus is really catchy, replaying in her head last night as she tried to sleep.

She’s also 90% sure it’ll make her album and probably be the first single. It has radio play written all over it. Camila loves the radio, but she loves the radio more when her song possesses her voice.

They go again, and again, and again, and after thirty minutes, Jeremiah finally lets Camila take a break. “Pee, eat some cheetos, text a fuck buddy, I don’t care. Just came back ready to kill it,” he says. “Stop giving me shit.”

“I’ll try my best,” she responds without inflection.

Thing she’s been reminded of lately: in Fifth Harmony, the girls and her were never all on the exact
same page. They weren’t a monolith or a hive mind, but they were in it together. They succeeded together, and they failed together. They had each other to lean on, to complain to, and to hug. They understood in a way only the five of them could, because they were the five in the trenches.

Camila’s alone now.

And it sucks.

She carries the weight of her failure heavy on her shoulders. It’s her fault Melody didn’t sell enough, it’s her fault the two singles from it didn’t crack the top 20, and it’s her fault the last single planned was tabled. Her interviews weren’t fun enough, her anecdotes weren’t relatable and interesting, the songs she wrote weren’t good. Her relationship with Shawn not believable enough.

Camila can feel a familiar exhaustion creeping between her joints and into her lungs and heart. She’s tired all the time, but she can’t sleep more than two hours without waking.

Sofi tells her she’ll be okay and that she’s amazing, her mom tells her she’ll be appreciated by the people who matter, and her father tells her it’s not her fault the public is too dense to appreciate her art.

None of that helps. Not in the same way rolling on the floor with Dinah did, laughing until she couldn’t breathe and planning idiotic pranks like switching the regular chips with the sour cream and onion ones. Not in the same way a hug from Ally did, how she would rub Camila’s back and squeeze her tightly, promising they’d be okay in a way that Camila believed because Ally was older and wiser and in the thick of it in the same way she was. Not in the way a conversation with Normani did. Not in the way sharing headphones with Lauren did.

It’s times like these when being alone converts to loneliness.

“You know,” she tells Jeremiah when he finds her scrolling through her twitter mentions on the couch. “I really hate this song.”

He laughs lowly. “Yeah, I can tell.”

“I’ll try to hide it better,” she promises. “If only so I can stop singing it.”

“If I do my job right, you’ll never get to stop singing it.” He slides into his chair and cracks his knuckles. “You’re not new to this, Camila. Stop acting like it.”

She rolls her eyes. “Oh, shut up.”

“And stop pretending to be a rebellious teenager.”

“I appreciate your honesty,” she says, tossing her phone next to her on the sofa and deciding to forget the random user who called her a ‘has been’ -- with 100 retweets. She stands and physically shakes it off. “And hey, at least if I have to sing this song at every show I do for the rest of my life, that means the audience will be singing it back to me.”

“I hear that always makes it easier to swallow. At least, if you’re not an asshole,” Jeremiah says it in a way that implies the jury’s still out on Camila.

She cracks a smile. He may not have been her first choice to produce this album, but he’s good at what he does, and she admires his inability to take any of her bullshit. Camila tries to remind herself Jeremiah is simply doing his job, and it’s not his fault the label forced her to work with him. She tries not to resent him. “Being an asshole is how I get ahead.”
“Alright, princess, back in the booth.”

“No chance.”

They go for another hour, and she never gets through the whole song without fucking something up -- rushing the chorus, flubbing the words during the second verse, or missing the high note when the song crescendos, her voice cracking -- but it’s enough that Jeremiah can probably piece something together. He assures her they’ll get back to this tomorrow. But yeah, they can try one of her “emo girly ballads,” too.

Camila tries really, really hard not to hate everything.

It’s a rare day off before her last three scheduled studio days, and Camila has consumed an In-N-Out burger and an entire pint of Ben and Jerry’s. She watched the latest Netflix original, and she skyped with Sofi for an hour. Her temples pulse, and she honestly wants to go to sleep even though it’s just after 8 and she slept until noon.

Her phone rings. It’s Shawn. “‘Sup.”

“‘Sup?” he repeats.

“It means what’s up.”

“Camila,” he begins, and Camila knows him well enough to know he’s got some bad news for her. It’s pretty typical, she thinks. She only gets bad news these days. “Shawn.”

“I met someone.”

“What?” She lets pleasant surprise into her tone. “That’s good, right?”

“Yeah,” he breathes. “That’s good. I like her a lot.”

“Her?” She wiggles her eyebrows even though he can’t see it.

“Yes. Her.” There’s a smile in his voice, and Camila forgets that there is bad news here, allowing herself to be happy for her friend. “Her name’s Bridget.”

“Ooooh. Bridget.”

“Yeah.” Shawn pauses, and Camila’s about to ask for all the details: where they met, what she’s like, how long this has been going on for, and if it’s more than a week, why hasn’t he told her until now? She’s romantically starved and hasn’t even kissed anyone in almost eight months -- not for real, anyway. But then: “We’re going to have to break up.”

“If you like her a lot why--” Camila bites her lip. “You mean you and me.”

“Yes. We’ve talked it over.” She knows he means he’s discussed it with his manager and her people. He’s not bringing her into the discussion, only informing her of its results. “And I’m not going to
like, walk a red carpet with Bridget anytime soon, or announce it publically, but. It’s better for her if I’m not … with you.”

“Yeah,” Camila says. “But my album isn’t even close to being finished yet.”

“Still. You can put a breakup song on there. I don’t know, say your ex was scum.” It’s a joke, but the laugh dries in Camila’s throat. “And, you know, milk that.”

“Right.” She chews on her lip. “Are we making an announcement?”

“I have an interview with People tomorrow. I’m going to tell them.”

Camila’s breath shallows and her stomach drops. It feels like her heart is breaking even though they weren’t really dating and he’s still her friend. “What about the stuff we worked on together? How can I possibly put that on the album?”

His responding silence is enough of an answer.

“Right,” she says. “You’re screwing me over because of some girl you’ve known for what, two weeks?”

“Two months,” he corrects, annoyance edging into his tone. “I like her a lot, Camila. And I’m really sorry the timing is so bad for you, but I was honestly just doing you a favor.”

“Whatever, Shawn.” She clenches her jaw. “Thank you.”

“I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

She closes her eyes and inhales. “Yeah.” When she opens them, her vision is blurry. “Yeah. Thanks for letting me know.”

Later, Camila will get the details and ask the questions that were on the tip of her tongue a minute ago. She’ll meet Bridget, and Camila knows that if Shawn likes her, she’ll definitely like her, too. Camila will apologize for putting her career ahead of his happiness. But right now it feels like everything she’s fought for is falling apart.

She wallows in it, ordering takeout even though she’s not hungry, and crying the bad kind of tears that leave her feeling listless and empty.

She calls her mom.

Camila ignores the fact that she doesn’t have a best friend outside her biological family to call.

Ally gets engaged.

Camila finds out via Twitter and Instagram, because she hasn’t seen Ally since Dinah’s wedding almost two years ago; she and Ally aren’t really close anymore. She tweets a congratulations, because the bad blood narrative has all but run its course, and Ally responds with a polite, public and impersonal Thank you.

Camila doesn’t know why this is the thing that drives her over the metaphorical edge.
She feels cracked open and sad. No frills. Just sad.

She gets dressed up and goes out to a club. She drinks lots of vodka lemonades and vodka cranberries and something else very fruity that a gentleman -- or, a man, he’s probably not a gentleman -- buys her. She dances in her too high heels, and she sweats so much her too short dress clings to her skin uncomfortably. Camila laughs too loudly at about three jokes she only finds funny because she’s drunk.

She rambles to a stranger about Ally’s engagement, tells him how they don’t even talk anymore and how Ally probably hates her, still -- presumptuous, really. Sober Camila would know that Ally doesn’t hate her, that Ally likes her just fine. Ally doesn’t put enough energy into Camila to hate her. She tells the stranger she hasn’t even been kissed in almost eight months, and then she kisses the stranger. He’s got a beard that’s scratchy against her face, and his hands are soft against her neck and bicep. It’s not good or bad, and it doesn’t satiate the growing pit in Camila’s stomach.

She doesn’t vomit when she gets home, even though she knows it would make her feel better. Lauren used to tell her that if you drink too much and feel sick and bloated and nauseous, throwing up will make you feel better.

It’s this thought, really, as she lies on her sofa because she doesn’t want to navigate the stairs, that prompts Camila to squint at her phone. The light is too bright in the dark, but she doesn’t dim it. She finds Lauren’s name in her contacts and calls the number.

She expects it to be disconnected. She expects someone else to answer it. She expects that Lauren changed her number.

She didn’t.

It goes to voicemail: “It’s Lauren. Leave a message. Thanks.”

“Lo!” Camila screams, and then winces, and it turns into a laugh. “Lauren, it’s Camila. Cabello. I miss you. Remember when you used to get drunk and I would make you and Mani drink water before bed? God, I’m druuuuunk. I’m sad.”

She exhales, and she blinks, and a tear slips out from the corner of her eye. “I’m sad, and I miss you. I hope you’re happy. Goodnight, Lauren. I really hope you have a good night. I miss you.”

She hangs up.

She falls asleep.

And when Camila wakes up the next morning, there’s gunk in the corner of her eye. She’s only wearing one shoe, and she’s disgustingly hungover.

When she remembers calling Lauren, she rushes to the bathroom and dry heaves.
2015 was an awful year.

Sure, “Worth It” was a huge hit. That was good. There were good bits scattered throughout, enough to keep the group afloat, enough to make it seem worthwhile, enough so that Lauren didn’t regret auditioning for The X-Factor, getting placed in Fifth Harmony, and signing a record deal. She wishes they’d signed a different deal, but that’s getting too specific, and it’s the specifics which put her (and Ally, Dinah, Normani, and Camila) in a blender and chopped her heart up. It was a different kind of heartbreak.

Camila had the hardest time. Camila had a truly awful year.

Lauren knew she wanted to leave.

She knew before Camila’s birthday spent with Taylor Swift instead of her family, before the release of “I Know What You Did Last Summer,” and before the other girls knew and the divide splintered them irreparably.

They talked about it, not in a real and official way, but like two friends whining about shared frustrations: crying about how tired they were all the time, complaining about having to wake up at five in the morning for glam when their faces were fine the way they were, or how the choreography was distracting from the entire point of singing. Lauren thinks Camila told her first, in those midnight sessions where they popped chocolates and chips and sometimes shared a joint.

She understood why Camila wanted to leave. Lauren wanted to leave, too.

She just didn’t think Camila would actually do it. She didn’t think Camila would be put into a position where the option to leave was legitimately on the table.

But it was, and she grabbed it.

Ally thought it was selfish, Normani thought it was worse than that, and Dinah loved Camila enough to love her through how much it felt like rejection. Lauren thinks she understood Camila’s decision better than all of them, but that itch of betrayal still sparked in her veins, accompanied by jealousy. She wasn’t jealous that Camila was allowed to leave, not that she was deemed the chosen one (Lauren’s not stupid, she knew she was next in some fucked up line the label had ordered them in) but that she had the gall to go through with letting the contract lapse.

There were days Lauren hated her for it, and there were days Lauren loved her for it, and there were a lot of days where her feelings fell somewhere in the middle.

Camila left.

Lauren stayed.

5H3 was generally well-received by critics and fans. There were singles and a tour and a few fan-voted awards, but the album undersold. Again.

They took a “hiatus.”

Ally signed to a small indie label, and she writes and records and makes enough. She fell in love, and she’s happy. She’s the strongest of the five of them, and it’s not a surprise she made it out with the
smallest dent to her sense of self. Dinah released a few songs, married a marketing director, and is content working for a nonprofit that helps underprivileged kids. Sometimes, when they talk, Dinah’s voice is wistful for a life she wishes she had and a career that had a different journey than Fifth Harmony’s, a different ending. But she’s okay. Normani choreographs now. She worked with Sean before branching out on her own, and she still releases mashups sometimes. Normani works hard. Lauren knows she still dreams of selling out arenas.

Lauren released some solo stuff, but her heart wasn’t in it. She was exhausted, disillusioned and angry.

She went to college. She always thought she’d study something like political science, sociology, or even English. Instead, she goes to Berklee and studies music production and engineering.

She knows she has enough connections and enough of a name to make a living.

She graduates with a bachelor’s, and unlike Fifth Harmony’s final performance, Lauren feels accomplished and proud of herself; she feels like she actually achieved something instead of simply surviving it.

Lauren loves Boston.

It’s not New York, but the history is cool, and the accent makes her smile. She really hates Dunkin’ Donuts, though, and the city’s love for it baffles her.

“I don’t know how you drink that stuff,” she says, eyeing the coffee John bought.

“It’s good.”

“It’s disgusting.”

“Eat your donut. I’m actually going to set foot in a Starbucks for you, Jauregui, so you need to relax.” He smiles before slurping his coffee.

“Don’t be jealous that I have a distinguished palate.” Lauren rolls her eyes. She takes a bite of her crawler, and yeah, okay, the donut is pretty good.

John scoffs. “Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

“I sleep like a baby.”

“Waking up every two hours for food?”

“That’s the weed,” she laughs.

John laughs, too.

They turn into Starbucks, and Lauren orders her iced caramel latte with whip, because she only likes her coffee loaded with sugar. She settles into an oversized lounge chair next to John. “You had that job interview the other day, right?” she asks.

“Yeah. I did.”
Lauren stares blankly. “And?”

“I have a follow-up interview Thursday,” he offers, running a hand through his hair. “I’m not super excited about it, but it’s got to be better than flipping burgers all day.”

“Or maybe you’ll discover you hate it and go back to McDonalds begging for your job.”

“Yeah, okay, and maybe you’ll stop being a bitch.”

“Don’t count on it,” Lauren says, smiling around her straw. There’s a girl at a table by the wall who has looked over twice, and Lauren tries not to make eye contact. She’s only gotten worse at being able to tell when someone actually recognizes her, versus when someone thinks they do but aren’t sure enough to ask, versus when someone just thinks she’s attractive.

“How are your job prospects looking, miss fame?” John asks with a hint of sarcasm that Lauren finds refreshing.

She made a handful of friends at Berklee, but it was difficult at first, sorting through the people who wanted dirt on Fifth Harmony, the people who thought she had connections she would just hand over to them if they laughed at her jokes (as if she had any guarantees herself), and the people who hated her because she’d been in a girl group and assumed she was a stuck up, arrogant princess. John was one of the first people she clicked with, and it helped that he wasn’t afraid to give her shit. He treated her like he treated everyone else, and Lauren liked that, craving that normalcy.

“Fine.” Lauren shrugs. “I’m giving myself the summer off before I start looking.”

It’s half-true: she emailed a few friends to see if there was anything available, even if the prospect was simply shadowing someone in the studio. Ally said she’d keep her ears open.

“Some of us working class folks can’t afford to take the summer off.”

“Shut up,” she laughs, reaching across the space between them to smack at his arm.

Lauren’s about to ask him if he’s still going to be able to attend her show Thursday night, but then there’s a girl standing in front of her, wringing her hands and clearing her throat. “Hi. Sorry to interrupt, um, I was just wondering if I could get a picture?”

John snorts, and the girl blushes.

“Uh, yeah, sure,” Lauren says, setting her latte on the ground and standing, pulling at the hem of her top and the bottom of her shorts so her ass isn’t hanging out.

“Thank you so much. I’m a really big fan. You’re so pretty,” the girl rambles before taking a deep breath and pulling out her phone. “I’ve loved all the songs you’ve put out in the last few years, and I’m coming to the show Thursday.”

John snorts, and the girl blushes.

“Thank you so much. I’m a really big fan. You’re so pretty,” the girl rambles before taking a deep breath and pulling out her phone. “I’ve loved all the songs you’ve put out in the last few years, and I’m coming to the show Thursday.”

“Thanks,” Lauren smiles. “John, would you mind?” She gently prys the phone out of the girl’s shaking hand and passes it to him. She wraps her arm around the girl’s waist, feeling her tense up before lightly doing the same, her hand hovering over Lauren’s hip.

Lauren smiles while the picture is taken, and then passes the phone back to the girl.

“Thank you so much. I’m sorry again.”

“No problem.” Lauren hugs her. “Thank you. I love you. I’ll see you Thursday night.”
“Yes, I love you so much. Oh, my god, thank you.” The girl’s eyes are bright, her cheeks flushed, and Lauren loves this part. She really does. She loves it more now that it happens less often. But it’s always been nice to see a fan face-to-face and experience that love in person. It’s not personal, but it’s real. It’s a genuine connection that she likes. She tries not to wonder whether the fans who tell her they love her in person also send her nasty messages online, and she’s gotten marginally better at it.

There were many things Lauren hated about Fifth Harmony: being overworked and undercompensated, lack of creative input, the pressure to act a certain way, the expectations from the label, the fans, and countless strangers. She never really felt like she could live up, and she knew she could never please everyone.

But she loved connecting with people, and she loved the actual act of singing and creating, even if the words weren’t her own or something she really loved. The other girls enjoyed performing more than she did back then. Instead, Lauren loved the studio and the recording booth. But she always knew performing her own music, stuff she believed in and wanted to be heard, was better. She loves smaller venues. She likes the intimacy, and she likes when someone sings her stuff back to her. She doesn’t think she’d mind a sold out arena screaming something she wrote, though. It’s a weird push-pull. A Love-hate relationship.

The girl squeezes her hand, letting go slowly and walking back over to her friend, her smile large and genuine, awe in her glassy eyes.

“Your ego is huge right now,” John says.

“Now who’s being a bitch?” Lauren shakes her head and bites down on her tongue, mouth twitching up.

John takes a sip of coffee and hums. “Certainly not the guy who bought you a donut.”

“It’s not my fault you don’t know what it’s like to touch another person’s soul.”

John rolls his eyes, and Lauren cackles. “You’re full of shit,” he says.

“Up to my eyeballs.”

This bar likes her, and Lauren likes this bar.

She’s played here a couple of times, and she always attracts a pretty good crowd. The floor packs in on itself in a way it doesn’t on other nights she’s been here, causing an arrogant tickle to spark at the base of her spine. The manager pays her enough to book a band to learn her shit, and tonight she did, but usually she contents herself with a backing track, because it feels weird to hire musicians.

Lauren likes being in charge, and she likes control, but she doesn’t like asking other creative people to conform to her vision and learn songs they had no input in. It feels hypocritical, but there’s nothing quite like a live band, either. Push-pull.

She takes a sip of beer and looks out at the mass of people.

It’s not even close to the largest group she’s played for, but it still makes her more nervous than any arena could. She’ll be able to make out individual faces from the stage, and she’ll be able to tell if
they’re singing along or ignoring her entirely. Usually, it’s a combination, the audience a mix of regular bar-goers and fans who saw her social media posts.

Lauren’s written a handful of songs over the last four years, and she’s mixed them herself, putting them up and letting the world hear some of her vulnerabilities. She likes that she can hear an improvement in the production, and she likes the positive feedback she’s gotten. She doesn’t even mind when people make fun of the lyrics, because she knows they’re not poetry. She doesn’t have any delusions about that, well, mostly. Sometimes when she thought a line was particularly insightful and someone mocks it, it hurts.

But that’s why she likes doing these shows.

The creative outlet, the being present, and the opportunity for people to put a human to the work instead of some person-like construction they take her twitter for.

“You ready?” the bartender asks, wiping at the counter and nodding toward the stage. “It’s nine.”

“Yeah.” Lauren takes another swig of beer and steps onto the stage. The lights adjust as she walks toward the microphone, and she squints, blinking a few times. She turns toward the band, counting off on her fingers.

The bassist starts, and it’s a little slow, so she nods her head in time and he gets the hint.

It’s like putting a puzzle together, and it takes a minute before Lauren is satisfied with the syncopation of the keyboard and the crescendo of the drums. She grins, clears her throat and pivots back around to the microphone.

Her set is 45 minutes.

Which is a joke, really, because she only has five original songs she likes to play live. She makes some small talk with the crowd. There’s a little group to the left of the stage that screams back at her, so she waves at them, and they scream even louder. Lauren has discovered she’s awful at this part of performing when the crowd doesn’t already love her, when they’re not predisposed to hang off her every word and head tilt. She’s attended enough small shows to know there are people who excel at it, she just doesn’t happen to be one of them.

“Thanks for coming out tonight. And thanks for listening. Unless you’re not. Then fuck you.” She laughs, and it echos around the bar. The group to the left shrieks. “If you know this next one, sing along,” she says before launching into a cover of the latest Rihanna release.

She does a lot of covers to fill time: Drake, JoJo, Vampire Weekend, The Weeknd, and of course, she’s perfected a Lana medley she likes to pretend she does justice.

“Play ‘Worth It,’” someone shouts.

Lauren bristles and ignores it. It happens sometimes, but people yelling at her to cover Fifth Harmony songs (she rolls her eyes in her head at that: cover a song that should be considered her own. But it isn’t, not really) is a hell of a lot better than the times when people yell at her to cover Camila’s stuff.

Once, someone wanted her to cover Ally’s latest single. Lauren grinned, chanting the chorus along with the crowd before offering: “I can’t hit those high notes,” accompanied by an eyeroll that was analyzed by the two people on the internet who still care.

Except this person does it again, during the break between each song, and she spots the offender
standing in the middle of the crowd, slurring and chanting: “Worth It, Worth It, Worth It.”

“Hey, you!” Lauren points. He taps the hand holding his beer against his heart and mouths at her. “Yeah, you! Shut up!”

There’s laughter, and yelling, and someone screams “Burn!” because apparently that is still a thing tipsy twenty-somethings yell in a crowded dive bar on Thursday night.

“This is the newest thing I’ve written,” she tells the crowd. “It’s the last song we’re doing tonight. It’s not about who you think it’s about.”

Lauren doesn’t know why she says that. She’s always trying to clarify things that don’t need it. Like she said previously, there are only like, two people who still care. She shakes her head, turns to the band and counts: “1, 2, 3, 4.”

That small group in the corner knows every word. She can hear them even louder as she closes her eyes. So she finds them when she opens up again, sings to them and watches the smiles stretch across their faces. This is the part of performing she loves. Whatever part of this they understand, whatever part of this they love, she feels it. Everything else is just noise.

“You were fine,” John says, laughing and swirling the scotch she bought him around his glass. “I still don’t get the hype.”

“I don’t either.” Lauren shrugs and tries to take a pull of her beer, but nothing comes out. She shakes the bottle a bit.

“Can I buy you another?” a girl asks, sliding next to her. She’s small, all elbows and bones. Her face is sharp, hair dark and frizzy. She’s pretty.

Lauren worries at her lip. “Sure.”

“You sounded good,” the girl says as she flags down the bartender. She orders Lauren another beer along with one for herself.

“Thanks.” Lauren’s mouth tips up at the corners. She takes a sip, swallowing hard.

“You’ve ruined all my progress,” John cuts in. “You see, Lauren here has a bit of a--” he sets his glass down, motions around Lauren’s head, and mimes it getting larger. “Next thing you know, she’s going to forget about the little people in an attempt to become the next Beyonce.”

The girl laughs uncomfortably. “Oh. Are you two...?”

“No,” Lauren answers.

Not anymore.

“She couldn’t handle this,” John scoffs.

Lauren pushes him away. “Ignore him. He’s just jealous that you’re trying to hit on me instead of him.”

The girl smiles, and John grumbles something before heading off to find people who “appreciate
him.”

The girl rolls her eyes, leaning against the bar, posture forcibly relaxed. “Your name’s Lauren, right?”

Lauren squints. She’s usually pretty good at reading lies on people’s faces. Either this girl completely has her fooled, or she really doesn’t recognize Lauren from her girl group days. “Yeah.”

“I’m Phoebe.” She smiles. “You really did sound good up there.”

“Thanks.” Lauren feels heat bloom down her neck.

“Are you a singer?”

“No really.” Lauren feels the involuntary twitch at the corner of her mouth. “I just graduated from Berklee.”

“Really?” Phoebe raises an eyebrow. “And you say you’re not a singer?”

“Music production and engineering.” Lauren takes a gulp of beer and wipes at her mouth with the back of her hand. “Being a singer feels like a youthful fantasy.”

“I’m a singer,” Phoebe laughs. She tilts her head and hums, looking Lauren up and down. “Maybe even better than you.”

“You probably are.”

Phoebe shrugs. Her eyes are dark and bright, and there’s an unabashed confidence to her that Lauren likes. It’s there in her calculated posture, the loose way she holds her beer with her thumb and middle finger, and how she tongues at the corner of her mouth like it’s a suggestion. “Maybe one day you’ll be the one coming up to me after a show.”

Lauren scrunches her nose. “Don’t count on it.”

“Maybe that guy was right about your ego.” She bites down on her tongue, and Lauren knows she’s doing it on purpose.

It works.

They take an Uber back to Phoebe’s place, and Phoebe waits for Lauren to kiss her in the living room, hand threading through the fine hairs at the base of her neck. She tastes like beer and waxy lipstick.

“Shh,” Phoebe laughs against her mouth.

Lauren rolls her eyes. “I didn’t say anything.”

“I have a roommate.” Phoebe trails her fingers along a patch of skin just above the waistline of Lauren’s jeans. “She’s used to this, but I try to be considerate.”

It’s Lauren’s turn to laugh, nipping at a spot on Phoebe’s neck. “Are you bragging about how often you get laid right now?”

“No,” Phoebe pulls her closer, their bodies flush against each other. “Unless that does it for you.”

“Oh, definitely,” Lauren deadpans.
Phoebe sucks a hickey above her right breast, her phone shuffles from Rihanna to Sky Ferreira, and Lauren realizes she could really like this girl if she let herself. “Hey.” She pushes at Phoebe’s shoulder.

Phoebe hums against her skin, pulling at it gently with her teeth.

“I’m gonna go.”

“What?” Phoebe moves back and finds Lauren’s eyes in the dark. “Did I do something?”

“No. No, you didn’t. I just.” Lauren uses her elbows to sit up, and Phoebe rolls off her. Picking up her bra from the edge of the bed, Lauren exhales: “I think I could actually like you.”

“Oh. And that’s a bad thing because…”

“Because I’m only here until August. And I’m not looking for anything serious right now. It’s just. Bad timing.” Lauren fumbles with the clasp of her bra. Her chest is tight, and she’s uncomfortably turned on, and she just wants to get out of here as fast as possible.

“What if I give you my number? No pressure to call,” Phoebe offers.

“Thanks.” Lauren looks over her shoulder and forces a smile before pushing off the bed and sliding her shirt over her head. “But I’m not interested.”

Phoebe’s mouth presses into a thin line, and she flops back onto the bed. “Okay.”

“Sorry,” Lauren mumbles, slipping on her boots and not bothering to lace them up.

When she gets outside, she feels like she can breathe again despite it being hot and humid. She gulps and starts walking. Lauren only has a vague idea where she is, and she stops outside a 24-hour convenience store, calling an Uber before heading inside to purchase a pack of cigarettes and some gum. While the employee rings her up, she pops the gum into her mouth, letting her eyes wander over the tabloids. There’s a picture of Camila in the corner of *US Weekly*.

Lauren feels like shit.

She’s halfway through *A Visit From the Goon Squad* when her phone vibrates against her thigh. She glances at it and sees that Ally is trying to FaceTime her. Lauren finishes her paragraph before marking her spot and answering.

“Lauren.” Ally’s face is plain, lacking makeup and pretense, lips barely containing a smile. “How are you?”

“You don’t have to pretend like you actually care,” Lauren says without sarcasm. Her heart feels bright and full just looking at the joy clearly radiating from Ally. She’s like a shot of optimism directly into Lauren’s veins.

“I care,” Ally laughs. “I just have some good news.”

“Out with it.” Lauren tucks a piece of hair behind her ear and twirls the back of her earring.

“I’m engaged!” Ally waves her hand too quickly for Lauren to actually see anything, a high-pitched
combination of a giggle and squeal erupting from her throat.

“Oh my god! Stop moving your hand and let me see the fucking ring.”

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Ally’s voice is wet, and the sparkle in her eye outshines the diamond on her finger.

“It is.” Lauren smiles softly back at her. “I’m really happy for you.”

“Thank you. I’m so excited. I can’t wait to plan it all out, walk down the aisle in a white dress, have my dad give me away.”

“Nicolas asked for permission before he proposed, didn’t he?”

“Don’t do that,” Ally half-scolds. “You know it meant a lot to my dad, and it means a lot to me that he cares enough about my family’s feelings to ask for approval.”

“I know.” Lauren shakes her head. They’ve had this conversation more times than necessary, but Lauren likes the way Ally’s voice rises and cracks when she starts getting defensive about the traditional concepts she still holds dear. “If I ever get married, my dad will murder me if he doesn’t get to walk me down the aisle.”

“That’ll put a damper on your wedding.” Ally’s still smiling, unable to keep it out of her voice or off her face for longer than a few seconds. “I just wanted to let you know before it goes up online. I haven’t been able to get hold of Dinah yet, so don’t go spoiling my surprise.”

“Promise.”

“What’ve you been up to, for real?” Ally asks.

Lauren hums. “Nothing, really. I’m trying to enjoy my summer before I have to get a job.” There’s a pause where Lauren contemplates asking Ally if she’s come across anything. She tugs her bottom lip into her mouth and runs a hand through her hair. “I should probably start editing my resume.”

“You don’t want to wait too long. You know what they say about worms.”

“Do you know what they say about worms?” Lauren asks, eyes crinkling and brows furrowing.

“The early worm gets the… good dirt?” Ally laughs. “I don’t know. But there’s some saying about worms.”

“The early bird gets the worm,” Lauren corrects. “Have you had any luck?”

“Oh.” Ally’s face falls a little. “No. Not really. I’ve asked around a bit, but there aren’t any openings, and the studio space is so small they don’t like to have extra people crowding around. I’m sorry.”

“It’s totally fine. Don’t be sorry.” Lauren waves her off. “I have to stop mooching off your success at some point.”

Ally rolls her eyes. “You’re so dramatic. You’ll be fine. Unless everyone who graduated with you already took all the available jobs and internships because you weren’t the early bird.”

Lauren groans. “Thanks, Mom.”

“You’re welcome.”
“Now that that’s out of the way, give me all the details. How’d Nicolas propose?”

“It was so romantic, Lauren,” Ally sighs, dreamy and far away. “It was our two year anniversary, so he took me to Perry’s like he did last year. He wore a suit, and I wore that pretty red dress -- oh, I posted a picture of it on Instagram. Go look!”

“Later.”

“I looked real good, though,” Ally insists.

“I believe you.”

“And after dinner he planned a private boat ride on the river. It was magical. He proposed on the water with the stars and the moon shining. They brought out glasses of champagne, and it was like a fairytale, Lauren. I felt like a princess. And he took me to my parents’ after, and there was cake! Even though I had dessert at dinner.”

“You really indulged,” Lauren says.

Ally’s smile expands somehow. “I did.”

“I’m really glad it was everything you wanted.”

“Me too. I’m so--” Ally’s cut off by her phone’s ringtone. “Oh! That’s Dinah.”

“I’ll talk to you later.” Lauren waves at the screen. “I love you.”

“I love you, too. And I’ll keep my ears open for any studio jobs.”

“Thanks. Bye Ally.”

“Bye.”

The call ends, and Lauren stares at her phone before checking Instagram and liking Ally’s photo. She really does look great in her dress, and Lauren can’t think of a person who deserves love and happiness more than Ally. She’s happier for Ally than she is sad for herself.

The sadness is more uncertainty than anything else. Four years of college to relearn who she is, to relearn how to love herself, to take control of her life and do what she wants with it, to disconnect from other people’s perceptions and opinions.

Lauren’s life has always come in defined periods: school, and then Fifth Harmony, chopped up by breaks of two days to two months, and then college. Now there’s nothing but adulthood on the horizon, and she has not current prospects. It’s an unappealing mixture of scary and exciting.

She wants to love life a lot more than she does.

Lauren wonders if that’s her problem. Normani, Ally and Dinah have always loved life a bit more than she has, in concrete ways instead of in the abstract. She thinks maybe that’s why life has given them more good things. She thinks maybe that’s why they’ve made good things out of what they’ve been given.

She’d shake her pessimism if she could, but it was inked into her skin at 16, and she hasn’t been able to remove it.
Lauren tries going back to her book, but she can’t focus now, so she takes a walk to Dunkin’ for a box of munchkins and a dunkaccino. She updates her resume. She smokes a joint and almost doesn’t feel it except for the way her stomach seems to open up and her head gets lighter. She falls asleep watching old episodes of Bojack Horseman and wakes up before the sun has risen, bleary eyed and starving.

She stretches her legs and reaches around her little coffee table for her phone. There are 18 messages in her group chat with the girls, and she’s missed four calls (she figures from the girls, too), and two voicemails.

Lauren scrubs at her eyes, pulls her sweats up where they’ve shifted down in her sleep, and types in the passcode for her messages, ambling to the kitchen to get a cup of coffee.

“No! Pick up your freaking phone!” Dinah says. “We have to start discussing what we’re going to get Ally as an engagement present! Plus, Normani is angry that I keep rubbing in how single she is when you’re also not getting any, either. And by the way, if you are getting any, you have to let us know, sis. Like, damn. Okay. I love you, Lolo. Mwah.”

The phone beeps and Lauren starts her Keurig, leaning against the counter and closing her eyes.

“Lo!” comes screeching into her eardrum and she winces. “Lauren, it’s Camila. Cabello.”

Lauren’s eyes fly open and she hits her elbow on the counter. “Fuck,” she mutters, rubbing at the bone.

“Miss you,” the message continues. “Remember when you used to get drunk, and I would make you and Mani drink water before bed? God, I’m druuuuunk.” There’s a miniscule pause, and Lauren wants to stop listening and delete the message without finishing it.

She presses the phone closer to her ear.

“I’m sad,” Camila says. “I’m sad, and I miss you. I hope you’re happy. Goodnight, Lauren. I really hope you have a good night. I miss you.”

Lauren’s heartbeat aches against her chest, and she tells herself it’s because she makes poor life choices: donuts, coffee, weed and not much else. Heart burn. She’s holding her phone against her ear, listening to silence when she takes her mug from the machine, spilling in sugar and hazelnut creamer. She takes a sip and listens to Camila’s message one more time. She almost deletes it.

Almost.

She makes poor life choices.
Chapter Summary

There’s a pause, and Lauren wants to clarify that this isn’t her fault. She’s been wasted plenty of times and never once left a message for Camila.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who read the first chapter, left kudos and commented! It means more than you know. Chapter title from "The First Days of Spring" by Noah and the Whale.

Lauren has heard Camila say “I’m sad” more times than she can count.

She heard it for the first time in early January, just off The X-Factor and waiting for the contract to be finalized (a joke, really, because there was nothing to negotiate. They were handed a contract, and it could have said each girl owed the label their firstborn, and they would have signed it, bright-eyed, exhilarated, and full of hope). Lauren had asked Camila why, eyebrow crinkling and curling her knees against her chest on the sofa.

“I don’t know,” Camila breathed over the phone. “Everything.”

Lauren’s not confused or surprised like she was back then. She doesn’t want to spend twenty minutes on the phone with Camila unpacking what she means by “Everything.” Nothing clenches in her stomach making her believe it’s her job to make Camila happy. Lauren knows happiness is a personal thing. She can’t force it on other people; hell, she can’t even force it on herself.

She plugs her phone into the charger, sips her coffee and watches the sun rise over the city.

Lauren’s not a teenager who’s never been in love before, so she doesn’t spend the day wallowing in self-pity, replaying the message over and over again. She showers, washing the smell of smoke off her skin before meticulously working through her makeup routine.

She towel dries her hair and makes a mental checklist of things she could do today: go to the gym (jokes!), start a real job search (probably not), see a movie (possibly), call home (please), pay her bills (easy enough). It’s mundane, and Lauren likes that. She likes that she has all day to do absolutely nothing.

She sorts through job listings for less than 20 minutes, eats a bowl of cereal, responds to Dinah and Normani’s texts, confirming when she’s available for a group conversation, as if the answer isn’t “literally any time at all.” She scrolls through twitter, sees that Camila congratulated Ally, texts John, and takes a nap.
She meets John at the five dollar movie theater to watch Marvel’s latest release. They sit in the last row of the small, empty theater, feet propped up on the seats in front of them.

“How was your night?” John asks.

“I got high and fell asleep.” Lauren shrugs before tossing a piece of popcorn into her mouth.

He narrows his eyes. “No, asshole, I saw you leave your show with that groupie.”

“She wasn’t a groupie.”

“Whatever.” John smirks. “Don’t avoid the question.”

“Maybe mind your own business.” Lauren rolls her eyes, wiping her buttery fingers against her shorts. “Nothing happened.”

“How was your night?” John asks.

“I got high and fell asleep.” Lauren shrugs before tossing a piece of popcorn into her mouth.

He narrows his eyes. “No, asshole, I saw you leave your show with that groupie.”

“She wasn’t a groupie.”

“Whatever.” John smirks. “Don’t avoid the question.”

“Maybe mind your own business.” Lauren rolls her eyes, wiping her buttery fingers against her shorts. “Nothing happened.”

“Okay, now I definitely know something happened.”

“God, you’re annoying.” Lauren really hates that all the people she likes abandoned Boston already, sticking her with this kid.

John’s still watching her expectantly, and his eyebrows arch the way they do when he’s about to say something he knows she’ll hate. She sighs: “We almost hooked up.”

“Almost?” There’s a confused lilt to the word.

“I left.” She taps her fingers against the popcorn bowl in her lap, willing the ads to end, the lights to turn down, and the movie 90% of the world has already seen to start.

His eyebrows fold in, and his mouth twists down. “Why?”

“Because I wanted to.”

John turns back to the screen, what passes as pre-movie trivia flashing across it, before mumbling, “You’re so fucked up.”

Lauren almost doesn’t catch it. “I’m so fucked up for not sleeping with a girl, because I didn’t want to? You’re such a boy.”

He looks at her again, mouth flat, eyes slits. “You gonna act like I haven’t seen you sabotage almost every relationship you’ve been in?”

“Hey.” Lauren curls her hands into fists against her thighs. She doesn’t think that’s fair. Relationships take two people. “Jamie dumped me.”

“Yes, he did. Because you were clingy as hell. And you broke up with Izzy for being too into you. You talked about her constantly for two months before you started dating. It was fucking annoying, by the way. And stupid, because you ended the relationship in two. Fucking. Weeks.”

“It wasn’t what I thought it would be,” Lauren says, running a hand through her hair and attempting to exhale out her frustration. “I guess I’m the only person who was ever wrong about a relationship. My bad.”

“You used me, too,” he adds, nonchalant.
Anger shoots up Lauren’s spine despite herself, and she can feel her nose flare, her face hot. “You are seriously deluded.”

“It was obvious. Ask anyone: Val, Chris, Sravya. Doesn’t matter. Hooking up with me was just an excuse to be emotionally unavailable.”

“Oh my god,” she groans. The lights in the theater finally begin dimming. “And what was it for you?”

“Sex,” he says.

“Jesus Christ. I’m not an idiot, John.”

“I didn’t say you were. Stop being so dramatic.”

“I’m being dramatic?” Her eyes go wide, and her volume increases. Whatever. “You’re accusing me of what? Consciously sabotaging all my relationships because? What? Why would I do that?”

“I don’t know.” He reaches over to grab a handful of popcorn before shoving it into his mouth. He’s so unbothered that it makes Lauren even more bothered. “It’s your problem. I’m just letting you know that you’re full of shit.”

“Next time, remember that I didn’t ask.”

Lauren looks at the screen. A trailer for some heist film plays, but she can’t focus on it.

She doesn’t think she purposely torpedoed her relationships. She liked Jamie so much. She liked that he kept 10 different types of instant oatmeal in a cabinet but didn’t have any cereal. She liked the smell of his cologne, and she liked the scratch of his beard against her face when they kissed. Izzy’s gorgeous, and funny, and likes to do crossword puzzles for fun. But no matter how attractive and intelligent she is, they weren’t sexually compatible, and the spark sizzled out before it ever really ignited. And, honestly, Lauren can’t believe John’s acting like she wasn’t the one to end their friends-with-benefits thing (that she absolutely regrets agreeing to in the first place, by the way).

She leans over to tell him that.

“Not the point,” he answers.

“I think it’s relevant.”

“I don’t want to go into detail about it, because I’m not a 12-year-old girl on AIM talking about how her crush brushed against her arm in the hallway. I actually want to see this movie.”

Lauren rolls her eyes. “You started it.”

“Very mature, Jauregui.” John grabs another handful of popcorn. “I’m just saying it seems like you always find your exit before you give something a chance. I don’t care that much about whether you get laid or not.”

“Could have fooled me.” Another group of people walk into the theater, and the screen changes to an ad about turning off your phone. “And you owe me five dollars if you’re going to eat half the popcorn.”

She bites her lip, the lights dimming even further and plunging the room into pitch black before the movie begins.
Lauren’s temples pulse with an oncoming headache. She didn’t want to see this movie in the first place, and she hates that she’s wondering if John has a point.

A child screams in the background, and Dinah’s laugh converts into a sigh. She shakes her head and shouts: “Control yourselves! We’re going to lunch later! Sorry about that,” she says to Lauren, rubbing at her forehead.

“No problem.” Lauren smiles. She likes how loud Dinah’s place is when she has family over, which is almost always. Even through Facetime, the happy sound of children playing rings in Lauren’s ears, making her feel like she’s there.

There’s a faint whine about ice cream or mac and cheese, and Dinah huffs. “They act like I don’t feed ‘em! We made waffles this morning.”

“They’re growing kids.”

“Sure.” Dinah waves her hand around absently. “Anyway, back to important things. Ally’s living room is peach, but I don’t know if she’d even want the picture there or in the bedroom.”

“I don’t think there’s a way to figure out where she’ll put it unless we ask her.”

“But it’s a surprise,” Dinah groans. “I wasn’t this difficult when I got engaged, was I?”

“Worse,” Lauren says. “You blew up the group chat every day with comments about what you wanted as an engagement present.”

“I don’t remember that.” A smirk flits around Dinah’s mouth. “But I love my crystal ring holder and engraved picture frame that perfectly matches our bedposts.”

Lauren rolls her eyes. “Yeah, yeah. But do you ever actually use the ring holder?”

“Nah. I only ever take my rings off when I’m doing dishes, and I keep the holder on my dresser.”

“Ally tried to tell you it was a useless gift.”

“Stop hating! We won’t get Ally a crystal ring holder, then. Jeez. I just wanted some bling to go with my bling.” Dinah furrows her eyebrows. “Unless you think she’d use it? We could get her a dingy one she can keep by her sink.”

Lauren scrunches up her nose. “I think the painting is a much better idea.”

They’ve commissioned an artist Ally loves, asking for a painting of her and Nicolas on the river, her red dress and him down on one knee. The date calligraphed underneath. Ally’s taken each of the girls to the artist’s small gallery when they’ve visited Austin, gifting them with small watercolors to take home. Lauren has one of hers secured in a box back in Miami (a bar in Austin, cozy and warm, full of oranges and chocolates), and another in some desk drawer in her apartment (the city’s skyline, the sun setting or rising, the sky gradients of blue, stars speckling the top of the cardstock).

“Let’s just not frame it,” Dinah suggests. “I know Mani says it’ll look incomplete without one, but why spend more money on an expensive frame that might not even match the room she sticks it in?”

“Because it’ll look incomplete.” Lauren pulls the inside of her cheek between her teeth and hums.
“We can just get a cheap one. She can always replace it when she decides where to hang the picture.”

“But then she has to buy her own.”

“She has to buy her own if we don’t get her one, too.”

“Maybe she doesn’t want it framed!” Dinah throws both her hands up in the air before flopping down and out of view. Lauren gets a nice glimpse of the sun glinting off her french doors and the fountain just beyond them.

“Dinah,” Lauren says, sharp and impatient. She loves her, but she’s fairly certain she’s losing brain cells the longer this conversation goes on. “We’ll just pick out a nice frame for it. It’s not that big of a deal.”

Dinah comes back into the picture. “You can think that, but I’m definitely blowing up y’alls phones later with ideas.” Her eyebrows waggle.

“And when Normani and I forget to put your name on the gift, don’t act surprised.” Lauren shifts, leaning back against the arm of her couch.

“Rude.” Dinah purses her lips. Then: “Oh! Remind me to send you someone’s number later.”

“I don’t want you setting me up on a blind date.” The last person Dinah connected her with took her to a nice restaurant, ordered a $25 steak, and then asked Lauren to pick up the check. He wasn’t even cute, and the only thing he wanted to discuss was basketball.

“I’m sorry about Devin.” Dinah rolls her eyes. “But it’s not about that. Levi was doing work for a cable channel, and there was something about music videos, blah, blah. And boring story short, there might be a connection your ungrateful ass could use.”

“Oh. Thanks.” Lauren blinks, stretching out her legs and flexing her toes.

“Having any luck on your own?”

“Not really.” Lauren exhales and doesn’t bother clarifying she’s only put about 10% effort into her job search. “Camila called me.”

“Who?”

“Camila.”

“My Camila?” Dinah asks, brows furrowing.

“Yeah.” Dinah grabs her phone and jerks it closer, her eyes going wide and her mouth opening. It takes Lauren a moment to realize the wail came from Dinah and not one of the toddlers currently occupying her home. “She was drunk. She probably meant to call you.”

Dinah tilts her head, confusion in the bow of her mouth. “Because ‘D’ and ‘L’ are next to each other in the alphabet?” A beat. “Unless she has your number saved under ‘Dumbass’ or ‘Dinah’s much cooler’ or ‘Don’t call her.’”

“Shut up. It was weird.”

“What did she say?”
“She left a message.” Lauren worries at her bottom lip. “She said she was drunk. That she missed me. I don’t know.”

“Did you call her back?” Dinah’s practically vibrating through the phone, and Lauren thinks she’s probably shaking her legs, suddenly full of pent-up energy. Lord knows where she gets it from. If Lauren spent as much time as Dinah does around that many children, she’d be exhausted constantly.

She scoffs. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Why would I?” Lauren never even considered the possibility. The message is still in her inbox, one of three, following the birthday voicemail from Taylor that she saved because it made her laugh so hard she cried, and one she sent herself as a reminder to get new license plates for her car when she returns to Miami. But the idea of replying seems wrong, makes her shoulders tense, an ache forming at the base of her neck.

“Because it’s the polite thing to do.” Dinah looks at her like she’s an idiot.

“Except she clearly didn’t mean to call me.”

Dinah shakes her head and tutts. “People don’t accidentally leave messages on people’s phones if they didn’t mean to call, Lo. She was reaching out. I’ve known Camila for a long time—”

“Oh my god,” Lauren groans.

“—and she probably wants to catch up.”

“Why are you acting like we meant to call each other, but kept forgetting until we lost touch?” Lauren runs a hand through her hair and slides down until her head is resting against the sofa’s arm.

“Because that’s exactly not wrong,” Dinah says. “And because I’m trying to help you be a decent human.”

“I’m offended.” Lauren rubs at a pimple she can feel forming underneath her jaw. “Besides, she—”

“Dinah!” A little voice cuts through. “I’m hungry!”

“Lunch is in ten minutes!” comes another, older voice. It’s one of Dinah’s aunts, but Lauren can’t quite place her.

“I’m coming!” Dinah shouts back. “Ugh.” She narrows her eyes at Lauren. “Woman up and call her back. I love you, and we will finish that conversation about the stupid picture frame later.”

They say goodbye and hang up. Lauren drops her phone onto her chest, taps her fingers against it, and stares at the ceiling, anxiety swirling in the pit of her stomach. She honestly considers texting Camila. But when she scrolls through her contacts and finds her, Lauren’s mind goes blank. She has no idea what she’d even say. It’s been a few days since Camila left the message, and the acceptable reply window has passed her by. Camila probably doesn’t want a response, anyway. No matter how much Dinah wants to pretend she knows Camila better than anyone, she doesn’t know the Camila Lauren knows.

Lauren listens to the message one more time, just to be sure.
She sets up a phone call with Levi’s industry contact, and it’s awkward. She fakes interest in aspects of sound mixing she has no desire to pursue because she wants to make a good impression. When he asks Lauren why she’s looking into live sound reinforcement, she stumbles over an answer, speaking twice as long as necessary because she doesn’t know if she’s convincing or completely transparent. Lauren spends 20 minutes of the conversation reminding herself how important networking is, and how much this could help her break into something. Anything at all. She reminds herself the first job she gets doesn’t have to be her dream job. You have to start somewhere and work your way up.

Lauren knows that dream jobs aren’t always rose-colored fantasies, anyway, and she wants to have an open mind about this. Ostensibly, she could fall in love with front of house work. But her skin feels dry, and she sits up so straight her back and shoulders ache. She wants this call to end as quickly as possible.

When it does end, he asks Lauren to email her resume, offering to look it over. There’s a vague, open-ended promise to get lunch if and when she’s in LA. She can even tour the studio he works in, and it should be exciting, but it makes dread pool in the pit of her stomach instead.

Lauren hangs up, rolling her shoulders back and shaking the tension out of her body.

Ridiculous. She knows she’s being selfish and ungrateful. She’s acting entitled to something when she has no experience. She keeps thinking about it, if she had gone solo (really and truly took a crack at it when the opportunity was there), if she’d be happy. If she’d be writing and recording her own music, playing for fans who also feel the things constantly swirling around her mind and heart.

Also ridiculous. Lauren knows that wouldn’t have happened.

She tried it for two seconds before realizing it was just another version of the same, limiting thing. She’d done the bullshit with Fifth Harmony, and she wasn’t going to keep redoing it and hoping for a different outcome.

Lauren rubs at the back of her neck, scrolling through her twitter feed. There’s an update from Camila, just over an hour ago: *even your muscles hurt when they grow*. Lauren rolls her eyes. It doesn’t make sense, but she knows there’s something to it in the way her fingers itch; she likes it.

In a fit of lunacy, she finds Camila’s number and calls.

It rings and rings, and her stomach churns and churns. Lauren wipes her hand on the sofa. Her skin feels hot now, and the ache in her neck and back reasserts itself. She exhales. Breathing is difficult, and she thinks if Camila picks up, she’ll be able to hear it, too loud and obvious. Lauren counts her breaths in and out. She tries to quiet the sound of the air in her lungs and unfurl the mess of knots in her stomach.

It’s stupid, and eventually the call goes to voicemail.

She hangs up before hearing Camila’s voice. She knows the voicemail box is full.

Lauren cracks her neck. Relief floods her veins, and she thinks she was right: Camila didn’t mean to call her or leave a message. She’ll have to rub that in Dinah’s face later. She waits for her heart rate to return to normal while scrolling through Netflix, passing by whatever almost seems interesting because she knows she won’t actually watch it.

Her phone vibrates against her thigh. She looks down, sees *Camila Cabello*, and freezes.
Lauren swallows, and her thumb drifts over the ignore button.

“Hello?” she answers.

“Hi?” Camila’s voice sounds different. There’s more rasp to it, and it’s deeper than Lauren remembers, maybe. She doesn’t know if it’s really changed, or if it’s just been too long since she’s last heard it.

“Hi,” Lauren repeats. Like an idiot.

“You, um, you called me?”

There’s a pause, and Lauren wants to clarify that this isn’t her fault. She’s been wasted plenty of times and never once left a message for Camila. Something seizes in her chest when she thinks maybe Camila doesn’t remember it. Maybe she thinks Lauren is the one who called her out of the blue like they’re still friends.

They didn’t part the same way Camila did with Ally and Normani. Whatever resentment there was, it had little to do with Camila’s career, and there was never any grievance they’d willingly address. There was never indifference, either. Whatever terms they left each other on, Lauren couldn’t exactly say; they weren’t good, and they weren’t bad in any easily identifiable way. Nothing about their relationship was ever easily identifiable, so the throughline was there, at least.

Whenever the other girls talked about Camila leaving, it was complex and messy and personal, but coated in a unextractable businessy film. It felt more like a breakup to Lauren than anything else, complex and messy and personal, too, but lacking the career-related anger. Lauren knows that. She thinks they all knew that.

Lauren clears her throat. “How are you?”

“Okay,” Camila says slowly. “I’m working a few things out.”

“Good.” Lauren nods and plants her feet steadily on the ground. “I’m glad you’re good.”

“How are you?”

“Good-- Well,” Lauren says. She wants to tell Camila more than that. She wants to catch up like they really are friends who accidentally lost touch. But she wants to keep everything close, too. She doesn’t want Camila to have any more power over her, and calling her back already feels like conceding something. “I graduated from Berklee.”

“I saw that. I’m really proud of you.” Lauren can hear the smile developing on Camila’s face as she speaks. “I’m happy you got to do that. Go to college, I mean.”

“Me too.” Lauren flexes her toes against the floor, the wood cool against her feet. “I don’t like that it’s over, though. I just want to … keep learning.”

“You can.”

Lauren laughs, erring on the side of cynical. “Not really. I don’t have the money for it.”

She knows she’s lucky. She didn’t have to take out loans, and she has enough to help her siblings along. But the money will run out soon, and the idea of owing makes her feel claustrophobic.

“Oh, well. School isn’t the only way to keep learning.”
“I know.” Lauren rolls her eyes.

“I learn something new every day.”

“Camila,” Lauren warns.

“Today I learned cha dao is the art of making tea.”

“Is it?” Despite herself, a smile makes itself known on Lauren’s face.

“It is. It’s very cool. I want to learn, but I don’t want to do it wrong. Or be insensitive. I think it could be helpful.”

“Helpful?”

“Yeah.” Camila sighs, and Lauren can hear the hesitation in her voice. She presses her phone closer to her ear. “I’ve been a little anxious lately.”

“Oh.” Lauren blinks and curls back against the sofa, tucking her knees in, heels pressing against her thighs. “Is it bad?”

“No, no, no,” Camila rushes. “It’s not bad. I’m okay. You shouldn’t worry about me. I mean, not that you worry about me. I just--”

“Camila. It’s okay.” Lauren shakes her head even though Camila can’t see. “Breathe.”

There’s an exaggerated inhale and exhale, and then: “I think I figured it out.”

Lauren bites down around a giggle, but it gets out anyway. “You’re so dumb.”

“I know.”

Lauren tucks some hair behind her ear and chews on her bottom lip. An awkward silence forces itself between them, and Lauren doesn’t know how to break it in a way that won’t make it worse. “But I really do want you to be good,” she says, finally.

“I am. I pinky promise.”

“Okay.” Lauren believes her, but she knows that even if she thought Camila was bullshitting, she’d have no right to argue the point. “What have you been up to?”

“Working on an album.” There’s a shrug in her voice.

“That’s cool.”

“Kind of. Shawn and I broke up.”

Lauren’s eyebrows furrow. “I didn’t know you were dating?” She doesn’t keep up with Camila, not out of bitterness, and not even out of self-preservation. She just knows what Camila and Shawn’s relationship was like, and it’s difficult for her to imagine them together. It’s difficult for her to imagine Camila risking their friendship and having it not work out, not after she and Camila playfully dissected the idea of it on their tour bus.

“We weren’t,” Camila offers. “Not really.”

“Not really?”

It clicks. “Oh.”

“Yeah. It is what it is. He’s got an actual girlfriend now. I haven’t met her yet, but I can tell he really likes her.”

“Good for him.” Lauren means it. “Must be a relief.”

“Not really,” Camila says, and Lauren can work out a hint of bitterness.

“Do you,” Lauren pauses, running a hand through her hair while her stomach twists. She doesn’t overthink it: “Do you like him?”

“Not really.”

“I know you can use your words.” She forgot how frustrating Camila could be when she didn’t want to discuss something. She’s stubborn and moody, and Lauren hates it. She used to especially hate it when people pointed out she was the same way. “You brought it up.”

“I’m sorry.” There’s a sigh. “It’s stupid. It doesn’t matter. It’s just PR stuff.”

Lauren rolls her eyes. “Right.”

“Sorry,” Camila mumbles. “Let’s just forget it. My life is boring. I want to hear about college.”

It’s a half-assed response and unsubtle attempt to change the conversation, and Lauren bites back a retort. “What do you want to know?”

“Everything.”

“Well.” Lauren presses at a mark by her knee. She can’t tell if it’s a freckle or a bruise. It’s light and smaller than the pad of her thumb. She hums, trying to decide if the wistfulness in Camila’s voice is real or imagined. “It’s a lot like I expected, but a lot different, too? Professors are mostly really chill. I think they’re like, settled in what they know? So they’re not afraid of other opinions.”

“That’s cool,” Camila says.

“Don’t get me wrong, there was one or two who I could tell were really set in their outdated ways, but for the most part they were great. Hard, though. It was not easy. I really did learn a lot, and I was behind when I started.”

Camila scoffs. “Impossible.”

“No, really.” Lauren insists. “My classmates were super technically savvy. Lots of tech kids, lots of people who came in knowing how to use programs other than garageband to make music and stuff. I wasn’t totally incompetent or anything, but I was very green. I had catching up to do.” Lauren takes a deep breath. “I’m still pretty green.”

“This is going to sound really stupid.”

Lauren frowns. She can picture the gesture on Camila’s face, too, but in a hazy way. It hits her that she no longer remembers the details of what Camila looks like, the bump of her nose, the arch of her eyebrows, the way her skin ripples around a dimple. “What?”

“What did you study?”
“Music production and engineering.”

“Really?”

“Really.” Lauren’s a little offended by the disbelief coloring Camila’s response. “Why?”

“I don’t know. I just thought you’d study something like…”

“Songwriting?”

“No,” Camila laughs. “No, like psychology or something.”

“I went to Berklee.” There’s silence. “College of music.”

“Oh, right.” She can feel Camila’s embarrassment radiating from her phone. “Sorry. I told you it was a stupid question.”

“It’s fine. I didn’t know you were ‘dating’ Shawn, either.”

“Yeah,” Camila says. “But that’s stupid stuff, Lauren. This is like, your future.”

Lauren bristles. She knows Camila is right. And she likes what she studied. She really did learn a lot about the technical side of the recording process. She knows if given the time and some money, she could produce a quality album. The idea thrills her, but she can’t seem to find the road there. She doesn’t know if she wants to put out her own stuff, anyway; some days that’s all she wants to do, and some days the thought gives her hives. “Yeah.”

“What do you want to do with it?”

“God.” Lauren pinches the bridge of her nose. “That question is actually more annoying than you think.”

“Sorry, sorry.”

“No. Don’t be.” Lauren squeezes her eyes shut, tracing the bone beneath the bags she’s had under them since she was 16. “Everyone wants to know. It’s just hard, because I don’t know. I want to produce music, obviously. But I want to be part of the creative process, too. And it’s just. I know it’s not realistic.”

“Why not?” Camila asks, and she’s so genuine. There’s always idealism with her, and Lauren used to mistake it for optimism. She imagines Camila leaning forward, eyes searching, sure Lauren could do anything at all.

“Because that’s not how these things work. There aren’t an infinite number of albums to produce at any given time. And even if I got a job doing that, it doesn’t mean it’d be music I’m passionate about.”

“Produce your own album.”

Lauren smiles small, but it makes something ache in her chest. “No. That’s not what I’m looking to do right now.”

“But it would be amazing,” Camila cuts in. “You could do whatever you want.”

“With what money?” she asks.
Camila’s faith in her is nice. It always has been. It’s warm and cozy, like a blanket knitted with Lauren in mind, snug around her shoulders. But Lauren thinks, in the midst of everything, Camila doesn’t understand. Lauren’s not broke, but she’s not fucking rich, either. Especially after paying for school. Camila found fame and success in a different way, and she doesn’t even seem to realize it.

“Help me with my album,” Camila blurts, rushed and without thought. “Oh god,” she spits not even a second later. A loud gasp and the sound of her slapping her hand over her mouth.

“Camila?” Lauren asks, eyebrows wrinkled.

“Oh my god.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes,” Camila whispers. “I just. I didn’t mean--”

“I know,” Lauren laughs, but there’s no humor in it. “I know you didn’t mean it.”

She thinks she doesn’t understand Camila’s position, either. Because either Camila really has the power to let her produce a song or two for her album, or she has the illusion of it. And Lauren can’t wrap her head around that. She doesn’t know how Camila could accidentally offer her a job when they haven’t spoken to each other in eight years.

She doesn’t understand why the fact that Camila is taking it back hurts, because she should take it back. Lauren knows it’s a ridiculous and stupid idea.

“I do mean it,” Camila says softly, like it’s a secret she’s just learning.

“Oh. Okay.” Lauren blinks. She’s shocked, and her heart is jammed into her throat. Her stomach had calmed, but it’s twisting up again.

“I mean it.” It sounds like a realization. “I really do. Um, Lauren? Would you? I mean. I have some things to work out and stuff, but. I think it would be great -- Good. I think it’d be really good.”

“I have to,” Lauren starts, the words are hoarse, and she clears her throat. It feels dry. “I have to think about it. We should both think about it.”

“Right. I’ll call you in a few days. Think about it.” Camila’s voice is steadier now, more sure, but still quiet.

“Yeah. I will. Thank you.”

“It was nice talking to you,” Camila says.

“You too.” Lauren swallows.

They say goodbye and hang up, and Lauren sits in silence, staring at nothing.

It’s hard for her to process she actually had a conversation with Camila, let alone was offered a job. Nothing about what just happened feels real. Her legs are stiff, and her heart is still lodged in her throat. She sits there long enough that if she didn’t have the call log in her phone, Lauren would think it was a dream.

She closes her eyes, and she knows if Camila was serious, she has to take the job.

Fuck.
Camila hangs up and her heart beats against her ribcage. She fears if she moves the wrong way, her bones will puncture the muscle in her chest. She reaches for her journal and writes the thought down, an almost illegible scrawl. It’s a good feeling, despite how gory it sounds. Camila presses her palms against her breast and breathes. Her eyes are wet, and her mouth slips, pulling up at the edges.

It’s a good idea: working with Lauren.

She’s already inspired by their conversation, by all the things she’s reminded of when she hears Lauren’s voice. Their relationship, built on tension and release, like a slingshot, is good for Camila’s creativity, and it’s an easy template for a song. Their musical leanings are similar enough to make the recording process fun, but different enough to push each other forward. A symbiotic relationship that Camila thinks she really needs right now, when it feels like everything and everyone is wearing her down and turning her to dust.

This is, of course, speculation on her part. Extrapolation from the relationship she and Lauren used to have and from the conversation that kickstarted something within her. There’s that feeling of being 15 tugging at her skin, and right now that feels like progress instead of regression. She wants this to work so much she can’t sit still with it, her fingers doodling in the margins of her journal.

Camila’s not ignoring the PR benefits, either.

With the end of her relationship with Shawn on newsstands before the week is out, she needs another push for her album. Being able to point to a collaboration with an ex-bandmate is, perhaps, even better than a breakup. The speculation about how they reconnected, about what it means for the music itself, and about the relationship they had and have, will all create noise. Camila thinks the label will go for it.

She doesn’t have more studio time booked yet, and she needs to run it by the powers that be, but she’s determined to make it happen.

She sits still, jotting down concepts and metaphors until a smile eats at her mouth and she has to stand up, turning on music to spin around to, light streaming in through the curtains and through her body.

Camila feels unburdened, transparent and happy.

She feels it, and a few tears leak out of her eyes.

Absurd. She feels that, too. She feels everything.

Roger waves when he spots her sitting in one of the chairs outside the conference room. He pauses
to say something to the receptionist, who hands over a manila folder in response. “Hello,” he says, and Camila stands up to give him a hug. He motions for her to sit back down.

“So?” Camila asks, raising an eyebrow. She tugs on her skirt and crosses her ankles.

“I like it.” He pushes at his glasses, flipping through the pages in the folder before looking back up at her. “I like it a lot.”

“Good.” Camila smiles, twirling the ring on her finger. “I think it will be a win-win situation.”

“I think so, too. But not everyone is in agreement.”

“Right.” Camila nods and tongues at the roof of her mouth. “What are the concerns?”

“That Lauren doesn’t have enough experience to produce a clean record—”

“She went to Berklee,” Camila cuts in. “College of Music.”

Roger huffs out a laugh. “Yes. We know. I think she’ll do fine. It doesn’t have to be clean, anyway. There’s an aesthetic argument to be made, pushing for a less crisp sound. It’ll seem more authentic.”

“Authentic is good.” Camila tugs at the skin between her thumb and forefinger.

Roger is usually positive about her ideas. He lets her down gently when he disagrees, always pointing out the aspects he finds promising before rationally explaining why he feels the risks outweigh the potential rewards. Camila has become good at spotting those moments, but she finds this isn’t one of them.

“And they can always hire someone else to co-produce with Lauren if they’re really worried,” Camila adds.

Roger presses his mouth into a thin line. “They could.”

“What else are they worried about?” Camila asks. She wants to be prepared before the meeting. It’s not just about Lauren producing for her; it’s about the vision for her album as a whole. She’ll hear some of the work she’s already done, the songs where they didn’t let her have a say in the lyrics or the production. This is when she’ll get her chance to comment, and whether her feedback is taken into consideration or not depends. They’re smart, because Camila knows that even when she’s disappointed, feeling like they listened to her goes a long way toward making her okay with the label’s choices.

“How the media will spin this.”

Camila frowns. “They can control that.”

“To an extent,” Roger says. “But there are still fans of yours who will run away with it.”

“Oh my god,” Camila groans, rolling her eyes. “Who cares?”

His tone goes sharp. “A lot of people.”

“Sorry.” Camila runs a hand through her hair, tugging when her finger snags on a knot. It doesn’t come loose, and she awkwardly pulls her hand away from her head. “But I mean, we’ve all dealt with rumors before. It’s not the first time, and it won’t be the last time, either.”

“I know. And I think it could revitalize a portion of your fanbase that’s lost interest.”
“Yes.” Camila smiles. “That’s good.”

It’s a debate, and Camila realizes that while Roger is sold, the label’s representatives aren’t. She wonders if they’re simply skeptical, or completely against the idea. Either way, she feels fortified with Roger next to her. He’s good at staying calm and making his arguments. He’s good at what he does, period. Camila gets flustered if she’s not prepared, and if she was going in alone, she’d have already lost.

“It’s just a matter of walking the line of--”

The door creaks open, and a man in an expensive suit with a scraggly beard stands tall. “Roger. Camila. We’re ready for you.”

“Thanks.” Camila smiles her best smile.

The conference table is a long oval. The room is beige, and a large whiteboard runs along one wall, award placards on the other. There’s a small table in the corner with a Keurig, fruit, and donuts. “Help yourself,” Fred offers before sitting at the head of the table. “We’re going to start by listening to a few tracks.”

Roger grabs a cup of coffee, so Camila does, too, adding a sugar and a splash of cream she doesn’t need just for something more to do with her hands. She takes a banana and a sprinkled donut, but she’s too nervous to do more than pick at the pieces of sugar. She ate before she came, but even now, she hasn’t been able to shake the feeling of rudeness if she ignores the offered food.

The songs they play for her are fine. There’s one she helped write that she likes a lot. She finds the production overwrought and dramatic, but hearing her words accompanied by an almost finished track still sends a thrill down her spine. The hit she worked on with Jeremiah is slick. By the second note of the hook, Camila knows it’s going on the album, whether it fits with the rest of the tracks or not. Most of the songs don’t make her tap her fingers, don’t make her close her eyes and lose herself to the melody. She says as much.

Fred asks her to rank them, pushing a piece of paper and pen across the table.

Camila, Roger, Fred and a woman introduced as Bernadette -- short, blonde bob and crows feet around her eyes -- talk through what they like and dislike. Fred likes the beat drop on track two, and Roger points out that Camila’s voice is underneath the track on five. Bernadette says track eight needs more drums, and if they want to use track three, Camila needs to re-record the chorus because it’s too raw.

It’s productive, and no final decisions are made.

That’s another one of those clever things that causes Camila to feel like her feedback will be taken into consideration. Maybe she’s an idiot for thinking it actually will be, but sometimes she does.

There’s a brief intermission where Bernadette leaves the room with Camila’s rankings and their comments. Camila takes a bite of her donut, and they’re joined by Mark, Heather and Anthony from PR, marketing and legal.

“What is this about Lauren producing for you?” Fred asks with a nod of his head and clench to his jaw that Camila doesn’t think is very open. He threads his fingers together and places them on the table.

“Um.” Camila blinks and looks down at the crumbs on her plate, the smattering of spots on her
banana. Her cheeks feel warm. She forces herself to look back up. “She has a degree in music production. And I think we would work really well together.”

“Based on?”

“Um, our relationship.”

“Which is?”

“Uh. It’s-- I mean, we’re.” Camila swallows. Fred’s eyes narrow, and the juxtaposition of his ragged beard and perfectly tailored suit turns menacing. She reminds herself that Fred has her best interests at heart, reminds herself Fred was instrumental in making the lead single for her second album happen and in getting it to number two. He had been on her side then. She reminds herself that it’s his job to be critical. It forces her to be better. It limits missteps. “We’re friends?”

Camila has never been good at defining whatever it is she and Lauren share. She has always gone with friends. It encompasses so many things that it doesn’t feel like a lie rolling off her tongue. Or, that used to be the case. They’ve had one conversation in eight years. If she wasn’t sure about the label before, she’s even less sure now.

Fear makes itself known in the pit of her stomach, twisting and turning. Because even though Lauren is not privy to this conversation, Camila hates the idea that Lauren is something to her that she isn’t to Lauren. She has always been afraid of this happening with everyone she meets, but the anxiety has always been heightened with Lauren. Camila hates how, of all the things that are different, this is one of the things that remains the same. It makes her feel uncomfortable and less than. Awkward. A negative side-effect to feeling 15 again.

Fred’s mouth gets thinner, and Camila inhales, ready to expand on her answer even though she has no idea what to say.

Roger saves her: “They’re friends. Camila has always said they relate on a musical level. They have similar inspirations, and Lauren could bring something fresh and new to the album.”

Camila sends him a look that she hopes conveys her gratitude.

“Camila’s a big name for us, and we don’t need her fifth album to be amateur hour.”

Camila flinches. “Lauren is very talented.”

“I’m sure she is,” Fred says, flat but with an undertone of malice.

“Camila and I were discussing going for a looser sound, anyway. There’s been some radio success with it lately. It comes across more authentic.”

“And because of my history with Lauren, the public will consider the music more genuine,” Camila adds. “It’s an easy story to sell.”

“Your material has always been genuine,” Mark reminds her. “And we’d have to deal with relationship rumors that have subsided. It’s a headache that doesn’t seem worthwhile.”

“But it is,” Camila offers dumbly.

“We can use those rumors to our advantage,” Rogers says. “Tap into a market she’s lost. And it wouldn’t have to alienate her current fanbase.”
“Bring the Fifth Harmony fans back in,” Camila adds.

“We don’t need them,” Fred says. It sounds like he doesn’t want them.

The room goes eerily silent, and Camila feels like all the blood in her body pools in her head. Camila wants them. Camila wants everyone to like her. She leans toward Roger and whispers: “Please. I’m going to get some air.”

He looks at her with concern in his eyes, and it helps calm the shakiness she feels in her limbs. He nods, and Camila pushes her chair back. She grabs a bottle of water and exits the conference room feeling foolish.

She hasn’t had to leave a meeting in so long; she forgot how embarrassing it is. Her heart races. Camila wipes at her forehead, unscrews the cap on her water and takes a few gulps, dropping into one of the chairs outside the conference room. She can see Roger’s back, posture impeccable and powerful. She trusts him. He’s the only person in this industry she has put all her faith in. It’s not that he’s never taken advantage, but it always seems to work out in the end. And he does small things to buy her a little more happiness, a little more control, things she knows most people wouldn’t bother with.

It makes a difference.

Camila finishes her water, stands up on wobbly legs, and walks down the hall to the bathroom. She looks pale, but other than that, no one would be able to tell she just fell apart trying to defend an idea she came up with, an idea she wanted to fight for. Camila wants to be better at fighting for what she wants.

If she were brave, she’d go back into the meeting, but the idea of it makes her throat close up.

She waits, and she waits, tapping her fingers, pressing her heels against the legs of the chair, and staring through the window at the conversation unfolding without her presence. She’s too invested in the outcome. If the answer is no, she probably won’t even be able to call Lauren back. It’ll be a blimp in time, another checkmark in the failure column.

Everyone but Roger exits the conference room. Everyone looks disgruntled, thick lines etched into foreheads and mouths turned down.

Camila walks back in silently. Roger is looking at the papers he was handed earlier, highlighting a few things and leaving notes in the margins. When he’s done, he pushes them toward her. “You’ll want to read these.” A beat. “You alright?”

“Yeah.” Camila tries to smile, but she knows it doesn’t come out right. “I’m sorry about that.”

“I know.” He rubs at his head. “I did the best I could.”

“Oh.” Camila looks down, running her thumb along the table’s edge. “Okay.”

“Here are the terms.”

Her head snaps up.

