Meet Me Halfway To Your Heart
by ariadnerue

Summary

The media had always assumed they were dating anyway. What big difference was it if they had to pretend to be engaged for a couple months?

a.k.a. The Second-Hand Famous Fake Engagement AU no one asked for.

Notes

Well this got a little out of hand.

Enjoy this fluff, creampuffs. The season finale is nigh and it's gonna be awful. So here. Take this gift. Laura and Carmilla, childhood friends, offspring of famous people, fake engaged, all the tropes. All of them.

I regret nothing.

Title from the song "Given It All" by Hayley Kiyoko.

EDIT: YO GUYS Papa Hollis has a name now so I'm changing it! His name in this story was originally Dan, so if you listen to the incredible podfic by Shmaylor he will be called Dan Hollis. But now it's Sherman.
It was her own fault, really. She was the one who insisted she and Carmilla go out tonight, take a break from stressing over their finals. She was the one who dragged her best friend of twelve years and roommate of four years to LA’s hottest new bar. She couldn’t even remember what it was called. The Snap or The Whip or something equally derivative. They were all the same; dark and loud and full of an odd mix of young Hollywood hot-listers and, as in the case of Laura and Carmilla, the children of established Hollywood A-listers.

Regardless, this was where it would happen. This is where Laura would finally snap and krav maga someone to death. Everything was leading up to it; she was just drunk enough, Carmilla had vanished to use the bathroom, and the ridiculously buff young man who had crowded into Carmilla’s seat at the bar beside her was just one more leering look away from shattering Laura’s resolve.

He was huge, noticeably sweaty, and he reeked of beer and body spray. Even if she was straight she wouldn’t have touched this guy. But he was completely oblivious to her lack of interest, all swagger and toothy grins and slow winks, going on and on about landing a walk-on role in Vin Diesel’s next movie.

Laura always kept a ring in her pocket just for situations like this. The second the self-proclaimed action star caught her eye, she surreptitiously slipped the ring onto her ring finger. Now was the time. Her ace in the hole.

“You want to get out of here?” he asked, leaning over her and getting his beer breath in her face. Laura forced out a laugh.

“Sorry, I’m spoken for,” she said lightly, fluttering her left hand in his line of sight. “Engaged.”

She saw his eyes zero in on the ring and his eyebrows shot up his forehead. She held her breath. Usually that was it. Usually the guy backed right off when he thought she was another person’s property, which pissed her off to no end but certainly came in handy.

But not the action star. No, this bozo had the gall to smirk at her and lean in closer.

“Engaged isn’t married,” he said suggestively, and Laura cringed. “Besides, I don’t see him anywhere.”

This was it. Laura was going to go to prison for killing this guy with her tiny fists.

“That’s because she’s right here.”

Laura was so relieved at the sound of Carmilla’s sharp voice she almost fell off of her bar stool. There she was, all black leather and red lipstick, shoving her way between Laura and the meathead with an eyebrow raised and a scowl on her face. Her hand landed on Laura’s knee, squeezing it in a move meant to both reassure Laura and dissuade the wannabe.

Laura smiled when she noticed the matching ring on Carmilla’s ring finger. Carmilla had liberated the pair of Tiffany rings from her mother’s Academy Awards swag bag the year she’d lost best actress to Kate Winslet. They’d both been using them to ward off potential stalkers ever since. Though this would be the first time they’d used them in conjunction.

“Young man,” Laura sighed in relief, and Carmilla gave her a brief smirk before she refocused her attention on their new friend. The man had stumbled a bit when Carmilla pushed him out of her
way, but now he had regained his footing and was staring between them slowly.

“Is there a problem here?” Carmilla demanded, glaring at him. The people crowded closest to them around the bar seemed to be taking notice of the potential conflict and Laura spotted at least two iPhones pointed at them.

“Chicks on chicks, that’s hot,” the guy said, leering at the both of them. Laura winced as Carmilla’s hand tightened angrily on her knee.

“Okay, you are testing my patience now,” Carmilla said firmly, leveling a gaze at him that would probably have made him pee his pants if he was sober. “So I suggest you back off.”

“Hey, no need to get angry,” the poor idiot continued, sidling back toward Laura and reaching an arm around her like they were old friends. “I’m totally down for a threesome.”

Before his arm could make contact with Laura’s shoulders, Carmilla placed a hand on his chest and shoved him back a few feet. This wouldn’t end well. Laura laid a steadying hand on the small of Carmilla’s back, trying to get her attention and calm her down, but her eyes were fixed fiercely on her target.

“You touch her again, I swear to god—” Carmilla growled, but she was cut off by the man laughing.

“You’ll what?” he asked.

Laura bit back a groan. That was the wrong answer. He reached for Laura again.

The sound of Carmilla’s fist connecting with the guy’s face was audible even in the noisy bar.

The crowd parted as the guy stumbled back and lost his balance, eventually ending up on the ground with a hand over his face. Blood was dripping out of his nose and he seemed more shocked than injured when his wild eyes fixed on Carmilla standing over him. She shook her hand out at her side and glared down at him as Laura quickly stood from her stool.

“I warned you,” Carmilla said with a shrug, and the guy just gaped at her.

Laura’s eyes scanned the crowd, trying not to count the amount of phone cameras that were pointed at them right now. She really hated LA sometimes.

Then two more muscular guys emerged from the crowd, one of them trying to drag Action Star to his feet while the other turned to Carmilla and Laura. Both girls tensed, Laura’s hand settling on Carmilla’s shoulder, but the guy just held his hands up apologetically.

“I’m so sorry about that,” he said in a rush, gesturing to his bleeding friend who was trying to fight the other guy off. “He always gets like this when he’s drunk. We try to keep an eye on him but he gave us the slip.”

He glanced back, watching the two men struggle off through the crowd.

“He gets punched a lot,” he admitted, wincing. Then he gave Carmilla a small smile. “Though usually it’s a big dude that knocks him on his ass.”

Carmilla just raised an eyebrow, clearly still in fight mode. So Laura slid her hand down her arm and tugged at Carmilla’s fingers.

“It’s okay,” Laura said quickly, her eyes never leaving Carmilla. “We’re fine. Just… get some ice
for his face.”

The guy nodded and disappeared after his friends, leaving Laura and Carmilla in the center of a rather large space in the crowd. Carmilla finally turned and looked at Laura, squeezing the hand in hers.

“You okay?” she murmured, dark eyes searching Laura’s with concern.

Laura laughed lightly and shook her head.

“I’m fine, Carm,” she sighed, rolling her eyes. “What about your hand?”

Carmilla held up her left hand, flexing her fingers and grimacing.

“Hurts like hell,” she chuckled with a shake of her head. Then the smirk came back. “Which reminds me: why was I the one punching Happy Gilmore over there when you’re the one in this relationship that knows krav maga?”

“What, did you want me to kill the guy?”

Carmilla laughed so hard at that she had to rest her head briefly on Laura’s shoulder. They were both still fairly drunk, it seemed, or they would have been much more concerned about Carmilla’s bruised hand and the amount of people around them that were still pointing phone cameras at them.

“We should get out of here,” Laura sighed, concern finally puncturing through the haze the alcohol left in her brain. “Get some ice on your hand.”

“We don’t have to leave just because of me,” Carmilla said with a frown, a whine in her voice that made Laura smile. “You were right, we needed to get out of the house. It’s summer.”

“Well I didn’t want to worry you, but I think a few people may have also realized who we are,” Laura said slowly, giving Carmilla a meaningful look. Carmilla glanced around, apparently only now becoming aware of the rest of the people in the bar. There were a lot of whispered conversations happening and a lot of eyes on them, and Carmilla let out a groan.

“Great,” she grunted, squeezing Laura’s hand again and starting for the door. “How long do you think it’ll be before Mother’s publicist calls me?”

Laura shrugged as they reached the sidewalk outside the bar, completely ignoring the frenzy of paparazzi that started shouting and snapping pictures from behind the bouncer’s velvet rope.

“I’ll guess about fifteen minutes before my dad’s publicist calls me,” Laura sighed, scanning the line of limos, cabs, and town cars with a frown. “Where’s Kirsch?”

As if on cue, a black town car pulled right up in front of them and Carmilla’s mother’s driver scrambled out of the car.

“Did you get in a fight?” he asked Carmilla, voice low and concerned as he opened the door for the girls. He gestured to his phone. “People on Twitter are saying you got in a fight.”

“God bless America,” Carmilla grumbled, gesturing for Laura to slide in first. Laura grinned as Carmilla followed her into the back seat.

“It wasn’t a fight, per se,” Laura answered when Kirsch got back in the driver’s seat. “She just decked a guy that really wanted to get in my pants.” Laura batted her eyelashes at Carmilla. “My
hero.”

“Oh stop,” Carmilla sighed, rolling her eyes dramatically as Kirsch pulled away from the curb. She threw her left arm around Laura’s shoulders, stretching out her aching fingers. Laura grabbed her hand gently to inspect it, the tip of her tongue peeking out between her lips and her eyebrows furrowing.

“It’s starting to bruise,” Laura pouted, concern wrinkling her forehead. She glanced over to meet Carmilla’s eyes. She was watching her silently, her eyes dark and sleepy like they always were after a night of drinking. Laura leaned over and pressed her nose to Carmilla’s jaw. “I’m sorry about your hand.”

“It was worth it,” Carmilla said quietly, shrugging just her right shoulder so she wouldn’t dislodge Laura on her left.

Suddenly Laura was scrambling in her jeans pocket, pulling out her phone and holding it in front of them. Carmilla rolled her eyes again.

“What are you doing, creampuff?”

“Preserving the moment for posterity.”

Laura snapped a picture, grinning at the camera with Carmilla’s chin on her shoulder. Carmilla was mid-eye roll and her bruised hand was prominently featured on Laura’s other shoulder, Laura’s left hand fastened around her wrist to push her purpling fingers into view.

She posted it to Instagram, giggling as she typed in the caption.

Laura2theLetter: Look what @heyCarmilla got defending my honor. #MyHero
#YouShouldSeeTheOtherGuy

“We are so photogenic together,” Laura sighed, tilting her head as she admired the picture.

“That is literally the only reason I keep you around,” Carmilla said with an air of great seriousness.

“Oh yes, because being best friends since we were ten is no contest for looking hot in photos,” Laura shot back, grinning.

“No contest whatsoever.”

They sat there in the back seat, drunk and giggling, until Laura fell asleep on Carmilla’s shoulder with Carmilla’s arm still wrapped around her. Carmilla let out a heavy sigh and Kirsch met her eyes in the rearview mirror.

“Make sure you get some ice on that when I get you home,” he said with a knowing grin.

Carmilla flipped him off.

Laura was awoken by the sound of the Imperial March from Star Wars.

The only thing stranger than that was the fact that it actually wasn’t that strange.

“Caarrmm…” she groaned, throwing an arm over her eyes to block out the light coming in through
the windows. “Why is your phone in my room?”

“We’re not in your room, cupcake,” Carmilla muttered back, voice muffled by something.

Laura peeked out from behind her arm and realized several things at once.

One: She was not in her bed. She was on the floor.

Two: Carmilla was right next to her, one arm thrown over Laura’s waist and her face buried in Laura’s hair.

Three: She was incredibly hungover.

Laura sat up abruptly, dislodging Carmilla, and immediately regretted it as her head started to pound. She squinted around her as Carmilla groaned. They had somehow ended up on the living room floor between the couch and the coffee table, neither having changed clothes from last night. Carmilla’s black cat, Bagheera, was sitting on the arm of the couch staring at Laura with his luminous green eyes.

“Don’t give me that look,” Laura grumbled, running a hand through her hair and looking around for Carmilla’s phone. It was under the couch, right next to the ice pack Carmilla had been using on her hand. With a sigh, Laura nudged aside the lukewarm bag of blue gel and grabbed the phone. She tossed it at Carmilla, drawing another angry grunt from her. “Answer the phone, Carmilla. You know who it is.”

The Imperial March was reserved for one particular person. And they would both be better off if Carmilla answered it sooner rather than later.

With another long groan, Carmilla grabbed the phone and put it on speaker so she could remain lying on the floor.

“Morning, Mother,” Carmilla sighed.

“Carmilla Karnstein, what were you thinking?”

Laura winced at three time Academy Award winner Lilita Morgan’s tone and got unsteadily to her feet. Carmilla just sighed and slowly flexed her left hand.

“I clearly wasn’t thinking,” she replied airily. “Now what are we talking about?”

“I just don’t understand why you wouldn’t tell me,” her mother continued, her tone harsh. But there was an edge of hurt creeping into it that Carmilla couldn’t quite place, and she looked over at her phone in concern. Laura paused in the kitchen, recognizing the shift in her voice as well. She’d known the woman for more than a decade, even if she was still a bit scared of her. “I mean I’m not surprised you would just put it out there in the public eye with no warning, but you could have at least told me! And Laura, I’m shocked you didn’t even tell your father!”

“You talked to my dad?” Laura blurted, abandoning the two water glasses she’d been filling and rejoining Carmilla on the floor. “Why? What’s going on?”

“Of course I talked to him, I figured he had a right to know that our daughters are engaged!”

Laura and Carmilla slowly met each other’s eyes. They were wearing nearly identical expressions of confusion and panic.
“What?” they blurted simultaneously.

“Oh please, you must have known the news would get out when you posted that picture last night, Laura dear,” Lilita sighed. “So? When did this happen? How long have you been together? Who proposed?”

Carmilla opened and closed her mouth several times while Laura tried to get her phone out of her pocket with shaking hands. Instagram was still open and Laura’s eyes went wide.

“I have eight thousand nine hundred sixty one notifications,” she said blankly. Carmilla stared at her.

“That is slightly more than usual.”

“What? Speak louder dear, I can’t hear you,” Lilita said crossly.

“Just a second, Mother,” Carmilla said quickly, taking her off speaker phone and leaning over Laura to look at the picture.

“Oh my god, Carm,” Laura gasped, her hand coming up over her mouth. “The rings. We didn’t take off the rings.”