“They’ll give you a month off to work with her. They won’t pay Lauren, and they won’t pay for studio time. Mark and Heather are going to do some market research, and they’re going to work on ways to present this collaboration to the public. It’s extra work they don’t want to do, but Fred will make it happen for you.”
Camila worries at her bottom lip. “Are they … even going to give the music a chance?”

“I don’t know,” Roger says. “But if Mark and Heather are crafting a narrative, I think you’ve got a good shot. They’re not a fan of Lauren, but they’re a fan of you. Remember what I told you?”

“Prove them wrong,” she echoes.

“Give them something so good that they can’t ignore it.” He reaches out and squeezes her shoulder. “You’re really okay?”

“Embarrassed, but okay.” Camila exhales, and her smile tips closer to genuine.

Camila twirls spaghetti around her fork, careful not to splash red sauce onto her blouse. The noodles wrap around and around before starting to slip off the utensil.

“Just cut it,” her mom says.

“I won’t give up.” Camila tries again, pressing her finger against the prongs when she lifts her fork horizontally. A noodle hits her chin before she can stop it, and her mom raises a knowing eyebrow. “Don’t say anything! Do you see a stain on my shirt?”

“Oh, Karla.” Her mom sighs, making a tsk noise in the back of her throat.

Camila smiles.

“I see you’ve withdrawn a large sum of money from your account?”

Camila’s smile falters. “You looked at my account?”

“Your father and I check the statements each month to make sure nothing suspicious is going on.”

“Right.” That makes sense. “But doesn’t like, the bank call me if there’s weird activity?”

“They should, yes. But it’s not a foolproof system. We just don’t want you getting taken advantage of.”

“Thanks.”

When this whole process started, Camila didn’t know anything about managing her money, or 401ks, or investing. She didn’t know anything about how the people she works for -- and the people who work for her -- could legally take the majority of her profits or illegally skim money off the top. Her parents knew a good deal by virtue of their construction company, and Camila learned a lot from them. She learned more from Roger, specifics of the music industry. She listened and educated herself. She hired a good accountant.

Her mother’s name is still on her accounts.

“So?” her mom asks again.

“I needed it to reserve studio time.”

Her mother’s eyebrows furrow. “For what?”
“To record.”

“Don’t be smart with me.”

Camila takes a sip of water.

Her mom used to be more involved with her career than she is now. But Camila knew she’d find out sooner rather than later, but she can’t help wishing the sooner was on the far side of soon. She’s still reeling from the past week.

Everything is happening at lightspeed, and she’s having trouble processing it. She immediately went to work figuring out where to record, feeling out the schedules of studio players she’ll want to employ, and parsing out how much she can actually afford to spend. Camila knows she can’t settle for whatever is cheapest, even though her bank account wants her to -- she’s not poor by any means, but she’s not sitting on liquid millions.

She wants to present Lauren to her mom in a way that guarantees a receptive response, but she remembers how hard Fred was on the idea, and she can’t help but feel like her mom will be hard on it, too.

“The label said I could only hire the producer I want to use if I pay for it myself.”

Her mom’s face gives way to even more confusion, mouth twisting. “Who do you want to hire?”

“Lauren.”

Her mom stares at her blankly for a long moment, eyes scanning her face, lips pursed and brows slanted in.

Camila’s entire body flushes hot.

“Oh,” her mom whispers. “Oh, mija.”

“She has a degree in music production,” Camila defends, a script she’s learned to recite.

Her mother’s face changes, eyes going soft and mouth curling into a loose sort of frown, unsure and sympathetic. There’s pity in the way her nose scrunches. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“Yes,” Camila says. Then: “No. I’m not.”

Lying to her mom is not her forte.

“I just don’t know if this is healthy.”

“I’ll be fine.” Camila reaches across the table, pressing her fingers against her mom’s wrist. Her mom moves, taking her hand and offering a gentle squeeze. “I want to do this.”

“But there’s so much pain between you and the girls. They hurt you deeply, Camila. I don’t think it’s necessary to rehash those arguments and reopen those wounds.”

“Do you think ignoring it is any better?” She wants to say that the wounds have healed, but she fears they’re broken bones she let mend on their own, setting wrong, a malunion or false joint. Using them again could just re-break them and cause more damage.

“Maybe. If it keeps you from getting hurt. Keeps you happy,” her mom says.
“I think maybe I’ll be happier if I do this.”

“I think you’re fooling yourself.” She squeezes Camila’s hand before letting go. “But you’re an adult. You make your own choices.”


“And if you get your heart broken again, I’ll still be here for you. Always. But this time I retain the right to say, ‘I told you so.’”

“That’s fair.” Camila fiddles with her napkin and swallows down her protests. “But please don’t root against me.”

“I would never,” her mom replies. “Now, try to eat your pasta like a lady.”

Camila laughs. She really loves her so much.

Camila can’t sleep.

Regret pools in her stomach, and she sorts through all the reactions she’s gotten to the Lauren news:

Dinah asked her why, if they’re soul sisters, Camila has never asked to do a collaboration with her.

“Do you want to?” Camila answered, biting at her lip. “I didn’t think you’d want to?”

“Walz, please.” Dinah rolled her eyes. “Like you could handle this? I’d wipe the floor with your ass.”

But Camila still feels a bit guilty about it, resolving to check in with Dinah more than she does -- again. She’s always trying to be better about keeping in touch with people. She figures she only fails once she stops trying. She thinks maybe if things go well with Lauren, she’ll be able to convince the label to greenlight a duet with Dinah.

When she told Sofi, her sister had frowned, looking more like their mother than Camila can ever remember. “Be careful,” she said. “I don’t want you to start crying again.”

“I’ll be careful, I promise,” Camila replied, but she had already failed, because the worry in her sister’s eyes made her vision blurry with tears.

There was a message on her phone from LA’s assistant about scheduling a meeting with Camila and Lauren, and a call from Simon reminding her to keep the work confidential. There had been an edge in his tone: “If I read anything about this, even if it’s in the National Enquirer or Daily Mail, you will have a lot to answer for.”

It worries her that no one seems excited about it. No one sees the potential but herself and Roger. She knows her family is supportive, at least, but they’re wary. They’re backing her because they have to and not because their hearts are in it.

“Trust me,” she keeps saying.

But Camila doesn’t know if she even trusts herself.
She blinks at the clock on her television. It’s 2:34, and the consecutive numbers make her smile. Lauren’s on the plane. She’ll arrive at LAX in less than an hour, purposefully choosing a redeye so there’s less chance of her being spotted at the airport, a time when fans and tourists and paparazzi aren’t lingering.

They’ll start work tomorrow -- today, whatever.

Camila’s excitement begins waning as anxiety plants itself in her brain, reminding her of everything she has riding on this. She keeps texting Roger for reassurance, and he keeps promising to intercede on her behalf. He tells her he’ll wear everyone down. If the product is good at the end of the month, he’s sure he can get them to put it on her album.

Camila wants to believe that if they come out of the studio with nothing, it’ll be fine. It’ll have been worth it to try. Lauren will have more experience regardless of the outcome. She’ll have a product to show potential employers, and Camila will have fought for something with grit she hasn’t used in years. She repeats these things over and over, but she’s still terrified, and that’s how she convinces herself it’ll be worth it. Fear means there’s something here worth fighting for.

She looks at the clock again and pushes out of bed.

She goes to the back of her closet, standing on her tiptoes and reaching for a shoebox. When she pulls it down, she loses her balance and almost drops it. She holds it tightly against her chest, feeling the lid slip.

Her room is dark, and she sits down on her bed again, turning on the lamp poised on her nightstand. It casts a soft glow, enough for her to read the scraps of paper in the box. There’s her old journal and faded ticket stubs: to movies and concerts and a play. There’s a receipt from a small coffee shop in New York, and a polaroid of Camila, cheeks puffed out and eyes crossed, a thumb in the corner.

She brushes her fingers against each object softly. She half expects the papers to dissolve against her skin. It’s been a long time since she’s had the courage to pull the box down, and even longer since the last time she opened it.

It makes her heart sad but warm.

She flips through her journal, scanning her words. They’re naive, full of dreams and promises she had no understanding of, but the longing in them is the same thing tugging at her now. She wrote about the feeling of being onstage, of the crowd singing along, trite metaphors about kissing and the difference between like and love, of loving someone and being in love with them.

Camila believes she’s more eloquent now, but she thinks she’s just as clueless as she was at 15. Cynicism isn’t the same thing as knowledge, despite what people try to tell her.

Her eyes ache with desire to close, but Camila ignores the signals her body sends. Instead, she smooths out a sheet with a list of Lana Del Rey tracks titled Life Changing Songs, random shapes doodled all around the words. Slowly and deliberately, Camila places all the items back into the box and carries it with her down the hall into her music room. There’s a baby grand, a drum set she’s touched all of two times, and a trio of guitars.

She grabs her old acoustic and sits on the piano bench, strumming absently.

Her fingers find an old melody, a song she wrote years ago.

Camila closes her eyes and hums. This song reminds her of the things inside the shoebox. It reminds her of the salty way the ocean smells, her heartbeat turning into the thump of the bass at a show, of
the first sip of coffee she ever had, grimacing at the bitterness.

The song isn’t good. She knows that.

She doesn’t even like it, really. It’s simple and boring, almost plagiarizes Ed Sheeran if anything Ed Sheeran wrote could be classified as boring.

Camila wrote it about a boy in her math class. She sat in front of him, and he’d kick gently at the back of her chair while the teacher wrote problems on the board. Camila remembers the first time it happened, turning around and asking him what he wanted. He was confused, didn't realize he was doing it, and her cheeks had flushed crimson. She liked him for months, writing many songs and poems about the swoop of his hair, and yammering on and on to Sandra and Marielle about how he never seemed to dot the ‘i’ in his name.

It was the first time Camila thought she was in love.

She wasn’t.

Love came later, and there was no thought required when it happened.

She looks at the clock.

Lauren’s plane will have landed by now. She’s probably still in the airport. Or maybe she’s in a cab, heading to the place she’s renting for the month. Despite the clenching in her stomach, Camila reminds herself that nothing is different.

She breathes and plays until she feels calm, until the exhaustion tugging at her limbs is too heavy to ignore.

Camila arrives at the studio half an hour before the time scheduled. She parks, pulls down the sun visor and studies her face in the mirror. She applied more makeup than she normally does; eyelashes black and curled, lips pink. She did her best to cover the dark circles underneath her eyes, but she’s never been very good at it, and when she absolutely needs it done for appearances, she has Dawn. She looks good, though. Presentable.

When Camila gets out of her car, her legs wobble, and she accidentally drops her car keys on the pavement. Camila grabs her guitar and goes inside. She makes small talk with the receptionist, and then she’s taken down a long hallway to the studio she booked.

She concentrates on familiarizing herself with the place despite feeling like her stomach is trying to eat itself. All studios are more or less the same: it opens up to the control room, containing a sofa and a couple of chairs in the corner. The machine room is to the left of the door, and she peaks inside.

They won’t need it today.

They won’t record anything.

There’s a live room and a smaller isolation booth. Camila goes inside the booth, moving the music stand toward the stool before sitting and letting her feet curve around one of the rungs. She runs her finger along the metal of the stand. She feels comfortable here. At home. Her stomach unknots, and she breathes, thinking of ways to make the place even cozier.
She’s been assured the space is hers for the month, so she’ll bring candles, and maybe she’ll stash some pillows and blankets in the corner.

Camila’s got her bottom lip between her teeth, staring at nothing and thinking about whether she’d rather bring in a vase of lilies or chrysanthemums, when there’s a knock on the booth’s door, still open from when she walked in.

She looks up.

Her eyes go wide.

Her heart kickstarts.

“Hey,” Lauren says.

“Hi.”
three: it's foolish to start

Chapter Summary

Now, she doesn’t know Lauren at all; she only knows who Lauren used to be.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Frank Sinatra’s “That Old Feeling.”

Camila stares. Her mouth dry.

“Hi,” Lauren repeats.

“You look…” Camila blinks and wets the corner of her mouth. “Different.”

“It’s the freshman fifteen.” There’s an awkward stiffness in Lauren’s posture, but a smirk flirts along her mouth. “Or all the plastic surgery.”

“You look good.” Camila shakes her head. She wants to pinch herself, but she knows she’s awake. There’s no way she could dream up the guarded spark in Lauren’s eyes, or how she leans against the doorjamb, just adjacent to casual. “I’m glad you found the place.”

“Wasn’t too hard. And traffic wasn’t too bad, either.” Lauren clears her throat. “You know, for L.A.”

“That’s good.” Camila’s toes curl in her shoes.

If the phone call felt like a dream, and if the email she sent Lauren with all the professional details and a contract to sign felt like playing a character -- high-powered executive Karla: the only thing higher than her security clearance is her heels, or, you know, something less obvious and cliche -- this feels tantamount to being thrown off a cliff into freezing water; waves that capsize.

Adrenaline kicks at Camila’s limbs, and she jumps off the stool. “We should probably get started.”

They move and sit on the couch. The air surrounding them thick and heavy.

“So, do you have any ideas?” Lauren asks. Her hair curls around her collarbones, her eyes smoky and lips chapped.

Camila blinks. God, she really has to get a grip. “No, not really.” She clears her throat, but she can still feel the lump threatening to choke her. “I thought we could come up with something together?”

“What about you? Any ideas?”

“Um.” Lauren’s fingers twitch in her lap, and Camila wants to reach out and touch them.

She knew this would be strange, but she didn’t know she’d have to fight so hard not to embarrass herself. Because she saw Lauren at Dinah’s wedding, and it was fine. They said hello, commented on how weird and right it felt that Dinah was the first of them to get married, and they managed not to run into each other the rest of the night.

It wasn’t easy, but being happy for Dinah and Levi was a distraction. Camila hugged Dinah until Dinah had to pry herself free, and she cried during the first dance despite her best efforts. Camila ate two slices of cake, did the “Cha-Cha Slide” with Sofi, and maybe there was a pinch in her chest when she accidentally made eye contact with Normani, exchanging tight smiles. But it was fine.

This is different.

Harder.

Just Lauren, her, and the last eight years hanging between them. Camila realizes it’s the lack of distance that thrums in her veins and makes her press the balls of her feet against the floor. It’s the unknown that scares her, their future stretched out before them and hinging on this moment, because their history has shaped the person Camila is, for better and worse.

“I don’t really know what you’re looking for.” Lauren finishes.

“I don’t know, either,” Camila says, her voice shaking as though she’s about to laugh. “I’m sorry. I feel like I should have been more prepared.”

“God, I should have something.” Lauren runs a hand through her hair. “It’s what you hired me for, and all I did was bring my laptop with a melody I wrote for a class last year.”

“Can I hear it?”

“What?”

“Can I hear some of your stuff? I mean, I’ve heard your songs, obviously.”

“Obviously?” Lauren’s voice cracks.

Camila’s face flushes. “The drums are a little heavier and harder than I would go for? I don’t know that my album is going to have the rock edge underlying your work. But I like how painful it is? Not that it’s like, painful to listen to or anything. It doesn’t hurt my ears. I actually really, really like it, I just, it’s—” Camila takes a breath. “Tell me to shut up.”

“Shut up.” Lauren’s not smiling, but her words sound like it. Her eyes focus on Camila, and Camila flushes anew, feeling the blush in her cheeks deepen. “I know what you mean.”

“You don’t think it’s stupid that I’m still making pop music?” Camila asks, looking down at her feet.

“No.”

“I just think it’s possible to express personal experiences in universal ways? I want to touch as many people as possible. But I want it to be genuine.”

“I know,” Lauren says.
Camila looks at Lauren again. She has no idea what she’s even saying, but Lauren’s posture has relaxed, and she doesn’t look completely freaked out. Camila considers it a small miracle that Lauren hasn’t gone running in the opposite direction yet.

She swallows. “I’m scared I’ve forgotten how to be genuine.”

“You haven’t.” Lauren’s smile is small, and her eyes are so green and so soft.

That’s another thing that’s scary: the way Lauren looks at her.

Camila has been looked at with reverence and adoration by thousands of fans, has been looked at with mild curiosity and confusion by people who recognize her in public. She has been looked at by more people than she can count, but there’s something about the weight of Lauren’s gaze that feels different. She has been looked at by Lauren in every way imaginable, and it always feels imprinted onto her skin -- each glance a new, invisible tattoo.

A scary thing: Camila doesn’t know if it’s real or not. If it’s a relic of a past that she hasn’t properly processed or something currently happening.

“Maybe,” Camila offers. “But, I guess, if there’s one thing I want to accomplish it’s that: universal feeling from a genuine place.” She can tell Lauren bites her tongue around something that flashes across her face. Camila doesn’t ask.

“Okay. Where do you want to start?”

“You stuff?” Camila asks again. “Unless you don’t want to.”

“Do I have to?” Lauren’s mouth twists, and she scratches at her knee.

“Of course not.”

Relief washes over Lauren and eases into her shoulders.

“The studio has to be a safe space,” Camila says. “It’s not-- it’s not like it was before.”

She remembers sixteen-hour days, throat so sore singing became almost painful. She remembers songs that felt wrong, lyrics uncomfortable on her tongue. She remembers feeling like the process encroached on something sacred, something that was meant to be a release and a comfort instead of exhausting and awful.

“I really should have prepared some stuff, Camila. It was unprofessional of me not to.” Lauren gathers her hair and swings it over her shoulder. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Camila smiles. “We both know this isn’t your typical working relationship. We can do things our own way.”

“Okay.” Lauren doesn’t seem uncomfortable, but there’s hesitancy in her words and a shyness that Camila doesn’t know what to do with.

“Let’s … listen to music. I know I said I didn’t know what I wanted to do, but I have the beginnings of a playlist I put together on my last tour.”

Camila grabs her phone, opening Spotify. The playlist is titled *Hamlet* because it was what she was reading at the time. She thinks of it as *Album Five Vibes*, but she couldn’t call it that with the fans watching her account.
“It’s not cohesive or anything. I mean, “Hit ‘Em Up” is on there, so.”

Lauren’s eyebrow kinks when Camila hands the phone over and she scrolls through the playlist.

They spend the morning listening to music, and Camila has never been more grateful for what it has done for her. Lauren’s eyes light up the moment Hilary Duff comes through with a “Hey now,” and when Camila tries to rap Busta Rhymes’ verse from “Look At Me Now,” it’s been too long and she forgets lines. They look up the lyrics, and she remembers Lauren being there the first time she learned it.

They learned it together.

It comes back, easy as anything.

“I see you still have the palate of a toddler,” Lauren says.

Camila scoffs, splaying her hand over her chest. She holds out the container of rice, chicken and broccoli, waving it under Lauren’s nose. “This is classic Chinese cuisine.”

“No, it’s not. And you asked for light sauce.”

“I have very sensitive taste buds. I can detect intricate flavors easily.”

Lauren rolls her eyes before shoving an ungodly amount of something called spicy noodles into her mouth. “You’re a goddamn liar.”

Camila shrugs. “At least I know how to use chopsticks.”

“Mean,” Lauren mumbles.

Lauren tied her hair back into a ponytail after headbanging too much to Def Leppard. Her lipstick has all but faded, and there are chunks of mascara on her eyelashes that Camila only notices because she’s looking too hard.

Camila furrows her eyebrows, sticking her tongue between her teeth as she works at picking up a clump of rice with her chopsticks. She chews and chances another glance at Lauren. She’s looking at something on her phone, slurping up a noodle. It’s the first time today Camila has really looked at Lauren without the shock of her presence overriding Camila’s ability to think.

Lauren’s beautiful.

Camila’s always thought so. She’s said it on more than one occasion and used to reiterate it during Fifth Harmony interviews: Lauren is beautiful.

But there’s something different about her now, in the way she carries herself. There’s hesitancy that either wasn’t there before, or that Camila didn’t notice. Maybe it’s not so much that Lauren’s different, but that Camila has changed over the years. That’s probably self-centered; it’s probably a mixture of both.

Camila feels far away from her, even now.

And maybe that’s a difference, too. She had gotten used to being close, of feeling like she knew
Lauren intimately, the shape of her heart and the tracks her mind often wandered down before splintering into new territory that left Camila awed. Now, she doesn’t know Lauren at all; she only knows who Lauren used to be.

“Have you recorded a lot of songs for the album?” Lauren asks.

Camila shrugs. She chews on an overcooked piece of broccoli. “Yeah.”

“What are you excited about any of it?”

“Yes,” Camila answers instinctively. True, because she’s always excited about music and the creative process, even if it isn’t her own. She feels a bit like she’s lost a handle on her career recently, if she’s being honest. And if she’s being brutally honest, she has a rocky past in regards to sharing the truth with Lauren, too.

Lauren raises an eyebrow, but she says: “That’s good.”

“I wrote a couple of songs with Shawn.” She pauses, expecting Lauren to take the opportunity to berate her about that whole PR nightmare.

Camila sent Shawn a text a few days ago, apologized for her rude behavior, and only rolled her eyes a little when he Facetimed her with Bridget. He looks at his girlfriend with soft, fond affection that reminds Camila of her parents. She wanted to fake gag, but she doesn’t know Bridget that well, and her self-restraint has clearly improved, because she managed to refrain completely from asking how Shawn roped someone so pretty into going out with him. They seem happy, and Camila couldn’t do anything but feel happy for them.

“That’s good,” Lauren repeats, the lift at the end of the sentence transforming it into a question.

“I can’t use them, obviously.”

Lauren blinks. She looks at Camila like she thinks Camila’s lost her goddamn mind, but also like she doesn’t want Camila to think that she thinks that. “Obviously.”

“There’s this one I really like, though.” Camila picks at her food, grabbing a piece of chicken and biting it in half.

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” Lauren starts. Camila’s shoulders tense. “But you’re doing that annoying thing you do where you bring something up and then don’t follow through on it.”

“Wait? What?”

Camila expected an impassioned, holier-than-thou speech about the moral implications of PR relationships. She expected Lauren to tell her she’s just feeding into the Hollywood machine, being manipulated and manipulative. She expected to be told she’s taking advantage of her fans and lying to them for her own gain. She did not expect … whatever this is.

“You like the song. You can’t use the song. This information helps me how?”

“Do you want to hear it?” Camila asks.

“Sure!” Lauren says with a hint of sarcasm, smile and eyes both wide.

There’s a file on her computer: layered vocals, guitar, drums, the whole shebang. Instead, Camila sets her takeout container down, shuffling over to where she placed her guitar case. “We never really
She sits back down, settling the guitar on her lap with the strap over her shoulder, because it makes her feel like a real musician. Camila strums a little, tuning the B string up half a step. Nerves flutter around her stomach, and she takes a deep breath, humming the melody lowly. She repeats the opening chord sequence four times before closing her eyes. Her voice comes out quiet and almost shaky. She stumbles over a few chord changes, going back to fix them and staring down at her fingers stretching over the frets.

Camila’s voice gets stronger as she goes. She really does love this song. There’s an intended dissonance, a sadness that makes her want to cry, and she’s proud to have had a hand in it.

When she finishes, she pulls her bottom lip between her teeth and cautiously looks up. Lauren’s face is blank. “So,” Camila exhales. “Did you hate it?”

“No.” Lauren’s mouth quirks up, her eyes focusing in on Camila again. “It just--”

“You hate it.” Camila scrunches her nose.

“No, I don’t.” Lauren shakes her head. “It sounds like a Shawn Mendes song.”

“He helped write it.”

“But shouldn’t it sound like a Camila Cabello song?” Lauren asks.

Oh.

“Yeah, I guess so.” Camila blinks. “I don’t even know what a Camila Cabello song sounds like.”

She’s released four albums, and they’ve all been pop, filled with a conglomeration of the music she likes. She’s jumped on radio trends and had mild success predicting what comes next. She’s worked hard to improve her vocals and her consistency, stretching her voice to work on range and malleability. But if there’s a throughline in her solo work, Camila doesn’t know what it is.

“We’ll figure it out,” Lauren says.

It sounds like a promise, and Camila has to swallow down the emotion welling in her throat.

Lauren offers a few ideas on how to make the verses of the song Camila wrote with Shawn flow smoothly into the chorus. They yell-scream along to “Pies Descalzos, Suñeos Blancos,” and Camila practices swiveling her hips. An awkward moment flits between them when Lauren remarks that Ally should be scared that Camila’s Shakira impression is going to be better than hers by the end of the day.

They leave the studio just after six, uncomfortably standing together outside the front doors. Camila’s guitar case hits her butt, purse slung over her shoulder and laptop pressed to her chest. Lauren moves her arm. There’s an awkward step, like an aborted attempt at a hug, before she waves, one brief swipe of her palm. “See you tomorrow, Camila.”

“Yeah, see you tomorrow.”

Camila watches Lauren turn and head to the opposite end of the small parking lot before taking the
few steps to her own car. When she gets inside, seat belt buckled and key in the ignition, Camila realizes how tired she is. She rests her forehead against the steering wheel and breathes. She contemplates crawling into the backseat and taking a quick nap before driving home.

She calls her mom instead, looking at her feet. Her entire body is sore like the first time she did hot yoga, as though all the atoms that make her up were vibrating all day to keep her from flying apart.

“Mommy,” she says, voice cracking.

Camila wipes at her face, the wetness pooling in her eyes somehow expected.

“What’s wrong, mija?”

“Nothing.” Camila swallows, and a tear falls sticky down her cheek, splashing against her knee. “I’m fine.”

“Tell me what’s wrong,” her mother says, quiet and steady. There’s anger there, too -- a demand. Like she’s going to personally give anyone or anything that upset Camila a black eye.

“I’m so tired.” Camila closes her eyes and tries to even her breathing. “I didn’t realize I was so tired.”

“Then go to sleep.”

If her mom wasn’t worried, there’d probably be an annoyed eye-roll. Camila feels guilt fidget against her rib cage, squeezing at her heart. She’s fine, really, and here she is making her mom think something is terribly wrong because she didn’t get enough sleep the night before.

“I will.” Camila leans forward an inch, the seat belt digging into her collarbone. “It’s just. You know when your adrenaline rush fades, and then you realize it’s over. And you’re alone?”

“Camila,” her mom says, voice soft. Camila can hear the tension as her mom attempts to keep her voice neutral and soothing instead of high-pitched and panicked.

God, she’s not making this any better. She wishes she was a better daughter. Sofi doesn’t make their mother worry this way. “I missed her so much.”

“You--” Her mom sighs, almost relieved. “I see.”

“I’m sorry.” Camila sits up, wiping at her nose with the back of her hand. There’s a package of tissues in her purse, but it’s on the floor of the passenger's side, and she’s already buckled in. “I shouldn’t have called you like this. I’m being dramatic.”

“I’m glad you called me.” There’s still tension threading through her words, causing Camila to question it, but she doesn’t protest. “Is there anything else?”

“No. I’m sorry.”

“Get some sleep, mija.”

They hang up, her mom saying “I love you,” in a tone that implies Camila makes it very difficult sometimes, like Camila is a teenager refusing to listen.

She turns on the radio, shifting the volume up too high and tapping her fingers against the steering wheel. She listens through two commercial breaks, Top 40 a shallow comfort. Her skin feels tight around her cheeks and her face is sticky. She knows her eyes will be red and puffy, but she doesn’t look.
It’s odd how Camila can close her eyes and picture the way Lauren looked today, can still hear the rasp in her voice when she sang, and yet it doesn’t feel like it happened. Lauren feels even less like a real person to Camila than she did three months ago. Like maybe she missed her so much that she made her up.

Camila wakes up the next morning to her phone ringing. She squints at the screen, confused, because Lauren is calling her. It takes a moment to register the time.

She’s late. Shit. “Hi, sorry, I’m coming,” Camila says after picking up. Her chest is tight with anxiety, and her words slur together: “I overslept. I think I forgot to set my alarm yesterday, I’m so sorry, I’ll be there in like 30 minutes. I’m coming.”

“Camila?” Lauren asks. “It’s fine. I just wanted to make sure nothing was wrong.”

“I’m fine. I’ll be there. See you soon. Bye.” She hangs up, leaving her hair in the messy bun she slept in, flopping off the side of her head. She pulls on jeans and a sweatshirt, shoving her feet into a pair of Converse and practically sprinting out the door.

She sits at a red traffic light when she realizes her plan to look put together for as long as possible has been rudely cut short by day two. There’s a crease on her cheek from her pillowcase, and the dark circles underneath her eyes look like black holes trying to suck her entire face into space.

It’s easier for Camila to focus on how she looks like shit than to try and replay the way Lauren sounded over the phone: a hint of worry, a hint of relief, a hint of amusement. Normal.

When she rushes into the studio, apologies immediately come pouring out of her mouth: “I’m so sorry, again. I overslept. I think I forgot to set my alarm, or I didn’t hear it. I’m sorry.”

Lauren sits on the sofa, legs curled back and laptop on her knees. A smile flirts in her eyes when Camila inhales sharply, hand splayed over her chest. “Did you run here?”

“No,” Camila says. “I power walked.”

“You’re okay, though, right?”

“Totally fine. Well rested.” Camila gulps around the dryness in her throat. She really should have taken the time to drink some water or go to the bathroom, because now that she’s standing here, she realizes she really has to pee.

“I was just worried something happened to you or your family. If you’re good, I’m good.”

“Everyone’s good.” Camila points at the door. “I’m going to pee. I’ll be right back.”

She hears Lauren laugh as she steps into the hallway.

Camila pees, washes her hands, and then splashes water on her face. She takes her hair down and does her best to comb it with her fingers before curling it into a bun on top of her head. She focuses on evening out her breathing and unraveling the anxious twisting in her stomach that always comes when she feels like she let someone down.

She knows Lauren worrying that something happened to her is normal. Anybody would worry. She
doesn’t know why Lauren didn’t seem angry she was late, but Camila figures it’s because Lauren knows she’ll be late one of these days, too. Camila won’t let her brain spiral out of control, despite the way it wants to -- searching for reasons and scenarios to make herself feel even more horrible.

Camila wipes at her face with paper towels, stops by one of the studio’s little kitchens for water, and decides it’s better to face Lauren now -- again -- than put off the inevitable.

“I’m still sorry,” Camila says.

“Don’t worry about it.” Lauren clicks a few things on her laptop before setting it on the table. “I worked on some stuff last night.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” Lauren shrugs, leaning forward to press play.

The melody that comes through pings something in Camila’s brain, and a feeling akin to deja vu washes over her. The production is messy; the layers sound just a bit off and not quite cohesive. It sounds like Lauren took bits of different songs and tried to mesh them into what she wanted. Camila is almost worried, but then Lauren’s voice comes through, low and clear.

The song feels intimate, and Camila stares at the screen despite her bones screaming at her to look at Lauren. She can feel Lauren watching her and fidgeting in her periphery.

When the song ends, Camila turns to Lauren, mouth pressed into a flat line.

“That’s just-- I did that a long time ago, so the music sounds weird. I tried to change it, you know? Make it fit you better. I don’t expect you to use the whole thing. But there are bits that I think we could salvage?” Lauren chews on her bottom lip. “Unless you hate it. If it’s totally wrong that’s fine. I know it sounds off.”

“Who’s it about?” Camila asks. She regrets it immediately; she doesn’t want to know. “You don’t have to answer that.”

“It’s okay.” Lauren looks down at her hands, face flushing. “A couple people. It evolved over time.”

“Can I hear the original?”

“Sure.”

Lauren opens a different audio file. The main melody is the same, but slower and more drawn out, adding drama to the song that Lauren removed from the first version, like the person here is purposefully amplifying their pain and making a spectacle of themselves. It’s meaner.

“I love it,” Camila offers.

She does. And not just because it sounds like it’s meant to, and not just because the one altered for Camila only half-sounds the way Lauren hears it in her head. She loves it because it says something about Lauren and the way she works. It tells Camila her instinct is to be honest to a fault; it tells Camila the girl sitting next to her right now isn’t an entirely new person, because she recognizes a constant part of her heart.

“Thanks.” Lauren’s smile is small, and her eyes are guarded.

They decide to come back to the melody later.
Camila wants to use it -- the original and not the reduction. She wants to put something that’s pure Lauren into a song and onto her album. She thinks that might be her problem: she wants to make an album full of things she loves -- a dash of Ed, some Celia Cruz, hell, even a hint of One Direction -- instead of finding that part of herself that she loves.

By day three, Camila recognizes she’s too scared to write a song with Lauren.

Chord progression? She can do that. Melodies? Fine. Sitting across from Lauren and coming up with lyrics? Impossible.

It’s absurd, really. Part and parcel of recording is jotting down lyrics, getting feedback, altering the words so they fit better and make a kind of emotional sense. Camila has ripped open her chest and held her heart out for the world before. Anyone can pick up one of her albums and see bits and pieces of who she is, who she was, and who she wants to be. She can type out an unrecorded lyric and post it on Twitter, but she can’t get out a rhyme with Lauren looking at her.

It’s a problem she should have seen coming; she’s afraid of Lauren’s judgement. She always has been. Camila hoped it would be something she would’ve grown out of, something confined to a younger, more insecure version of herself.

And it’d be fine if she felt rejuvenated and inspired whenever they leave the studio at night. She could go home, sit in her music room, and spend an hour or two crafting a poem. She could sleep on it, make minor edits in the morning, and have something to share. Instead, whenever she gets in her car, Camila feels exhausted. It’s the good kind of tired, like running ten miles or staying up all night binging a new show, but it’s not conducive to productivity.

She’s wasting money and everyone’s time.

Lauren sits at the drums, listlessly tapping out a beat against the snare. They’re trying to piece together all the parts: guitar, keys, bass, percussion. Roger and her entire team will kill them both if Camila hands over acoustic bullshit at the end of the month.

“I think we want your voice to drive the song, not the drums,” Lauren says. She hits a cymbal and lets it ring.

“Yeah.” Camila sits cross-legged on the piano bench, hands on her feet, concentrating on stretching her back and pulling at her toes. “But for that to happen, I’d actually need something to sing.”

“I know.”

“I’ve been avoiding writing lyrics,” Camila confesses.

Lauren focuses on her, mouth pulling down. “Why?”

Camila bites her lip. “You.”

“Me?” There’s barely concealed hurt in Lauren’s voice, and her frown makes itself known. “What did I do?”

“Nothing.” Camila shakes her head. She feels so silly. “There’s just all this history between us, you know? And I don’t want to suggest anything stupid or embarrassing.”
Lauren sets down the drumsticks, spinning around the throne a few times. When she comes to a stop, she tilts her head. “You say stupid, embarrassing shit all the time.”

Camila inhales sharply, but there’s a laugh dancing in Lauren’s eyes, and Camila can’t help but giggle, covering her mouth with her palm. “I know. God.”

“There’s a reason I haven’t broached the topic of lyrics, either,” Lauren says.

“It’d just be so much easier if you were--”

“--almost anyone else?” Lauren finishes.

“Yeah.” Camila exhales, bending her toes back as far as they’ll go. “It’s so much easier to be vulnerable with strangers.”

“For you, maybe.” Lauren raises an eyebrow. “I’d rather let my parents read my diary.”

“Liar.”

Lauren grins and pulls a knee to her chest, foot resting on the stool. “But only a little.”

“This is going to sound both stupid and embarrassing, so get ready.” Camila breaks eye contact, looking up at the ceiling. Her heart hammers against her rib cage. “I want you to like me.”

“What?”

Lauren doesn’t laugh like Camila expected.

“I missed you a lot,” she says, eyes fluttering closed. “And I’m afraid if I open up and write anything honest, suggest ideas that mean something to me, you’ll hate them. And I know that doesn’t mean you hate me, but I just.” Camila is the one who laughs, a harsh, humorless breath. “I’m scared of getting hurt.”

She squeezes her eyes shut. Her lip trembles, but she isn’t going to cry. She feels better having said it.

Camila remembers being young, starry-eyed and nervous, hope spreading heat through her veins as she whispered jokes into Lauren’s ear during boot camp. She wasn’t very funny, but Lauren always laughed before whispering back. They made fun of other contestants a lot; a streak that was almost mean. She remembers how terrifying it was to open up to Lauren then, because Camila never had a lot of friends, and she wanted Lauren to be her friend so badly she spent her nights dreaming up cool things to say to her. But it was the moments when she was most honest, filter failing her, that she felt the best, the most connected, like she and Lauren were special.

Camila knows if she keeps this up -- if she keeps thinking of Lauren the way she did back then -- recording with her will never work.

“Me too,” Lauren says.

Camila feels Lauren’s hand on her knee, knuckles nudging her over. She opens her eyes and complies, dropping her feet to the floor and scooting so there’s enough room for both of them to squeeze onto the small bench. The tension between them feels dense, creating a thick fog that clogs her vision, but Camila can’t ever remember a time when there wasn’t something between them; sometimes it was good, electric and empowering, and sometimes it was awful. Sometimes, it would thin out to almost nothing, but Camila can’t ever remember it dissipating completely.
Someone had a word for that once.

“Maybe if I let you read my journal it’ll help,” Lauren adds.

“Maybe we should just get over ourselves.” Camila runs a hand through her hair and presses her mouth into a thin line. She looks at Lauren, at her pale face, the smattering of small bumps on her left temple and the lack of makeup -- Camila showing up looking like a wreck on day two had some perks, because now they both seem to know there’s no point in putting forth the effort of a complete makeup routine.

“That’ll work, too.”

“The worst that could happen is we write something awful,” Camila says, leaning over to bump her shoulder against Lauren’s.

“Like ‘Friday.’”

Camila gasps. “Take that back!”

“It’s friday, friday,” Lauren sings, overly nasal. “Gotta get down on friday.”

Camila elbows her in the side, but she continues with the next lyric she remembers: “Partying, partying, yeah!”

They end up rolling around on the floor, doing their best to sing the stupid, embarrassing song in the most stupid, embarrassing way. They only remember half the lyrics, and they’re probably not in the correct order, but it doesn’t matter.

And when Lauren lies on her stomach, elbows propped up on the floor, palm in her hand and legs kicking behind her, doing her very best to look vapid and singing in a valley girl accent, Camila realizes -- so stupidly, so embarrassingly -- just how much she likes her.

Just how much she’s always liked her.

And she’s aware enough to know that whatever way she stitched up her heart all those years ago, whether it healed properly or not, she’s poking at the scar.

Camila changes her mind; she thinks she wants it to hurt.

* * *

A few red flags pop up during Lauren’s first week in LA.

The first is the lack of an A&R person at the studio. She doesn’t say anything, because she knows enough to realize she’s not the one in charge here. She wipes her palms against her jeans and tries to wipe away the pulse of jealousy in her fingertips. Lauren wonders if she had stayed and played ball for another record, if she would be able to do what Camila is doing now, is doing for her.
It’s a favor.

That makes something pulse in her fingertips, too. Lauren knows it’s only because Camila’s the person with the favor; the music industry is built on favors and lucky breaks.

Lauren hates that.

The second is the way Camila looks at her sometimes.

Camila’s relatively the same. She’s sharper, and she’s confident enough to mask any major doubts she might be having, her bumbling and rambling genuine but endearing, and she knows it. She wasn’t always aware, but some time between 15 and 19, a flip was switched, and Camila learned how to use her personality to her advantage. But her eyes are different, and when she looks at Lauren now, there’s a film over them, like she’s zoning out but not unfocused. Like she’s both here and not here at the same time. It’s disconcerting.

Lauren glances up from where she’s layering the notes for the bass and the guitar, and she finds Camila staring at her with that faraway look in her eyes. “What?” she asks.

“Nothing.” Camila blushes and looks down at the journal in her lap. “Sorry.”

She doesn’t sound very sorry.

The biggest flashing light directing Lauren to run in the opposite direction is how she can’t help the stupid laugh that bubbles out of her throat whenever Camila says anything resembling a joke. The way her body instinctively shifts, arm reaching out to steady Camila when she trips over an amp.

Lauren likes the way Camila sings, eyes closed but hands still in her lap, a static energy, like she wants to move but has worked hard to unlearn the habit.

It’s easy to fall into old habits and old patterns.

She’s learned so much over the years, and she wants to believe she’s grown as a person, but she’s watching the shape of Camila’s mouth when she sings, the wrinkle in her eyebrow when she focuses, and the way her tongue darts to wet the crease of her lips when she thinks Lauren can’t see her staring. It feels remarkably like knowing you’re about to make a colossal mistake, a mistake you’ve made many times before, and doing it anyway.

They find a melody they like before Lauren loosely strings together how she wants the song to sound.

She spends her nights listening to music Camila has recommended to her over the years, honing in on songs Camila associates with her parents and her roots. It’s an obvious choice, a retread of her earlier stuff when Latin music boomed on the radio, but Lauren still thinks it’s a good one. She fiddles with the notes, stacking the chords until it sounds right, the guitar setting off the keys just enough.

Camila has studio musicians coming in early next week to record, and Lauren feels the pressure pushing on her spine. She hardly sleeps. She works and reworks the material she and Camila compile in the studio. A lot of the time, she ends up back at the original arrangement. But she’s scared the musicians will do what’s on the page, and when she tries to finish the song, she’ll have missed an obvious note change or uptick in tempo.
Lauren has always feared missing out (on high school, and parties, and holidays, and mundane events like brunch), but the way it twists and manifests itself now is worse than she can ever remember it being.

“This is good,” Camila says, chewing on her bottom lip.

“Yeah?”

“I like the way the main melody switches from the guitar to the keys during the bridge.” Camila points at the audio line, and the shift causes her knee to press against Lauren’s.

“Thanks.” Lauren tries very hard not to smile.

“I knew you’d be good at this, but you’re like, really good at this.” Camila looks at Lauren, her eyes shining. “The bass before the downbeat? It reminds me of the Salsa my mom and dad always dance to while cooking dinner.”

“Yeah.” Lauren nods, running a hand through her hair. “I’m glad you caught that. I studied the history of Cuban music in school, and I wanted to incorporate some of its markers into what we’re doing.”

“Really? That’s so cool.” A beat. “You should teach me.”

“About Cuban music? I’m not an expert or anything. You probably have a more natural ear for it than I do, anyway.”

“Doesn’t mean you couldn’t help me learn.” Camila nods and purposefully hits her knee against Lauren’s. “Besides, my music vocabulary is probably really limited.”

“Camila, come on, you know so much.”

Lauren can’t tell if Camila really thinks Lauren knows more about music than her. Lauren loves music, and she loves the process of making it. She knows she possesses production skills that Camila doesn’t. There’s only so much you can learn while recording an album and shadowing the producer when you’re not busy with your guitar and a notepad, with A&R and meetings, but Camila listens to music constantly. Lauren has never met anyone who has it playing more often. It’s like a score that follows Camila around, often at odds with the mood, crescending in all the wrong places, but in her ear nonetheless.

Or maybe she’s just having one of her self-deprecating days. A day when she needs more reassurance than she gets, her brain louder than her soundtrack, no matter how high she turns the volume.

Camila shrugs. “I can always learn more.”

“Well, there are definitely people more qualified than me who can teach you.”

“I don’t care,” Camila says, a clipped quality to her voice that wasn’t there before. Her eyes droop and her posture sags, her entire body shifting so she’s not touching Lauren anywhere. “Sorry.”

“What’s wrong?” Lauren asks.

“Nothing.” Camila sighs. She looks at Lauren, and Lauren can see her eyes soften, worry lines deepening along her forehead. “I got a few emails from Roger last night.”
“That bad, huh?”

She has never understood the relationship between Roger and Camila. There’s trust there that has always made Lauren wary. She learned long ago never to trust men in suits, and she doesn’t understand how Camila does it easily. Maybe that’s an act, though: pretend to trust them so they trust her. If it is, it works. Camila has always been better at putting on a show than Lauren.

“No, not really?” She starts shaking her leg, and empathetic anxiety swirls in Lauren’s gut. She wants to reach out, place a hand on Camila’s knee, and make her stop. “Normal stuff. More changes on the tracks we already recorded. Information on what’s going to happen with the music we hand over.”

Camila usually wears her anxiety below the surface, but it’s starting to ripple on her skin. It’s all too familiar, and it makes something ache in Lauren’s chest. “The tracks we’re working on?”

“Yeah.” Camila worries at her bottom lip, frowning.

“What?”

“Nobody thought this was a good idea, Lauren. Nobody wanted you to write with me or produce for me.” Camila swallows.

“Oh.” Lauren doesn’t know why she’s surprised. “Then why am I?”

Camila smiles, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. “Because it’s what I wanted. But, you know--”

“--there’s no such thing as a favor,” Lauren finishes.

“Exactly.” Camila’s the one who reaches out, placing her hand on Lauren’s knee. Her hand is warm and almost clammy. Lauren doesn’t know when her own leg began shaking; she doesn’t know whether the panic tightening in her chest is still born from empathy, or if it’s stemming from her own fears.

“I’m sorry.” It sounds feeble and feels futile.

“Don’t be, please. I know Roger is doing his best for me, but sometimes it just feels like nobody is in my corner. And having you here, getting to do this with you, it reminds me what it feels like to have that. Like I’m part of a real team, you know?” Camila squeezes Lauren’s knee.

“The fact that you were still able to make this happen says a lot about how far you’ve come,” Lauren offers, but she’s even more confused than she was before.

“Roger made this happen,” Camila corrects. “I couldn’t even get through the meeting.”

“Camila.”

Lauren frowns. She moves her hand and her arm brushes against Camila’s. She hesitates before placing her palm over Camila’s knuckles. Lauren wants Camila to look at her, but she’s staring at the ground, her shoulders hitched by her ears and her breathing shallow. She’s overthinking it.

“You’re recording your fifth album. You’re living your dream. You made that happen. Nobody, not even Roger, could have made that happen for you. It came from your heart, and it’s your voice. I know you don’t feel like you’re in charge,” Lauren pauses, waiting for Camila to refute her. She doesn’t. “But you’re using all your resources to make sure they listen to you.”
Silence stretches between them, and Lauren feels awkward. Camila is still tense beside her, thinking so quickly Lauren can practically see the synapses firing in her brain. She thinks she must have said the wrong thing, and it’s an eerie feeling. She has said the wrong thing to Camila so many times, but she still remembers when they first met, those early days of friendship when the right thing always seemed to roll off her tongue, how Camila would smile, laugh, and melt.

“You really shouldn't be so nice to me,” Camila mumbles. She makes eye contact, and Lauren feels relief, because her eyes are focused, clear, and nowhere else but here.

“You’re just going to have to deal with it.” Lauren feels something untangle in her chest.

She looks down, remembers her hand on top of Camila’s, and removes it.

Camila’s eyes are closed, and she spins around in her chair. She listens to the changes on the track, lips pursed even as she twirls. Lauren likes this version better, the drums muffled under the guitar and the keys, driving the beat but letting Camila’s voice keep the rhythm.

Lauren taps her fingers absently against the desk and focuses as the music crescendos. It’s missing ad libs, and the mixing still isn’t perfect, but it’s close. It’s an almost complete song, and it sounds like Camila. No one else could sing it the way she does, and Lauren thinks anyone else’s version wouldn’t sound quite right. Lauren feels proud. She feels like she did her job well.

When the music stops, the studio goes silent. Camila halts her chair with her feet on the floor, hands reaching out and grabbing on to the table.

“Well?” Lauren asks.

“Can you play the first one again?”

Lauren keeps her face blank. “Sure.”

This version is fine, but Lauren thinks it’s expected. It sounds closer to any song you hear on the radio. When she hears this version, Lauren can easily picture all the covers that’ll go up on Youtube, or a Live Lounge that sounds like a copy. She knows nobody sings like Camila, but she thinks there’s something about this mix that makes the singer less relevant and less essential.

“I like this,” Camila offers halfway through the first chorus.

“Really?”


“Okay.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that’s fine.” Lauren wants to roll her eyes, but she doesn’t.

“Lauren, do you like the newer one better?”

Lauren sighs. “Yeah, I do.”
“Okay,” Camila says.
Lauren thinks this is so stupid, but she asks anyway: “What do you mean?”
“I mean that’s fine.” Camila laughs.
Lauren can’t stop the eye-roll now. “I hate you.”
“We’ll send them both.” Camila nods, shimmying to the beat before lifting her feet off the ground and using the table to push herself into another spin.
“What?” Lauren’s eyes go wide, and she feels dizzy watching Camila go around and around.
“This is a democracy,” Camila offers. “The vote is split.”
“You know that’s not really true,” Lauren says. She’s been tiptoeing around the subject these last two weeks, but she figures there’s really no point. “You hired me. You’re my boss.”
“Huh?” Camila stops suddenly, almost tipping over her chair. “You can’t actually think that?”
“Where’s A&R?”
Camila shrugs. “I told you nobody wanted you to produce for me.”
“So … they’re just paying us to fuck around in this studio all month?” Lauren raises an eyebrow. Every time Camila lies to her, she can feel it poking dull underneath her ribs.
“No.”
“If there’s nobody from A&R here, then you must be A&R.”
“No,” Camila repeats. She folds her hands in her lap and cracks her neck. “They just gave me some freedom to try this. They’ll A&R it later.”
“A&R isn’t a verb.” A beat. “And what are the restrictions?”
Camila sighs, the annoyed long-suffering kind. “There aren’t any, Lauren. You read your contract. That’s all there is to it. No guarantee anything we do goes on the album. You get compensated either way.”
“That doesn’t make any sense, Camila.” Lauren rubs at her forehead.
“It’s like…” Camila trails off, eyes flitting toward the ceiling. “Like when Shania Twain recorded her second album with Mutt Lange.”
“Oh my god.” Lauren presses her palms against her temples. “You’re not making any sense. Her label had no faith in her and nothing to lose, and he was a well-known producer, Camila. I’m just me.”
“Lauren,” Camila says, raising her voice. “I’m sorry, okay? I worked so fucking hard to get us this month. And Roger is making sure the songs we turn in are looked at fairly. I know it doesn’t make sense. I know it’s weird. But I-- I don’t know what else to tell you.”
Her eyes are dark, both void and too emotional at the same time.
Lauren knows there’s more Camila isn’t telling her, but she relents. She understands that maybe
Camila’s hands are tied. She’s been thinking about this all wrong: Camila doesn’t have all the power Lauren’s been giving her. But she’s not the victim of an unfair contract, either. Camila knows what she’s doing, and Lauren is completely out of her depth.

“Okay.” Lauren swallows. “I’m going to get some water.”

She stops by the door and asks Camila if she wants anything. Camila looks like she wants to say something.

She doesn’t.

Normani’s squints at the screen. “Wait, where are you right now?”

“Where I’m staying,” Lauren answers.

She texts with Normani constantly, but recently she hasn’t really been saying much of anything. Normani told her about flying out to LA to work on choreographing a tour next month, and she rambles enough about how exciting the opportunity is that she doesn’t seem to notice Lauren’s answers are short, that Lauren hasn’t expanded much on what she’s been up to lately.

“Did you move?” Normani asks. Her eyebrows wrinkle. “You didn’t say you were moving, did you?”

“I didn’t.” Lauren bites at her lip. “I packed up early and sent most of my stuff to my parents’.”

“Why?” Normani’s confusion is quickly turning into frustration. Lauren can see it in the curl of her lips.

Lauren thinks that’s a lot better than what it’s about to be.

She avoided telling Normani, because she knows how Normani is going to react. At best, it’s an annoyance to both of them, a rehash of advice Lauren’s been given over and over, taking it with varying rates of success. At worst, it’s a fight. Either way, nothing will change.

“I’m in LA doing some work.”

“Oh my gosh, Lauren!” Normani lights up, mouth pulling into a grin. “Why didn’t you tell me?” She looks around like she wants to make sure no one is eavesdropping, despite the fact that she’s in her own apartment. “Is it a secret? Someone super famous?” Her eyes widen. “Beyonce?” she mouths.

“No, oh my god.” Lauren laughs, but it scrapes on its way out.

“Someone not famous at all that no one but you has ever heard of?”

“No.” Lauren runs a hand through her hair.

If she plays her cards right, she could avoid telling Normani. But Dinah knows, and her cooperation thus far has almost been more than Lauren expected. Whether Dinah means to or not, it’ll slip out eventually, and Normani knowing Lauren lied to her would make this even worse.

And as much as she dreads telling Normani, she does want to. Lauren hates hiding things from her. So, she takes a deep breath and rips off the bandaid: “I’m writing with Camila.”
“You what?”

“Yeah.”

Normani raises an eyebrow. “What the fuck.”

“Don’t do this,” Lauren says. “I needed a job. She offered me one. That’s it.”

“That’s it?” There’s disbelief, affront, and something else that Lauren doesn’t want to think is pity, but probably veers that way. “I really thought you had gotten over this years ago, Laur.”

Anger spikes along Lauren’s spine, because she is over it. She doesn’t need Normani to feel bad for her. “Honestly, just say what the fuck you want to say so we can move on.”

“Move on?” Normani asks flatly. “That’s funny. Because I thought we had, except you seem to be moving backwards.”

Lauren rolls her eyes. “Very clever.”

“I thought so.”

“This is why I didn’t want to tell you,” Lauren says. She tucks a piece of hair behind her ear and slumps back further into the sofa. “I knew you’d take it the wrong way.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Normani says, sarcasm thick and viscous. “You’re just putting yourself in a situation where you have to see the girl who screwed us over every day.”

“You have to get over that.”

“Fine. Whatever.” Normani sighs and rubs at her forehead. Her voice is a bit softer when she continues: “It just seems like you’re falling into old habits. You can be over something without having to go back to it to prove how over it you are. She’s going to mess you up again.”

“Mani,” Lauren groans. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Lauren looks away from her phone and Normani’s face, staring at the black screen of the television in front of her. It’s true, because Lauren was never good at talking to anyone about her relationship with Camila. It’s not true, because Normani was there for the entire thing: for the good days, the bad days, and the really terrible ones. Normani was there when Camila left, and she understood Lauren’s specific mixture of frustration and hurt more than Dinah or Ally.

“I know a monogamous relationship is supposed to be between two people. But if you ask Luis or Brad, they’ll tell you there were three of you, and not because they wanted it to be like that.” Her words are harsh, but her tone edges closer to gentle, like she thinks Lauren woke up with amnesia, and she wants to explain who Lauren is without freaking her out too much.

Lauren feels it more like condescension, bristling with it and sitting up straighter. “Stop making it sound like I cheated. You know I never did. Never would.” Lauren presses her thumb into the hollow at the base of her throat. It hurts. “I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I know Brad ended up being a dick, but you’re really going to pretend that makes it okay? You’re really going to pretend you didn’t do anything to Luis? Girl, I swear. Camila messed with your head. You didn’t know when you were going to get to have her, and always being ready to drop someone for her was unfair. To them. And to you.”
“It wasn’t like that.”

“Right.” A beat. “You both screwed over Austin, too.”

Lauren rolls her eyes again.

“I really thought you were off that self-destructive path and onto a more interesting, slightly less harmful one. But you’re willing to throw away all the progress you made? For what? A song on her album she probably won’t even sing live?”

“Yes.”

“You know this is going to end badly.”

Lauren sighs. “It’s going to be fine. We’re already halfway done. I’m getting experience doing what I want to do. Everything that happened between Camila and I is in the past.”

Normani looks at her, pressing her mouth into a frown, eyes narrowed but kind.

Lauren’s heart beats heavy and wild in her chest.

“You didn’t even tell me. You can’t actually believe that,” Normani says.

Lauren thinks about how sometimes when she laughs, Camila’s jaw opens left. She thinks about the barely there calluses on Camila’s fingertips, and the way they scratch against Lauren’s skin when Camila taps her forearm to get her attention. She thinks about Camila hearing a chord progression that doesn’t quite work and writing a better one without hesitation.

She blinks.

“You don’t believe that,” Normani whispers, a coat of sadness painting over her words.

Lauren gulps. “It’s just seeing her again, you know? It’s new, but it’ll pass.”

She wants to believe it’ll fade: the uncertainty churning in her gut whenever Camila smiles at her with bright and dark eyes, the emotion present so obvious, but when Lauren reaches for the word, she comes up empty. Camila’s a familiar mystery. An open book with lines redacted in permanent marker.

“What if it doesn’t?” Normani asks.

“I don’t know.” It terrifies her, making her throat close up. “It’ll have to.”

She wants to say it’s probably like a contact high. She doesn’t think Normani would appreciate the metaphor, though; she would call it out as bullshit. But there’s something to it, because she’ll go back home, and Camila will stay in LA, and it might be hard at first, but being here with Camila is hard in its own way.

They’ll forget about each other again.


Lauren doesn’t let herself think about all the other history they could cycle through.
Camila stands in the booth, hands pressing against her headphones as she sings. She’s looking at the lyrics, even though she’s been singing the song for the past half hour. She sounds good. She always sounds good, but there’s something about the rasp in her voice that buzzes in Lauren’s head and makes her feel warm and tingly.

Camila pushes toward the lower end of her register and drops one hand to splay over her stomach, probably trying to make sure her diaphragm holds up. Lauren watches her lean back just slightly to inhale off the track. Her voice comes through, solid and low, and Lauren glances at the monitor to make sure nothing is fucked up, and then she closes her eyes, waiting for Camila to hit the note.

It sounds effortless, even though Lauren knows Camila’s been trying for 30 minutes. She feels her smile like the contraction of muscle when lifting weights, sore but good. Her eyes flutter open and find Camila’s. She gives Lauren two thumbs up, still singing and trying to finish strong. Lauren can’t look away, even when Camila looks down at the lyrics again, kicking her feet out like a dork.

Lauren laughs.

A fount of fondness springs from the top of her head, dripping down to the tips of her toes.

They used to talk about this, cuddled together on one of their beds in The X-Factor house, Camila’s socks scratchy against Lauren’s shin. They fantasized a romantic version of events that would only be diluted by reality: the two of them on a piano bench, thighs pressed together, staff paper in front of them as their hands hovered over the keys, one girl responsible for the bass and the other the treble. They would write lyrics about whatever they felt. If they were awful, they’d laugh, Camila’s eyes crinkling with it, leaning her cheek against Lauren’s shoulder. But mostly the words would come easy. They would be beautiful; they would say something that mattered, something only the two of them understood in the same way, rooted deep in their hearts.

It was never like that.

It’s not like that now, either.

But it’s closer.

The music stops, and Lauren looks back at the computer and the line of soundwaves. Camila exits the booth and leans over her shoulder. “I did it,” she says.

“You did,” Lauren agrees. She turns her head and finds Camila closer than she expected, Camila’s tongue caught between her teeth as she grins. Lauren feels one side of her mouth tug up, like there’s a string and Camila’s pulling it. “What?”

“Do you want me to go again?”

“I think we got it.”

“Cool.”

Camila’s eyes sweep over Lauren’s face, and she leans forward. Her hair brushes against Lauren’s shoulder before she stands up straight, turns and stumbles back to the sofa. Camila sits down and kicks her feet up, knees bent over the sofa’s arm. Reaching out, she wobbles as she grabs her phone.

Lauren exhales.
She plays back Camila’s vocals. They’re raw, and Lauren hopes the song makes her record. She wants other people to hear her like this: vulnerable and intimate. Lauren hasn’t paid much attention to Camila’s public image, and she doesn’t know if it needs rehabilitation, or if she wants to shift it a notch. But Lauren thinks if she did, this would be a good place to start. Lauren doesn’t know what the song means for Camila, not really. It’s about a tenuous relationship, the feeling of control slipping from your grasp and holding on until your knuckles turn white. But those are vague things.

There is nothing concrete here.

Lauren wanted to ask, but she knew if she broached the subject, Camila would volley the question right back. That’s the last thing Lauren wanted. A catch-22.

It’s an apt definition of their entire relationship, really.

A catch-22.

She shakes her head and starts adjusting the levels on Camila’s vocals, deciding which parts of which takes sound best, and how she wants to mix them with the instrumental. It’s easy to fall into, playing the same snippets over and over, her ear picking up the most acute changes as she works. She finds momentum, shutting everything else out and narrowing in on Camila’s tone and the way the bass echoes the guitar. Her thoughts clear, and it’s what Lauren loves most about music. She knows Camila values the connection and the emotion first and foremost. Lauren appreciates that, too, but she really loves the escape. The stress relief.

When Camila places a hand on her shoulder, she jumps.

Camila giggles.

Lauren flushes. “Hi.”

“I told Roger I’d send him the file when you’re done for the day. No pressure, though.”

“What time is it?” Lauren blinks and presses the light on her phone: a few minutes after seven.

“Like 7:15,” Camila answers anyway. “You can stay if you want, but I think I’m going to head out soon.”

“No, yeah, I’ll go, too. Just give me a second.”

Camila hovers while Lauren finishes up, saving the file and moving over so Camila can email it to Roger.

“You’re not even going to listen to it first?” Lauren asks.

“I trust you.” Camila shrugs and smiles small. “It’s not the final version, anyway.”

“How do you know?” Lauren arches an eyebrow.

“Because I know things.”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

Camila scrunches up her nose, and Lauren thinks she looks young. She looks light and carefree. It’s contagious. “The human head weighs eight pounds.”

“Okay, Jerry Maguire.” Lauren shakes her head, but the exasperation is all fond.
“Please,” Camila scoffs, flipping her hair over her shoulder. “Call me Lizzie.”

Lauren laughs, that loud, abrasive laugh she can’t help, but has always hated.

Camila’s eyes are warm, and she holds out her hand, helping Lauren up. Her hand is warm like her eyes, soft like her eyes, and the feeling of her palm against Lauren’s makes it difficult for Lauren to look her in the eyes.

She pulls away, fidgeting with the strap of her tank top and clearing her throat. She collects her things: the flip flops she toed off by the door, her purse slumped next to the couch, and the sweater she tossed into the corner when Camila unceremoniously cranked the thermostat up. Camila watches her, leaning next to the door, one foot back against the wall, and twirling her keyring around her finger.

She looks like she should be popping gum.

Lauren tucks a piece of hair behind her ear. She motions toward the hallway. “After you.”

Camila steps into Lauren’s space instead, her eyes dark and wide, scanning Lauren’s face and probably cataloging her reaction. Lauren’s heart jumps in her chest, sharp and uncomfortable. She tries very, very hard not to look at Camila’s mouth.

“I like recording with you,” Camila whispers. And Lauren knows she’s failed, because she watches Camila’s lips form the words. Camila reaches forward, her fingers brushing against Lauren’s forearm, gentle and barely there, before pressing a kiss that mirrors the feeling against Lauren’s cheek.

She pulls back, and Lauren can’t breathe.

“It’s not as easy as I thought it would be. But I think that only makes it better.”

Lauren inhales. Her entire body hurts. “I think so, too.”

Camila smirks, caught somewhere between seductive and shaky.

They walk out together, their elbows brushing and making sparks explode against Lauren’s skin. She presses her purse awkwardsly to her body and clutches at her sweater, focusing on having something to do with her hands so she doesn’t reach out for Camila.

Camila actually waves goodbye as she’s unlocking her car door.

Lauren waves back and mouths: *You’re so dumb.* Camila’s eyebrows furrow, but Lauren shakes her head. Camila swipes her thumb across the corner of her mouth, tilting her head and lifting one shoulder in an aborted shrug.

Lauren’s stuck at a red light, and there’s a break in sound as one song changes to the next. In the silence, she can’t stop herself from thinking about kissing Camila.
four: terrible sting and terrible storm

Chapter Summary

She still wishes she had a direct line to Roger or someone from A&R, but if she thinks about it too much, her shoulders hitch and a headache threatens to make itself known behind her forehead. Lauren decides to let it go, filing it away for later.

Chapter Notes

Again, I cannot thank you all enough for all the excited, sweet and thoughtful comments. They really do make a world of difference and brighten my days so, so much. Chapter title from Sufjan Stevens's "The Predatory Wasp of the Palisades Is Out to Get Us!" I'm sure it becomes clearer and clearer with every chapter that I had a title I was married to for the first one, and have been winging it ever since lmao. Anyway, enjoy!

Lauren has wanted to kiss Camila more times than she can count.

When they made it to finals on *The X-factor*: Camila’s eyes blown and glassy, wet with happy tears and a smile stretching her mouth comically wide. The bow on her head careened to the right. Camila had hugged Lauren tightly, rocking their bodies side-to-side while attempting to jump up and down. She spun Lauren around and around until they both felt dizzy.

When they watched a horror movie, it had terrified Camila so thoroughly that she grasped Lauren’s arm in a vise grip. She screwed her eyes shut and buried her face in Lauren’s neck, breath hot and heavy, still managing to scream based on music cues.

When the film ended, there was a scratch on Lauren’s arm. Camila had pressed her thumb against it, and a sad, shaky smile slipped onto her lips when she apologized: “I’m so sorry. I told you I didn’t want to watch it.” It was then that Lauren wanted to lean forward and press their mouths together. An apology of her own.

The first time she saw Camila kissing someone else, and every time she saw Camila kissing someone else after that.

Lauren’s not a stranger to this feeling, of looking at Camila and wanting to be closer, of wanting to splay her hand over the small of Camila’s back and pull her in, sliding their mouths together and seeing what happens next.

She’s not a stranger to what happens next, either. Both the good and the bad.

So, Lauren knows it's best to avoid thinking about kissing Camila.

The problem is, once she realizes she wants to, it’s very difficult to stop wanting to.
Camila pulls her hair back into a ponytail, her jaw sharp. Her collarbones peek out from underneath her t-shirt, and Lauren’s desire to press her mouth to Camila’s skin pulses in her fingertips. She wipes her hands on her shorts and swallows. She does not look at Camila’s mouth or study the way Camila rubs her lips together after taking a swig of water.

“A more live feel,” Camila finishes.

“Yeah, that could be dope.”

“I mean, obviously it has to sound finished and professional.” Camila rolls her eyes, flopping down onto the sofa and kicking her feet up onto the coffee table. “Roger’s really like—” A smile grows on her mouth. Lauren blinks. She is not looking at Camila’s mouth. “He’s excited about the material. He really likes the direction we’re heading in. But, he suggested the sound be a little less contained, to go with the ideas and the lyrics.”

“Yeah, okay.” Lauren nods.

The feedback is good, and she thinks no notes would be a worse sign than constructive criticism. With Roger’s approval, the way Camila has relaxed, and the decision to focus on one song instead of throwing a handful of rushed ideas at the label to see if anything sticks, Lauren is starting to feel better.

She still wishes she had a direct line to Roger or someone from A&R, but if she thinks about it too much, her shoulders hitch and a headache threatens to make itself known behind her forehead. Lauren decides to let it go, filing it away for later.

Nothing about this situation is normal, anyway.

“I’m not sure how we want to go about it, though.” Camila bites her bottom lip.

Lauren hates her.

“Well,” Lauren starts, running a hand through her hair. “I don’t know. How realistic is it for you to do the song in one take?”

Camila tilts her head, smirking. “I can do it, Lauren.”

“Really? Because I haven’t seen that.”

“What? Do you think you could do it?” She raises an eyebrow, all arrogance.

Lauren laughs under her breath and shakes her head. Unbelievable. “We have different ranges.”

“That’s what I thought.” Camila’s smirk grows into a smile. “Besides, if I’m going to sing it live every night on tour, I have to be able to get through it.”

“Even the lower notes?”

“Especially the lower notes,” Camila says, voice dropping to the same deep intonation she uses when she’s mocking something a man said to her: Shawn, Roger, her father.

“Okay, get in there.” She points her thumb toward the booth.
“Now?”

Lauren answers with a playful roll of her eyes. “We don’t have all day.”

Camila slides down an inch, the fabric of her shirt bunching around her belly button. Her eyebrows furrow like she’s about to say something like, “You’re not the boss of me,” or “Who made you god?” or “It’s not even ten.” But then she nods her head, almost imperceptibly, and Lauren only notices because she’s looking at her very intently to keep from glancing at the smooth, muscled plane of her stomach. “Yes, Ma’am.”

Camila shoves off the sofa, pulls on her hair to tighten her ponytail, and heads into the booth.

The first take is fine: she’s a half-step sharp during the bridge, and she misses the lowest note. The second take is better. There’s too much vibrato in her voice during the chorus, but that’s a matter of taste.

There’s still something missing, though.

“It’s wrong,” Camila affirms, moving the pad of her right headphone off her ear.

“Yeah.”

Lauren looks at her laptop, and then down at the soundboard, adjusting a few levels before having Camila try again. Her vocals are almost immaculate. Lauren could marvel at her consistency; the brief warm-up she needed to hit her sweet spot no more than a blink. Camila worked for this. She worked so hard, and she still does. She has that thing: natural ability and work ethic. Lauren knows most people only get one.

Even so, the take lacks something.

Lauren chews at her bottom lip.

This is the part of production she loves: tinkering with a song until it sounds like it was meant to. “It doesn’t sound… live enough?”

“Oh.” Camila blinks slowly and licks at the corner of her mouth. Lauren half-thinks she’s doing this on purpose. “Yeah, that makes sense. How do we get a live-recording to sound… more live?”

“Could we bring back the studio musicians? Try to record it all at the same time?”

Camila hesitates and taps her fingers against the music stand.

Lauren answers her own question: “No, it wouldn’t sound clean enough.”

She looks at the spikes of Camila’s audio track, the instrumental layers, and the levels. She looks back up at Camila, headphones half-off, staring blankly at the lyrics, stupid pink mouth soundlessly forming the words. Her eyebrows crinkle, and Lauren notices a smudge on the glass between them, just to the left.

“Camila?” She hums in acknowledgement. “What’s your favorite thing about performing?”

“Hmm?” Camila looks up, and Lauren sees her eyes focus.

“Your favorite thing about singing live?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” She smooths her hand over her hair. “The fans are always great. It’s good to see
their faces. And whenever I meet them, it’s like they almost can’t believe I’m a real, living, breathing, flesh and blood, human person. But that’s how I feel about them. They … exist, and they like me. That’s…”

“Amazing,” Lauren finishes.

“Yeah.” The first note of a laugh spills out before Camila slaps a hand over her mouth. “Oh my god, Lo. I’m totally weird.”

“Yeah, you are.” It betrays just how fond she feels. Lauren exhales and plants her feet firmly on the ground. “What’s your favorite memory of performing?”

“I don’t—”

“No bullshit, Camila. There’s no need to worry about offending a fan from Vegas who’s watching a video on Youtube, because you said you like performing in LA more.”

Camila pauses, eyes narrow. And then: “I was in Brazil. In the middle of “End of the Day,” and I totally spaced. Completely forgot the lyrics. Not in the usual way, you know? I had no idea where I was in the song. I lost the melody. It was mortifying. But the crowd picked it up. Normal at first, and then louder.

“They were so fucking loud, Lauren. Honestly, the loudest I can remember a crowd ever being. They sang the entire song to me. Even when I got back on track and figured out what I was doing. I felt like we were in it together. A team.”

“That feeling?” Lauren begins. “Close your eyes and remember that feeling. Then sing.”

It’s better.

The next time Camila sings the song, Lauren lowers the track in her ear and gestures for her to keep going. When the song climaxes, Lauren cuts the instrumental completely. Camila stops short.

“What?” she asks.

“Let’s go again. This time, when the music stops, just keep singing.”

Lauren watches and listens, feeling ridiculously vulnerable as Camila sings. She drops the volume in Camila’s ear until it’s muted. She bites the inside of her cheek, hearing every dip in Camila’s voice, every inhale, every crack that almost breaks. Camila’s ritardando is too much at the end. Lauren knows it won’t fit.

But god, it’s good. Actual goosebumps-on-her-arms good.

Camila bites her lip when she finishes, looking at Lauren with wide, almost black eyes. It takes a breath for Lauren to realize Camila’s waiting to see if she can speak. She doesn’t want to ruin the take. “That was incredible,” Lauren says.

“It wasn’t awful, was it?” Camila asks. “Be honest.”

“No.” Lauren shakes her head. “It was -- you can sing.”

Camila giggles, her smile going wide like her eyes. Her face flushes, the tips of her ears pink with it. “I hope so. Or else I’m in the wrong profession.”

They work like that until lunch: Camila singing without the track in her ear, eyes closed and hand
moving without inhibition. Lauren plays with when to cut the music. She tries to bring it back once, but that just confuses Camila, making her stutter and stop, attempting to find her place within the instrumentation.

Her voice sounds raw and alive, accompanied by a spontaneity that wasn’t there before.

Lauren dismisses the idea of putting one vocal take over the music. She’ll have to play with all of it again: the guitar, the piano, the drums, and the vocals. A new puzzle that’s similar to the last, but still entirely its own.

She looks at Camila, the headphones falling off her ears completely and looping around her neck. She sends a thumbs up.

Lauren laughs.

Excitement swells in her chest.

She loves music, she loves the studio, she loves creating, she loves -- this.

Lauren fiddles with the track on her laptop, headphones in and feet tucked underneath her ass. They’re going to fall asleep soon, but her concentration keeps her from caring. She needs to finish this so Camila can try some ad libs in the booth tomorrow.

It’s their last week in the studio, and Lauren wants to have the closest thing to a completed song as possible. She knows A&R will give it a listen, and if they want to continue with it, they’ll change some things. Lauren wants to be the one to make those changes, but she doesn’t know if she will be.

In seven days, she flies back home.

That’ll make it more difficult.

She knows Camila’s team could gut the entire thing, reworking the song from the ground up.

But Lauren’s hoping, if they like it at all, they won’t, because that would be a lot of effort for one song, and she thinks they probably won’t want to reinvest that kind of time. Camila really seems to love it as is, and if she chooses to wield the power she possesses for this song (their song), it might make a difference. It depends on what she’s willing to compromise and what she’s willing to give up.

Lauren wishes she knew, but it’s probably better that she doesn’t. It might make her regret a few things.

She’s still digesting all the compromises she made in Fifth Harmony and all the things she gave up for the group. It’s less about regret now and more about acceptance. But sometimes she lies in bed at night and remembers a lie she told, or a truth she didn’t tell, or a choice she made that doesn’t sit easy in her mind, and it makes her feel nauseous.

Lauren exhales and fixes the piano’s volume in the second verse.

She feels Camila’s eyes on her and waits a minute before pausing. “Yeah?” she asks, not bothering
to look up. Lauren squints at her laptop, leans forward and studies the numbers staring back at her.

“We have a meeting on Thursday.”

“What?”

“With the label.”

Lauren blinks, looks at Camila, and blinks again. “We?”

“Yes.” Camila nods, her eyes bright. Anxiety creeps in the arch of her eyebrow, but she seems to have it controlled. “Don’t you want the opportunity to defend your work? Isn’t that basically what you did at college? Make music and then explain why it was good?”

“Kind of.” Lauren swallows.

“It’ll be easy. You just say why you like the song. If I can do it, you can definitely do it.”

“Very motivating.” Lauren shifts, setting her laptop onto the coffee table.

“Honestly, they don’t care that much what you say. They just want you there.”

“Why?”

Camila presses her mouth into a thin line, watching Lauren like she’s a stray that might bolt or go rabid. Camila’s fingers scratch over the back of her phone case before she sits on the coffee table, eyes never leaving Lauren’s face for longer than a second. There’s something deliberate about her, open knees, elbows on her thighs, leaning forward.

“Because A&R isn’t here.”

“That was their choice.”

“Because you’re you.” Camila shrugs. “Can you really blame them?”

Lauren wants to look away, but Camila’s gaze mesmerizes and unsettles her. “I guess not.”

“They probably just want to scare you into submission.” Camila waggles her eyebrows and sits back. “Give you a long lecture about the non-disclosure agreement. You know suits get off on wielding their power over you. Like without seeing their botoxed faces in person, you’d be stupid enough to break your contract.” There’s a hint of bitterness embedded into the sarcasm.

There’s honesty, too.

“Okay, fine.” Lauren runs a hand through her hair. “Not like I have a choice, anyway.”

Camila beams. “Nope.”

“You can leave, if you want. I’m just trying to finish this up.”

“It’s only nine,” Camila says with a wave of her hand.

“And you have nothing to do?”

“Please,” Camila scoffs. “I’m a very busy woman. I have plenty to do. I can … blow out all the candles. Why did I think it was a good idea to burn the jade-citrus at the same time as the lavender?
Or, I could answer my emails. We’re working out the shoot for the album art. Or, I could--”

“Stop.” Lauren rubs at her temples.

Camila moves, gracefully shifting next to Lauren on the sofa. “I could watch you finish up the production. I want to learn something here, Laur.”

Lauren thinks about protesting. She knows Camila has watched more experienced producers work on her material, has had them explain the mix and the process they used to get to the finished song. This is Lauren’s first real job, and while she doesn’t feel incompetent, she doesn’t feel like she can explain herself to Camila better than Max Martin could -- has.

But Camila’s eyes are earnest, her smile just beginning to tug at the corners of her mouth, her bare knee barely touching Lauren’s, and Lauren doesn’t think she could say no, even if she actually wanted to for reasons other than vague insecurity.

“Okay.”

She reaches for her laptop, sets it on her knees, and angles it so Camila can see the screen.

Explaining is easy.

They’ve worked this song forward and backward together. The lyrics and arrangement are mostly from Camila, still intact from the way she initially wrote it, presenting the idea with a blush high on her cheeks and a small tremor in her hand. The melody’s a combination of the both of them, and they’ve talked through the instrumentation and production choices already. Mostly, Lauren just rehashes conversations they’ve already had, showing Camila how the software works and letting her hear what a well produced song sounds like versus a poorly produced one. She makes a few minor changes to the track and explains why.

Camila’s a quick study; Camila already knows most of this. When Lauren’s happy with the finished product, laptop closed on the coffee table, she reminds her of that.

“Yeah, but knowing it in theory doesn’t mean I know how to do it. It’s really cool that you do.”

There’s a pause, and Lauren nudges Camila’s shoulder.

“It’d be really cool if I could make an entire album myself,” Camila continues. She swallows and looks at Lauren, eyelashes casting spiderwebs against her cheeks. The studio is dark, Camila’s candles still flickering around the room. “I’m never going to be able to play all the instruments or do the engineering and everything. But, I want to do everything that I can. Without anyone else’s interference. A record as purely me as you can get.”

“That sounds great.”

Camila frowns. “Sounds impossible.”

“You’ll do it one day,” Lauren says.

“Maybe.” Camila shakes her head. “You should do an album like that. All you.”

“Maybe,” Lauren echoes.

“Mine would probably be a mess. I love so many different kinds of music and have so many partially formed ideas in my noggin.” Camila knocks on her head, making a clacking noise with her tongue. Lauren laughs, a whispery thing. “I need people to reign me in. But you? You could do it.”
“You give me too much credit.”

“You don’t give yourself enough.”

One of the bulbs burned out an hour ago, making the studio seem a lot darker than it’s been before. Their thighs press together. Camila reaches out and dances her fingers over Lauren’s knee.

Lauren swallows. “Neither do you.”

“You could change the world. You have ...” Camila offers, voice thick and so quiet, hiccuping and tapering off like there’s more to the sentence she can’t vocalize.

The air is thick, and it’s the feeling of Camila so close, the heat of her body and the press of her fingertips, the saucers of her eyes and indent of her teeth as she bites her bottom lip.

That’s Lauren’s mistake. Looking at Camila’s mouth and then her eyes, watching Camila’s eyes flick up from Lauren’s mouth.

Camila inhales, and Lauren hears it in the silence. Camila leans forward, and Lauren closes her eyes.

She turns her head.

Camila’s mouth lands gently against her jaw.

Lauren opens her eyes.

Camila’s hand is still on her knee, warm and soft. Her brow wrinkles, mouth slanted into a frown, eyes wet.

“It’s unprofessional,” Lauren says around the lump in her throat.

“Yeah.” Camila exhalles, removes her hand and tucks a piece of hair behind her ear. “Yeah. You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

It’s not, really, it’s not okay.

(Camila looks at her, shifting away and smiling sadly. “Okay,” she says.)

They both know that.

Lauren watches the elevator count down, and nerves pull at her insides. She wipes her palms, concentrating on breathing and not the way her stomach threatens to eat her from the inside out.

Despite what Camila said, this meeting is important.

Her career doesn’t depend on it, perhaps because Lauren really doesn’t have a career anymore. Perhaps because she really is just here to get reacquainted with her NDA and see if the label likes the song. But if she can make a good impression, if she can show a willingness to play ball and take direction, it will only help her.
She doesn’t even know if she wants to produce for people like Camila: famous, micromanaged, and responsible for answering to dozens of people. When she pictures her future, Lauren sees herself in a studio with artists like Ally, producing records with just enough cash to make something clean and polished, with just enough restriction to inspire creativity without hindering it.

But as Ally has kindly told Lauren, those jobs are almost as hard to come across as the ones for people like Camila. Any job doing what Lauren wants to do is hard to find.

A good reputation, no matter who it’s with, can only help.

The problem is Lauren’s already playing from behind.

Okay, that’s not totally fair. Her experiences gave her knowledge about the business aspect of production; she knows how the music industry functions, disproportionately benefiting the people at the top. Theoretically, she knows how to schmooze, what is expected, and how she’s meant to deliver it. Her time in Fifth Harmony gave Lauren contacts most of her classmates couldn’t even dream of. Case in point: Camila, and where Lauren is standing now, wringing her hands as the elevator dings, door opening.

But, she also has a (hopefully mild) reputation for being difficult. She talked too much when she shouldn’t have, overcompensated to the point where it became counterproductive, and her team had to work overtime to contain the situation.

At least that was manageable.

What wasn’t manageable was quitting.

Which is what Lauren did.

Her team invested time and money in her, in a solo career that was meant to be profitable, at least for enough years to make it worthwhile for them.

Instead, she basically gave them the finger and walked away.

Lauren doesn’t regret it.

It was better for her mental health, the exhaustion that took residence in her bones, and her love of music that almost seemed to wan completely, muddled in the politics and PR.

But it also means the people she’s about to sit across from aren’t particularly fond of her anymore, if they ever were at all.

As the elevator stops, Lauren shifts to the right, allowing a man wearing a pressed and tailored suit to get on. His cologne is so thick and musky it makes Lauren feel ill.

When the elevator rises to the floor Lauren was directed to, she steps out and focuses on breathing again. In and out. Quiet and without hiccup. She knows Camila’s people see her as a liability; she wishes she could say they’re wrong, but honestly, she doesn’t know if they are.

She digs her phone out of her bag to check the time. She only has five minutes to find the room, and she loses one of them when she realizes she turned the wrong way and the numbers are getting smaller instead of larger.

Her stomach finds a way to knot further, and her phone vibrates in her hand.
Camila’s calling.

“Hey,” Lauren answers. Her voice doesn’t waver.

“Hi. Where are you?”

“Some hallway.” She bites on the inside of her cheek. “I just passed … conference room 12?”

“Oh, good, you’re close. At the end of the hall just turn left and you’ll see me.”

“Okay. See you soon.”

They hang up, and Lauren looks at the fork in the hallway a few feet ahead. She pauses, dropping her phone back into her bag before running a hand through her hair. She tugs out a few loose tangles and rubs her lips together, lipstick still sticky and smooth on her mouth. Squaring her shoulders, Lauren lifts her chin and reminds herself she can do this.

There’s a receptionist desk right when Lauren turns left, an elevator that she didn’t know existed but would have gotten her here much faster, and Camila, a couple paces down the hallway, standing next to a set of chairs and staring at her phone.

“Hey,” Lauren calls.

Camila’s head snaps up, and her smile exudes relief. “Thank god. I was worried you were gonna ditch.”

“No.” Lauren can’t help but smile back. It probably looks just as fleeting as the confidence in Camila’s posture. “I would have called you earlier with a fake illness if I was going to do that.”

“Right.” Camila nods.

“Camila, come on. This isn’t high school. I wasn’t going to play hooky at a meeting I’m required to attend.”

“Sorry.” Camila shakes her head. “I’m just nervous. I really want them to like the song.”

Turns out, Lauren didn’t have to worry about being on time. It’s another ten minutes before Roger and a group of people show up, ushering Lauren and Camila into a room and offering an assortment of coffee and food. Lauren grabs some coffee, pouring an absurd amount of sugar and cream into it, and stirring the beige liquid into a whirlpool as she sits next to Camila.

Introductions are made, hands are shook, and then Fred, who seems to be in charge, cracks his knuckles. “Let’s take a listen to this song, shall we?”

It’s weird watching other people listen to all the work she and Camila put in over the last month. Their faces are still except for the occasional eyebrow twitch or thinning press of mouth, and it makes Lauren swallow around something hard and bitter. She put so much of herself into this, and not even in the vulnerable way Camila did with lyrics that say something about who she is, but it’s still there. It still leaves Lauren susceptible to judgement.

A thought flickers through her head: hopefully, they won’t like it. Then, no one else will ever have to hear it, will ever hear the part of herself she embedded into the track. But the idea fails to spark, because even though it’s kind of nice, Lauren wants to succeed more than she wants to hide.

When the song ends, the room sits in a silence that stretches and stretches in Lauren’s anxious mind.
She takes a deep breath.

Roger speaks first: “I love it.”

“Me too,” Camila adds. “I really want to find a place for it on the album.”

Fred and a woman introduced as Bernadette look at each other. Bernadette shrugs. “It is good.”

Fred sighs and pinches his beard between his fingers. “I agree,” he says, sounding pained, almost like he lost something. “Changes will have to be made. The opening needs to be stronger. And there’s some reverb issues here and there. But the bones are solid. I think it’ll fit nicely with some of the tracks we’re retouching.” He looks at Camila, eyebrow arching. “Good job.”

“Thank you,” Camila whispers.

Bernadette scribbles some notes onto a pad of paper. They ask Lauren about a few of her choices: the dynamics of the piano, the key change before the last chorus, and how she layered Camila’s ad libs. That part is easy. Lauren’s responses come naturally, and the conversation is more like an evaluation, reminding her of Berklee.

When Bernadette leaves, the mood of the room shifts, becoming tense in a way that leaves goosebumps on Lauren’s skin.

Anthony from Legal opens a folder, sliding two contracts across the table and directly in front of Lauren and Camila. “We’ll need these before you leave today. I have a phone call to take, but I’ll be back soon.”

“What’s this?” Lauren asks, running her thumb along the edge of the contract and baiting a papercut.

“It reiterates some of the NDA from the first contract Camila had you sign,” Fred explains. “And it goes into more detail about the rights to the song, royalty percentages, especially if we decide to make it a single.” A beat. “Don’t plan on it.

“There are details about promo, regardless.” Fred reaches across the table and taps on Camila’s packet. “If you turn a few pages, you’ll see it. A set number of social media posts about the song. If you haven’t already, you’ll need to take a few pictures in the studio. Document the process. And we’ll need access to your Twitter, Lauren.”

“Why?” Lauren blinks. “I can post the promo myself. You can even send me the tweets.”

“Her fans will be watching you when they realize the collaboration is happening. We won’t have you jeopardizing her image.”

Lauren stops herself before she rolls her eyes.

“Everyone in this room knows this isn’t a typical songwriting and producing relationship.”

“Right.” Lauren gulps, face flushing.

“I’ll give you two a chance to read through the contracts. Anthony can answer any questions you have when he gets back. Heather and Mark are managing this little—” a flick of the wrist “— experiment. They’ll go over the specifics of the public arrangement.” Fred stands up, posture rigid. “Lauren.” He nods. “Camila. Consider yourselves lucky.”

Lauren feels cold as she watches him walk out of the room. The ice sticks to her skin as Heather
speaks, reminding her that if -- *when* -- she does this, she’s giving up part of herself. Again. She’s agreeing to present herself how they want her to, whether she likes it or not, whether it’s who she is or not. It’s all standard. The contract is nothing out of the ordinary. It’s ridiculous, but Lauren’s seen worse.

She’s *signed* worse.

The motion of pen on paper and her resulting scrawl inked onto the line makes something tighten in Lauren’s chest.

She glances at Camila, shaky smile for shaky smile, and Camila’s hand finds hers underneath the table, offering a reassuring squeeze.

When all is said and done, Lauren is locked in for a year.

“Congratulations,” Roger says. He’s not the only person who sounds genuine when he says it. Mark and Heather seem excited, too, not because they care, but it appears like this is a challenge for them, like they’re going to prove something to someone Lauren has never met and never wants to meet.

It’s just the three of them now: Roger, Camila, and Lauren. Roger pushes back his chair.

“Thanks.” Lauren drains her coffee cup and stands when he and Camila do.

“Thank you.” Camila half-smiles. “I don’t know what you did. But thank you.”

Roger waves her off. “The song is good. You two did a nice job managing the sound.” There’s a pause, and then: “You should get dinner on me tomorrow. Celebrate.”

“Well.” Camila bites at her bottom lip, making eye contact and shrugging before turning her attention back to Roger. “If you’re paying...”

Roger smiles and shakes his head. “I reserve the right to be reimbursed if you order multiple bottles of the most expensive wine they have.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” Lauren says. There’s a reason she and Camila have limited their time together to the studio. “We’ve been really busy, and I want to make some of the changes they suggested, and--”

“Relax,” Roger cuts her off, holding his hand up. “It’ll be fine. You both need a break. What’s the point of working hard if you never enjoy it, right?”

“Come on, it’ll be fun,” Camila adds. Her hands are clasped behind her back, and she bounces on the balls of her feet.

It’s a truly awful idea.

And if Lauren wasn’t so tired from the last month, from seeing Camila every week and wanting to kiss her every day, from the fluorescent lights of this meeting, from Camila’s team watching her with a palpable sense of condescension, from the strong coffee sitting acidic in her stomach, she might have fought it more.

She still probably wouldn’t have read into Camila’s fidgeting.

But then again, Lauren’s always been too quick to trust her, defend her, and cut her some slack.

Old habits die hard, or whatever.
Camila sits in the car Roger rented for the night, tugging on her skirt and tapping her heels against
the floor. Her heart feels like it's made of broken glass, beating hard against her chest, a sharp, cool
pain when she breathes.

She swallows, trying to will away the dread and anxiety rolling around her stomach.

It’s awkward enough that she tried to kiss Lauren and Lauren turned away -- Camila really thought
she’d gotten better at reading signals over the years, and she really would have thought she’d gotten
better at reading Lauren -- but this feels almost like a date now. And it’s going to end badly.

Camila knows it’s going to end badly.

There’s no other way for it to end.

It’s not like watching a car crash and being unable to look away from the smoke, damage and bloody
wreckage on the side of the road. There’s too much distance in that metaphor. It’s more akin to being
in a car going the wrong direction down a one-way street and seeing the truck racing toward you as
the horn rings in your ears. The collision inevitable and awful; people staring at you, stuck in the car,
seat belt digging into your collar bones, smoke and fire and pain in your guts, turned inside out and
suffocating.

Camila hates this.

She looks away from the window when she sees Lauren and the driver approaching and pretends
she wasn’t staring and waiting. The door opens, and Camila turns her head again, forcing a smile.
“Hi.”

“Hi.” There are nerves in the curve of Lauren’s mouth and the wrinkle of her eyebrow. A palpably
uncomfortable energy twitches underneath her skin as she steps into the SUV, sliding into the seat
next to Camila and thanking the driver before he shuts the door after her.

“You look good,” Camila says.

Lauren does. She really does. In her black jeans and her black boots and her black blouse. Camila’s
mind offers up the concept of a funeral. It’s unhelpful. She needs to calm down enough to get
through dinner, to make Lauren feel at ease, and to enjoy the night as much as she can before it all
goes to shit.

She’s been planning her explanation since they left the studio earlier, after having the receptionist
take a picture of them in front of the soundboard, as well as a couple of fake candids of Camila
recording, Lauren working, and both of them leaning over the equipment.

The best picture: Lauren’s eyes screwed shut and the corners of her mouth tilting up as she laughs.
Her head bowed and body leaning slightly toward Camila. Camila’s bottom lip trapped between her
teeth, biting down around her own fond smile. It’s the realest photo they took.
Her team won’t use it; not on Instagram and not on Twitter. Camila knows that, but she doesn’t know if she prefers it. She doesn’t know if she’d rather share something genuine -- Lauren laughing too hard at some stupid, forced joke she made -- or if she’d rather keep it for herself. Camila doesn’t know if keeping it to herself diminishes it. She doesn’t know where the line between secrets and privacy lies, especially when it comes to Lauren.

She and Lauren never really agreed about that to begin with. Camila’s line was red and small compared to Lauren’s, inked black and bold and somewhere so far away Camila couldn’t see it from where she was standing. She doesn’t even know who wanted to hide more. Camila figures it was probably conditional, situational.

“Thanks. You look good, too,” Lauren offers before buckling her seatbelt. “I like your skirt.”

“Thanks. It’s got breathing room.” If they weren’t in a moving car, Camila would stand up and twist around, showing Lauren the way it swishes against her thighs, light and airy.

“It’s cute.” Lauren runs a hand through her hair and audibly exhales.

It’s awkward.

It’s so bad.

Camila wants to push the door open and jump out of the car. She could tuck and roll, and it probably wouldn’t be worse than this. They make stilted conversation about the last, minor changes applied to the song before sending it to the label and relinquishing their control. For Camila and Lauren, the song is complete. For the label, the jury’s still out.

It should feel good. They accomplished something. They accomplished more than Camila dreamed about, reigning in her fantasies after everyone was so hesitant to follow through on the idea. But the song is great. And she should be excited that it’s finished, but she doesn’t want it to be. She already misses Lauren.

Camila has always gotten ahead of herself like that.

Lauren sits across from her at the not-too-fancy restaurant. The lights dim just enough, but Camila barely notices the place’s intended ambiance. She’s too busy focusing on the after. On Lauren leaving LA. On Lauren hating her.

Camila takes a sip of wine and reminds herself to be present.

She should enjoy this.

She wants to enjoy this.

The alcohol helps settle her stomach, relax her muscles and calm her bones. “Thank you.”

Lauren’s eyebrow crinkles. It’s an abrupt shift from whatever forced conversation they were having about how good the bread is. “For what?”

“This was probably one of the best months of my life.”

“Camila…”

“No.” Camila shakes her head. “You don’t get to tell me I’m being dramatic, even if I am. Like, we created an entire song from scratch. Just the two of us. I feel like I can do anything.”
“That’s good.” A beat. “You can.”

“Not really.” Camila laughs, pulling another piece of bread out of the basket. “But it was nice to feel that way. I think I needed it. You always make me feel good about myself.”

A lie. A lie so blatant Lauren doesn’t even acknowledge it: “I’m glad I could help you overcome whatever creative hurdles you were having.”

“It was more than just that.”

Lauren’s eyes widen, and Camila doesn’t look away.

“I felt like I lost myself a little bit. It’s so easy to do in this business, no matter how hard you try to stay grounded. You know how that is.” Camila tucks a piece of hair behind her ear, feeling the blush warm on her cheeks. “But this past month, I don’t know, I feel like I remembered who I am. The good parts. The bad parts, too. All the stupid, boring parts.” Lauren’s mouth tugs up, betrays her, and urges Camila on: “I think you do that for me, Laur. I just feel more like myself with you.”

“Camila, that doesn’t. That doesn’t make any sense.” Lauren shakes her head.

“And no matter what happens after this, I hope you remember that.”

Confusion passes over Lauren’s features, and then she blinks, licking at her mouth and faded lipstick. Camila wants to kiss her. It’s the wrong time. She doesn’t know if there’s ever been a right time, even when they were younger. “We’ll keep in touch. It won’t be like before. I promise.”

Camila opens her mouth, letting the phrase die on her tongue: don’t make promises you can’t keep.

“Okay, good. I might annoy you.”

“You always annoy me.” Lauren rolls her eyes. “I don’t mind.”

Camila likes her so much. The feeling settles alongside the tar in her stomach, causing her to feel like the air is dying in her lungs. A mix-match of good and bad. She grins. “You think I’m great.”

“Don’t get an ego.”

“Too late.”

Lauren kicks her under the table, and Camila kicks back.

Camila lets Lauren pick the fries off her plate, and they share one of those chocolate lava cakes. Before it comes out, Camila sneaks off to the bathroom to pee, washing her hands and sending a text. She returns to chocolate spilled on the plate, and a smudge of cake at the corner of Lauren’s mouth.

“You couldn’t even wait for me?” Camila asks.

“Nope,” Lauren says, smiling so wide Camila wants to take a picture, freeze the moment and stay in it a little bit longer.

She takes a few bites and lets Lauren have the rest. The cake is good, but her mouth is dry and her leg shakes underneath the table.

She takes a deep breath before pushing open the door and exiting the restaurant.

There’s a beat before the first camera flashes, and Camila blinks, half-expecting it’s not going to happen. But then the lights are blinding, and she doesn’t have time to look back at Lauren to garner
her reaction.

Paparazzi call their names, asking question like: “You guys are still friends?” and “How was dinner?” and “Is Fifth Harmony getting back together?” and “Lauren, did you help Camila through her break up with Shawn?”

Camila breathes, keeps her head down, and tries not to grimace too much, schooling her face into a neutral expression.

The driver holds out his hand and helps her into the car.

Lauren follows.

When the door closes, the volume dies down, and all that’s left is the faint flash of the cameras trying to see inside the tinted windows.

The car is eerily silent, and when the driver asks if they want to listen to the radio or plug in one of their phones, Camila says the radio is fine -- whatever he wants.

She chances a glance at Lauren as they merge onto the freeway. She’s staring out the window, hands still in her lap, mouth set in a thin line. Her entire body seems stiff and static, like she’s on the verge of vibrating, and if one hair on her head moves, she’ll break apart.

Camila looks away and out the other window. She stares at the pavement, broken up by the occasional car passing them. Her head feels fuzzy, and she leans it against the window, closing her eyes. The glass is cool next to her flushed skin.

“That was fucking low, Camila.”

It takes a moment for Camila to register that Lauren said something. She exhales, sitting up. “I’m sorry.”

Lauren scoffs. “Yeah, I bet.”

“I am. I wanted to tell you, I just-- They didn’t want me to. You wouldn’t agree to go to dinner if you knew.”

“I signed the contracts. I didn’t have a choice either way.” Lauren rolls her eyes.

“Yes, you did.” Camila sighs. “You have to tweet when they want you to, and if they want a quote for an interview about the song and the album, they’ll prep you on what to say to the journalists. But you didn’t agree to be papped with me.”

“Great. You still used me for publicity.”

“Please don’t think--”

“--You know, Camila, I get it. You deserve your success. You work harder than anyone I know. You play whatever game they ask you to, and you do a decent job of it. But I guess I didn’t think you’d ever use me.” Lauren laughs, a broken and bitter thing. “I don’t know why I thought that. It was fucking stupid, in hindsight.”

“Yeah, okay. Fine. I used you for publicity. But they need to see how fans react to us reconnecting.”

“A tweet wasn’t a good place to start?” Lauren cocks an eyebrow.
“This is flashier.” Camila feels hot all over, and then she feels cold and light-headed.

Lauren’s right. Of course Lauren’s right. Camila should have told her. She shouldn’t have agreed to it in the first place. But without the pictures, there wouldn’t be a song. Not on her album, at least. This is the guarantee; the photos seal the deal.

“It’ll make more headlines. Get the fans riled up. They already have a general plan, but this will help them work out the specifics. How much lesbian damage control they have to do versus snake shit. Figure out the best way to push the narrative that we’re genuinely friends.”

“Oh my god.” Lauren actually does a double take, eyes wide and dark, almost black. Camila’s only ever seen her this angry a handful of times. “You did not just say ‘lesbian damage control.’”

Camila gulps. “That’s how they phrased it.”

“Great.”

“That’s not why I did this,” Camila offers. It’s weak. It’s true. “I love the song. I loved working with you. I fought for this, Lauren. I paid for this.”

Lauren’s eyes narrow. “You paid for this? What the fuck does that mean?”

“Fuck,” Camila breathes. She closes her eyes and curls her hands into fists. “The label didn’t believe in you. In us. They gave me the time off, but I paid for the studio. I paid the musicians.” She looks at Lauren, scowl transforming her entire face. Somehow, this is going even worse than Camila expected. “I paid you.”

“Jesus fuck.” Lauren looks up, eyes growing wet. “You are such a liar.”

“I just wanted you to be honest with me, Lauren. Okay? You’re never honest with me, and you wouldn’t have been. You know that. You wouldn’t have agreed to come out here and work with me if you knew I was bankrolling the song myself. You wouldn’t have agreed to go to dinner if you knew Heather was going to call the paparazzi after. If you want to pretend you would have, that’s fine. But you know I’m right.”

“And that should have been my choice.”

“I know.” Camila unfurls her fingers, wiping her sweaty palms against her skirt. “I know, and I’m sorry. You have every right to hate me. I’d hate me, too. I don’t know why you didn’t hate me before.

“And I know you have no reason to believe anything I say, but you did more for me in the last month by just… being there than I deserve. And I hope you know me well enough to know that I wouldn’t just use you to sell records. I was selfish, okay, but I wanted to help you, too.”

“Thank you very much for all the charity,” Lauren spits.

“God, you don’t get it.” Camila shakes her head. The longer Lauren looks at her like she’s something grotesque, the more she believes it, feels it seep into her skin, and transform into anger.

“You’re right. I don’t get lying to my friends and blatantly using them for fame.”

“Shut up!” Camila screams. The radio gets louder. “Yeah, I did this. I’ll own it. But it’d be nice if you could own your shit, too.”
Lauren crosses her arms. “I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“You spent the last two weeks looking at me like you want to fuck me, and then when I try to kiss you, you act like I’m insane.”

“Well, it’s a good thing we didn’t. Since you’re my boss and all.”

“I’m not,” Camila protests. They were equals. They are equals. Money isn’t going to change that. She rubs her hands over her face, pressing her palms against her forehead. “Jesus. Vete a la verga culero.”

“Very mature.” Lauren rolls her eyes.

“Well, we can’t all be as good at deflecting as you.”

“At least I’m not still in the closet.”

Camila feels the words sting like a slap against her skin. She blinks, swallows, and knows she’s going to cry no matter how much she tries to fight it. “Right.”

“Look--”

“No,” Camila says, heart trapped in her mouth and threatening to spill out. She can’t make eye contact with Lauren anymore. Her throat feels dry, her breathing shallow, and her lungs too small. The words tug at her, and Camila scratches her nails against her knees to relieve the itch. “You’re right.”

“I just meant--” Her tone isn’t soft. If Camila knows anything about Lauren, she knows Lauren wants to explain, not apologize.

“Stop.” Camila bites her tongue so hard it hurts. She doesn’t want an explanation. Her breathing is so frantic she can hear it over the classic rock playing on the radio, loud enough the driver is clearly trying to tune them out. But god, her breathing is louder, panicked and shaky in her ears. “I know what you meant.”

Camila turns her entire body away from Lauren, curls her knees up onto the seat and leans her forehead back against the window, eyes closed. She vaguely registers the car stopping and the “Bye, Camz,” Lauren whispers across the gulf between them.

When Camila gets dropped off, the driver helps her out of the car, telling her to “Have a nice night,” with something akin to pity in his eyes. It makes her feel sick. He asks if she needs help getting to the door, and she shakes her head.

Her legs are jelly. Camila takes slow steps, hands shaking as she digs around her bag for her keys. She collapses the minute the door is closed.

Her face is already wet.

She already cried.

She cries some more.

Camila feels like she can’t breathe, the tears a lump in her throat, blurring her vision and pulsing behind her skull. She sits on the floor in her entryway until she can’t cry anymore. Her knees ache when she stands up, and she follows the wall to the stairs, leaning against it as she makes her way to
the bathroom.

She takes a xanax.

Checks her phone.

She missed a call from Roger. There are emails from Heather and Mark and her mother. Shawn left a voicemail. There’s a text from Dinah about the pictures that have already shown up online. She opens her contacts and doesn’t have to scroll to find Lauren. Her phone tries to autocorrect the message, but she goes back and fixes it: I fucking hate you you’re such a bitch. She can’t bring herself to press send.

Camila takes another xanax, angrily pushes her skirt off her hips and crawls into bed, tossing and turning until she falls asleep.

She dreams of nothing.

Lauren’s back in Miami by the time she reaches out to Camila.

Camila knows because she’s pathetic, and because she saw the picture a fan took with Lauren in the Miami airport.

It’s been four days.

Her phone rings and rings in her palm, vibrating against her skin as she sits in hair, getting ready for her album photoshoot. Her heart lodges in her throat again, but she swallows around it.

A minute later, there’s a text: At least clean out your voicemail.

Camila rolls her eyes.

She sets her phone face down against her thigh, humming along to the playlist her mom blasts through the studio. She looks at her face in the mirror, makeup already done. It looks heavier than it will in the photos and underneath the bright lights. Light and simple, bare. There’s supposed to be honesty in it, stripping back all the success, all the excess of fame, and leaving just Camila.

They keep trying to strip it all back, and she’s starting to worry that when they succeed, nothing will be left.

Her phone vibrates again. She runs her fingers over it, but doesn’t look.

“You feeling okay?” Genevieve asks. Genevieve's been working with her for almost a year now. She’s funny, always willing to ramble about the shenanigans her twin toddlers have gotten up to, whether it’s coloring on the wall with her collection of eyeliner, or trying to coax a squirrel out of a tree by barking like dogs. She makes Camila laugh and makes glam fun.

“Yeah. Just tired.”

Genevieve eyes her in the mirror. “You want to talk about it?”

“No.” Camila clamps her palm down over her phone. “I want to know what Nico and Elsbeth have been doing.”
Genevieve’s eyes light up.

She darts into a story about taking them out to eat, relaying how they insisted on ordering from the adult menu. Camila half-listens, smiling and nodding in all the right places, watching the fondness and affection drift over each expression, even the ones of exasperation and frustration. She half-waits for her phone to go off again, fingers playing with the case, pushing it off and back on.

The shoot goes well, and the photos look great.

Camila is almost out of there alive, but then her mom’s fingers snake around her wrist, tugging her to the side with a wrinkle between her eyebrows and a thin mouth. “Mija, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Camila tugs at her hair, pulling a strand straight. The careful waves are meant to look natural. “I’m fine.”

Her mother tuts.

Camila sighs and looks down. She doesn’t want to see the judgement on her mom’s face when she tells her. Her mom is always right. It’s a lesson she has to keep learning, over and over again. “Lauren and I got into a fight.”

“Oh.”

When Camila looks up, her mother is frowning. The only emotion Camila can discern is disappointment. She doesn’t know if it’s in her, or in the way the situation turned out. “Yeah. I mean. It was my fault, so. I don’t know. She didn’t do anything wrong.”

Lauren’s words cut, and Camila can still feel the wound like a serrated edge against her skin. Because she and Lauren had talked about it. A lot. They shared intimate details of guilt and frustration and anger, a conglomeration of messy emotions aimed at themselves, their managers, and some unidentified ‘they.’ It was too much at 16 and 17 and 18. Camila remembers crying, tears salty against Lauren’s shoulder, and Lauren’s hand in her hair, comforting and calming.

Lauren used it against her, and Camila aches.

But she also knows Lauren is right. Lauren was blindsided and taken advantage of, and Camila did lie to her. A lot. Both the blatant and outright kind, and the kind she’s gotten very good at, the side-stepping the truth kind. She understands why Lauren said it. She just wishes that would mitigate the hurt.

“Have you apologized?” her mom asks, frown deepening further.

“No.”

“Well?”

Camila’s mouth twitches. “I know, I know. She’s not a mindreader, and I can’t expect her to know how sorry I am if I don’t tell her.”

“Exactly.” Her mom smiles small, takes hold of Camila’s hand and squeezes. “But I hope you know she’s not perfect, either, mija.”

Camila rolls her eyes. “I know.”

“You’re very bad at staying angry with her. Even when she hurts you.”
Her mom is right about that, too. Always right. Because her mom’s the one who had to wipe away the tears that fell because Lauren said or did something, or didn’t say or didn’t do something else. Camila remembers all the times she mumbled against her mother’s chest that she “messed it all up,” and that Lauren probably hates her now. She remembers how her mom would shush her, saying it was impossible, and that it was never wrong to love somebody.

“Mom,” Camila sighs. She doesn’t want to get into this conversation. She doesn’t want her mom to tell her something she doesn’t want to hear.

“Just be careful. Don’t apologize for the way you feel.”

Camila swallows. “What if the way I feel is wrong?”

Her mom raises an eyebrow. “I thought you’d grown out of that.”

“Oh my god.” The smile cracks unwillingly. “I don’t mean it like that.”

“Good.” Her mom pulls her into a hug and whispers into her ear: “If I am hard on Lauren, or skeptical about her, it’s only because you are not hard on her enough, Mila.”

Camila wants to protest and tell her mom that she doesn’t know Lauren like Camila does. She hasn’t seen all the gory parts of her that Camila has, but when her mom pulls back, there’s something warm and kind in her eyes, a knowledge of Camila’s heart shining through, bare and honest. The real thing instead of an illusion created by makeup. Her mom doesn’t say anything, though, like she knows Camila is not ready to acknowledge the reality of it just yet.

“I love you,” her mom says instead, pressing a kiss to her cheek. “I’ll see you for dinner?”

“Yes.” Camila smiles. Her heart is still heavy, but it’s easier to breathe when the look in her mom’s eye shifts to something affectionate and familiar. It’s the same way she looked at Camila the first time she successfully completed her multiplication tables and the first time she hit a G5. “I love you, too.”

The second text she received earlier wasn’t from Lauren at all, but Dinah, telling her: pick up ur dam phone when laur calls. Camila rolls her eyes, shooting back: I thought you were my bff???

I AM SWITZERLAND

Camila laughs, shaking her head and texting Dinah that she loves her.

Camila throws together half a sandwich, responds to her emails, and looks at her itinerary for the next few weeks. There’s a lot of work to be done on the album: touching up tracks and making decisions on which songs to include before cutting a few more. She has a handful of performances lined up just to keep herself in the public eye. They’re securing dates for when the first single drops, the album’s release, and all the interviews that will lead up to it. It’s a busy time that counterintuitively seems like a lull, like it’s more planning than doing.

She checks her twitter. There’s a tweet she didn’t write thanking Lauren for a good time at dinner, and a retweet of the restaurant’s response, welcoming them back any time. Camila takes a sip of water. She’s sure her mentions are a mess, even worse than usual, and she closes out of the app without looking at a single one.
She used to go through her mentions constantly, like a drug she couldn’t get enough of, hit after hit of love and hate. The love glid right over her and the hate stuck to her skin, leaving little needle marks in her arms and her heart. The worst kind of come down.

This is progress.

There’s an hour before she has to leave to meet her family for a late dinner, and instead of opening twitter again and giving in to the craving, she scrolls through her recent messages. She decides to take her mom and Dinah’s advice.

“Hey,” Lauren says, a giggle coloring her voice. There’s noise in the background; people talking and laughing over each other. Camila hears Lauren, muffled and far away: “I’ll be right back. I have to take this.” A pause, some faint shuffling. “Hey. I’m glad you called.”

“Hi.” Camila purses her lips. “How are you?”

“Well.”

“How’s Miami?”

“Humid,” Lauren groans, but there’s a smile underneath it all. “Every time it rains, my hair tries to get as far away from my skull as possible.”

Camila nods.

“Camila?” Lauren asks.

“Oh, yeah, sorry. I’m here.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Camila brings her knees to her chest. She feels fine. Totally, completely fine. “I just wanted to … apologize. About the other night.”

“Oh, okay.” Her voice gives nothing away.

The pause is so long Camila keeps talking: “I should have told you. Even if it was just before we left the restaurant. I know that. I was following orders, but that’s no excuse. I should be better than that. I know better. You’re important to -- well, I knew how you’d react, and I did it anyway. And there’s no excuse. And I’m sorry.”

She exhales. Her heart thumps quick and painful in her chest. Camila gnaws on her lip and waits for Lauren to say something.

There’s nothing.

Camila takes the phone from her ear to check that Lauren didn’t hang up on her.

And then: “Okay.”

“Okay?” Camila asks.

“Oh.” She imagines Lauren running a hand through her hair, a roll of her eyes. “That’s fine. I get it.”

“You do?” Camila doesn’t believe her.
“Yeah,” Lauren sighs. “Look, Camila. I shouldn’t have said what I said to you. I was fucking pissed, and you’d just needlessly betrayed my trust in every way possible.” Camila flinches. “I lashed out. It was unfair.”

“Um. Yeah.” Camila is hesitant to agree, afraid it’ll set Lauren off. Lauren’s still angry. Camila feels Lauren’s residual irritation and indignation radiating through the phone and against her cheek. She hears what Lauren said that night over and over again, sharp, sharp, sharp. She swallows. “Thank you.”

“I’m sorry if what I said hurt your feelings.”

Camila closes her eyes and inhales. It’s not an apology.

She didn’t expect one, but she still feels the lack.

“I’m sorry, too,” Camila says, like a scratched record.

She feels sixteen again. No spine, no words to explain to Lauren that they’re not understanding each other. Communication initially came easy to them; they could look at each other across a room and immediately know how the other was feeling and exactly what they were thinking. It was so innate that when it started breaking down, they didn’t know how to fix it. They didn’t understand what was happening.

Camila would say something now, except she wants Lauren to forgive her more than she wants to be right. She wants Lauren to be her friend more than she wants Lauren to apologize.

She almost laughs.

“Are we going to be okay?” she asks instead.

“I don’t know,” Lauren says. Camila can almost hear her shrug. “I guess.”

“I don’t want it to be awkward when the album comes out.” Camila bites her lip. “I don’t want to lose you again.”

Lauren’s silence is deafening.

Camila exhales, hugs her knees even closer, and lays her cheek on one of them. She screws her eyes shut to deter any tears threatening to pool.

“Me either,” Lauren rasps, voice cracking. “Everybody makes mistakes, right?”

“Right.”

Camila sucks on her teeth.

“I’ll text you later?” Lauren asks. “I’m with some friends, and I should probably get back.”

“Yeah, yeah, no, totally. I get it,” Camila babbles. She ignores the churning in her stomach, the anxiety and solace mixing together. The fear that Lauren won’t text Camila later settles alongside the relief that she’s speaking to her now and doing her best to forgive her. “Thanks for talking to me. I’m really, really sorry.”

“I know,” Lauren says. “I’ll talk to you later, Camila.”

“Okay. Have fun.”
They hang up.

Camila thinks about the way Lauren would look at her mouth in the studio, the disgust in her voice when they left the restaurant, the knowing way her mother’s eyes softened at the photoshoot, the thumping of her heart in her stomach, and the warmth of her phone pressed against her ear.

Camila thinks about the fragility of her happiness, and she wonders if she is trying to bring it closer or push it further away.

She goes to her piano.

She breathes.

She writes a new melody.
five: playing with the hand that we were dealt

Chapter Summary

“Lauren.” It’s ridiculous how just saying her name makes Camila’s pulse jump, and she fights the urge to blush, telling herself it’s just nerves. At least half her interview prep was about Lauren, and if she fucks it up, Heather and Mark will never forgive her.

Chapter Notes

Title from Ariana Grande’s "Best Mistake," buy "Thank U, Next," on itunes!

Lauren stares at Camila’s back. She’s turned entirely toward the door, forehead against the window. Her blouse stretches over the wings of her shoulder blades, sharp and angular. Lauren doesn’t say anything.

Camila is a coward, that much she knows is true.

Camila lied to her over and over again, and the knowledge swirls inside her chest, black and dark and angry. Lauren’s hands curl into fists, and her jaw clenches so hard it’ll hurt tomorrow. She feels nauseous.

Camila has no right to be folded up the way she is, as though she’s the victim in this, as though Lauren did anything other than tell the truth when Camila would rather ignore it and tell another lie to cover up her shitty actions.

Lauren thinks of that Maya Angelou quote: “When someone shows you who they are, believe them.”

She thinks this is who Camila is.

Camila is someone who will do any fucked up thing for her career. Because she likes performing in arenas more than small bars. Because she likes the crowd screaming every lyric back at her instead of listening and discovering. Because being famous is as important to her as making music.

Lauren exhales, long and low, and she wants to yell. She wants to tell Camila she is the worst kind of person; she’s the kind of person they used to giggle at and roll their eyes over when they first started this whole thing.

But she doesn’t. Because Lauren knows Camila wouldn’t hear her. She wouldn’t understand. It’d be a waste of breath.

The car rolls to a stop in front of the apartment complex she’s staying in, and the driver gets out to open her door.

“Bye, Camz,” Lauren offers.
She wants it to sound bitter and accusatory. She wants it to sound final. But it comes out sadder than she intends, betraying a hurt Lauren wants to bury under the fire of righteousness blooming in her chest. She wills her anger to dissolve any fond feelings she had for the girl across from her.

Camila says nothing. She doesn’t even flinch.

Lauren chokes on the urge to ask if she’s okay.

She fumbles with the apartment’s lock, drops her purse on the counter, and gets a glass of water from the tap. Lauren chugs it down like she’s trying to avoid a hangover. She takes a shower, washes the night off her skin, and scrubs herself red and raw, replaying every little awkward thing Camila did at dinner, trying to decide which ones were flashing warning signs and which ones were just Camila.

She skims over the contract she signed. Camila was right. There’s no mention of publicity stunts or paparazzi photos. There’s enough space for Lauren to refuse and not get sued. She thinks there’s another version of this somewhere in that building, one that would squeeze the freedom right out of anyone who signs it.

Lauren thinks they knew she wouldn’t have.

It’s why they didn’t give her the chance.

She sits on the bed, legs crossed and beginning to tingle with pins and needles. She stares at the contract, rereading sentences and attempting to figure out what other fucked up shit they could do to her.

Her phone vibrates. It’s Normani: Dinner???

A tear falls, and Lauren wipes it away.

Angry. She wants to keep being angry.

She calls Normani. “Hi.”


Lauren squeezes her eyes shut and fights against the tears swimming behind her lids. She’s such a fucking idiot. “She didn’t tell me.” Lauren hiccups, feeling her throat close. “She called the paparazzi, and she didn’t even tell me she was going to do it.”

“What?” Normani’s volume increases, and Lauren flinches. “What the fuck?”

“I don’t know.”

“Oh my god, that’s awful. I’m so sorry.”

“Me too.”

Lauren feels small. She leans forward and rests her forehead against her knee. She feels the stretch in her back, and she thinks of Camila’s back in the car, curved forward and drifting toward the fetal position.

“That’s disgusting, Laur. Honestly,” Normani says. Her tone is sharp and hot, and the angrier she sounds, the less angry Lauren feels. “She had no right to use you that way. It’s morally deprived, and--”
Lauren blinks. “Depraved.”

“What?”

“Depraved. Not deprived.” Lauren’s mouth presses into a thin smile. Her eyelashes are sticky, and a phantom headache pulses behind her forehead. She loves Normani so much. “Deprived is like, to not have something.”

“Oh.”

“I wanted to kiss her,” Lauren confesses.

“Oh,” Normani repeats, but there’s no surprise.

“Shit.” Lauren laughs, a bitter and sad thing.

Anger takes energy, and Lauren just doesn’t have it anymore. She used all of it in the car, in keeping her insides from bursting in every direction and secrets from spilling out of her mouth. She used it in the shower, loofah like sandpaper against her skin. She used it staring at the contract, flipping the pages with her thumb and allowing a papercut to bloom.

Without the anger, she’s only exhausted and sad.

“But,” Normani begins, quiet now, uncertainty making itself known in the lilt of her words. “You knew this would happen, didn’t you?”

“That she’d lie to me about,” Lauren exhales and swallows, “about everything?”

“That you’d want to kiss her.”

Lauren squeezes her eyes closed again. It hurts. Her eyes hurt, her back hurts, her entire body hurts. She slumps over, paper in her lap crinkling, and she shifts, lying on her stomach, cheek pressed against the sheets. “No. I thought I was over it. I really did, Mani.”

Normani is quiet for so long Lauren’s eyes start to feel heavy with sleep, and then: “Why?”

“I don’t know. It’s been a long time. I’ve changed. I’ve grown up. I’ve been in love with other people.”

“That makes sense, I guess. It’s just--”

A beat.

“Just what, Mani?” Annoyance licks at the corner of Lauren’s mouth, and she bites on the inside of her cheek, trying to keep herself from misdirecting it.

“I don’t understand why you risked it. You’ve always had the worst time getting over her.”

Lauren sighs. Her shoulders tense. “I was over her.”

“I know.”

“I needed a job.”

“I know that, too,” Normani says. “I really am sorry she did this to you.”
“I think she hates me,” Lauren whispers.

“You don’t hate her.” Normani’s voice gets higher at the end, but it’s not a question. There’s some mixture of exhaustion and sympathy threading itself through the words and shooting into Lauren’s lungs.

“I wish I did.”

Lauren has never been able to hate Camila. Not ever. Her mom tells her that’s what strength is, but it never feels like it. It feels like something that zaps the muscle from around her bones and heart, leaving her weak, vulnerable, and making it that much easier for other people to break her, too.

“I’ll beat the pipsqueak up for you,” Normani offers.

Lauren laughs, but it turns into a sob. “I really w-wanted to kiss her. I- I probably-- We were done. We weren’t coworkers anymore, and I--”

She’s crying too hard, the words a stuttered slur slipping from her sad mouth. She gasps around air her lungs can’t seem to find.

“I know, hun,” Normani says, gentle, like Lauren’s made of shattered glass, and she’s trying to pick up the pieces without splitting her own skin open.

“I’m so stupid.”

“No, you’re not. She is.”

It’s not really a comforting thought.

Lauren knows it isn’t true.

She thinks about how Camila always knew what to say to make her feel a little bit better when anxiety threatened to tug her stomach out of her body, when a boy stomped on her heart, or when she missed her abuela so much it felt like there was a giant black hole where her guts were meant to be, everything going right through her and causing her to feel empty and alone.

Lauren cries harder.

She wakes with a crick in her neck, lying with her feet on a pillow and her head at the end of the bed. Lauren shivers and licks at her dry mouth. It takes considerable effort to open her eyes, glued shut with tears.

Her phone is a mess: dozens of text messages, email alerts from Heather and Mark, and her battery dipping below 10%. She has a headache, she feels like she got hit by a car, and the thought of dealing with everyone else’s emotional fallout has Lauren wanting to close her eyes and go back to sleep.

She tries for a solid minute, spinning herself around so her head rests on the pillow. Lauren pulls the covers up to her chin, but it’s futile. Her brain buzzes with everything strangers will be saying and thinking about her, and with the knowledge that Camila is both exactly the same person and an entirely different one.
Lauren rolls out of bed, makes herself a cup of coffee, and plugs her phone in despite wanting to let it die. She checks her email and makes the mistake of scrolling through Twitter, where someone has already tweeted for Camila. There’s a predictable flood of annoying responses, and Lauren swallows around the urge to reply to someone, anyone, letting them know they can stop talking about this bullshit now.

She knows it would only make her feel better for a few minutes, before she got yelled at, the tweet got deleted, and everyone started being annoying about that, too.

Lauren mindlessly watches the news, sinking into the feeling of how awful and fucked up the world is. Her phone rings and Dinah’s name flashes across the screen. Lauren chews on her bottom lip and waits until it goes to voicemail.

Not even a minute later, it rings again.

“What?” Lauren says, short and sharp.

“Someone woke up on the wrong side of Camila’s bed.”

“Dinah,” Lauren starts, grimacing and scratching at the back of her neck. “What do you want?”

“I want to know how you guys are, jeez. Put Walz on. She hasn’t responded to my text messages yet. She’s rude, and I don’t know why I’m friends with her.”

“I don’t, either,” Lauren mumbles.

Something about that catches Dinah’s attention, because her voice shifts down a notch. “Wait, what?”

“Nothing happened, Dinah.” She’s already tired of telling people. She thinks about how she has to explain to her family, Ally, and all her friends. Scrubbing her hand over her face, Lauren’s stomach clenches. “She set me up.”

Silence.

Lauren watches the time change: 9:08 to 9:09, and then she says: “I’m going to hang up now.”

“Wait, Lo, come on. Give me a sec here.”

“Why?” Lauren asks. “You only need a minute to come up with some magical explanation that excuses what she did?”

“Okay… but, you know it’s not her fault–”

“–Bullshit.”

“It’s not all her fault,” Dinah corrects. “She was just doing her job.”

Lauren rolls her eyes. “And her job is vile. A headline matters more to her than I do. It’s fine.”

“Okay, listen.” Dinah sighs as though Lauren’s the one being ridiculous. “I know you’re going to want to interrupt me and yell about how I don’t know her as well as you do, because of Cuba, or Miami, or the last month, or whatever other crap you wanna pull out of your ass. But I do know her, and I know that when she left, I told her I couldn’t deal with her worried calls about going solo. It was just-- It was just too hard.
“And I know that over the last eight years, I’ve still gotten some of those calls at gross times of night, when an interview has gone badly, or a crowd was too big, or whatever, I don’t freaking know. I just know her mom’s not there, and she’s breathing unsteadily over the phone and not making any sense. And she’s probably having a panic attack.

“Maybe that means she cares about her career more than my feelings. But I think it means those were the times she didn’t have anyone else, and she trusted me enough to call and breathe with her over the phone. She always spends the next day apologizing an annoying amount.” Lauren pictures a fond eye roll. She can imagine a smile tugging at Dinah’s mouth that she doesn’t let take hold, because Dinah rarely gets the chance to lecture people, and she wants to take full advantage.

“I don’t know if I’m a dumbass for loving her. I don’t care what you think. I’m not in Mila’s stupidly smart brain, and it’s possible she doesn’t give a fuck about you and doesn’t feel bad. But I doubt that’s true, and I think you know that it’s not true. Shit, I hope that made sense. Anyway, save me the speech.”

Lauren decides not to point out that Dinah just gave one. She blinks, eyebrows furrowing. “She’s not some puppet, Dinah.”

“No. But you know as well as anybody that she’s doesn’t get the final say in everything.”

“I’m just supposed to forgive her?”

“No, gosh, I thought you were smart.”

“Thanks,” Lauren drawls.

“You’re not supposed to be an emotional bitch. That’s all.”

Lauren purses her lips and reads the headlines running across the bottom of the television screen, happy that, at least to MSNBC, she’s not news. “Fine,” she relents, too tired, the spreading pain in her chest too dull. “I’ll think about it.”

Lauren goes home to Miami with all the exhaustion from the last month settling heavy into her bones. The hours of sleep she skipped finally take their toll, and she sleeps for 12 hours the first night she’s back, curled up on her side in her childhood bedroom, feeling safe and protected from everyone prying into her life anew.

The next night, her dad makes harina con cangrejo, her mom makes arroz con leche, and if that wasn’t enough of a sign, her dad looks at her with soft, sympathetic eyes and says: “You’re going to be okay, mija.”

Lauren shakes her head. “I know. I’m fine.”

“If you ever need anybody to talk to--”

“--You’re down the hall. I know.” Lauren accidentally hits her spoon against the side of her bowl, and some pudding splatters onto the table cloth. She wipes it away with her thumb, but it leaves a discolored, uneven stain.

Her dad laughs, but it’s not as hearty as usual. “I just wanted to reiterate.”
“Thank you.” She half-smiles at him.

“I hope Camila is doing well,” her dad says. “Although, she’s probably used to those scoundrels by now.”

Her mom clears her throat but doesn’t say anything.

Lauren didn’t offer up details about Camila calling the paparazzi without her consent, but her parents know how she feels about cameras being shoved into her face and the fame game. She didn’t tell Taylor, either, even though her sister has her life together and gives good advice. Taylor would have told their parents. Her parents are weird about Camila as it is, and Lauren doesn’t want the conversation to devolve to the point where she feels the need to defend her.

“She’s fine,” Lauren replies, clipped.

Camila hasn’t contacted her, and Lauren super doesn’t care that she hasn’t even tried to apologize. Lauren is busy being wrapped in the familiar smells of her home, she finally got a decent night’s sleep, and she only checked Twitter once, spotting a tweet she didn’t write before closing the app.

She doesn’t want to think about Camila or the pictures, because when she does, anger and sadness slots itself into the notches of her spine, less intense than before, but undeniably there.

Her dad finishes his pudding. Lauren can see the gears turning in his head, thinking of something funny, sympathetic and open to say, just to make sure Lauren knows she can confide in him about anything, even Camila, so she cuts him off: “This is really good, Mom.”

Her mom’s stiff shoulders shift, and she tilts her head. “Thank you.”

“I missed your cooking.”

“If you have any requests, I’m going to the store on Thursday.”

“I’ll think about it,” Lauren says.

“What about that chicken with the capers?” her dad asks.

Lauren’s phone buzzes against the table, and Ally’s name lights up the screen. “I’m just going to take this.” Lauren pushes her chair back, waiting until she’s halfway up the stairs to answer. “Hey.”

“Hi,” Ally says, soft and sweet as honey. “How’re you doing?”

“Good,” Lauren answers, but the breath is shaky.

“Normani told me what happened.”

“Yeah.” Lauren shuts her bedroom door and blinks back tears. “I’m fine. I’ll be okay.”

“Have you talked to Camila?”

“No.”

“You should.”

Lauren sits on her bed and chews on her bottom lip. “I’m good, thanks.”

“Lauren,” Ally says, not unkind.
“You don’t like her, either.” It’s petulant and absurd, and Lauren falls back onto her mattress. She runs her nails over the sensitive patch of skin below her belly button where her T-shirt has ridden up.

“I let bygones be bygones,” Ally corrects, too much amusement in her voice for Lauren’s liking. “And you like her.”

Lauren huffs. “I do not.”

“Okay, but you should still talk to her.”

“Why?”

“You need closure.”

“There’s nothing quite like the closure of being yelled at by paparazzi because she just couldn’t help herself,” Lauren says, low and bitter.

“You sound totally over it,” Ally deadpans.

Lauren exhales, feeling her body go concave. She refuses to cry about this again. “I really thought things were good. But she just--” her voice cracks. “She didn’t even warn me. It’s so fucked up.”

Ally hums. “Do you remember when you were dating that girl, Juana? It was toward the end of your contract, and you had to go to that party with that guy? Dan or Dave or something?”

“Yes.” Lauren knows where Ally is heading.

“Tara had you take those pictures on the step-and-repeat. And then you and Dave kissed.”

His name was Dane, but Lauren doesn’t correct Ally. “I told her about the party. I didn’t lie to her.”

“I know. But she broke up with you after the pictures were posted online, anyway.”

“Yeah.” Lauren swallows. She closes her eyes against the lights in her room. Her team only made her kiss Dane because she told them she wasn’t renewing her contract. It’s one of those things Lauren doesn’t think about anymore, but at the time, it resulted in her taking a few too many shots. “Which, I get. Because no one wants to deal with PR shit. I was upfront about it, though. She wasn’t bamboozled.”

“I know. And you have every right to be upset. I would be, too. You’ve been out of the business for a long time now, but Camila hasn’t. You remember how impossible it could be. And if you can’t muster up any empathy for the situation she was put in by people she’s supposed to trust, then how can anybody else?”

“Did Dinah put you up to this?” Lauren asks.

Ally laughs, a tinkling, fond thing. “No, Jesus did.”

It’s Lauren’s turn to laugh, but it fades quickly. Ally is right. She understands that the people in charge don’t give a fuck about Camila’s health or integrity. They just want money. She understands that Camila is still under complicated contracts, and she understands how easy it was, especially in the beginning, to be manipulated into doing terrible things.

“I just-- The anxiety I felt with those cameras in my face?” Lauren starts. “And it’s not like Camila’s a naive kid, Ally. She’s been in the business a long time. She’s had to have signed new contracts by now. She let this happen.”
“I know. But, we both know it’s not always as easy or as simple as saying, “No.””

“Yeah,” Lauren sighs, scraping a hand down her face. Her stomach aches, and she doesn’t know if it’s because she ate too much of her parents’ cooking, or if it’s a result of this conversation. She remembers sitting next to Camila in uncomfortable chairs, too scared to look at each while they got berated for slipping up and saying things they had already been told they shouldn’t, things all too easy to misinterpret.

“Just. Talk to her. I’m sure she’ll apologize.”

“And that makes it okay?”

“No,” Ally says, warm and kind as ever. “You know that. But it’s a start. At least do it for yourself. You deserve an apology.”

“I do,” Lauren agrees.

“And please call me if you ever need anything. If my phone is on do-not-disturb, just call me twice so I pick up.” It’s sincere and worried, and Lauren hates that however Normani phrased the explanation, it made Ally think Lauren might need to call her at ungodly hours of the morning to process or cry.

“I’m fine,” she reiterates.

She wants to be so fine that she doesn’t have to remind people she’s fine.

Camila ignores her calls at first. It’s irritating.

Lauren has to text Dinah, who intercedes, and then Camila finally calls her back and apologizes.

Lauren believes her. She knows Camila is sorry.

She has gotten a lot of Camila’s apologies over the years. There’s something that twists in Lauren’s gut when she knows Camila’s “I’m sorry,” is not really true, and there’s something that releases when Lauren knows she means it.

The second time Camila calls her, Lauren’s brow furrows. “Hey?”

“Hi. What’s up?” Camila asks.

“Not much.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Lauren studies the paused *American Horror Story* scene in front of her: the dutch angle and Lily Rabe’s wavy blonde hair. She brushes some dust off her laptop with her pointer finger. “Okay.”

She knows Camila’s finalizing her album. Camila’s team keeps sending Lauren emails she forces herself to read in case she misses a crucial piece of information she’ll kick herself for ignoring later.

“I’m supposed to tweet something about our song,” Camila says.
“Okay?” Lauren feels her next too shallow breath sharply.

“I don’t know…” Camila trails off.

Lauren gathers her hair and flips it over her left shoulder. She hates this. She knows how important marketing and publicity is, and she knows Camila has to do it: tweet, livestream, travel to every big city’s big radio station, and charm her way through talk shows, even the ones nobody watches. Being attached to the promo tour bristles underneath Lauren’s skin, her shoulders tensing. “Am I supposed to do anything?”

“Someone will tweet for you,” Camila breathes.

“Right.” Somehow the single syllable manages to be too short, too harsh.

“You can do it yourself, if you want. Like I’m doing,” Camila rushes.

“No.” Lauren swallows and shakes her head. “No, somebody else can do it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine, Camila.” Lauren shifts her laptop onto her nightstand and stretches her legs, pointing her toes.

“I know this sucks. But I just. I like doing as much of it myself as I can. Then it’s coming from me and not Heather and Mark, y’know?”

“Yeah, I get it.” Lauren chews on her bottom lip.

She admires Camila, really. Her team is already paying somebody, or some group of somebodys, to draft a series of tweets that’ll cover the next six months, but instead, she’s going to write new ones herself. Lauren knows Camila loves her job, but she also knows how exhausting it is. Camila is giving herself more work to be as authentic as she can despite the limits in place.

Lauren’s mind flickers with the thought that Camila tweeting for herself is more real and genuine than Lauren letting Camila’s team access her Twitter and spout stupid bullshit on her behalf. Camila is taking the action Lauren would uphold as right, and Lauren is doing the antithesis. She rolls her neck. Ignores it.

“Is there any like, lyric you like? Or, I don’t know, anything you don’t want me to say?” Camila asks.

Lauren huffs. “Can’t think of anything. Not that you’d be allowed to say, anyway.”

“Right. Um,” Camila whispers before clearing her throat. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have called you. I just thought-- you know, that you’d want a say because… yeah, anyway, sorry.”

“Camila,” Lauren says, closing her eyes. “You’re right. I appreciate you asking.”

“Yeah?”

She can picture Camila biting her lip, eyes wide and vulnerable. Lauren pulls her own lip between her teeth in response. “Yeah. Thanks.”

“I’ll probably just tweet a lyric,” Camila says.

“Okay.”
“Mark and Heather will be fine with that. I’ll have to reply to a fan who guesses it’s the song we did together or something, but I think--”

“Camila,” Lauren cuts her off. She really, really doesn’t want to hear about this.

“They won’t even let an intern handle this one.”

Lauren’s laugh surprises herself. “Oh my god.”

“You’re making everyone’s job harder,” Camila says, light and airy and nice. Like she appreciates that Lauren is causing her team aggravation simply by existing.

“Good.” Lauren smiles small, running a hand through her hair. She wishes she wasn’t a cog in the system at all, but if she has to be, she prefers making the machine run less smoothly and efficiently.

“I have to go,” Camila says.

“Okay. Have a good night.”

“I will. You too.”

“Bye,” Lauren says.

The next beat stretches. Lauren can almost hear Camila breathing, and she feels her hesitation palpably. “It was nice talking to you. Bye, Lauren.”

Camila makes it really difficult to stay upset with her, to hold on to the bitterness and anger Lauren is trying to remember. It’s easy to forget when Camila says her name the way she does, soft and warm, fluttering in Lauren’s stomach.

Between Dinah’s almost coherent words, Ally’s measured advice, Camila apologizing, the snap she sends Lauren with an ice cream cone the size of her head, and a text asking if Lauren thought Halle from The Parent Trap remake was into tie-dye girl (obviously), Lauren lets forgiveness spread through her body.

It feels better than holding a grudge, and she has other things to worry about anyway, like finding a job.

She lands one running sound for live performances at a bar downtown. It pays enough, and it’s not awful, but it’s not what Lauren is looking to do, either. She does some half-hearted apartment hunting, but she doesn’t really want to stay in Miami. There aren’t any studio jobs available to her here, and while it’s fine to make sure half-decent bands sound fully decent while playing for middle-aged people on dates, Lauren thinks she’ll lose her mind if she’s stuck doing it forever.

It’s not a creative breeding ground the same way a studio is, and it’s not what Lauren wants.

She leans against her parents’ kitchen counter, breaking apart a poptart just after eleven in the morning and contemplating whether she needs to wash her hair before work tonight.

Her phone vibrates.

“Hey, nerd.”
“Takes one to know one,” Camila says.

Lauren nibbles on the poptart’s crust and rolls her eyes. “Very clever.”

“I thought so.” Camila’s voice has a smug timbre to it, as though she isn’t aware Lauren is being sarcastic. “How are you?”

“Good. You?”

Lauren hates this: the formalities that have slotted between them. They might as well make idle chat about the weather before getting to the core of what Camila wants to say. This is why they don’t talk on the phone often; there’s too much pressure and expectation, and it’s too immediate. Lauren knows they both prefer having time to craft a response and make sure their words are clear and careful, a studied and deliberate ease to them.

It gives the impression they’re back to a place of trust and friendship they haven’t been at in a long time, a place Lauren doesn’t think they’ll ever really reach again.

“Really good. I feel good. Just focusing on work. Um.” Lauren can hear the breath Camila takes. “I just wanted to let you know the final version of the song is done, complete, finished, cleared by the suits, has everyone’s stamp of appro--”

“Camila,” Lauren cuts in. “That’s great.”

“Yeah.” She pauses. “They’ll send it to you soon. I just-- I just wanted to let you know. Um, and I wrote something for you. It’s just.” She inhales, frustration cracking her voice.

“Camila,” Lauren says softly, balancing her phone between her ear and shoulder before splitting the remains of her poptart in half. A few crumbs spill against her shirt and onto the floor. “It’s okay.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

“It’s an email.”

“Okay.” Lauren blinks. She has no idea why Camila is being so dramatic.

“Just to kind of explain myself, you know? I’m not great with words the way you are, but sometimes it’s easier to write my thoughts down. It’s just to say thanks.”

“Thanks?” Lauren takes another bite of poptart and feels the edge of the counter digging into her back.

There’s a considerable sigh, and Lauren’s mouth wants to twitch into a smile. “Yeah. I don’t know. It’s dumb. I know I already told you how much working on the song together means to me, but I wanted to explain myself better, and I felt like it was easier to do it this way.”

“Okay.” Lauren’s throat feels dry, and she doesn’t know if it’s the pastry or the fact that Camila clearly wrote an emotional, personal email and felt the need to warn her.

“Just, don’t freak out when you get it, okay?”

“Sure.”

“Thanks.” Lauren can hear the smile in Camila’s voice.
“You’re dramatic, you know that?” Lauren says.

“Takes one to know one,” Camila counters.

Lauren laughs. She can’t help it. “You really are an idiot. But, you know, thanks.”

“For what?” Camila asks quietly, an edge of awe to the words, reminding Lauren of too late nights on tour buses, rolling down the expressway and being able to feel the momentum that kept them from falling asleep well after the point of exhaustion. It reminds Lauren of an honesty she thought she wanted, but was afraid to have directed at her.

“The opportunity.”

She can hear Camila swallow. “It was my pleasure.”

Lauren feels heat in her cheeks, down her neck and spreading through her chest. She knows, if she could see it, Camila would smirk at the flush of her skin. Whatever this push-pull between them is, Lauren knows she can’t get too comfortable. It can turn on a dime.

“In other news,” Lauren starts, a desperate transition to distract herself from the sparking of her pulse. “I think my dad’s been eating my poptarts.”

Camila gasps. “How rude!”

“It’s underhanded and shady. I bought them myself and wrote my name on the box.”

“Like, what is this? Just because he’s responsible for you existing, he gets to eat your food? It’s not like he’s the one who birthed you.”

“Exactly.” Lauren pushes off the counter. “Men are so entitled.”

This is safer territory. Easy and uncomplicated. This, she can do.

* *

Camila finds herself back in the studio with Jeremiah, rerecording parts of songs the label liked but found lacking. He instructs her over and over to deliver something other than shit. The day her voice keeps breaking around the high note of a ballad, he rolls his eyes and asks, “Is this even in your range?”

“Shove it,” Camila says.

He laughs, hearty and loud, before insisting she try again.

Camila meets with a vocal coach and focuses on strengthening her diaphragm, scaling from her lower to higher register, and refining her belting technique. There are a handful of new exercises she starts doing almost daily. Camila feels herself getting stronger and more confident, becoming aware of when she sacrifices proper technique for an easy solution. She practices ignoring those easy
solutions and doing the hard work.

Camila re-ups at a yoga studio, attends class three times a week, and leaves with a light sheen of sweat coating her skin. The euphoria of endorphins rushes through her veins. She likes the teacher’s focus on being in touch with her body and her breathing, feeling each movement, pressing her feet into the ground -- solid and steady -- and feeling alive and present.

She reviews the album artwork and gives her input on the cover: knees pulled up against her chest, her head tilted, eyes wide but piercing, and mouth relaxed. It’s soft, all white and light except for her skin, eyes and hair. No one seems to agree on where to place her name or the album title, arguing over what font to use and how large it should be, but eventually they reach a settlement.

They let Camila title the record after paring down the options. She settles on *The Breath Before Relapse*.

Fred, Bernadette, Roger, and the label whittle her tracklist down to twelve, fourteen for the deluxe version, and another two for Japan. Camila sees the song she wrote with Lauren sitting solidly at number eight. The label has another producer fiddle with it, and their name goes next to Lauren’s in the credits. Camila only takes one moment to cover it with her thumb, returning the song to its original form.

She shoots a video for the lead single; the annoyingly bland and catchy thing she recorded with Jeremiah, the track that takes her voice but no other part of her. Camila hates the song more than it deserves, but she likes the video. She likes twirling around in a pretty dress, dancing like an idiot and smiling into the camera. Her mom tells her it looks like she’s doing a commercial for Thursday Night on ABC, and Camila laughs so hard she can’t breathe, holding up an imaginary wine glass to clink.

The director has her do some serious takes, too, going on about smoldering eyes and seductive smirks. There’s a small dance break, and Camila performs it by herself on set, the sound of her voice looping in her ear, and the choreographer complimenting how clean her movements have become.

She doesn’t like eyes on her as she dances by herself.

Camila likes dancing, has learned to love it, even. She knows she’s gotten better at it, but she’s a singer, and she never wanted to be a dancer. Dancing makes her feel more stupidly vulnerable than almost anything else.

When the video comes in a few weeks later, Camila gives feedback on the edit, trying to minimize shots of her dancing and focus more on her face. She argues it fits better with the feel they’re going for this era: the last was glitzy, glamorous popstar; they’re returning to the real, vulnerable and intimate, even on pulsing tracks with beats that urge undulating hips, tracks meant for the radio.

The label has her approve the minor changes, and Camila holds on to the shred of control she still feels and doesn’t allow herself to spiral out. She focuses on the things she can do instead of the things she can’t.

Things she can control: the sporadic texts she sends Lauren, mostly just updating her on what’s happening with the song and the album. Camila knows Lauren’s receiving official emails from her team, and that she probably doesn’t care all that much, anyway, but how much Lauren cares is in the ‘can’t’ column, so Camila doesn’t dwell on it. She can control the snaps she sends when it’s late in Miami and there’s a good chance Lauren is asleep. Camila makes them absurd, using all the most ridiculous filters and pulling the ugliest faces she can think up. She sings Disney songs off-key and shows Lauren the cupcake she plans on giving to Sofi, but might just eat at midnight, because she’s had a long day. She recites lines from Lizzie McGuire episodes and giggles too much.
Lauren usually responds the next day, sometimes in the morning, clearly still lying in her bed, hair sticking up in every direction, lips chapped. On bad days, Lauren simply rolls her eyes or frowns, telling Camila’s she’s ridiculous. Maybe it’s fond, but Camila doesn’t think so, not on the bad days. On good days, Lauren laughs and chews on the vegan bacon she has for breakfast, mouth disgustingly open. She sings the next part of the song back, and she quotes: “Sing for me, Paolo,” in her best Isabella accent.

It’s good.

They’re good.

Camila’s good.

While lying in bed and counting how many hours of sleep she can get before her wake up call -- five, if her body succumbs in the next 20 minutes -- Lauren sends her a snap, unprompted, and Camila is so, so good.

She opens it with bleary eyes, something warm glowing in her chest.

Lauren’s at a club. It’s dark, but Camila can make out her dilated eyes and sweat sticking a strand of hair across her forehead. She’s with a man Camila recognizes from a handful of her Instagram posts. When Camila holds her phone closer to her ear and turns up the volume, she’s not surprised to find the club playing an almost familiar remix of the biggest hit off her third album, because Lauren’s caption reads: your songggg.

Camila watches the snap a second time, feels the light in her chest travel down her spine and curl into her sock-covered toes.

She gets less than five hours of sleep. The thrum of Lauren drunkenly singing along to a song she wrote keeps Camila awake, biting around the smile she can’t contain.