Sure enough, Carmilla’s bruised left hand featured a shiny platinum ring on her ring finger, and Laura’s hand wrapped around her wrist was sporting the other half of the matching set.

They each looked down at their hands where the rings were still on their fingers. They were objectively beautiful, identical bands with a line of small diamonds set into the side. They weren’t technically engagement rings, but they sure looked like them. Their eyes met again.

“Shit,” Carmilla said blankly.

“I have to call my dad,” Laura blurted, but then there was a knock on the door.

“Laura Hollis, open this door!”

“Or not,” Carmilla sighed, flopping back onto the floor at the sound of two time Academy Award winner Sherman Hollis shouting through the door. She picked up her phone again. “Mother, I have to go. Laura’s dad is about to break down the door.”

“Oh, Sherman is already there? Good, I’m just pulling into the parking lot.”

“What?”

“I’ll see you in a moment. Don’t go anywhere.”

“Wait, Mother!”

Laura could hear the dial tone from a foot away. Carmilla dropped her phone with a thud and ran her hands up into her hair.

“You’d better open the door,” she said lowly.

Laura nodded, shakily approaching the door as her father continued to pound on it from the other side.

“Dad, chill,” Laura snapped, fussing with the locks. “I’m opening the door, okay?”
The second the door was open, Sherman Hollis was through the doorway, sweeping Laura up into a huge bear hug.

“I am so mad at you right now,” the man said firmly as he lifted his daughter off the floor with the force of his hug. He looked at Carmilla over Laura’s shoulder. “You too, Carmilla. Now get over here.”

“Nice to see you too, Sherman,” Carmilla sighed, but she slowly got to her feet regardless. The second she was in range, Sherman pulled her into the hug as well.

“Dad, what the hell?” Laura asked, her voice muffled in her father’s shoulder.

“Watch your language,” he chastised quietly. Laura just rolled her eyes. She was twenty two years old, she had just finished her junior year at UCLA, she’d been living with Carmilla in this apartment since she was eighteen, and still her father managed to treat her like a child. “I’m just so happy for you two!”

“Um…” Laura began, casting a panicked glance at Carmilla, who was still crushed against her father’s other shoulder.

“I knew the two of you would figure it out eventually,” he went on, finally pulling back and looking between them with his hands on their shoulders. He beamed at Carmilla. “I mean I knew that Laura had a crush on you when you were kids.”

“Dad!”

He returned his attention to his daughter and his expression fell.

“But I don’t understand why you wouldn’t tell me! You’ve never kept something like this from me, Laura. I’ve always tried to be supportive of your love life and I thought…”

“Oh good, the touchy-feely conversations have already started.”

The three of them turned to find Carmilla’s mother in the doorway, tucking her sunglasses into her clutch with a stern look on her face. She stepped into the apartment and closed the door behind her stiffly.

“There’s already a swarm of paparazzi outside the building,” she sighed, waving her hand vaguely toward the window. “I left Kirsch down there to try to disperse them.”

“The press is here?” Carmilla asked, running her hands up into her hair again. “They haven’t staked out the apartment since we first moved in.”

“Well what did you expect?” Lilita demanded, giving a nod of greeting to Sherman. “Dropping news like this?”

“We’re not engaged!” Laura blurted. The room went very quiet as all eyes turned to her. She felt herself turning red, so she focused on Carmilla. “We’re not even dating!”

Carmilla crossed her arms over her chest, nodding.

“It’s true,” she shrugged, eyes fixed on her feet. “The rings are actually yours, Mother. We just use them when we go out and don’t want to be bothered by sweaty jocks.”

Carmilla’s mother immediately pulled out her phone and turned away from the group. Laura’s dad
“Explain,” he said shortly. The three of them sat down at the kitchen island while Lilita paced the living room, speaking quietly to someone on her phone. Between the two of them, Laura and Carmilla managed to explain what had happened at the bar the previous night. By the time they were done, Carmilla had her face flat on the counter and Laura’s head was in her hands.

“Oh, so this was all just a misunderstanding,” Sherman said slowly, nodding. Laura rolled her eyes at the disappointed look on his face. He got to his feet and started bustling around the kitchen. “What you girls need now is the Hollis Hangover Helper.”

Carmilla snorted out a laugh from her place on the counter and Laura aimed a rather ineffective punch at her shoulder.

“Don’t laugh, you know from experience how well it works,” Laura chided, grinning.

“I know, but that name always gets me,” Carmilla laughed, swatting Laura’s hand away when she tried to punch her again.

“Alright, both of our publicists are on the way over,” Lilita said suddenly, perching herself on Sherman’s vacated bar stool.

“You called my publicist?” Sherman asked, glancing over his shoulder at her with raised eyebrows as he rummaged in the fridge.

“We’ve worked on enough projects together, Sherman,” Lilita replied with a roll of her eyes. “Betty and I are old friends at this point.”

“I don’t see why we even need her and J.P. here,” Carmilla snapped, lifting her head to frown at her mother. “It’s like Sherman said, this was just a misunderstanding. We can just explain.”

“It’s not that simple, dear,” Lilita replied in a tone that brooked no argument. She frowned as she took a closer look at Carmilla and Laura, all messy hair and wrinkled clothes and smeared makeup. “You two are a mess. What, did you sleep on the floor?”

“Yes,” Carmilla grunted defiantly. Laura shoved her.

“Go get cleaned up,” Lilita said, ignoring her daughter’s outburst. She pointed to the stairs leading to Laura and Carmilla’s bedrooms. “Right now. I expect you both to be presentable by the time Betty and J.P. arrive.”

Carmilla looked ready to argue, but Laura just got up and grabbed her uninjured hand to drag her out of the room.

“There’ll be two Triple H’s ready when you’re done!” Sherman called after them.

“I can’t believe this,” Carmilla grumbled angrily. She poked her head around the shower curtain to glare at Laura, who was at the sink brushing her teeth. “This is your fault, you know.”

Laura shot Carmilla’s glare right back at her, but dissolved into giggles when she saw that Carmilla had used shampoo to slick her hair up into a mohawk.

“Oh sure, totally my fault that your mother is here bossing us around like we’re teenagers again,”
Laura replied after she spit out her toothpaste.

“You’re the one that posted that picture of us,” Carmilla sang, her voice bouncing strangely from inside the shower.

“Yeah well you’re the one that loudly announced to the crowded bar that you were my fiancée,” Laura snorted, pausing in the act of applying her mascara so she could laugh without poking herself in the eye.

“I still maintain I wouldn’t have needed to step in if you’d just killed him.”

“Oh, so you’d rather be all over the tabloids because I killed someone than be engaged to me? Harsh, Carm.”

The shower shut off and Carmilla stuck her hand out from behind the curtain. Laura rolled her eyes again and handed her a towel.

“Thank you.”

“I just don’t get what the big deal is,” Laura sighed, glancing over as Carmilla stepped out of the shower wrapped in a towel. She quickly looked away and tried to fight down her blush. “People have been thinking we were dating since we were like fifteen.”

“The rings make it different,” Carmilla shrugged, leaning over Laura’s shoulder to grab her hairbrush. Laura stiffened, Carmilla’s hair dripping on her neck. Laura hummed thoughtfully.

It had always been like this with them. Since they were kids. There was an effortless closeness that they didn’t experience with anyone else. And it was that very attribute of their friendship that consistently led the media to believe they were a couple.

“Well that and the fact that we’re kinda married,” Laura added when Carmilla backed away. She froze in the doorway to the bathroom.

“Married?“

Laura laughed out loud at the confusion in Carmilla’s voice. She pointed between the two of them.

“Oh come on, you literally just walked in and took a shower while I was brushing my teeth in my underwear,” Laura pointed out, gesturing vaguely to her bra and panties. “And this is not an unusual occurrence.”

“I fail to see your point,” Carmilla said coolly. She strode across the hall to her room, not bothering to close the door behind her.

“We’ve lived together for four years, we go to school together, we do pretty much everything together,” Laura listed. “And we’re both openly gay and in the public eye. What do you expect?”

“I expect people to mind their own damn business.”

“Keep holding onto that dream.”

Carmilla was dressed by the time Laura finished her makeup. They switched places, Carmilla taking over the bathroom mirror and Laura going to her room to get dressed.

“Okay, so we’re kinda married,” Carmilla finally acquiesced, raising her voice so Laura could still hear her. “I still don’t see why Mother is making such a fuss about it.”
“I guess I agree with you there,” Laura admitted slowly as she dug through her closet. “It’ll be kinda nice to have Betty and J.P. yelling at us in person for once.”

“You and I define ‘nice’ very differently.”

“Ugh, this stuff always tastes like tar,” Carmilla grimaced, licking her lips as she placed her glass back on the counter.

“You want taste or you want results?” Sherman asked seriously.

“Should we… be doing something?” Laura asked slowly, eyes fixed to the doorway while she forced down her own Hollis Hangover Helper.

Betty and J.P. had both arrived while the girls were changing. So far, they hadn’t actually made it into the apartment. Carmilla’s mother had started talking the moment she opened the door for them, and five minutes later there was still a very stern conversation happening between the three of them.

Betty was a tall, skinny blonde who was very serious about her job and very serious about life in general. Laura got along with her somehow, as did Sherman, but Carmilla was somewhat terrified of her. She was too much like her mother, even though she was Sherman’s publicist.

J.P. on the other hand was a handsome, if harried, young British man. He was serious about his work as well, but he was also soft-spoken and kind in all the places Betty was harsh. How he and Lilita Morgan managed to work together was generally considered a mystery, though it may have had something to do with his uncanny resemblance to Carmilla’s little brother Will. She just couldn’t be too hard on him when he looked like her youngest.

“No,” Carmilla answered bluntly, eyeing her drink with distrust. “I’m on summer vacation. I refuse to worry about anything until September.”

“Why couldn’t you have adopted that attitude twenty four hours ago?” Laura sighed.

“So this is still my fault, huh?”

“Shush, they’re coming over,” Laura hissed, swatting Carmilla’s arm.

“I can see that, stop hitting me,” Carmilla growled, slapping at Laura’s hand.

“Okay, so,” J.P. began, all smiles even though his eyes were nervous. “First of all, just to make sure… how would you two feel about actually getting engaged?”

Laura nearly fell off her barstool and Carmilla spat out the sip of Triple H she’d just taken.

“Right. Yes. I thought as much,” J.P. muttered, wringing his hands. “So that’s option one off the table.”

“Why can’t we just explain everything?” Laura blurted, patting a spluttering Carmilla on the back. “Release a statement about what happened last night?”

“That’s what I’d like to know,” Sherman added as he offered Carmilla a napkin.

“Really Sherman?” Lilita sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. “This sort of thing could be a
mild scandal on its own, but considering the film we are both in that is premiering at the end of the summer? This could be taken as a joke, and in very poor taste, which would be disastrous.”

“What are you talking about?” Carmilla grunted when she finally stopped choking.

Laura and Sherman exchanged a worried glance.

“I forgot about that,” Laura admitted. She turned to Carmilla, nervously biting her lip. “The movie they did about the Supreme Court that ruled on marriage equality. It’s coming out at the end of July.”

“So?” Carmilla sighed.

“So, the two of you accidentally announcing your engagement to your many young, impressionable social media followers has become kind of a big deal,” Betty said swiftly. She frowned at Laura. “Have you read any of the comments on the picture yet? Any of the response on Twitter? You’ve become America’s Sweethearts overnight.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Carmilla groaned, dropping her head back onto the counter.

“Carm… she’s not kidding,” Laura said quietly, eyes glued to her phone as she scrolled through the comments. “It seems like we really… inspired a lot of people.”

“Buzzfeed has already called me three times to try to get an official statement from any of you,” Betty sighed as she reached up to massage her temples.

“They’ve only called me twice,” J.P. replied, and Betty just glared at him. He laughed awkwardly. “Sorry.”

“So if we can’t just tell the truth, what exactly are you suggesting we do?” Carmilla deadpanned. She seemed to have gotten to the point before anyone else was ready, and the room fell silent. She just raised an eyebrow and took a long drink of her Triple H.

“We are suggesting that you release a statement confirming that you’re engaged,” Betty said delicately.

Carmilla swallowed hard and set her glass back down on the counter with more force than was probably necessary.

“Come again?” she demanded.

“You just pretend to be engaged until after the movie premieres,” J.P. cut in awkwardly. “Once it’s past the first week in the box office, we release another statement that you’ve decided to end the engagement.”

“You know, the whole ‘we’re better as friends’ crap that people on TV are always pulling,” Betty said with a shrug.

“And you think people will buy that?” Carmilla asked, rolling her eyes.

“By then no one will care about it anymore,” Betty replied with a dismissive wave of her hand. “It’s three months away. Pop culture will have moved on by then.”

“It’s the best idea we have,” Lilita said simply, shrugging as if they were discussing the weather.

“I don’t like it,” Sherman admitted with a frown. “Making the girls lie for us.”
“What are your thoughts?” J.P. asked Laura and Carmilla quickly, recognizing the glare Lilita was sending Sherman.

Carmilla turned her gaze to Laura, her hard expression visibly softening as she did so.

“You’ve been quiet,” Carmilla said simply, nudging Laura with her elbow.

Laura glanced up at her, eyes wide. Her phone was still in her hand, scrolling through the comments on the picture.

“I think… we should do it,” Laura said quietly. Carmilla’s eyebrows shot up. Laura held up her phone. “Look at what all these people are saying, Carm. People are happy for us. People are proud of us.” Carmilla took the phone slowly, eyes scanning over the words on the screen. “If we just say it’s nothing, it won’t just be the movie that gets hurt.”

“So that’s four votes to two,” Betty said quickly, tugging her phone from her purse like she’d been waiting for it. “Let’s get down to business.”

“Wait,” Laura cut her off with a glare. “I’m not doing this unless Carmilla agrees.”

Carmilla closed her eyes and took a deep breath through her nose. Then she grabbed Laura by the elbow.

“We need to talk about this,” she said tightly. “Alone.”

Laura just nodded and got to her feet, allowing Carmilla to lead her up the stairs and into her bedroom. Laura sat down on Carmilla’s bed immediately, watching Carmilla as she paced.