Camila doesn’t even feel that tired in the morning, the dregs of adrenaline sticking to her skin, keeping her eyes wide and alert, the snap flickering in the back of her head.

The single drops at the end of October, and her album’s release date is slated for December 6th, pushed up a week to avoid competing directly with Taylor’s. Taylor sends Camila a copy of her album along with a homemade gift basket congratulating Camila on The Breath Before Relapse. The present contains a detailed note with a list of all the elements and lyrics of Camila’s album that Taylor loves, a pair of hand-knitted rainbow socks, and the snickerdoodles Taylor makes that she knows are Camila’s favorite. It’s sweet, and very Taylor, and Camila mentally adds her name to the ever growing list of people she needs to remember to call more often.

She does an interview with Billboard the first week of November.

At this point in her career, Camila has done enough of these to understand the process. She knows the restaurant they pick conveys something -- an authentic, family-run Mexican place in the heart of LA -- as well as the outfit she and her stylist painstakingly assemble from Camila’s actual closet: a dark pair of skinny jeans, designer boots, and an old sweatshirt freshly washed, smelling like fabric softener. She wears her hair up in a loose, messy bun, a few strands artfully falling around her face. Her makeup minimal, but not done herself.
They’re selling her. Always selling her to sell songs.

Camila has gotten better at this part. She’s better at recognizing the moments where she has to pick her words carefully to make sure they can’t be twisted, taken out of context, and quoted to relay something she didn’t mean. She’s gotten better at spotting which interviewers are looking for a story with drama and headline-grabbing quotes, using Camila to advance their own careers rather than telling her truth. She knows which interviewers maintain a relationship with her label. In return for their cooperation, they gain exclusives and meatier interviews that mean something more than a brief spike in hits and a few days of drama. Billboard is the latter, which makes it easier. Heather and Mark will read the article before it’s published, meticulously oversee edits, and guarantee it reads the way they want: just the right amount of drama and casting Camila in the correct light, whatever that means.

She still smiles when she sees the interviewer, waving animatedly before slipping into the chair.

“Hi.” Camila holds out her hand. “I’m Camila.”

“Hi.” The woman’s mouth quirks up. “Stacey.”

She’s already signed the agreement, sliding it over to Roger. Camila sits quietly while Stacey and Roger clarify what topics will be covered, what questions need to be asked, and what subjects Stacey’s not allowed to broach.

The conversation is recorded for accuracy.

Camila knows ‘accuracy’ is not all that important. She doesn’t understand the show of these types of interviews, but she’s learned to play along anyway.

She orders for the table when the waiter comes by, and when he leaves to give the ticket to the kitchen, she explains: “My family likes to come here. My sister swears by the carne con papas. She thinks theirs is better than my dad’s, but I’ve taken a vow of secrecy.” Camila giggles, fake and forced. “Oops. Don’t tell her I told you.”

Stacey laughs, too, and it sounds about as genuine as Camila’s.

“‘Loose’ is doing well,” Stacey offers.

“Thanks. The video was really fun to film.”

“It comes across. Fits the song and displays your personality.” Stacey sips her water. “Is it representative of the direction your album takes?”

Camila hums, recalling her talking points and the practice interview Mark did with her a few days ago. “Yes and no. The dance influence permeates the record, definitely. But I drew inspiration from a lot of different types of music and time periods. The fun was in making all these separate things cohesive. I tried to give myself a more focused sound. I wanted to grow. I wanted someone to hear a track and say, ‘that’s a Camila Cabello song,’ you know?”

“Some people might say that the ‘Camila Cabello factor’ is the openness with which you share yourself in your music and with your fans. Is that something you want to continue?”

“Of course. That’s kind of the challenge. Being brave enough to share more of myself with each song. Whether I wrote it or not, it has to say something about my soul. I’m an open book, anyway, so my fans would immediately call bullshit if something didn’t seem true to me.” Camila smiles, runs a hand through her hair and exhales.
“‘Loose’ is about you, then?” Stacey raises an eyebrow.

Camila coughs, feeling a bite of food lodge in her throat. She tries to clear it and smacks her palm against her chest. “No, not literally. I’m more of a homebody during my down time. But I do like to dance, even if I’m not very good at it.”

“Come on, we’ve seen your moves.” Stacey smiles kindly, jotting something down in a notepad. “You reunited with an ex-bandmate for a song.”

“Lauren.” It’s ridiculous how just saying her name makes Camila’s pulse jump, and she fights the urge to blush, telling herself it’s just nerves. At least half her interview prep was about Lauren, and if she fucks it up, Heather and Mark will never forgive her.

“How did that come about?”

“We were talking on the phone one day, and she had just graduated from Berklee with a degree in music production. We’ve always connected, and it seemed like a natural step to take.”

“Musically,” Roger cuts in.

“Right.” Camila nods. “Connected musically. We’ve always had similar taste.”

Talking point number one: check.

“What was it like getting back into the studio together?” Stacey asks.

“It was good. Every writing and producing partner is different, but there always has to be dialogue, you know? A willingness to mess up and pitch an idea that is just… not good. I’ve always had a team around me that I know has my best interests at heart.” She glances at Roger, and he shoots her a smile.

Camila rolls her shoulders back.

She can do this; she can steer the conversation away from specifics about her relationship with Lauren. Mark hammered that into her: not ‘Lauren,’ but ‘my team.’ Stacey’s not allowed to probe further, anyway. “I’ve been really lucky that my team truly gives me room to grow as an artist.”

“If there’s one thing you want your fans to take away from this album, what is it?”

“Um.” Camila bites her lip. “There’s themes of survival and growth, and I think I’d want my fans to know that I’ve grown a lot throughout my career, but that growth isn’t always a straight line. Sometimes there are setbacks, and sometimes you regress, but that’s okay. It’s all about the journey and what you learn from it.” Camila sighs. “I’ve learned a lot, and I’ve gotten to do that because of them, and I’m so grateful. I’m so grateful my fans have been on this journey with me.” She blinks, remembers: “And I hope they continue coming along for the ride.”

Stacey touches on her relationship with Shawn, and Camila explains they’re still friends, that the breakup was amicable but difficult. She knows Mark and Heather will make sure to add some description of her looking sad or conflicted.

That’s the other thing they’re running this press tour on: for every mention of Lauren, there needs to be two of Shawn.
Shawn holds out a glass of pinot noir.

Camila takes it, leans against the island in his kitchen, and glances between him and Bridget. “Wait, how tall are you?”

“5’ 9’,” Bridget offers. Her smile is warm, and the right side of her mouth seems to naturally tick up a little higher than the left. One of those imperfections that makes beautiful people even more breathtaking.

And Bridget is really beautiful.

Her black hair curls around her collarbones, eyes darker than Camila’s, but also brighter than Camila has ever seen. She’s tall and thin, and Camila is not surprised to learn Bridget tried her hand at modeling before becoming a realtor. Camila makes a joke about Bridget dating her instead, and Shawn rolls his eyes while Bridget laughs uncomfortably.

“Maybe we can spin this,” Camila says. “Say you dumped me because I was too short. Your neck hurt too much from having to lean down to kiss me.”

A smile flits across his face, but he says her name like a warning.

Camila glances at Bridget. She holds the stem of her wine glass tightly in her left hand, right arm slung protectively across her stomach. Her face pinches together, her mouth thin.

“Sorry,” Camila says. “Just let me know when I’m being annoying.”

“Sorry,” Bridget sighs. “I’m just not used to how this works. It’s hard for me to separate the fact that you two dated from the fact that, um, you didn’t.”

“Right. Yeah, that makes sense.”

“So, if you could stop making comments about kissing me, I think that would make everyone feel a bit better.” Shawn raises an eyebrow and takes a sip of wine.

Camila bites down around the instinct to reassure Bridget that kissing Shawn was like kissing her brother. An imaginary brother that she doesn’t have. Not bad, per se, but weird. She’d do it again if she had to, but she’s not dying to get another taste or anything. She’s had worse kisses than the handful of staged ones with Shawn. She’s had worse real kisses, even.

“Stop that,” Shawn says.

“I didn’t say anything!” Camila protests.

“Your face said enough.”

Camila rolls her eyes. “Whatever. You’re not psychic.”

“And you’re not as good an actress as you like to think.”

“Let’s stop being mean to me,” Camila says, tapping her fingers along the marble countertop. “So, how exactly did you two meet? Make it as romantic as possible.”

Shawn and Bridget look at each other, and Bridget giggles underneath her breath when they make eye contact. He runs a hand through his hair, and she brings her glass toward her mouth but doesn’t
take a sip. Their bodies lean in, almost like a magnetic force is pulling them together, and Camila wants to fake gag at how cute the display is.

It’s nice.

Only a little annoying.

She’s only a little jealous.

“We met at a charity gala in New York,” Shawn explains. “And there was this ugly antique vase up for auction--”

“--and I knew it would look perfect in my mom’s kitchen,” Bridget cuts in. “And I could probably win it. Since I had no shot at the big ticket items, and this vase was incredibly, incredibly, incredibly ugly.”

Bridget glances at Shawn, a quiet, private laugh escaping her lips, and Shawn’s eyes crinkle. He reaches out, pressing his hand against her back. She shifts closer to him, and Camila doesn’t know why her brain supplies a sarcastic, “Incredible” in Lauren’s voice.

“Except, it was also the perfect gift for my lawyer’s office. My primary attorney is clumsier than you, and I’d witnessed her breaking her last one when I was there the week before.

“So every couple of minutes, I’d go back to the sheet, and there was always another bid.”

“Oh my god,” Camila says. “You got into a bidding war at a silent auction?”

“Yes,” Shawn affirms.

“He gave me the vase,” Bridget says, leaning fully into Shawn’s side as his arm wraps around her waist. “Now, whenever we visit my mom, it’ll be right there on her coffee table.”

“Let me guess, in exchange, you had to go on a date with him?”

“Camila,” Shawn laughs.

“I actually asked for his number,” Bridget explains, gazing at Shawn with so much affection it radiates throughout the room, making Camila’s heart ache with the warmth of it. She wonders if Shawn knows Bridget loves him. “I figured any guy nice enough to let me take an ugly vase home to my mom without asking for anything in return is worth my time.”

“He is,” Camila agrees.

They sit down for lunch, and the tension drains from Bridget’s shoulders the more Camila listens to their bland and cute couple anecdotes, the more Shawn fills her glass of water without her having to ask, and the more she finishes his sentences and he lets her, like he was just waiting for her to jump in and tell the story.

And Camila promises, really, she’s only a little jealous.

When they finish eating, Bridget rushes off to show a house in Beverly Hills, and Camila and Shawn end up by the piano.

“What do you think?” he asks, pressing Middle C with his thumb and holding it down. The note rings, clear and crisp, through his living room.
“Of Bridget?”

Shawn nods.

“I think…” Camila trails off, slowly running her fingers over the black keys, pushing them down without allowing them to make a sound. “She’s great.”

“Yeah?” Shawn’s eyes are soft and hopeful.

“Really great.” Camila smiles.

“I think so, too. I, um, we’re thinking about moving in together.”

“What?”

“Too fast?”

“No, oh my god. That’s seriously like-- You’re serious.” Camila whacks his arm. “I mean, I could tell you guys were in love, I just didn’t know you were so serious.”

“Ow!” He rubs his arm.

Camila rolls her eyes. “I’m happy you’re happy.”

“Thanks.” There’s a beat of silence, and then Shawn says: “I listened to your album the other day.”

Camila inhales, scrunching up her face and looking at him. “Oh, no.”

“Not ‘oh, no,’” he mocks. “It’s good. Not as good as your last one--”

Camila smacks him again.

“--Hey! I still liked it.”

“What’s wrong with it?” Camila asks.

Shawn shrugs and rubs his forehead. “The quality varies, I guess. ‘Todo El Tiempo,’ is one of the best things you’ve ever written. I would have been shocked if you helped write ‘Miss Me,’ but the production is impeccable. ‘Loose’ is fun, but an obvious radio grab. The song you did with Lauren isn’t the best one on the album, but it feels like that’s the direction you should go in, instead of a pitstop on one record.”

Camila nods.

That makes sense.

Shawn has always been brutally honest with her, and she has always found it helpful. Whereas sometimes she feels the criticism she gets is harsh, intended to cut her down and not much else, Shawn’s always feels constructive. Her gut clenches around the disappointment and knowledge that Shawn is missing from the album. Camila doesn’t mind PR most of the time, but when it interferes with the music and her process, she can’t help the sour taste on her tongue.

“Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind,” she says.

“Any gems that got cut?”
“Why? You want to steal them?”

Shawn laughs and nudges her shoulder.

“That’s a yes.” Camila smiles, but it fades quickly. She gnaws on her bottom lip. “I wrote a melody the other day. Just on the piano. I haven’t played it for anyone yet. It might be crap, but.”

“But what?” Shawn raises an eyebrow.

Camila exhales slowly, staring down at the keys before setting up her hands. She stretches her left hand for the bass chords, the melody in her right. She murmurs the tempo underneath her breath: “one, two, three, four, one, two, three, four,” before beginning, pressing the keys down softly. Camila fumbles, her left hand not in time with her right. She inhales and sits up straight, improving her posture and repeating the opening phrase.

She feels the melody in her heartbeat, like it’s part of her.

When she finishes, she looks to Shawn, wiping her hands against her jeans. “I know it’s messy, but I think I like it and--”

“Does Lauren know?” he asks.

Camila’s eyebrows furrow. “Know what?”

“That you still feel that way about her.”

“What?” Her head feels the same way it does when she pushes into a handstand for too long -- heavy and woozy. “Who said it’s about her?”

“Mila,” Shawn says softly, squeezing her knee. “We both know you’ve never written a love song that good about anyone else.”

“Who said it’s a love song?”

Shawn arches his eyebrow, sure and kind, causing her meek protest to die in her throat.

“I don’t know,” Camila says, answering his first question. “I don’t know if she knows. I don’t really know anything.”

Nothing will ever thrill Camila quite as much as hearing her own voice traverse through a room, jumping out through the speakers and pushing her from huddle to huddle as she makes the rounds. It’s like a good version of her birthday: she’s the center of attention, everyone has to love her, and she gets a cake. Except she doesn’t have to deal with blowing out candles or growing older; she doesn’t have to reflect on the last year of her life and decide whether she’s glad it happened or wishes she could go back and redo it, erasing all her mistakes and making new ones.

She’s proud of her album.

She’s glad all these people came out to support her and celebrate the hard work of everyone who made her record a reality instead of another dream sparking between the synapses of her brain, forgotten when she peels her eyes open in the morning.
The last thing she wrote were her Thanks Yous. That’s always the last thing Camila does. It reminds her that she can’t do anything alone. That she doesn't want to, even if sometimes, during the long nights recording and long days negotiating, she feels like she does. It reminds her that the best art is collaborative, whether it’s between Camila and Jeremiah, Camila and Shawn, or Camila and her fans. It reminds her to be happy.

She took her Thanks Yous into the label’s office and begged until she got access to a copy room. Camila messed up four different attempts at blowing up the list into a poster before fumbling into success. She taped her Thank Yous on the club’s wall, right by the entrance, and she glances in that direction every time she gets a chance, wondering if the people she thanks will read her words and understand how genuine they are, bubbling up from the most grateful, lightest part of herself, the part of her that still believes in unicorns and fairy tales and soulmates.

Her album drops at midnight, and she stands in a corner tweeting with her fans until she’s called over to the DJ booth and handed a microphone. Camila looks out among the faces, most of them cast in shadow, a blur of people she knows mixed with people she doesn’t. She gently taps her finger against the microphone: “Testing, testing, one two three,” she whispers, before clearing her throat and hearing her voice boom across the room.

The one thing her birthday can hold over album release parties is that no one usually asks her to give a speech. And if they do, it’s her birthday, and she doesn’t have to do anything she doesn’t want to do.

“Sorry,” she says when she feels most of the eyes in the room turn toward her. Camila finds her mom, standing directly in front of her and giving a thumbs up. She remembers to breathe.

“I just wanted to thank you all for coming. This album means a lot to me. I hope you love it as much as I do.” She rattles off a list of people compiled by someone at the label: Roger, Jeremiah, Max Martin, Simon, Lauren, giving their contributions a name. “I’ll shut up now, I--” She spots Lauren leaning against the bar in the back and forgets how to breathe all together. “Yeah, um.” She blinks and forces her eyes to drift over the rest of the crowd. “Sorry, I was always better at singing rather than speaking.” A beat: “Thank you.”

Camila stumbles off stage as the cake comes rolling out, her face staring back at her. She smiles and poses for pictures, the flashes causing white spots to dance around her eyes. She blinks them away before cutting into the pastry, purposefully picking a place that doesn’t slice her face in half and doesn’t result in a gash across her forehead or give her chin a dimple.

More pictures are taken of Camila holding her fork to her mouth before she actually eats a bite. It’s not the best cake she’s ever had, but it’s not the worst, either. Her mom smears frosting on her nose, and Camila returns the favor, swiping her thumb over her piece to give her mom sugary war paint. She laughs, and she almost forgets that Lauren is here. Almost.

And then she spots her again, a little closer than before. Lauren smiles and raises her beer in acknowledgment.

Camila knew Lauren would be here.

Lauren RSVPed, and Camila saw the snap of Lauren at LAX last night, but despite all the conversations they’ve had over the phone, seeing her across the room only reminds Camila of the last time Lauren looked at her, and her stomach flips. The glass of wine she had earlier sloshes around her ears uncomfortably, a high-pitched static telling her to run even as her limbs move her forward.
When it comes to Lauren, Camila is good at sweeping things under the rug.

When it comes to Lauren, Camila is good at ignoring her survival instincts.

Camila makes her way toward Lauren, only briefly losing focus to thank someone from A&R for coming, and urging the intern who let her into the copy room to get a piece of cake before it’s gone. She feels a bit rude, trying to slip away the minute they catch her elbow, but Lauren is right there, chatting with Jeremiah, and Camila always likes the reminder that Lauren is flesh and blood just like her. She hopes their relationship isn’t going to be lived through texts and Snapchat.

She slides over awkwardly, tapping Lauren’s arm. “Hi.”

“Hi.” Lauren’s eyes are dilated, her smile is warm, and Camila knows if she kissed her right now, she’d taste like beer.

“We were just talking about you,” Jeremiah says.

“Only good things, I hope.” Camila forces herself to laugh.

“Not a chance.” He reaches out, playfully smacking her arm. “I should get going. Early day tomorrow. But the album is great, Camila. You should listen to me more often.”

Camila’s mouth twitches up. “Thanks for coming.”

“Of course.” Jeremiah pulls her into a hug. “You did good, kid,” he whispers.

“Thanks. Next time, don’t boss me around so much.”

He laughs, pulling back and rolling his eyes. “Nice to meet you, Lauren. Definitely call me.”

Her smile is tipsy. “I will.”

There’s an awkward beat where Jeremiah walks away, and Camila shifts into the spot he occupied across from Lauren. “Call him?” she asks, feeling it prickle against her skin.

Lauren rolls her eyes. “Networking.”

“Oh. Right.”

Camila feels so stupid.

“Hey, let me buy you a drink.”

“It’s an open bar,” Camila says dumbly.

She blames the glass of wine she already had and seeing Lauren face-to-face for the first time in months, her hair a little longer, curling past her shoulder. She blames the fact that somewhere buried deep, she’s still angry about what Lauren said to her, how she knows Lauren meant it because she likes anything that makes her feel superior. She blames how much she likes Lauren, painfully obvious, everyone in her life poking at the raw nerve. She half-expects her phone to vibrate with a text from Jeremiah saying damn, you real thirsty, huh?

But Lauren laughs.

God, Lauren laughs, grabbing Camila’s hand and pulling her toward the bar, and Camila likes her so much it’s threatening to overtake any last crumbs of rationality she possesses. It sputters in her chest
and jumpstarts her heart.

It’s bad.

She knows it’s bad. Camila feels the same way she felt about Lauren when she was 15, not the way she felt about her at 17 or 18. She knows the way that ends, because Lauren is human, and sometimes Camila has a hard time remembering.

Camila’s twirling the stem of her glass in her hand when Lauren belatedly thinks to ask: “You still like merlot?”

“Sure.” Camila shrugs.

They chat about things that don’t matter: how much Camila misses Miami, Sofi dying her hair for the first time and how the smell of bleach made her want to throw up, Lauren enjoying brunch with her parents on Sundays after mass, almost always hungover from the night before.

And then their song is playing, and Camila blames how she’s caught up with Lauren, alcohol bubbling in her veins, making her blush and lean closer. “We did this,” she says.

Lauren grins. “We did.”

Happy Lauren is Camila’s favorite Lauren. There’s an openness about her, a spontaneity that Camila feels echoed in her own heart. Lauren’s happy now. Her eyes are bright, and her smile is crooked. She’s leaning toward Camila, too, soft and uninhibited, and Camila thinks it’s because of her.

Lauren is happy because of her.

Camila bites at her lip and lets her eyes drift over Lauren’s face.

She knows it’s a bad idea, and there are a lot of excuses unfurling in the back of her mind for later, for why it’s not such a bad idea, or for why she did something so stupid. But then she feels Lauren’s breath on her mouth, and she looks up at Lauren’s wide, glassy eyes, their song pouring out of the speakers like proof that they’re good together.

The kiss is mutual, Lauren opening her mouth against Camila’s, and Camila’s fingers threading in her hair. Lauren’s soft. Her hair against Camila’s palms, her hands finding Camila’s waist, her lips pressing against Camila’s: soft soft soft.

Camila hates beer, but she doesn’t mind it so much on Lauren’s tongue.
six: the sun comes up, i think about you

Chapter Summary

It feels casual, and Lauren’s breathing steadies. There’s no uncomfortable churning in her gut, and her palms don’t go sweaty. She uncrosses her legs and bounces a little so her knees don’t lock. For the first time in a long time, Lauren really believes she and Camila can be friends. They can text sometimes, and catch up over lunch, and Camila probably sends out Christmas cards, so Lauren can receive one of those, and everything will be simple and nice. Nothing deep or complicated or ruined by angst. They can do this. She can do this.

Chapter Notes

As always, all your comments really do make a world of difference to me, and I appreciate them so much. Thank you!

Chapter Title from Follies' "Losing My Mind," by Stephen Sondheim.

Kissing Camila is familiar.

Their song spins around them, the beat and the melody tying them together. The club is dark; everything is shadowy and dense, bodies milling around too closely. Camila’s hand finds Lauren’s cheek, a gentle caress before fingertips thread through her hair. Lauren’s hands find Camila’s waist, the left splayed against her hip, the right still wrapped around her own beer bottle, knuckles brushing against Camila like she needs to be touching her regardless.

Camila’s gotten better at this.

Her mouth moves more confidently than before, an assured rhythm that Lauren can follow just enough to make work, but not enough that it’s predictable. Camila’s mouth is soft, but her teeth nip at Lauren’s bottom lip, and Lauren opens up easy. Camila stumbles, and it takes Lauren a moment to realize she took a step back to place her glass on the bar. There’s a gasp for breath, Camila’s other hand prying open Lauren’s knuckles by her hip bone, and doing the same with Lauren’s beer.

When Camila slips her tongue into Lauren’s mouth, Lauren moves her hand to the small of Camila’s back, pushing her closer so their bodies press together like flowers drying between pages of a book, delicate but firm. Lauren feels Camila everywhere, and her mind flashes to Camila’s email: The way you looked at me, and the sound of your voice, reminded me of who I am. You help me figure out who I want be. Every day. Just by being you. You make the abstract concept of being alive turn into something real for me.

It had made Lauren uncomfortable, the reverence and the way Camila straddled the line between friendship and something more than that. It had made her uncomfortable knowing Camila would probably never be able to say most of it to her face; she would be too nervous or too scared.
But Camila kisses her now without obvious anxiety or fear. She has both hands on Lauren’s face, a softness betrayed by how hard her mouth is. Their teeth hit, and Camila’s tongue slides, slippery and warm, against Lauren’s.

Lauren is tremendously aware of being alive.

“Wanna get out of here?” Camila mumbles against her mouth.

Lauren thinks she can do this. If it’s like this: not too soft, she can do this. She thinks maybe this is what they need to ease the tension. Maybe everything will be fine if they just get out of here and scratch the itch so it goes away.

“Yeah,” she answers, pressing her mouth against Camila’s again and squeezing her hip. “Yeah.”

The air is thick on the ride to Camila’s, their pinkies pressed together in the back of the car they called, not saying a word and listening to Top 40. All Lauren can think about is how Camila kissed her; Camila’s mouth was almost unrecognizable against her own, but the warmth that curled in her stomach was all too familiar.

She thinks she missed this.

She knows she shouldn’t have.

They practically run to Camila’s front door, and Lauren laughs when Camila trips up a step. Camila looks back at her, smile wide and eyes so bright. “Shut up,” she says around a giggle, cheeks red with embarrassment, exertion, and probably wine.

Camila opens the door and wraps her hand around Lauren’s wrist, tugging her inside. She doesn’t let go as she closes the door behind them and locks it, setting the alarm.

Camila gazes at Lauren, bottom lip between her teeth. She looks cute: pupils wide, lashes long and lipstick worn. She leans forward and kisses Lauren once, a solid press of closed lips. Her thumb brushes against Lauren’s pulse, and Lauren wonders if it’s intentional.

Lauren licks her mouth, the wax-like taste of Camila’s lipstick against her tongue. Camila’s smile grows less cute.

“Come on,” Camila says, voice low as she turns and heads toward the stairs. Lauren twists her wrist free, but her hands find Camila’s hips, chasing after her and stumbling against her. Lauren’s heart hammers in her chest.

When Camila finds her bedroom, the door is already ajar. She looks at Lauren, leaning against the jamb, eyes dark and dilated. The shadows dance across Camila’s face, and Lauren wants to trace them with her fingertips and map them with her mouth. The cavity between each breath expands, filling with something that sparks like the static after someone rubs their socks against the carpet. The shock of electricity pulsing beneath Lauren’s skin is oddly exhilarating.

Camila’s mouth tips up in a way that shouldn’t be as tempting as it is.

She’s beautiful.

There’s a lightness to her, and Lauren knows it’s reflected back in herself. They have no right to be having this much fun, to be this weightless, like their relationship is something settled and steady instead of what it is: marred by the past, surrounded by bruises that change colors as though they’re healing, a gaping wound with soft and sticky infection masquerading as a scab. But Camila smiles,
her tongue between her teeth, and Lauren kisses her anyway, their mouths curving against each other.

Camila pulls her into the bedroom.

Lauren closes the door behind them.

No light is flipped on.

“Be careful, this dress cost hundreds of dollars,” Camila says, and Lauren can hear the roll of her eyes as it slips over her shoulders. Lauren’s hands bunch the fabric, pushing it down. She reaches around Camila to finish unzipping it. “I hate this dress.”

Lauren giggles, a barely there push of breath through her teeth. She drops her forehead to Camila’s shoulder, and her laugh muffles against Camila’s skin. “Looks good on you, though.”

“Looks better off me.”

Lauren laughs harder, and Camila does, too. “I can’t believe you just said that.”

“I’m very sexy.”

Lauren looks up and Camila pouts, dress holding on against her hips, hair mused from Lauren’s fingers. She looks ridiculous, and Lauren can feel her mouth twist with her next sentence, but Camila slips a hand into her back pocket, causing Lauren to stumble forward. Camila kisses her dirty and rough, pulling at Lauren’s top lip before running her tongue against the ridges of Lauren’s teeth like a dare she knows Lauren won’t accept. Camila kisses her in a way that she only ever used to do when she was upset about something: angry or jealous or sad.

She’s not any of those things now, Lauren doesn’t think.

She manages to tug the dress down Camila’s hips, and then Lauren’s hands are everywhere Camila’s skin is exposed: shoulders and ribs and thighs. Her skin is warm and soft beneath Lauren’s touch, and Lauren imagines it thrumming the way her pulse does in her own ears. Touching Camila has been complicated far longer than it was ever uncomplicated, but it has never felt wrong. Lauren wishes touching everyone felt like this: made her stomach drop and her pulse find itself between her thighs.

Camila drops to her knees to pull Lauren’s jeans off, and Lauren closes her eyes, because she doesn’t want to admit that Camila was right; she can be very sexy when she wants to be.

Camila knows, regardless, and she helps free Lauren’s feet from the denim before nudging her legs apart and kissing up her inner thigh. Lauren breathes, hoping it’s quieter than it sounds in her head. Because it goes both ways: touching Camila feels just as good as being touched by her feels. It’s stupid, because Camila is so different now. It’s not the same, and Lauren shouldn’t feel the same.

Camila’s hands are gentle, drifting over Lauren’s body the way a plucked petal dances in the wind, but there’s a new hint of roughness from an uptick in guitar playing. Her flyaway hairs tickle along Lauren’s leg, but Lauren doesn’t laugh. Camila presses a light kiss at the juncture of Lauren’s thigh and hip, too close to where she wants Camila, but not close enough. Lauren knows her next breath is the loudest thing in the room.

“You’re beautiful,” Camila whispers, pressing a finger to the damp spot of Lauren’s underwear.

Lauren swallows.
She helps Camila clamber to her feet and curls her palm underneath Camila’s jaw, fingernails gently scratching through the hair at the base of Camila’s skull. Lauren kisses her with an open mouth and sucks on her bottom lip. She peppers kisses along Camila’s cheekbone, along her jaw and down her neck, nipping at her collarbone. Camila stops touching her, and Lauren feels the lack, biting harder in protest. Camila moans, her bra slipping down her shoulders and her hands backing Lauren up to her bed.

They fall against the mattress, and Camila’s knee digs painfully into Lauren’s thigh. “Ow, shit.”

“Sorry,” Camila says. She shifts, splays her palm over the pain and rubs it away in wide circles. “Sorry.”

“You’re so clumsy,” Lauren says. But it’s not mean. It’s breathy and light, and it could’ve been a laugh if Camila’s finger hadn’t brushed against her through the fabric of her underwear again.

“You’re being quiet,” Camila says before kissing against Lauren’s pulse. “I don’t like it.”

It surprises Lauren that Camila’s willing to speak up.

She knows Camila likes vocal reassurance during sex, and she also knows it usually takes Camila a long time to ask for things she wants and needs. Either Camila isn’t afraid of voicing her desires anymore, or she’s picking up where they left off, as though this isn’t the first time they’ve done this in years, as though just last week she had her face in Lauren’s cunt.

“What are you gonna do about it?” Lauren asks.

Camila huffs. “It’s your turn to be funny, huh?”

Lauren cocks an eyebrow. “Maybe you’re not as good at this as you think.”

“You’re awful,” Camila says.

She’s smiling though, her entire body flush. She settles herself against Lauren’s thigh, grinding down once, warm and wet through the silk of her thong, and Lauren bites the inside of her cheek, refusing to give Camila the satisfaction that easily.

But when Camila’s thumb rubs circles against her clit, and she clenches around Camila’s tongue, Lauren can’t help the way Camila’s name breaks in her throat, heels slipping against the sheets and thighs shaking. She can feel Camila smile and hum against her, proud and smug. Lauren comes after, predictable and embarrassing.

“Hey,” Camila says, gently tugging Lauren’s arm from where she’s flung it over her eyes. “Thank you.”

“Why?” Lauren asks, breathing still labored. “You didn’t even come yet.”

Camila’s face lights up, and her breasts brush against Lauren’s as she leans into her. “Yet,” Camila whispers, lips pressing Lauren’s taste into her own mouth.

When Camila does come, two of Lauren’s fingers buried inside her, she looks gorgeous, a sheen of sweat coating her skin, hair wild and black eyes blown wide open. Camila embodies the vulnerability that’s always present when she’s like this. A fondness that makes Lauren ache, a fondness she decides is a consequence of Camila’s pleasure and nothing else.

Camila bites her lip so hard it leaves an indent, and Lauren thinks it’s the first time all night she’s
done it unintentionally.

Lauren’s exhausted after, from exertion and her orgasm, and because she’s used to eastern time.

Camila’s already set the alarm.

Lauren stays.

Sun streams in through the windows, and Lauren blinks against the light, disoriented in the way waking up in an unfamiliar place makes someone. Camila’s knee presses against her thigh, and Lauren’s eyes flutter closed as she remembers and processes.

Fuck.

She presses her palms against her eyelids, creating a kaleidoscope of colors, and sighs. Quietly.

Because Camila is still asleep, and Lauren needs to weigh the pros and cons of calling a car.

She wants to. She wants to tiptoe out and pretend last night never happened at all. If last night never happened, she doesn’t have to deal with the consequences, and she doesn’t have to feel the regret threatening to break through the dam she’s built up. Lauren only has to regret it if the consequences are awful.

She chances a look at Camila: mouth open against her pillow, hair stuck to her cheek, and sheets slipped down just below the wings of her shoulders. She’s soft, and beautiful, and Lauren feels Camila’s knee again, a gentle press.

It’s odd. Because Camila’s a cuddler. Lauren feels grateful for the space between them, undoubtedly a deliberate choice, just as it would have been had Camila thrown her arm across Lauren’s stomach and snuggled against her chest. But she also feels nauseous, because it was a deliberate choice, and she has no idea what Camila means by it.

Lauren slips out of bed, staring at Camila from the foot when she rustles but doesn’t wake.

The bathroom door creaks when Lauren opens it, and the small closing click echoes loudly in her head.

Everything seems to echo, almost like a hangover.

But Lauren doesn’t have one. Which is just. Great.

She fumbles around for an excuse, and she knows she’ll end up using many of them, but right now, they all ring false. Lauren could blame Camila. Camila makes it easy, always has. But Lauren’s older now, and it feels more cruel, somehow. There are other things to blame Camila for, but this isn’t one of them.

Lauren takes stock of the bathroom; it looks different in the morning than it does at night. The basket of plush, maroon hand towels, the marbled counter and polished faucet. There are splotches of toothpaste dried near the drain, and Lauren lets the water run until they start to rinse away. She splashes cool water on her face and uses her finger as a makeshift toothbrush. It’s hard to be in Camila’s bathroom and not remember times when both their things would be spread out in one they
Lauren sits on the toilet lid, breathes and thinks about all of the stupid decisions she’s made that have led her here. Apparently there were a lot of stupid decisions, because she’s remembering the time she and Camila broke into a hotel pool after a show, when there’s a quick knock that sounds like “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,” followed by Camila’s voice, sleep rough: “Lo, I need to pee.”

“Yeah, okay, hold on.” Lauren swallows, stands and stretches. She takes a moment to stare at herself in the mirror, and she thinks she looks younger in a way that’s not good.

Camila smiles lopsided when Lauren opens the door, brushing by her. “Thanks.”

Fuck.

Lauren blinks and clears her throat. “It’s your bathroom” comes out both too quiet and after Camila’s closed the door.

Lauren pulls the old sleep shirt Camila offered over her head, letting it dangle between her fingers as she bends down to grab her bra. She gets dressed and folds the shirt up before setting it in the hamper. It’s all so stupid: hiding in the bathroom, folding the shirt, sleeping with Camila.

She’s so goddamn stupid.

“Breakfast?” Camila asks.

Lauren turns to look at her and worries her lip.

“Come on,” Camila adds. “Don’t make me feel cheap.”

She says it like a joke.

“Okay,” Lauren relents, trying for a smile.

She follows Camila to the kitchen, sits on one of the stools by the island, and watches as Camila putters around, pulling out a large pan and a box of pancake mix. There are multicolored ducks on her pajama shorts, and the bun she threw her hair into tilts to the right.

“Do you want chocolate chips?” Camila asks. “Wait, I think I have blueberries.”

“No, it’s fine.”

Camila’s eyes shift over the counter. “There’s only one banana left, and I was going to have that. I could mix it into the batter? Or we could split it?”

“No,” Lauren repeats.

“You sure?”

“Yeah.” Lauren smiles tightly.

Camila hums, apparently unconvinced, but she doesn’t protest.

Camila eyes the blueberries she takes out of the refrigerator, letting them roll around the carton. She fishes some eggshell out of the batter with a spoon, making a little noise of satisfaction as she sets the utensil into the sink. She plops a couple of berries into the pan, and Lauren feels all the things they’re not saying lumping in her throat.
She pulls her phone out of her bag, scrolls through her messages and checks Twitter. Lauren instantly regrets it. Camila’s album dropped at midnight, and Lauren has too many notifications about it, even in her verified feed. But every time she looks up at Camila, right there in front of her, Lauren can’t hold still; she has to find something, anything else, to do with herself.

Camila slides a plate across the counter: mickey mouse pancake, complete with blueberry eyes and a banana smile.

“Camila,” Lauren sighs.

“What? It’s cute.”

“You’re an idiot.”

Camila grins, tongue poking out between her teeth. “Thank you.”

Over breakfast Lauren learns Camila drinks her coffee black now (“You could just drink gasoline.” “I’m working my way up to it.”), only owns one, tiny bottle of maple syrup she stole from a restaurant, and that she swings her feet from her stool, stubbing her toe against the island, not once, but twice (“Ow, shit!” And later: “Fuuuuuc-dge.”).

When they’ve finished eating, Lauren slides her stool back, the scrape of it against the hardwood like nails on a chalkboard. “I should uh, get going.”

Camila’s face doesn’t exactly fall, but it does seem to freeze. “Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“I should probably call you a car. I mean, your Uber driver probably won’t know this is my house, or sell a story to the press. But just in case.”

“Okay.” Lauren nods and curls her toes around the legs of the stool. “Thanks.”

Camila doesn’t move. She just looks at Lauren with a flat mouth and flat eyes. Lauren bristles, sits up straight and taps her fingers against the counter until she hits her own phone.

“Nevermind, I’ll just--”

“What does this mean?” Camila asks.

Lauren’s throat dries. “I’m sorry.” She runs a hand through her hair, or rather, she tries to, but it’s all knots. “We really shouldn’t have,” she says, pausing and gesturing between them.

“Slept together?”

Lauren wishes Camila would arch a brow or lift her mouth into a smirk, but she just looks even more two-dimensional, like somehow all the life has drained from her face. “Yeah.”

“Sorry.”

“No, it’s not--” Lauren sighs. “Don’t be sorry.”

It’s hypocritical, really, because Lauren’s sorry.

“It doesn’t have to mean anything, Lauren,” Camila says. “It was fun. And we’re adults. It doesn’t have to be some serious thing.”
“It doesn’t?”

Camila laughs, an edge of desperation that makes Lauren pause. “Of course not. You can’t tell me everyone you’ve slept with has come with emotional baggage.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, they have, or yeah, I’m right?”

“You’re right,” Lauren admits. She thinks of her handful of one-night stands, and she thinks of John. As incomprehensible as it is that Camila could fall into the same category, Lauren likes the idea of placing her there, of letting last night be sex and nothing more.

“It doesn’t have to change anything.”

“Okay.”

Camila’s mouth finally flirts with a smile: relief and joy and success. “So, we’re good, right?”

Lauren rubs the side of her nose.

She knows Camila is wrong. She knows because of the way Camila is looking at her right now; something thinly veiled behind her eyes that Lauren can’t sort out. She doesn’t trust it, and she doesn’t trust Camila. But Lauren’s brain hasn’t come up with any better excuse for last night, and if they agree it doesn’t change anything, then Lauren will take it. It might as well be like nothing happened at all. “Yeah, we’re good.”

“And,” Camila begins gently, reaching out to place her hand on Lauren’s wrist, “if it happens again, then that doesn’t have to change anything, either.”

Lauren frowns. “Camila…”

“Relax.” She rolls her eyes and swipes her thumb over Lauren’s pulse before pulling her hand back. “I’m just saying I haven’t slept with anyone in so long, and it was nice. It’s hard to find someone.”

“Please, there’s got to be a million actual people on this planet who would have sex with you, no questions asked.”

Camila rolls her eyes again. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

“Yeah, I do,” Lauren concedes. “Just, don’t expect this to be a regular thing.”

“Of course not.” Camila nods, too eager. “I’m here, and you live in Miami, and then I’ll be touring, so.”

It’s not quite the agreement Lauren was looking for, but.

Good enough.

After pretending she wants Lauren to help her with the dishes, but shoving her away every time Lauren tries to dry something, Camila calls a car. When it arrives, they awkwardly dance their way into a hug that ends with Lauren pulling away and Camila holding on tighter. It lasts a beat, and then Camila’s lips brush against Lauren’s cheek, and Lauren convinces herself that nothing has changed. They can be friends who accidentally slept together.

Again.
History doesn’t have to repeat itself.

Camila doesn’t text her for over a week, and Lauren figures she’s busy with album promo. Then she gets a message saying *The Nightmare Before Christmas* is on TV, followed by: *any movie with the word nightmare in it is not a xmas movie!!!*

Christmas comes and goes, and Lauren spends it with her family in Miami. They drink wine, open presents under the tree, and laugh as her dad interrogates Taylor’s new boyfriend. It reminds Lauren Miami can be cozy under the right circumstances, especially when everyone she loves is tipsy or drunk, the lights blurring as she closes her eyes, resting her head on her mom’s shoulder.

They ring in the new year in Cuba, dancing in the streets. Lauren feels more connected to her heritage than she ever has. Her Spanish isn’t bad, but any time someone asks her to repeat herself, she feels a twinge of self-consciousness that flutters in her gut and warms her cheeks. It’s the result of the country itself, her family’s history, her blood, and her desire to belong more than she does. It feels like a vacation because it is. Lauren loves Cuba, but she’s grateful to have been born in the United States, and she’s grateful that her family worked so hard to give her freedom, when not so long ago, they didn’t have it.

But then she’s back in Miami, and it’s just her and her parents, and she feels listless.

This was never the future she envisioned for herself: doing sound at a shitty bar, staying up too late, sleeping in too late, and feeling like she took three steps backward. It makes her head fuzzy and her body stiff, as though the lack of movement in her career atrophies her bones, too.

Her bank account has seen better days, and Lauren starts applying for jobs in earnest, even ones she’s not excited about, settling for listings that seem marginally better than where she is now. She forces both her parents to read over her cover letters, even when the changes are minimal, and she keeps a physical notebook of all the applications and resumes she’s sent out.

It feels good. Swimming instead of treading water.

“When time before April 25th next year,” Dinah says, like it’s the most obvious answer in the world.

“That doesn’t really narrow it down.” Normani almost laughs, shaking her head and fidgeting where she sits.

Lauren rolls her eyes. She’s tired from work last night, her throat itches, and her head feels like somebody stuffed cotton into her brain. She really hoped to avoid a cold this winter, but no dice. “Do we even know when Ally’s free?”

“Yes!” Normani picks up her phone, taps something and scrolls. “She gave me some dates when I volunteered to plan the bachelorette party. Um, February 27th or 28th, march 13th, 14th or 21st, and she’s pretty much cleared her schedule all of April.”

“Did she really take her entire wedding month off?” Lauren asks.
“Hey, don’t be that way, Ralph. There’s a lot to do,” Dinah says. “It’s something you only experience once.”

“Tell that to half the population.”

“Can you be bitter later?” Normani asks.

“Someone needs to get laid,” Dinah says, smirking. “I’m sure Mila’s good at phone sex.”

Lauren chokes on air, blanches, and hits her palm against her chest, coughing.

“What?!” Normani shrieks.

Dinah laughs. Like this is funny.

“I’m going to kill her,” Lauren offers. “I’m going to murder her, and then when I’m tried, I’ll plead guilty. Because she deserves it. And I’ll probably get off.”

“Like Camila got you off?” Dinah asks, the end of her sentence tight and high with how hard she has to work to get the words out without cracking up.

“You had sex with Camila?” Normani asks, eyes wide. “Why?”

“I really don’t know,” Lauren says before looking at Dinah again. “I can’t believe she told you.”

Dinah shrugs. “I think she wanted to tell someone so she wouldn’t forget it happened.”

“What?” Lauren furrows her brow and frowns.

“Blah blah, I don’t know the real Camila. It’s not like she’s my friend or anything. I have no idea what happened, even though she told me, blah blah,” Dinah says in a low, nasally voice.

“Don’t mock me.”

“But it’s so easy.” Dinah smiles, small and self-satisfied. “She didn’t give me all the gory details, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I just don’t understand why she told you.”

It was supposed to stay between the two of them. It didn’t mean anything, and there was no reason to think about it enough that they’d tell anyone else. There was no reason to think about it. At all.

“I don’t understand why you thought sleeping with her would solve your Camila problem,” Normani interjects. “When did this happen?”

Lauren looks down and chews on the inside of her cheek. She thinks about Camila’s supposed reason for spilling. Maybe Lauren didn’t tell anyone because she wanted to forget. She’s come to terms with it, mostly. But she still regrets it. And she doesn’t need everyone else to know how stupid she was. “After her album release party.”

“Why?” Normani sighs, and it sounds the way Lauren feels.

“I don’t know.” Lauren shrugs. “We wanted to. But it didn’t mean anything, and nothing has to change. Nothing has changed. We agree about that.”

Dinah’s forehead and nose scrunch, and confusion makes itself known in the shift of her eyebrows.
Normani hums noncommittally.

“What? We still text sometimes. I’m being normal. She’s being normal.”

Dinah scoffs.

“I’m serious,” Lauren says.

“Okaaaaay.” Dinah clearly doesn’t believe her. Whatever.

“Don’t you think it’s weird she confided in Dinah about it?” Normani asks before addressing Dinah: “Like, no offense, girl, but you suck at keeping secrets.”

“Obviously,” Lauren mumbles.

“Well,” Dinah says, dragging the word out for five syllables. Lauren can practically see the gears turning in her head. “Maybe instead of wanting to have me remind her it happened by singing “Let’s get it on,” on the rare occasion she calls me, she was… proving it really didn’t mean anything.”

“Huh?” Lauren and Normani respond in tandem.

“Don’t secrets get power by being secrets or some shit? I don’t know. I’m just the pretty one.” She flicks her hair over her shoulder.

Lauren rubs her lips together and sniffs. “That… sort of makes sense, actually.”

“Because she told Dinah she slept with you, it proves she’s not secretly pining?” Normani asks, and she actually seems to be considering it. Lauren doesn’t know if it’s because Normani thinks Camila is incapable of having positive human feelings toward any of them, if it’s because she thinks Lauren didn’t tell her because Lauren is secretly pining, or if maybe she just thinks it’s a rational explanation.

“Sure.” Dinah shrugs her left shoulder. “You could ask her. If you’re both so normal and stuff.”

“Shut up,” Lauren says with a shake of her head. “It’s fine. Let’s get back to planning Ally’s bachelorette party. I’m getting a cold, and I want to take a nap.”

Lauren knows she’s not going to ask Camila about it.

If she does, it means they have to discuss sleeping together again. And if they talk about it, she has to confront the fact that, sure, they can be friends, but they can’t ever be friends like they used to be. She’ll have to use words like ‘mistake,’ and even though that’s true -- Lauren does think it was a mistake -- and even though she agrees with Camila that it didn’t mean anything, they have a history. Camila’s been totally nonchalant and cool, but ‘mistake’ is a heavy word when it comes to them.

Lauren knows even if it meant nothing to Camila, and she finds believing that easier and easier, Camila would not take too kindly to being called a mistake.

Normani calls the next day. “Hey, how’re you doing?”

Lauren sniffs, her nose red and raw, her throat sore and scratchy. She feels exhausted despite sleeping for almost 10 hours. “Okay.”
“Sick?”

“My cold has reached its full potential.” Lauren shuts her laptop, scoots it off her thighs, and slides further down her headboard and onto her pillow. “I hope.”

“Knock on wood,” Normani offers.

Lauren, unhelpfully, thinks about how if Camila said that instead of Normani, she’d start fumbling around for a wooden surface to actually knock on. “Yeah. I feel like shit.”

“Hopefully it won’t last long.”

“Fingers crossed.” Lauren pulls her comforter up. “So, just like, say it.”

Normani audibly sighs. “You slept with Camila.”

“Yeah. I definitely did do that.”

“Why?”

“The reason anybody sleeps with anybody else,” Lauren offers. “I was horny.”

Normani snorts.

Lauren laughs and feels it burn her throat. “God, I don’t know why.”

“The last time we talked about her, you were crying,” Normani says, managing to avoid traces of pity or accusation.

“Yeah.” Lauren closes her eyes. “But it’s fine. We’re just friends, and she hasn’t been weird about it.”

“Did you forgive her?”

Lauren doesn’t trust Camila as far as she can throw her, and if she thinks too hard about Camila calling the paparazzi, her breathing shallows and a vague sort of rage diffuses into her bloodstream. But she still enjoys Camila’s stupid snaps, and she laughs at most of Camila’s jokes. She likes talking to her. Lauren likes her. She doesn’t have to trust Camila with her innermost secrets to be friends with her. “Sure.”

Normani hums. “That doesn’t sound very convincing.”

“Nothing is going to change what happened. It’s fine. I’m fine.”

“Say fine one more time,” Normani says. Lauren can picture the arch of her eyebrow accompanied by the amused but challenging look in her eye.

“Fine.” Lauren smiles a little. “Camila telling Dinah is weird, but whatever. I didn’t tell you because it was a one time thing. Not a big deal.”

“I don’t understand how, in a few months, you went from crying about wanting to kiss her to sleeping with her without any sort of like, emotional fallout.”

That’s fair.

Lauren doesn’t have an answer, not really. Much like the paparazzi thing, she’s focusing on not
thinking about it. “I just decided not to be an emotional, dramatic mess. Mind over matter.”

“And that’s working?” Normani asks skeptically.

“Sure,” Lauren says again. “Listen, I’m really tired, and there’s snot threatening to drip out of my nose. But I promise I’m totally—”

“—Fine?”

“Yeah.” Lauren rubs at her forehead, burying herself further into her mattress. She’s been awake for three hours and could use a nap before trudging to work tonight. “I promise you’ll be the first person I call if I start having some sort of emotional meltdown over her.”

“Deal.” Normani pauses, and Lauren can almost hear the question she decides not to voice. “Anyway, feel better soon.”

Lauren wants to ask Normani what she’s thinking, but Normani has always been honest with her, especially when she most needs to hear it. Lauren probably doesn’t have an answer to whatever it is, anyway, and her eyes are starting to droop. So she says, “Thanks. I hope I will,” and lets sleeping dogs lie.

No overly emotional and dramatic mess in sight.

Camila’s album does well.

Better than her last.

Music critics generally have positive things to say about the song Lauren did with her, and it feels good. Lauren’s shoulders stiffen with the criticism she does read, because they worked hard, but she thinks it’s fair. It’s the most high profile thing she’s ever done, in terms of songwriting, production, and something official that deserves to have her name attached to it. Not something where her name is slapped on because it looks good and she accidentally changed a ‘but’ to an ‘and’ in the booth.

And, as it turns out, the success of the song, combined with actually applying for jobs, leads to one interviewer recommending Lauren for a separate job.

A job she likes better.

Jeremiah putting in a good word sends her over the top, and Lauren will probably work under him occasionally. Which is great. She’s not super into the music he produces, but he’s undoubtedly good at what he does. All his work is clean and polished, and all his songs are produced to maximize the hook and make the melody stick in your head.

She could learn a lot from him.

Lauren clinks her champagne glass against her mom’s when all the paperwork is finished and she’s officially hired.

“Congratulations, mija.” Her mother smiles, bright and wide. “You’re all grown up.”

“You’ve been saying that since I got my period.”
“You keep being all grown up,” her mom replies. “And you’re moving across the country. You couldn’t have thought of a place farther away from me?”

Lauren takes a sip of champagne and squints. “Maybe like, Seattle. I’d probably like Seattle more than LA, too.”

“That’s not funny.” Her mom gulps down the rest of her glass, hip against the counter. “Next thing I know, you’ll be telling me you’ve decided to move to Hawaii. Or Alaska.”

“Gross. I hate the cold more than I love making you miserable.”

Her mom rolls her eyes, pouring herself another glass and topping off Lauren’s. The champagne almost bubbles over. “You have your dad’s sense of humor.”

Lauren grins. “Thank you.”

Her mom leans forward and tucks a piece of hair behind Lauren’s ear, eyes soft and voice low: “But you got my stubbornness.”

There’s a wetness in her tone that informs Lauren she’s tipsy, sentimental, and maybe about to cry. “Okay, none of that.”

“None of what? My baby is moving across the country. And not just for four years. *Forever.*”

“I got my dramatics from you, too,” Lauren laughs.

They finish the bottle, Lauren’s stomach pleasantly warm and head pleasantly fuzzy. Her mom tells the story of Lauren being afraid to ride her bike without training wheels until Chris did it. She recalls how, the very second after Chris rode down their driveway, Lauren was peddling down the street, steady and sure and not upstaged by her younger brother.

Her mom’s about to launch into a tale about Lauren getting lost at the zoo, a story Lauren has heard a million times, when her phone buzzes loudly against the counter.

Camila.

Lauren eyes it, swiping over the lock screen.

“I’m going to use the restroom,” her mom says, clearing her throat. She squeezes Lauren’s shoulder as she walks by, but it’s too hard and almost painful. It doesn’t feel very reassuring.

Lauren exhales.

She and Camila haven’t spoken outside of texts since December.

“Hey,” she answers, aiming for casual.

“Hi.”

Silence.

Lauren leans more fully against the counter, crossing her legs and tapping her finger against her hip.

“What’s up?” Camila asks, followed by a quiet, uncomfortable laugh.

“Nothing much.” Lauren shrugs.
“Cool. Well, I just wanted to let you know that I’m going to be in Miami next weekend. If you wanted to do something.”

“Oh.” Lauren chews on her bottom lip. “I don’t think I can, actually.”

“Right. That’s cool. I know it’s last minute.” Camila’s tone becomes breezy, and Lauren wishes she could see her face.

“Yeah. It’s just that I’m working Friday, and Saturday Taylor and Chris are going to be here for a going away thing.”

“Going away thing?”

“Yeah,” Lauren says.

“Who’s going away?” Camila asks.

It feels casual, and Lauren’s breathing steadies. There’s no uncomfortable churning in her gut, and her palms don’t go sweaty. She uncrosses her legs and bounces a little so her knees don’t lock. For the first time in a long time, Lauren really believes she and Camila can be friends. They can text sometimes, and catch up over lunch, and Camila probably sends out Christmas cards, so Lauren can receive one of those, and everything will be simple and nice. Nothing deep or complicated or ruined by angst. They can do this. She can do this.

“Me,” she answers.

Camila chuckles, low and amused. “And where are you going away to?”

“LA.”

“My town?”

Lauren scoffs. “Your town, huh?”

“Shut up,” Camila says, her smile as evident and clear as if Lauren were looking at her.

“I got a job with Verve.”

“Oh my god, Lauren. That’s so great! Congratulations.”

“Thank you.” A smile flirts across Lauren’s mouth.

She likes sharing the news of her job with people. It makes her chest swell with pride, and she feels good about herself in a way that’s different from a good hair day or some stranger telling her she changed their life. The hair thing just means she’s more likely to accomplish tasks on her metaphorical to-do list, buoyed by the boost of confidence, and the stranger thing feels misplaced, like they’re talking about someone else and not her, and she only feels the last ripples of it.

Lauren likes the reaction she gets when she tells people, too. She liked the fond way John told her it was “about time, Jauregui.” She liked her mom jumping up and down, clapping her hands before pulling Lauren into a bone-crushing hug. And she liked how Dinah shrieked that they’d be in the same time zone. But there’s something about Camila’s enthusiasm that never fails to make a unique impression, genuine and vibrant, almost like there’s so much of it inside her, compressed and carbonated, that she’s always waiting for a moment to pop the cap and fizzle.

“When are you moving?” Camila asks, voice a pitch higher than before.
“End of the month.”

She hears the exhale across the line, and then: “I could totally help you find a place.”

“Huh? Oh, no. You really don’t have to do that.”

“But I’ll be in the middle of tour rehearsals and stuff, and it’d be a nice break. Plus, I can tell you all the important things, like if a place is close to the hip, local hangs.”

Lauren can’t help but laugh. She knows the smirk that must be on Camila’s face, proud and just the right side of arrogant. “Anything else you can help with?”

“I’m a good haggler,” she says.

“Are you?”

“At a flea market, I got my mom a $375 table for $350.”

“Doesn’t sound like a great deal,” Lauren says, pressing her mouth into a thin smile.

It hasn’t been all that long, but she missed talking to Camila like this, hearing the scratch in her voice when a laugh gets suppressed in the back of her throat, the catch on her vowels when she’s surprised, and the way the smartest things she says are often the dorkiest, dumbest things she says. The wit isn’t the same over text; it’s the immediacy and effortlessness of it that makes Lauren laugh.

“Maybe not. But I did convince the previous owners of my place to pay for new kitchen appliances.”

“All right,” Lauren says, still chewing on her lip.

“All right?” Camila repeats. She sounds far too pleased with herself.

“I’ll think about it.”

Camila quizzes her on what kind of place she’s looking for, asking purposefully annoying questions about crown molding and architecture styles. Lauren rolls her eyes, more fond than she likes to believe she lets on. After they hang up, because Lauren’s dad returned from bowling and Camila should “probably eat dinner,” Camila sends her four different apartment listings, one of them comedically out of Lauren’s price range.

Lauren asks Did u eat?, and Camila replies with a picture of a dirty plate and a text that reads: pbj!!

She forgot how annoying Camila could be, and she forgot how she mostly doesn’t mind it, even when she probably should.

Camila doesn’t actually have a lot of time to help Lauren apartment hunt. It’s probably for the best, because Lauren’s dad comes along to help with the drive from Miami. It takes four days, most of Lauren’s possessions stacked on the backseat and packed in the trunk. They listen to almost every soft rock record her dad owns and eat too much McDonalds before LA greets them.

Lauren and her dad see two places, one of which Camila sent her a listing for. Lauren decides to take the apartment she found on her own, and she bites too hard around her smile when Camila responds to the news with a long series of sad emojis.
The apartment has one tiny bedroom, one even tinier bathroom, and a nice living area connected to the kitchen. There’s more cabinet space than the place she rented in Boston, it’s situated perfectly on the third floor (the ground floor is always, universally terrible, and Lauren doesn’t want to have to walk up ten flights of stairs if the elevator breaks), and it comes in a hundred dollars under budget. The walls are an off-putting beige, and even though the manager seems to think painting them would ruin the place’s aesthetic, Lauren likes the apartment.

She likes the idea of decorating even though she knows she won’t follow through beyond the first weekend. She likes that her dad accompanies her to the store, helping pick out trinkets and coffee table books before his flight home. Lauren even lets him buy her an ugly lawn gnome from that flea market Camila told her about. He makes her promise to stand the little guy in the living room, and Lauren knows she will despite the terror she’s bound to feel when she catches sight of it in the middle of the night.

Lauren stays at the hotel another week before she can actually move in. It’s a waste of money, but she’s the first to admit she didn’t plan this transition all that well. She was excited, but not super proactive about apartment hunting, and she didn’t want to fly out to LA early to look at places, sign a lease, leave and drive back out less than a month later.

When it comes time to actually move in, Camila insists on helping. “I only have a few phone interviews in the morning. I’m free all afternoon.”

“I’m not sure your bird arms are going to be much help,” Lauren laughs, eyeing the pile of clothes strewn haphazardly in her suitcase. It’s the only bit of packing she really has to do, but she’s been putting it off all day. As nine ticks closer to ten, she feels the procrastination itching against her skin.

“Hey! I guarantee I can lift more than you.”

Seeing as Camila probably has a personal trainer and goes to the gym regularly, all Lauren can do is hum. “Whatever. Moving is annoying. But I don’t really have that much stuff, and it won’t be too bad.”

“Come on, Lauren. I want to help.”

“Don’t be doing me any favors,” Lauren says, and it comes out a little more bitter than she intended.

“You’d be doing me a favor,” Camila counters, flippant but soft, and with a hint of decision. Like she knows she’s going to help Lauren move, whether Lauren agrees now or it takes another hour of Camila whining.

“Fine,” Lauren relents. She doesn’t need to be convinced that Camila is a pro at taking stairs two steps at a time now. A lie so obvious they’d both laugh, even as Camila would push through her giggles to continue.

“Good. And we can break your kitchen in after. We can make medianoche and mojitos.”

Lauren furrows her brows. “I’d have to go to the store to buy food after moving. Not happening.”

“Fine,” Camila sighs, like she’s the one who should be exasperated. “We’ll order pizza.”

“Why do you think you’re going to eat dinner at my apartment?”

“Because I’m doing you a favor,” Camila says, cheeky as anything.

Lauren groans. “Stop.”
“Listen,” Camila begins, voice dropping so Lauren really has to pay attention. “I know you don’t need help—” Lauren can practically see the aborted eye roll. “—and I’m sure there are other people you’d rather have help you, but I’m free, and I don’t have anything else to do. Normally sitting home alone reading a book sounds great, but. Sometimes getting out of the house is good for me.”

Lauren inhales, closing her eyes and rolling her neck.

She can’t say no to that.

The guilt of it would eat her alive.

*

Camila plops down on the floor, spreads her arms and legs, and makes pretend snow angels on the hardwood. Her arms feel a bit sore, but they’re not even approaching gelatinous, and she counts that as a win. There’s a faint sheen of sweat tickling her hairline. The exertion makes Camila feel like napping for 10 minutes before taking over the world.

She cracks an eye open to find Lauren looming over her. “What?”

“What are you doing?” Lauren asks.

“Resting.”

“Nothing’s unpacked.”

“But everything’s here,” Camila says, pointing around the room. “Besides, I’m tired.”

“So am I, but the mattress I bought is leaning against the wall, the bed frame isn’t assembled, and where the hell am I going to sleep?” Lauren huffs and crosses her arms.

“You sound exhausted.” Camila smiles, a small little thing, and tugs at Lauren’s ankle. “Lie down for a few minutes. We can order some food, and then we’ll be refreshed enough to finish.”

Lauren narrows her eyes. “Easy for you to say. You have a house with a table that’s not in a box. I don’t even have a couch.”

“Let’s compromise: you lie down for five minutes, and then we’ll order food and assemble your bed while we wait for it to be delivered. And, if I’m up to it, I’ll watch while you put your kitchen table together before I go home.”

“Camila,” Lauren says, voice tight. “Can you stop being so happy?”

“Nope.”

It’s the first time she’s seen Lauren since the morning after, and her soul sings with it, bright and warm like the sun on the first day of spring.
Every time she followed Lauren up the stairs, Camila looked at the baby hairs at the nape of Lauren’s neck, a few thin strands drawing lines through the dragonfly, brushing the top of her spine, and overwhelming Camila with affection. A bobby pin would have held the wisps up, and something about Lauren not taking the time makes Camila’s mouth twitch up.

It’s absurd, and she can’t explain it to Lauren, because it would freak her out with how much it doesn’t sound like something a friend would say.

But Camila missed her. Missed the mundane things: the tilt of Lauren’s mouth when she thinks Camila has said something incredibly ridiculous, the obvious and exaggerated eye-roll when she’s exasperated, or how, when she’s thirsty, she drinks sweet iced tea or soda instead of water.

“Can you at least try not to rub it in my face so much?”

“Yes,” Camila says, tugging at Lauren’s leg and causing her to stumble. “Now, come on. Five minutes can’t hurt.”

Lauren sighs like Camila is the most annoying person on the planet, and Camila can only laugh. It doesn’t make her feel insecure like it might if Lauren was someone else. At least, it doesn’t right now, because Lauren’s eyes sparkle and the laugh lines on her face etch themselves into the ventricles of Camila’s heart.

She joins Camila on the floor, keeping enough space between them so there’s no chance of touching, and begins fiddling with her phone. Camila peaks. “You’re setting an alarm?”

“Five minutes.”

“You’re overreacting,” Camila says.

“I know.” Lauren saves the alarm and turns her head to look at Camila. “But I want my apartment to be mine already. I want to have a home instead of a bunch of boxes.”

“Yeah, makes sense.”

Lauren bites her bottom lip, and Camila only lets her eyes drift for a second. “Thanks for letting me do you a favor.”

“It was your pleasure,” Camila teases with a wiggle of her eyebrows.

“Not really. If you weren’t here, I would’ve had like, three people helping me instead of your solitary, lazy ass.”

“Oh, so now I’m lazy?”

“Yes.” Lauren’s eyes go bright, but she presses her mouth into a thin line.

“Just because I’m here doesn’t mean no one else could be,” Camila says.

Lauren’s eyes sweep over her face, brows tilting. Camila catches Lauren’s fingers tapping in her periphery. “I know,” comes Lauren’s answer, quiet and unsure, like she didn’t know that at all. “But this is easier.”

She feels like a secret, and her bright, sunshiny insides become clandestine shadows.

It’s ridiculous, and Camila remembers a time when she would have selfishly wanted it that way, because she didn’t want to be asked questions when she didn’t have answers. Because she thought
secrets were something to build a bond over, instead of a vine growing like fungus, suffocating and dark.

She remembers a time when she would have hated it. When she would have turned Lauren’s admission into passive-aggressive avoidance or a fight. Camila would have swallowed down any understanding her mind tried to provide, and it would have made her scrub her skin red in the shower, dirty and exhausted and shameful.

Now, she just purses her lips and nods, recognizing the disparity between Lauren seeing her as a friend, and Lauren seeing her as someone to be kept distant from the other people in her life.

It’s absurd, but Camila gets it.

Their relationship has never been something easy to parse, and Camila won’t begrudge Lauren time to figure out what it means to her now and what she wants from it.

“Do you know what you--” BEEP BEEP BEEP. “Rude.”

Lauren chuckles, turning off her alarm and scrambling to her feet. “Come on,” she says.

Camila pouts. “What’re you thinking for dinner?”

“I don’t know. Get up, Lazy.”

“I’m hungry.” Camila juts her lower lip out even further, reaching her hands up, wiggling her fingers, and enjoying how Lauren rolls her eyes and huffs.

“You’re impossible,” she says, her shoulders slumping. Her eyes are soft and, Camila thinks and hopes, a bit fond.

When Lauren grabs Camila’s hands, Camila squeezes, bending her knees so the soles of her feet hit the floor. She uses the leverage to help Lauren pull her up.

They stumble with the shift in weight, knocking elbows and hips. Camila giggles, soaring with the feeling of Lauren’s hands in hers. Lauren’s alarm sounds again for no discernible reason, and Camila’s laugh bubbles over. When Lauren’s grip loosens, Camila holds on tighter, tugs her forward, and presses a kiss to the corner of her mouth before connecting their lips more fully.

Lauren kisses back for a heartbeat, and then she pulls away, yanking her hands out of Camila’s and lunging for her phone on the floor. It takes a few swipes to silence it. Camila pulls her bottom lip into her mouth and stares at the flush dusting Lauren’s cheeks.

“Jesus,” Lauren huffs before running a hand through her hair.

Camila clamps down around her smile.

“Why did you do that?”

“Because,” Camila says, honest as anything.

“Because why?” Lauren asks, eyes wide and nervous, tone hinting at frustration but drifting more toward baffled.

“Just because.”

Lauren shakes her head. “It’s a bad idea.”
“Why?” Camila knows why. She could probably list off at least ten separate reasons, ending in the prediction that if they do this, by the end of the year, they won’t be friends at all. But she wants to hear Lauren say it.

“Because,” Lauren says. It’s her turn this time, and her entire body seems to sag, resigned. “Shit, Camila.”

“Just friends,” Camila offers as a reminder, swaying forward. “It doesn’t have to mean more than it is.”

Not a lie.

It doesn’t have to mean anything to Lauren; Camila doesn’t define what it is to her.

“You promise you won’t get weird?” Lauren asks, eyes focused on Camila in a way that makes goosebumps pop at the base of her spine. She thinks she sees Lauren’s hand tremble before she wipes it against her thigh, but Camila can’t be sure, too caught up in how Lauren’s gaze slices through something deep inside her chest.

“If you promise.”

A beat.

And then: “Yeah, okay.”

“Okay?” Camila bites her tongue, presses her fingertips against her sides, and tries her best to contain all the adrenaline rushing through her veins. She feels her hummingbird heartbeat in her toes and ears. She feels pink all over, her body a flashing sign of truth when everything she’s saying hits just off center.

“Just two friends who get each other off sometimes,” Lauren says.

Camila laughs, halfway between embarrassed and relieved. She shifts forward and kisses Lauren again, a chaste press. “Exactly. Now, I’m feeling pho, but if you want Indian, I can make an exception.”

Flipping through the contract, Camila initials and signs where all the conveniently arrow-shaped sticky notes jut out. She is always signing things, marking off on interviews and public appearances, remixes and music videos, okaying wardrobe decisions and lighting.

It’s annoying and time consuming, causing Camila to stretch her hand as though she has a cramp. But she prefers it this way. It’s always about the illusion of control, and Camila takes it readily with a scribble of black ink.

“Oh, okay,” she sighs, setting the pen down on Roger’s desk before arching her back and linking her hands above her head as she stretches.

“Oh, okay,” Roger repeats, flipping the contract around. “Everything for the tour is finalized, then.”

“Cool.” Camila fidgets in her seat, sucking her cheek into her mouth.

Roger shoves her contract into a manila envelope, the bottom left corner of the top sheet folding
over. He places it on the outgoing mail pile, and Camila knows it’ll be copied a few times. One copy will be handed to her in a couple of days, whenever he sees her next. The original will be filed permanently in whichever cabinet he has that pertains to her and the career he has helped her build and sustain.

Camila reminds herself of that: she would not be where she is without him.

“Anything else, Camila?” Roger asks, straightening his glasses and looking at her in a way that reminds her of her father.

“Yeah.” Camila bites her lip.

They’ve never discussed this before. It’s never been pertinent.

Camila knows Roger loves her. He wants her to be happy and successful, whatever part of that is marred by his own ambition doesn’t matter to her, except well, that part of him probably never wanted her to bring this up.

“I’m listening,” Roger urges.

“Sorry,” Camila says, all instinct. “Um, I.”

She blinks, sits up straight, and twists the ring around her finger. She doesn’t mean to be looking down at her hands when she says it, but she is: “I want to come out.”

The silence that follows makes her palms sweat and her lungs tighten. The air in the room becomes thick, and the longer Camila doesn’t look up and meet his eyes, the harder it gets to do. A sinking feeling settles in her gut. She feels Roger’s disappointment radiating uncomfortably against her skin.

“Camila,” he says.

Her head finally snaps up.

“Care to say that again?” His voice is eerily calm, and Camila wonders if this is what he sounds like to other people during negotiations -- to the people he’s fighting against, the people he’s fighting for her.

She shakes her head no, like some school kid who said a bad word.

“If you don’t have the balls to say it again, then this discussion is over.”

Camila hesitates, splaying her palms over her knees and wiping her hands. It’s a free pass, and she wants to take it. It’s easier and simpler. No questions to answer, no drama to ignore, and nothing to change. She could stay comfortable.

Camila is no longer afraid of who she is, but she also doesn’t feel like anyone has a right to know all the pieces that make her up, the small, important truths, the tidbits that make her real and not some fantasy.

But she wants to do this now, pull back a curtain and allow people to see a little more.

Camila thinks of all the people who would breathe a little easier and feel more at home in their own hearts if she came out. It’s good, like a warm bath at the end of a long day. And, like a warm bath, a bit like soaking in her own grime, because she wouldn’t be doing it for them.

Everyone close enough already knows.
But she feels the superior stick of Lauren’s words in the back of that car, *at least I’m not still in the closet*, and Camila wants to prove something to her.

Proving something to Lauren isn’t the most altruistic reason for wanting to come out to the world, but it’s not the worst reason that’s floated through Camila’s head over the years, either.

“I want to come out,” she repeats, more of a whisper this time, but steadier. Camila’s unblinking as she looks at Roger.

He clears his throat. “How important is this to you?”

“Important enough to ask.” She shrugs, the effort causing her to realize how tense her shoulders are and how sore her neck has become.

“I don’t think you can.”

“Why not?”

“There’s only so much your team is willing to accommodate, Camila. And there’s only so much capital you have. You used most of it to work with Lauren.”

“But it was a good song,” she says, the words scratchy. “Don’t you think it helped more than hurt?”

“I do.” He nods. “But this is not a song, Camila.”

“I know.” She swallows and rolls her shoulders back. “It’s me.”

Roger looks at her like he has no idea who she even is, and she curls back with the force of it. Camila knows she’s caused trouble by saying the words aloud, but now that she’s done it, she’s not willing to renege without a promise that he’ll consider the idea and discuss it with her label.

“Oh? Why now?” he asks, monotone and impossible to read.

Camila’s never been on this end of Roger’s eyes before. Even though she has always known this side of him exists, that to be successful in the music business this part of him must be well-honed and often used, she finds it dampens her respect for him, just a tad.

She forces herself to turn to steel instead of ash. “I’m tired of waiting.”

True: she’s thought about coming out before, but pushed it back. Pushed it back because Lauren wouldn’t meet her eyes after they kissed, pushed it back because her mom said the world would be tougher on her, pushed it back because it seemed like a fight she didn’t need to give herself. Not when finding boys to like was easy, and when kissing them made her feel just as good.

True: Camila has waited.