“I don’t like this,” Carmilla finally said, her voice low and tense.

“I know,” Laura replied calmly, leaning back on her hands and just following Carmilla with her eyes.

“I mean… it’s not like I set out to be anybody’s role model,” Carmilla continued, frowning. “We didn’t choose to be famous, you know. We were born into this.”

“I know,” Laura repeated, nodding. She knew Carmilla needed to vent, so she just listened. Carmilla started biting her nails as she paced, an old nervous habit that she only displayed when she was really stressed. Laura reached out and took Carmilla’s hands in hers to stop her, squeezing her right hand and just holding her left, which was still bruised. “But that didn’t stop you from becoming my role model.”

Carmilla stared at her, eyebrows slowly rising up her forehead.

“What?” she asked simply, a skeptical smile tugging at her lips. Laura laughed and looked down at their hands.

“I’ve gotten so much braver since I met you,” she said quietly. “You taught me that. You taught me to be confident and stand up for myself and not care what anybody else thinks about me.”

“So why do you think we should be pandering to the press like this?” Carmilla sighed, leaning in and lacing their fingers together idly.

“Because this movie is important,” Laura replied with a shrug, causing Carmilla to roll her eyes. Laura squeezed her right hand again and laughed. “It is, whether you like it or not. We’ve had it
really good, with our parents being so supportive. I know it took your mom a little while when you first came out, but she came around and she’s been in your corner ever since.” Carmilla sighed and looked away, her gaze drifting out the window. Laura just watched her, smiling. “I think we can return the favor.”

Carmilla was silent for a long time, and Laura could practically hear her thinking. Her fingers twitched as she thought, but Laura just held them steadily.

“Okay,” Carmilla finally said. She returned her gaze to Laura, offering her a small smile. “I’ll do this. But I have conditions.”

“Do go on.”

Carmilla rolled her eyes, but she couldn’t fight the smile that Laura’s tone brought to her face.

“We need to be honest with each other,” she said firmly. “If they want us to do something that makes either of us uncomfortable, we don’t do it. Okay?”

“Of course,” Laura replied seriously.

“And when this is all over, we go back to the way things were,” Carmilla continued, her tone softening. She looked down at her feet. “I can’t lose you as a friend, Laura. So we won’t let this change us. Okay?”

Laura had to consciously tell herself to take a breath. Carmilla wasn’t usually the one saying things like that. Even with Laura, there were limits to how much she would open up.

“Okay,” Laura said softly. “It’ll only be weird if we let it be weird.”

“Right.”

They settled into silence for a moment, Laura’s right hand still gently holding Carmilla’s left. She ran her thumb idly over the ring.

“You know I can’t lose you either, right?” Laura said at length, glancing up at Carmilla through her eyelashes.

Carmilla smiled, looking away to try to fight the blush that Laura could already see on her cheeks.

“I know,” she sighed. Then she tugged on Laura’s hand, stepping back to pull her to her feet. “Let’s go get this over with.”

Laura laughed lightly, lacing their fingers together as they walked.

“Like I said earlier, we’re already kinda married,” she said with a shrug. “This is going to be easy.”

This was not going to be easy.

Pretending to be engaged to your best friend is one thing. Pretending to be engaged to your best friend who you’ve been in love with since you were kids is another thing entirely.

Laura tapped her fingers restlessly on the kitchen counter as she watched everyone else talk.
Carmilla was pacing again, remaining silent while J.P., Betty, and their parents discussed their next step. The conversation had faded to a low buzz in the background while Laura focused on quelling the panic rising in her chest.

Clearly she had inherited some of her father’s acting skills, because there was no one better at pretending to be totally okay with something that was absolutely not okay than Laura Hollis. There was almost no way she would come out of this without getting her heart broken, but self-preservation had never been her strong suit. She cared too much about everyone else.

Stupid selflessness.

Laura closed her eyes, focusing on her breathing.

She had been okay for a long time now. She had accepted the fact that Carmilla wasn’t in love with her. Not like Laura was in love with Carmilla. And that hurt like hell for most of her teenage years. But if she could only have Carmilla as her best friend, that was enough. More than enough. Because Carmilla made her happy.

Sure, pining sucked. But it was just another thing Laura had accepted.

She was good at that, too. Pretending to be okay and accepting things that really sucked. Again with the lack of self-preservation. She really needed to work on that.

Laura opened her eyes, turning her gaze from the argument happening between her father and his publicist and letting it gravitate to Carmilla. She had a certain way in which she paced. Slow, careful, graceful, powerful. She didn’t look directly at her mother, but it was clear that her attention was there. Always out of the corner of her eye, watching. Waiting.

God, Laura really loved her.

But maybe this was the time to practice reckless optimism. Maybe this could be a good thing, pretending to be engaged to Carmilla.

They wouldn’t have to do much. Just hold hands when they went out together, be a bit more… touchy. They just had to act like a couple, and maybe that was just what Laura needed. Maybe a couple months of acting, pretending like Carmilla was in love with her, would be enough. Get it out of her system. Like when you have a song stuck in your head and you just have to listen to it all the way through once and then it’s gone.

She could do this. She could be fake engaged to Carmilla until August, and then go back to being friends. Because being her best friend was enough. That’s what she’d been telling herself for the last six years, so it had to be true.

With a final deep breath, Laura pulled herself back into the present. They were arguing over how to go about confirming the engagement. Laura just sighed and pulled out her phone.

“Carm, come here,” she said quietly, holding her hand out and wiggling her fingers. Carmilla stopped pacing and came to her side without question. “We’ll handle this ourselves.”

A few minutes later, Betty’s phone started dinging. J.P.’s followed soon after. Google Alerts was informing them that Laura2theLetter had posted a new photo on Instagram.

The picture showed Laura beaming, Carmilla pressing a kiss to her cheek. In the foreground, both of their left hands were visible holding up only their ring fingers, flashing their rings at the camera.
Sherman, Lilita, Betty, and J.P. all looked up from Betty’s phone to find Laura and Carmilla sitting silently at the kitchen island, waiting. Laura grinned.

“So, now that’s out of the way,” she said with a shrug. Carmilla smirked. “What’s next?”

That was how it started. On the first Saturday morning in June. And when Laura looked back on it, she could almost hear the sound of her entire life quietly derailing in the distance.

J.P. made them a list of rules. Though he called them guidelines in an attempt to make it seem like they weren’t just telling the girls what to do.

They had to keep wearing the rings. They couldn’t date anyone else. When one of them went out, the other had to come along. And when the cameras were on them, they had to act like they were in love.

And no, they were not allowed to just hole up in their apartment until the end of July. Carmilla had asked.

They couldn’t tell their friends, and unless absolutely necessary they wouldn’t tell Carmilla’s siblings either. It would be easy with Will, but her older sister Mattie was an expert at telling when Carmilla was lying.

It was well past noon when everyone finally left Laura and Carmilla alone in their apartment. Laura had turned her phone off an hour ago, overwhelmed and annoyed with the amount of social media notifications and text messages she was receiving. Carmilla had simply thrown hers across the room shortly after Laura posted the picture.

They collapsed on the couch together with a fresh icepack on Carmilla’s hand, Laura’s head falling to Carmilla’s shoulder and Carmilla’s head resting on hers. Bagheera finally emerged, winding between Carmilla’s legs before leaping up and settling in Laura’s lap.

“I’m sorry about all this,” Carmilla sighed. Laura frowned.

“What are you talking about?”

“You were right, it’s my fault,” Carmilla grumbled, wiggling herself further into the couch cushions. “I said I was your fiancée and I decked that guy. I got us into this mess.”

“Carm, I was kidding,” Laura laughed incredulously, turning her head on Carmilla’s shoulder and looking up at her with wide eyes. “This isn’t really something we can blame someone for. It just kind of happened.”

“You sure?” Carmilla asked skeptically, turning so her forehead was pressed against Laura’s hairline.

“Completely,” Laura sighed as her eyes fluttered closed. “Now stop worrying. You think too loud and we both need a nap.”

Carmilla just grinned and closed her eyes, reaching her right hand over to scratch Bagheera’s ears. He started purring and the sound lulled both girls to sleep.
The official story broke later that day. Lilita Morgan and Sherman Hollis both confirmed to the press that their daughters had been dating off and on since they were eighteen. It had gotten serious in the past couple of years, and two days ago Laura had proposed.

(They’d played rock paper scissors to decide who got to propose. Carmilla was awful at rock paper scissors.)

The internet exploded, and by the next day there were rumors ranging from one of them suffering from a life-threatening illness with a wedding as a dying wish to one of them being pregnant.

(Laura and Carmilla had a good laugh about that one. Being gay wasn’t exactly the leading cause of unplanned pregnancies.)

Taking Betty’s advice, they didn’t leave the apartment until Tuesday. By then, there were hundreds of Pinterest boards dedicated to what their wedding should look like, and Twitter was still arguing over what their official couple name should be: Carmaura or Hollstein?

In short, according to Carmilla, Hollywood had finally lost its goddamn mind.

J.P. texted Laura on Tuesday morning to let her know they should probably go out that day. He suggested they just go get lunch somewhere.

“Okay, sure,” Carmilla sighed, rolling to the edge of her bed to sit up while Laura leaned in her doorway scrutinizing her phone. “Let’s just go to Tacos Por Favor like usual.”

“Oh thank god, I’ve been dying for fish tacos,” Laura sighed dramatically, crossing the room and flopping onto Carmilla’s bed next to her. “Which reminds me, we need to go grocery shopping before we come home.”

“Ugh,” Carmilla grunted, glancing over at her with a pout. “I hate grocery shopping.”

“I know,” Laura shrugged, reaching out and tugging on the hem of the Runaways t-shirt Carmilla always slept in. “But we’ve been stuck in this apartment for three days and we’re out of food.”

“Can’t we just make Kirsch do it?” Carmilla whined, fidgeting a bit when Laura’s knuckles brushed her hipbone and it tickled. Laura grinned and Carmilla slapped her hand away.

“No, Kirsch is doing his actual job today,” Laura replied, eyes following Carmilla as she bent over and scooped a pair of jeans off the floor. She slept in just the t-shirt and her panties, so she immediately shimmied into the pants and collapsed back onto the bed. “He is your mother’s driver you know, not ours.”

“Whatever.”

Carmilla rolled onto her side to face Laura, who wrinkled her nose.

“Don’t you even give your clothes like… the sniff test before you wear them off the floor?” she asked, eyebrows raised.

“And yet you’re still marrying me,” Carmilla hummed, grinning and sticking her tongue out between her teeth. She leaned in and poked Laura’s nose with it.

Laura’s gaze immediately dropped away. She was usually the one initiating the close contact.
Whenever Carmilla did it, it threw her. Made her hopeful. And that was never a good idea. So she rolled out of the bed quickly, shooting a text to J.P. with their plan.

“Hurry up and get ready,” she said lightly over her shoulder as she left the room. “I’m starving.”

“If Kirsch is doing his actual job, how are we getting there?” Carmilla called after her.

“I’m driving.”

“Noooo, I wanna drive.”

“We can’t carry groceries on a motorcycle, Carmilla. I’m driving.”

“Ugh. Fine.”

The cameras followed them from the moment they left the apartment. There weren’t as many as there had been waiting outside that first day, but for a pair of college students who described themselves as “second-hand famous,” it was still a bit overwhelming.

The paparazzi couldn’t follow them into the restaurant, so they had a break while they ate lunch. Things were surprisingly normal for a good half hour, huddled at a table together in the back of Tacos Por Favor, stealing sips of each other’s horchata and laughing together like usual.

But pretty soon it was clear that the rest of the restaurant had realized who they were. There were a lot of entirely unsubtle pictures snapped of them, people with iPhones in their hands en route to the restroom and taking photos of their food with oddly low angles.

On their way out, however, they were stopped by someone. A girl, probably around fifteen or sixteen years old, with glasses and a nervous smile.

“I’m so sorry to bug you,” she said, her voice soft as she wrung her hands anxiously. “I just wanted to say thanks.”

Carmilla and Laura shared a bewildered look. The girl scratched the back of her neck and looked at her feet.

“Seeing you guys just being who you are and being happy together really helped me out, you know?” she laughed lightly. “Plus the fact that people have been so supportive of you has calmed my grandparents down about me being bi.”

“Oh,” Laura said, blinking in surprise. She was blushing a bit as she glanced back at the girl’s table, where her grandparents offered them small smiles and waves. “Wow, that’s… that’s great.”

“Yeah,” the girl laughed again, looking up at Carmilla. But Carmilla seemed stunned by the whole thing and was just staring at her with her mouth open. Laura nudged her with her elbow and she jumped. The girl laughed again. “So anyway… just… thanks.”

Without warning, she grabbed Carmilla in a hug. Then she did the same to Laura, who had longer to prepare but was still caught off guard. The girl scurried back to her table and dropped into her chair, chattering away animatedly to her grandparents the second she sat down.

Carmilla turned her blank stare to Laura. Laura just slowly smiled at her.
“Come on,” Laura giggled, looping two fingers through one of Carmilla’s belt loops and tugging her out the door.

The moment they reached the sidewalk, cameras started flashing. The paparazzi were still waiting outside for them and they all started shouting.

“Laura! Carmilla! Over here!”

“Carmilla, is your mom still upset that you’re a lesbian?”

“Why did you keep your relationship a secret for so long?”

“Let’s see the rings!”

Carmilla immediately adopted a scowl and put her sunglasses on, turning away from the cameras. She threw an arm over Laura’s shoulders.

“They’re blocking the way to the car,” she said quietly, leaning over and speaking into Laura’s ear. Laura fought down a blush. “We’re only a couple blocks from the grocery store. Let’s walk.”

They set off walking down the sidewalk, Carmilla moving at a brisk pace with her arm still hanging over Laura’s shoulders. Laura was struggling to walk, stuck to Carmilla’s side at an odd angle.

“What are you doing?” Laura laughed, attempting to extricate herself from Carmilla’s grip.

“What do you mean?”

“The arm, the walk,” Laura grunted, finally managing to duck under Carmilla’s arm. “You’re acting like a total dude-bro.”

Carmilla stopped walking, turning to Laura with dramatically raised eyebrows and a scoff.

“Excuse you,” she blurted, and Laura laughed again. The paparazzi were still behind them, snapping pictures from several yards back. The girls ignored them. “This is how I act when I’m with someone.”

“Yeah, and it always looked weird when you were with other girls, too,” Laura huffed.

“Then what do you suggest I do?”

“Just be yourself, Carm. Be the way you always are with me.”

Laura reached for the inside of Carmilla’s wrist and slid her hand down, slowly lacing their fingers together. She resumed walking, tugging Carmilla along with her, and Carmilla smiled at her.

“There,” Laura sighed, humming in a pleased sort of way. “Isn’t that better?”

Carmilla rolled her eyes, letting out a quiet laugh.

“Yes, oh wise one,” she said dramatically. Then she sent Laura a mischievous look, a look Laura usually saw right before she got in trouble. “But I have an even better idea.”

All Laura could do was squint at her suspiciously before Carmilla darted behind her and wrapped her arms around her waist, picking her up and spinning her until she couldn’t hold in her laughter.
any longer.

“Carm, oh my god!”

The sound of the cameras clicking faded into the background as Carmilla’s laugh joined Laura’s.

Laura rode the rest of the way to the store on Carmilla’s back, giggling the entire way.

By the time they got home from grocery shopping, there were no less than a thousand pictures of them online. Pictures of them leaving the apartment, pictures of them entering the restaurant, pictures of them holding hands, pictures of Carmilla spinning Laura around on the sidewalk, pictures of Carmilla giving Laura a piggyback ride, pictures of them leaving the grocery store laden with bags.

The crazy part was that if the paparazzi had been following them the past few years, the pictures would have been mostly the same. Laura was touchy. She liked holding Carmilla’s hand when they walked together. She liked cuddling up to Carmilla on the couch. And Carmilla hadn’t been quite so forthcoming when they were younger, but being with Laura so long, she’d picked up the same habits. It was the way they had been together for years.

But with a pair of Tiffany rings on their fingers, it was front page news.

“Some of these pictures of us are actually really cute,” Laura said with a grin, cutting her eyes at Carmilla as she sat at the kitchen island and scrolled through her phone. “You’re even smiling in a few of them.”

“You’re hilarious,” Carmilla drawled from her place by the stove. Between the two of them, Carmilla was the cook. Left to her own devices, Laura would survive entirely on cookies and grape soda. So Carmilla didn’t really mind making them dinner most nights. “Here, try this.”

Laura glanced up to find a spoon in front of her face, Carmilla cupping her hand under it to keep from dripping. Her gaze traveled up Carmilla’s arm to her face. Her cheeks were a bit pink from standing over the hot stove and her eyes were soft and sparkling as she waited for Laura to taste the sauce she was offering. Laura opened her mouth mindlessly, paying more attention to the way Carmilla’s fingers brushed her nose when she pulled back than what she was tasting. For a moment, anyway.

“Wow, this is delicious,” Laura said, blinking up at Carmilla. Carmilla grinned and turned back to the stove. “What is it?”

“Sauce béchamel aux champignons,” Carmilla purred, and as it always did, her perfect French accent made Laura’s stomach do a funny flip. “I’ve never used this recipe before.”

“You could just say ‘mushroom sauce’ you know,” Laura teased, returning her blushing gaze to her phone and saving a few of the pictures she found where Carmilla was smiling.

“But where’s the fun in that, ma chérie?”

Laura groaned and rolled her eyes dramatically, grinning at the sound of Carmilla’s laugh. She settled into it, warm and familiar, and before she knew it Carmilla was sitting across from her at the kitchen island, watching her silently.

“So, our first day out as an engaged couple,” Carmilla said quietly. She leaned her chin on her hand, one corner of her mouth turning up in the barest hint of a smile. “Kind of felt like a regular day.”
“Yeah,” Laura agreed, reaching over and grabbing Carmilla’s left hand. She pulled it closer, inspecting the platinum ring identical to her own. “But it’s like I said before. We were already kinda married.”

Carmilla squeezed her fingers suddenly, lacing their hands together.

“I thought you were exaggerating the first time you said it,” she admitted with a wry smile. “But it turns out you were right.”

Laura hummed a bit, trying not to blush as she glanced away. She was reminded once again of how possible it was to love someone so much it hurt.

“Rule number one of being fake married to me,” she shrugged. “I’m always right.”

“Funny, that’s rule number one of being fake married to me, too.”

Laura watched as Carmilla squeezed Laura’s hand again before pulling away, going back to the stove to check on dinner. Her heart felt like it was swelling, she felt so much fondness and adoration and love for Carmilla in that moment. She sighed to herself and set a picture from earlier in the day as her phone background. Carmilla had her hands around her waist and Laura had her head thrown back, and they were both laughing so hard their eyes were closed.

Carmilla started humming Cheap Trick at the stove, her hips swaying to the beat of I Want You To Want Me, and Laura’s heart beat so hard it felt like it was punching her in the chest.

Yeah. She was screwed.

Laura and Carmilla had met the first time their parents did a movie together. They were both ten years old at the time, and they connected instantly.

It wasn’t until five years later that Laura realized it had been love at first sight.

That the butterflies she felt in her stomach just at the thought of her best friend weren’t normal. That the growing urge to kiss her wasn’t just something everyone felt about their best friend. That the idea of being without her made her feel like she couldn’t breathe and that wasn’t just an ordinary feeling.

When they were fifteen and sitting on the roof of Carmilla’s mother’s vacation home in Monaco, Carmilla tracing the constellations with her finger and telling Laura all of their names and stories, Laura knew. She could lay there forever in the warm summer night, listening to Carmilla’s voice and holding Carmilla’s hand and watching the way Carmilla’s eyes lit up when she told the story of Cassiopeia, then softly murmured “Cassiopée” in a flawless French accent that she was still convinced wasn’t perfect.

But it was. And she was. She was perfect, and Laura knew.

And she was fifteen, and Carmilla was her best friend, so naturally it scared the hell out of her.

It wasn’t until she was sixteen and had just been devastated by a messy breakup and Carmilla snuck out of her house (where she was grounded for smoking) with a case of wine coolers (which she had stolen from her mother) and climbed through Laura’s bedroom window at one in the morning just to get her to stop crying that Laura brought it up.
They were both drunk for the first time, curled up in a blanket fort Carmilla had hastily made with sheets and a desk chair and Laura’s bedposts, and Laura had finally stopped crying. She hadn’t mentioned the fact that her girlfriend had broken up with her because it was obvious she had feelings for Carmilla. She just said they’d broken up, and that was all Carmilla needed to offer to key the girl’s car and come racing to the rescue.

“Have you ever thought about it?” Laura asked quietly, looking over at Carmilla from where her head was resting on her stomach. Her voice was low and raspy from crying and her words were just a bit soft on the ends from drinking. “Being together? You and me?”

Carmilla stiffened. Laura could feel her holding her breath. The silence was heavy and it made Laura’s head hurt.

“I’ve… thought about it,” Carmilla admitted after a painfully long time.

“You don’t…” Laura began laboriously. She sniffed and looked away, rubbing her nose self-consciously with the back of her hand. “You don’t like me that way.”

Carmilla was silent again, and Laura chanced a look at her. Her eyes were shut tight and her jaw was clenched so hard the muscles in her neck stood out. She took in a shaky breath that Laura felt more than she heard.

“I would just… I would break your heart,” Carmilla whispered. “We shouldn’t… we’re better the way we are.”

“Okay,” Laura murmured, looking away so Carmilla couldn’t see the fresh tears gathering in her eyes. She rolled off of her, carefully putting space between them and grabbing her favorite yellow pillow to hug to her chest. “I’m sorry I… I shouldn’t have said anything…”

“No, don’t… don’t be sorry,” Carmilla stammered, turning her head to look at Laura with wide eyes. But Laura couldn’t meet her gaze. “I just… I’m sorry, I just…”

“It’s fine,” Laura cut her off, surprising herself by curling into Carmilla’s side and closing her eyes tight. “I’m just glad you’re here.”

“I’ll always be here,” Carmilla whispered into Laura’s hair.

Laura fell asleep shortly after that. When she woke up she felt awful, both from her first hangover and her broken heart. But they never discussed the conversation. They pretended it had never happened. They went back to the way things were, but Laura could see a shadow of it in the way Carmilla looked at her.

At age eighteen, Laura accepted the fact that she was never going to get over Carmilla Karnstein. She was going to be in love with her forever, and that was just a fact of life that she would deal with. It hurt, seeing her with other girls. Which was fairly common, given Carmilla’s tendency to have a different girl in her bed every night of the week. And it hurt being with other girls. And it hurt so much and so often that she gave up on dating altogether when she was twenty.

So here she was at twenty two, sitting in her downstairs neighbor’s apartment at the end of June and staring at a text message from Betty saying that there were unpleasant rumors flying and to head them off she and Carmilla would have to let the paparazzi get a picture of them kissing by the end of the week.

“This is ridiculous,” Laura sighed, glancing over at Danny’s dog, Summer.
When Laura and Carmilla moved in, Danny had already lived in her apartment with her husky for a year. They all became fast friends, Laura warming up to her more than Carmilla, and Laura fed and walked Summer whenever Danny was out of town. Which was fairly often for a successful stunt woman.

Summer made one of those odd sounds only huskies could make, whining as if in response to Laura’s predicament.

“I know,” Laura sighed, burying her face in her hands. “I agreed to this. I can only blame myself.” She peered at the dog through her parted fingers. “And it’s just one kiss. It’s not like it’ll kill me.”

Both Laura and Summer jumped when someone started pounding on the door.

“Laura!” Carmilla called from outside. “Please tell me you’re still in there!”

“It’s unlocked, Carm,” Laura shouted back.

Carmilla immediately burst into the apartment, slamming the door behind her and brandishing her phone like a grenade.

“Did you get this text from Betty?” she demanded, not even glancing down at Summer when she trotted over and sat down at Carmilla’s feet.

“Yep,” Laura replied simply, flopping back onto the couch.

Carmilla knelt down on the floor, burying her face in Summer’s fur and groaning.

“We said we wouldn’t let this get weird,” Carmilla grumbled, the sound muffled in the husky’s fluffy neck.

“It doesn’t have to be weird,” Laura shrugged. “I mean… it wouldn’t even be our first kiss, technically.”

Carmilla glared up at Laura, who was grinning at her teasingly.

“Okay, that peck on the lips when we were thirteen doesn’t count.”

Laura gasped, a hand on her chest in mock horror.

“Doesn’t count?” she repeated dramatically. “Carmilla, you wound me. It was my first kiss!”

“Yeah, mine too, that was kind of the point, remember?” Carmilla teased right back, getting up and dropping onto the couch beside Laura. “To get it out of the way so we wouldn’t have to worry about it anymore.”

Laura glanced over at her, a small smile on her face. Her teasing seemed to have done its job. Carmilla was clearly no longer anxious, sprawled beside her on the sofa like a ragdoll. She turned to look at Laura after a few silent moments, her face softening visibly the second their eyes met. Laura forced herself to take a slow breath.

“We never talked about it afterward,” Laura said quietly. “I’m surprised you even remember.”

Carmilla smiled at her. That soft, secretive smile of hers that started out as a smirk but just got warmer and wider as her cheeks turned pink. The smile reserved exclusively for Laura.
“It was my first kiss, cutie,” she said lowly. “How could I forget?”

Laura swallowed hard and looked away. She sat up quickly.

“Want to take Summer for a walk with me?” she asked, forcing her voice to sound casual as she hooked the leash onto Summer’s collar.

“Oh what the hell,” Carmilla sighed, slowly rolling to her feet. She stretched languidly and Laura stared pointedly at the dog, who was hopping excitedly by the door. “Maybe if Bagheera smells dog on me he’ll get jealous and finally like me better than you.”

“He’s your cat,” Laura laughed, walking through the door as Carmilla held it open for her. “He already likes you better than me.”

“We both know that’s not true,” Carmilla said seriously, but her tone was offset by her smile. She held her hand out and Laura took it automatically. “Stupid disloyal cat.”

“I’ll give you disloyal, but since he prefers me he’s obviously not stupid.”

“So you admit it!” Carmilla clutched her chest dramatically. “If a girl can’t trust her own cat and fake fiancée, who can she trust?”

Summer barked, and Laura burst out laughing.

They walked Summer down to the beach and took turns throwing a tennis ball for her until she laid down in the shade and fell asleep. Laura and Carmilla sat down with her, watching the waves and the beachgoers and playing “spot the tourist.”

They’d made it through almost one month of their fake engagement. The fervor was dying down, which was a relief for everyone involved. But now Betty was getting some unpleasant questions. Questions that apparently took the lack of kissing to mean the whole thing was fake. That they just set it up as a publicity stunt. And the last thing anyone wants in a scam is for people to find out it’s a scam.

“Only one camera followed us all the way here,” Laura said quietly, tilting her head slightly toward where the man was sitting up the beach.

“A welcome change,” Carmilla hummed. Laura bit her lip.

“You recognized him, right?” she asked.

“Mr. Nice Guy,” Carmilla agreed.

They had given nicknames to a few of their regular paparazzi. Mr. Nice Guy was the only one of the bunch who was consistently polite to them, even going so far as to tell off the others when they were getting too rowdy. On the opposite end of that spectrum was Douchewaffle. He wasn’t really worth talking about.

“I think we should give him the money shot,” Laura said thoughtfully. Carmilla turned to her, eyebrows raised.

“You want me to take my shirt off?” she asked with feigned incredulity. Laura rolled her eyes.
“Come on, Carm. If anyone is going to get a picture of us kissing, might as well be an apparently decent human being.”

“No, you’re right,” Carmilla sighed, smiling just a bit. If Laura didn’t know any better, she’d say she looked nervous. “It’s kind of a golden opportunity, or whatever.” She pushed her sunglasses up onto her head, eyes darting nervously around Laura’s face. Laura found her shyness oddly charming. “So how do you want to uh…”

Laura didn’t let her finish the sentence. She just reached up to the back of Carmilla’s neck and pulled her in, all sure movements and easy confidence that belied how badly she was freaking out right now. Maybe she was a better actress than she thought.