False: she’s not tired of it. It doesn’t really feel like waiting anymore, and it hasn’t for a long time. She’s not hiding.

But Lauren’s tired of her waiting, and it shouldn’t matter.

It really, really shouldn’t matter.

It does, though. Camila doesn’t want this to be the thing Lauren dangles over her head when she gets angry. Camila doesn’t want Lauren to place it in the same category as when she ‘dated’ Shawn or let the label convince her to pick the opening act she hated for her last tour.
Camila knows it shouldn’t be about Lauren. Of all the people Camila coming out shouldn’t be about, Lauren probably tops the list. Lauren would hate the way it would link them, and Camila would love it, just another thread binding them together. So many fragile strings, but enough strands tied together become strong.

“They’re going to say no.”

“I’m going to keep asking.”

Roger narrows his eyes, and Camila grinds her teeth.

“Fine.”

One of the things Camila finds she likes best about being a solo artist is being onstage. She knows how that sounds, and it’s partly due to all the attention focused on herself, sure, but it’s the freedom of it, really. She remembers a time when she liked performing with the girls, like a distant memory from a life that wasn’t her own. But it became too regimented. There were too many people to keep track of onstage and too many beats to hit so that everything looked cohesive.

There’s still choreography. There’s still stage direction. Camila has a script of what she’s supposed to say and when she’s supposed to say it. But now, if she decides to wiggle to the left side of the stage instead of the right, she won’t be getting in anyone else’s way. If she wants to drop the moves to hold a high note, no one is going to raise their eyebrows as though she’s pulling focus. Now, the stage belongs to her.

Tour starts next week, and it’s Camila’s second to last day of dance rehearsal. Luam focuses on Camila instead of taking in the whole picture; she has more time to perfect the backup dancers later.

“Hey!” she calls, nodding her head at Terri, who cuts the music. “Mila, you’re a step behind.”

Camila groans. “The spin throws me off.”

“I can see that.”

“Sorry.” Camila smiles sheepishly.

Everybody take five.”

“Thank you, five,” Gina says before she can stop herself, and Camila’s mouth twitches up. The other dancers like to tease her for it, a leftover relic from her high school theater days.

Luam jogs over to Camila. “Not you.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine. It’s one of the hardest passes I gave you.”

“Should have thought that one through,” Camila jokes, pushing back the fine hairs that have stuck to her forehead.

“You can do it slowly.”
“You know I’m just gonna skip it most shows.”

Luam rolls her eyes. “If you can do it slowly, you can speed it up. It just takes practice and concentration.”

“It’s not so easy to focus while singing.”

“That’s the kind of thing an amateur says.” Luam raises an eyebrow, mouth set. This is not a joke to her, and Camila appreciates it. Luam is one of the most uncompromising people Camila’s ever worked with. She’s unbelievably talented; the ease with which she moves through the steps and the clarity with which she explains them earns her toughness. She demands competence and perfection because she is competent and perfect.

“I’m working on it,” Camila offers.

“Let’s work on it some more. Right now. Talk me through each step.”

Camila does, slow and precise, wobbling slightly as she marches through the footwork into the spin.

“Again,” Luam instructs.

Camila does it again and again, until her dancers are back, watching from the edges of the room like a pack of wolves studying their prey. They’re a talented group, and they all get along, but it isn’t going to be Madonna circa Blonde Ambition. They’ll have jokes and a bond that spans the next few months. They’ll get close, and these people will know part of her soul like they know the steps to the dances, and they’ll lose her just like they’ll lose the moves, remembering bits and pieces in ten years, but never the whole dance, and never how the beats flow together.

By the time Luam lets her stop, Camila’s skin is warm and damp, stomach grumbling for lunch and mind unthinking as she works through the steps.

“Good job,” Luam says. “After lunch it’ll be muscle memory.”

“Thanks.” Camila smiles. Luam doesn’t exaggerate, so Camila feels better about a positive word from her than just about anyone else. It boosts Camila’s confidence and allows her to feel more at home in her body and more sure of its ability to move.

Luam dismisses everyone for the hour, and Camila retrieves her water bottle, taking a few long pulls.

A tap on her shoulder, and then: “Your coordination has improved.”

Camila forgot Lauren was meeting her for lunch today.

That’s another thing Camila likes about Luam: she works them so hard Camila can only think in eight counts, focusing on the places her feet are meant to be and the pleasant ache in her thighs. Everything else falls away. She wonders if this is how people who love to dance -- really and truly love it, not like Camila, whose joy is fickle -- feel every time they set foot in a studio.

“Thanks.” Camila smiles wide and lopsided, grip tightening around the bottle. “You want to learn?”

“Me? Please,” Lauren scoffs.

“It’s not that ridiculous!”

“You don’t have all day for lunch.”
Lauren has a point, and Camila is hungry, but. “Come on, teaching helps people learn. And besides, if we run out of time because you suck, you can always pick up lunch somewhere else and snap a bunch of pictures to rub it in my face.”

The lines around Lauren’s eyes are still skeptical, but her mouth melts into an almost smile. “Five minutes.”

“Give me your phone.”

“Why?” Lauren asks.

“So I can set an alarm,” Camila laughs.

“Are you ever gonna let that go?”

Camila speaks over her: “We wouldn’t want to accidentally dance for six minutes!”

“I hate you.”

“I know.” Camila holds out her hand. Lauren slumps forward in exaggerated dismay, but slips her palm into Camila’s without hesitation. “Stop dragging your feet.” Camila laughs again, tugging Lauren toward the center of the room.

She narrates the steps, showing Lauren as she goes -- a slide to the left, feet together, arm flowing up, a shake of the hips. Lauren watches, mouth pressed into a thin line. “Okay, let’s try it together,” Camila says.

“If I have to.” Lauren shifts so she’s next to Camila, looking at her sideways.

Camila repeats herself and watches in the mirror as Lauren follows her lead, copying Camila a beat after she’s done each move. Lauren’s a decent dancer when she wants to be. She possesses natural rhythm and sensuality, but she often doesn’t care enough to try, and everything she does ends up looking bored and unpolished. Now, when she cares even less than usual, there’s an awkwardness to her, each beat filled with hesitancy as she rushes through the steps. The way her body moves looks unnatural.

Camila sighs. “You have to try.”

“Don’t,” Lauren says, chin up. Her smirk is the only thing that keeps Camila from abandoning the moment.

They run through the pass two more times. Lauren works quicker as she remembers which steps flow into each other, but instead of loosening up, her body becomes stiffer.

“You’re not doing it right,” Camila says. “You look constipated.”

Lauren laughs, a surprised scream of a sound. Camila can’t help but laugh, too.

“Here.” Camila moves behind Lauren, toes hitting against her heels and hands curling over her hips. “Let me show you.”

“Oh,” Lauren breathes. “You were trying to hit on me this whole time.”

Camila chuckles, breath fanning out against Lauren’s hair. “In your dreams, Jauregui.”

She flexes her hand against Lauren’s hip, whispering the steps into her ear in an absurdly deep voice
that makes Lauren’s body twitch with laughter and makes it easier for Camila to move her the way she wants. Camila rolls through the choreography, pushing her own hips against Lauren’s in a way that could be sexy if her words weren’t having the opposite effect.

They’ve slept together twice since December.

The first time was a few days after Camila’s birthday when their schedules aligned for a movie night. They ate takeout and watched old romcoms until Camila came back from the bathroom and flopped down sideways, head on Lauren’s lap. She almost expected Lauren to lift her knees and jostle her off, but instead she straightened Camila’s sleeve where it had curled up. Camila watched a few more minutes of *Sleepless in Seattle* before turning. She ran her fingertips over the waistband of Lauren’s jeans and underneath her shirt. She splayed her hand over Lauren’s stomach, soft and warm.

“What?” Lauren had asked.

Camila shrugged the best she could. “Want to make you feel good.”

Lauren bit her lip, and Camila rucked up her shirt, pressing her mouth to Lauren’s bellybutton. She’d been soft until Lauren’s hand had knotted in her hair, pulling.

Lauren didn’t want soft, and Camila tried her very best not to think that it had something to do with her.

The second time, Camila had just been frustrated, a dull ache between her legs. She drove to Lauren’s apartment just after 11, finding her already in her pajamas, mouth minty from toothpaste. Lauren had liked this better, Camila thought, the casualness of it, the clear intent to get off.

Camila doesn’t mind. Not yet.

She knows that one day she will, maybe when the counting won’t be so easy to brush off, because three is easy to remember. She’ll want soft, and she’ll want the intent to be something different, something deeper. Lauren has always been better at casual than her, and Camila has always been good at deceiving herself. She remembers Lauren brushing some hair from her forehead after the second time, before Camila drove home without staying over. No matter how good Lauren is at clamping down her emotions, they always seep through.

“See,” Camila says, knocking her knee against the back of Lauren’s. “It shouldn’t be like you’re fighting your body. It should be natural.” She stretches her words out, rolling them around her tongue and ignoring the loud growl of her stomach.

“I got it.” Camila can hear Lauren’s eye roll. “Is torturing me worth torturing yourself?” She reaches back and pokes at Camila’s belly.

“Yes.”

Lauren spins around, shaking her head. “Unbelievable.”

“Craft services has the best sandwiches. I think it’s the white bread.” Camila grabs one that looks to be made of ham, cheese and mustard, adding it to the pile of matchstick carrots and grapes on her plate. “Oh! Brownies.”
“You have the lunch of a kindergartener,” Lauren says.

Camila eyes Lauren’s spread: a simple salad, dressing leaking toward her grapes, and mostaccioli. “Yours isn’t much better.”

“You literally picked those carrots out of the salad.”

“There’s burgundy lettuce in there.” Camila shrugs, picking up a water bottle and handing it to Lauren.

The corners of Lauren’s mouth lift with a smile, and she follows Camila to the corner of the room, sliding down against the wall. “Your first show’s next week?”

“Friday,” Camila clarifies. “Vancouver.”

“Are you excited?” Lauren asks.

Camila bites a carrot in half and nods. “Yes. It’s my favorite thing.”

“Exhausting, though.” Lauren’s eyes turn thoughtful, and Camila remembers the way she would sometimes sleep on tour, heavy, breathing so steady and deep Camila would worry she’d stopped. As tour dates rolled into each other, Lauren’s eyes would get darker and the circles underneath them would become puffier. Camila remembers the fight she had with Lauren and Normani about the two of them going out at night and coming to soundcheck sluggish.

Normani was better at rallying, but Lauren was better at getting angry.

“It’s worth it to me,” Camila says, defensive.

Lauren’s eyes narrow and her mouth tilts down. “I know.”

“Sorry. You’re right. It is tiring. But seeing all the fans? It’s why I do this. It’s why I love it.”

Lauren stabs a tomato and smears it in dressing. “Not the love of music?”

Camila hums and licks some mustard from the side of her sandwich. There’s a wrinkle between Lauren’s eyebrows as she pretends to focus on her plate, and Camila wants to wipe it away.

Lauren’s asking a trick question. “It’s different,” she decides. “I love everyone who comes to my shows, and it’s why I don’t mind the long nights, sleeping on buses and taking red eyes. You don’t tour because you love music.” Camila takes a bite of her sandwich and watches the way Lauren’s face slopes further inward. “The music is just … it’s me.”

“It’s who you are,” Lauren says, looking up at Camila. Her face softens.

“Yeah.”

Lauren loved touring once. She loved the thrill of seeing the crowd and felt unbridled exhilaration when they knew all the words to all the songs. She felt cool having a tour bus, and she liked seeing so many different cities, getting a glimpse of what made them tick, even if she never had enough time to unearth their hearts.

She feels sad Lauren lost that joy.

“You should come with,” Camila says.

“What?”
“To Vancouver. Sing our song with me.”

Lauren’s eyes widen. “No. Nope. No.”

“Why not? It’ll be fun.” Camila wants Lauren to remember the thrill of being onstage and looking out into a sold out arena, feeling so small and yet larger than anything. She thinks it’s the best way to get Lauren to understand.

“No,” Lauren says again, firm, eyes dark. “I don’t want to.”

Camila frowns. “Well, okay. You could at least come and watch.”

Lauren shakes her head. “Thanks, but no thanks.”

“Why not?” Camila doesn’t understand why she won’t even consider it. “It’s going to be a great show.”

“I know.” Lauren sighs, setting her plate down and turning toward Camila. Her eyes droop and she bites at the corner of her mouth. Lauren runs a hand through her hair, uncomfortable and, Camila thinks, sad. “If I were to go, it’d be all about that. It wouldn’t be about you anymore.”

“I don’t care,” Camila rushes, too fast. She knows because Lauren looks at her like Camila’s the pavement she just scraped her knee against, leaving it sore and bloody.

Lauren’s voice is quiet but sure, venturing toward offended: “I care.”

“Right.” Camila chews on her bottom lip. “Sorry.”

Lauren doesn’t say anything.

Camila watches her stab at a carrot so hard her plastic fork breaks. Lauren stands up to grab another from craft services, breathing just a bit too shallow.

Camila realizes just how fucked up this is. Because she’s in love with Lauren. Again.

Maybe always.

She’s in love with Lauren, and she’s waiting for Lauren to catch up, like when they were sixteen.

Except it’s worse this time, because Camila knows how much it hurts, especially when she waffles between thinking the wait is worth it, and knowing it can’t possibly be. This time, she doesn’t have the luxury of thinking she’ll wait forever. Camila knows she won’t. She’s not good at waiting for nothing.

She’s really good at waiting until the hurt outruns the love, though.

It might be the thing she’s best at.
seven: part of you pours out of me

Chapter Summary

Camila wraps her hand around Lauren’s wrist, but Lauren tugs it away when they arrive at the end of the first hallway. Camila’s explaining that this is the good vending machine, the one with the goldfish and buttery cookies, when Lauren says: “The one on the north side ate three of your dollars once.”

“Yeah, it-- Oh.” Camila forgot that Lauren's been here before.

Chapter Notes

Title from Joni Mitchell's "A Case of You."

Heather folds her hands over the table. Her fingers are thin and bony, and so is her face, more so than the last time Camila saw her. Mark sits next to Heather, shoulders back, rigid as a statue. “You want to come out,” Mark says.

Camila looks at Roger. He raises an eyebrow as if to say this is her battle and not his. He might be her ally, but he’s keeping his troops home for this one. “Yes. I do.”

“Why?” Mark asks, voice monotone.

“Because it’s who I am.” Her words shake with uncertainty, sentence turning at the end almost like a question.

“Why now?”

Camila exhales and tucks a piece of hair behind her ear. She doesn’t think it’s fair to ask, even though she knows, if she were to come out, people would ask: on Twitter, Instagram, and in interviews. Her answers, sickly sweet and lacking substance, would be printed in glossy tabloids people buy when they purchase gum and a candy bar at the grocery store checkout. “Because I’m ready.”

“So?” Mark asks. Everything he says sounds the same: flat, uncaring and bored. He believes Camila’s wasting his time.

“This is really important to me.”

“You’re not dating anybody,” he says.

Heather narrows her eyes.

“No, I’m not.”

Camila hates the trick embedded in the question. If her answer is yes, she’ll get in trouble for not
following the intended protocol: disclosing the relationship so Mark can figure out the best way to handle it going public, if at all.

She hates that, because the answer is no, it means she doesn’t really need to come out. Public Relations and Marketing are boys at a club, and they’ll only respect her if she’s already dating someone. And if she were seeing a boy, they’d just call her difficult. Because everyone would assume she’s straight like they already do, and there would be no point in clarifying.

Except that everyone is wrong.

“So, you want to make our jobs more difficult for no reason?” Mark asks, a challenging quirk to his mouth.

“The reason is it’s who I am,” Camila protests. Her voice still sounds thin, but her words don’t vibrate with nerves. “I want to be honest.”

“You’ve never cared about honesty before,” Heather offers. Her words are cooler than Mark’s, sharper, like a slap.

Camila’s jaw clenches.

“Do you know why people come out, Camila?” she asks, so icy Camila fights a shiver. “Sometimes it’s because they’re in love. Sometimes it’s because they feel too much guilt about not showing the public who they are. Nevermind the fact that they are never really themselves in public, and they won’t be, even if everyone knows they want to sleep with someone of the same gender.

“Mostly, people come out because they’ve been caught, and it’s more cost effective than trying to bury the lead. Coming out now wouldn’t hurt your career the way it would have once. It’s not a death sentence. But it won’t help you. You don’t even seem to know why you want to do this.”

Camila blinks and digs her nails into her palms. It hurts. “You’re an asshole.”

“This is business, Camila. I understand that it’s hard for you. I understand that you’re a person with feelings. But you have to understand, it’s not my job to care about that. It’s my job to make your label money.”

Camila can feel Roger tense next to her. She casts a glance his way and finds him looking at Mark and Heather, calm and unreadable.

“We want you to be happy,” Mark cuts in. “We were skeptical about your desire to collaborate with Lauren. But you did, and it worked even better than we could have predicted. But this is an even bigger favor. And you haven’t earned it yet.”

“I have to earn the right to be myself?” Camila shakes her head. “My career was built on the backs of girls like me. And you don’t want them to know I can relate?”

“You want to do more LGBT outreach?” Heather asks. “We can do that.”

Camila opens her mouth, unclenches her fists and shakes her head. “I mean, sure. Yeah. I’m not going to say no to that, I--”

“Your fans have always felt loved and supported. Nothing is changing unless you stop loving and supporting them,” Mark says.

“So it’s my fault?” Camila asks.
This conversation is making her insides curdle like overheated milk. Anger spreads hot over her face, and she feels nauseous. The worst part is that, in their own twisted way, Heather and Mark are right about her. She doesn’t want to do this in order to bare her soul to her fans. She doesn’t even want to do this to make them feel less alone. She wants to do this to prove a selfish point to Lauren. To prove that Lauren isn’t better than her.

Because she wants Lauren to be proud of her.

“No,” Mark says, word clipped and frustration leaking through.

“Then what?” Camila asks. “Will you at least consider all the positives to me coming out? The people who will give my songs a listen just because I’m bi? The people who will buy tickets to my shows?”

“Maybe in a few months,” Heather says.

Camila swallows back tears, her mouth dry. “That’s it?”

Mark nods. “That’s it.” He stands, pushes his chair into the table and holds out his hand for Camila to shake.

Camila wipes her palm against her pants and shakes his hand, forcing herself to maintain eye contact and focusing on making her grip confident and firm. She came across weak enough as it is, and she doesn’t want to add to the trainwreck. It’ll only hurt her when they revisit the topic -- if she still wants to revisit it. And the fact that she might not makes her hate herself just a little more.

Heather offers a handshake as well, adding: “It’s commendable. What you want to do. Incredibly short-sighted, but commendable.”

Camila stares at nothing.

“I’m sorry,” Roger says. He has the gall to sound resigned.

Camila blinks, wipes at her eyes, and curls her fingers around the edge of the table. “Don’t be,” she says, looking down at him. “Your silence spoke volumes.”

Some time between Vancouver and New York City, Lauren changes her mind.

Camila receives a text two days before the show when she’s stopped in Toronto. Lauren says she’ll be in the city visiting friends over the weekend. She doesn’t ask for a ticket; she makes Camila offer again, but she accepts. Camila knows enough to deduce that it’s why Lauren reached out.

Camila spends her traveling day devouring a peanut butter and banana sandwich, finishing her book, and catching up on sleep. When the sun’s low enough in the sky to make looking out the window impossible, but high enough that no one would say it’s setting, Camila naps. It’s the light kind of lucid sleep where her thoughts turn into dreams she can steer.

Anxiety curls in her stomach. She can’t stop thinking about Lauren. She worries Lauren won’t be let into the venue; or worse, she’ll get there too late and people will spot her. Lauren wouldn’t like that, and neither would Camila’s publicity team. She imagines herself forgetting the words to her songs, tripping over her feet and slicing her leg open, like when she was little and had to get stitches at the
back of her ankle. She pictures the lights blinding her, the crowd dead silent, losing her voice.

Camila feels herself rolling around her bunk as the sleep does nothing for her vaguely tired ligaments. She takes it, anyway, forcing herself to lie there with closed eyes.

When the bus arrives in New York the next morning, the sun’s still asleep, but there’s enough adrenaline thudding through Camila’s veins that she feels well-rested. Her family flew up yesterday because Sofi’s on spring break; Camila will get to hug her father, split a sundae with her sister, and wink at Lauren while she stands at the side of the stage. Camila bites the inside of her cheek when she thinks about it.

She meets her parents in the restaurant of the hotel’s lobby. Her dad speaks sleep slow while drinking his coffee and biting into a cheese danish. He complains that it’s not her mom’s pastelitos de guyaba.

“Eat your $10 pastry,” her mom says, shaking her head. But her mouth tilts up. She likes the compliment, even wrapped in whining about overpriced hotel food.

Camila grabs a keycard off them and crawls into bed with Sofi, cuddling close and inhaling the scent of her hair. All traces of Sofi’s shampoo have melted away in the night, and Camila wonders if she still uses the fruity one she switched to last year.

Camila waits until she can’t anymore, and then she jostles Sofi. “Mija,” Camila sings in her ear. “Sofia.”

Sofi groans, rubbing her eyes with one hand and batting Camila away with the other. She can feel the moment Sofi tenses, followed by the hug, tight and crushing. “Missed you.”

“I missed you more.”

“You probably did,” Sofi relents.

Camila laughs and swats at her shoulder. “Brat.”

Sofi’s freshly eighteen, and Camila can see it in her face, the last of her baby fat fading away. She’s mouthier, too, and depending on the day, Camila fluctuates between amused and annoyed. Today, she’s amused. Today, she loves her sister more than anything in the world.

While Sofi gets ready, Camila drifts back to her parents. They’re still at their table in the restaurant, coffee mugs just refilled. Camila takes a second cup, too. She orders fruit from the nice waitress and nibbles on the flavorless melon cubes she brings out.

Camila’s mom asks how she’s been the last few days and inquires about the tour schedule. She fusses: Camila’s not eating enough, not sleeping enough, needs to rest her voice and feet, and needs to call more.

Camila smiles and feels the tiredness seeping in as she begins sipping on her third coffee of the day. “I’m good,” she promises. “I just go to sleep later and sleep in longer. Touring makes you nocturnal.”

“I don’t like that,” her mom tuts. “It’s unnatural.”

Camila shrugs.

Her mom brushes a hand through her hair, fidgeting with the ends until she finds a split. “You need a
“She should get a buzz cut,” Sofi says, pulling another chair over to their table. “It’d look really cool.”

Camila grimaces. “No, thanks.”

“Maybe I should get a buzz cut,” Sofi continues. “It’d look better on me, anyway.”

“Ay dios,” their mother groans. “Over my dead body.”

“I’m an adult now. I can do whatever I want.”

Their mom’s eyes practically pop out of her head, and their dad laughs.

Camila missed her family so much.

She pays for breakfast and calls a car, telling the driver they can take a detour to Central Park. Camila has to be back at the venue, but Sofi whines that it’s too early, and she promised her friends she’d get a picture with Alice. They listen to the radio while Sofi chatters about how she aced her calculus test. She complains that her history teacher gives twice the homework as everyone else’s, and sighs, semi-embarrassed and fake annoyed, when their mom spills that Sofi’s friends, Elisa and Sara, think Camila is cool.

“For some weird reason,” Sofi huffs.

“Hey! I’m cool,” Camila protests. “As a cucumber.”

Their dad goes with Sofi, but their mom stays in the car, heading to the venue with Camila.

Camila fesses up when they’re at a redlight: “Lauren’s coming tonight.”

“Lauren?” She brushes her bangs to the side, a nervous tick.

“Yeah.”

“Won’t that be difficult?”

“Why?” Camila asks.

“Sofi hasn’t seen her in years.”

Camila blinks. “Oh.”

“You weren’t the only person in this family who loved her, Mila,” her mom says, soft and disappointed. “You aren’t the only one she hurt.”

“Please, don’t,” Camila whispers, voice cracking. The radio goes to commercial, and she fumbles with her phone, the screen lighting up and dimming before it slips out of her hand and onto her lap.

“I’m not trying to be cruel. I’m just reminding you. You should let Sofi know before she arrives.”

Camila nods and looks out the window at a yellow taxi cab. There’s someone in the backseat, and she wonders what kind of person still uses a cab in New York City.

Her mom catches her eye at the next stoplight, mouth tipped down but tender and kind. “I love you,”
Camila knows. She has never once doubted it; she has never believed her mother had anything but her best interests in mind. She only wishes she could scoop out the flip-flop feeling of her heart when she thinks of Lauren so that her mom could touch it, understand the shape and sound of it. Then, Camila thinks, her mom could give her specific advice, draw a map and lead her out of the tunnel. Maybe not even away from that feeling, but somewhere where it doesn’t eclipse everything else.

Despite the caffeine coursing through her veins, Camila lies down on the sofa in her dressing room when she returns to the arena. A few minutes later, her tour manager gently shakes her shoulder and reminds her she has a few radio interviews. Those go well enough. Camila is good at the light, airy interviews. The hosts crack jokes that only land half the time, but everyone always laughs heartily, regardless.

Her stomach growls by lunch, and Camila remembers all she’s consumed recently is tea, coffee and bland honeydew. She can’t feel her hunger, though, so she forces down what she can. Her mom’s fretting only increases each time she pauses and lets the prongs of her fork rest against the ridges of her paper plate.

Lauren arrives right before Camila has to soundcheck, the click of her dressing room door causing Camila to turn her head.

“Hi,” Lauren says, eyes shifting to the floor as she tucks a strand of hair behind her ear.

‘Hi,” Camila parrots. She can feel her mom’s eyes on them like coals rolling over her back.

“Be still,” Dawn scolds, gentle and light. “We’re almost done.”

“Sorry.” Camila fights the urge to worry her bottom lip.

“Hello, Lauren,” her mom says. From the corner of her eye, Camila sees her mom stand.

“Mrs. Cabello. It’s nice to see you again.” Lauren’s voice is brittle, some combination of her parent-voice and something Camila can’t quite place, maybe guilt or doubt.

“You, too.”

Camila’s anxiety clumps around her throat, and she wants to turn her head and study the shape of her mom’s shoulders, the heaviness with which she holds her hands, and the bend of her elbows. Over the music playing from her phone, Camila can’t hear the tone of Lauren and her mom’s conversation well enough, and her chest feels tight with the breath she holds in.

“What are you doing these days?” her mom asks.

Lauren tells Camila’s mom about her job, voice dancing with it. She asks after her mom, dad and Sofi. It’s all so generic, reminding Camila of when she accidentally runs into someone from high school at the zoo or Disney World, any warmth forced by awkwardness and a hope for the encounter to end sooner rather than later.

A mixture of disappointment and relief intertwines in Camila’s chest when her mom excuses herself to get something to drink, offering to bring a coke back for Lauren -- who politely declines. Camila
feels an odd apology curling underneath her tongue on behalf of her mother and her distant kindness.

She chokes it back, lets the relief win out, and exhales. Dawn instructs her to look up: “Just one more minute. I promise”

When Lauren’s fingertips brush against her shoulder, Camila almost gets mascara in her eye. “Hey,” Lauren says, soft but bright, like glow in the dark stars on a bedroom ceiling.

“Hey.” Camila can’t help but smile.

Lauren crosses behind her to sit on the sofa, and Camila taps her fingers against her knee until Dawn finishes her makeup.

She swivels to face Lauren before the door even closes behind Dawn: “Hi.”

“Idiot,” Lauren says, mouth twisting with a smile.

Camila laughs. “Third time’s the charm. How was your flight?”

“Good. Long.” Lauren’s hair drifts past her collarbones, curling like it does when she’s been rained on. Camila wants to run her fingers through it, cuddle up close and see if she smells like damp flowers, dewy and sweet.

“When did you wake up?”

“Three.” Lauren scrunches her nose. “I don’t know why I did that.”

“I don’t, either.” Camila has an idea, but she doesn’t dare speak it. She feels scared that even thinking it will jinx it. “We haven’t soundchecked yet. If you wanted you could still…”

“No, thanks. It’s your show.”

“Yeah.” Camila hops out of her chair and stands in front of Lauren. “Come on, let me introduce you to everyone.”

Camila wraps her hand around Lauren’s wrist, but Lauren tugs it away when they arrive at the end of the first hallway. Camila’s explaining that this is the good vending machine, the one with the goldfish and buttery cookies, when Lauren says: “The one on the north side ate three of your dollars once.”

“Yeah, it-- Oh.” Camila forgot that Lauren’s been here before.

“It’s okay.” Lauren smiles small. “I don’t mind. I didn’t really remember until now, either.”

“Is it weird?”

“A little, yeah.” She shrugs.

Camila swallows. “Okay.”

Something gnaws at her chest when she takes Lauren to the north end, kicking the other machine and yelping because it hurts her foot. The gnawing is Lauren’s laugh, her kind smile, and the circles underneath her eyes. She kicks the vending machine, too, the thud not quite as loud as Camila’s.

She’s here. For Camila. Because Camila asked her to be.
Camila wants to hold her hand and run down the hallway like they did when they first started. Run until they’re both out of breath, leaning against the crook of the wall and each other, giggling, Lauren pressing her palm over Camila’s mouth so they don’t get caught -- by who? They never knew. They just knew they were too loud, too far from where they were meant to be, and breaking some unspoken rule. It was the thrill of it. Moderate rebellion.

Camila leaves Lauren in her dressing room to nap, wanting nothing more than to curl up next to her on the cramped couch.

When she returns from soundcheck and the meet and greet, Camila finds Lauren, Sofi and her father.

She swallows.

“Hi Karla,” Sofi says, voice a strained tightrope.

“Did you miss me?”

“I need to talk to you.”

“Okay.” Camila cracks her knuckles, eyes slipping from Lauren to Sofi to her dad. She shifts her weight from one foot to the other, unable to keep still. Lauren’s face remains neutral, mouth smooth, but her posture stiffens. Sofi crosses her legs, eyebrow arching with an air of victory that forms an anxious ball in Camila’s stomach. Her dad looks like he took a bite of something awful and doesn’t have a napkin to spit it into.

“Alone,” Sofi says, clipped. She looks at Lauren, but it doesn’t seem mean.

“I’ll uh, go find something to do,” Lauren says. She leaves with a raised eyebrow, and Camila turns like she’s going with her.

Her dad files out next, brushing a kiss to her temple. “Te quiero,” he says.

Camila clenches her jaw and looks at her sister. “How was Central Park?”

“Lauren’s here,” Sofi says, voice thick with about a hundred different emotions.

“Yes.” Camila wrings her hands.

“I wish you would have told me.”

“I meant to,” Camila says. She forces herself to look Sofi in the eye. “I’m sorry. I just kind of … forgot.”

“I would have worn a cuter outfit.” Sofi pouts and pats the crown of her head like she’s afraid of her hair frizzing out.

“You look very cute.” Half of Camila’s mouth tilts up, and she risks taking the place Lauren had occupied on the sofa. It’s still warm.

“I guess…” Sofi starts. She blinks and meets Camila’s gaze, braver than anything. “I don’t understand. Am I going to see her again, or is this…”

“I don’t know,” Camila answers. “It’s not work.”

Sofi shrugs. “It doesn’t matter, really. I just wish I would have been prepared.”
Camila observes her sister. The lines of her face have hardened, her jaw tightening. She’s upset in a principled way more than an emotional one. She’s not angry with Lauren. Camila doesn’t know if Lauren hurt her when Camila left, or if in some secret part of Sofi’s heart, she blames Camila for taking Lauren away from her.

“Me too,” Camila admits.

“I used to want her to be my sister. Sometimes instead of you.”

“I know.” Camila’s laugh is forced, shaded with almost forgotten jealousy.

Sofi’s her little sister, and even as a legal adult, Camila thinks she’s impossibly young. Younger than Camila was at eighteen, even though Camila knows that’s not true. Sofi’s much more worldly and much less naive than Camila used to be. She learned from mistakes Camila made.

“I’m sorry,” Camila reiterates.

“You should be.” Sofi elbows her in the ribs, rolling her eyes. “But you can stop saying it. I don’t want to feel bad for you.”

“Then stop being mean to me.” Camila ruffles her hair.

Sofi huffs, going over to the mirror to fix it. “I’m not a baby, Kaki. You don’t have to hide stuff from me.”

The way she says it, flippant and frustrated, makes Camila think she knows a lot more than she should.

The rush Camila feels onstage is surreal, heightened by her family in the front row. Her parents sway and clap along to the beat, and Sofi jumps up and down, arms in the air. The New York crowd sings along loud enough for Camila’s smile to stretch and to make her contemplate, not for the first time, buying an apartment here. They’re not the loudest crowd she’s ever had, not even this tour, but she doesn’t mind. Camila loves them, and right now she loves them the most.

She tells them as much, excluding the right now, a faux whisper into the microphone. “Promise not to tell the other cities,” she says, and she can practically hear the answering laughter among the screams.

The unspoken right now fades a little more when she looks stage left. Lauren’s there, sandwiched between Camila’s tour manager and bodyguard. She looks so small, eyes wide and bright, a secret tucked into the corner of her mouth that lodges itself between Camila’s ribs. Blood rushes to Camila’s head and threatens to make her dizzy. It’s hard not to stare, glance Lauren’s way every other beat, and affirm that Lauren looks like she’s having fun.

Every time Camila runs off stage -- for a minute’s rest or a quick change -- she fights the urge to shoot herself into Lauren’s arms. She wants to hug Lauren and ask if she noticed how Camila chickened out of that high note, or missed that dance step, or if she liked the ad lib during the bridge.

Usually, Camila doesn’t want to get off stage. She dreams of living under the spotlight so long she burns from it, but tonight she can’t help but think about what happens after.
What happens after:

Her parents pick up ice cream for her, Sofi and Lauren.

It’s a bit of a tradition.

Every time Sofi comes to a show, she and Camila share a banana split. Sofi eats all the peanuts and lets Camila eat all the pineapple. Sofi gets the strawberry ice cream and complains that Camila keeps mashing her half of the banana into the vanilla.

Her parents pick up a scoop of mint chip for Lauren. When Sofi asks, Lauren lets her try it. Camila offers Lauren her cherry, and she sees the future laid out in front of them.

Lauren nods solemnly during Sofi’s story about Josefina dating the boy she likes despite Sofi revealing her crush during truth or dare.

“You’re too good for him,” Lauren says.

“Josefina’s a bi—” Sofi’s cuts herself short, eyeing their parents the next table over, and then Camila. “The worst.”

Lauren hums. “Maybe. But maybe she likes him, too.”

“She doesn’t,” Sofi huffs, scraping her plastic spoon against the melting chocolate at the bottom of their sundae. “She only asked him out because she knew I did.”

Lauren bites her lip and catches Camila’s gaze, amused. Camila shrugs. She has no idea what Sofi is on about. This is the first time Sofi’s saying any of this to her. Camila has a feeling Sofi’s only saying it now to impress Lauren with how grown she is.

“You’ll find someone better,” Lauren says.

Sofi rolls her eyes. “I don’t want someone better. I want Rey.”

Lauren nods, spoon excavating a chip her ice cream. “I’ve been there.”

Camila murmurs her agreement and bites into the last strawberry. It’s cold from where it was buried underneath the ice cream, causing an unpleasant chill to shoot through her teeth.

“What happened?” Sofi asks.

“Um, I guess I moved on,” Lauren answers.

“That’s … boring.”

Lauren’s nose wrinkles, and she laughs. “Yeah, I guess it is.”

“I thought your life was more interesting than Camila’s.”

“Hey!” Camila protests.

“All you do is sing, read, and watch TV.” Sofi shakes her head and slurps up the last of their ice cream before licking at her mouth. “You never do anything.”

“I’m going to add your friends on Facebook and tell them how much of a brat you are.”
Lauren chuckles and tucks a piece of hair behind her ear. “You are a little boring, though.”

Camila gapes. “Take that back!”

“Real friends don’t lie to you,” Lauren says. Instead of a jagged edge, it’s all teasing, buried in hoarse laughter and a shared grin with Sofi.

Camila wants this future. She wants this forever. She wants this in the way Sofi doesn’t want someone better, but that boy who is dating one of her friends instead of her.

When Sofi yawns and slouches against the table, their parents say it’s time to go back to the hotel, looking at Camila expectantly. She doesn’t leave until tomorrow afternoon.

Camila glances at Lauren. “I’m going to stay a little longer.”

Her mom nods, mouth turned down and concern etched into the lines around her eyes. Her dad says, “Mija,” and nothing else, hugging her so tightly it leaves her feeling fragile and young.

A few fans loiter outside the venue. Camila spots fatigue in their bodies, but they smile with adrenaline and joy when she finally pushes through the doors. She signs a few autographs, snaps a few selfies, records a video for one girl’s friend, and hugs them all. Their hugs remind her of her father’s: fragile and scared, their hands shaking like they can’t believe she’s real.

When Camila’s safely on the bus, she waves and closes the blinds. It takes almost 30 minutes for the last group of girls to leave, and another 20 until Lauren’s ushered onboard.

This is the kind of secret that sends a spark up Camila’s spine. The bus driver heads toward the designated lot for the night, and her bodyguard and tour manager discuss something at the small kitchen table. Camila grabs Lauren’s hand, leading her toward the back of the bus. She wants to feel like they’re alone.

“Did you have fun?” Camila asks, pushing aside the curtain to her bunk and crawling inside. She bunches her pillows against the wall so she and Lauren can sit back against them.

Lauren hesitates before following. She settles next to Camila, leaving a faultline of space between them. “Yeah. You were amazing.”

“Thanks,” Camila whispers, teetering toward embarrassed and shy, face warm with the compliment.

“You’re one of those people who belong onstage.”

“I’m glad you came.” Camila watches Lauren’s face, cast in shadow because she never bothered to flick on her bunk’s small light. Lauren isn’t smiling, but her mouth dances like she is, her eyes dark and wide, lashes long.

“Me too,” Lauren admits.

Secret.

It’s all so secret in a way that makes Camila’s toes curl and breath catch, like breathing too loudly could break the spell.
“I haven’t heard you sing our song since we recorded it,” Lauren says. “It sounded different.”

Camila cocks her head. “Bad different?”

“No.” Lauren yawns, shuffles closer and rests her head against Camila’s shoulder. “It sounded even more like you.”

Camila’s heart flutters, and she splays her hand over Lauren’s knee, their thighs pressing together. “I like myself with you,” Camila offers.

Lauren freezes, but she doesn’t move. Camila tries to see her face without shifting too much. She can’t, not really, so Camila draws curlicues onto Lauren’s skin, feeling it warm up underneath her touch. Lauren’s breathing slows and evens. When Camila thinks she’s asleep, Lauren says: “You can’t say stuff like that.”

“Ohkay.”

Lauren lifts her head, her eyes half-lidded with exhaustion. “I’m glad we’re friends again.”

“Me too.”

Camila kisses her, sleepy soft and gentle.

Lauren lets her.

Lauren lets Camila kiss her for what feels like hours, hands running up and down her arms, thumbs brushing against her shoulders and the sides of her neck. Camila’s head goes fuzzy with it, heart aching between her thighs in a way that only kissing shouldn’t do. They haven’t kissed like this in so long -- maybe ever -- like they have all the time in the world.

Camila wants to remember the weight of Lauren’s tongue against her own and the flutter of Lauren’s hands across her thighs, afraid to settle. Lauren tastes a little like chocolate, but all the mint from her ice cream is gone. She’s warm and lovely, and Camila tries to tell her that without saying it, without scaring her.

When the bus rolls to a stop beneath them, Camila doesn’t notice.

There’s a cough. They break apart to Anthony looking beyond them: “Would you like a room?” he asks.

It’s not jokey or dirty. The crew is staying in a hotel tonight, and Camila initially declined the invitation, expecting to room with Sofi.

“Yes,” Lauren says.

An earthquake erupts in Camila’s chest.
Lauren knows why she lets it happen. She knows why she follows Camila to a small hotel room: a balcony and one king and two key cards. Lauren knows why she lets Camila touch her with reverent hands, fingertips brushing against her cheeks, trailing a line down her jaw, and drawing a necklace between her collarbones. She knows why she allows Camila’s palm to spread over her chest like she wants to be able to feel Lauren breathe.

Lauren knows why, but she wishes she didn’t.

It’s not hurried, and it’s not light. There’s heaviness between them, blocking Lauren’s throat and making it impossible to think. Camila’s kiss anchors her, deep and needy. Lauren whimpers against Camila’s mouth when Camila taps her hip bone.

Camila is achingly slow, every touch like the swipe of a paintbrush. Her mouth presses a chaste kiss against Lauren’s breast. Her fingers caress their prints into Lauren’s stomach and ghost over her hips like a summer breeze

She’s embarrassingly wet by the time Camila touches her. Camila looks at Lauren, mouth parted and eyes blown wide open. She whispers: “You’re beautiful.”

It’s not the first time Camila has said it.

It is the first time in recent memory where it doesn't cause Lauren to scratch her fingernails down Camila’s back, bite at the pulse in her neck, and make this thing between them sharper, speeding it up so the fire burning beneath her ribs doesn’t spark against her heart.

Camila won’t stop looking at her, eyes dilated and dark, hazy with something other than lust. Lauren feels Camila’s gaze everywhere, tingling in her toes and lodging itself in her lungs. Her breathing stutters, shallow and quick.

It’s hard to ignore, splits her open and makes her vulnerable. Camila’s thumb brushes over Lauren’s clit, and her teeth scrape against Lauren’s mouth. Camila bites her own lip like she’s the one being touched where her heart beats.

She looks at Lauren, and Lauren could pretend she doesn’t know what she finds there, plain and clear in Camila’s eyes, lip falling from her teeth like her heart from her chest. Lauren turns her head and squeezes her eyes shut. She wants to live in this moment, but she wants it to happen in some other life and to some other version of herself.

It doesn’t fit her. Not here and not now.

She can’t do it. She wants it so much, but she can’t.

And she could pretend.

She could pretend, except Camila’s fingers slide back inside her, and Camila shifts impossibly closer, mouth babbling uselessly against the base of Lauren’s neck. Lauren hears it right before her body spasms: “Love you.”

Camila does her the kindness of leaving first, with a crooked smile and casual, “My parents will kill me if they wake up and I’m not there.”
She sends Lauren a text in the afternoon: *thanks for coming ;)* 

Lauren stares at it, blinks, and wills it to change. It’s too much: too humorous and too ridiculous and too Camila. 

She plans to respond. She really does. She sits bored at the airport the next day, looking at the message and trying to figure out what to say to drain the dread from her chest. She can’t do this anymore. She can’t. 

She can’t keep telling herself she can sleep with Camila and have it mean nothing, especially when Camila’s shown her hand. She can’t blur the lines of friendship like their past didn’t reveal the consequences: messy and angry and bitter. Lauren thinks maybe she can’t be friends with Camila at all. 

*Maybe trying was their first mistake.* 

*Deciding there’s nothing more to say, Lauren closes the thread, closes her eyes, and waits for boarding.*

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John visits LA for a business conference, annoyingly braggy about the hotel his company puts him up in and annoyingly persistent about Lauren showing him “the scene.” Every time he says “the scene” it sounds like some secret cult, the kind where everyone ends up drinking the kool-aid and dying. 

“I still have no idea what that means,” she tells him, enjoying the way he flinches while she curls her lashes. 

“You know, the scene.” 

“Very descriptive.” 

“Just when I thought maybe you weren’t still the worst, you prove me wrong,” John says, running a hand through his hair and shaking his head. “The hot spots. Like where the Kardashians would have partied in their prime. The scene.” 

“Gross,” Lauren groans. She shuffles through her makeup bag for mascara. “I’m not taking you anywhere if you’re going to buy coke.” 

John laughs. “You going to pretend you’ve never been to those clubs?” 

Lauren smirks. “No.” 

“Fuck off.” 

“You’re the one who’s so determined to rub elbows with the rich and famous.” Lauren rolls her eyes. 

“That’s not what I’m trying to do, Jauregui. I just want the true LA experience.” 

“There are many LA experiences that don’t involve getting wasted at a seedy club. We did that all the time in Boston. It’s not unique.” Lauren studies her reflection in the mirror before smearing gloss onto her lips.
“Keep acting like you don’t want to go out tonight. I’m calling an Uber.”

John’s right. Lauren’s excited to dance until she can’t feel the blisters her high heels rub into her feet. She wants to drink until her head is light and her entire body feels loose. She wants her head to be so fuzzy she forgets about her problems, including the project she was given at work that involves a program she’s never used before, her dwindling bank account until she gets paid on Friday, and Camila.

The ride to the club takes too long, making Lauren wish they had pregame more at her apartment. Their driver plugs in John’s phone and blasts his Spotify. He and Lauren sing along, post too many snapshots, and argue over the merits of remixes that make a song twice as long as the original (Lauren: creative freedom! John: unnecessarily self-indulgent!).

“Are you serious?” John asks while they line up. “You don’t have like, ex-famous person privileges? Weren’t you papped last year?”

“Shut up.”

Lauren could probably try if she wanted to, cutting to the front of the line and seeing if the bouncer knows who she is. But she’d rather wait, flirt with the idea of being normal, and avoid the embarrassment if the bouncer doesn’t recognize her.

And she definitely doesn’t want to be let in quicker because of those pictures with Camila. The thought of them still makes Lauren feel dirty.

John butts into the conversation the group behind them is having about drunk food, hitting on a girl who introduces herself as Beverly. Lauren recognizes that it might be her actual name, but she can’t help her scoff when she hears: “Beverly, as in Beverly Hills.” Ridiculous.

They enter the club 30 minutes later, and 10 minutes after that, John and Beverly are all over each other on the dance floor. Lauren tries to slurp her brain out through the straw in her rum and coke. She watches the bodies undulating, a sweaty mass of hormones. The strobe lights flashing across her vision threaten to give her a headache if she doesn’t get drunk fast.

Lauren heads back to the bar, shouldering into a vacant space and waving when the bartender turns in her direction. She orders another drink, fiddles with her phone, and feels someone standing too close.

“Hey,” he shouts.

“Hey.”

He wears nice jeans and a too open black button up, sleeves pushed past his elbows. She can’t tell the color of his eyes in this light, but his jawline is nice. He holds out his hand: “Luke.”

“Lauren.”

“Luke and Lauren; sounds good together.” He grins, teeth white and straight.

Lauren arches an eyebrow. “I don’t know about that.”

“Are you up for being convinced?”

The bartender slides her drink in front of her, and Lauren drops some cash onto the counter. “Why not.”
“I like a challenge,” Luke laughs, but the sound gets swallowed by the bass.

She sips her drink, and Luke orders shots for both of them. She learns he’s an actor who moved to LA just over two years ago, which is disgustingly typical. He seems impressed she’s in music production, eyes going just wide enough to not seem fake.

“You could be a model,” he offers, a smirk almost permanently folded into the corner of his mouth.

Luke clearly knows how attractive he is, but he possesses enough genuine, boyish charm to keep from being too sleazy. When he asks if she dances, Lauren lets him lead the way.

His hands find her waist easily, and she moves her hips to the beat thudding through the club, the bass a metronome for her heartbeat. She doesn’t mind the press of him behind her, or how he seems to get closer with each passing song. Lauren feels sweat beading along her forehead, her skin flushing with the humidity of all the bodies pressing together, and the crowd moving in syncopated harmony.

The alcohol has finally made its way into her bloodstream, loosening her limbs and clearing her mind. Lauren sings along to the songs she recognizes, a phrase here and there, quiet enough that she can’t even hear herself over the music. She loves the feeling of being lost in a crowd, of Luke’s hands inching just enough under her top so the tips of his fingers press against her warm skin.

When she turns, he’s still got that dumb smirk on his lips. Lauren doesn’t care and leans up to kiss him. He instantly opens, mouth sour and firm against hers. One of his hands rucks up her shirt, splaying over her back and pushing her against him.

When Luke bends down, mouth wanting against her neck, Lauren remembers Camila’s lips ghosting there and writing love on her skin. She freezes, nails digging into his shoulders.

He doesn’t notice, and she blinks, begging herself to forget, but it’s too late. There’s something like guilt curling in her fingertips and wetness behind her eyes, the memory of tenderness she regrets accepting.

“Fuck,” she exhales, pushing him away.

Luke’s eyes are dilated and dark. That smile has gone, mouth parted and tongue darting out to lick at his bottom lip. “What?” he asks.

Lauren leans up and shouts into his ear. “Sorry. I have to go.”

He asks why, and she swallows. “I just can’t. Sorry.”

Lauren pushes through the crowd, letting the bouncer stamp her wrist even though she has no intention of going back inside. She bums a cigarette off a girl with stringy hair and black lipstick, shoulder against the brick while she smokes.

Lauren inhales, feeling the smoke swirl around her lungs and settle like a vice. She breathes out.

She hopes to breathe out the apology she doesn’t want to give Camila, but she thinks she owes her. Lauren doesn’t want to take responsibility for what’s happened between them; she doesn’t want to recognize her role in it. But, deep down, she knows she needs to. The affection she has for Camila refuses to turn to indifference, no matter how hard she tries, and it holds the guilt heavy in her chest like the smoke compressing her lungs.

She can’t pretend not to know how Camila feels anymore, and she can’t just keep ignoring her. The
messages Camila sends every few days remind Lauren she’s still complicit: i fell on stage today lol, and tried escargot it was GROSS, followed five minutes later with i think i have food poisoning, and then: did you lose your phone?

She texts John that she’s leaving, and he says he’ll find his own way back. She rereads Camila’s messages while she waits for the Uber, her guilt migrating and turning to knots in her stomach.

Lauren watches the end of the cigarette burn.

While the phone rings, Lauren focuses on the taste that lingers on tongue and the open feeling of her lungs. The smell of marijuana clings to her skin.

“Lauren?” Camila answers, tone an impossible mixture of concern, relief, sadness and happiness.

“Hi.”

“Is- Is everything okay?”

“Yeah,” Lauren says. “Everything’s fine.”

“Did you get a new phone?” Camila asks, her voice tight and high. Camila already knows the answer.

“No.”

“Oh.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Camila offers.

She means it. Lauren knows she does by how slow the words come, warm and well-worn, like a favorite blanket. Camila is always too forgiving, offering people second chances, and fifth and sixth ones, too. Lauren doesn’t understand how she’s had her heart broken so many times and still manages to turn herself inside out for people to see, vulnerable and exposed.

Lauren has a hard enough time opening up to people who’ve given her no reason to distrust them.

“It’s really not,” she says. “But, thank you anyway.”

“How have you been?” Camila asks.

Lauren closes her eyes and tries to work up the courage to come clean. “Okay. Work’s been stressful, but I’m learning a lot, especially about sound layering. Um, John was just in town.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. He had a business conference. We went out Friday night.”

“That’s fun,” Camila says, too kind and interested in the mundane day-to-day of Lauren’s life.

“It was good to see him.” Lauren squeezes her still shut eyes and shifts on her sofa, tucking her
knees to her chest. “How’s the tour been?”

“Really good! The New York crowd is still my favorite, but Pittsburgh was proudly the loudest? I don’t know. I felt like there was a wall of sound the entire show, not just when I asked a question or during the encore.”

Lauren hums, curling her toes against the sofa’s edge.

She meant to tell Camila she kissed someone on Friday. She meant to tell her they can’t be friends anymore. It’s too hard and she thinks someone is going to get hurt. She wanted delivering the news to be like ripping off a bandaid.

But Camila is so easy: easy to forgive her and move on, easy to chat with, voice lilting pleasantly even though it’s late, late for Lauren in California, and much later for Camila somewhere in the midwest. Camila’s joy spills through the phone in a way that makes Lauren’s heart flutter, almost covering the anxiety that fidgets in her fingers.

“One girl gave me a planner she handmade. There are pressed roses on the cover. It has a calendar and a place for contacts and notes. She added a section for song ideas, too, and there’s staff paper. The last section is full of inspirational quotes and letters from fans for when I’m having a bad day.”

“That’s really dope,” Lauren says.

“Really dope,” Camila agrees. Lauren can hear the smile smoothing out her mouth. “I can’t imagine how long it took her.”

“People really love you.”

Camila exhales, and the silence stretches between them. “I guess.”

“They do.”

“Thanks,” Camila whispers, wetness in her voice that wasn’t there before. “One of the letters says our song is that person’s favorite on the album. They listen to it while getting ready for school to pump themselves up.”

Lauren scrunches her eyebrows. “That’s, um, it’s not really inspirational.”

“Yeah, but it’s fun. Sometimes people just need a little fun and distraction to feel better.”

Lauren steels herself, rolling her neck and adjusting her phone against her ear. She planned this. She can do it. It’s just Camila.

“Is that what we’re doing?” she asks.

“What?”

Lauren repeats Camila’s words back to her: “Having fun and distracting ourselves?”

In the beat that follows, Lauren feels her heart drop into her stomach. She’s afraid of what Camila will say, and she’s grateful she can’t see Camila’s face, can’t see if it falls or if there’s a mask she slips on. Lauren expects and fears agreement: yes, that’s what we’re doing<./i>. A repeat of Camila’s mantra lately; this doesn’t have to mean anything.

“I miss you,” Camila says instead, softer and more vulnerable than anything. Her voice doesn’t waver, no tears evident, and Lauren doesn’t understand how she can be so brave and so stupid.
“Oh.” She closes her eyes.

There’s not enough time to muster up the words she needs before Camila asks, “Do you miss me?”

Lauren’s face flushes hot; her throat is dry but her hands are damp. She shifts, tucking her feet beneath her thighs. The weight of Camila’s question presses against her chest, revealing something about herself that Lauren wishes she didn’t know, and confirming something about Camila that makes Lauren’s ribs ache.

Lauren has two choices: she can tell the truth, or she can lie.

Lying is probably the right choice. It will be kinder to Camila’s heart. It will make ending this nebulous thing between them easier.

She tells the truth:

“Yes.”

“I miss you, too,” Camila repeats, still so open, but tinged with lightness.

“We can’t,” Lauren rushes before she loses her nerve and digs herself an even bigger hole.

“But we do.” She can picture the confusion as it settles on Camila’s face: sucking on her cheek and eyes turning dark in the worst way, like rain clouds. No thunder or lightning, no anger or fight in her.

“This was a bad idea.”

“Friends can miss each other,” Camila says, voice thin.

“Camila,” Lauren exhales. “I don’t know what to tell you. This isn’t working for me.”

“Why?” she asks, voice edging on desperate.

“Because I can’t be your friend, and I can’t be with you.” Lauren swallows and hears the hitch in Camila’s breathing. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. I’m sorry,” Camila whispers. “I’m sorry I fucked it up.”

Lauren blinks and finds her vision blurring. “It’s not all your fault.”

“It feels like it.”

“It’s not.” Lauren runs a hand through her hair and waits while Camila breathes an almost unsteady rhythm. When her feet start to fall asleep, Lauren realizes she can’t wait any longer. She doesn’t know what she’s waiting for, anyway. “I have to go.”

“Okay,” Camila says, word breaking in half.

Lauren wishes Camila hadn’t been such a good liar before, and she wishes Camila was a better liar now.

“Bye,” Lauren says.

Camila doesn’t say anything.
Lauren blinks, allows a few tears to spill down her cheeks, and rubs them away. She hangs up and tries not to think about how long Camila is going to sit on a one-sided call.

A perk to living in LA is that a lot of Lauren’s friends moved here after graduating or have reasons to be in town for work. The city makes it easier to keep in touch with people, opening a sprawling network of future opportunities and a distraction from things she doesn’t want to think about.

Ally’s in town for a few days, hitting the interview circuit to discuss her latest EP. She makes time to meet Lauren for lunch at a cozy little place that smells like lemon and honey. The cafe is all dark wood, dim light and cozy decorations. Even though she’s never been here before, Lauren immediately feels at home. The place reminds her of Ally.

“Hey, girl,” Ally greets, pushing her chair from the table and standing. She hugs Lauren tightly, up on her toes to hook her chin over Lauren’s shoulder.

“Hey. How are you?”

“Good! Busy with marketing and the wedding, but the good kind of busy, you know? I sleep like a rock every night. How’re you?”

“I’m okay.” Lauren smiles at Ally, and then at the waitress, who flips her glass and fills it with water.

Ally orders fried okra to share and tells Lauren the macaroni and cheese is heavenly right before she opts for a sandwich with avocado and sprouts instead.

Lauren hasn’t seen Ally in over a year, and it feels good to be in her presence again. They text and Skype, but it’s a poor substitute for the warmth of Ally’s hug and the sunshine of her smile. She possesses an open and calming aura that puts Lauren at ease, convincing her everything is going to be okay, no matter what kind of day she’s having.

Ally describes her new music as a little more Christian with a little more fiddle, and she promises to send Lauren an early copy of the record. Her eyes shine and her grin widens as she runs through her interview schedule and the small list of shows she’s playing to promote the EP. She emits a kind of settled happiness and excitement that Lauren envies.

“And I’ve finally decided on wedding colors,” Ally says, reaching over her plate to stab at the okra in the center of the table.

Lauren scrunches her nose. “Should I be nervous?”

“No.” Ally rolls her eyes. “Merlot, peach and sage!”

“What?” Lauren watches Ally’s face remain smooth, no laugh in the furrow of her forehead.

“It’s great, right?” Ally’s grin somehow cracks even wider. “I think I want your bridesmaid dresses to be sage, but if y’all want peach, I won’t complain.”

Lauren blinks. “That is the most pretentious way to say those colors.”

Ally kicks her gently under the table. “It’s specific. I can’t say orange without people thinking my
wedding is going to look like juice.”

“Alright, fine.” Lauren sips her water. “Do you know when we’re getting these dresses?”

“I’m trying to organize a good time for everybody to go shopping together in a few months.”

“And what if we can’t all agree?”

“You’re really trying to make me feel bad, aren’t you?” Ally laughs.

“Sorry.” Lauren frowns. She looks down and picks at her fries.

“Hey.” Ally reaches across the table and taps her wrist. “It’s fine. I think we can find a style that’ll make everyone look good. But if you’re really difficult, I might let ya’ll split between two. The color should unite you enough. Whatever the budget allows, though.”

Lauren nods, absently running a fry through a puddle of barbecue sauce.

“So, how are you, really?” Ally asks, prying but gentle.

Lauren shrugs. “I’m good.”

“Lauren.” Ally narrows her eyes.

“I’m good,” Lauren repeats.

Her job is challenging and fulfilling, and she finally feels like her career is heading in a direction she likes. She looks forward to improving her craft and creating. She has good friends; people to go to movies with, laugh with, get drunk and high with. Everyone in her family is healthy. She’s happy, truly, but sitting with Ally, she’s reminded what real love looks like, clear and unabashed. Lauren knows it’s dramatic, but she’s having a difficult time believing that type of love is in the cards for her. It’s a small complaint her mind turns into a giant, gaping hole, and it feels like it’s expanding.

“I just,” Lauren starts, running a hand through her hair and sighing, frustrated. “I’m so happy you’re in love and getting married. I don’t want to … dampen that at all for you.”

“But,” Ally urges, leaning forward, eyes steady, empathetic and kind.

“I think I want that.”

“Oh, honey.” Ally reaches across the table again, this time grabbing Lauren’s hand and squeezing. “You’ll have it.”

“I feel like every time I’ve had a chance at it, I sabotage myself because I feel like there’s something better out there.”

“All that means is that it wasn’t right.”

Lauren doesn’t believe that, but it’s nice to know that Ally does. “Or maybe it really is my fault,” she counters, anyway.

Ally hums and tilts her head, looking at Lauren so intensely that she sits up straight. Ally twists her mouth and her eyebrows wrinkle. “I think for a long time you’ve tried to be emotionally unavailable.”

“I’ve heard that one before.”
Ally pulls back and dabs at her mouth with a napkin. “Do you want to know the truth?”

Lauren shrugs. “Why not?”

“You’re awful at dealing with the reality of loving someone, and because it hurts, you give up.”

“That’s what I said,” Lauren cuts in, too harsh.

“Not really,” Ally says, smiling small and bordering on condescension. With her, Lauren doesn’t mind as much as she does with everybody else. “You’re asking the right questions and striving for self-awareness. Which means when you think someone is worth it, and all your experiences have made you ready, you won’t let yourself give up so easily. Just make sure you’re open to people. You have to let yourself love someone, and you have to let them love you back, even if it might hurt. God has a plan. I believe that.”

“You’re really smart.” Lauren’s mouth tilts up, and she finds that when Ally gives advice, it’s easy to take. Ally’s kind, but it’s not in her nature to exaggerate to make someone feel better. She’s plain in her honesty.

“You know what?” Ally starts, eyes bright again as she picks up her sandwich. “People don’t tell me that enough.”

Lauren leans against the counter, waiting for her leftover pad thai to warm up as it spins around and around in the microwave. She thinks about taking a nap after she eats, curled up in bed underneath the ceiling fan. Naps in bed run the risk of lasting hours, but Lauren would rather that than lie on the sofa with no fan. The air-conditioning in her apartment is on, but not high enough to completely cut the heat.

The microwave beeps, and someone knocks on Lauren’s door. She frowns, taking her plate out and setting it on the counter.

Lauren looks through the peephole.

It’s Camila. Her hair’s pulled back, and her mouth’s pulled down into a tight frown, hands bunching and unbunching at her sides.

Lauren blinks and leans heavily against the door, falling off her tiptoes and onto her feet with a painful thud.

Camila knocks again.

Lauren could ignore her. She knows Camila will give up and go away. She might try sending a text or Snap, or she might call and leave a voicemail, but those things are easy to ignore, too. Easier, really.

Lauren opens the door.

Camila’s eyes go wide, brows jumping up her forehead. “Oh,” she says. “Hi.”

“Hey.” Lauren blocks the entrance to her apartment; one hand on the jamb, the other on the casing.

“Can I come in?”
Lauren worries her bottom lip, tracking the dart of Camila’s gaze restlessly around her face, back into the apartment, and onto the floor. “I guess.”

Closing the door behind them, Lauren feels claustrophobic and uncomfortable.

“Were you eating?” Camila asks, standing halfway between where the kitchen turns into the living room.

“I was going to.”

“Sorry.” Camila frowns, a small, pinched thing.

“It’s fine,” Lauren says.

It’s not fine. But that has nothing to do with how her pad thai cools as Camila shuffles her feet.

Camila hugs her arms to herself like she needs protection, and Lauren wants to think it was brave of Camila to come here. If their roles were reversed, Lauren never would have dropped by Camila’s house. But instead of finding it commendable, Lauren just thinks it’s incredibly stupid.

“So,” Camila begins, taking a few steps. Her back is to Lauren now, shoulders hunched and a few strands of hair spiraling out from her bun.

“So.” Lauren clears her throat. “You can sit down.”

Camila teeters on the edge of the couch cushion and runs her hands over her knees. Her feet tilt onto the balls. “I’m sorry,” she says again, glancing toward the kitchen. “I just wanted to talk.”

“About what?” Lauren asks, pulling a chair from the kitchen table kitty corner to Camila. She sits, pressing her knees together.

“Us.” The word cracks in Camila’s mouth, quiet and soft, but somehow hard, too. She smooths her hand over her head and rocks on her feet, knees going up and down.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” Lauren says, but she feels like her throat is closing up, as though she’s allergic to this conversation.

“Don’t say that.” Camila’s frown deepens. “I need an explanation.”

Lauren sighs, running a hand through her hair and shaking out a few knots. “I told you.”

“You can’t be my friend,” Camila says, words scratching like sandpaper.

“Right.”

“Why not?”

Lauren inhales and pretends the breath strengthens her. “You know why.”

Camila finds her eyes for the first time since she entered the apartment. “Why?”

“Because you’re in love with me.”

It sounds dumb and arrogant and wrong coming out of her mouth. It’s the kind of thing a boy at a bar running on good hair and liquid courage would say to her, sidling up and letting his hand drop to her thigh. Lauren winces.
Camila breaks eye contact and chews on the inside of her cheek. “So?”

“Camila,” Lauren says, annoyance starting to build at the base of her spine. “We can’t keep doing what we were doing. It’s not fair to you.”

“So?” Camila repeats, rubbing at her temple and closing her eyes. There are dark circles underneath them.

“Don’t be stupid.”

“I’m not,” Camila protests, a bite to the words. She swallows and looks at Lauren again, her body curving forward. “I’m fine. I don’t care about this being fair to me. I’m a grown woman, and I can handle myself.”

“I know,” Lauren snaps. “So can I, and I don’t want to do this.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t have to explain myself to you.”

“We can have an adult conversation, Lauren.” Camila’s eyes have gone hard now. She’s emboldened, and maybe it stems from a vein of annoyance similar to the one Lauren feels.

“You are the most obtuse person sometimes, you know that?”

“You want to know what I think?” Camila asks, sitting up straight. Her entire body seems to vibrate with energy.

“No,” Lauren responds, sharp.

“You’re scared of me.”

Lauren scoffs. “Why would I be scared of you?”

“You’re scared to fall in love with me.”

“You are out of your--”

“I know you feel something, Lauren. There’s always been some weird energy between us, ever since we first met. And you just don’t want to acknowledge it. I don’t know why.”

“Camila,” Lauren sighs, pressing her palms to her forehead. She feels a headache encroaching. Camila’s too close, and Lauren hates that.

When they were in Fifth Harmony, Camila was scary not so much because she was Camila, but because she was a girl, and because she was in the same group.

Then, the fear took the shape of the past, of everything that went as wrong as anything could possibly go. But Lauren wanted her too much to let the past dictate her present. In retrospect, she was on the verge of trying with Camila. Until Camila fucked her over.

The fear slotted into place again. A new spackled wall, higher and thicker.

Lauren didn’t want to be a fool, and she didn’t want to get hurt.

She hates that Camila sees through her like frosted glass. She’s too close, but she’s not close
enough. Her vision distorted.

“All we do is hurt each other,” Lauren offers.

“We’ve grown up. I know we have. If we just communicate—”

“You lied to me last year. Your career is always going to be the most important thing to you. That’s fine. Someone is not going to care about playing second fiddle to your ego. That person isn’t me. I know where your priorities lie, and I don’t trust them.”

“I apologized!” Camila’s face flushes. “I’m sorry. You said you forgave me.”

“I do.” Lauren nods. Her heart lodges in her throat, and she feels sadness webbing through her veins as she watches Camila bite her lip the way she used to do when she was watching a sad movie and trying not to cry. Lauren decides not to call her out on ignoring the most important part of what she just said. “I forgive you. But it doesn’t make it go away.”

“I’m sorry,” Camila manages, firm and sincere. Her chest rises and falls with effort.

“I know.” Lauren looks down. “You’ve been lying about this whole thing, though.”

“We were just friends,” Camila whispers. “It didn’t have to mean anything. It didn’t mean anything to you.”

“Camila.” Lauren tilts her head and blinks, her vision blurry. “That’s not true.”

“It’s not not true, either.”

Lauren swallows and wipes at her eyes. “You’re right. But I can’t be with someone who thinks like that. In not untruths. I just.” She shrugs. “I can’t.”

A silence settles, and Camila stands up, rubbing at her eyes. When she opens them, they’re too wide and too sad, the circles underneath them too dark, tinged yellow toward the bridge of her nose like a bruise. “I was scared,” Camila says. “I only lied because I didn’t want to lose you.”

“Then I probably wasn’t worth having.”

Camila shakes her head. “I don’t think that’s true.”

“I’m sorry, too. I think I knew you weren’t being honest, and neither was I. But the sex was good, so.” Lauren laughs, a humorless sound. She’s tangled up in Camila’s game of half-truths. It’s awful, and she doesn’t know how to find her way out. Regret trickles down Lauren’s throat, but she can’t pinpoint what it is that’s causing it.

Camila smiles, crooked and heartbreaking. “Yeah, it was.”

“Maybe one day we’ll be able to move on from the mess we’ve made of ourselves,” Lauren says, the closest thing to comfort she can come up with.

“Yeah.” A tear falls down Camila’s cheek, and she bats it away. “Maybe.”

Lauren lets Camila hug her before she leaves, her face damp against Lauren’s cheek, body warm and soft, nails blunt against her shoulders. Camila smells like soap and eucalyptus, and Lauren breathes her in one last time. “I’m gonna miss you,” she whispers.

“Me too,” Camila says. “I’ve been missing you since that dinner.”
Camila’s honesty shatters something in Lauren’s chest, but she waits until Camila’s gone to cry.

Lauren owes her that much.
eight: separate the salt from the sugar

Chapter Summary

“There are lots of people out there,” Normani agrees. “But only if you want them to be.”

Chapter Notes

"I'm super proud of her. I'm grateful that she's gotten to a place in her career where's she happy, and she's doing what she wants to do. It's amazing that she got nominated."

Title from Kacey Musgraves's "Stupid."

Lauren knows what it’s like to feel Camila’s absence. She felt it parting at the airport after The X-Factor ended, with hope that somehow third place was charmed, the magic number to get Fifth Harmony signed. She felt it during that first mall tour. Even though they were always together, whenever Camila laughed and floated out of her reach, Lauren’s heart tumbled down a slippery slope she hadn’t known it was perched on. She felt it during that last tour when Camila pulled away, further and further, occasionally snapping back like a rubberband, only to stretch again until the band broke.

Now she feels it again, a ghostlike press against her chest when her boss tells a joke Camila would like, or when she gets a spotty check from their song, or when she’s lying in bed at night and her mind betrays her.

The worst part is not knowing if Camila is okay.

Lauren doesn’t want to care, and she doesn’t dare look at Camila’s Twitter: muted, or Instagram: never even refollowed her. Even though she thinks Camila is probably fine, she wonders if Camila misses her.

She hopes Camila does, selfish and awful. She hopes Camila misses her more than she misses Camila. Lauren hopes Camila thinks about her every day, drafting messages she saves but doesn’t send.

She wants Camila to feel what she felt at sixteen and seventeen, and sometimes even at eighteen and nineteen.

It’s mean.

It’s why Lauren knows she made the right choice.

Their capacity to be mean and hurt each other stretches far and wide. She fears it eclipses their ability to be kind to each other or happy for each other and with each other, any affection buried in layers of resentment and cruelty.
Lauren made the right choice, but it still stings.

The LA heat ratchets up; the air a bit stickier than it has been. Lauren doesn’t mind. It’s nothing compared to the humidity of Miami. She bundles her hair into a ponytail and sips on her water, spotting Normani rushing toward her with a smile slipping onto her mouth when she sees Lauren.

“Hi,” Normani says.

“Hey.” Lauren stands and hugs her. “You know, for all the times you complained about me being late for shit—”

“Shut up,” Normani laughs, pressing a kiss against Lauren’s cheek before taking the seat opposite her. “My mom called me right before I was leaving the hotel, and you know how she can talk. I called my car like, ten minutes after I planned.”

“I’m just hearing excuses.”

“I get to be late this one time. It’s payback.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Lauren waves her hand dismissively.

“Remember the time you were over an hour late for our dinner reservation?” Normani slides her sunglasses off her face, sets them onto the table and quirks an eyebrow.

“No.”

Normani snickers. “Anyway, it’s good to see you. You look really good.”

“It’s all the botox I’ve gotten since moving here,” Lauren deadpans.

“I did not miss that sense of humor,” Normani says, but she smiles, fond and bright. Lauren loves her.

“You talked to me two days ago, so you didn’t have the chance yet.”

Normani ignores her. “How’d your date with that guy go? Bob? Bill?”

“Brian,” Lauren corrects, shrugging. “It was fine. He’s a really nice kisser, but he’s also super into himself? I swear he went to the bathroom twice just to stare at his reflection in the mirror.”

“Ew.” Normani frowns. “LA guys are just like that, I guess. What you really need is to find a nice good country boy or gal.”

“When are you going to find a nice country boy?” Lauren asks, eyebrow arching.

Normani’s eyes smile in that embarrassed way of hers, halfway between offended and bashful. “I’m working on it. But I want to be single for Ally’s wedding, you know? I’m sure there are some groomsmen who also double as gentlemen.”

“You wanna do that whole cliche thing where you hook up at a wedding, don’t you?”

“You should do it, too!”
“I’m in.”

“It shouldn’t be too hard unless Nicolas only has married and gay friends. But he’s like, super Christian in a way I don’t trust, so I doubt it’s the latter.” Normani lifts her hand when she spots a waiter helping another table on the patio.

They split an order of fries, a fancy kind with feta, mint and basil, and Normani orders a bottle of beaujolais to share. Lauren only ribs her a little about how extravagant it feels.

“We should stalk Nicolas on Facebook later to see if he has any cute friends,” Normani says.

“Research,” Lauren laughs.

“Exactly! You don’t want to go into the weekend unprepared. We’ll need a game plan.”

Lauren smiles and runs her finger through some condensation on the side of her water glass. “So, how’d the music video go?”

“Good. Blair is a natural dancer despite not being trained, and the song had a really nice beat I could choreograph to, so I love what I came up with.”

Half the time, when Normani talks about dancing, Lauren has no idea what she’s saying, but the joy and passion she exudes is infectious. Lauren could listen to Normani talk about pas de beurre, leg position and body rolls for hours, nodding along and humming during all the right pauses. It sparks creativity and makes Lauren want to sit at a piano and tinker with a melody, open her laptop and write lines, or grab a pad of paper and jot down lyrics.