But then she wasn’t thinking at all, because she was kissing Carmilla. And it was awesome. But also a really bad idea.

She smiled into it, setting a languid pace, like it was something they did every day. Carmilla’s warm lips and the easy sigh she let out through her nose were addicting, and therein was the really bad idea.

Laura wanted this. She wanted this so badly. She wanted this to be the first thing she woke up to in the morning and the last thing before she fell asleep at night. She wanted this when she left for classes and when she got home from dinner with her dad. She wanted this, with Carmilla, for the rest of her life.

But it wasn’t real.

She pulled back slowly, the smile still on her face, and felt Carmilla lean in to chase her lips. But when she felt the distance she stopped, and Laura’s eyes fluttered open to find Carmilla staring at her with her lips parted and her eyebrows raised.

“Wow,” Carmilla said blankly, and Laura couldn’t help herself. She laughed. Carmilla immediately turned bright red, and it just made Laura laugh harder.

“Wow?” Laura repeated. “Carmilla Karnstein, lady-killer extraordinaire, just gave me a wow!” Carmilla’s lips twitched, a move Laura recognized as her trying not to laugh. “I feel like I should get a medal or something.”

“Oh shut up,” Carmilla grumbled, finally slipping into a smile as she leaned back in. She silenced Laura’s giggles with another kiss, shorter and softer than the first. Carmilla kissed with purpose, steady and warm and breathtaking. This time it was Laura sighing into Carmilla’s mouth, and Laura could feel it intimately when Carmilla’s lips curved up into a smile.

Laura was still grinning when she pulled back and Carmilla just rolled her eyes as she got to her feet. She offered Laura a hand to pull her up after her, and Summer made another odd husky noise as she got up from the sand, and without further ado they started the walk back home hand in hand.

Mr. Nice Guy made eye contact with Carmilla as they left, and she threw him a wink and a salute. Laura started laughing again.

By the next day, pictures of the two of them kissing on the beach were on every entertainment and gossip site on the internet. Laura didn’t save any of those pictures. Every time she looked at them, she’d just have to remind herself it wasn’t real, it wasn’t real, it wasn’t real.
Betty and J.P. sent them a box of donuts and a thank you card.

It was the beginning of July when things inevitably went wrong.

They had gone out nearly every night this week, getting dinner at nice restaurants and seeing movies and dancing at clubs and drinking at bars. Nearly everywhere they went someone thanked them like that first girl at Tacos Por Favor, and a few people even asked for pictures with them.

But today was their day off from the media circus, so Carmilla was in her room being philosophical and broody, and Laura managed to do nothing all morning until she felt guilty for wasting the day and went to get their mail.

She kicked the apartment door shut behind her, eyes focused on the stack of mail in her hands. She grinned at the first item.

“Carm, your copy of Book Nerds Monthly is here!” she called.

“It’s called The New Yorker, Laura.”

The grumpy edge to Carmilla’s reply was softened a bit by the distance from her bedroom, but Laura still laughed. She paused in the living room, flipping through the mail absent-mindedly until she reached something in the middle of the pile.

The rest of the mail dropped to the floor, bills and magazines scattering across the carpet.

She heard Carmilla say something else, but it was like the sound was travelling through syrup. The words didn’t make sense. The entire world had shrunk down to the post card in Laura’s shaking hands.

Her eyes raced over the words at high speed, but she couldn’t seem to absorb them. Her senses were flooded with panic, her heartbeat thudding rapidly in her ears, her breathing high and shallow. She heard Carmilla’s voice again. It was far away. Everything was far away. She was underwater and it was dark and everything was spinning because the post card in her fingers started with “Dear Laura,” and ended with “Love, Mom.”

Every time, this happened. Every single time.

“Laura.”

Laura’s head snapped up at the sound, wide eyes fixing on Carmilla, who was standing right in front of her. When had she come downstairs? How long had she been standing there?

“Look at me,” Carmilla said, her voice quiet and firm. Laura nodded, latching onto the sound of Carmilla’s voice and the color of her eyes. She made sense. Carmilla made sense. Carmilla could make her head stop spinning and her heart stop hurting. She always did.

Carmilla’s soft hands were on her face, holding her in place as she stepped in close. Laura waited for her soothing smell to embrace her, but it didn’t come.

“Breathe, honey,” Carmilla whispered, thumbs brushing tears from her cheekbones that she didn’t remember shedding. “You have to breathe for me.”

Laura took in a gasping breath. Carmilla’s warm, comforting smell finally broke through, like pine
“Look at me,” Carmilla repeated, and Laura obeyed without thinking. Carmilla was closer now, standing toe-to-toe with her and holding her gaze. “Just focus on me. It’s okay. You’re okay.”

Laura nodded again. She was squeezing the post card so hard the edge was cutting into her palm, and Carmilla knew. She noticed somehow, though her eyes never left Laura’s, and her hands slid down from her cheeks to her shoulders, moving slow and soft down her arms. They stopped at Laura’s shaking hands, tugging the post card gently out of her fingers and squeezing both of Laura’s hands in her empty one.

She had backed them over to the couch somehow, and Carmilla eased down onto the cushions, pulling Laura into her lap. And before she knew it, Laura was wrapped around her, sobbing into her neck with reckless abandon.

“I know, darling, I know,” Carmilla whispered into Laura’s hair.

Laura felt like she was breaking open. She was going insane, or maybe dying, because there was no other way to explain this violent reaction every few years when her mom remembered she existed. Her throat was raw and she felt dizzy and sick. But Carmilla made it better.

Carmilla’s hand was running up and down Laura’s back, the action slow and soothing and repetitive. Something Laura could focus on. She matched her breathing to it, a slow rhythm that made so much more sense than anything else in the world in that moment. Her other arm was wrapped around Laura’s waist, holding her close while she pressed kisses to Laura’s head.

“I’m sorry,” Laura gasped, the sound raspy in her throat. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry I always do this…”

“Hush,” Carmilla murmured, her hand never ceasing in its path up and down Laura’s spine. “It’s okay. Just listen to my voice. Just keep breathing.”

Laura nodded. She couldn’t do anything else.

Carmilla started humming. It took a moment for Laura to place it, but she soon recognized it as that eighties song about walking five hundred miles. It made Laura smile. Leave it to Carmilla to calm her down with The Proclaimers.

The panic ebbed away. Exhaustion crept into its place. Laura let out a long, slow breath, her body finally relaxing against Carmilla’s.

“Where is she this time?” Carmilla asked quietly.

Laura sat up slowly. She was straddling Carmilla, knees on either side of her thighs, but right now it couldn’t make her blush if she wanted it to. She was numb. She took the post card from Carmilla’s hand and stared at it.

“Arizona,” she replied hollowly. Her eyes dragged over the words again. She glanced up and met Carmilla’s gaze. “She saw a picture of us in a magazine. Wanted to congratulate me.”

Carmilla nodded, reaching out and brushing the last remnants of tears from Laura’s cheeks.

“She said you’re beautiful,” Laura sighed, dropping the post card onto the couch.

“Not as beautiful as you,” Carmilla replied instantly, like it was the easiest thing in the world for her to say. Like it was a fact of the universe. Laura looked away and Carmilla took her face in her
hands again. She peered into her eyes, searching them carefully. “You want me to call your dad?”

Laura just shook her head slowly. She leaned forward until her forehead was resting against Carmilla’s and closed her eyes.

“You’re enough,” Laura whispered. She heard Carmilla’s breath catch just a bit, but she was too numb to wonder what it meant.

Then Carmilla was shifting, moving to lie down lengthwise on the couch.

“Inside or outside?” she asked simply.

“Inside.”

Without another word, Carmilla tugged Laura gently into the space between herself and the back of the couch, wrapping her in her arms securely and tucking her head under her chin.

“How long has it been?” Carmilla asked when they were settled.

“Three years,” Laura said, the words muffled against Carmilla’s collarbone. “Almost four.”

“Maybe it’ll be another four years before she writes again.”

“Or longer,” Laura added hopefully. Carmilla kissed the top of her head. “Thanks, Carm.”


“Don’t ever leave,” Laura blurted before she could stop herself. Her voice was thick, whether from tears creeping back up on her or exhaustion, she couldn’t tell. “Please don’t ever leave me, Carm.”


Laura dropped into the dreamless sleep of the emotionally exhausted after that. When she woke up a few hours later, Carmilla was still there. As promised.

Things were okay after that for two whole weeks.

They settled back into a routine. Being fake engaged was surprisingly easy for them, thanks in no small part to the fact that they were already kinda married, as Laura liked to teasingly point out. They were still hot gossip on the internet, but only for the fact that they appeared to be stupidly happy together.

The pictures of them being tagged as “relationship goals” multiplied every time they went out. There they were getting frozen yogurt, Laura laughing as she wiped whipped cream off of the end of Carmilla’s nose with her finger. There they were at the bookstore, Carmilla grinning gloatingly over her two extra inches of height as she reached over Laura with a hand on her hip for a book on a high shelf. There they were on the beach after a day of swimming, Laura dozing with her back against Carmilla’s front, Carmilla reading her book over Laura’s shoulder, all in the shade of a large beach umbrella.

But it was all so normal for them. So easy. They even kissed a few more times when the paparazzi were being especially polite.
So naturally everything had to go wrong.

It started out innocuously enough, a knock on their apartment door near the end of July. The movie would be premiering in less than a week and they were expecting their red carpet dresses to be delivered soon, so Carmilla answered the door without thinking.

Laura was in the kitchen reading, and she could hear the conversation happening at the door.

“Oh. Can I help you?”

Carmilla sounded confused. It obviously wasn’t the delivery guy with the dresses. Laura frowned and got to her feet, slipping a bookmark into her book and carrying it with her.

“Yes, I’m looking… wow, you really are beautiful. You must be Carmilla.”

The voice was clearly female, but besides Laura couldn’t make much out.

“Must I be?”

Laura laughed a bit at Carmilla’s tone as she stepped through the doorway into the living room. Whoever was at the door laughed as well, if a bit uncomfortably.

“Right, sorry, is Laura here?”

“Yeah, I’m—” Laura began as she stepped into view of the door. She stopped dead, her book dropping to the floor with a thud.

There was a woman at the door with a duffel bag at her feet. She wasn’t much taller than Carmilla, and she was thin and tan. Her hair was the same color as Laura’s, if a bit grayer, and cut to hang just above her shoulders. She looked a bit weathered, like she’d been travelling for a long time. Her hands went to her mouth the moment she laid eyes on Laura.

Laura couldn’t breathe.

“Hi princess,” the woman said with a wary smile.

Laura wanted to scream.

Carmilla had always called Laura by various nicknames. Cupcake. Sweetheart. Creampuff. When they were fourteen, she had called Laura princess once. Just once. Because the moment she said it, Laura jerked back like she’d slapped her. Carmilla didn’t need to ask why. She just never said it again.

Now Carmilla knew why.

“Mom.”

The word left Laura’s mouth without her permission, sounding cracked and broken and strange. Her eyes flicked over to Carmilla for the first time since she’d entered the room.

Carmilla was staring hard at the woman in the doorway. Laura could see her jaw clench and her fingers tighten on the doorknob. But she kept her expression blank. Her eyes met Laura’s suddenly, and the look in her gaze spoke volumes.

Laura never talked about her mom. Not really. All Carmilla knew was that she’d left when Laura was seven and it had devastated her. And every few years she sent a post card from wherever she
was at the time, never anything more than an arrangement of “this is where I am” and “this is what I’m doing” and “I hope you’re well.” Like she was writing to a distant relation or a friend. And whenever one of those damn post cards showed up, Laura shattered for a little while.

But Laura’s mom didn’t know that. She didn’t know anything about her. Because she hadn’t seen or heard from Laura in fifteen years, since the day she walked out the door.

Carmilla suddenly tensed, and Laura returned her gaze to her mom. She was approaching her with her hands outstretched. Laura took a step back.

“Don’t,” Laura blurted, and her mom stopped with several feet still between them. “Please just… don’t.”

“You’re so beautiful,” she said, her voice wavering as her hands dropped to her sides. “So grown up.”

“I’m twenty two,” Laura snapped, eyes on the floor. “It’s been fifteen years, of course I’m grown up.”

Suddenly Laura felt an arm wrap around her waist, a hand settle warmly on her hip, but she didn’t flinch away. She knew what Carmilla’s touch felt like. A kiss was pressed to her temple and she felt herself calming down immediately.

“You’re angry,” her mom said, and Laura looked up to meet her eyes. She looked disappointed, maybe even a little surprised. It just made Laura angrier. “Of course you are. I can’t blame you.”

“Why do you have a bag?” Laura demanded. She pointed to the duffel bag Carmilla had placed just inside the door. “What are you doing here?”

“My little girl is getting married,” her mom said with a smile. “I had to come see you.” She paused, glancing back at her bag. “And I was hoping… to stay with you, just until I find my own place to stay…”

Laura started shaking her head immediately, backing up again, but Carmilla squeezed her hip and stepped between the two women.

“Why don’t you go wait in the kitchen for a moment, Mrs. Hol… er…” Carmilla began, trailing off with a raise of her eyebrow.

“Elaine,” Laura’s mom supplied, her gaze lingering on Laura.

“Right, just wait in the kitchen, Elaine,” Carmilla said quietly, gesturing to the doorway. Elaine nodded and disappeared into the kitchen.

Carmilla immediately turned to fully face Laura, reaching up and taking her face in her hands. Laura grabbed Carmilla’s elbows and squeezed, holding onto her like a life preserver in a storm.

“Go upstairs and call your dad,” Carmilla spoke slowly, her voice low and soft, drawing Laura in until their foreheads touched. “And just in case, grab essentials out of your room and move them into mine, okay?” Laura nodded, eyes fluttering closed. “Just focus on that. Focus on one thing at a time.”

“Okay,” Laura whispered shakily. Carmilla pressed a soft kiss to her forehead and Laura made a small sound in the back of her throat.
“Just breathe,” Carmilla murmured, hands slipping down to Laura’s arms and rubbing. “Call your
dad. I’ll talk to your… Elaine. Okay?”

Carmilla’s hands were firm on Laura’s shoulders as she turned her toward the stairs, giving her a
gentle push.

Laura did as Carmilla said. She called her dad, in a fog, and was vaguely aware of her dad blurring
that he was on his way and hanging up. She went through her room quickly, picking up anything
she might need to spend the next few days and nights in Carmilla’s. Everything was terribly quiet
and she could only hear her own heartbeat in her ears.

She was in shock. Her mom was downstairs. Talking to Carmilla. Her mom. Was here.

She sat down on the bottom step of the staircase, close enough to the doorway to the kitchen that
she could hear the conversation happening.

“I read a couple of articles online… wanted to catch up on Laura’s life a bit…”

Her mother was speaking. There was a nervous edge somewhere in her voice, but just barely.

“I understand you two have known each other for a long time?” she asked Carmilla.

“Longer than you knew her.”

Laura looked up in surprise. She was expecting Carmilla’s forced polite voice. The one she
sometimes adopted with her own mother or with J.P. and Betty. She wasn’t expecting Carmilla’s
dangerous voice. The one that was quiet. The one that she only used when she was so angry she
was calm.

“I… I’m not sure…”

“Let’s not do this,” Carmilla said, cutting off Elaine’s unsure stammer. “There’s no need to
exchange pleasantries and pretend like we’ll get to know each other better. I don’t want to get to
know you better.”

Laura’s heart was beating rapidly. She strained her ears to hear every word, every nuance in
Carmilla’s tone.

“All I need to know is that you left her, and you didn’t say goodbye. You didn’t apologize. You
didn’t explain. You just left. And every few years you write to her like nothing happened, and she
breaks all over again.” Laura heard Carmilla take a deep, steadying breath. “Now, I will let you
stay here only if Laura allows it, and only if you agree to my terms. First, if you’re going to run
out on her again, you’ll do it sooner rather than later. I don’t want her to be in pain any longer than
she has to be.” Laura’s breath caught in her chest at the way Carmilla’s tone shifted just a bit,
waivered when she mentioned Laura being in pain. “Second, when you run off again, you will
have the decency to tell her to her face and say goodbye. I will be civil to you as long as you are
here if you agree to those two things. Do we have a deal?”

“I don’t-”

“It’s a yes or no question, Elaine,” Carmilla cut in, her voice hard. “Do we have a deal?”

There was a brief silence in which Laura held her breath.

“Deal,” her mom said stiffly.
“Good,” Carmilla said clearly. Laura could hear her standing up. “Stay here. I’m going up to check on her.” She heard her footsteps drawing closer and retreated up to the top step of the staircase. Carmilla paused in the doorway, looking back into the kitchen at Elaine. “Because the idea of anyone leaving her willingly just… baffles me.”

Laura pretended she was just sitting down at the top of the stairs. The moment Carmilla saw her she hastened up to her, sitting down at Laura’s side without hesitation.

“Did you call your dad?” she asked.

Laura nodded. And she sniffled. And then there were silent tears streaming down her cheeks which Carmilla tried to wipe away. Laura just leaned into her side, pressing her face into the space between Carmilla’s neck and shoulder. Carmilla automatically wrapped her arms around her, like it was a reflex.

“Why is she here?” Laura cried quietly, her shoulders shaking. Carmilla just held her tighter. “God, what does she want? She must want something from me. There’s no other… there’s no reason for her to… I never thought she’d actually…”

“Hush,” Carmilla whispered, and she slowly started rocking them back and forth. “Don’t worry about that now. Just breathe.”

Laura did as Carmilla said, taking long, slow breaths against Carmilla’s neck. Every inhale sent the smell of Carmilla’s skin directly to her brain, and it started doing weird things to her. She was still in a complete emotional tailspin thanks to her mom showing up, but suddenly she just wanted to get closer to Carmilla. She wanted more of them to be touching. She just kind of… wanted.

It wasn’t an unfamiliar sensation. It happened every time Laura got drunk. It happened whenever Carmilla looked at her or touched her in a certain way, completely unaware of what she was doing. It happened when Laura saw Carmilla with one of the many girls she slept with once and never called again, but that was usually drowned out by a rather ugly feeling of jealousy.

But it had never happened in a situation like this. Usually the panic induced by correspondence from her mom was completely draining and left her hollow. Right now, Laura felt like a live wire. Like she had too much nervous energy and no outlet for it.

Carmilla could definitely feel how restless she was, as she just held her tighter and started humming Golden Slumbers. She knew Laura listened to The Beatles when she had trouble sleeping.

Laura had never loved Carmilla more in her life than she did in that moment, and that was saying something.

The front door slammed open suddenly and Laura jumped in Carmilla’s hold. Carmilla instinctively pulled her tighter, her gaze jerking over to the door. Laura felt her relax when she saw who was there.

“Sherman,” she said quietly, her breath leaving her slowly in a relieved sigh. “Good.”

He stopped at the bottom of the stairs and Laura finally turned her head away from Carmilla’s neck to look at him. He was staring up at the two girls, his forehead creased with worry and his fingers clenching and unclenching repeatedly at his sides.

“Are you both okay?” he asked lowly.
“I’ve got her,” Carmilla said quietly. Laura’s heart thumped so loud in her chest she was sure Carmilla would hear it. “Elaine is in the kitchen.”

With a curt nod, Sherman marched through the doorway into the kitchen. They usually left the door open, but he closed it hard. It didn’t entirely block the sound of him shouting, though, or the sound of Elaine shouting back. Laura curled herself further into Carmilla’s side.

“Did you get your things moved into my room?” Carmilla asked, her voice the softest Laura had ever heard it.

“I kind of just dumped everything on your bed, but yeah.”

Carmilla laughed a little, the sound lighter than usual, and Laura finally felt herself smile.

“Carm?”

“Yeah?”

Laura pulled back a bit and Carmilla let her, reaching forward and brushing her hair away from her eyes and behind her ear. Laura swallowed hard and looked down.

“I’m just… I’m sorry about all this,” Laura began lowly. “I should really just be grateful that I have two parents.”

“Hey,” Carmilla said sternly, tilting Laura’s chin up with her fingers so their eyes met. “Don’t apologize, okay? I was a baby when my dad died, I didn’t know him. And knowing my mother, she would have just divorced him in a few years anyway.” Her hand moved from Laura’s chin to her cheek, slowly brushing dried tearstains away with her thumb. “You were old enough for it to hurt when your mom left. You knew her. And she… she chose to leave you. And I will never understand that. We both have grief, it’s just way too different to compare.”

Laura stared at Carmilla, searching her eyes. She could say it. Right now. She could tell her she loved her. She could just say it and let the chips fall where they may. She could kiss her. She could just lean in, it would only take a few inches, and kiss her with no cameras flashing and no paparazzi shouting.

But she could still hear the muffled voices of her parents at the bottom of the stairs. Her heart rate hadn’t slowed much since she first saw her mom standing in the doorway. She still felt dizzy, lightheaded, like she’d just been on a really unpleasant rollercoaster. Her cheeks were gritty with dried tears, though Carmilla had managed to brush some of them away, and she generally felt like a complete mess.

Now was not the time for her to get her heart broken on top of all that.

Because Carmilla didn’t love her. She didn’t. She had told her so when they were sixteen, and she had continued to make that fact apparent with every girl that came stumbling out of Carmilla’s room at ungodly hours of the morning in the four years they’d lived together.

So Laura pulled back, like she always did. It would be easy to let herself believe Carmilla wanted her back. But it wasn’t real. The kisses for the camera weren’t real, the couple-y Instagram pictures weren’t real, the teasing and the touching and the laughs for the benefit of the paparazzi, none of it was real.

“Thanks, Carm,” Laura said quietly. Carmilla smiled at her rather sadly.
“Of course, sweetheart,” she sighed. Then she surprised Laura by leaning back in and kissing her forehead for the second time that day. “Come on. Let’s go make sure you have everything you need in my room.”

They were lying side by side on Carmilla’s bed, Laura curled into Carmilla’s side, when Sherman knocked on the door over an hour later. Carmilla sat up and leaned back against the headboard, tugging Laura along with her.

“Can I come in?” Sherman asked through the door.

“Yeah,” both girls said at once.

Laura’s dad walked through the door looking exhausted. He sat down on the edge of Carmilla’s bed and sighed.

“Are you okay?” he asked Laura quietly, eyes searching hers.

Laura smiled a little and nodded, head still on Carmilla’s shoulder.

“Yeah,” she said slowly. “Surprised. And confused. And… a lot of things, I guess. But also okay.”

She could feel Carmilla smiling, the arm around her waist shifting as she squeezed Laura’s hip. Sherman nodded and sighed again, and Laura had never seen her dad look so tired.

“I don’t know,” he said, shaking his head and staring at his hands. Laura stiffened. “I asked her what she wanted from you about a hundred times but…” He met Laura’s eyes warily. “She just wants to spend time with you.”

“She can’t stay here,” Laura said abruptly, and Sherman nodded.

“She won’t. I’m paying for a hotel,” he said immediately, and Laura’s heart rate slowed considerably. “I already paid for a cab to take her there, she’s on her way.”

Laura felt like she could breathe again for the first time since she dropped her book on the living room floor.

“But she’s coming over tomorrow,” Sherman continued, frowning. “Wants to take you both to lunch. Is that okay?” Laura closed her eyes, breathing in slowly through her nose as she thought. It was an ideal situation, really. Just lunch. Very little pressure. And she wouldn’t be staying here. “You don’t have to say yes, I can take care of everything.”

“No, it’s okay,” Laura said slowly. She looked over to meet Carmilla’s eyes, only to find her smiling patiently. Waiting for Laura to decide. “I can do that. I mean if it’s okay with you, Carm…”

“Whatever you want to do, I’m there,” Carmilla said instantly. There was that soft smile of hers again, that smile Laura never saw directed at anybody else. It made her feel warm and comfortable and safe.

All of a sudden Laura’s dad was wrapping them both up in a bear hug, extremely reminiscent of the one he gave them when he thought they were engaged, and the girls just laughed helplessly in his
“I’m so proud of you,” he murmured into Laura’s hair. “You’re so strong. My little warrior woman.”

“Dad,” Laura laughed, embarrassed. He hadn’t called her that since she was twelve.

“And thank you, Carmilla,” he continued as if he hadn’t heard her. “For taking care of my baby.”

“Oh my god, Dad,” Laura groaned, but Carmilla just laughed.

“My pleasure,” she said sincerely, and Laura felt like her heart was too full for her to breathe properly.

After ordering takeout from the girls’ favorite Thai restaurant and tipping the delivery guy handsomely, Sherman left. But only after Laura had assured him about twenty times that she would call him if she needed anything tomorrow. Laura and Carmilla huddled together on the floor between the couch and the coffee table, only the background noise of the TV breaking the silence.

“Carm?” Laura asked at length, picking at her noodles with her chopsticks. “Can I um… I don’t really um….” She trailed off, letting out a slow breath. Carmilla reached over and tucked some hair behind her ear, moving slowly like she was afraid she’d startle her.

“What is it, cupcake?” she asked gently. Laura took in another deep breath and met Carmilla’s eyes.

“Can I sleep in your room tonight?” she asked hastily. She saw the surprise in Carmilla’s expression, but it passed quickly. Laura blushed and looked down. “I just… my stuff is already there and I don’t really…” She huffed, aggravated by her own stammering. “I just don’t want to be alone, I guess.”

“Of course,” Carmilla replied immediately. Laura looked up in surprise and Carmilla smiled at her. “What, did you think I’d say no? You jump into my bed all the time.”

“You make it sound so dirty.”

They both giggled quietly, Laura pressing her forehead to Carmilla’s shoulder. She wasn’t wrong. Laura did have a tendency to crawl into bed with Carmilla when she couldn’t sleep. Or when she’d had a bad day. Or when Carmilla had been in a broody philosophical vortex for too long and Laura wanted to snap her out of it.

She just hadn’t done so since they’d suddenly become a soon-to-be-fake-married couple.

“You don’t have to ask, Laura,” Carmilla murmured, lips tickling Laura’s hairline. “You know that.”

“I know,” Laura sighed into Carmilla’s shoulder. “I just… thanks.”

Tangled up in Carmilla’s arms that night, Laura slept better than she had in months.
Lunch with Laura’s mom was awkward.

They went for sandwiches at Phillipe’s, Laura and Carmilla sitting on one side of the table and Elaine on the other. The paparazzi went completely nuts when word got out about Laura’s mom, who hadn’t been seen in Hollywood for fifteen years.

The conversation mostly consisted of Elaine asking questions about Laura and Carmilla’s lives. How they had met, how they had grown close. She wanted stories of their time together in school in Beverly Hills. She asked about college, Laura’s major in journalism and Carmilla’s in philosophy. She asked about their friends, Perry and LaFontaine.

Laura answered in as few words as possible, keeping her eyes focused on her hands. Carmilla provided details when the table lapsed into uncomfortable silences between questions. She never moved more than a few inches from Laura’s side, eyes rarely leaving her as she watched her expressions for discomfort or panic. When she wasn’t eating, she had an arm around Laura’s shoulders or her waist, a hand in hers or on her knee.

When the questions moved on to their falling in love and getting engaged, Laura stammered. Carmilla took over, spinning their story unflappably with a soft smile and her gaze fixed on Laura.

Laura let herself get carried away by it. She was stressed, with a complete stranger across the table calling her “her little girl” and “her princess.” So she let Carmilla’s story become her reality for that little while, even knowing it would break her heart more later. Before they left the table, she looped an arm around Carmilla’s neck and pressed a fond kiss to her cheek that made her grin.

As they were preparing to leave the restaurant, Elaine quietly asked Laura if she could give her a hug. She sounded so sad and so hopeful that Laura relented.

The hug completely floored her.

All of a sudden she was surrounded by this scent and this warmth, this familiarity that brought her right back to the happiest parts of her early childhood.