“I can’t wait to see it,” Lauren says when Normani finishes, their waiter setting down their fries and pouring wine into their glasses.

“Here.” Normani reaches for her purse and pulls out her phone. “I have video of myself doing it.”

Normani’s graceful and precise in a way Lauren has never managed to be, her movements clean and beautiful. She’s skilled and practiced, but more than that, she’s confident. Lauren has always known what moves she’s meant to do and when she’s meant to do them, but she’s never had the certainty that Normani does. She thinks maybe that’s half the battle. Dancing is second nature to Normani and watching her is mesmerizing.

“That’s amazing,” Lauren says, handing the phone back across the table. “That body twist thing on the second beat? So dope.”

“Thanks.” Normani’s grin is self-assured. “I’m really proud of it.”

“You should be! Like, damn girl. Your legs.”

Normani laughs, fishing a fry from the bottom of the pile. “There’s a dancer in the video I think you might hit it off with, too.”

“Normani,” Lauren warns, grabbing the stem of her wine glass. “You’re not setting me up.”

“Why not? I know you better than anyone. I swear she’s smart and beautiful. You’d love her.”

“No, thanks.” Lauren gulps down some wine.

Normani studies her over the rim of her own glass, eyes narrow and brows furrowing. Her mouth slowly thins, the corners pulling down the longer she looks.
“What?” Lauren asks, rolling her eyes.

“You keep going on dates, and you say they’re all ‘Whatever,’ and I just don’t get it.”

“Don’t get what?” Lauren watches the cheese stretch as she pulls another fry free before folding the entire thing into her mouth.

“What’s the point? You don’t seem to want to give anyone a chance.”

Lauren chews.

“Is it about Camila?”

Lauren chokes, coughs, and hits her palm against her chest. “Shit. No.”

“Okay, jeez, calm down. I was just asking.”

“I guess-- maybe?” Lauren frowns, takes a sip of water and clears her throat. “Our entire relationship was so fucked up. Then we tried to be friends, and we fucked it up again. I just. I want to make sure whatever weird Camila residue still stuck to me is gone before I invest in someone else. I don’t want my own issues to ruin something that has the potential to be good.”

Normani nods. “That makes sense.”

“Also, like, almost everyone in LA wants to be famous.”

“We’re famous,” Normani says, her eyes lighting up like she told a joke.

“You know what I mean.”

“Yeah,” Normani laughs. “Yeah, I do. Remember that guy who always put globs of gel in his hair and called himself a mactor?”

“Oh my god, Mani.” Lauren’s eyes widen. “He did not deserve to go on more than one date with you. See, that’s your problem, you give people too many chances.”

“If we were one person,” Normani starts, “we’d be excellent at dating.”

“Better than we are now,” Lauren agrees.

“What if we tried that thing where one of us goes on the date and the other one listens in and tells us what to do?”

“We are not Cyrano-ing ourselves.” Lauren shakes her head, fond and amused. “That never works out.”

“Whatever.” Normani shrugs. “At least tell me if you’ve gotten laid recently.”

Lauren has.

Twice.

She gives Normani the gory details, but she doesn’t say the first time she kept comparing the girl to Camila, and the second time it was easier not to, but the guy didn’t make her come and didn’t seem to notice when she faked it, either.
Lauren gets the opportunity to lead the production of a track. The song is meant for the sophomore album of a singer named Amelia. Even though Jeremiah is Lauren’s second, it’s terrifying. She feels the pressure tightening between her shoulder blades. Recording with Amelia makes her mind race, and she doesn’t think she’s ever had a headache last this long.

There’s so much to think about, from the level of harmony to include, to how long the opening melody should loop, to the amount of bass driving the song forward. Lauren has read over the A&R treatment so often it’s practically burned into her brain. She could recite it verbatim at the snap of Jeremiah’s fingers. She listens to the demo on repeat like it’s the best song ever written (it’s not) and ingrains the melody into the synapses of her brain so her thoughts lilt in it. She notes the vocal tics of the demo singer, categorizing them: the ones she likes versus the ones that distract from the music’s mood.

Lauren has to learn Amelia’s voice in a way she never had to with Camila’s. The tone and pitch resonate differently in person than when recorded. It’s not that Amelia sounds different, per se, it’s just that her voice feels different. Voices are nuanced things. It takes time to figure out how they work and what you need from them.

In actuality, it’s not that Lauren never had to learn Camila’s voice; it’s that she put the work in years ago without realizing it. She was simply reacquainting herself, like rereading your favorite book, wear in the spine and some of the pages gone wavy with spilled water.

“Let’s take it from the top,” Amelia says, standing in the booth with her headphones askew. She wears black lipstick and a leather jacket. Always. She says: “The person this is about would have a tramp stamp and smoke cigarettes.”

Lauren understands. Amelia didn’t write it. Her record company assigned the song to her without asking her opinion, but it fits the husky quality of her voice and follows her blasé and shadowy aesthetic. It ramps up the concept of her debut album and turns everything a smidge grittier.

Amelia sings like an actress, like the song is a role and she just needs to get into character.

“Give me a second,” Lauren says, filing away today’s first take.

“I want to come in softer on the second verse.”

“Sure.” Lauren nods. “Alright, take two.”

The second take is fine. Every take is fine. There’s nothing vocally challenging about the song. The entire thing is slow and even, cyclical. Before she read A&R’s treatment, Lauren knew she wanted to make the song haunting and sadder than the demo. She isn’t sure she can balance what she wants to do with what she’s supposed to do, and it’s an all too familiar feeling.

“Better,” Amelia says, hanging the headphones around her neck.

“Yeah,” Lauren agrees.

Jeremiah slaps her shoulder. “You planning on giving her any constructive criticism?”

“I have.” Lauren blinks, mouth pursing.
“Not really. I was letting you get comfortable, but you’re normally incredibly bossy. I don’t know what’s happening here.”

“What’s happening?” Amelia calls from the booth, probably straining to hear the quiet, staccato cadence of Jeremiah’s voice through the glass.

“A teaching moment!” he calls back.

“A waste of my time!” Amelia returns, mouth a lopsided grin despite the roll of her eyes.

“She’s not in charge here. You are. Ryder and Linda are. Amelia is just the talent.”

Lauren’s stomach twists. “That’s not really fair.”

“This industry isn’t fair.” Jeremiah points at the soundwaves on the screen. “Are you seeing this shit?”

“No.”

“I’m absolutely sure you hate these spikes,” he says. “I saw you watching the screen and the soundboard. You hate this.”

“I like the song.” Lauren does. As far as dream assignments go, this is about as close as they come.

“You don’t like the way she’s singing it.”

“Yeah, but she has--”

“Stop,” Jeremiah huffs, friendly exasperation in the backward tilt of his head. “She doesn’t matter. Fucking fix this.”

Lauren sighs and runs a hand through her hair.

Jeremiah’s right. Lauren’s thinking too much about industry politics and not enough about doing her job. She needs to be technically proficient, she needs to translate the A&R treatment into a finished product, but she’s also supposed to direct Amelia. And she isn’t. She’s letting Amelia do whatever she wants. Maybe because Lauren’s scared to get it wrong. Maybe because recording with Amelia matters so much more and, somehow, so much less than recording with Camila had.

“Hey,” Lauren says.

“Yeah?” Amelia perks up, screwing the cap onto her water bottle. “I was thinking this time I’ll punch up the last chorus?”

“Actually,” Lauren starts, biting at her lip and shifting her gaze to Jeremiah. He arches one eyebrow in challenge, mouth tight. “Can you try it flatter?”

“You mean off-key?”

“No, I mean monotone.”

Amelia’s eyes narrow. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Just try it,” Lauren says. She wheels her chair closer to the soundboard and sets up the next recording.
Amelia takes the monotone note to heart, almost speaking the lyrics over the music and sounding bored the entire take. It’s awful to listen to, uninspired and annoying.

That’s another thing that’s different: Camila was always good at taking direction.

Lauren exhales and looks at Jeremiah.

He shrugs, his expression hard and unyielding. “I’m going for a smoke break,” he says. “When I come back, you better be producing this song instead of sitting on your ass doing nothing.”

Lauren sighs and watches Jeremiah leave the room, the door clicking behind him.

So, she’s really doing this.

“Can you try not to sound like you’re fifteen and being forced to tell your parents about your day?” Lauren asks.

“Listen,” Amelia starts, tugging on the sleeves of her jacket before crossing her arms over her chest. “You’re the one who wanted the song to sound boring.”

There’s no training for this, not really. Shadowing and working with producers with experience is great, but it also means everyone they worked with respected them, never questioned their decisions, and trusted they were going to put out a good product, whether the product was collaborative or a singular vision.

It’s fair that Amelia doesn’t trust her. She sees this as an opportunity to take control of her music. Lauren figures there were a few times when she was a producer’s nightmare, too, armed with sarcastic comments, overdramatic sighs, and too many eye rolls. That’s not even counting the arguments she and the girls would get into with each other, raising their voices as the disagreements felt more personal than they probably were.

Still, this is her job now.

And in some ways, she has to be the person she used to hate.

“No. I want the song to sound haunting,” Lauren clarifies. Her voice isn’t very forceful, and her words sound like a suggestion Amelia can dismiss.

“Fine.”

The take ends up slightly better than awful, which still isn’t very good.

Lauren decides to stay late, picking through her Spotify playlists to find examples closer to the vibe she’s looking for. She even gets in the booth, records herself singing the song a few times, and makes sure she’s not asking for something the tempo and rhythm won’t allow.

It’s thrilling

It feels like she’s breaking a rule, and her heart skips a few beats, her face flushing. Lauren missed the sound of her own voice. She’s not harboring delusions of grandeur anymore. She’s finished being frustrated at the notes she can’t hit. She plays back her attempts, closes her eyes, and thinks about her tone, the feeling, how when she tries, she can be really good at this.

Lauren ends up deleting her takes after confirming she does like the song better this way. There’s no reason to keep them, and the reminder to trust her gut sticks. It causes her to smile and turn up the
radio on the way back to her apartment, scream-singing along as she inches down the freeway.

She only hesitates a little when Camila’s latest single comes on, her heart heavy in her chest, listening through to the first chorus before flipping the station.

The song turns out great once Amelia understands Lauren’s vision and actually starts listening. The finished product deviates from the version playing in Lauren’s mind, but she’s pleased to find it’s not because she’s incapable of making that sound a reality, but because what she and Amelia come up with is better, both musically and in terms of what her A&R people want.

Lauren has no idea if the track will make the album, but it doesn’t matter.

It’s a personal victory more than anything, and the next time she gets the opportunity, Lauren will have more confidence in herself and her opinions. It won’t be so scary having other people depend on her.

The experience leaves Lauren flying high, and she texts Normani, asking about the dancer she mentioned a few weeks ago.

Her name is Sydney. She has sleek black hair that hits at her lower back, and she shows up to their first date with about three pairs of fake eyelashes glued on. She’s tall, stunning, and her voice is low and smooth when she greets Lauren with a “Hey.”

Lauren thinks that no matter whether this ends up being a dud or not, Normani definitely has a better read on her taste in partners than Dinah.

The first date isn’t a dud.

It’s probably the best first date Lauren’s ever been on with someone she’s never met before. Sydney is smart and witty, telling the best joke Lauren’s ever heard about Republicans even though people aren’t supposed to discuss politics or religion on first dates.

“Fuck that,” Sydney says. “I’m supposed to fall for someone, and then in two months find out they’re a literal piece of shit?”

“Right? Such a waste of time,” Lauren agrees.

“I have to deal with enough stupid people as it is. There was this dancer on the last tour I did, and she honestly thinks ‘boys will be boys.’”

“Ew.” Lauren grimaces.

“She couldn’t tell left from right in rehearsals, either, so.”

“I still use my hands to double check which way is left sometimes.”

“Really? Okay, I guess that’s something we can work on.” A teasing smile flirts at the corner of Sydney’s mouth, and she really is very attractive.

Lauren feels it vaguely, but her stomach doesn’t twist and her palms don’t sweat. “I’ve never accidentally turned the wrong way when someone is giving me directions, so I think you’re safe.”
Sydney hums. “Maybe.”

“If you’re lucky, you might see for yourself.”

“Or unlucky.” Sydney smiles, raising an eyebrow.

“Hey! I’m a really good driver,” Lauren says. It’s true. She’s only been in two accidents, and she was stopped at a red light during the first. The second is harder to prove either way, but Lauren is absolutely sure it wasn’t her fault.

“Nobody who’s a good driver says that.”

Lauren laughs.

Sydney has great tour stories and is upfront about being contracted to go on the road again in a couple months. Lauren admires her transparency in a town where it can be so difficult to come by.

When Sydney kisses her goodnight, Lauren feels it spark at the base of her spine, but it doesn’t diffuse throughout her body, curl in her toes or tingle in her fingers. She chases Sydney’s mouth anyway, because Sydney’s a good kisser.

She’s great.

And it’s good.

“How’d it go?” Normani asks the next day over Facetime, smirk already annoyingly spread across her mouth.

“Good. Sydney’s great.”

“And?”

“She’s great,” Lauren repeats, shrugging. “She’s beautiful, so thank you for that. And super smart. I like her.”

“And?” Normani wiggles her eyebrows.

“It’s cool that she understands the industry, but isn’t at the center of it, you know? I don’t know. It was a good date.”

“And?”

Lauren rolls her eyes. “We kissed goodnight. That’s all.”

“Okay, Lo, where is the enthusiasm? When you started dating that Jamie guy, you gushed about him for like an hour. You literally spent a solid five minutes trying to describe the color of his beard as though I couldn’t just look him up on Facebook.”

“I’m sorry I’m not appropriately excited,” Lauren says, shaking her head and leaning back into her sofa.

“But you liked her, right?”
“I did. I can’t think of anyone who would be more perfect for me.”

“Okay,” Normani says slowly, clearly unconvinced. “It’s just that your words aren’t saying what your face is saying.”

Lauren sighs. She taps her toes against the leg of her coffee table. “I’m not sure what you want me to say?” Normani presses her mouth into a thin line. She eyes Lauren carefully and tilts her head. “What?”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“Nothing!” Frustration curdles in Lauren’s stomach. “I said she’s perfect for me. You did a good job, miss matchmaker. Pat yourself on the back, brag to Dinah, whatever.”

“You’re seeing her again?” Normani asks.

“Yeah, we have a second date on Friday.”

Normani hums. “And you’re excited about it?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. I’m just saying you don’t seem very excited about it. That’s all.”

“Well, I am,” Lauren snaps.

“Is this about Camila?”

Lauren groans, accidentally kicks the coffee table and stubs her toe. “Why would this be about her?”

“You’re saying Sydney is perfect for you, but your entire face is screaming that you’re going to sleep with her on Friday, go out with her one more time, and then tell her it isn’t working out,” Normani answers, voice steady and flat like she’s reading a list of facts. “I’m just wondering if maybe you’re not as over Camila as you told me.”

“I was never not over her. There was nothing for me to get over.”

Normani scoffs. “We both know that’s not true.”

“I’m sorry,” Lauren says. She squeezes her eyes shut, scrapes her hand over her face, and blinks to clear her vision. “I do like Sydney. But I just met her, and I’m seeing where it could go, okay? It was a really great first date, but it wasn’t love at first sight.”

Normani nods. “That makes sense, I guess. It’s just I’ve seen you more excited about other first dates.”

“Yeah, with people I knew already or had a crush on.”

“Right.” Normani smiles, small and sheepish. “Okay.”

“You’re a little right, though,” Lauren admits.

Normani’s eyebrow crinkles. “Yeah?”

“It kind of felt like something was missing. I just don’t know if it’s in my head or not.”
“Okaaaaaay,” Normani drawls, two syllables becoming five.

“I know you have something to say,” Lauren says, raising an eyebrow. “I already know what it is, so you might as well say it.”

“I don’t get it, Lauren. I’m not upset with Camila anymore. I forgave her.” Her voice is soft, a twinge of sadness sticking to the syllables. “And I want you to forgive her, too. But I haven’t forgotten, either, you know? I don’t want to be best friends with her again. And wrapping my head around your whole deal is just…”

“Go ahead.” Lauren rolls her eyes, but it’s kind. “I won’t throw my phone across the room.”

“The way you talk about her, or don’t talk about her, it’s like.” A beat. “Maybe you think the thing that’s missing is that everyone you’re dating isn’t her.”

Lauren swallows. She knew it was coming, but it still stings, cold and sharp against her chest. “But there’s got to be somebody else out there.”

“There are lots of people out there,” Normani agrees. “But only if you want them to be.”

“Yeah.”

Lauren doesn’t want to want Camila, and she wants to want other people to be out there.

Sometimes she thinks she’s accomplished both, but other times an old song will play on the radio that she heard for the first time with Camila’s head on her shoulder, and Lauren doesn’t quite know what to do with it.

Her second date with Sydney is great. The conversation is fun, and the sex is good. By the third date, Lauren’s excitement hasn’t bubbled up, but it hasn’t waned, either. She tells herself this is a good sign, especially as their comfort level increases. Lauren thinks this relationship is going somewhere solid and good. She ignores how touching Sydney feels nice but not like much else. Relationships are built on trust and comfort, anyway. Not lust.

And it’s good.

Great.

Same difference.

“Do you want to split an order of grilled mushrooms?” Sydney asks, scanning the menu.

“Sure.”

“And maybe the lasagna? Or the squash ravioli if you’re feeling adventurous.”

“I’m always feeling adventurous,” Lauren says. “I’ll try anything once.”

Sydney wiggles her eyebrows. “Well, then I have some ideas for later.”

Lauren smiles. “We’ll discuss it. But if you want to pee on me, I’m definitely not into it.”
“Damn it,” Sydney laughs, a low, rumbling thing that makes Lauren smile even wider. “Do you think we should split a salad, too? Or is that too much?”

“Whatever you want.”

They order the salad.

Lauren’s mouth is full of ravioli, listening to Sydney talk about today’s rehearsal, when she spots Camila behind Sydney’s head. Which is just. Fuck. Camila’s with Shawn, and Lauren knows they’re only friends, but something dims in her brain. She narrows her eyes a little.

She wonders if there are paparazzi outside now.

“And it’s like, I know we’re just learning it, but if you can’t even count to eight, how can this possibly be your profession?” Sydney sighs and takes a sip of water. She doesn’t drink as a healthy diet thing, and it means Lauren’s completely sober right now. Which is probably good, but she really wants a glass of wine. Or some vodka.

“Yeah,” Lauren agrees, focusing on Sydney.

It’s harder now.

Her stomach turns, and she feels uncomfortably warm. She likes Sydney a lot; she swears she does. She tells Normani that she likes Sydney a lot every time they talk, but Camila is right there, and Lauren doesn’t understand why that’s somehow -- still, months after the last time she saw her -- so much more than a lot.

Lauren manages to mostly pay attention to the girl she’s dating, but every so often she catches a glimpse of Camila at the bar with Shawn, waving her fork around, brushing some hair out of her face, or throwing her head back to laugh. Lauren can’t actually hear it, but her brain imagines the sound echoing around her skull. She wants to know what’s so funny.

She sees Shawn take Camila’s fork and eat whatever is on the end of it. Camila smacks his arm playfully. It makes Lauren’s heart race and causes something like jealousy to bloom at the base of her spine and wedge between her ribs. And it’s. Absurd. He has a girlfriend. Lauren could have a girlfriend. She’d just have to ask the woman sitting across from her.

She feels so gross.

She feels even grosser when they finish eating and the waiter drops off the check. It’s Sydney’s turn to pay -- they’ve gotten to the point where they take turns paying -- but it feels wrong to let her. Sydney raises an eyebrow when Lauren insists on splitting the bill, argues that this restaurant was her choice, and reminds Lauren that she picked up the last one, but ultimately concedes.

Which is good. Because when the waiter takes their cards to process, Lauren spots Shawn heading toward the bathroom and makes an excuse about having to pee, only half-heartedly laughing at the piss play joke Sydney cracks.

Lauren takes a deep breath, acutely aware of the sound. “Hey.”

Camila looks up from her phone, eyes going wide. “Hey.”

“I just wanted to say hi,” Lauren offers.

“What are you doing here?” Camila swallows, eyes dark, fingers tapping against her locked phone.
screen and causing it light up and fade to black over and over again.

“Oh, I’m on a date.” She gestures vaguely to the table Sydney still sits at.

“Right.” Camila smiles, a tight thing. “Shawn and I are just catching up.”

“Do you,” Lauren hesitates. She’s a god-awful person. Truly. “Do you want to catch up with me some time?”

Camila’s eyes dart around Lauren’s face, eyebrows furrowing and mouth twisting like she’s trying to figure something out. “Why?”

“Because I want to.” Lauren shrugs, trying to seem casual with her heart racing.

Camila chews on her bottom lip, fingers still restless. She looks down before she asks: “As friends? Right? Because honestly I’m still not…”

She doesn’t finish the sentence, and Lauren doesn’t jump in to save her. Lauren tracks the curve of Camila’s eyelashes. She catalogues the rouge of her cheeks, the wrinkles in her forehead, and the sag of her shoulders. She’s beautiful, and something in Lauren’s chest aches.

She misses her.

Not all of the sudden. She has been missing her. She just didn’t want to fully admit it. It was there when she’d spring for the broccolini Camila likes (“Because it’s cuter than regular broccoli”), and when she’d put on her 2012 playlist while getting ready in the morning, singing along to “A Thousand Years,” and when she’d pointedly not stare at the billboard with Camila’s face on it, all too aware it was there.

It was easier to pretend she didn’t miss her. It was easier to pretend she could fall in love with Sydney, instead. It was easier to pretend that doing what she thought was right was simple. But maybe it was so hard because it was wrong. Maybe Lauren didn’t want to move on, but was too scared to move forward. And she hates that.

Fucking hell.

“I’m sorry,” Camila whispers.

“No,” Lauren manages. Her throat is dry, and she feels her own flush of embarrassment echoing the one dusting Camila’s cheeks. “Don’t be sorry, I– I don’t. It doesn’t have to be as friends.”

Camila’s head snaps up, and Lauren watches her mouth work. Then: “Aren’t you on a date?”

“Yeah,” Lauren laughs, hollow and horrible. “I guess it’s just that--” She runs a hand through her hair, frustrated. “I’m on a date with a girl I really, really like, but I saw you and all I wanted to do was talk to you, so.

“I’m tired of fighting whatever this is,” she says, gesturing between them. And she is. It feels like it’s been wearing her down slowly, missing Camila more exhausting than trying to deal with whatever tension sparks between them. She didn’t realize how exhausted she was until she admitted it.

Trying to feel something more than nice when Sydney kissed her was a futile exercise that left Lauren frustrated and tired. But standing in front of Camila has her heart hammering, sending a shot of adrenaline and energy straight into her bloodstream. “I’m not where you are, but I don’t know. We’ve never really given this a chance before.”
She feels sick. She doesn’t know if it’s because she should or shouldn’t be doing this.

Hope brightens Camila’s eyes, and Lauren likes her so much. She feels the warmth of the smile playing on Camila’s mouth curl in her toes, curling around the nausea in her stomach, and the thought of settling for the fear and exhaustion and niceness is so much worse than this.


“Okay,” Lauren repeats back, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear. “I’ll call you?”


“Oh.” Lauren’s heart thuds in her stomach. She really is awful. “Yeah, I. This is Camila.”

“Sydney,” she says, holding out her hand.

Camila’s ears turn red, but she shakes Sydney’s hand, always polite. “Hi, um. Lauren told me she really likes you.”

“Really?” There’s surprise in her tone.

“Did you not know that?” Lauren asks.

“Am I missing the party?” Shawn says. “Hey, Lauren.”

“Hi.” Lauren feels her posture go rigid.

“This is Sydney,” Camila introduces, her voice returning to a normal pitch. “Sydney, this is Shawn.”

“Right.” Sydney’s face clears. She nods. “Nice to meet you, Shawn.”

They make a bit of polite small talk, and Lauren’s shoulders become increasingly stiff the longer it lasts. She excuses herself to finish filling out her portion of the receipt, shoving her card back into her wallet and eyeing the way Camila blushes and shakes her head in conjunction with the tightness of Sydney’s smile.

“Camila seems nice,” Sydney says when Lauren parks in front of her building.

“She is,” Lauren agrees.

“I auditioned to be one of her dancers once. Didn’t get the gig.”

“That sucks.”

“It happens.” Sydney shrugs before unbuckling her seatbelt and reaching for her purse on the floor of the car. “Do you want to come inside? I have some vegan ice cream you could try. I swear the texture is creamy as hell.”

“Actually,” Lauren says, turning toward her. “I don’t think this is going to work out.”

Sydney’s eyes flicker across Lauren’s face, and then she laughs, a light sound marked by resignation. “Yeah. That makes sense.”

“I’m sorry,” Lauren says.

“I didn’t think too much about the check thing at first, but when I asked Camila and Shawn how
long they’d been together, they told me they were just friends, so.”

“I really do like you,” Lauren offers, guilt wilting around the words. “I just saw her tonight, and I- I don’t know…”

“It’s fine.” Sydney sighs, annoyance plain. “I don’t want to be with someone who’s more interested in somebody else.”

Lauren winces even though that’s fair. “Sorry,” she says again, feeble and useless.

“Yeah.” Sydney nods and opens the door. Her voice tilts off the cliff into bitter: “Hope it works out for you.”

Lauren feels awful as she watches Sydney walk toward her building. She wishes she had explained herself better, clarified that she didn’t get in touch with her knowing she wanted to try things with Camila. Lauren hadn’t realized how much she’d pushed down her feelings; she truly believed she was done with Camila altogether, that she could be and wanted to be. But seeing her again when Lauren had tried so hard to feel the same way about Sydney made everything snap into place.

Camila had been right the whole time.

Lauren wants to explain that even though she thinks that’s true, she’s still not sure. She’s still second guessing.

She drives home in silence and finds the guilt gives way to the excitement swirling in her stomach when she lets it, doubling when her phone vibrates with a text from Camila.

She’s fucked, but Lauren thinks maybe that’s finally a good thing.

*

Camila’s heart flutters in her chest. She lets it, revels in it, looks at Lauren and doesn’t have to obfuscate her intentions. She doesn’t have to hide behind half-truths that she can only live with because she’s a master of technicalities. She feels free with Lauren in a way she almost never has, only waving at the feeling in passing before now. It never stuck around when they were on The X-Factor, and certainly not in the years after. Now Camila thinks it might.

“Here,” Lauren says, handing her a drink and sliding into the spot next to her on the sofa.

“Thanks.” Camila smiles. The drink is cold in her hand, a pinkish color from the lemonade. She swirls the ice around before putting her nose close to the rim.

“It’s not that strong, I promise,” Lauren says.

“To you.”

Lauren rolls her eyes, and Camila loves it. She loves that Lauren is always acting frustrated with her. She can’t wait until they’re somewhere with other people, and Lauren glances at her to share her
actual frustration because of something someone said or did. “Look,” Lauren says, shoving her own drink underneath Camila’s nose.

“Ew.” Camila reels back. “That smells like something you clean your bathroom with.”

Lauren laughs. “See. Yours is fine.”

Camila still eye it warily before dipping her tongue in. “Mmm,” she hums before taking an actual sip. “It’s good.”

“It’s almost all lemonade,” Lauren clarifies.

“Thank you.” Camila leans over, pressing a sticky kiss to her cheek.

She hits play on the next episode of *Friends*, the one where the gangs plays poker, and lets herself settle into the moment. As the theme song punches through the speakers, Camila remembers that this show has ten seasons; a lot of episodes to watch together. They’ve both seen the majority of them already, but before they settled on *Friends*, Camila eyed the enormous episode count and felt it thrumming in her veins. The decision felt like a promise of enough time to watch all ten seasons. When Camila allows herself to think about the comedies that could follow, her toes curl underneath her knees, her legs criss-crossed like a pretzel.

She likes glancing at Lauren when a joke makes her laugh, watching if Lauren’s mouth tilts with humor, too. She likes slurping her drink down too quickly so she can set the glass on a coaster and cuddle into Lauren’s side, linking their elbows together and painting circles along Lauren’s wrist. She likes the drowsy, happy feeling of a night spreading out before them, because Camila doesn’t have anything tomorrow except dinner with her mom.

“You want to watch another?” Lauren whispers when the credits roll.

“Sure.” Camila half-shrugs, letting her head loll against Lauren’s shoulder.

“You’re not going to fall asleep?”

“If I fall asleep, we can just watch it again later,” Camila says, blinking up at her, pleased smile slotting onto her face.

“No. You have one chance to watch the monkey run away, or you’ll never know if he’s okay.”

“Marcel,” Camila corrects.

“I know.” Lauren tries to nudge her in the ribs, but their elbows are still linked, and it doesn’t quite work.

“I might fall asleep,” Camila admits. The lights are on, her feet fell asleep ten minutes ago, and when she wiggles her toes, she feels pins and needles stabbing all the way up her calves. But Lauren is soft and warm next to her, making this the perfect spot to close her eyes and take a nap.

“It’s not even ten,” Lauren points out.

“Excuse you. One of us woke up at four this morning for a radio interview, and it wasn’t you.”

“One of us slept in until ten this morning and isn’t tired.”

“Do you have a hairbow?” Camila unhooks their arms, sitting up and uncrossing her legs. She stretches, noticing how Lauren watches her, piqued interest and slow eyes. It makes Camila warm all
over. “I can’t believe you didn’t even wake up to listen.”

“You’re excited to announce European tour dates next week, you had a blast touring North America, etcetera,” Lauren says, pulling a hair-tie from her wrist and handing it over.

Camila chuckles and gathers her hair into a ponytail. She adopts her best radio voice: “I’m still clumsy. There are many compilations of me tripping and messing up dance moves, but you should absolutely not look them up.”

“See, I got the highlights.” Lauren takes a sip of her drink. All the ice cubes have melted, leaving what Camila assumes to be a slightly watered down mixture of vodka and lemonade.

She ties her hair up, leaves it looped through the elastic, and grabs Lauren’s glass, swallowing the rest of the liquid and wiping at her mouth with the back of her hand. “Ew,” Camila says out of habit more than the actual alcohol concentration.

Lauren’s phone vibrates. Camila watches her unlock it and read a message. “Hey, are you going to Ally’s wedding?”

“Uh, no.” Camila blinks, eyebrows furrowed. She tugs her shirt down. “I’d have to be invited to go.”

“Oh,” Lauren says. She digs her teeth into her bottom lip. “Right. Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Camila smiles small, reaching across the space between them to tuck a piece of hair behind Lauren’s ear. “I wasn’t waiting by the mailbox for an invitation.”

She knew Ally was getting married because of social media, but she didn’t know a date had been set. Camila didn’t expect to be invited, not really. She and Ally are acquaintances at best, their relationship a relic of the past. But there’s a younger Camila who would be devastated to learn she isn’t invited, the same Camila that was convinced Ally and Troy would get married, and the Camila who thought she’d be a bridesmaid at each of the four girls’ weddings. There’s a piece of that Camila still inside her, because she can’t help but frown, a sad ache in her bones that everything turned out the way it did.

She’s not surprised, but it doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt.

“Do you have a plus one?” Camila asks, fiddling with the hem of her T-shirt. It’s the kind of jealous prying she’s so accustomed to doing with Lauren that it doesn’t even cross her mind not to ask. She forgets that they’re supposed to be mature adults; they’re no longer teenagers pinballing between passively-aggressively trying to hurt each other and silently trying to apologize without admitting to doing anything wrong in the first place.

The apologizing was always worse, because it left Camila wondering what Lauren had done.

Lauren blinks. “No. Not yet, I mean, I’m sure I’ll find someone…”

“I could…” Camila starts, the offer dying in her throat when she sees Lauren’s head tilt, forehead wrinkled and mouth pursed.

She loves the idea of going to a wedding with Lauren. She thinks about glancing at Lauren when the wedding march begins, squeezing her hand during the vows, laughing with her during the speeches, and wrapping her hands around Lauren’s waist on the dance floor, full of cake and all the love floating around.
Camila thinks about marrying Lauren, and it’s too much too fast, but she gets a flash of it before she can stave it off. It makes her inhale sharply, air cold against her teeth.

It’s too much, even for her.

They’re not even officially dating. They haven’t agreed to be exclusive. Camila hasn’t told Roger or her label or her own mother.

“Sorry,” she says slowly, reigning in her mind and rubbing at her forehead. “Forget I said anything.”

Lauren presses her lips together. Her eyes are unreadable before she stands up and rises on her tiptoes, a momentary stretch. “I’m going to get another drink. Do you want one or--”

“No, no.” Camila waves her hand around. “If I have more I’ll be drooling on you before the opening credits.”

Lauren scrunches up her nose. “Gross.”

“Okay, don’t act like you haven’t had my spit in your mouth.”

“Oh my god,” Lauren groans, looking up the ceiling like she’s asking if God can believe this shit.

Camila laughs.

She loves her.

She’s not going to let herself get carried away, but Camila loves her. She loves thinking it without feeling like Lauren will punish her for it, even if Camila can’t say it to her just yet.

Her mom studies the menu, humming and sighing at irregular intervals. She keeps flipping it over and back, and Camila taps her fingers against her bouncing knee. She can be indecisive herself, and she knows she gets it from her mom, but this is ridiculous, especially because they’ve been here before. The waiter has already come around three times to see if they’re ready to order.

“What are you deciding between?” Camila asks.

“The fettuccine sounds good, but it comes with soup or salad.”

“You don’t have to eat it all.”

“But I know I’ll eat too much soup or salad when they set it in front of me, and then I won’t be able to enjoy the pasta the way I’d like,” her mom says.

Camila sighs. “Order the fettuccine, and I’ll split the salad with you.”

Her mom tuts, looking up at her. “Relax, mija.”

“Sorry.” Camila tries her best to sound sincere.

“Did you forget to eat lunch?” her mom asks, eyes narrowing as she scans Camila’s face like she’ll be able to see her growing gaunt after missing one meal -- which, okay, Camila didn’t actually eat lunch. She had a bowl of cereal at Lauren’s before heading home to shower and change for dinner.
“I had a late breakfast,” Camila says.

“Mila, you know you have to eat.”

“I do.” Camila rolls her eyes.

“You get crabby when you’re hungry.”

Camila sighs again. “I’m not hungry, Mom, I just--”

“Have you lost your appetite again?”

“No, I get hungry, I just mean I’m not overly hungry right now.”

“Are you ladies ready to order, or do you need some more time?” The waiter asks before her mom can grill Camila further, and she has never been so grateful to see any server, especially when her mom orders the fettucine and the salad to split.

She can’t really blame her mom for being worried. Camila had trouble eating and sleeping when Lauren left New York, and there was that awful weekend after Lauren finally answered her phone. The weekend where, if Camila wasn’t on stage, she was asleep somewhere or trying to be asleep somewhere, replaying all the things she did wrong in her head.

Lauren dumping her when they weren’t even together broke Camila’s heart along the fault lines already scarring the muscle. Camila blamed herself until Juno told her that she should have been honest from the beginning, but it sounded like Lauren wasn’t honest, either. It sounded like -- despite everything -- Lauren really did care about Camila. Having a friend allow her to take responsibility made it easier for Camila to accept that Lauren had hurt her, too. It wasn’t her fault that Lauren was afraid.

And it sucked. Especially when she gathered the courage to drive to Lauren’s apartment and failed to convince her to take a leap of faith. Camila lost her appetite, ate too many pot brownies to get it back, and watched too many movies she hates simply because the people in love don’t get their happy ending. She accepted that Lauren might never let herself love Camila, and she got out of bed, went to dinner with friends, and hugged all of her fans a little bit tighter.

She couldn’t hate Lauren, and not just because Camila loved her and hadn’t quite found the time to stop, but because she knew Lauren was hurting, too. She knows her Mom would find her empathy for Lauren too vast, but Camila doesn’t care.

Except for the reminder of her mom’s legitimate reason to be concerned, making it even more difficult to broach the Lauren subject tonight.

Camila rolls her shoulders back, exhales, and tries to relax. She asks her mom how she’s been, listening carefully as she speaks. When they haven’t talked in a few days, her mother takes off like a car on a racetrack. Camila loves the way her mom tells a story, including all the mundane details of her day. She just goes and goes, gaining speed and momentum. There’s an art to it.

“And she strolls in at 1:12 in the morning. Mila, I was furious. She didn’t call. She didn’t respond to your father’s text. I don’t trust that Celine is a safe driver, either. And you know what Sofi said to me?”

“What?” Camila spears a tomato.

“It’s not that big a deal, Mami.’ I could have strangled her right in the entryway. Over an hour after
her curfew and-- okay, what is it?”

“Hmm?” Camila hums around her tomato.

“I think we’ll have a better evening if you tell me why you keep looking at me like you have to tell me you crashed my car.”

Camila swallows. “It’s really not a big deal.”

Her mom quirks an eyebrow.

Camila sets her fork down on the edge of the bowl between them, wipes her hands on her jeans, and tucks her hair behind her ear. Her mother’s eyes are soft and concerned.

“I’m seeing Lauren.”

“Where?” Her mom asks, eyebrows tilting in.

“We’re like …” Camila bristles, feels her entire body flush even while she shivers, and rubs her arms, trying to be small. “Dating.”

Her mom sits back in her chair, eyes somehow becoming softer and more concerned. “Okay.”

“Okay?” Camila runs her tongue over her bottom lip, her mouth dry as sand.

“Okay.”

Camila takes a gulp of water. “I know you hate her, but I--”

“I don’t hate her, Camila.”

“You don’t?” Camila’s mouth twists in question, forehead wrinkling.

“No.” Her mother closes her eyes and sighs, but when she opens them, her gaze is clear and focused. “I hate how she made you feel, mija. I hate how she broke your heart. I don’t understand why you keep giving her the chance to do it again. I don’t know if she knows how to love you back.” A Beat. “But you’re an adult now. I get that, I do. And I’m your mother, so I’ll be here to pick up the pieces if I have to, every single time. But, I hope I don’t have to.”

“Me too.” Camila tries to smile and wipes at her eyes even though she’s not crying. “It’s different this time. I promise.”

Her mom doesn’t believe her, face pinched and pained. “It was just a few months ago, Camila. That’s barely enough time to process what happened.”

“She said she was sorry. I believe her. I’m-- I think our problem was that we never defined anything.”

“So now you’re…?” Her mom asks, folding her hands over the table.

Camila grabs her fork to have something to fidget with. “Dating.”

“You don’t have to explain yourself to me.” Her mother swallows and smiles, a genuine but sad thing. “Sofi tells me most mothers don’t pry into the details of their daughters’ love lives.”

Camila can’t help but laugh. “You’ve never been most mothers.”
Camila leaves Ellen with her hair still styled from her performance but her sweatpants back on. She looks down at her feet and her favorite worn Converse, a gap between the fabric and the rubber by the arc of her right foot. The sun is warm, but there’s a nice breeze, and Camila thinks maybe she should go for a run in the park.

She climbs into her car and turns the air on as cold and as high as it will go. She buckles her seatbelt, drumming her fingers against the steering wheel. The podcast Camila listened to on the way over is barely audible above the air, but she’s not paying attention anyway, just reading the license plates in the lot and attempting to find each letter of the alphabet.

When her car is an icebox, she adjusts the air and pulls out of the parking lot. The expressway is speckled with cars, but traffic moves along easily. Camila likes the metronome sound of her blinker when she changes lanes to pass a minivan.

She’s almost to the park when her phone rings.

“Hey.” She smiles.

“I’m so sorry. I don’t know who else to call, and I can’t like, call an ambulance,” Lauren says. Her voice is hoarse, quiet and shaky.

“What?” Camila almost pulls over onto the shoulder.

“I have a fever.”

“And you want to go to the hospital?” Camila asks. Her heart clenches in her chest, and her hands grip the steering wheel too tightly. She keeps drifting in her lane and abruptly pulling herself back to center.

“No, urgent care.” Lauren coughs. “I’ve missed two days of work, and my fever isn’t breaking.”

“I’ll take you.”

“Nevermind. This was stupid. I’ll drive myself.”

“If you’re that worried about it, I’ll bill you next week,” Camila says, trying to calculate the fastest route to Lauren’s place from here.

Taking the expressway exit ramp, Camila turns the dial and warms up her car. By the time she parks outside Lauren’s apartment complex, sweat has started gathering around her hairline and a stuffy, uncomfortable feeling pushes against her skin.

“Why is your car hotter than me?” Lauren asks, clicking her seatbelt into the buckle. She’s paler than she normally is, and an unhealthy sheen sticks to her skin. Even her hand was too warm when Camila helped her down the stairs, her legs weak. Camila can’t prove it, but she thinks Lauren’s trying not to shiver.

“Because you’re sick, and I can’t have you freeze to death,” she answers, a mixture of frustration and
Lauren lays her head against the seat and closes her eyes. Camila glances at her every time she hits a red light. She stares too long once and gets honked at, but Camila can’t help the worry settling into her bones. She knows Lauren will probably be fine. It’s not like she’s coughing up blood or anything.

But still.

You never know.

Lauren lets Camila help her inside the clinic, hand loose around Lauren’s elbow, but she tugs her arm away when they get into the waiting room. Camila’s gaze flits around: a couple with matching grey hair watch the news on one of the three televisions, a mother tries to soothe her restless baby, and a man has his head bowed between his hands. It’s not much to worry about, but her team has always taught her you can never be too careful.

It scares Camila that even with a fever Lauren is more aware than she is.

They’re led to an exam room ten minutes later. The nurse takes Lauren’s temperature and asks a few routine questions. When the nurse leaves, saying the doctor will be in soon, Lauren nods at Camila. “Come ‘ere.”

“Are you okay?” Camila asks dumbly, rolling her eyes at herself. She balances on the edge of the examination table, her knee gently pressing against Lauren’s thigh. She flexes her fingers and itches to run a hand through Lauren’s hair.

“Thanks,” Lauren whispers. Her eyes are shiny, her lips chapped, and Camila would kiss her if the rest of her week wasn’t filled with talk show appearances to promote her newest single followed by the start of her European tour.

“I had nothing better to do, anyway,” Camila says.

She means it. She’d rather be with Lauren in a room that smells like disinfectant than running laps at a park in Beverly Hills.

“You’re a liar.” A smile flits around Lauren’s mouth before she sighs, head lolling to the side. “I hate this.”

“I know.” Camila traces her finger along Lauren’s side, careful not to touch. “Remember that time I got sick on tour, and you brought all the blankets from your bunk, and we watched every Audrey Hepburn movie we could find on Netflix?”

Lauren blinks up at her. “And then I got yelled at because I had a cough the next day.”

“And to spite them you slept with me again that night.”

Camila remembers being too hot under their combined blankets as their tour bus rolled east toward Ohio. Lauren’s body was curled against hers, and part of her leg was prickly against Camila’s shin because she hadn’t shaved. She remembers Lauren pressing soft little kisses against her cheek, forehead and jaw, mumbling about how Camila just had a runny nose and they’d all probably pick up the cold. She was simply getting it out of the way.

“I was tired of them telling me what I could and couldn’t do.”
“I know,” Camila says.

At the time, she thought it was because Lauren wanted to take care of her. It was just another special thing about the two of them. She quietly convinced herself that Lauren didn’t mind getting sick if she could nuzzle against Camila’s neck. Camila still likes to think that, but she doesn’t doubt Lauren wanted to do something she wasn’t supposed to do, too. She always had a rebellious streak, and Camila watched it grow and grow, year after year.

Lauren had Camila’s cold two days later, puffy eyes, congestion and sore throat. When the tour manager told her off, Lauren had scoffed: “Whatever, it was worth it.”

“You returned the favor, too,” Lauren says, reaching out and brushing her knuckles against Camila’s hip. “It was nice.”

“Well, I was the only one who was immune.” Camila can’t help but smile. She runs her fingers through Lauren’s hair and massages her scalp. Camila can feel the heat radiating off her, but Lauren leans into the touch, so Camila doesn’t stop.

“I must be really sick if I’m feeling nostalgic about a cold.”

When the doctor comes in, she runs a quick test before confirming Lauren has the flu.

“I can’t take care of you,” Camila says. “I have a plane to New York tomorrow morning for interviews, and then a flight to London on Thursday.”

Lauren rolls her eyes. “I’m not an invalid.”

“Beg to differ.”

She drops Lauren off at her apartment, picks her prescription up at the pharmacy, and buys three servings worth of chicken noodle soup for her to heat up.

“See, Camz, you are taking care of me,” Lauren says.

Camila snuggles up next to her, watching Friends until it’s bordering on irresponsible for Camila to stay instead of heading home, packing and sleeping.

She leans against Lauren’s door jamb. She likes the frizzy strands of hair that’ve fallen loose from Lauren’s ponytail and how small she looks wrapped in her blanket. Camila wishes she could stay just a little bit longer. There’s really nowhere else she’d rather be, and no healthy person she’d rather be with. “Remember to drink lots of fluids,” she says.

“Thanks, Mom,” Lauren mocks.

Camila ignores her. “Call me tomorrow.” She leans forward, up on her tiptoes, and presses her lips against Lauren’s forehead.

Lars, the interviewer, scribbles something in his compact notebook. Camila leans forward to see, but it’s written in German and illegible to her.

Camila likes him more for it: the notebook and the chicken scratch handwriting. He records the conversation, too. She doesn’t think anyone would be allowed to simply take notes for an interview
these days. But he still writes down words and phrases as she speaks, maybe as an organizational
tool, a kinesthetic way to keep track of what sticks out to him, or maybe to keep present and focused.

Camila doesn't know why he does it, but she feels an unfounded kinship with him as a result.

“I think it’d be really cool to do an acoustic or stripped down show. Some of my songs lend
themselves to it, and I like the idea of performing at smaller venues. I love doing the big arena shows,
but with the relationship I have with my fans, I think a more intimate show would be cool, too.”

“Yes,” Lars says, underlining something in his notepad. “You really talk about your fans like they’re
your friends.”

“They are,” Camila confirms, smile spreading. “They’ve always been there for me. I just try my best
to give back a little bit of what they’ve given me.”

“Is there anything you don’t share with them?”

She chuckles, rubbing her finger over her right eyebrow. “You’re really trying to set me up, huh?”

“Some artists I’ve spoken with have been open about setting boundaries with their fans. I’m just
curious if that’s a view you share.”

He rests his arm on the table between them, tapping the tip of his pen against the corner of his paper
and leaving a small, blue tadpole. Camila tries to catch her mom’s eye from where she sits on the
sofa, slurping an iced coffee and scrolling through her phone, but it’s futile.

Camila runs a hand through her hair and chews on her bottom lip. She wants to word this carefully --
correctly.

“There are things they don’t know. Obviously. My coffee order: I drink it black now. I’m really into
St. Vincent’s newest album. I guess they could probably figure that out from my Spotify, though.”

Camila shrugs. “Mundane things.”

“Everything else is open season?”

“Yeah, I mean, to an extent.” She points behind him at her mom, smiling silly. “Even my mom
doesn’t know everything about me. So it’s just like … a different version of that. Just because I don’t
tell them every detail of my life, it doesn’t mean they’re not my friends.”

Lars nods, adding something to the list he’s curating without looking down. “You recently tweeted
about the courage it takes to move on?”

“Yeah.” Camila nods. “It seems to be a theme for me. It’s scary to move forward and take those
risks. But I’ve always found them rewarding. Personally and professionally.”

“So, it’s safe to say you’re over Shawn, then?” he asks, mouth turning up and face wrinkling in a
way that convinces her he’s not prying. He’s good at his job.

“We’re still friends,” Camila assures. “I’m hoping to write with him again. And I’m so happy he’s
found love. If anyone deserves it, it’s Shawn.”

“Are you looking to find love, too?” Lars asks.

Camila tongues at her bottom lip. Her stomach swirls with nerves she doesn’t need to have, and she
rests her elbow on the table, her chin in her palm. “You single?”
He laughs, a surprised and warm chuckle. He holds his right hand out to show her his ring. “Married, actually.”

“Aw, that’s wonderful.” Camila smiles, leaning forward to get a better look at the simple band.

Camila loves love, always has. She successfully gets Lars off topic, asking questions about his husband: how and where they met. Lars’s eyes brighten, turning into happy slits the stars in them manage to shine through. His German accent grows thicker, and Camila’s body relaxes with her wistful sigh.

“We got married the week after same-sex marriage was legalized. We’d waited almost a decade. We were ready.”

“Oh my god.” Camila’s body melts impossibly further into her chair. “That’s amazing.”

“It is.” Lars beams, clears his throat, and writes something down. “But you didn’t answer my question.”

She sits up, posture better but bones still loose. Camila makes sure to keep the open, friendly smile tugging around her mouth. “What was it again?”

“Are you seeing anyone?”

Camila has been inundated with advice about how to answer questions regarding her love life more times than she can count on her fingers -- reiterated forcefully after the Lauren collaboration, like everyone on her team just didn’t trust her (turns out, that was a good instinct on their part, but whatever). She doesn’t feel like she’s drowning, and she doesn’t wish she had been briefed before the European leg of her tour kicked off. Camila’s only gotten better at answering tricky questions; it’s a skill she’s honed and a muscle she can rebuild quickly if she needs it.

She knows there are a few ways she can answer: honest, dishonest, and the gray area between the two where her professional persona flourishes. She knows the answers Roger and her label would like best.

The variable this time is Lauren. She doubts Lauren will ever read the interview, but Camila cares enough about that “what if” to make sure her answer doesn’t hurt Lauren. There are answers -- honest, dishonest, the gray area in between -- that would hurt her. Camila tries to sift through them in a few blinks, finding one that her management would deem acceptable, that Lauren would be fine with, and that Camila can live with.

“Touring keeps me pretty busy.” She sighs, a soft, almost put upon sound. “But I’m always open to love. Trying not to be is too exhausting for me.”

Lars’s gaze darts around her face, non-judgemental but searching. Camila really hopes whatever he finds or doesn’t find is good. His mouth flattens, he circles whatever he had written before, and Camila tries her very best not to bristle.

“What do you want me to say about you?” Camila asks, apropos of nothing.

“Uh?” Lauren’s eyebrows scrunch.
Camila turns the volume on her phone down a notch. “An interviewer the other day asked about my love life, and I was just like … I don’t know.”

“You said you didn’t know?” Lauren asks.

“No.” Camila shakes her head. “I said I was busy.”

Lauren hums. “Sounds fine to me.”

“Yeah?” Camila whispers as she leans into the left side of the armchair, legs curled and feet pressing into the right, toes digging into the space where the arm meets the cushion she’s sitting on.

“Yeah,” Lauren agrees.

It hurts a little. Camila doesn’t know why. She hasn’t told anyone besides her mom and dad that she’s seeing Lauren. She couldn’t possibly have said anything about it to the press without being knee deep in shit.

But just like when she was a teenager, there’s a tug in her chest that wants to yell into the wind, let her words glide through the universe, loud and real and with the faint possibility of being heard. She wants people to know because she’s happy, because she’s not embarrassed, and because Lauren is her favorite person again.

“So like…” Camila trails off, focusing on the freckles spotting Lauren’s nose. “I don’t know. He was really nice and easy to talk to.”

Lauren’s eyes narrow, and Camila feels the need to look down and tug at the hem of her shirt. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

Camila shakes her head, looks directly into her phone’s camera and smiles. “Yeah. I am. I just didn’t expect to be asked about it, I guess.”

“The vultures need to know,” Lauren says, rolling her eyes.

Camila isn’t sure that’s fair, but she doesn’t want to argue about it now. She’s tired after the concert, a nice ache in her bones, and Lauren’s voice is thick and warm like honey, having woken up from a Saturday afternoon nap to Facetime Camila like she promised she would.

“You have the day off tomorrow?” Lauren asks.

“Yep!” She pops the ‘p’ because she knows it makes Lauren’s mouth twitch. “My mom and I are exploring Italy, and I’m eating all the pasta and pizza they’re willing to give me.”

Lauren laughs, a rumbling sound that makes Camila feel like she’s floating. “Sounds like a disaster.”

“A beautiful one,” Camila scoffs.

“I didn’t say otherwise.”

“You implied it.”

“Whatever.” Lauren shakes her head before biting at her thumb nail. “Hey, so, what are you doing on April 25th?”

Camila purses her lips and tries to think, as though she can remember anything on her schedule beyond the next few days. “I don’t know. Why?”
“You want to go to a wedding?”

“What?” she asks.

Lauren raises an eyebrow.

Camila’s heart plummets. She feels like throwing up and dancing around her hotel room at the same time. The idea of seeing Ally and a handful of people she left behind spikes her anxiety, but the idea of Lauren asking her to a wedding makes her brain tingle like those ASMR videos on Youtube that she tried watching when she had a particularly bad bought of insomnia three years ago.

“What?” Camila asks, too loud.

“I know,” Lauren says, words steady, measured, and somehow flippant. “I sound completely insane, but my parents are busy with work, Taylor’s school year ends in May, and John’s got some work thing.”

“I mean, if Ally wanted me there she would have invited me, so.” Camila shrugs, careful to take even breaths and focus on how green Lauren’s eyes are.

“I asked her if it was okay.”

“Oh.”

Camila blinks.

Her sleepy mind works overtime to sort out how her heart feels. She wants Ally to be happy. There’s no bad blood between them, at least not on her end.

Lauren looks at her in a way that reminds Camila of the two of them at The X-Factor house: cuddled together on a twin bed, the room dim and their breathing loud in the dark. Both of them scared and excited, and Camila trying very hard not to think about kissing Lauren, trying very hard to remind herself that Lauren doesn’t like her like that. But she’s always been easy for Lauren, pliant and lacking self-preservation. During The X-Factor, Lauren always made her feel brave, like she could do anything. She would squeeze Camila’s hand and pull her into hugs so tight she should have been worried about the lack of air in her lungs instead of buzzing at the feeling of Lauren pressed against her.

Camila thinks about Lauren asking her to attend a wedding, and she can feel it reverberating in her stomach and lungs.

She exhales a shaky breath. “I’ll think about it and let you know later.”

Lauren gathers all her hair over her right shoulder. “Is that code for ‘I’m going to text you ‘No’ later?’”

“That’s code for I have to think about it and ask Roger about my schedule.”

Camila already knows if she’s free, she’s going to say yes. But first she is going to do her best to actually think about it, consider the pros and cons, and discuss her decision with her mom over a glass of wine.

When she crawls under the duvet, her mind already hums with counterpoints to any reason her mom might tell her not to go. But the person she was last year wouldn’t even have the conversation at all.
Camila’s going to call that progress.
nine: you've been on my mind, girl, since the flood

Chapter Summary

The chosen scriptures are probably recited every day at a different wedding, but they refuse to diminish from overuse: love is patient; there is no fear in love. Camila spends half of the wedding trying not to look at Lauren. Mostly, she succeeds.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for your patience, kindness, kudos, and especially, comments. I truly do smile a little bit more and feel a little bit happier when I receive them or think about them!

Chapter title from "Ophelia," by The Lumineers.

Fred briefs Camila, Roger and her team on the numbers from the tour. Camila always finds the numbers enthralling and depressing. It’s mind-blowing how much money is spent and made on tour; it’s the meat of the music industry, but it never stops being weird seeing the data in front of her, as though you can put a price on human connection and the feeling music gives people. As though those things are only worth however many zeros are at the end of them.

“We’re excited about the demos you’ve submitted for the next album, and the studio schedule has been approved,” Fred says before glancing at his watch. “Any questions?”

Camila looks at the spread of numbers, running her thumb over the totals on the first page. “No.”

“I think we’re all settled here,” Roger says. He’d gotten the report earlier, marking it up and addressing any concerns he had with the label before the meeting. If Roger doesn’t see any discrepancies, Camila trusts the math. She’ll look over it again later, at night when she can’t sleep or on a plane. If there’s anything she doesn’t understand, she’ll ask Roger the next time she sees him.

Camila’s gotten into the habit of really studying these things.

Better to be safe than sorry.

Fred smooths out his beard. “Mark and Heather should be here soon. Take five?”

“Sure,” Camila says.

Fred leaves, checking his watch again. Roger grabs another cup of coffee, and Camila takes a sip of water, staring at the ink in front of her until it starts to blur.

“Camila?” Roger asks, sitting back down.

She looks up. “Hmm?”
“How have you been?”

“Good.” She shrugs, half of her mouth turning up. “Tired. A good tired, though. I think we’ve finally worked out a tour schedule that doesn’t wear me to the bone.”

“You made that really tough,” he says.

“I know. I just. If I was feeling good, I really thought I could keep going and going. I wanted to. The energy I feel while onstage makes anything possible. It’s just that my body doesn’t always cooperate.”

“And sometimes you mind.” Roger raises an eyebrow before taking a sip of coffee.

“Yeah,” Camila sighs.

She doesn’t like to think about it that way. She doesn’t like to think that, sometimes, she felt like it would be best to work herself past the point of exhaustion. It kept her from thinking about things she didn’t want to think about. She often forgot that the exhaustion could make her head spiral further down into the darkness instead of keeping it at bay.

For this tour and album cycle, Roger made sure the label took extra care cultivating a schedule with both momentum and proper time to rest -- between individual dates and between continents. He guaranteed Camila had access not only to a label-hired counselor who worried more about business than her health, but to a real, licensed therapist she’s been seeing off and on for years. They scheduled regular check-ins even when timezones should’ve made it impossible. Roger has learned that when she’s on the road, Camila is even worse about asking for help than she is otherwise, too many variables to consider.

Camila had been unsure, and she pushed for a few more dates and less gaps. But the end result worked well, besides the iffy period between New York and the end of the North American leg, which had nothing to do with scheduling.

Roger and Camila talk about his wife and kids, and she shares Sofi’s woes, unbelievably proud that her sister survived her first semester of college.

Then, Fred returns with Mark in tow.

“What’s up?” Mark reaches across the table to shake her hand, and Camila fights the urge to roll her eyes.

“Hi,” she says.

He opens a manila folder and hands another packet to everyone in the room. It’s a detailed PR plan: scheduled events, talking points, market research about demographics and who they’re trying to sell her on, who they’re trying to keep, and who she’s supposed to be.

“I hope this is what you had in mind the last time we spoke,” Marks says, addressing Roger.

Camila really doesn’t like Mark, and she knows rolling her eyes would be super unprofessional, but he makes it very hard not to.

Roger scans the list, so Camila does the same. Nothing seems out of the ordinary. Her team has learned the things she’ll do for the camera, and the things she wants to do on her own time. There are things that matter to her so much that she doesn’t want them constantly tainted with an appeal for public adoration.
“Looks good,” Roger says.

“If you turn the page, we can look at--” Camila turns the page -- “some of the events we’re getting involv--”

“--What?” Camila cuts off Mark. She blinks. “What is this?”

“What is what?” he asks, a hint of frustration seeping through his bored tone.

“LA LGBT center.” She points at the date with her finger.

He sighs. “You’re performing at an event they’re putting on.”

Camila sits up a little straighter and squares her shoulders. It’s not like she’s never done this before. She has free reign to run around onstage with the pride flag. Lately, they’ve steered her away from mentioning her LGBT fans in interviews, but she has. She likes reminding them she loves them and that their kind words mean more to her than anything else. She’s always painted herself as an advocate.

“Good.” She catches Mark’s eye and holds it for a moment. Camila figures the dislike is mutual.

“Let’s keep going,” Fred says.

Marks outlines the next few months, and Camila listens. She has a new perfume scheduled to launch during the summer, an endorsement deal with a credit card company, and she’s going to take part in a new anti-bullying campaign.

It’s all standard.

“We’re thinking a fall release for the sixth album,” Fred says, flipping through the PR proposal. “Time it with your coming out.”

“My what?” Camila chokes. She blinks. All the blood rushes to her head, and her cheeks feel incredibly warm.

“I was told you wanted to come out. Was that not true?” Fred looks up at her, the edge of a page still between his thumb and forefinger, suspended mid-air. “Because a lot of this changes if that’s not true.”

Camila clears her throat. “No, um, that’s accurate.”

Fred smiles at her, a quick, sarcastic thing. “Great. There’s an up-and-coming model: Stella or Scarlett or something. We figured we’d pair you together.”

“Like …” Camila starts, fiddling with her hands underneath the table. “For PR?”

“Yes.” Fred raises an eyebrow.

Chewing on her bottom lip, Camila tries to steady her breathing. She sort of feels like she’s being burned alive, and she has to vomit, and her head is spinning. “I don’t know.”

“Camila,” Roger says. There’s confusion and uncertainty in his eyes.

“I don’t want to do another PR relationship.” She swallows. “Not for this.”

Mark sighs. “It makes it so much easier to market. Something for the public to be invested in. A
narrative to sympathize with.”

“They can’t sympathize with me wanting to live my full, authentic truth?”

“They can, but they’re going to want to know ‘why now?’” Mark says. “Because you’re in love with a woman is the simplest answer.”

Camila can think of a few other answers: because she’s finally ready (not true; she’s been ready for years, but it never felt pertinent or necessary), because she’s finally allowed (true), because she wants to, plain and simple (half-true; her reasons aren’t simple or altruistic).

“Is it the only way?” she asks, her voice shaking.

Mark, Fred and Roger all exchange looks, and Camila hates it. She hates that they have decision-making power. She hates that she can’t post an Instagram story at three in the morning while in her pajamas, spur-of-the-moment, telling the entire world who she is.

She hates that she wants to tell the world she is in love with a woman.

That kernel of truth they’ve unknowingly unfurled with their carefully planned schedule sits heavy in her stomach.

“I’m not sure,” Fred seems to decide. “We’d have to reconsider.”

“Okay,” Camila exhales, the breath loud and uneven. She runs a hand through her hair. Roger catches her eye, questioning. Camila knows she has to tell him about Lauren. He can’t advocate as effectively on her behalf without all the information. It’s kind of like attorney-client privilege.

“Can I think about it?”

“You sure know how to look a gift horse in the mouth,” Fred says.

“Sorry,” Camila answers. She doesn’t mean it; the apology a reflex propelled by how tense and uncomfortable she feels.

Mark makes it clear it’s an inconvenience, but Camila gets time to think.

Camila sips her tea, smiling as Lauren waves a nutella-covered knife around. “I was so tired, and honestly, who cares if someone booked the private room for nine? The rehearsal dinner starts at seven, and everyone can migrate to the bar anyway. But she was shrieking like someone died.”

“What if they arrive late?” Camila asks.

“It takes like, 45 minutes to eat. Tops.” Lauren rolls her eyes, sticks her knife back into the jar, and scoops out another blob to spread over toast.

“Probably longer when she has to introduce her extended family to Nicolas’s extended family, and both of their families to the wedding party.”

Lauren huffs. “All I’m saying is that she could have thought about the time difference and waited two hours to wake me up on Sunday morning. The restaurant wasn’t even open to take her complaint.”
Camila’s mouth twitches up. “That’s fair.”

“I’m really happy for Ally and Nic, but since April hit, every text, email and phone call stresses me the fuck out.”

“Dinah said the same thing,” Camila offers. “Except it was more like, ‘I was totally, super chill during my wedding. Ain’t nobody ever got a chance to call me bridezilla.’”

Lauren laughs, setting the knife into the sink with a soft clatter. “Like I said, very happy for her. Can’t wait for it to be over.”

Camila nods, running her tongue along the ridges of her teeth. Lauren brings the plate over and sets it between them. “Me either.”

Lauren tilts her head. “What does that mean?”

Camila grabs her toast, takes a large bite and chews more than necessary. She looks down at the table and the crumbs that have spilled onto it.

She’s been avoiding saying anything of substance to Lauren about anything that’s related to Ally’s wedding. It’s the Fifth Harmony of it all, and it feels like a sore subject, even if they’ve never really talked about it. Camila swallows, takes another sip of tea and looks at Lauren. “I’m really nervous.”

“Yeah,” Lauren says. She bites her bottom lip. “That makes sense. But you want to go, right?”

Camila hesitates.

Lauren notices.

“You don’t want to go?”

“No, I do.” Camila exhales. She thinks she shouldn’t say it. It’s too much. It’s going to scare Lauren away when things have been good. Camila remembers Lauren hugging her the first time she saw her after the European tour, leaning completely into Camila, arms wrapped tightly around her shoulders, and pressing a handful of quick, insistent kisses by her ear. She remembers Lauren calling her while stuck in traffic, asking Camila to tell her a story to pass the time. Lauren knows the difference between Camila’s order from the Chinese restaurant down the street versus the one by Camila’s house. It’s good. It makes her feel so good.

But it’s not deep.

There’s been flirting, banter and jokes, holiday and birthday text messages, and an argument over the best Jane Austen book that ended with Camila sending paragraphs from *Pride and Prejudice* to Lauren with lots of extra exclamation marks after every sentence.

She hasn’t scared Lauren off yet, but it’s hard to shake the notation that she could. With one too blunt sentence.

“I want to go with you.”

“Okay?” Lauren’s forehead wrinkles.

“I just want to go with you.” It’s not coming out right. “It’s like. I wish it was some friend of yours from college that I’d never met, and it could just be you and me at a wedding together. I don’t want to see the other girls.” Camila brushes the breadcrumbs onto the floor with her palm and curls her
Lauren nods, swipes some nutella off the piece of toast closest to her, and sucks it off her thumb. “Oh. Okay, yeah. Kind of like going to an ex's wedding.”

“Kind of.”

“You don’t have to go, you know? I won’t be mad if you back out.”

“No. That’s not what I want.” Camila shakes her head. “If I didn’t do anything I was anxious and unsure about, I’d be an entirely different person.”

Lauren smiles a little, eyes soft, open and understanding. There was a time when no one could calm Camila down quite like Lauren. It felt like Lauren was tuned in to her frequency, knew when she was vibrating too high, and knew what to say to steady her. She could look into Camila’s eyes and squeeze her hand, teaching her how to breathe when nobody else even realized she was struggling.

“I guess I’m just good at thinking of worst case scenarios,” Camila says.

“Okay.” Lauren hums. “Well, Dinah likes you just fine. Ally’s the epitome of diplomatic and agreed to let you crash her wedding in the first place. Plus, if Normani tries to hit you, Ally will kill her.” A beat. “Not because she’s like, invested in you being alive, but because if her wedding is ruined, she’ll go full-on Carrie.”

Camila laughs. “Stop it.”

“Seriously. If you were getting these emails, you’d know I’m right.”

“Laureeeeeeeeen,” Camila whines, kicking at her shin under the table.

“Hey,” Lauren says, looking at Camila with nothing but seriousness. She reaches across the small table to press her thumb against the pulse beating in Camila’s wrist. “You survived Dinah’s wedding, and this time I’ll be with you. At most, there’ll be a couple of awkward moments.”

“I’m used to awkward moments,” Camila agrees, biting the inside of her cheek.

“You’ll tell me if you feel uncomfortable, and we’ll figure it, okay?”

Camila tucks a piece of hair behind her ear. “Okay.”

She’s still nervous, but she focuses on the pad of Lauren’s finger against her heartbeat.

It helps.

Lauren’s hair is curled and pulled loosely back, her makeup soft and almost airbrushed. Camila watches her slip into her bridesmaid dress, a soft, pale green that looks gorgeous against her soft, pale skin. She smooths out the silk with her palms, turning left and right in the hotel’s mirror. Camila’s eyes trace the curve of her hip, the subtle pop of her collarbone, and her hair brushing against her shoulder.

Lauren’s eyes sparkle bright green, her mouth a lovely pink, and Camila bites her lip, her mind going hazy. Lauren’s beautiful, and it tingles underneath Camila’s fingertips.
“Hey,” Lauren says, a smirk ghosting across her mouth. “You like me or something?”

Camila blinks and finds Lauren’s eyes in the mirror. “Just a little.”

Uncertainty and something Camila can’t quite decipher flash across Lauren’s face. She turns around, looks at Camila without the distance of the mirror, and seems to make a decision. “More than a little.”

It’s kind. Pleased and fond.

Butterflies flutter around Camila’s stomach. She wipes her damp palms on her dress. “Yeah,” she breathes, a confession curling out. The sun slanting into their room causes a thick shadow to cast itself diagonally across the floor. “A Lot.”

Lauren smiles small.

For the first time in a long time -- maybe ever -- Camila doesn’t feel like her feelings for Lauren are too much, too large, and too everything.

Camila slips into a pew in the middle of the church. The wood is hard and uncomfortable without any cushion, and she crosses her ankles, running a hand through her hair.

It’s bright, airy and chilly. Camila rubs at her arms when goosebumps pop up. There’s an altar, a pulpit, and a giant cross hanging from the ceiling. She catalogues details to help pass the time and give herself something to focus on: three steps from the front of the church to the aisle, the potent smell of incense and holy water, and the scoffs on the floor’s graying marble.

The church fills up, and when asked, Camila tells the woman next to her that she knows the bride, even though it feels odd on her tongue. Not quite a true thing.

Lauren walks down the aisle on the arm of a groomsman, somehow even more beautiful in the church than in their hotel room. Finding Camila, Lauren winks at her as she passes, and Camila clamps down on her smile, afraid if she doesn’t, the joy will audibly find its way out of her mouth.

There’s a pinch in her chest when Normani walks down the aisle, and it blooms further when the wedding march begins and the church stands for Ally. She looks like a princess in her white, lacy dress, her eyes welling as she looks at Nicolas. Camila chokes back her own tears. She doesn’t know anything about their relationship: how they met, how long they’ve been dating, what it is about each other they love, but Camila can feel that love radiating between them, palpable and electrifying.

She feels it like something suspended in the air and something catching in her breath, transcending everything.

The ceremony is traditional and lovely. The chosen scriptures are probably recited every day at a different wedding, but they refuse to diminish from overuse: love is patient; there is no fear in love. Camila spends half of the wedding trying not to look at Lauren. Mostly, she succeeds, and when she fails, she finds Lauren looking at Ally and Nicolas, neutral smile on her face, the bouquet twirling slowly between her palms, and occasionally shifting her weight from foot to foot.

After Ally and Nicolas are pronounced husband and wife, holding hands and kissing chastely before they turn to smile at the congregation, Camila fails again. This time Lauren is already looking at her,
smile growing a little bit wider and eyes a little bit brighter, glassy.

It cracks that pinch in Camila’s chest, something warm and wild seeping out.

As it turns out, she doesn’t get to watch the ceremony with Lauren, and she doesn’t get to sit with her during dinner, either. Lauren’s at the front table with the wedding party, and Camila is relegated to a table with Nicolas’s cousins. She can’t decide if Ally meant it to be a favor or an insult. It’s okay, though, because she sits next to a man named Miguel who laughs at all her awkward jokes. She listens to stories about what an annoying kid Nicolas was, chiming in with her own tale about getting Ally lost somewhere in Ohio. Camila swore she knew where she was going -- she had looked it up! -- and then Ally hit her multiple times with her purse, because they didn’t find the store and arrived late to rehearsal. A bruise materialized on Camila’s arm, and Ally felt so awful that she took Camila out for ice cream. She didn’t even complain when Camila ordered the biggest, most ridiculous sundae on the menu.

Dinah’s husband stops by Camila’s table to say hello and commiserate about his own placement: “I’m chaperoning Ally’s aunts and uncles, and they have been arguing for 20 minutes about whether an old truck one of them crashed was red or blue.”

Ally and Nicolas recite vows they wrote themselves before the entrees are served, and then the maid of honor and best man give their speeches, the right combination of sweet and funny, even if Camila won’t remember any of the details by the end of next month.

The first dance is sweet, an intimate sway around the floor, and Camila’s captivated by it. Ally and Nicolas hold each other like they’re the most precious things in the world. Camila can’t make out their facial expressions, not really, but she can fill in the details. She feels the awe and the joy like a song scribbling its way into her heart. She wants to remember this feeling later and turn it into a strum on her guitar.

Tears fall from Mr. Hernandez’s eyes during the father/daughter dance, and Ally cries, too -- the first time today Camila sees Ally really let herself.

It’s magical and beautiful, and Camila finds herself happy for Ally in a way that’s more personal than she expected. She’s happy for the Ally who hit her with her purse and bought her ice cream, an Ally who is probably not completely separate from the one who wipes her father’s tears away when the song ends, hugging him tightly.

Mr. Hernandez passes her to Nicolas, and then everybody is invited to dance.

Camila doesn’t know where Lauren went, but she still has some bubbly champagne left in her glass from the toast, so she stays put. Miguel keeps her company.

She laughs at a mean joke he makes about someone’s dancing before she feels a tap on her shoulder.

“Hey,” Lauren says, fingers lingering against Camila’s skin. “You wanna dance?”

“I’d love to.” Camila pushes her chair back and takes Lauren’s outstretched hand. “It was nice to meet you,” she says to Miguel, flashing a smile.

Lauren spins her around to “Waiting for Tonight,” the skirt of Camila’s dress ballooning and
swooshing against her thighs. The music pulses through the dancefloor and their hands, keeping them connected. With each twirl, she finds Lauren’s eyes, a fixed point to ward off dizziness.

It’s the opposite of what Camila’s used to.

Lauren smiles. With her eyes and with her mouth, a pure and carefree thing that makes Camila grin, too, all teeth. Everything else falls away, and it’s just the two of them on the dancefloor, shimmying and laughing and moving in whatever silly way they please, unashamed, their cheeks reddening from exertion and joy instead of embarrassment.

There’s a shift when one song ends, slows, and Camila hears Ed Sheeran croon: *I found a love*. Camila becomes aware of her body, feels the ache in her arches from her heels, and wipes at the sweat collecting along her hairline. Her smile fades and falters.

Lauren’s flushed and beautiful and a few inches too far away, and Camila loves her.

She bites her lip, glancing down shyly and wrapping her fingers around Lauren’s wrist.

“C’mere, Camz,” she thinks she hears Lauren say over the music.

She stumbles forward but catches herself, settling against Lauren and lacing their fingers together as her other hand finds Lauren’s waist. She feels Lauren’s breath warm against her cheek, her hair tickling Camila’s collarbone. Camila smells her perfume: a gentle, floral thing she knows Lauren only wears on special occasions.

She imagines Lauren’s heartbeat synchronized with her own. When Camila hears Lauren start murmuring the lyrics, a soft, low hum against her ear, Camila closes her eyes, exhales, and melts. Sunshine pours out of her skin, and she understands what it feels like to have a heart so full it could burst.

She forgot that Lauren could be a romantic like herself, sappy and sentimental. She spent so much time remembering the scars, anger and fear, that she almost forgot how sweet Lauren can be when she likes someone, tender and open and thoughtful.

She forgot how easy Lauren is to fall in love with.

Which is silly, because it’s something Camila’s been susceptible to since the moment she saw her, more so than anyone else she knows who has ever loved Lauren.

The song ends, transitioning to something a little more upbeat, but not quick, like they’re easing into it again.

Camila and Lauren pull back but don’t let go.

Camila swallows, phantom smile on her lips, and she flexes her fingers against Lauren’s hip. “Thank you,” she says. “For inviting me.”

“Thank you for coming,” Lauren answers.

They keep swaying until the song ends, and then they have no choice but to do the "Macarena."

After Ally and Nicolas cut the cake, smearing frosting against each other’s lips in a way that looks
purposefully measured in its recklessness, Camila and Lauren grab two slices and find their way to Camila’s table.

“Are you having a good time?” Lauren asks.

“Yes,” Camila says around a mouthful of cake. She swallows and looks around the reception hall. A handful of people sit at each table, the dancefloor is full, and beyond the glass doors behind her, she sees a smattering of guests milling about. “They know a lot of people.”

“Ally’s kind of a social butterfly,” Lauren says.

Camila nods. She knows that -- knew that. “The cake is delicious.”

“Yeah,” Lauren agrees, cutting another piece with her fork. “They did a really great job with everything.” A beat. “My feet are gonna hurt like a motherfucker tomorrow, though.”

“Mine too.” Camila wiggles her toes and feels them fighting against the fabric of her shoes. “We can give each other foot massages.”

“Ew, gross.”

“Shut up. I give excellent massages.” Then, off the smirk smearing smartly across Lauren’s mouth: “Fuck off.”

Lauren’s eyebrows are high and self-satisfied. “I wasn’t disagreeing.”

“Weddings are supposed to be a place for good and holy and lovely things. Not your perverted thoughts.”

“Yeah, that’s why everyone is always talking about finding someone from the wedding party to bang.”

“Luckily, I’ve already found somebody.” Camila smiles, pointing her frosting-smudged fork at Lauren. “You know that guy who was sitting two people to the left of Nicolas?”

Lauren is halfway through an eye roll when she gets distracted by the chair on the other side of Camila pulling back. Miguel flops into it.

“Hi,” he directs at Camila before leaning across the table, hand out for Lauren. “I’m Miguel.”

Lauren eyes his hand, shooting Camila a look that’s the equivalent of a scoff before shaking it. “Lauren.”

“Have you gotten your groove on?” Camila asks, shimmying her shoulders.

“I haven’t really had a partner.” Miguel’s eyes are wide, the offer plain.

“Oh, I--” Miguel was so nice to her. “I don’t know.”

“Just one dance?” he asks.

Camila looks at Lauren.

She shrugs, leaning back in her chair, eyes going cloudy. “Whatever you want to do.”

Camila presses her lips into a flat line, hesitating. “Well, maybe just one dance?”
“Okay,” Lauren says. She sits back up, thumbing at the corner of Camila’s mouth as though there are crumbs to wipe away. Maybe there are. Camila can’t feel them. “I’ll be here.”

Miguel leads Camila to the floor the same way Lauren had earlier in the evening. His hand is larger, more calloused, and too hot. She bops around to the latest Top 20 hit blaring through the speakers and smiles at Miguel whenever she catches his eye. That shift happens again, that slow song meant for lovers. Camila sets both her feet as steadily on the ground as she can in the heels she’s been wearing for almost five hours. “Thanks for the dance.” She bites her tongue and points vaguely in the direction of their table. “I’m going to--”

“One real dance?” he asks, head dipped so they’re eye-to-eye.

“Oh, um. No. No, thank you.”

“Oh, come on, why not? Three minutes won’t kill you,” Miguel says, light and casual.

“I don’t want to,” Camila answers. Her hands flutter by her sides, and she rocks back and forth on her feet. “I really appreciate the offer, I just.” She looks away, but they’ve migrated too far into the mess of bodies to see beyond the crowd. “I’d just rather dance with Lauren, is all.”

“Oh,” he says.

“Sorry.”

Miguel looks at her, realization dawning as she frowns. “Oh. Oh, yeah. It’s, uh, yeah, whatever. Sorry.” He pats her arm awkwardly. “I had fun talking to you tonight.”

Camila chuckles, uncomfortable. “Yeah, me too. Thanks.”

She shuffles away as quickly as possible, feeling a little bit flattered and a little bit embarrassed.

She finds Lauren scrolling through her phone, elbow on the table, cheek resting against her fist, and looking like someone took a pin to her balloon.

“Hi,” Camila says as she retakes her seat.

“How’s Miguel?” Lauren asks, not bothering to lift her head.

“Fine.” She scrapes at some frosting stuck to the bottom of her plate and licks it off her fork.

She waits for Lauren to lock her phone and sit up. Lauren’s jaw ticks, and nerves sit in the wrinkle that wilts her between her brows. “Can I ask you something?”

A black hole opens up in Camila’s stomach. “Sure.”

“Are you seeing anybody else?” Lauren asks, mouth pursed and eyes piercing.

Camila blinks, and her mind threatens to spiral in the time it takes. The vortex in her stomach makes her nauseous, too much sugar and champagne churning around her gut. She remembers all the boys there were while they were in Fifth Harmony, and the weird timelines they both have flimsy excuses for. Lauren was on a date when she approached Camila about trying again, and Camila wonders if Lauren has been seeing other people. She thinks that would be fair. And she thinks it would hurt.

“Camila,” Lauren whispers, resting a hand against her knee and squeezing. “Hey, it’s okay.”

“No,” she breathes.
“No, it’s not okay? Or no, you haven’t been seeing other people, or?”

“No, I haven’t been,” she clarifies. Lauren’s mouth twitches, and Camila rests both her hands on top of the one on her knee. “I don’t want to see other people.”

“Okay.” Lauren nods, the lightness back in her eyes. “Good. Me either. Me too.”

“Yeah?” Her stomach flips, but it’s so good.


Camila’s mind flashes to Roger, Mark, and the plan for her to come out. But it’s not the right time or place.

Lauren’s thumb rubs circles into the side of her knee. She presses a chaste kiss against Camila’s mouth, and it’s hard to think about anything but Lauren when she looks at Camila like maybe Camila is her favorite person, too.

Camila feels a little stupid about her anxiety, because she only runs into Normani once when she goes to grab a second slice of cake. They awkwardly say hi and move along, neither willing to linger on small talk.

Lauren forces her to congratulate Ally and Nicolas before they leave for their honeymoon. Ally smiles warmly, hugs Camila loosely, and thanks her for coming, even though they both know she’s only here because she’s Lauren’s date.

Ally holds both her hands and looks her in the eye, jubilant in a way Camila imagines only things like getting married or having kids can make someone. “It’s good to see you, Camila. I’m glad you’re doing well.”

Camila believes her. Ally’s always been honest, and she’s never been the type of person to hold a grudge. It’s kind of nice, actually, to know if she ran into Ally somewhere, they could say hello, make small talk, and have it be breezy, kind, and not consumed by underlying tension.

“See?” Lauren says, slipping off her shoes once Saturday has turned into Sunday and they’re back in their hotel room. “You did it.”

“I did it.” Camila nods, reaching around to the back of her neck and fumbling with the solitary button at the top of her dress. “It actually wasn’t so bad.”

They undress in silence. Camila goes to the bathroom first and takes a long time wiping off her makeup, scrubbing at the sensitive skin underneath her eyes where her mascara and liner keep leaving new smudges even after she thinks she’s done. She forgot the eye makeup remover that Dawn always tells her she needs, not only because it works better, but because the skin around her eyes is thinner and requires more care. Camila washes her face, moisturises, and knows Dawn will be pleased with that, at least.

She brushes her teeth, throws on her pajamas and pulls her hair back. She looks at herself with no cover up: ever present circles below her eyes, discoloration low on the right side of her jaw, and some of her eyebrow hair sticking up.
She looks content, and Camila can’t remember feeling so at peace with herself, maybe ever.

She’s twisting the cap of her chapstick when Lauren cracks the door open. “Hi.”

“Hi,” Camila laughs, raspy and hoarse.

Lauren wraps her arms around Camila from behind, rocking up to rest her chin on Camila’s shoulder. “Tonight was fun.”

“Yeah.” Camila agrees before rubbing her lips together.

“Well,” Lauren begins. Camila feels Lauren’s chin dig into her each time she speaks. “Except for Miguel.”

Camila laughs. “He was nice.”

“I didn’t like it,” Lauren whispers, hugging Camila back against her. Her hair has been pulled into a ponytail, but it’s messy and full of bumps as though she used her fingers instead of a brush. Her eyes droop, and she buries her face in Camila’s neck.

Camila’s heart pitter patters against her ribs. Lauren vibrates with vulnerability and openness in a way Camila used to pray for and wanted more than anything toward the end, but was too afraid to ask -- didn’t know how to.

“I like that you didn’t like it,” Camila says.

“Stupid,” Lauren murmurs into her skin.

“Yeah.” Camila smiles.

“I like you so much,” Lauren says.

Even though Lauren’s the one who spoke, Camila feels the words catch in her own throat, her heart thrumming against her skin, all her nerves exposed, raw and sore to the touch.

She falls asleep snuggled against Lauren, Lauren’s hand rucking up her shirt and thumb pressing circles against her hip. It’s something Camila stopped letting herself miss when she was nineteen and figured she’d never have it again.

It feels almost like coming home.

*

Lauren’s missed Camila before, more times than she can even hope to remember.

She missed Camila when she was sent to recording sessions during *The X-Factor* and Lauren was scheduled with the wardrobe department; those few hours they were apart making time tick by just a little slower. There was so much to do: choreography, the song arrangements, and filming the
segments that aired before their numbers. But Lauren always found time to think about Camila, cataloguing anything funny and interesting that happened to tell her when they reconvened for lunch.

When Lauren first pulled back, saying she needed some space, that people were starting to get invasive and take their relationship too seriously, she missed her. She missed Camila when Camila complimented Normani, when she curled up on the other sofa in the dressing room to read, and when she wrapped herself around Dinah, smacking wet kisses all over her face and laughing, a bright, blithe thing.

Lauren even missed Camila after she left and the four of them got into the studio to record their last album without her. She wasn’t supposed to miss Camila, and she tried not to let on that she did. The only person who slipped up sometimes was Dinah, but that was expected. Everyone gave Dinah a pass.

But Lauren missed her, too. She missed Camila sitting in a corner and strumming a guitar, furiously writing something Lauren knew, by that point, she’d never share with them, frustrating and annoying and selfish. She missed Camila leaving a banana peel on the table next to her marked up lyric sheets, her socks rolled into a ball beside the sofa. Lauren missed when it was her turn in the booth and Camila’s vocals would stream through the headphones so she could figure out where to try ad libs.

Lauren thinks the thing she has always been most used to with Camila is missing her, so it surprises her a little when Camila travels to Nashville for two weeks to record, and Lauren counts down the days until she gets to see her again.

Her skin itches, and she bounces on her toes when she rings Camila’s doorbell.

Two weeks. Nine days, really.

Camila opens the door with a soft smile on her face. Her hair is in her eyes, glasses perched on her nose, and sweater falling off one shoulder. A book dangles between her fingers.

Lauren kisses her as the door clicks closed, pressing her against it, hands on her cheeks. Camila laughs into her mouth when her glasses shift, sitting askew on the bridge of her nose. Lauren hears the soft thud of the book when Camila tosses it to the small table she keeps in her entryway.

“Hold on,” Camila says, smile in her voice as she pushes Lauren back, hands bundled inside Lauren’s jacket pockets, still managing to keep her close.

Lauren scans her face. Camila’s skin is sunkissed, her lips look slightly more chapped than the last time Lauren saw her, and her hair seems longer than two weeks would allow. She swallows around the impulse to kiss her again. Lauren feels the words roll around her stomach, and her cheeks flush with them, but they come easily: “I missed you.”

Camila looks at her like it’s the best present she’s ever gotten.

It still scares Lauren, urging her to kiss Camila again, harder and rougher. It makes her want to wipe that look off Camila’s face and not because she missed her. She fights the instinct, feels better when she does, and palms at Camila’s neck, her skin soft and warm underneath Lauren’s touch. Lauren finds Camila’s pulse, finds it running under her thumb.

“I missed you, too,” Camila whispers.

“Glad we’re on the same page,” Lauren says.

Camila yanks her forward and Lauren stumbles into her, accidentally knocking Camila’s glasses off
her nose. They catch on her chin, and she whines about how she can’t see.

Lauren laughs, a bubbly and dorky sound she can’t help, and when she says, “God, you’re such an idiot,” it sounds like a compliment.

They order pizza, and Camila tells Lauren about touring the Grand Ole Opry and eating the mac’n’cheese at every barbecue restaurant in a ten block radius of the studio. Her voice is gravely from recording and travelling, and Lauren feels it like sand rubbing against her skin. She follows Camila’s hands as they move. She likes when Camila reaches over to tap her forearm whenever she gets really excited or serious about something, like the little coffee shop that gave her a free muffin, or the fan she met outside of it, telling Camila she inspired her to pursue her creative passion instead of accounting.

They end up cuddled on the sofa watching *Friends*, and when the episode ends, Camila admits: “I wrote a lot of lists about you.”

“Oh?” Lauren asks, raising an eyebrow and running a hand through her hair. “Good lists or bad lists?”

Camila hums. “Both.”

It hurts, but Lauren doesn’t think she can blame her. “Like, you actually wrote them down?”

“Yeah.” Camila pushes at the bridge of her glasses. “In my journals.”

“I probably drafted some in my head when I couldn’t fall asleep.” Lauren never would have written them down, the chance of them being found and being read too high.

“I liked having them to look at, and I needed to see them on paper. Physical evidence of how I had felt or what I had thought,” Camila says. She chews on her lip and pulls at the fraying hole in the left knee of her jeans. She’s not looking at Lauren. “Especially toward the end. On days when you were particularly nice to me, I needed to remember the days you weren’t.”

Lauren feels it cold in her chest, too blunt to be sharp. There’s an aching pain there; Camila’s honesty seeping out like it always does. Lauren swallows. “Yeah. That makes sense.”

Camila looks at her, eyes searching and sad, wide open in the dark. There’s a patch of light from the kitchen that fades into the room from the corner, and the light from the paused TV reflects onto them, Camila’s face clear but shadowed.

Her breathing sounds too loud, and she looks beyond terrified.

“I’m going to come out.”

“That’s great,” Lauren says, quiet. She doesn’t know how to reconcile the way Camila’s looking at her and the news that should be, if nothing else, a relief.

Camila’s tense all over.

“I know how hard it is,” Lauren offers. “It’s hard not to be allowed to come out when you want to, and it’s hard not to be out even if you don’t want to be.”
“Thanks,” Camila whispers. She’s so still, and her eyes aren’t focused.

“This is what you want?” Lauren asks.

“I don’t know.” A beat. She blinks, clearing her eyes enough for Lauren to know she’s present. “I just want to be with you.”

Lauren swallows and tears well in her eyes. She grabs Camila’s hands where they’re twisted together. “You are.”

“They want me to say I’m dating a model. Scarlett something.”

“Why?” Lauren’s eyebrows furrow. She doesn’t understand why Camila’s speaking in fragments. It’s causing a pit to grow in her stomach.

“To say that’s the reason I’m coming out. Because I’m in love with a woman.”

Lauren shakes her head. “I don’t understand. How does it make any sense to come out and lie to everybody in the same breath?”

“Because it answers ‘Why now?’ Because it’ll help us both get press,” Camila says.

Lauren pulls her hands back like she’s been burned. “Is that why you’re doing this? To sell records?”

“No!” Camila groans, pressing her palms against her eyelids. “No, god. Of course not. Is that really what you think of me?”

“I don’t know, Camila. The last time we went out to dinner you had us papped.”

Camila looks at her again, eyes wet and narrow. Lauren sees something snap. “I said I was fucking sorry. There’s literally nothing else I can do about it. I’m sorry that you’re ashamed of me and that you’ve never wanted anyone to know about us.”

Lauren can’t believe this.

She can’t believe Camila still doesn’t understand.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” she mutters, standing up. “Everything is always about you.”

“What world are you living in, Lauren? It’s always been about you.” Camila stands, too. “I wasn’t allowed to look at you in interviews because it made you uncomfortable, I wasn’t allowed to room with you unless you decided it was okay that night, and I sure as hell wasn’t allowed to post any pictures I took of us.”

Lauren curls her hands by her sides. “That was a lifetime ago.”

Camila’s eyes scan Lauren’s face, and Lauren crosses her arms over her chest, feeling like Camila’s trying to see to the center of her. “I never got any explanation.”

“I told you.”

“No,” Camila says, her body sagging. It looks like resignation. “No, you didn’t. It made you so angry whenever anyone said anything about us. I don’t even mean the fans. I mean Dinah could make a joke, or Normani could make an innocent comment about tension, and you’d just shut down.”
“You know how it was. You were there,” Lauren says, feeble, angry and exhausted all at once.

She hates to think about it.

She hates remembering how all the tweets and comments from fans were exhilarating and thrilling at first, a confirmation that she wasn’t imagining Camila’s friendship, that someone else saw the way Camila looked at her and thought the same thing she did.

She hates remembering when it took a turn, when suddenly it felt like the entire world could see everything she felt written on her face. It was everything she wasn’t supposed to feel or allowed to feel; everything wrong and bad. But no matter what she said or did, she kept feeling it, and people kept seeing it.

Camila shakes her head. “Yeah, I got sat down for the same meeting, but I didn’t care. I never would have done anything to purposely ruin it for us. But they didn’t say you couldn’t tell me how you felt. They didn’t say you had to be so good and nice to me, and then turn around and act like my existence was a burden.”

Camila’s body is open, palms out, and she’s always been braver than Lauren ever even wanted to be.

“I was in love with you,” Lauren says.

It’s that feeling of relief she was talking about, a weight lifted from her shoulders, a secret she didn’t realize she was still carrying around. But Camila looks at her like she’s a liar, and it’s awful.

“What?” Camila asks, and a tear rolls down her cheek. “That— that doesn’t make any sense. You never said anything.”

“How was I supposed to say anything? Marielle messaged me and told me that you weren’t a lesbian, and I should keep my sinful hands off you.”

Camila’s eyes are saucers in the dark, and her hands tremble. “It wasn’t true.”

“Wasn’t it?” Lauren asks.

“I never said that,” she insists. “I don’t remember saying that.”

“You’ve said a lot of shit about me, Camila.” Lauren swallows around the lump in her throat.

Camila bites at the corner of her mouth. “I’m sorry if I said that.”

The last bit of hope dissipates, and Lauren knows what she thinks she always knew: Camila said it. Maybe not in those words, and maybe she didn’t mean it. Maybe it was peer pressure or anger about something else, but it was enough to hurt. And it hurts now, too, but it hurt then like Camila had reached inside her mouth and ripped her heart out through her throat.

“I was 15, and I was stupid,” Camila says.

Lauren wipes at the wetness spilling out of her eyes.

It was a lot of things.

Here’s Lauren’s list: it was the Guzmans and that message she kept in her inbox for an entire week before deleting it, crying in her bed before meeting up with Camila at the airport to fly back to LA and act like nothing had happened; it was the meeting she had with their management about needing to be straight and not feeding the rumors that she and Camila were dating; it was the homily she
heard about loving the sinner but hating the sin.

“I know.” Lauren blinks.

Camila clears her throat. No new tears have fallen, but she looks constantly on the verge of crumbling, legs giving out and sobbing so hard she’ll crack in half. “But even after that, you never-- We made love and you still thought I didn’t...?”

“It wasn’t that simple, Camila. They kept telling me ‘Don’t. Don’t. Don’t.’ And I was so scared.”

“Of them?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“Of me?”

Lauren’s bottom lip quivers. “Yeah.”

Camila steps forward, tugging the sleeves of her sweater over her palms. “Is there anything I could have done?”

“No,” Lauren says. “I hated myself for feeling that way about you, and I never understood how easy it all was for you. Do you remember when you told your mom?”

“Yeah.” Camila doesn’t smile, but it’s a near thing.

“You were so happy. You always knew she was going to love you, no matter what. That’s what you told me. And I didn’t know that. I didn’t know my family would love me no matter what. Not when we had been going to church every Sunday and my dad was making ‘No homo’ jokes.”

Camila swallows. “But they did love you.”

“They did. They do.”

Camila takes another step forward. “I didn’t understand. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

They were young, and they were caught up in a storm, and they were both reckless with each other.

“I’m sorry that I thought I knew you like the back of my hand.” A beat. “I didn’t know you were in love with me.”

Lauren shakes her head and laughs, quiet and bitter. “Everybody knew. Luis figured it out. Brad wrote a fucking song about it.” She exhales. The Netflix screen has given way to black, on too long without activity. “Lucy knew.”

Camila gapes at her. “You were in love with me? Even then?”

“I was miserably in love with you until you left.”

Lucy was a saint. Lucy waited, Lucy picked her up, and Lucy put her back together.

It might have been different if they had happened further away from the wreckage of Lauren’s feelings for Camila, when Lucy wasn’t trying to love someone with a heart too soft and weak to build a solid foundation on. At some other time, and in some other world, they might have been able
to make it work, but in the end it wasn’t enough. It was too hard.

She fell in love with Camila too soon, and she fell in love with Lucy too late.

“I want to come out because of you,” Camila whispers.

Lauren studies her: the cut of her cheekbones, the clumping of her eyelashes, and the pink of her mouth. It’s honest, and it’s flattering, and it hurts. Lauren closes her eyes, brushes her drying tears away, and attempts to think clearly.

“I don’t want to pretend to be in love with Scarlett. Scarlett’s a stupid name.”

Lauren laughs. She can’t help it. She puts her head in her hands and laughs, her shoulders shaking.

She tried so hard for four years not to be in love with Camila, and she tried so hard to be free of the machinations of the music industry, PR, and having to think about the parts of her life that were hers and the parts that were public consumption.

And here she is. Again.

“It is a stupid name,” Lauren agrees.

She rubs at her eyes and opens them to find Camila looking back at her, mouth twitching like she doesn’t know if she’s allowed to smile. “I hate it,” she says, and Lauren doesn’t know if she still means the name or something else.

“I don’t know what to do,” Lauren admits.

She doesn’t know if it’s worth it.

She wants to be with Camila the person, but she doesn’t know if she wants to be with Camila the popstar.

Camila swallows. Lauren watches her flex her fingers before reaching out and lacing their hands together. “I know it’ll be hard. I know there are things we have to work out that other people don’t have to deal with. But if you want to try, I want to try.”

Lauren presses her mouth into a thin line. She can feel a headache beginning to pulse in her temples from crying, laying herself bare, and having the entire conversation in the dark. “I have to think about it.”

“I won’t do it, if that’s what you want. I won’t come out. Or we can figure out something else with Roger and everybody. I’m not willing to give up my career, but everything else is negotiable,” Camila says.

“Okay.” Lauren squeezes her hand. “I have to think about it.”

Camila nods.

“I should probably go.”

“Will you stay?” Camila asks. “Just tonight?”

Lauren sees the panic at the edge of Camila’s expression, the corners of her mouth downturned, pinched, eyes black holes. She hears the just in case that Camila doesn’t say.
“I’ll stay.”

They get ready for bed in silence.

Camila flips the light switch before crawling in next to Lauren, not touching. “Goodnight,” she whispers.

Lauren shifts, throws an arm over Camila’s stomach, and buries her head in the crook of Camila’s neck, breathing in her familiar scent. Camila runs her fingers through Lauren’s hair, massaging her scalp.

Lauren’s bones are loose, light as air, and she’s almost asleep when she feels Camila’s lips brush against her forehead. Camila confesses: “I did, too, you know.” A beat. “I do. You know I do.”

“I know you do.”

Lauren calls John.

He’s the only person she’s willing to talk to who doesn’t have history with Camila and has enough distance from the situation to give unbiased advice.

“Hey, what’s up?” she asks.

“Trying to decide if I’m hitting up the bank before it closes at noon. You know, banks really don’t seem to care that most people work during their hours of operation.”

Lauren rolls her eyes. “It’s Sunday.”

“Oh, shit,” John says. “I need to talk to someone about financing.”

“Financing?” Lauren raises an eyebrow. “Financing what?”

“A house.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.” He sighs like Lauren is the annoying person in this friendship. “I got that promotion I told you about, and my mom said it was a good idea.”

“Maybe 40 years ago it would have been.” Lauren takes a drag of her joint.

“Let’s skip the holier-than-thou speech about the housing market, depreciating value and gentrification.”

“You’re so annoying,” she says, because it’s really important that he knows.

“So are you.”

“Whatever.” Lauren runs her tongue over her teeth. “I need advice.”

John chuckles, arrogant and self-satisfied. “Shoot.”

Lauren leans her head back against the arm of her sofa, stretching her legs out and wiggling her toes.
“Camila wants to come out because of me.”

“Wow,” is all John says, neutral and flat.

“Very helpful.”

“Okay, Lauren. I’ll bite. What’s wrong with that?” he asks.

“It’s like...” She exhales. “It’s too much pressure. She should come out because she wants to, not because of me.”

“You think she’s going to regret it and blame you?” He sounds far away, and she hears the drip of a coffee machine. “Because I don’t think that’s going to happen. Isn’t she already out to everybody she actually knows, anyway?”

Lauren chews on her bottom lip. “Yeah, she is.”

“Right. So glad we’ve solved that. Next problem.”

John has this habit when he’s giving advice: he thinks about it for two seconds, sorts it out in his head, and then assumes Lauren knows exactly what he’s thinking. He figures she’ll automatically agree with his train of thought and the solution it brings. It’s clinical instead of personal. Lauren can never decided if she loves or hates that about him.

“They might want her to pretend to date some model,” Lauren says.

It makes her skin crawl to think about Camila getting photographed holding somebody else’s hand and laughing; the entire world believing Camila’s in love with somebody else when it’s not even true. It makes jealousy shoot up Lauren’s spine, and it makes her feel even worse than jealousy normally does, because there’s nothing to actually be jealous of.

“Is she going to?” John asks.

“She doesn’t want to,” Lauren admits. “She said if that’s the only way she’s allowed to come out, then she’s not going to do it.”

Lauren doesn’t know what Camila will do if Lauren backs out. She can imagine Camila going through with it just as easily as she can imagine Camila dropping the entire thing. Camila’s never really felt like she was hiding. She uses gender neutral pronouns, smiles and carries a pride flag around her stage, kisses her fans’ cheeks, no matter who they are, and feels like she is being herself. There is no disconnect for her.

Lauren can’t decide which potential choice is worse. She doesn’t know which decision she feels holds more moral value.

It’s hard to think beyond the point of Camila making the decision without her.

“I get that this involves you because you’re the person she’s actually dating,” John starts, soft but firm. “But if you’re the person she’s actually dating, and she wants to come out because of you, are you opposed to being the person she’s coming out for to everybody else?”

Lauren takes another drag, holding it in her lungs as long as she can before she exhales. “What?”

“When she comes out, and the media wants to pry into every aspect of her sexuality, would it make you uncomfortable if she told them she was dating you?” he asks again.
Lauren swallows and closes her eyes.

Her knee-jerk reaction is yes.

Ally glows when Lauren meets her at the airport.

She’s in LA to collaborate with a country singer Lauren’s vaguely heard of but doesn’t know much about, and she agreed to let Ally crash at her place for a couple of nights.

Ally hugs her tight, rocking back and forth with the force of it.

“You’re much too happy for someone who woke up before the sun to catch a plane,” Lauren says.

Ally’s grin doesn’t falter. “I’m a morning person.”

They stop at In-N-Out for lunch, and Ally recalls her honeymoon in excruciating detail, as though Lauren has never been on a beach before. But she offers Lauren her extra fries, so Lauren can’t complain too much.

She asks about work on the drive back to Lauren’s apartment, and Lauren tells her it’s good. She’s assigned to a production team for a record early next year, and she’s started writing her own songs again.

“For other people, or for you?” Ally asks, fingers tapping against the car door.

“I don’t know.” Lauren shrugs. “For me, I guess.”

“That’s great, Lo.”

She can feel the pull of wanting to create for herself underneath her skin again. It’s always been there but went dormant with exhaustion and burnout. There was something about Camila that reignited it. Lauren felt it in the studio with her, heading back to the place she rented every night to work on the song and experiment with ways to make it better. She was inspired and alive, and the lingering sparks of it still crackle in her chest, waiting to catch fire. She wants to connect with the world. She likes helping other artists do the same, but she wants it for herself, too. She always has.

After she helps Ally drag her suitcase into the apartment, Ally excuses herself to call Nicolas, and Lauren opens the poetry book Camila lent her ages ago and probably forgot about. Camila marked poems with different colored post-its, but there’s no guide. Lauren doesn’t know if blue means she likes it, or if pink means she loves it, or if green means it reminds her of someone. Lauren tries to figure it out, but knowing Camila, the colors could coordinate to the singer she recommends playing while you read that particular piece.

“I brought you something,” Ally says, hands behind her back.

Lauren marks her spot, setting the book down on the coffee table and smiling an exaggerated thing. “I love presents.”

Ally shakes her head, fond exasperation, and hands Lauren a cheaply framed picture. “The photographers caught it, and I thought it was cute. You’re welcome.”

It’s a moment: Camila’s hand in Lauren’s, raised up, her skirt still settling from a spin. Lauren’s
smiling, and it looks like Camila’s laughing. Lauren hears the roll of it in a way she wouldn’t have been able to over the music. Looking at the picture causes Lauren’s heart to beat wildly against her ribs and makes her smile fade. She carefully runs her finger along the frame’s edge.

Ally settles next to her. “Do you love it?”

Lauren waits a beat too long to answer: “Yeah. Thank you.”

“What’s wrong?”

Running a hand through her hair, she places the photo next to Camila’s poetry book. Ally’s eyes are kind, the furrow of her brow soft.

Lauren explains everything. She tells her that Camila wants to come out, and that she wants Camila to do that. She wants Camila to change people’s lives by being herself. She tells Ally Camila offered not to come out at all, and she tells Ally that she doesn’t know if Camila’s still giving Lauren too much. She hates the caveat of the press, and she doesn’t know if she would want Camila to tell them she’s dating Lauren. She admits that she doesn’t know if -- instead of Camila -- she was dating any other imaginary famous person, she’d feel as weird and confused about everyone knowing.

Ally waits patiently while Lauren speaks, nodding and humming occasionally, but not interrupting or jumping in at every pause.

“You know what’s annoying about Nicolas?” she asks when Lauren’s finished.

“What?” It’s confusion and not genuine interest.

“He always forgets to put the toilet seat back down, and he only likes to watch action movies. When we’re at church, he loudly sings off-key just to bug me,” Ally says, soft and satisfied. She takes one of Lauren’s hands in her own, squeezing gently. “But he calls his parents once a week to check in. When I’m having a bad day, he comes home with flowers to cheer me up, and he lets me sleep with the fan on even though he hates it.

“You don’t have to weigh all the good things, and all the bad things, and see if you come out ahead. You could try, but love isn’t a math equation.”

“Okay,” Lauren says, but it lilts like a question. Ally is smart. She’s one of the most emotionally smart and healthy people Lauren knows, but she doesn’t understand how this is relevant.

“When you love someone you have to work at it, Lauren. And when you see all the good things about them, it’s easy. When you see the bad things, it’s not. But you love them anyway.

“This isn’t Camila taking too long in the shower. I get that. This is a huge thing.”

“It’s deciding if I want a relationship in the public eye,” Lauren says. “More than if I was with anybody else.”

“It is,” Ally agrees. “And I can’t tell you how you feel about that, or Camila, or how she feels about you. But I know how happy you looked with her at my wedding. It sounds like she wants to put in the work, and it sounds like you’re reaching for any excuse not to, even ones you know don’t hold up.”

“I’m just trying to make an informed decision.”

“You can’t predict the future, Lauren.”
“I know that,” she groans, shaking her head.

“Don’t get upset, please.” Ally tilts her head, mouth pressed thin, eyeing Lauren like she’s a stray cat.

Lauren swallows. “That’s something people only say before they’re about to say something upsetting.”

Ally doesn’t laugh. “It sounds like you’ve made a decision, but there’s some scared part of you that doesn't like it.

“Who cares if everybody on the internet tells you they knew the whole time? Are you really asking if Camila is worth it, or are you asking if your pride is?”

Lauren blinks and fights the urge to rip her hand away from Ally.

It’s a better question than she cares to admit.
ten: surrender up my heart and swap it for yours

Chapter Summary

*The lights are hot and bright, and if she looks up at just the right angle, all she sees is Camila and an empty arena.*

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry it took me so long to get this final chapter edited and posted. In my defense, I thought I'd have it up last week, but then I got sick. I have no defense for all the time before that. My tunnel vision shifted, and I spent my free time focusing on other things rather than finishing this up.

But thank you to everyone who has read this or stuck with it. I truly am so grateful for all the kudos and comments. This fic was a project that has helped me process and heal, both my Fifth Harmony and Lauren/Camila feelings, and other, unrelated feelings. I hope this gives you some of the sense of closure that writing it and finishing it has given me.

Chapter title from "Lego House," by Ed Sheeran, because I'm sentimental like that.

Love is a temporary madness. It erupts like an earthquake and then subsides. And when it subsides you have to make a decision. You have to work out whether your roots have become so entwined together that it is inconceivable that you should ever part. Because this is what love is. Love is not breathlessness, it is not excitement, it is not the promulgation of promises of eternal passion. That is just being "in love" which any of us can convince ourselves we are. Love itself is what is left over when being in love has burned away, and this is both an art and a fortunate accident.

*CAPTAIN CORELLI'S MANDOLIN, LOUIS DE BERNIERES*

Lauren watches Camila prepare tea: the pale slip of skin that appears when she reaches to grab two mugs out of the upper cabinet, the practiced motion of her hands when she tugs the tea bags out of the box, her lip pulled between her teeth as she carefully pours boiling water from the kettle to the cup, bending down to gauge the amount.

She shoots Lauren a shaky smile as she moves slowly and steadily across the kitchen before placing the mugs onto the table.

Lauren pulls hers closer, wrapping her hands around it so the warmth transfers from the ceramic to her palms. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” Camila tucks a piece of hair behind her ear. “So. How have you been?”
She asked the same thing when she let Lauren in.

“Okay.” Lauren nods. “You?”

“Good.”

Lauren exhales. “Good.”

“Yeah.” Camila swallows and scoots her chair closer to the table. There’s expectation in her eyes; a combination of dread, hope and fondness that Lauren can’t quite parse. It’s probably similar to the amalgamation of relief and anxiety Lauren felt when Camila hugged her upon opening the door.

“Can we just--” Lauren looks out the window. It’s cloudy, and some palm trees seem to sway with the wind. “Can we not act like idiots? Just for this conversation.”

“I’m sorry,” Camila says.

Lauren finds her eyes again. “For what?”

“I assumed a lot of things back then. I didn’t tell you how I felt, because I thought I knew how you felt. Or didn’t feel. Whatever.” She shakes her head like she’s irritated with her vocabulary. “I blamed you for things that weren’t your fault. I tried to hurt you instead of talking to you.”

“I did, too.”

Camila bites at her thumb. “So … I’m sorry.”

“I know. But we have to move past it, Camila.” She’s tired of pretending their past doesn’t exist, picking and choosing the things that matter, and then focusing on the hurt when it’s convenient for her. “Is there anything you want to know?”

Camila looks down and traces a finger around the rim of her mug. “What changed your mind?”

“What?”

“In the restaurant when you asked me out-- to hang out.” Camila clears her throat. “I know you told me about your date and everything, but I don’t understand what changed. From you ending things to wanting to try again.”

“I was scared. You know that. I was upset. I knew how I felt about you. And it was okay as long as it was just me harboring feelings. I could ignore it well enough and pretend it wasn’t real. But knowing you were--” Lauren inhales too loudly. “I knew we were both going to get hurt if we kept sleeping together, and I didn’t want it to be any worse than it was.”

“But if you felt something for me, and you knew how I felt, why not stop pretending to be friends with benefits? Why not start dating?”

Lauren chews on her bottom lip. Her stomach flips. “Being in love with you was the worst thing that ever happened to me.”

“What?” Camila blinks. Tears pool behind her eyes.

“Not-- when we were in Fifth Harmony,” Lauren rushes. She flexes her fingers against her mug and watches Camila fidget. “It felt like so much was terrible, but that was the most terrible thing. Because it was all my fault. I wanted to stop loving you, but I couldn’t figure out how. And I was scared it would end how it did when you left.”
“It won’t,” Camila says.

“I know. When I saw you, I realized I didn’t want to move on until I gave us a real shot. Even though I’d tried to convince myself otherwise, I’m still pretty bad at controlling my heart.”

“Oh,” Camila blows on her tea and nods. “You did hurt me, though. When you ended things.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” Lauren swallows down her tears.

“I forgive you,” Camila says, even and warm, too kind.

“Anything else you want to know?”

Camila shakes her head.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Anything,” Camila breathes.

“Did you leave the group because of me?”

Lauren had worried that Ally, Dinah and Normani would decide that Camila wasn’t the only one to blame. She felt half-alive the first month after, even though she knew it was coming. Sometimes she was fine, and sometimes she worked extra hard to convince everyone around her, and sometimes she was too tired and blamed it on anything else -- a fight with her sister, insomnia, or the state of American democracy.

Camila tilts her head, baby wrinkles around her eyes. “No. Sometimes it was hard to be close to you, so I wanted to leave, or was glad I was leaving. But it was never about you. Not really.”

“Oh.” Lauren relaxes her shoulders before taking a sip of tea. It’s still hot, and she feels the burn of it leave a sore patch of taste buds on her tongue. “Thank you.”

“Is there anything else?”

“No.”

“If you think of anything later, you can just ask me,” Camila says. The corners of her mouth tilt up. “So?”

“I don’t want you to pretend to date Scarlett.”

“I don’t want to do that, either.”

“What do you want?” Lauren asks. “I don’t want to know what you think I want you to say, but what do you really want to do?”

Camila looks down and licks at the corner of her mouth. Lauren watches two minutes tick by on the microwave clock before Camila makes eye contact. “I want to come out. And I know that’s a good thing, I know it will help people. But it’s not really the coming out I care about. I don’t feel guilty not labeling myself for everyone when I’m single. I don’t feel guilty keeping parts of my life private. The only time I ever feel guilty is when I’m dating someone and I just … can’t be.

“I want to come out so I can write a song and not have to force male pronouns where they don’t exist.” Camila blinks, her eyes dark and lucid. “I want to come out so I can hold your hand in the grocery store without worrying about getting in trouble.”
Lauren tightens her grip on her mug.

“And I’m scared that you’ll never want to hold my hand in the grocery store.”

Lauren feels the words hot and pulsing underneath her skin, almost painful. It doesn’t take a lot out of Lauren to say it, but it takes a lot to mean it: “I’d hold your hand.”

Camila keeps clamping down the hesitant happiness skipping around her face, but Lauren can see it, like Camila’s waiting for the right time to open up and let it bubble out. “Roger thinks without a girlfriend they won’t let me come out.”

“You do have a girlfriend.” Lauren runs her teeth against her sore tongue.

“Yeah, but—”

“I’ll do it.”

“What?” Camila’s eyes widen, her mouth agape.

“I’ll do it.”

“Really?”

“I don’t want to do any of the bullshit, Camz. The whole hired-paparazzi-to-‘accidentally’-catch-us-in-a-compromising-position or whatever? Gross. I don’t want to give an interview, or be paraded around like a farm animal.”

“Yeah, of course.” Camila’s hands flutter from her mug, to the table, to her face. “Are you sure?”

“I thought I was done hiding, but I feel like I’m hiding.”

Camila reaches across the table and holds Lauren’s hand in hers. She smiles, a teary, happy thing. “Thank you.”

Lauren clears her throat. “Can we go back to holding my hand in the grocery store? How does that work? Who pushes the cart?”

Camila laughs and rolls her eyes. “Maybe I’m carrying a basket.”

“Am I just supposed to stand there while you scan the shelf for bowtie pasta?”

“Shut up.”

“It doesn’t seem very practical,” Lauren says.

‘It’s supposed to be romantic.”

Camila has stars in her eyes. She grins, large and lopsided, and when she swings their hands, she knocks her tea and spills it all over the table.

There’s a meeting, and then there’s another meeting, and then Lauren’s dragged in for a third meeting.
It’s annoying, and she has to sign another contract. She compromises because she doesn’t have much choice in the matter other than walking away, and she doesn’t want to do that. Not with Camila tapping the toe of her shoe against Lauren’s underneath the table and shooting her apologetic looks whenever Mark, Frank or Heather say something particularly stupid.

Lauren kind of gets a kick out of how over it the three of them seem by the end.

But there’s a direct line from those meetings to Camila’s show in Miami.

“I’m really sorry,” Camila says.

“No, you’re not.”

“Well, I’m sorry you don’t want to do this.” She tugs on Lauren’s jacket. “Listen. I know it’s stupid. But don’t think of it as setting up a narrative. Think of it as doing something for me.”

Lauren rolls her eyes. “I hate you.”

“Yes, I know. Are you nervous?”

“No yet,” Lauren says.

The show is too many hours away, but she knows when she stands on stage, just out of sight, the crowd larger and louder than anything she’s seen in years, her stomach will roll and her palms will sweat.

“I’m nervous,” Camila admits.

Lauren quirks a brow. “Why?”

“It’s just.” Camila shrugs and twiddles her thumbs. “I know it’ll be fine. The fans will lose their shit. And I know what I just told you, okay? But it is the start of everything. Everything is going to change after this.”

“It’s going to be good, though.”

Camila grins. “The best.”

“Plus, I don’t have to do any more stupid shit after this,” Lauren says. Her mouth twitches up.

There are things that are scheduled: Lauren has to (gets to) refollow Camila on Instagram, there’s an outlined Twitter conversation, and then there’s a picture posted on Lauren’s social media, followed by one on Camila’s. It culminates in Camila releasing her album and giving an interview where she explains why she, blatantly, sings a song about being in love with a woman.

It’s not ideal, having dates to post things set in her calendar. But those reminders require less time and energy than a performance, and they come with incremental increases in freedom. After their relationship is public, it’s almost like Camila’s team won’t be scouring every move Lauren makes.

They will be; she knows that.

But it won’t matter.
Unless she does something incredibly embarrassing.

“What if you realize how much you’ve missed performing with me and beg me to let you crash every show I have?” Camila asks.

Lauren hums noncommittally.

“I’m a good time.” Camila waggles her eyebrows.

Lauren laughs. She can’t help it, slapping gently at Camila’s arm. Camila devolves into giggles, too, her head falling against Lauren’s shoulder, hand gripping Lauren’s arm like she’s afraid she’s going to fall out of her seat.

They quiet when a couple of suits come in, and Camila sits up straight.

“If I forget the words, or if I lose my voice, or completely meltdown tonight, you’ll have to save this,” Camila says, soft and serious.

“I don’t think you running offstage is what they,” Lauren starts, pointing to the handful of public relations people that were sent here in case they manage to fuck this up, “want.”

Camila pales.

“Calm down.” Lauren leans over and places a hand on Camila’s knee. “You’ve got this. You’ve done this countless times. The crowd will just make it easier.”

“That doesn’t sound right,” Camila says, narrowing her eyes.

That’s good. It means she’s focused on what Lauren is saying and not in her head running a loop of herself fainting on stage tonight. “Their energy feeds you when you’re out there, right? They’re going to freak the fuck out. We probably won’t even be able to hear ourselves.”

Lauren hates it. She’s trying to convince herself to hate it a little less.

Camila frowns. “I want to be able to hear myself.”

“I just mean the adrenaline will help. Once we start, you won’t be so nervous.” She squeezes Camila’s knee and leans forward to kiss the corner of her mouth. “And if you are, just look at me. It’ll just be us, okay?”

“Okay,” Camila says, expanding the syllables. She doesn’t look quite convinced, but she nods before taking the hand on Lauren’s knee and lacing their fingers together.

Lauren holds her microphone by her thigh and watches Camila from the side of the stage. Camila sits at the piano, finishing up the ballad that precurses their song on the setlist. Her eyes are closed, and her voice goes so quiet and breathy before the song crescendos and she belts into the microphone.

Camila is good at being on stage; spotlight on her as she conveys everything the music calls for. It’s harder than it looks: hitting the notes, engaging the audience, and making them feel something special so they fall in love with you. It’s always been natural for Camila, but she’s honed her stage presence over the years, and it shows.
“Thank you,” Camila says when she’s finished.

The crowd doesn’t let up, loud and brilliant in response.

“Thank you so much.” Lauren sees Camila smile on the screen behind her, eyes crinkling. “Now, I was figuring we’d do something a little different for the next song. I mean, this is my hometown, right?”

The crowd gets louder.

“I agree.” Camila laughs and arpeggios down the piano. “You guys are so special to me, so here’s something special for you.”

She inhales; Lauren can see the rise of the breath in her body. And then she starts singing. The rhythm is unsteady and a bit slower than it’s supposed to be. The band joins in after the first verse, amplifying the chorus and following the little changes Camila keeps making, whether on purpose or as consequence of nerves, Lauren can’t tell.

The chorus ends, and Lauren listens for the downbeat, raising her microphone and stepping into view as she starts singing.

The crowd gets louder.

Her heart beats in her ears, and she feels like she’s shaking. She hopes she’s not shaking. Camila looks down at the piano, at her hands, and then she looks up at Lauren, mouthing along but not singing.

Lauren holds Camila’s gaze as long as she can before looking at the audience. She looks toward the back where it’s all shadows and all noise, where she can’t make out individual bodies, let alone see their faces. It calms the churning in her gut as she walks toward Camila the way they mapped out during soundcheck.

Camila stands during Lauren’s chorus, letting her keyboardist take over the melody and fumbling to get her microphone off its mount. She bites around her tongue and looks at the crowd, reacting for them. It’s the kind of thing that endears Camila to her fans, the kind of detail they’ll write when threading together thoughts on social media. A moment that was shared between themselves and Camila, specific to them, specific to this show and this moment.

It warms something in Lauren’s chest.

She glances at the first two rows, illuminated by the stage lights. A few people have their phones up. One girl, front row center, is crying, and they all appear to know the words. An audience singing along to a song Lauren has a hand in will never stop making her heart ache with awe, a tiny blessing fluttering around the edges of a smile. She focuses on trying to hear the audience around the mix in her in-ears, because when Lauren can see the fans in front of her, happy and real, she doesn’t know how not to be grateful for everything they’ve given her. She doesn’t know how not to love them.

She thinks it goes both ways: sometimes they don’t understand she’s real and human until she’s standing in front of them, and she doesn’t understand they mean no harm until their voices waver and they give her a hug.

When she and Camila reach each other, they don’t touch. They sing: to the sobbing girl in the crowd, to the people in the back building up momentum, and to each other.

It’s … incredible. Camila’s eyes are dark and bright, glowing. She focuses on Lauren in a way she’s
never been allowed before. There’s no attempt to hide her feelings, and no fear of repercussion. Lauren still hopes she isn’t shaking, but instead of nerves, the cause would be Camila.

Camila’s voice mixes with Lauren’s during the last chorus, and Lauren feels it vibrating within her chest, beating inside her heart and pumping blood through her veins.

She hugs Camila when they finish, feeling giddy and anxious in a way she hasn’t in a long time. Lauren fights the urge to bury her head in Camila’s neck, breathe her in and let her mouth ghost over her skin, squeeze her tightly and never let go. The lights are hot and bright, and if she looks up at just the right angle, all she sees is Camila and an empty arena.

The crowd gets louder.

Camila screams: “Give it up for Lauren Jauregui!”

Louder and Louder and Louder.

Lauren missed this. She missed performing her own material for people who care. It’s not about the size of the audience, and it’s not about them knowing the words, either. It’s not even about the love some of them already have for her. It’s a crowd wanting to listen, wanting to be carried away on the feeling of the right melody or lyrics phrased just so. Occasionally, Lauren experienced that at the bars in Boston, but it was never the entire place. She thought that was better, but there’s something inimitable about how she feels now.

She smiles and waves at the crowd, stepping toward stage left. “Give it up for Camila!”

It’s a stupid thing to say, and she can see the joke flirting around Camila’s face. Camila woo’s into the microphone, and the crowd won’t stop screaming.

Lauren feels herself bursting in the same way Camila seems to overflow with everything: alive and inspired and connected.

She might understand why Camila loves this too much to give up.

Lauren sips water, gathers her hair into a ponytail, and waits restlessly in the dressing room. Adrenaline thrums through her body. She thinks about going back and watching Camila from the side of the stage like she did last year. She doesn’t get a chance, heart beating too wildly in her chest, before Camila comes rushing in.

Her hair is mussed from running her hands through it and flipping it with the choreography. There’s a sheen of sweat on her skin that makes her outfit stick to her. Her eyes are still dark and bright, and Lauren’s heart still stutters in her chest.

“That was incredible,” Camila says.

“Yeah.” Lauren feels her answering smile. Her fingers itch to reach out.

“You sounded amazing.”

“Thanks.” Lauren tugs at the zipper hanging at the bottom of her jacket. “So did you. You always do.”
Camila flushes. She glows, pure and radiant and beautiful. It’s the kind of beauty that only comes from a moment of elation unable to be marred by anything outside of it, divorced from all the bullshit attached. She pushes her hair out of eyes, and Lauren can see a bead of sweat tracing its way down her temple and toward her ear.

She’s beautiful.

“Thanks. I mean, I kept fucking up the piano bit at the beginning.” She laughs, shrugging her shoulders. “But when you came out it almost felt like I was giving the part of the song that was yours back. And it was just -- like the first time when you’re on stage and everything clicks. You are so …” Camila’s smile shrinks, but it’s nice, a settled contentedness. “Incredible.”

The sincerity pinches against Lauren’s ribs and causes an imaginary mark to bloom in her chest. She kisses Camila, hands steadied on her hips.

They’ve kissed in dressing rooms like this before, spurred on by the darkness compared to the blinding stage lights, the quiet compared to the roaring crowd, and the rush of performing. It was an expulsion of energy more than anything else.

This is different.

Camila laughs against her mouth, hand finding the back of her neck and thumb swiping against the base of her jaw. It’s soft and nice, enough to be felt, before they move back, foreheads pressed together.

“Thank you so much,” Camila breathes.

“Don’t mention it.” Lauren smiles.

“You wanna do that again, don’t you?”

Lauren rolls her eyes, but she presses a kiss to the corner of Camila’s mouth, anyway.

“I meant perform,” Camila laughs.

Lauren feels Camila’s breath warm against her skin, and she likes her so much. “Maybe, yeah.”

“With me?” Camila bites her lip, somehow managing to look up at Lauren through her lashes.

She feels the yes rumbling in the pit of her stomach, the maybe in each beat of her heart, and the no crawling up her throat. She’s too close to the experience to judge. She squeezes Camila’s hips. “Right now, yes.”

“And tomorrow?” Camila asks, taking a step back.

“I’m not sure.”

Camila nods. “Okay.”

She heads down the hall to shower, and Lauren wipes her hands against her jeans.

She plays a game of solitaire on her phone, and the jubilance of performing begins settling in her chest. The adrenaline seeps out of her bloodstream.

She realizes she can’t win the game she’s playing when there’s a knock on the door. Her mom comes in. “Hey,” Lauren says, tossing her phone onto the cushion beside her and standing.
“You were amazing,” her mom says, wrapping her in a hug. “I’ve missed seeing you on stage.”

“Thanks.”

Lauren told her family not to come. There was too much business at the core of tonight, and even though she can isolate the moment on stage, everything else always comes crashing in. She only has to look at her social media to confirm.

But her mom insisted.

Lauren loves her, and she knows her intentions are good, but sometimes the way her mom supports her isn’t the way she wants to be supported.

Lauren steers the conversation away from the performance and her mom’s gushing. Instead, they discuss the drama with her cousins, her mom’s summer school classes, and her dad’s newest household project.

“It’s not that difficult to paint a room! It’s been over a week, and I’m tired of having all the furniture shoved in the kitchen,” her mom complains. “At this rate, I might have to do it myself.”

“If he sees you painting the living room, he’ll just--”

She stops when the door opens.

Camila’s in sweatpants and a tank top, her hair damp. “Oh, hi.”

“Hey,” Lauren says.

“Camila.” Her mom blanches, stands and smooths out her pants.

“I’m glad you could come, Mrs. Jauregui,” Camila says.

“You can call me Clara. You know that.” Her mom’s voice is tight, just like the small smile on her mouth. “The show was good.”

“Thanks.” Camila swallows. She steps forward and shifts closer to Lauren, but the space feels vast.

“Well,” her mom sighs, turning her body toward Lauren. “I should probably go. Your dad and I are working our way through the DVR.”

“Okay. I’ll walk you out,” Lauren offers.

“It was good to see you,” Camila says.

“You, too.” The hug is quick and awkward, and Lauren cringes.

She sees the way her mom tracks the touch of Lauren’s hand to Camila’s, shoulders rigid and mouth pressed flat. She sees how her mom doesn’t look at Camila when Camila says goodbye.

The parking lot is empty, but Lauren knows if they walked around the back of the venue where the trucks sit, they would find a gaggle of fans waiting. Even though the sun has long set, it’s still hot and humid.

“You have to be nicer to her,” Lauren whispers.

“I am nice.”
Lauren groans. “She’s not going away, okay? I’m not asking you to go above and beyond, Mom. But you can’t make her feel bad just for existing.”

“I’m not trying to make her feel bad.” Her mom bristles.

“Well, you did.”

“That’s on her, then. I was perfectly polite.”

“You know that’s not really true.” Lauren raises an eyebrow.

Her mom digs through her purse, pulling out her car keys. “It’s just hard for me, mija.”

“It’s not about you,” Lauren says, focusing on not clenching her jaw and loosening the tightness in her shoulders. Her hands still curl into fists.

“I know.”

“It’s been years. Please just. Be nice to her.”

“Well, I thought we were done with her forever, so forgive me for needing time to readjust.”

Lauren rolls her eyes. “Oh my god, give me a break. It’s not that hard to actually be nice to someone for five minutes. I’m not having the same fight I had with you ten years ago.”

“She hurt you so badly,” her mom says, anger underlining the words.

“I fucking know.”

Her mom flinches.

“Work through whatever issues you have with her. That’s fine. But don’t be rude, and don’t do it with me. It was up to me to forgive her, not you. This is what I want, and you’re not going to ruin it or talk me out of it. Not this time.”

Her mom looks down. Her shoulders sag, and she fidgets with her car keys. “I’m sorry.”

“Okay.” Lauren pinches the bridge of her nose and breathes in and out.

“I want you to be happy,” her mom says. Her cheeks are flush, but Lauren doesn’t know if it’s from Miami weather, anger or embarrassment.

“I know you do.”

She hugs her mom goodbye and watches her drive through the empty parking lot toward the exit. Lauren knows she’s going to get a call from her dad tomorrow playing peacekeeper, and she feels the dread of it going hard in the pit of her stomach. She shakes it off and turns, heading back inside the arena.

That’s tomorrow, and tonight she and Camila are going to meet the Cabellos at their house for ice cream.

She won’t allow her mom to sour her mood and ruin her night.
Lauren can’t look at her social media.

At all.

Between shippers, and the people arguing with them, it’s too much.

She was always told she shouldn’t read her comments, but she’s never been very good at following that advice. Lauren wants to know what people have to say about her. She wants to know if they understand what she’s expressing, and sometimes it’s impossible to repress the urge to remind them that they’re wrong, to tell them they’re making assumptions, and you know what people say about assumptions.

So, she can’t look at her social media.

But, she can’t help but look a little.

“Can’t they just mind their own business?” Lauren asks, passing her phone down to Camila, who sits in front of the sofa with her legs crossed like a pretzel.

Camila takes the phone, haphazardly shoving the pencil she was using to mark her sheet music into her bun. Her brow furrows. “That’s kind of nice, actually.”

Lauren rolls her eyes. “Yeah, but it’s wrong.”

“Well, duh.” Camila hands the phone back, twisting to look up at Lauren. “You didn’t read The Age of Innocence so someone on the internet could google it and figure out that its most famous quote is actually about us.”

“Edith Wharton is rolling over in her grave.”

“Edith Wharton is probably happy to know a lot more people are going to read her novel.”

“They’re not going to read it,” Lauren huffs.

“Probably not.” Camila smiles, resting her elbow on the couch cushion. “That comment isn’t even mean, though. You really need to learn to let this stuff go. Even the mean ones.” She scrunches her nose. “Especially the mean ones.”

She’s right, but it doesn’t make it any easier for Lauren to unlearn years of getting worked up by strangers’ hot takes. “I was only looking for a little empathy.”

“Okay, you have my empathy.” Camila tilts her head, pencil askew in her hair and mirth dancing in her eyes. She reaches out to brush against the underside of Lauren’s knee.

“Thank you,” Lauren says.

Camila turns around and picks up her staff paper again. Lauren traces the curve of Camila’s neck with her eyes before going back to doing nothing on her phone. She’s easily distracted from that nothing when she notices Camila patting the floor with her palm, sheet rustling. Camila gets on her hands and knees, bending down to try and look underneath the couch.

Lauren smiles, soft and small. “Camz?”

“What?” Camila asks, sitting back on her haunches and eyeing the slip of space where the couch
cushions come together.

Lauren plucks the pencil out of her hair. “Here.”

“Thanks!” Camila looks at Lauren like she performed a magic trick and she’s trying to sort it out. She rolls the pencil between her palms, expression shifting from delight to something a little more guarded. “Hey, can I ask you a question?”

“It was literally in your hair the whole time.”

Camila shakes her head. “I ran into that girl you used to date.”

“Who?” Lauren blinks, dropping her phone into her lap.

“Sydney?”

“Oh, yeah. Okay.” Lauren sits up straighter.

“I mean, it’s not really about her,” Camila clarifies, pressing the tip of her pencil against her thumb. “She was dancing for someone at a Pride gig I did, I don’t know. I just. I saw her there. And then I was thinking about … everything. And then I was thinking about when you kissed me.”

“Okay?” Lauren has no idea what Camila is rambling about.

“The first time, after Austin broke up with me.”

Lauren remembers.

Lauren remembers Camila’s face sticky with tears, hair going greasy by her part, and Cheeto stains on the t-shirt she had been sleeping in. Lauren remembers Camila was the one who did the kissing first, and Lauren didn’t know what to do with her hands, left them fluttering by Camila’s face and sides before settling on her hips.

“You kissed me,” Lauren says, quiet.

“That’s not how I remember it.”

Lauren feels her heart beating in her throat. “Memories are funny like that.”

Camila nods and pushes some loose hair out of her face. “I was so sad. Because I had liked him so much, and I didn’t see it coming. Which in retrospect, was stupid. And then you were so nice, and I thought I loved him, y’know?”

“How do you think you love somebody and not know?” Lauren asks.

Camila chews on her cheek, face flushing. “I guess because when I was little my parents used to tell me I always felt everything at a ten. When toddlers fall, if their parents don’t fuss, the toddler will stop crying because they realize nothing is actually wrong, right? Except my parents were always telling people at barbecues and stuff that I would just keep crying, like I felt it hurt a lot more than it actually did. I wouldn’t even have a scrape or bruise, but I’d wail for 10 minutes.

“And I felt my love for everyone differently, anyway, which made it more confusing.” Camila frowns. “I knew I loved you differently than how I loved Dinah, which was different than how I loved Sofi, which was different from the way I felt about my mom.”

“Okay.” Lauren nods, trying to understand. Knowing when she loved someone was never the
problem. The knowing was always the easy part.

“So, I was a mess. You kissed me, or I kissed you, or we kissed each other, whatever.” She waves her hand around in dismissal, but it’s too frantic, words beginning to slur together in her haste to get to the point. “And god, Lauren. It was like—” She exhales, eyes incredibly soft and reverent. “Oh, so that’s what it’s supposed to feel like. Because kissing Austin was fun and nice, and I really, really liked him.”

Lauren flexes her fingers against her thighs.

“And so I figured, when we kissed, that’s what it felt like to kiss someone you were in love with. But when I kissed you? It was just … more than that. I actually felt that at a ten.”

“Yeah.” Lauren remembers the thrill of it, her entire body tingling when Camila’s mouth pressed softly against hers. She remembers the fear and the want mixing in her brain, making it hard to think. She remembers the want being in her body, but she felt it in her head, too, in her heart.

“I remember thinking, that even though I was so sad about Austin, it was worth it if it meant you kissing me.”

Lauren swallows. Her throat is dry. “That’s kind of fucked up.”

Camila’s laugh is wet and sad. “Yeah.”

Camila doesn’t say anything after that, so Lauren asks, “Was there a question?”

“Oh.” Camila blinks. “You didn’t kiss me because you felt bad for me, did you?”

“No.”

“I always thought that was why,” Camila admits, glancing down. “I thought every time you kissed me it was because you felt bad for me, or because you were angry about a boy, or because you were angry there was no boy to be angry about.”

Lauren bends her knees and hugs them to her chest. She feels the pain of having been in love with Camila like a burn on her heart, pulsing with heat but starting to fade. Starting to heal. “Maybe sometimes. But not then. Not the first time.”

Camila looks up at Lauren through her eyelashes. Her hands and legs tremble when she pushes herself off the ground and sits next to Lauren on the sofa as best she can, facing her. “Thank you.”

“Yeah. Of course.”

Camila leans forward, pressing a gentle kiss against Lauren’s mouth, her hair spilling out of her bun. “It’s kind of strange that we talked about everything but us,” Camila says, fingers splaying against Lauren’s knee. “I mean, I guess it makes sense, it’s just weird. We talked about liking girls but never about liking each other.”

Lauren shrugs. “Until we couldn’t talk about anything at all.”

“Right.” Camila’s hand stills.

“It’s okay,” Lauren says, leaning forward to tuck a piece of hair behind Camila’s ear.

She feels the need to touch Camila sometimes, so acutely that something inside her trembles. Lauren doesn’t know if it’s a remnant of the time when they couldn’t communicate -- when they were
strangers masquerading as friends who only had the brush of fingertips against a forearm as a way to understand -- or something else.

She knows it’s never going to be like it was then, and she knows it’s never going to be like it was during the euphoric beginning when they couldn’t stop talking, just for the sake of it.

“I used to ask you about that kiss all the time,” Camila says. “In my head.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“And how’d the answer stack up?” Lauren asks.

Camila smiles. “Much less dramatic.”

When Lauren tells Camila she’s working on music for herself, Camila sets her up with Shawn. Lauren’s skin itches with the favor, but she likes the idea of creating without boundaries, and the performance with Camila ignited the spark underneath her skin. She missed it: music that was her own, the sound of her voice, and the feeling of being on stage.

Lauren and Shawn are acquaintances, but they’ve never been friends.

She rings his doorbell, fidgeting with the strap of her purse. A few long moments pass before Shawn answers. “Hey.”

“Hi, Lauren. Good to see you again.” They hug, but it’s a loose, uncomfortable thing, a result of social norms and expectations. “Come in.”

“Thanks for having me,” Lauren says, glancing around as Shawn leads her into his kitchen.

“Did you want anything to drink? Water?”

“Water would be great.” Lauren rolls her shoulders back, running her eyes over the stainless steel appliances and marble countertops. His kitchen is huge and clean. His entire house looks huge and clean.

She takes her glass and follows Shawn down a hallway sparsely decorated with framed artwork. There’s something about his house that reminds her of Camila’s place, except Shawn’s decor feels more planned and professional. Camila’s house has a pinch more coziness and feels a dash more like a home.

They head downstairs to his basement studio. Gold and platinum records line the wall, along with photos of Shawn and his frequent collaborators. Lauren’s eyes go directly to the collection of pictures of Camila and Shawn. They’re casually taped up without frames: a selfie, a shot someone took of the two of them leaning over a soundboard, and a photo of Camila, socks off, curled up on the sofa, guitar on her lap and tongue out, directed toward the person behind the lens.

“So,” Shawn begins, motioning for Lauren to sit on that same sofa. “Camila said you were working on something already?”

Lauren shares the song, and Shawn actively listens. He asks about other pieces she’s written and
produced for herself in the past and seems genuinely excited to hear them, tracking where she’s come from and where she wants to go.

There’s something soothing about his aura. He’s easy to work with, and she can see why Camila likes him so much.

“There are some lyrics that could be streamlined, but I don’t know if that’s really what you’re going for. And I’m sure you know what you want to do with instrumentation and production, but if you’d like, I can send you some more developed thoughts in a few days,” he offers.

Lauren nods, running her hand through her hair. “Yeah, that’d be great.”

“Cool.” Shawn tents his fingers. He doesn’t spin his chair around completely, but he does move from side to side. “You and Camila work so differently.”

“Do we?”

“Yeah. I mean, you both clearly want to express something lyrically. There’s honesty, but the way you go about it is like, polar opposite.”

Lauren frowns. “Okay.”

“Right.” Lauren feels prickly all over. She knows Shawn would understand Camila’s creative instincts and rhythms more than she would, but they’ve only had this one conversation, and it’s barely been an hour. She makes an effort to smile. “That’s really interesting.”

“I guess just because you started in the same place, I thought the steps you take would flow the same way. But it’s clear your schooling sunk in. Camila still works more like a novice.” The corner of his mouth pulls up, ribbing and fondness in his voice.

“How do you work?” Lauren asks.

“It’s different every time. I haven’t shaken all my youthful instincts, but I’m always trying something new. Camila could probably tell you how annoying I am firsthand.”

“I’ll have to ask her.”

Shawn sighs, slouches and searches Lauren’s face. “Do you have a problem with me?”

“What?” Lauren blinks and sits up straighter. “No?”

“Sorry.” He shakes his head. “I’m probably projecting.”

“Why? Do you have a problem with me?”

Lauren hasn’t thought much about Shawn lately. Maybe in 2015 there were sparks of jealousy whenever Camila would gush about him and their song, or when interviewers would ask about their relationship as though they were secretly in love. But she and Camila were good back then. Camila having Shawn opened her up to Lauren in a way Lauren still doesn’t understand. It had been so nice that she hadn’t trusted it.

“No, no.” Shawn clears his throat and rubs at his temples. “I actually don’t.”
“That’s good.”

“I think it’s probably a testament to how much we both liked Camila back then that we never hit it off before. And it’s probably a testament to how much you like her now that you even called me.” Shawn looks at Lauren with respect, and his voice never loses that frank and sincere timbre. “I had the biggest crush on her, but she was so into you.”

“Oh.” Lauren feels her shoulders tense.

“It was a lifetime ago. I realized it was never going to happen, even after you broke her heart.”

“I didn’t--” Lauren interrupts.

“I’m not upset about it. It’s okay. She was the first person I told when I started seeing Henry, and she cried so many happy tears with me. Then, when it went to hell, she cried sad tears with me.”

Lauren doesn’t really know what Shawn’s talking about; she and Camila don’t spend a lot of time discussing him. But he’s staring at her, mouth thin and eyes focused, and Lauren gets the impression that he really wants her to like him, but it’s mixed with the feeling of a parent asking his daughter’s date about intentions. “I don’t really--”

“I’ve been with Camila through it all, Lauren. She probably tells me more than anybody. It’s part of her songwriting, I think.” He pauses, eyes so intent that Lauren looks down. “And all her best love songs are about you.”

She swallows.

“I get it. I want her to be happy. She seems genuinely happy now. She’s one of the strongest people I know, and I know she could survive you again. But I don’t want her to have to.”

Lauren feels her face flush. She wipes her hands on her jeans. “I don’t want her to have to, either.”

“Okay. Good.” Shawn presses his lips together, and then he nods, hint of a smile poking through.

“Sorry if I was a bitch before,” Lauren says before clearing her throat. “I was wary of the competition.”

Shawn blinks, and she can see a flash of emotions flicker across his face, but she doesn’t know him nearly well enough to process them before he looks at her with soft amusement. “You never had any competition.”

Lauren knows that’s not true. Camila spent plenty of time talking to her about boys, talking to her about Shawn, even, though he was always more flimsy than the others, a nice thought more than something she felt. A nice boy who was there for her, but with no real intent.

Shawn clearly believes it, though, and Lauren feels the statement bloom between her ribs, searching for a place to take root.

Lauren invites Camila to an album release party she’s obligated to attend for work. Camila looks at her, mouth twisted to the side. “Is it okay if I don’t want to go?”

“Yeah,” Lauren says, reaching across her kitchen table to spear a piece of cantaloupe sitting on the
Lauren laughs. “Yeah, a little bit. But there’s an open bar.”

She’d like to go with Camila, but she’s not surprised Camila would rather not. Camila never loved partying all that much to begin with, and if she’s not in the mood, she’s not really a good time. Lauren finds it comforting that Camila would decline the offer, because even if it’s a small thing, there was a time when Camila would have said, ‘Yes,’ just because Lauren asked.

There was something about that eagerness that made Lauren’s skin crawl. Too much pressure, and too much give.

This is better.

Lauren networks and eats too many canapes before heading to the afterparty at the club down the street. She swallows too many shots and lets the dancefloor invite her in. The lights flash and blind; the bass-filled remixes fill the space and pound behind her eyes. The bodies all press together, knocking into each other, hips and elbows and feet. She feels light, carefree and happy. She’s too warm, but she doesn’t mind.

She ends up wasted and leaves with a couple of coworkers.

Her mind sloshes and balance is hard to come by, but Lauren finds humor in everything Zach and Ashley are saying as she fumbles to sit on the curb. She slips off her heels and waits for the Uber.

“I love you, guys,” she slurs. “Haven’t gone out in too long.”

“It shows,” Ashley says.

Lauren laughs at that, too.

Zach helps her into the car, and Lauren leans her head against the window. The air blasts, and she shivers, rubbing at her arms. She feels a little dizzy and closes her eyes, listening to the radio while Ashley and Zach discuss how much fun the night was and how Ricky definitely did a line or two in the bathroom.

She must fall asleep, because she doesn’t remember anything, but her head is on Zach’s shoulder, and he’s shaking her awake. “Hey, Laur, do you like, know the code or something? You need to get us in?”

“Get in where?” She blinks, and her eyes can’t focus, her brain too mushy and too tired.

“Wherever the fuck your last ride took you.”

Right. Lauren’s fingers weren’t working. And neither was her brain.

And now they’re outside Camila’s neighborhood.

Lauren tries to roll down the window, and Zach leans over to help.
“Hello!” she sings, sticking her head out and waving. “Oh, Mitch! Great! Hi. It’s me.”

The guard squints at her. “Hi.”

“I told the driver to go to Camila’s by accident,” she whisper-screams.

She thinks Mitch raises an eyebrow. “Do you want me to call her?”

“No, I’ll call her. Just let me in?”

“Of course, honey.”

“Thank you! You’ve always been my favorite!” She blows him a kiss, and she swears he laughs under his breath. “Your beard is great.”

Her phone is too bright, and it takes what feels like ages to find Camila’s number. When she does, it rings and rings and rings. It goes to voicemail. She’s about to apologize, explaining that she needs to go home and not to her girlfriend’s house, when her phone buzzes in her hand and she yelps.

“Camz! Hi, sorry! Can you let me in?”

“What? Lauren, it’s almost 3 AM,” Camila says, voice sleepy and hoarse.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t paying attention when I called the Uber.”

“Okay.” There’s a pause. She hears the rustling of sheets and Camila breathing. “Hold on. I’ll see you in a minute.”