She managed to fight back her tears, but before she could stop herself she was asking her mom to come to their apartment for dinner. Elaine lit up and agreed to be there in a couple of hours. Laura ground her teeth until they reached Carmilla’s motorcycle.

“What was I thinking?” Laura groaned as Carmilla handed her a helmet.

“You were thinking you wanted to spend a little more time with your mom,” Carmilla replied simply, voice muffled through the visor of her own helmet. “You can’t exactly fault yourself for that.” She patted the space behind her on her motorcycle. “You gonna stand there all day or can we go home so I can start making dinner?”

Laura huffed and jammed the helmet onto her head, swinging a leg over the bike and wrapping her arms around Carmilla’s waist.

“You don’t have to cook, Carm.”

“Of course I do. You once set a salad on fire.”

“…Fair enough.”

Laura, for all of her griping, actually enjoyed Carmilla’s motorcycle. They got everywhere much faster without having to haul an entire car through LA traffic. Plus, she got to spend the ride
wrapped around Carmilla. That was just an added bonus.

“Do you want to invite your dad?” Carmilla asked when they got home. She frowned as Bagheera streaked right past her in order to wind his way between Laura’s legs and meow until she picked him up.

“No,” Laura sighed, absently scratching Bagheera behind the ears. He started purring immediately, his eyes fixed on Carmilla as if to say ‘yeah, I like her better. Deal with it.’ “They were only in the kitchen together for like three seconds before they started yelling.”

“True,” Carmilla said, sticking her tongue out at Bagheera before she made her way into the kitchen.

“If you’re taking menu suggestions,” Laura hummed as she followed her. “I wouldn’t say no to the fish with that béchamel you made after our first fake date.”

“Oh Carm, you don’t have to cook, Carm,” Carmilla mocked as she dug through the refrigerator, putting on a high pitched voice that was apparently supposed to represent Laura. “But while you’re at it, Carm, just make this for me, Carm.”

“I do not sound like that!” Laura protested through her laughter, and Carmilla whipped toward her with a smirk on her face.

“You sound just like that, trust me,” she said, nodding seriously. She stepped toward Laura slowly and Laura stepped back, trying to maintain distance until her back bumped into the kitchen island. “I’m the one that has to listen to you all day.”

“Well I definitely don’t call you Carm that much,” Laura sniffed, sticking her chin in the air as Carmilla prowled into her space.

“Wanna bet?” Carmilla asked quietly, and even though Laura knew it was coming she still had no defense when Carmilla started tickling her. Bagheera was dropped unceremoniously to the floor as Laura tried to save herself, batting away Carmilla’s hands only for them to find ticklish spots somewhere else.

“This is so… not fair!” Laura gasped between giggles. She finally managed to grab both of Carmilla’s hands, lacing their fingers together and holding them down at her sides. She blew some hair out of her face and rolled her eyes at the shit-eating grin on Carmilla’s face. “One of these days, Karnstein. I’m going to figure out where you’re ticklish. And you’ll be sorry.”

“Well it’s been twelve years and you still haven’t made any progress,” Carmilla shrugged, leaning in and licking the end of Laura’s nose so suddenly that Laura dropped her hands. “So I’m not worried.”

And with a wink she turned back to the fridge, leaving Laura leaning against the kitchen island with her mouth open and a blush from her ears to her toes.

Dinner went weirdly well. Elaine was quiet, mostly listening to Laura and Carmilla playfully bickering and smiling at the way they interacted together in their space.

After complimenting Carmilla’s cooking multiple times, Elaine turned the conversation to their wedding. Both girls laughed with practiced ease and said they hadn’t even begun thinking about
planning. But Elaine could be surprisingly charming, and she managed to get Laura to admit she wanted something small and simple and Carmilla to quietly acquiesce that she’d always pictured them getting married outside in autumn.

And Laura let herself go again. Let herself believe that it was all real, that Carmilla wasn’t acting and had really imagined them getting married someday. That the way she was staring at her and smiling at her really was as adoring as it seemed.

Elaine hugged her again before she left. Laura even let her kiss the top of her head. And when her mom said she hoped they could do this again soon, Laura just smiled and said “yeah, me too.”

“I know you don’t like her,” Laura blurted after she closed the door behind Elaine. Carmilla looked up from the couch with a frown. “I don’t really… I mean I still don’t really know how to feel about her, but…” She locked the door and plopped down next to Carmilla on the couch. “I heard what you said to her yesterday in the kitchen.” Carmilla immediately stiffened and was clearly about to start apologizing, but Laura just smiled at her and shook her head. “I’m glad you said it. Thank you, Carm. For protecting me.”

“Of course,” Carmilla replied slowly, concern still wrinkling her forehead.

“Thanks for everything,” Laura sighed, slumping into Carmilla’s side. “For cooking and for being nice to her despite everything and… and for letting me try to figure this out, I guess.”

“She’s your mom,” Carmilla said quietly, shrugging. “I’ll never get why she did what she did, but if you want her back in your life, I understand. I’ll even try to get to know her better if you want me to.”

“Slow down there,” Laura laughed lightly, nudging her with her shoulder. “I’m still on the fence about whether I should have let you throw her out yesterday.” Carmilla hummed noncommittally. “But I’ll… let you know.”

Carmilla didn’t respond. She just nodded and let Laura think.

They were silent as they got ready for bed, Carmilla eyeing Laura in the mirror while they both brushed their teeth. And when Laura paused in Carmilla’s doorway, realizing she’d had every intention of just sleeping in Carmilla’s bed again without thinking about it, Carmilla just smiled at her from where she’d just sat down at the edge of her bed.

“You coming?” she asked teasingly, tilting her head toward the unoccupied side of her bed.

Laura let out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding and smiled right back.

And when they settled into the sheets and whispered “goodnight” to each other and Carmilla immediately rolled over and pulled Laura’s back tight against her chest and sighed into her hair, Laura found it nearly impossible to listen to that voice in her head that kept whispering it wasn’t real, it wasn’t real, it wasn’t real.

Laura didn’t remember consciously deciding to drive to her dad’s house in Bel Air at dawn the next morning. She just sort of found herself there suddenly, sitting on the floor in her childhood bedroom with her back against the side of the bed.

Her dad was away on the press tour for the film, so Laura was on her own. She fled here when she
was especially upset, but usually her dad was here to comfort her. She hadn’t really thought this through.

Then again, she hadn’t really thought about it at all.

She hadn’t thought of anything since she woke up to a Google Alert that took her to an exclusive interview with Elaine Warren, wayward mother of America’s sweetheart Laura Hollis, about her day with her daughter and her fiancée. Complete with pictures.

She hadn’t even noticed her mom taking pictures of her and Carmilla. But there were a couple from lunch and nearly a dozen from her visit to their apartment for dinner. They were nice photos. Carmilla with her arm around Laura’s shoulders, gazing at her fondly while Laura laughed about something. Laura on her tiptoes to rest her chin on Carmilla’s shoulder as she hugged her from behind while she was standing at the stove making dinner. Carmilla on the couch with Laura’s head in her lap, dozing after dinner while Carmilla ran her fingers through her hair.

Laura hadn’t managed to read the entire article. The words kept getting blurred by her eyes filling with tears, and eventually she just had to run. She had to go somewhere else, someplace safe. Because home didn’t feel safe right now. Not with an article out there in which her mom described it as “a cozy love nest that was just full of evidence of a long and loving relationship.”

So here she was. In her bedroom at her dad’s house. Staring blankly at the shattered remains of her phone and trying to remember throwing it against the wall.

“Laura?”

Carmilla’s voice surprised her, tearing her gaze away from her broken phone for the first time in at least an hour. She sounded scared. Laura frowned. Carmilla was never scared.

“Up here,” she called back.

She immediately heard running footsteps, Carmilla’s boots pounding up the stairs. She came through the doorway so fast she almost tripped right over Laura, but she didn’t. Instead she dropped to the floor in front of her, taking her face in her hands.

“Are you okay?” Carmilla demanded, and Laura was startled to see tears in Carmilla’s eyes.

“Yeah,” Laura replied instantly. “Yeah I’m… fine.”

Carmilla closed her eyes and exhaled slowly through her nose. Laura could feel the tension in her hands, could see her trying to calm herself down. A tear slid down her cheek and Laura’s breath caught in her throat. She reached forward slowly, brushing the tear away with her knuckles.

“Carm…”

Before she could say anything else, Carmilla had wrapped her arms around her and pulled Laura into a fierce embrace. She buried her face in Laura’s hair and squeezed her against her chest until Laura was sure Carmilla could feel her heart beating. But then Laura could feel Carmilla shaking, could feel her breath hitching, could hear her trying to bite back sobs.

“Don’t ever do that again,” she whispered, her voice thick and husky with tears. Her hands ran endlessly over Laura’s back and shoulders and arms, her movements slow and deliberate but hinting at desperation. “Please, please, don’t ever do that again.”

The first feeling that managed to break through Laura’s numbness was guilt. Slow and creeping.
She hadn’t even woken Carmilla. She just ran.

“God, Laura,” Carmilla breathed, finally stilling long enough to just feel Laura in her arms. Just smell her hair and hear her breathing. “I was so scared. Waking up to see that article open on your laptop and you were just… you were just gone and I thought…”

“Carm,” Laura whispered plaintively, but Carmilla just shook her head.

“You’re not rational when it comes to her,” she went on harshly, and Laura could hear her struggling to hold back her tears. “I didn’t know what you’d do. God, you don’t… you wouldn’t answer your phone and I just…” She let out a quiet sob and Laura felt something inside her break. “I can’t lose you. I can’t. You know that.”

“I’m sorry,” Laura murmured. “I’m so sorry, Carmilla. I didn’t think, I wasn’t thinking, I just…”

Carmilla pulled back enough to look Laura in the eye and Laura immediately reached forward, taking Carmilla’s face in her hands and brushing at her tears with her thumbs. Carmilla’s hands slid up to Laura’s shoulders and stilled at the back of her neck.

“I saw that article and I just… I shut down,” Laura whispered, shaking her head as she searched Carmilla’s eyes. “I was hurting so bad I couldn’t stand it and I just turned myself off. I just left. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Carmilla sighed, a soft smile finally curving her lips and lighting up her eyes. She leaned in, pressing her forehead to Laura’s, and closed her eyes with a comfortable hum. “Just… please don’t do it again.”

“I won’t, I swear,” Laura said in a rush, but Carmilla just whispered a soft “shhh” and she fell silent.

“We’re in this together, you know?” Carmilla whispered, and Laura felt her own eyes slipping shut as she nodded. “Whatever happens, I’m right there with you. I promised, remember?”

Laura swallowed hard. Of course she remembered, brokenly demanding that Carmilla never leave her after the last post card from her mom arrived.

“I promise too,” Laura said softly, and Carmilla’s eyes fluttered open. “I promise I’ll never leave you like that again.”

A slow smile spread over Carmilla’s face, and Laura thought it may have been the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen.

Running entirely on instinct, Laura pressed a kiss to Carmilla’s forehead. She felt her relax, heard her sigh. Then she shifted, moving so she was sitting at Laura’s side with her back against the bed, and let her head drop onto Laura’s shoulder. Laura reached between them and took Carmilla’s hand in hers, lacing their fingers together.

“I broke my phone,” Laura said blankly after a long silence.

“I see that,” Carmilla replied lightly, regarding Laura’s broken phone with a frown. A thought occurred to Laura and she was blurring it out before she could stop herself.

“How did you find me?”

“Well, I scared the hell out of Danny by banging on her door at seven in the morning to see if you
were there,” Carmilla began thoughtfully, and Laura grinned. “I left an angry voicemail on both of the Ginger Twins’ phones demanding to know why neither of them were answering the one time I actually needed them.” Laura made a sound somewhere between a laugh and a scoff. “And then I remembered something.”

“What?”

“This is where you go,” Carmilla said with a shrug. “When you’re hurting. This is where you go.”

Laura was saved from trying to come up with a suitable response to that by Carmilla’s phone ringing. She pulled it out of her jacket and glanced at the screen before holding it out to Laura.

“I’m guessing your dad has seen the article and tried to call you,” she said.

Laura took the phone with a grateful smile, laughing a bit when she saw the name on the screen was “SherMAN Hollis.”

“Hey Dad.”

According to Betty, the article was more helpful to their situation than anything. Elaine had said nothing but good things about their relationship, massive invasion of privacy and betrayal of trust notwithstanding.

Laura never saw or heard from her mom again. That was just fine with her.

The red carpet for the premiere of the film was a zoo. And only partially because of the protesters.

Any movie with a positive LGBT message was bound to attract the crazies, and they came out in spades for this one. Luckily, they were drowned out entirely by the screaming fans and the shouting paparazzi.

There were a lot of big names in the movie, but by far the loudest screams were for Laura and Carmilla. That was an odd experience for the two of them, but they just smiled for the cameras and held onto each other’s hands extra tight.

“This is crazy, right?” Laura said in Carmilla’s ear as the cameras flashed.

“A little,” Carmilla replied with a shrug, lips brushing Laura’s ear as she spoke. “But I’d be going crazy for a photo of you too if I didn’t get to stand next to you.”

Laura turned and stared at Carmilla, an eyebrow raised in question. Carmilla just smirked at her and pressed a kiss to her cheek, prompting the paparazzi to lose their minds.

“You look beautiful,” she murmured.

Laura turned her head and buried her face in Carmilla’s neck to hide her blush.

“You too,” she replied, grinning.
The movie was excellent. By the end of the credits, everyone was already talking about how many Oscars it was sure to win.

Carmilla had fallen asleep about twenty minutes in, a fact that Laura teased her about ceaselessly all the way to the after party at the swanky hotel down the street from the theater.

Mattie and Will had come to the premiere as well, so the two of them ended up sitting at a table with Laura and Carmilla for dinner. It was unusual for all three of Lilita’s kids to be in the same place at once, as Will was just going into his last year of high school and Mattie was an actress with her own projects. She’d even been nominated for her first Academy Award last year, which was one of their mother’s favorite conversation topics.

But dinner found all of them there, with Will mostly on his phone and Mattie mostly staring down Carmilla.