She shoots Zach a thumbs up, still holding the phone to her ear even after Camila’s hung up.

She directs the driver to the correct house, and he pulls up the driveway. Zach helps her out of the car, saying: “I swear to god, you would have been fucked if he had dropped me off first.”

Zach’s barely helping her because her legs are almost completely stable, thank you very much. As they reach the yellow glow the porchlight casts, Camila opens the door, rubbing some sleep out of her eye. She’s in her pajama shorts and an old band t-shirt, hair a bird’s nests. She looks beautiful.

“Camila would’ve helped me. She’s in love with me,” Lauren whispers, like it’s a secret.

“Alright, Romeo.”

She rips her elbow out of his barely there grip, only stumbling a little, and Camila sends her the shadow of a smile. So, whatever. Take that, Zach.

“Hi, I’m Zach,” he introduces. “Sorry about the drunkard.”

“Only a little,” Lauren corrects.

“Camila.” Lauren half-sees them shake hands. Slightly dizzy from the walk, she leans against the wall and closes her eyes. “Thanks for bringing her home.”

“She would’ve made it by herself. I think she just likes the attention.”

“Rude,” Lauren huffs.

Camila helps her up the stairs and sits on the edge of the bathtub while Lauren pees, brushes her teeth and washes her face. She tries to stick her head under the faucet, but it makes her brain spin.
“I’ll get you some water,” Camila says before standing.

“I’m fine. Go back to bed. I just fell asleep in the car, but I’m awake now. I’ll get it.”

“I know.” Camila’s got this half-annoyed, half-amused look on her face, and Lauren likes her so much.

Camila lets Lauren wobble down the stairs and doesn’t even follow her. Lauren is satisfied with that. She has to grip the railing to make sure she doesn’t fall, but it’s not so bad. She gulps down a glass of warm water to help alleviate tomorrow’s hangover and refills the cup, bringing it back upstairs. A few drops slosh out and onto the carpet.

Camila sits on the edge of her bed now, some pajamas for Lauren to borrow in her lap. Lauren likes that they smell like the detergent Camila uses, and she likes that Camila moves a garbage bin to Lauren’s side of the bed in case she gets sick, and she likes that she falls asleep with Camila’s warm breath on the back of her neck, a nice antidote to how cold the car had been.

Lauren wakes up in Camila’s bed with one motherfucker of a headache.

She blinks, groans, and pushes some hair out of her eyes. The curtains are drawn, and there’s Tylenol sitting next to a glass of water on the nightstand. She downs it gratefully before pulling the sheets up around her shoulders and willing herself to fall back asleep.

It doesn’t work, so when the pounding in her head has dulled to a mostly ignorable pain, Lauren slowly pushes herself up and out of bed.

Camila sits at her kitchen table, reading through some paperwork as her glasses slip down her nose.

“Hey,” Lauren mumbles, heading for the coffeemaker.

“How’re you feeling?” Camila asks with a hint of delight that makes Lauren want to glare at her.

“Like I was run over by a truck.”

Camila hums. “Sounds about right.”

“Thanks for the Tylenol.”

“No problem. Are you hungry?”

“Probably, but I’m going to see how coffee settles and then get McDonalds or something.” Lauren shuffles to the fridge to pull out the cream she knows Camila only bought for her. It’s the same generic brand she keeps at her apartment, and it makes her chest tighten every time she thinks of Camila going to the store and picking it out.

She watches the last drops of coffee stream through the Keurig before adding cream and too much sugar. The first sip is delicious, sweet and warm, and Lauren almost sighs with it.

“So, you had a good night?” Camila asks after Lauren sits down, arching a brow.

“Yeah, it was fun.”
“Good.” Her smile is soft and lovely, her cableknit sweater swallows her, and the red of it is almost too rich for Lauren’s hungover eyes. Her fingers tap against the edge of the table. “I’m glad.”

“Sorry for waking you up,” Lauren says, a flash of embarrassment coursing through her.

She remembers a Camila who would eye her in annoyed judgment during rehearsals after she and Normani spent a night out. She remembers a Camila who held her hair as she threw up, rubbing circles into her back even though they hadn’t spoken about anything non-work related in weeks. She remembers taking something in the dingy bathroom of a club to forget Camila, and she remembers it working.

“It was mildly irritating,” Camila says, but there’s joy jumping underneath her skin.

Lauren rolls her eyes, and they ache with it, so she says: “It won’t happen again.”

“It’s okay.”

And even though Camila’s all nonchalance, Lauren feels the itch of the past. “Is it?”

“Yeah, I mean,” Camila pauses, running a hand through her hair and sighing. “Nothing happened, right?”

“Like what?”

Camila swallows and looks away. “Nothing bad happened? You weren’t trying to like, forget something, or feel something, or, I don’t know. Whatever.”

“No. I didn’t eat dinner, and I haven’t been out in a while. I was having a good time. I had one too many shots.” Lauren shrugs. “Nothing deep and dark and twisted.”

“Okay. That’s good.”

“You weren’t worried, were you?”

“No.” A beat. “You were cute.”

Lauren takes another sip of coffee to ground herself, as though the caffeine will kick in the minute it slides down her throat. “Cute?”

“When you’re drunk, your cheeks flush and your forehead wrinkles in concentration. And I like taking care of you.”

“You don’t have to.” Lauren bristles. She doesn’t like the idea of imposing or of being a burden. She doesn’t like the idea of Camila having something to hang over her head later. She wants to know, instinctively, that Camila won’t. She’s almost there, but not close enough.

“I know that,” Camila answers, irritation in the twist of her mouth and the hitch of her shoulders.

“Okay.” Lauren clears her throat. “Anyway, sorry.”

Camila sighs, all exasperation and annoyance, loud enough that it pulses in Lauren’s head. “Stop apologizing, Lauren. I like when you take care of me. I like taking care of you. I want to. That’s part of what a relationship is.”

“I was fine,” Lauren snaps.
“I know. I’ve seen you fucked up, so I know you were fine.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” Camila whispers, slouching in her chair.

Lauren’s throat is dry. “Do you think I’m an out of control trainwreck?”

“No.” Camila’s eyes are wide and dark and hurt. “That’s not what I meant.”

Lauren runs her tongue over her teeth. She exhales. She knows that. “I’m working on it, Camz.”

Camila’s brow furrows, and she frowns. “On what?”

“I don’t know.” Lauren shakes her head. Her stomach churns, her brain feels like it’s bleeding, and her mouth is too dry. “I’m hungover, and you’re being sweet, and I keep thinking about all the times when I was hungover and you weren’t.”

“Oh, okay.”

“It’s not your fault,” Lauren clarifies.

Camila nods. “I wasn’t judging you, you know that, right?”

“Okay.”

“I used to. Sometimes.” Camila’s presses her lips into a thin line, and she looks down. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. You weren’t the only one.”

“It really was annoying to be woken up an hour after I fell asleep. But you were cute, too,” Camila adds, catching Lauren’s eye again. “I wasn’t lying.”

“I know.” Lauren tries to smile. “It was always easier for me to be the one taking care of you than the other way around.”

“I figured that out, too.”

“It was a defense mechanism,” Lauren offers. “The more we were talking about you and your feelings and problems, the less we were talking about mine. The further we were from how I felt about you.”

“I’m glad your app filled in the wrong address.” Camila chews on her bottom lip. She looks at Lauren, and says: “I like sleeping next to you.”

It’s plain, and it doesn’t sound like a secret or a confession. There’s something about it that hurts, but in a good way, like the soreness of muscles when they’re breaking down from exercise only to be built back up stronger.

“Me too.”

“Good.” Camila’s mouth twitches with a smile. “I’ll give you a key. For next time.”

Lauren doesn’t protest.
“You seem happy,” Normani says.

Lauren blinks, smile dancing around her mouth and blush dusting her cheeks. “Yeah, I guess I am.”

“That’s good. It’s been a long time since you were happy.”

There were fleeting moments and weeks where Lauren would let her hair down, lay out at the beach, and feel the sun warm her skin. She felt happy scribbling her own lyrics into a notebook, mastering a new program at Berklee, and slurping down Jell-o shots on Shravya’s birthday.

Her life wasn’t devoid of joy or respite, but Lauren hadn’t realized how exhausted she always was until suddenly she wasn’t. She and the girls were shuttled to interviews, the studio and shows, always working or traveling with brief breaks that were almost enough. Doing it by herself was exciting for a few months, and then it was even worse than before. It was easy enough to chalk it up to lack of sleep and lack of freedom.

In college, it was easy enough to chalk it up to lack of sleep, hard work, and partying on the weekends.

Hindsight is 20/20, and even though Lauren sleeps more now, she knows, inherently, it’s not the only reason she has more energy at work. She still feels sad, angry, scared and exhausted, but she isn’t sad, angry, scared or exhausted. Those aren’t her bones anymore; they’re just a few of the colors shading her in.

“I guess so,” Lauren agrees.

“I’m happy for you, Lo. I really am.” Normani smiles, eyes soft, but there’s uncertainty in the crease of her forehead.

“Thanks.” Lauren tucks her hair behind her ear, but she just cut it, so a few strands refuse to stay.

“You could forgive Camila, too, you know. It did wonders for my skin.”

Normani laughs, rolling her eyes. “I forgave her before you did, and I’m really not looking to ride the rollercoaster that lead you two to this place. Or for Camila to fuck me over before fucking me.”

“Ew,” Lauren grimaces. “You and Camila would be hot, but I don’t want to think about it.”

“Glad we agree.”

“But, like, you forgave her?” Lauren asks.

“I did. I don’t have a problem with Camila. I just don’t need her in my life.”

“How is that going to work?”

Normani sighs. “I’m not sure.”

“We’ll just not talk about her.” Lauren shrugs. Compartmentalizing her life used to be second nature.

“No. We always talk about the person you’re dating.”

“How can I talk to you about Camila while you don’t have her in your life?”

Normani’s eyebrows wrinkle together. “I don’t know. It was easier to have forgiven her and
forgotten her before you forgave her and did the opposite.”

“I don’t want this to affect us,” Lauren says.

The thought of Normani drifting away to avoid Camila makes Lauren’s shoulders tense. Compartmentalizing she can do, but losing either one of them right now is unfathomable and makes the solidness of her happiness feel almost precarious.

Normani looks at her with certainty. “It won’t. I promise. If I really forgave her, I can hear about her. I can see her. It shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Okay, good.” Lauren almost moves on, but then: “And if you end up trying to pretend you don’t wanna murder her with your eyes when you actually would if you could?”

“I know your mom apologized for that,” Normani giggles. “Like, a lot.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Lauren rolls her eyes. “The gift basket was nice.”

“And if that happens, then I guess I need to work on that forgiveness thing some more. I love you, Lauren. I have your back, and that’s not going to change.”

“Thank, Mani. I love you, too.”

“Can we find a man to love me, now? I was the hottest girl in Fifth Harmony. How am I the only single one?”

“Men are fucking stupid,” Lauren agrees. “I would totally have dated you.”

“I know.” Normani flips her hair over her shoulder, smug and satisfied smirk curling around her mouth.

Lauren’s underneath Camila, her hips bracketing Lauren’s, one hand rucking up her shirt and splayed over her stomach, the other bent by her head. Her mouth is hot and soft, and Lauren feels her everywhere, a pleasant buzz sparking against her skin.

Camila spent last week in New York recording for her album. She Facetimed late at night, eyes drooping with sleepiness, the wisp of a smile she was too tired to let out. Lauren had missed her, and Camila had told Lauren every night that she missed her, too, voice hoarse from overuse. It settled snugly in Lauren’s chest, and she likes her so much it’s spilling over.

Camila works her mouth against Lauren’s neck, scraping her teeth gently over Lauren’s pulse. Lauren squirms underneath her, hands gripping tighter around her waist.

“You’re so hot,” Camila breathes, one last press of her lips against Lauren’s skin before she pushes herself up, allowing her left hand to join the right pressing against Lauren’s stomach. “I missed you.”

“I can tell,” Lauren laughs, low and languid. She runs a hand up Camila’s side just to feel more of her skin.

“I’m done recording vocals. The rest of the production stuff I have to do is here.”

Lauren smiles when Camila’s fingers bump against the edge of her bra. “I know.”
“Three months without a single plane to catch,” Camila says, her eyes blown but bright.

“You won’t even have a chance to miss me.”

Camila leans down to kiss her and imprint her grin onto Lauren’s mouth. “Sounds nice.”

Lauren groans when Camila sits back again.

“I’m so excited. The last song I worked on might just be me and a piano.”

“That’s cool,” Lauren says, thumb circling Camila’s hipbone.

“Yeah,” Camila breathes. “I hope they don’t add a bunch of unnecessary shit to it.”

“Me too.” Camila’s eyes dance with mirth, and her fingers dance along Lauren’s ribs to the same rhythm. “Are you just going to stare at me all day?” Lauren asks.

“Maybe,” Camila laughs, shifting to press her knees into Lauren’s sides. She pulls her hands out from underneath Lauren’s shirt, and Lauren almost protests, but then one is tangling in her hair, cradling her head, and Camila is kissing her with purpose, open-mouthed and heavy. She rolls her hips into Lauren’s, and Lauren’s hands drop to her ass, pulling her closer. She needs to feel the weight of Camila’s body against hers the same way she feels the weight of Camila’s laugh when she tells a bad joke and can’t help herself, the weight of Camila’s gaze when they’re watching television and Lauren can feel Camila watching her reaction more than the show, the weight of Camila’s feelings when they’re out and she brushes her knuckles against Lauren’s.

Camila’s tongue slips into her mouth, wet and warm, and she tastes how she always does, a little sweet and so lovely. Lauren feels it tingling in her toes. She feels Camila everywhere, wants to feel her everywhere, burning up her skin and setting fire to her heart. Her fingers curl around the back of Camila’s neck, trying to find some control, something to keep her from floating away, but Camila bites at her bottom lip, scratches her nails down her stomach, grinds against her, and Lauren moans, more air than sound.

“I wrote a song about you,” Camila murmurs against her mouth. She pulls back enough so Lauren can see how dark and blown her eyes are and the flush down to her collarbones.

“Another one?” Lauren jokes.

“Yeah,” Camila says, honest and breathless, hand snaking down to run along Lauren’s thigh. “There’s no mistaking it for anything else.”

“Okay.”

She presses a chaste kiss to Lauren’s jaw. “Your turn.”

Camila has started doing this thing where she tells Lauren something she’s afraid to say, or was afraid to say, and then Lauren responds with a secret of her own. Camila had confessed that she was the one who accidentally got melted chocolate on Lauren’s t-shirt, but she let Lauren blame Dinah because she didn’t want Lauren to be upset with her. Another time, it was that a boy Lauren liked asked her if Lauren ever said anything about him, and Camila lied, “No, not really.” Once, when Lauren was touching her, she whispered into Lauren’s neck that she had been so frustrated and heartbroken seeing Lauren every day during that last tour, that at the end of an offday, she slept with a girl and imagined her hands were Lauren’s the whole time.

Camila bites at her own bottom lip, gaze darting between Lauren’s mouth and eyes. She swipes her
“I love you,” Lauren says.

She can feel Camila’s entire body still above her, her lip slips out from between her teeth, and her eyes look impossibly dilated.

Lauren swallows around the lump in her throat, and her heart races so hard she swears she can feel it beating against her breast. She inhales and feels like she’s gasping for air. Camila is unblinking, just for a moment, but it stretches beyond the physics of time.

And then she smiles.

It’s the best thing Lauren has ever seen.

“I love you, too,” Camila says, sounding like the swell of music during the climax of Lauren’s favorite song.

“Yeah?” Lauren asks, and even though she knows, she can hear the awe in her own voice. It’s hard sometimes, to process that Camila loves her now, still, even after everything. Camila loves her, and she lets herself have it.

“Yeah.” Camila nods. “So much.”

“Me too,” Lauren says. She brushes her hands up and down Camila’s thighs.

Camila’s hair, wavy and mussed, tumbles against her shoulders, her eyes are the darkest and brightest Lauren’s ever seen them, and everything about her is beautiful. For the first time, being in love with Camila isn’t terrifying, and Camila being in love with her isn’t tainted by lingering doubt.

Lauren feels light but grounded, steady. A weight lifting and making her stronger. She giggles at nothing, and Camila laughs too, wispy and happy. Lauren works her fingertips under the hem of Camila’s shorts, and Camila leans down to kiss her. “Thank you,” she says.

“You’re welcome,” Lauren answers.

Camila huffs, eyes as fond as ever.

Lauren cradles Camila’s cheek in her palm and runs her thumb along her cheekbone. She’s wonderful, and this feeling is wonderful, uninhibited and warm, abundant and soft. It melts around them. “I love you.”

Camila gently knocks her nose against Lauren’s. “Yeah. You do.”

Camila peppers kisses along Lauren’s jaw, painting hearts on the apples of her cheeks and licking at the dip of Lauren’s collarbones. She sings affection against her belly button, drips her love against Lauren’s skin like honey, and Lauren feels it thick in the air. Instead of making it harder to breathe, it’s the only thing she wants to inhale; the love stripes away everything else until it’s the only thing that exists.

Lauren loves her, and loves her, and loves her.
Camila uses her elbow to knock on Lauren’s door, her purse slouching in the crook. Her car keys dangle precariously off her finger, and the plastic bags holding the Chinese she picked up twist around her hand, threatening to cut off her circulation. She has a bottle of wine in her other hand and a folder tucked underneath her armpit.

She’s really proud of herself for not dropping anything.

Lauren swings her door open. “Hello.”

“Hey, Laur,” Camila answers, voice high and strained.

Lauren steps aside, opening the door further. “Need some help?”

“I think I might drop everything if you try.” Camila rushes into the apartment and lets all her bags and belongings slip onto the kitchen table, carefully trying to ensure that the oyster pails don’t tip sideways.

“You did it,” Lauren says when Camila steps back, hands on her hips as she eyes her handiwork.

“I really did.” Camila wipes at her brow, letting out an affected sigh. “I’m truly amazing.”

“It would have been more amazing if you’d gotten here an hour ago before I made myself a sandwich.”

“You didn’t.”

“I did.” Lauren wrinkles her nose. “Camz, it’s 10:30.”

Camila pouts. “I’m sorry! I was at the studio and lost track of time.”

“It’s okay,” Lauren says, grabbing two wine glasses off the counter.

“At least have a spring roll.” Camila unknots the plastic bag holding the containers of food. “I risked my life bringing them up three flights of stairs.”

“Well, if you risked your life,” Lauren deadpans. She doesn’t roll her eyes, but Camila can hear it in her voice regardless. Lauren sets the glasses on the kitchen table before rifling through her silverware drawer and pulling out a corkscrew and a fork. “How was the studio?”

“Good.” Camila hums, opening up each oyster pail and bending the cardboard back. She takes the fork Lauren offers her and sticks it into the lo mein. “I feel like the album is really starting to take shape, you know? Like, I can actually hear the finished product in my head right now.”

Lauren uncorks the wine, a stupid and amused smile on her face. “You sure you’re not just losing your mind?”

“You’re so annoying.”

“I try.” Lauren shrugs, pouring the merlot.
“You succeed,” Camila corrects.

She sits in Lauren’s small kitchen, eating lo mein directly out of the carton, taking sips of merlot, and listening as Lauren recounts her day: the gross joke Jeremiah told, cleaning up a mix of a song she’s working on, and the frustrating conversation she had with an artist’s A&R representative.

“They’re jumping on current radio trends, while trying to predict the next ones, and it’s so stupid.” Lauren shakes her head. Camila hands her a spring roll. “It’s like, possible to do both, right? Theoretically. But it doesn’t make sense with the demo they gave us, and the band hates it. Because it’s their demo, and that’s the sound they want. Not some rhythmic, thumping bass line trying to double as something slinky and smooth.” She bites the roll in half.

“That sucks,” Camila says.

“Yeah,” Lauren answers around shredded carrot and minced pork. Camila thinks it says a lot that she’s more endeared than grossed out. “I don’t even know what’s next on my docket. They keep giving me the stuff everyone with more seniority -- so like, almost everyone -- doesn’t want to do.” Camila eyes the folder she’s brought from the studio. “Are you looking to bring any work in?”

“I don’t know?” Lauren swirls the wine in her glass. “Do you know somebody who’s looking?”

“Me.”

“Pass.”

“What, why?” Camila asks. She loved working with Lauren last time. It was exhausting and invigorating, and they produced a song she really loves. She already floated the idea by Roger, and he seemed to think the label would agree to it. This time, she’s already done the hard work of being stared at like she’s trying to sink her own career. The fact that she’s coming out would only add hype, sales and streams to another collaboration. People would want to hear the song even more than they did last time.

Camila’s actually kind of surprised Frank didn’t bring it up during all those mind-numbing meetings, but it probably has to do with the fact that there would be even more details to work out that he didn’t have the patience to deal with.

Lauren really seems to bother her label.

Camila gets that. Lauren was closed off when they hammered everything out with her team, and she talks back too much. Camila knows she’ll never really be like that. She’ll never be that stupid or transparent or brave. She knows in this industry you don’t get freedom by being difficult.

She earned the room she has to create, and she earned the ability to come out.

Camila knows those are things she shouldn’t have to earn at all, but she plays the game the best way she knows how. It’s all she can do.

“Because,” Lauren sighs. She pops the last bite of spring roll into her mouth, and Camila raises an eyebrow. “I don’t want our work to be overshadowed by our relationship.”

Camila hums. “That’s fair, but like. It would be really fun, you know?”

“Yeah, it would be.” Lauren nods and crosses her arms over her chest. “Except haven’t you ever heard not to mix business with pleasure?”
“I’ve literally never done that in my life.”

“Always a first time for everything.”

Camila finishes her wine. She studies the arch of Lauren’s eyebrow, the casual way she slouches in her chair, and the brush of her hair across the top of her shoulder. Camila can tell she’s made up her mind. Whatever: “But, I mean, music is so personal. And I love that it’s something we connect over. It’s kind of a waste not to collaborate again just because fans might not listen to it the way you want.”

“Camila,” Lauren says, exasperation curling around her name. “I get that, but I don’t think it’s a good idea right now.”

“Right now or ever?”

“I don’t know. It’s just too much.” Lauren presses her mouth into a thin line. She looks tired even though she said she took a nap after work. “I’m not ready for all of it. I’m doing the best I can.”

“Okay.” Camila runs her tongue over her teeth, kicking at Lauren’s shin underneath the table because her arms are still crossed and Camila can’t get to her hand. “But can you just try to be open to it? I know not right now. I get it, Lauren. But don’t say no because of what other people might think. Say no because you really don’t want to do it.”

Lauren nods. “Yeah, okay. I guess you’re right.”

“I am.” Camila smiles before slurping a noodle into her mouth. “You should admit that more often.”

There’s a moment where Lauren almost rolls her eyes, Camila can see it, but then there’s the ghost of something familiar flickering across her face. Lauren chews on her cheek, and then: “If I decide it’s never a good idea?”

Camila swallows down the immediate urge to assuage her and say anything to smooth out the wrinkle across her forehead. She studies the pattern of fading freckles scattered across Lauren’s nose. She thinks about why she wants this. She loves working with Lauren, but something tickles at the base of her skull.

“Maybe it’s a little bit about other people for me, too,” Camila admits. It feels terrible to say aloud. “Like, you didn’t want them to see anything between us, and I just want to have another thing to prove that there was -- there is.”

“I don’t want to be some object you show off,” Lauren says, too harsh.

Camila winces. “Not like that. Back then--” She clears her throat. “I kept thinking there could be something there that wasn’t. I thought I made stuff up about you actually liking me. So, it’s just. A song is a permanent thing I can go back to. Like my journal. Concrete evidence of the two of us together. Of how you feel about me.”

“Everyone is going to know I’m your girlfriend, Camila.”

“Yeah.” Camila twirls her fork around.

“Is that not enough?”

She bites her lip, letting the idea of it sit inside her chest, warm and glowing. “Yeah. It just doesn’t feel real yet, like something that’ll actually happen.”
“But it is,” Lauren says. Her eyes focus on Camila, piercing and steady.

“It’s going to happen,” Camila concurs. “And you’re not thrilled about that, either.”

Lauren runs a hand through her hair and sighs. “No, not really.”

“I don’t understand how you can love me and not want anyone to know.” There’s a lump in her throat, and she’s afraid blinking will summon tears.

“I value our privacy,” Lauren says, voice too hard for the simplicity Camila can tell she aims for.

“I understand that.” Camila wants privacy, too. She doesn’t want to be followed around by cameras or asked invasive questions. She doesn’t want to make their relationship public when she comes out only to act like it never happened in the following months, either. “But I don’t want to have to censor myself for the sake of having it.”

Lauren chews on her bottom lip before sitting up and sipping her wine. The glass clinks when she sets it back onto the table. “Everyone who’s important to us knows.”

“My fans are important to me.”

“I know they are,” Lauren says. Her mouth tilts down, and she rubs at her eyebrow.

“I know that agreeing to do this with me was hard for you. It’s a big deal.” She reaches across the table, palm open. Lauren takes her hand. “Thank you for doing it. It means the world to me.”

Camila exhales.

“I wish it was enough. But it hurts that you don’t want to do it. It makes me feel like you don’t think I’m good enough for you or something.”

“Camila,” Lauren whispers, voice breaking. She squeezes Camila’s hand, and Camila wipes underneath her eyes. “That’s not it. God, it’s not even about you.”

“How? You’ve never cared about anyone knowing about your other relationships existing. The only thing different is me.”

“I’m so lucky to have you, and I’m so grateful that you’re being so patient.” Lauren blinks and scoots her chair around the table. The scrape of wood against tile makes Camila want to flinch. “I just hate the impending stream of I knew it’s and I told you’s. It reminds me of feeling like my life wasn’t my own. Like our relationship wasn’t really ours.”

“It wasn’t,” Camila says. “Not really. Not back then.”

“Yeah, but it is now. And I love you so much.”

“I love you, too.” Camila swipes her thumb against Lauren’s hand. Desperation clouds the corners of Lauren’s eyes. “It doesn’t really feel like it’s going to happen to me, either. When it does, I’m probably going to hate it.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?” Camila squeezes Lauren’s hand to fight the urge to pull away.

“No.” Lauren exhales, shaky and loud. “But I promise I’m going to get over it.”
“How do you know?”

“How about this: my dad makes fun of me for bringing you up out of nowhere every time we talk, and because Dinah’s teasing is only a little bit annoying.”

“It’s really annoying,” Camila corrects. “But it’s really nice, too.”

“Yeah.” Camila watches Lauren’s gaze linger on their intertwined hands. “I’m not ashamed of you, Camz. It’s just, people will know I liked you while we were in Fifth Harmony, and I wanted them so desperately not to know that. I’m embarrassed that I wasn’t able to hide it, and I’m embarrassed that I hated myself for it. I hate that I cared, and that part of me still cares. But once they know, there’ll be nothing left to be embarrassed about. I’m not ashamed of you. I admire you. You’re brave. You’re wonderful. I’m so proud of you.”

Camila loves her. She can’t help it, but even if she could, she would still choose to love her. “Being scared but doing it anyway is braver than not being scared at all.”

A shadow of a smile smooths across Lauren’s mouth. “I know so many people are going to love themselves a little bit more when you come out. And I’m going to love you a little more, too. I’m probably going to love myself a little more, and I’m going to hold your hand in the grocery store without thinking twice.”

Lauren’s eyes are honest and vulnerable, and Camila believes her.

Lauren does a small gig in LA.

The venue holds maybe 500 people, and the tickets sell out in three days. Lauren insists it’s because a McDonald’s employee took a selfie with them when they went through the drive-thru at two in the morning. Camila thinks it’s because Lauren is magnetic and people love her and her new song.

Lauren rolls her eyes and tells her to stop conflating her own feelings with the general population’s.

The entire week before, Lauren assures Camila that the concert, “if you can even call it that,” is really not something that requires girlfriend attendance.

Camila scoffs. “Of course I’ll be there.”

And she is, she’s just late.

She was stuck in a meeting finalizing her album’s tracklist and title, and then LA traffic made matters worse. It turns out okay, though, because when she sneaks in, sunglasses on like an asshole, everyone is focused on Lauren up on the small stage, bathed in light, voice low and clear. Camila can sense a few people around her staring while trying to pretend they’re not.

She exhales, pushing her sunglasses up and onto her head so she can focus on Lauren without a tinted filter. Lauren looks ethereal underneath the spotlight, and Camila feels the music beating in her chest and fusing with her heart. She watches Lauren punctuate the beat with her hands, and she hears the crowd murmuring along like they almost know the words -- but not quite.

Camila knows Lauren can’t see her, but when she looks toward where Camila stands, bumping shoulders with the girl next to her, Camila bites at her lip, lifting herself onto her toes and resisting the urge to wave.
“This one’s for a girl,” Lauren says.

Camila swallows.

Lauren hums. She allows the words to seep from her mouth like molasses, and it takes a moment for Camila to realize it’s a song Lauren must have heard playing around her house, slotted at the end of Camila’s album preparation playlist. She wonders if it reminds Lauren of the same memories it summons from the recesses of Camila’s heart: the two of them cuddled together in one of their bunks that first tour, sharing headphones, the rush of adrenaline from performing still lingering before the music faded to something slower, before their eyes drooped and one of them reluctantly clambered into their own bed. Both of them laughing about anything -- a stupid pun, a cowlick Ally couldn’t stick all the way down, a typo Camila had made in a text -- as they sat with their shoulders pressed together in the back of a van heading from one radio station to the next. Watching Hayley Williams belting from the side of the Jingle Ball stage, jumping up at down, smacking their hands together before holding on tightly and pretending they weren’t singing to each other.

Camila murmurs along under her breath, can’t quite wrap her mouth around the new tempo when her heart is seeping out of her chest, down her spine, and into her toes, a liquid warmth. She blinks back the tears welling without her permission. Her entire heart vibrates with something that feels so public and open and proud: “And after all this time, I’m still into you.”

Camila starts making her way toward the dressing room before Lauren’s even off stage. It takes longer than she’d like because she keeps getting stopped by fans who tell her they love her and grab her hands. Their eyes flit around her face like they’re afraid to look into hers for too long. She takes a lot of pictures, and she knows her team will like it. They’ll say that fans posting the story online adds to the authenticity, and Camila will have to swallow around an eye roll because it is authentic.

She obliges each person, but her body is thrumming with the rasp of Lauren’s voice, the need to tell her how captivating she was, and the desire to touch her. Camila fidgets and skirts away too quickly, hoping none of the fans notice and, if they do, they’re forgiving.

When Camila finds Lauren in a tiny dressing room that barely contains enough space for a ragged and worn sofa, Lauren smiles, the grin splitting her face. Camila wants to kiss her, but there’s a smattering of people crowding the room. Normani sits on the sofa’s arm, and Camila feels her posture correct itself.

“Hey,” she says quietly, trying not to disrupt the chatter.

Lauren nods her over, raising the beer dangling between her fingers.

“Excuse me,” Camila says, nudging her way past the people forming a semicircle around the sofa. “Oh, hey Zach.”

“Hey. Nice to see you again.”

“Yeah, you too.” Camila feels awkward and shoots him a forced smile before taking another step to reach Lauren.

“You didn’t have to come,” Lauren says, wrapping her hand around Camila’s waist, pulling her close, and pressing a kiss to her temple.
Camila rolls her eyes. “Yeah, okay, and then you’d be secretly upset for a week.”

“Would not.” She squeezes Camila’s hip. “But I’m glad you came.”

“You were amazing.”

“Thanks, Camz,” Lauren says, soft and gooey.

Camila melts in return. “You’re welcome.”

Lauren introduces Camila to everyone crammed into the small space. Camila loves hearing stories about Jeremiah, especially because he wasn’t called to work on her newest record. She doesn’t miss him infringing on her sound, but she does kind of miss his ribbing her when she’s in the booth, vocals just left of where they need to be. Lauren’s coworkers make fun of label representatives and complain about obnoxious artists. Camila only worries a little about how some of her label-assigned collaborators might talk about her when she isn’t around.

She never becomes engrossed enough in the conversation to forget about Normani sitting on the sofa, especially as people start filtering out, heading to the bar to get a drink, or parting with a quick hug. Normani’s eyes keep drifting to her, seemingly at ease as she talks to Lauren’s friends, relaxed and cool.

When Lauren steps away to show Ashley something related to the venue’s sound mixing, she leaves Camila shifting on the balls of her feet, glancing at Normani and Lauren’s co-worker, Amanda. Camila can tell Lauren respects Amanda by the way she speaks of her.

Amanda is the one who beckons her over with a smile. “So, what’d you think of the show?”

“It was good,” Camila offers, closing the space between where she stands and the sofa. She runs her right hand up and down her left arm, trying not to close herself off too much. “Hi, Normani.”

“Hey,” Normani says.

Amanda blinks, and Camila thinks she can sense how uncomfortable Camila feels.

It’s not that Camila hasn’t spoken to Normani since she left the band. She has. She’s run in to her at events, and they’ve made pleasant small talk for the sake of appearances and the people around them. But instead of getting easier, it’s gotten harder over the years. The repetition of “How are you?” “Good, how are you?” growing stale and dry before turning to dust in Camila’s mouth.

Normani is nice and pleasant, but Camila is not convinced Normani doesn’t secretly hate her. A relic of when they were first put in a group together and a reminder of the arguments pebbling their friendship before Camila chose to leave.

“Lauren really did a great job with the acoustics,” Amanda says.

“Yeah, she sounded great.”

Amanda discusses the sound quality of the show and Lauren’s vocals, edging near constructive criticism before pulling back. Her eyes linger on Camila when she mentions how sultry the “Still Into You” cover was, and Camila feels a flush she hopes doesn’t show. Amanda is nice, carrying herself with confidence and humor, and Camila can understand why Lauren admires her.

Until she excuses herself to say goodnight to Lauren and head home.
Camila avoids making eye contact with Normani.

“So,” she trails off, wringing her hands.

“Camila,” Normani sighs. “Can we just get this over with?”

“What?” Camila asks, looking past Normani at the crooked picture hanging on the wall.

“Lauren is my friend, and we’re going to have to see each other. So we might as well just stop all this.”

Camila’s hands are damp, and her stomach rolls. “Okay.”

“You’re not going to do anything stupid, are you?”

“No?”

Normani’s eyes are narrow and dark. She’s as beautiful as she’s ever been, and Camila can see the shape of the girl she used to love somewhere, but she has no idea how to chisel her out. She doesn’t think she has the energy.

“Lauren seems to think you’ve changed,” Normani says, and Camila can hear the lack of belief in her tone. “I can be cool with you, but I swear if you pull the same stuff you used to…”

“I didn’t ‘pull any stuff,’” Camila repeats back, hint of mocking. “I’m not going to do anything.”

“I’m not trying to be rude. I was just … there. I saw the flip switch when you decided you mattered more than the rest of us.”

“That’s not what happened.” Camila tugs at the hem of her shirt. “I just wanted to make music. I didn’t want to do what they told me to do anymore. They said jump, and we were expected to ask how high.”

“And now you can do whatever you want?” Normani raises an eyebrow.

“It’s complicated,” Camila groans.

“Whatever. This isn’t about that. There was so much going on back then, and it doesn’t matter anymore.”

“I wasn’t trying to hurt you,” Camila says.

“I know.” Normani nods and pinches the bridge of her nose. “I knew you weren’t happy. I just think you went about fixing it in the shittiest way possible.”

Camila understands. She wasn’t as forthcoming with how she felt as she should have been. But she didn’t even know how she was feeling. Between the exhaustion of touring, the growing pile of weeds twisting in her brain, and navigating the social intricacies of the group -- exponentially more complicated when she couldn’t tell where she stood with Lauren -- Camila didn’t know how to articulate the darkness that descended over everything.

At the time, leaving felt like survival.

She knows that it looked different to Normani and the other girls. It probably looked like ramming the ship into an iceberg and escaping on the only lifeboat.
“Yeah. Sorry about that.”

“Thank you.” Normani swallows. “I’m honestly not interested in rehashing everything. Like I said, it doesn’t matter.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Camila agrees. She and Normani aren’t looking to sort through their history, correct mistakes they made, and become best friends who share secrets and call each other when something monumental happens. She knows the issue now is Lauren. She’s the reason they’re having this conversation and not faking amiability.

“I’m not going to hurt her,” Camila says. “I love her.”

“I know you do.” Normani’s tone is kinder than Camila expects. Which she thinks is unfair. Her expectation of Normani a projection of the memories Camila has from those last days in the band, when Normani wouldn’t listen and Camila wouldn’t speak. “But that doesn’t really change anything.”

“I don’t have a simple answer for you.”

“That’s because there isn’t one.”

“Do the past few months not mean anything?” Camila asks.

Normani nods. Her eyes soften in a way Camila remembers, but there’s a new distance there that makes something dusty inside her heart ache. It’s a pain she’s learned to live with, a dull and nice kind of sadness she remembers sometimes, a snag in the tapestry of her life she can run her fingers over, still soft and warm. “Yeah. Keep it up. She doesn’t talk about you so much when she’s happy with you.”

Camila frowns.

Normani adds: “To me. We’re working on it.”

Camila’s mouth twitches with the urge to smile, and she sticks her hand out between them. “Truce?”

“Truce,” Normani agrees. Her face expresses absurdity at shaking Camila’s hand, but she does it anyway. Camila misses Normani doing absurd things because she asked her to.

Camila misses Normani, full stop. But she’s never going to have her back, not in the same way. And that’s okay. She made her choices, and she’s going to live with them.

They might be able to get dinner with Lauren and whoever Normani is dating, and they might be able to stand together if Lauren does another show, discussing their work and the weather before it starts. Maybe they’ll bond over how all of Lauren’s hoodies smell like weed, even after they’ve been washed.

It’s a nice thought, one Camila will tuck away for a rainy day with a guitar.

Camila settles down on the sofa at the Billboard studio, and Roger, Mark and Heather take their place at the table to her left. They’re going to listen intently the entire interview. Camila has done five mock trials, and each one has been analyzed acutely, right down to the connotation of every word.
The process has been like memorizing a script, but learning it isn’t enough not to be carefully managed when the curtains go up.

Her heart races, her palms dampen, and she feels a breath away from hyperventilating.

The interviewer smiles, sits and pulls at her skirt. She places a recorder next to her and clicks it on. “Good to see you again, Camila.”

“You too,” Camila says. She only remembers her name because Roger reminded her on the way over, informing Camila that Stacey interviewed her the last time she did this with Billboard. “How are you, Stacey?”

“I’m doing well.” She cracks open a folder that contains a list of questions Camila has seen before. Camila knows the order they’ve been typed in and the precise wording of them.

Stacey asks how she’s been, and Camila rambles about recording the album and the increased freedom she’s had. Her name is on every song, and for the most part, it feels right. Even the manipulated, finished versions belong to her. Camila elaborates on how piano drives the album forward, more melody than percussion. The production is light, and she wants to tour the record in smaller venues. She wants to be able to make eye contact with each person in the audience and really connect.

It’s not the kind of album that would fill an arena, the sound too sparse.

Camila calms because discussing her music is second nature.

Everything almost feels normal.

“There are female pronouns on a couple of these songs,” Stacey says. The air is sucked out of the room, and Camila feels her team narrow in on her from where they sit. “‘Again,’ ‘Spinning Out,’ ‘I Know Where I’m Going.’”

Camila waits for Stacey to finish the question on the page, but she just smiles at Camila, nodding softly.

She’s been briefed. She knows how this is supposed to go.

“Yes.” Camila’s mouth is dry, and she swallows around nothing. “That’s true.”

“They’re all love songs,” Stacey says, glancing down at her outline. “Did you try and get into the headspace of past love interests?”

“No, not really? I mean, I have. In the past. But these songs are about me and my feelings. I really tried to dig in to the way I process emotions and think about love. Not just translate the way I feel, but ask why I feel that way. Ask what or who makes me do things.” Camila laughs, and it sounds more tense than she intended. “I do some pretty stupid things.”

Stacey does her the favor of laughing, too. “So, these songs are about a girl?”

“Yes.” Camila wipes her hands on her jeans. This is harder than she thought it would be. She isn’t supposed to elaborate. She isn’t allowed to explain they’re not all about the same girl. It’s a weird contradiction wherein her team doesn’t want people to think she’s been with multiple girls, and yet they don’t want the public to think it’s all about Lauren, either.

“These are the first love songs you’ve written that are expressly about being in love with a woman.”
Camila glances at Roger. He nods.

This is it.

“Yes. I’m actually seeing someone now. It’s--She’s--” Camila shakes her head, flustered. She’s practiced this so many times, and it’s still not coming out right. That’s funny. Coming out right. Her mind spins. She practiced this too much, so it doesn’t feel natural or organic when it’s meant to. “She’s wonderful, and I love her very much.”

Stacey raises her eyebrows, but not in shock.

Camila is supposed to keep going.

“I’ve gotten more comfortable with myself and my sexuality. I’m in love, and I’ve always been my most authentic self in my music and with my fans. They know me. I wouldn’t keep something like this from them. I have so many LGBT fans, and I love them very much. And they’ve always loved me.

“They’re so brave and so proud, and I’m proud of them. I hope they’re proud of me, too.”

“I’m sure they are,” Stacey offers. Her eyes are vibrant and kind, lit up with the scoop and something Camila hopes is empathy.

“Thank you.”

“Any hints about the woman who stole your heart?” Stacey asks, leaning forward. Her tone aims for friendly gossip. It’s weird, and they’re not friends. “There’s been a lot of speculation about a former bandmate of yours.”

Camila looks at Roger. He smiles, and she exhales.

“Has there?” Camila asks, playing coy. She’s not very good at it.

“You and Lauren have reconnected recently.”

“We have.” Camila smiles and feels the shape of it growing on her face despite herself. “We’re very happy together.”

When the story drops online the day her album is released, Camila reads it. It feels like something that didn’t actually happen to her.

She tweets love is love with a rainbow emoji, and Lauren retweets it. Camila’s mom is in LA, and she hugs her tighter than she ever has, whispering: “I’m so proud of you, mija. I love you. I will always love you.”

There’s an outpouring of support: kids telling her how much she’s helped them accept themselves and how proud they are of her. Camila’s so touched by the former and buoyed by the latter that she doesn’t see the negative comments right away.

Her follower count grows, but not the same way Lauren’s does.

Camila does the talk show circuit. Ellen flashes a picture Camila posted of herself and Lauren onto
the screen behind them. She politely pushes for information she knows she won’t get, just to see Camila stutter and blush. And when they discuss coming out, Camila cries.

There’s something about Ellen’s energy and understanding that is different from everyone else’s, a shared experience of being closeted in the entertainment industry binding them together. When Ellen tells Camila she did a great thing, she believes it more than when the newest host of the Late Late Show says it.

Nothing feels monumentally different.

Until it does.

Lauren goes to the kitchen to get a cup of coffee, and Camila scrolls through her phone, waiting to start the next episode of Friends. She pauses on a message from the mother of a fan she’s met multiple times: a girl named Iliana. Iliana has always been sweet, gifting Camila too many boxes of chocolates that she fishes one piece out of before sharing the rest with her crew. Camila follows her on twitter and keeps a letter she wrote filed in a cabinet with similar notes that hold a feeling a little bit greater and more personal than admiration and infatuation.

Her mother’s message contains none of that particular, wonderful emotion: Camila, I’m very disappointed in you. My daughter, Iliana, will no longer be purchasing your music or attending your shows. I thought you were a role model. I will pray for you and hope you reconsider the abandonment of your morals. Sincerely, Luciana.

It’s not the worst response Camila’s gotten -- not even close -- but it strikes a chord.

It takes her another minute to find Iliana’s twitter. Her icon is still a picture of herself and Camila taken during one of their meet and greets, and her header reads: “Always be a little kinder than necessary. - J. M. Barrie.” Her pinned tweet is a stan list, her bio marks the day Camila followed her, along with lyrics Camila recognizes as Shawn’s, and Lauren’s one of the five people she’s followed most recently. Iliana’s response to Camila’s Love is Love tweet is simply a line of heart emojis.

Camila scrolls through her tweets: my mom hates camila now lmao im cryign :)))))))))), followed by my mom was a fake fan, and if camila thinks lauren is good enough for her then we have to respect it, and girls are so beautiful i love girls, and @Camila_Cabello please tour here next fall when im at college and can actually gooooooo. miss you so much xoxo.

Camila swallows around the lump in her throat, her vision blurring. Iliana is a microcosm of something Camila is sure happens too often as a response to a public figure coming out. Not only are bigots abandoning her, but people who have only ever loved her are being told she’s wrong and that they’re wrong to still love her. It breaks something new in Camila’s chest, and she bites her lip to keep it from trembling. She sends Iliana a direct message: thank u for all the love!!!

Camila feels the first tear fall. She sets her phone facedown on the coffee table before wiping it away and attempting to regulate her breathing.

She thinks about the people saying she’s going to Hell, and the people who are calling her a liar. She thinks about the comments saying she’s just using Lauren, and the comments from people who claim to love and know Camila, saying Lauren isn’t the right person for her. It’s too much. It’s all too much. Wedged between declarations of love and understanding, the hatred and the curses feel much louder.

Not just because it affects her, but because it affects her fans.
“You okay?” Lauren asks. She holds her mug in one hand and a glass of water in the other.

“No,” she answers, more tears falling with the effort speaking requires.

Camila cries, and Lauren wraps her arms around her, cradling the back of Camila’s head and holding her against her chest. Lauren rubs circles into the small of Camila’s back. She smells like lavender and coffee. She’s warm, soft and secure, and Camila inhales big gasping breaths, her tears turning into sobs. She soaks through Lauren’s T-Shirt, hiccuping out phrases like “I’m sorry,” and “It’s so stupid,” and “She’s so young.”

“What happened?” Lauren whispers when Camila’s crying has stopped shaking her like a leaf, all-encompassing and awful.

Camila tells her and watches Lauren’s brow furrow, cheeks reddening with anger and frustration. Lauren’s hand remains gentle where it runs through Camila’s hair, fingers tugging out the small knots that living accumulates.

“She doesn’t deserve this. Not because of me,” Camila says.

“It’s not your fault.” Lauren shakes her head. “And it’s fucking that her mom will take her to a show where you sing about sex, but the minute you sing about being in love with a woman, you’re an awful role model.”

“It’s stupid.”

“Yeah.” Lauren leans forward and presses a kiss against Camila’s sticky cheek. “But this isn’t.”

“No.” Camila smiles, shaky and strained. “This is the smartest thing I’ve ever done.”


“I just want to tell her that, if she does like girls, it’s okay. No matter what her mom thinks.”

“You can.”

Camila tilts her head. Lauren’s eyes are soft and focused, and she laces their fingers together, squeezing Camila’s hand and letting her know she’s there. Camila kisses Lauren, short and sweet. Because Lauren is there, and she thinks she can depend on her now in a way she never could before.

“You’re so smart.”

“I know.”

“Would you be too upset if I told her now instead of later?” Camila asks.

“Telly Ross is going to say Rachel; the suspense isn’t killing me.”

“Spoilers!”

Lauren rolls her eyes, and Camila loves her so much.

She drafts a post telling her fans she loves them. Camila tells them she appreciates their support, and they lift her up when she’s at her lowest. She tells them she’s happy, that she loves herself, and that they can love themselves, too. Wherever they are in their personal journeys, however they are, whoever they love, no matter what anyone tells them, they’re wonderful and she loves them with her entire heart. She loves them, she loves them, she loves them.
She sends it to her mother first.

And then Roger.

She has to wait until he gives her the go ahead to post it. But when she hits send, it feels like the kind of coming out Camila would have chosen for herself.

Camila leans forward, seat belt digging in to her shoulder. “You cannot ask her about marriage, or politics, or religion.”

“Tranquila,” her mom says from the driver’s seat. Camila sees her roll her eyes. “We’re not going to embarrass you.”

“Just pretend like you’re meeting her for the first time. Be completely chill and nice.”

“Wouldn’t it be strange to act like we’ve never met before?” Sofi asks.

Camila glances at her. “No.”

“Did you make notecards of acceptable conversations topics, too?” Her dad turns his head, looking at her sideways. “We could keep them on the table.”

Camila smacks the back of the passenger seat. “This isn’t funny! I haven’t seen her dad since 2016, and her mom hates me. You guys have to be like, peacemakers.”

“The Jaureguis don’t hate you. I know Clara was … too stern with you sometimes. But, I’m sure she won’t interrogate you tonight.” Her mom flips on her blinker and slips into the turn lane.

“She yelled at me! Multiple times!”

“She and I discussed it back then. I’m sure they realize you and Lauren are adults. For better or worse, you can make your own decisions. I would be shocked if they still have a problem with you, mija.”

“And you don’t have a problem with Lauren and aren’t going to bring up visiting last month and seeing her toothbrush in my bathroom?”

“¿Cómo?” her dad asks.

“Leave her alone, Alejandro. What are you going to do? Camp out at her house to make sure nobody spends the night?”

“Maybe Clara and I can take turns.”

“Ugh,” Camila groans as her mom turns into a parking space. “Please, please be cool.”

“I’m the coolest,” he defends, hand splayed over his chest.

Sofi unlocks her seatbelt as her Mom is still putting the car in park. Camila tries to appeal to her: “You like Lauren. You keep them in line.”

“No,” Sofi scoffs. “She’s your girlfriend. They don’t listen to me about anything, anyway.”
They shuffle inside the restaurant, and her mom gives the name for the reservation. Her family sits along one side of the table, and Camila eyes them, mentally trying to come up with a seating arrangement that isn’t awful.

It’s kind of impossible, so she sits across from Sofi and hopes Clara doesn’t sit next to her.

Lauren’s family arrives 15 minutes after seven, following Lauren’s text about Chris being an asshole who can’t keep track of time. She sits on one side of Camila, rubbing at her shoulder as she pulls out the chair. “Hey, sorry we’re late.”

“Oh, it’s fine,” Camila’s dad responds, standing up to hug Clara lightly and shake Mike’s hand.


There’s an almost hectic energy as everyone makes themselves comfortable around the table and Camila’s family is introduced to Chris’s girlfriend. The waiter fills their glasses, explains the specials, and gives them time to peruse the menu. While everyone scans entrees, Camila feels an uncomfortable tension settle between her shoulder blades.

Lauren seems to notice, shooting her a small smile and patting her knee.

They order drinks and appetizers, and Clara asks how Sofi likes college. Sofi explains testing out of English 101, grinning while bragging about her 300 level Irish literature class. “Only five of us got A’s. Oh! I also passed my driver’s test.” Sofi sits up a little straighter.

“Did you drive here?” Mike asks.

“We wanted to survive the ride,” her dad jokes, and Sofi blushes a deep red, probably praying their dad doesn’t bring up the time she hit a car in the Publix parking lot.

Camila smiles, sending her a look of sympathy.

Her mom and Clara slip into conversation about raising teenagers, their complaints about hormones intermixing with the fondness of witnessing their children grow into their own.

Camila asks Chris how he met his girlfriend. Abby is sweet and shy, eating her food and not interjecting much, even as Chris explains meeting at a work party his roommate threw.

“She’s too good for him,” Taylor says.

“Oh, totally,” Lauren agrees. “There’s always dishes piled in his sink, and he cleans the bathroom like once a month. He’s disgusting.”

“You don’t even live here, stop fucking lying,” Chris argues.

Taylor leans forward so Camila can see her clearly on the other side of Lauren. “She’s right. His apartment looks like a college dorm room.”

Taylor teaches elementary school and enthusiastically recounts stories of the funny things her kids do. One little girl, Ella, claimed another student, Harper, pushed her on the playground. When Taylor asked if anyone saw, Ella directed her to a third student, who refuted Ella’s claim, saying Ella was the one who pushed Harper. “Thank god she hasn’t learned to lie correctly,” Taylor laughs.

Everything is going well, even when Mike asks about her album and if she’s planning on touring it -- yes, after her birthday. It streamed well, but sold less than all her previous output. Camila didn’t
know what she was expecting, because she was warned about a drop in sales. Roger and her label took that into account, seeming pleased with the numbers, but it still twists something awful in Camila’s stomach.

“But yeah, it’s good,” she finishes weakly, running a hand through her hair.

“The album’s great,” he says. “Lauren made us listen to it.”

Camila’s smile falters. “Oh, okay. Thanks.”

“Oh my god,” she hears Lauren mutter to her right.

Everything is good until Camila excuses herself to go to the bathroom and realizes Clara hasn’t said a single word to her since “hello.”

She only really notices because Clara pushes open the door to the ladies room as Camila’s drying her hands. “Hey,” she says.

“Hi, Camila.” Clara’s hair is shorter than Camila has ever seen it. A few more wrinkles web around her eyes, making it even harder for Camila to look into them. “You seem to have grown up a lot.”

Camila’s mouth goes dry. “I hope so.”

“I think I owe you an apology.”

“A what?” Camila blinks and accidentally moves her hand back underneath the dryer, causing another loud gust of air to hit her skin before she flinches away.

“There was a time when I blamed you for Lauren’s,” she exhales, laughs a little, “Lauren’s sexuality. God, it’s still hard for me to say. I sometimes get embarrassed when I run into one of her former teachers and they ask if she’s found a boyfriend or husband.”

“You don’t have to apologize to me,” Camila says. She fights the urge to roll her neck and flex her fingers, her entire body still and too tight.

Clara looks at her, soft and sad. “I do. Because when she told us she was bisexual, her dad was so supportive. He gave her the biggest hug. Everything but how much he loved her fell away. All the things they tell you parents grieve? He didn’t give a shit. But I grieved them, even though I knew she might marry a boy. It was easy to think she’d end up with a boy, so I could ignore that entire part of her. It was easy when she wasn’t around you. Or Lucy.”

Camila bites her lip.

“I felt so guilty about it, especially when her dad was able to just love her. And I took it out on you, and on Lucy. Lauren and I got in so many fights about it. I made it so hard for her, to love herself and to come out to me. That’s not what a mom is supposed to do. I made it all about me.”

A woman comes into the bathroom, stepping past them and into a stall.

“It’s okay,” Camila says. “I’m sure she understands.”

“She does.” Clara shakes her head. “But I was hard on you, too. You were just a kid, but I saw you making my kid’s life harder. I’m sorry I treated you the way I did, towards the end.”

“It’s okay,” Camila repeats. She doesn’t know what to say.
“God, this is bad, isn’t it? I’m trying to apologize, but I’m still just talking about me.” Clara sighs. “I’m sorry.”

“I forgive you.”

Clara hesitates, arms open, and Camila hugs her. It’s awkward, and weird, and if Clara just secretly hating her would have saved her from experiencing this, she almost wishes that was the case. “Thank you,” she whispers.

A toilet flushes, and Camila knows this moment is too private for such a public space.

“No problem,” she offers.

“You make her very happy.”

Camila swallows. “She makes me very happy, too.”

Clara smiles, a small and sad thing, like she’s doing her best but still has baggage when it comes to Lauren and Camila together. But Camila realizes it’s more about herself than it is about them. Clara points behind her. “Now, I really do have to pee.”

Camila laughs, but her throat is dry and it comes out scratchy. “Okay. Yeah. I’ll see you back at the table.”

She calls Lauren from her bedroom in her parents’ house and tells her about the conversation she had with Clara.

“Oh my god,” Lauren says. “I’m so sorry, Camz. That’s… mortifying.”

“It’s okay, really. Like, it was awful, and I didn’t need an apology. I wasn’t hung up on it, but I guess she didn’t hate me like I thought, so.” She shrugs, but she’s lying in bed in the dark, and Lauren can’t see her. “It’s whatever. I just. Thought you should know.”

“Jesus, I knew she was drinking her wine too fast.”

Camila laughs. “Hey, my mom asked if you were brushing your teeth every night.”

“Our parents are something else,” Lauren says.

“Yeah.” Camila curls her toes against her sheets. “I miss you.”

“We flew out together two days ago and were at dinner together three hours ago.”

Camila rolls her eyes. “Yeah, I know that.”

“I miss you, too,” Lauren whispers, her voice soothing and warm. “When I came out to my parents. After, I mean, my mom came up to me and she asked me how I knew. I gave her so many reasons. And then I told her I was in love with you.” Camila hears the shake in Lauren’s breath. “And I was crying, and it wasn’t the good kind of crying. So. It’s kind of my fault she started treating you like shit.”

Camila closes her eyes. “It’s not your fault.”
“I guess not,” Lauren says, but there’s reluctance there. “Okay. Your turn.”

Camila’s brow furrows, but then she understands. She presses her cell closer to her ear, as though it’ll make Lauren closer than the thirty minutes it takes to get to her house. “I want your only toothbrush to be in my bathroom.”

Lauren is silent.

“Okay, yeah, so, anyway, Sofi could not stop talking about you on the drive home. I think she was trying to seem cool, but--”

“--My lease is up in May,” Lauren says.

“Oh,” Camila exhales. She’s soaring, and she’s flying, and she’s quoting High School Musical in her head like she’s fifteen. Her body is awake again, no longer sinking into her mattress but sparking with energy, all the love she contains on the verge of pouring out. “Yeah. Cool. May’s good. I mean, I’ll be on tour, so, February’s good, too.”

There’s a beat and then: “Yeah. February is good, too.”

She can hear Lauren’s smile grow as they talk, discussing where her furniture will go (“To Goodwill,” Camila says. Lauren scoffs.), which day works best to move her in, and which side of the closet she’ll get. By the time they hang up, it’s half past three, and Camila’s exhausted. She knows she’ll feel it when she’s woken up by her family to go Christmas Caroling, but she doesn’t care.

She’s so happy she thinks she could cry.

The good kind of crying. The best kind of crying.

Moving Lauren to Camila’s place is easier than moving her into her old apartment, mostly because they rent a truck instead of loading up her car. It means there’s only one trip to make through LA traffic.

Camila’s house is fully furnished, but she lets Lauren pile her plates and cups in the cabinets, shift pots and pans so her collection fits, and clatter her silverware on top of Camila’s. They move Camila’s sofa two feet to the left so Lauren can slot her mismatched end table on the other side. Camila carries armfuls of clothes to a guest room closet, making space in the master for jeans and sweaters and T-shirts.

Camila’s house is fully furnished, but finding space for Lauren to fit is as easy as taking a step back, tilting her head and making a decision. They float the idea of moving her sofa into the walk-in closet, mostly because it would fit and seems fancy and absurd. They reject the idea, deciding it would mostly just be an inconvenience. Instead, they force Zach and Ashley to help carry it further down the hallway and into the music room.

After everything finds a place, and Zach and Ashley have stuffed themselves with pizza and headed to their respective homes, Lauren and Camila find themselves back in the music room.

It’s a shared space. The entire house is a shared space, really, but Camila invites Lauren in, lets her sit at the piano and forces her to play the opening pass of “Für Elise.” Camila knows it’s one of the
first things Lauren ever learned on the piano, by ear and finger placement rather than by sheet music and notes. Lauren doesn’t focus on phrasing or musicality; she fumbles over the keys, and Camila watches the too high arch of her hand and wrist.

Lauren curves forward, eyes on the keys and hair falling from behind her ear. She plays the opening again, slowing to a stop during a refrain of the opening phrase. She probably knows less than a page of it. Camila smiles.

“Are you happy now?” Lauren asks, looking at Camila sideways.

“Very.”

“Okay, your turn. Play ‘Rondo alla Turca.’”

Camila laughs, gently shoving her shoulder against Lauren’s. “You’re an asshole.”

“Oh, we’re not forcing each other to play classical piano melodies?”

“No, I was forcing you.” Camila rolls her eyes, but her voice is fond, and she can’t quite stop the twitch of a smile on her mouth. Their thighs and knees press together, and the piano light casts a glare across the black music stand. It’s nice. The room is quiet except for the phantom ring of the piano strings and soft gusts of air coming through the vents as the heater kicks in.

“Can’t believe I actually did it,” Lauren says. She shakes her head, her own smile tucking itself into the corner of her mouth.

“I can.” Camila makes a whipping noise, and Lauren tries to push her off the piano bench. Camila laughs, and Lauren’s hands find her ribs, tickling her onto the floor. She grasps at Lauren’s hands and kicks her legs at nothing. Her giggle turns breathless, and Lauren hovers over her, hair tickling Camila’s collarbones. “I give. You win.”

“Thank you,” Lauren says, smug and self-satisfied as she rolls next to Camila.

Camila reaches out and grabs her hand, closing her eyes because the light above them is too bright. Lauren’s thumb runs circles against her skin, and a hazy sort of feeling settles over Camila, almost dreamlike.

“Are you tired?” Lauren asks, voice a whisper between them.

“No.”

“You want to do something stupid?”

Camila turns her head, cracking one eye open. “Maybe.”

“Live a little?”

“Maybe,” Camila repeats, hesitation stretching the word.

Lauren’s eyes are clear, and there’s a challenging, pleased taunt in the arch of her eyebrow. She pushes herself up on her elbow and tugs on Camila’s hand. “Come on, you can always back out if you’re too chicken.”

Camila scrambles up and scoffs. “Please. I’m not a chicken.”

Okay, so maybe she’s a little chicken, because Lauren parks in a strip mall where everything seems
to be closed except a chinese restaurant and a tattoo parlor. Camila figures they’re not about to eat dinner again. She swallows, eyeing the light on the dashboard before Lauren cuts the engine.

“You can just hold my hand,” Lauren says, amusement coloring her tone.

Camila looks at her, cast in shadow, the curl of her hair just over her collarbones. Her smile tilts fondly and knowingly, and Camila decides she wants to do something stupid. “I’ll do it.”

“Really?”

“Sure.” Camila nods once, resolute. Her stomach clenches, but she tilts her chin up and unbuckles her seatbelt. “What are we getting?”

Lauren’s eyes widen. “Really? Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” Camila shrugs with all the confidence she isn’t feeling. “Hearts are cute. Oh, or music notes.”

“A little cliche, don’t you think?”

“Are we pretending every tattoo you have is uniquely creative?”

“Hey!” Lauren smacks her arm.

“Ow!” Camila says, even though it didn’t hurt.

“If you thought that was painful, you’re never going to survive this.”

Camila shakes her head in mild annoyance. “Let’s just go. We’ll figure it out.”

The parlor is nice and brightly lit, appearing clean and organized. Camila rolls her shoulders back.

“Hey,” Lauren says to the woman behind the front desk. Her right arm is sleeved in tattoos, the left just a smattering of lines. There’s a bold streak of turquoise in her hair.

“Hi. Just give me once second, okay?” The woman points to the chairs lining the wall. “Please sit.”

“Okay, thanks,” Lauren says, grabbing a book off the small table before plopping down.

Camila leans over Lauren’s shoulder as she slowly flips through the book. It’s filled with different tattoo designs: crosses, Chinese symbols, angels, skulls, stars. Some are black and white, some are filled with color, and the artists name is always scrawled onto the bottom-right corner. Camila figures the people who work here designed them. “I like that one,” Camila says, pointing at a rose made up of black lines.

Lauren wrinkles her nose. “Who’s the cliche now?”

Camila nudges her shoulder. “Both of us.”

“These are so ugly,” Lauren says, eyes skimming over a page of dragons.

“Who would want this permanently on their body?” Camila asks, trailing her finger over a huge, red dragon with a scaly snake hanging out of its mouth.

Lauren shrugs. “Chris, probably.”
Camila snorts.

Two pages later, and there’s a small, innocuous heart in the upper-right hand corner of the page. Camila rests her chin on Lauren’s shoulder, squeezes her arm, and squints. “I like that,” she mumbles.

As she sits with her knee pressed against Lauren’s leg, Camila calms. She used to be terrified of the abstract idea of inking her skin. Getting a tattoo requires recklessness, which Camila is good at in spurts, but not enough, or confidence and knowledge of oneself, which she has, but she’s never been sure. She always thought she would change enough that any tattoo would turn into a regret or lie. But she’s not scared of linking herself with Lauren.

Lauren feels steady and permanent.

“What?” Lauren asks. “This?” Her finger brushes over the two fingerprints that make a heart.

“Yeah.”

Lauren hums. “Me, too.”

“I’m ready for you!” The woman calls, leaning forward over the desk.

They decide to get their left thumbprints painted onto each other.

“Less cheesy than a heart,” Lauren says, her voice lilting and sweet. Her eyes are bright and her smile is soft, and Camila has to lean forward and press her own grin against Lauren’s lips.

Camila goes first so she doesn’t chicken out. Lauren asks if she’s sure one more time, squeezing Camila’s hand in both of hers. “Never been more sure of anything in my life,” Camila says.

“Liar,” Lauren whispers.

“Not really.”

Camila gets Lauren’s fingerprint in white ink on the inside of her ankle. Private. Just for her, and just for them, and maybe for someone who happens to see it when she’s wearing shorts and sandals, but they’d have to look at her ankle pretty hard, so. It feels private but declarative, and Camila’s chest expands.

She grits her teeth, and Lauren squeezes her hand in reassuring pulses, describing how it felt each time she got one of her tattoos. It doesn’t hurt as much as Camila thought it would, and Lauren kisses her temple when the woman with turquoise in her hair -- Myra -- says she’s finished.

Camila swallows around her heart when she sees the black fingerprint -- her fingerprint -- on Lauren’s pale ankle.

“Feel real yet?” Lauren asks, hint of amusement in her voice.

“Yeah,” Camila breathes.

She doesn’t think anything in her life as ever felt as real as how she feels about Lauren.
The weekend before Camila’s birthday, she and Lauren head north to San Francisco to celebrate.

It’s chilly, and they bundle up in sweaters and jackets, a scarf around Camila’s neck a fan made her a few years ago, the ends beginning to fray. Regardless, Camila spends too much time complaining about being cold while they’re on the beach and popping into shops at Pier 39.

“What are you buying?” Lauren asks, the tip of her nose pink.

“There’s this shot glass for Sofi with the Golden Gate bridge on it, even though I don’t condone her drinking,” Camila says, showing it off before handing it to Lauren so she can continue digging through her finds. “Oh, and these two are for us, because it’d be a fun collection to start, you know? Look at all the crazy eyes on these trolleys! The Alcatraz one is for you, obviously. We could put this picture frame on the end table in the living room. And there’s a rainbow on this shirt, so now that I’m out, I had to get it. Duh.”

“Duh,” Lauren repeats, sarcasm coloring the words.

“There’s stuff for your family, too. Because I can’t have them thinking I’m in--”

“--Camz,” Lauren cuts her off, hand resting on Camila’s forearm. “You cannot possibly buy all of this.”

“I know this may come as a shock to you,” Camila says, leaning in conspiratorially, “but I’m rich and can totally afford these overpriced nicknacks.”

Lauren rolls her eyes. “You don’t like shots. That picture frame is overly sentimental, and we’re not going to pretend you don’t have 50 random pieces of rainbow clothing already.”

“But I want it all.” Camila pouts.

“Why?”

Camila looks down at her basket, running her fingertips against the T-shirt she was going to buy and probably use as a pajama top constantly on tour before forgetting about it completely. It’s the kind of soft Camila can tell will wear away after a few washes. “Because it’s nice to have souvenirs.”

“Yeah, but you don’t need hundreds of them.”

“I told you I’m getting stuff for our families, too.”

“Oh my god,” Lauren shakes her head and ruffles through Camila’s basket. “My mom does not need an ornament of Rudolph and Santa chilling on the Golden Gate Bridge.”

“Clearly that’s for Taylor,” Camila says.

“My mistake.” Lauren’s mouth twists with a smile. “You don’t have to prove yourself to my family or anything, you know that, right?”

“It’s not about that.”

Lauren narrows her eyes. “Okay. If you really want to turn your house into a celebration of San Francisco, you can go for it, I guess.”

Camila hums. “Sounds good.”

She continues walking around the cramped shop. It’s not busy season, but there’s still a smattering of
other guests shaking snow globes and holding T-shirts against their bodies to help figure out fit. Camila picks up a pen. There’s so much attached to it she cannot imagine it’d be easy to write with. She throws it into her basket anyway.

Turning, Camila spots Lauren looking at the rack of postcards by the door, hands stuffed into the pockets of her jacket and mouth pressed into a thin line. She tilts her head and crouches to read more cards. Camila watches her pull one out of its slot, flipping it over a few times before putting it back.

It’s their first real trip together. It’s not Lauren visiting her friends in New York when Camila’s tour just happens to be there, or Lauren needing a date to a wedding, or dinner while they’re both home for Christmas. It’s just the two of them spending a long weekend somewhere for Camila’s birthday. It’s Lauren dragging her to Alcatraz, Camila squeezing her hand the entire time even though they’re learning history and it’s not like, haunted or anything. Or at least, when she asks, the tour guide says it’s not haunted. He looked a little shifty to Camila, though.

It’s Lauren taking pictures of her on the Golden Gate Bridge, arms stretched out, wind blowing her hair into her face and laughing when she trips over her own two feet. It’s sitting on the beach at dusk, bundled together and sharing headphones, alternating who gets to pick the song, telling stories about the beach in Miami that they may have told each other before but can’t quite remember, wondering if maybe they were ever there at the same time without knowing it.

It’s Camila getting tipsy at a vineyard and whispering dirty things into Lauren’s ear. It’s making love at their hotel after a too fancy dinner, Camila telling Lauren this is her favorite birthday, maybe ever, and Lauren smiling when she tells Camila it’s not really her birthday.

“Smartass,” Camila mumbles, kissing Lauren’s smile and imprinting it onto her own mouth.

It’s Camila putting the stupid San Francisco shirt back, because she doesn’t need to wear it on tour to remind herself that Lauren loves her.

Coming out changes everything and nothing. There are still people who support her and people who hate her. There’s still a list of things she’s allowed to do, a list of things she has to ask permission to do, and things she can’t do at all. Her mom makes sure she’s going to therapy to process everything, especially before the tour starts and she begins bearing witness to her fans’ reaction in person, seeing face-to-face how their stories interact with hers.

Camila spends her first actual birthday out to the whole world rehearsing for tour, and it’s good. It feels good.

It feels good to be a little more free and a little more herself. Like she’s allowed to be a little more in love in addition to being a little older and, fingers crossed, a little wiser.

She’s excited about touring. More dates, but smaller venues. She’s playing an instrument during almost every song, and it’s a different kind of work than learning choreography. There’s a phantom ache in her fingers from strumming guitars and pressing piano keys.

Camila’s exhausted when she gets home, but Lauren baked her a cake. They share a slice while waiting for pizza to be delivered, Camila smearing a glob of frosting across the corner of Lauren’s mouth just so she can kiss it away.
They watch Monica propose to Chandler, and they both pretend not to cry.

Camila falls asleep first.

She also wakes up first.

She puts on the bunny slippers Sofi gave her for her birthday and trudges into the kitchen, bleary eyed and still too tired to be awake. She makes a cup of coffee, feels it burn down her throat with the first sip, and opens Instagram. Lauren’s post pops up at the top of her feed.

Lauren hasn’t posted any pictures with Camila since Camila came out. Lauren will like her posts and retweet her, but that’s it. Camila’s been too busy to think about it too much, especially when Lauren’s opening up to her again, when Camila can feel the increasing thrill of vulnerability echoing between them, steadied by the comfort of loving each other. The opposite of what happened to them in Fifth Harmony, when the vulnerability and uncertainty became too much and they shut each other out.

It still hurt a little, and Camila focused on coming to terms with the fact that Lauren is different with her, for better and for worse, and maybe that means she interacts with her differently on social media than she did with her exes. If it started hurting a little more, she promised herself she would say something.

But there’s a picture of Camila on the Golden Gate Bridge, eyes squinting with a laugh, cheeks flushed with cold, arms spread as wide as they go. She swipes, and there’s a picture of Camila, mouth hiding behind a wine glass, eyes crossed. The last picture is a selfie of them on the beach, heads tilted together, Camila’s tongue between her teeth, Lauren’s smile so effortless and bright it makes Camila smile, too.

The caption simply reads: Thank you. I love you. Happy Birthday, Camz. ❤️

She feel happiness swelling in her chest, and she abandons her half-full coffee mug on the kitchen table, risking her life by sprinting up the stairs two at a time. She hops onto the bed, heart hammering away, full and wonderful. She shakes Lauren awake, kissing her nose and her temple and her forehead and her chin.

“Hello,” Lauren laughs, voice syrupy with sleep.

“I love you,” Camila says. “I love you so much.”

“I love you, too.” It’s easy and plain. She brushes some hair out of her face, blinking at Camila.

“What time is it?”

“Like, half past six.” Camila bites around her smile.

“Can I go back to sleep now?”

“Yeah.”

“Thanks.” Lauren shifts, pulling her pillow more securely underneath her neck.

Camila crawls off the bed. Rapidly cooling coffee and tour rehearsals await.

But when she reaches the door, Lauren calls: “Camz.”

Camila finds her way back to Lauren, who’s propped herself up on her elbows. Lauren kisses her,
chapped lips and morning breath.

Everything has changed, and nothing has changed.

Camila doesn’t worry about an expiration date, she just loves her.

She just loves her, and loves her, and loves her.

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