The conversation was exclusively about the fact that Laura and Carmilla were engaged, and Mattie hadn’t even been aware they were dating. Every time Laura tried to change the subject, Mattie dragged it right back.

“I’m just saying this seems like the type of thing you’d tell me about,” Mattie drawled for the fourth or fifth time in the last half hour. The subject was clearly wearing on Carmilla as Mattie kept pointing out that she’d known Laura just as long as Carmilla but she’d never fallen in love with her. “You’ve never been shy about your romantic conquests before.”

“She’s not a conquest,” Carmilla snapped, and the table fell silent. Even Will looked up from his phone. Carmilla rolled her eyes and Laura took her hand under the table. She gave it a comforting squeeze and Carmilla visibly relaxed.

“She’s got a point though, kitty,” Will said, rather unhelpfully. “We’ve been seeing the pictures. How you’re all sappy and lovey-dovey with her. You’ve never acted like this with the other girls you’ve been with.”

“I wasn’t in love with any of those other girls,” Carmilla blurted. Will’s phone fell out of his hand and Mattie’s mouth dropped open. Carmilla glanced nervously at Laura, who was watching her with wide eyes. “Maybe I only do all the sappy lovey-dovey stuff because it’s her.” She licked her lips and looked down. She squeezed Laura’s hand and Laura almost jumped. “Maybe she’s the only one that’s worth it.”

It wasn’t real. It wasn’t real. It wasn’t real.

“I’m sorry, bella,” Mattie said quietly, and both girls looked up in surprise. “I didn’t mean to upset you. I’ve always known that you had a crush on Laura, I just… figured you’d be shouting it from the rooftops the moment it happened.”

“Yeah, sorry,” Will muttered, ducking down under the table to find his phone.

“It’s fine,” Carmilla sighed, glancing over to meet Laura’s eyes again. She smiled at her.

“I really am happy for you,” Mattie added, a genuine smile on her face as she looked at Laura. “I’ve never seen Carm quite so… giddy.”

It wasn’t real. It wasn’t real. It wasn’t real.
“Are you okay?”

Laura blinked. Carmilla was frowning at her, forehead wrinkled with concern, and Laura couldn’t take it anymore.

“I um… no, no I’m not I um…” she stammered, getting to her feet awkwardly. “I just um… I have to go and um… I just have to go.”

She turned and ran.

“Laura!”

She could hear Carmilla behind her, but she didn’t stop. She didn’t turn. She just wound her way through the tables to the edge of the room and went out the nearest door she could find. It led her out into a big empty hallway which she fully intended to run the length of, but then Carmilla’s hand was on her wrist.

“Laura, stop,” she pleaded, holding tight to Laura’s wrist and refusing to budge when Laura tried to pull away. “What’s wrong? Please, talk to me.”

“No,” Laura blurted, fixing her wild eyes on Carmilla’s and nearly breaking in two when she saw the amount of care and concern there. She yanked on her arm again. “I can’t… I can’t be around you right now, Carm.”

“What did I do?” Carmilla asked breathlessly. She tugged Laura closer, grabbing hold of her other wrist and trying to hold her still. “Please, sweetheart, tell me what I did. Just talk to me.”

“No, god Carmilla, I can’t!” Laura snapped, and it was then that she realized she was crying. It felt like the world was shrinking in around her and she was terrified. All she could see was Carmilla and the heartbroken look on her face and she sobbed. “I can’t do this anymore.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I can’t… I can’t just go on pretending like my heart isn’t breaking every second I’m with you,” Laura gasped out. She closed her eyes, hot tears sliding down her face. “I thought I could, I thought I could just… pretend to be with you for a while and I’d get it out of my system, but god… I’ve been so happy with you, even though it’s not real and it hurts. It hurts so much and I can’t do it anymore. I can’t…” She took in another shaking breath, opening her eyes briefly to see Carmilla staring at her wide-eyed, shaking her head. “I can’t have you like this and then have to give you up, I can’t. I’m sorry, Carm. I just… I’ve loved you so much for so long and I’ve tried not to but it hurts so bad and-”

She was cut off by Carmilla yanking her forward by her wrists and kissing her hard. She stumbled into it, steadied only by Carmilla’s hands on her hips, fingers digging in possessively. And she was so surprised by the whole thing that she let herself get lost in it, let herself wind her hands into Carmilla’s hair and gasp when Carmilla pulled back only to tilt her head and press in again, let herself fall apart a little more with every slow stroke of Carmilla’s tongue.

It wasn’t… it wasn’t real. It wasn’t…

Laura yanked herself back from Carmilla’s mouth.

“What are you doing?” she blurted.

“Kissing you,” Carmilla replied instantly, looking Laura dead in the eyes. Laura searched them,
confused.

“Yeah, I got that, but why?” she stammered. Carmilla swallowed hard.

“Because I’ve been in love with you since we were sixteen,” she said firmly. Laura felt like the floor had opened up beneath her. Carmilla licked her lips. “And I needed you to stop crying.”

And then she was kissing her again, one hand on Laura’s lower back to press her closer and one on the back of her neck to tilt her head back and give her a better angle to lick slowly into her mouth. A sound was drawn out of the back of Laura’s throat, somewhere between a sigh and a moan, and Carmilla seemed to unravel at the noise. Before Laura was even aware that they were moving, Carmilla had her pressed against the wall, fingers drawing slow lines up and down her sides.

“Carm,” Laura murmured, most of the sound lost to Carmilla’s lips. She finally gained a hold of her senses and pushed against Carmilla’s shoulders, enough to disconnect her mouth from Laura’s but not enough to dislodge her hands. “Carm, wait.”

“Sorry,” Carmilla panted, resting her forehead against Laura’s. “Sorry, I didn’t… I shouldn’t have…”

“Since we were sixteen?” Laura repeated incredulously.

Carmilla leaned back to meet her eyes, reaching up with one hand to brush away the remains of tears on Laura’s cheeks.

“Technically I guess I’ve been in love with you since we first met,” Carmilla said quietly. “It was just at sixteen when I saw it for what it was.”

Laura swallowed hard, taking her lower lip between her teeth and glancing down between them.

“So was that before or after you told me you didn’t want me?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

“I never told you I didn’t want you,” Carmilla said firmly, taking Laura’s face in both hands and forcing her gaze back up. “God, Laura, I’ve wanted you so badly.” Her eyes fluttered closed briefly and Laura’s breath hitched. “I told you I’d break your heart. And I would have.”

“Carm, what-”

“Do you remember what I was like at sixteen?” Carmilla asked with a low laugh and a shake of her head. “I was smoking, I was drinking, I was breaking the law. I was a mess. I was constantly one bad decision away from self-destructing and I didn’t want you getting caught in the blast.” Laura shook her head vehemently, opening her mouth to argue, but Carmilla just reached a thumb over to trace Laura’s lower lip and she froze. “I would have broken your heart, darling. We would have ruined each other if we started something back then, and I never would have forgiven myself for hurting you.”

They fell silent for a few moments, breathing each other’s air and sharing each other’s space. Laura’s grip tightened on Carmilla’s shoulders.

“I couldn’t love you if I didn’t even like myself. I had to be better for you, Laura,” Carmilla whispered, leaning in and brushing kisses over Laura’s forehead, “And I did get better, thanks to you,” and her cheeks, “and my family, and your dad,” and her nose, “and I can love you like you deserve now.”
Laura was on fire. She couldn’t imagine that Carmilla wasn’t being burned by her. Every touch of her lips, every stroke of her fingers, and she was burning. When they’d kissed for the cameras she’d never let herself feel this, never let herself indulge. But this, this was everything. She was drunk on the smell of her skin and the taste of her lips and the sound of her breathing.

This was real.

“Then what has this been?” Laura sighed, leaning her head back against the wall to give herself a chance to breathe. “These past two months pretending we were engaged. Why didn’t you say something?”

Carmilla bit her lip and looked away. She took a deep breath and let it out shakily. Her hands slipped back down to Laura’s hips and settled there, a warm weight that left Laura feeling tingly.

“I was trying to get you out of my system, too,” Carmilla admitted quietly. Laura blinked up at her in surprise. She smiled sadly. “I thought you’d moved on. Thought you were… over me.”

“Over you?” Laura laughed incredulously, reaching up and brushing her fingertips over Carmilla’s lips. Laura heard her breath catch and smiled. Carmilla playfully bit down on her index finger and Laura squealed.

“Ever since we moved in together I’ve been trying to get closer to you,” Carmilla sighed, taking Laura’s hand and pressing kisses to her knuckles. “But every time I did you pulled away.”

“Well I’ve spent the last six years repeatedly telling myself that you don’t love me,” Laura replied with a deep sigh of her own. Carmilla looked completely heartbroken at the very idea, so Laura just smiled softly. “So basically we’re both idiots.”

“Two halves of a whole idiot,” Carmilla corrected, leaning in to rub her nose against Laura’s, and they both dissolved into giggles. Laura interrupted their laughs with a few smiling, open-mouthed kisses which Carmilla eagerly participated in. She was the one to pull away this time, licking her lips again.

“Do I really make you happy?” she asked, her voice dipping to something almost reverent. Laura nodded eagerly and Carmilla gave her a breathless smile.

“I’m so happy with you, Carm,” Laura sighed, eyes fluttering closed when Carmilla’s lips moved to her jaw. “Always have been. Even when it wasn’t real.”

Carmilla scoffed, pulling back and smirking at her.

“It was always real,” she murmured, leaning back and taking both of Laura’s hands in hers. She looked down at the rings on their fingers. “So, what do we do about this?”

Laura lifted Carmilla’s hands to her lips.

“Carmilla Karnstein,” she began seriously. “Will you stop being fake engaged to me, and start being real engaged to me?”

“You couldn’t stop me if you tried,” Carmilla grinned. “Laura Hollis, will you marry me?”

Laura couldn’t stop the tears from forming in her eyes again.

“Of course,” she laughed breathlessly.
“Please don’t cry,” Carmilla said with a watery smile, brushing tears away with her thumbs. “If you start crying, I’ll start crying.”

“They’re happy tears, I promise,” Laura sighed happily. “Just um… I’ve spent six years convincing myself you don’t love me, so if you could remind me that you do every so often that’d be great.”

“I love you,” Carmilla said immediately, dropping a kiss on Laura’s lips. “I love you so much.” And another kiss on her jaw. “Always have.” And then her lips drifted down to Laura’s neck, and her breath abruptly left her.

“Here kitty kitty kitty!”

“Oh stop it William, you know she hates it when we call her that in public.”

Laura turned her head in surprise at the sound of Will and Mattie as they bickered through the door. They both froze at the sight of Laura pinned to the wall by Carmilla, lips on her neck and hands on her butt.

“Oh my god why,” Will groaned, immediately turning away and pressing the heels of his hands to his eyes.

“Well, don’t let us interrupt you,” Mattie laughed.

“Okay, we won’t,” Carmilla grumbled, face still pressed to Laura’s neck.

“Carm, stop,” Laura giggled as a vibrant blush crept up her neck. Carmilla sighed heavily and turned to look at her siblings.

“What?” she asked flatly, one eyebrow raised in question.

“Mother wants a family photo,” Mattie said lightly, smirking. “Though you might want to touch up your lipstick first, sis.”

Laura and Carmilla glanced at each other, noticing the smeared lipstick on both of their faces for the first time, and Laura burst out laughing.

“Okay,” Carmilla sighed dramatically as she finally stepped back from Laura, only to take her hand. “Tell her I’ll be there in a minute.”

They stopped by the bathroom on their way back into the party, taking a bit longer than was probably necessary to fix their hair and makeup because they kept getting distracted by each other’s lips. When they finally emerged, Laura blushing and Carmilla grinning, Lilita didn’t seem amused. But she put on a big smile for the camera.

Three pictures in, Carmilla put up a hand to stop the photographer.

“Mother, can we take one with Laura?” she asked politely. Laura, who was standing behind the photographer, looked up in surprise.

“Why?” Lilita asked distractedly, meeting her daughter’s eyes.

“Because she’s part of the family,” she said with a shrug. She swallowed hard and gave her mother a meaningful look. “I’m marrying her, you know.”

There were a few long moments of silence as Lilita Morgan stared at her second daughter, her
eyebrows slowly rising on her forehead. Carmilla just nodded, and her mother’s eyes went wide. Her mouth curved up into a genuine smile.

“Well of course,” she said, a barely perceptible waver in her voice. “Come along, Laura dear. Next to Carmilla.”

Carmilla reached out her hands as Laura approached and Laura took them, blushing under the scrutinizing look Mattie was giving her. They took another three pictures with Laura at Carmilla’s side, Carmilla surprising her in the last one with a kiss on her cheek.

The photographer grinned and said it was a keeper.

Carmilla’s mother took the two girls aside then, out of earshot of anyone else. And she immediately wrapped her daughter in a hug.

“I’m so proud of you,” she said quietly, and Carmilla almost started crying.

Then Lilita turned to Laura and gave her a long look. Laura managed not to fidget. She also managed to contain her gasp when Lilita Morgan, a woman she had known for twelve years and was still kind of afraid of, pulled her into a hug for the first time.

“Welcome to the family, dear,” she said, and then she whirled off to talk to Will and Mattie, leaving Laura and Carmilla standing there stock-still in shock.

“Did Lilita Morgan just hug you?”

Laura and Carmilla turned to see Laura’s dad approaching them, looking very dapper in his tux. Carmilla nodded, but Laura still seemed frozen in place. Carmilla rolled her eyes and wrapped an arm around her waist to get her attention.

“Oh, yeah,” Laura said blankly. She grinned at Carmilla for a moment, fairly certain her heart had never felt this full. “She may have just… welcomed me to the family.”

“Oh?” Sherman prompted, eyes widening.

“Yeah, so, we’re actually super gross in love with each other and we decided we’re going to get married for real,” Laura blurted, a blush rising on her cheeks as she let the words tumble out of her in one long breath. Sherman stared between them silently and Carmilla just shrugged, a smile on her face. “So… someone should probably inform Betty.”

True to character, Sherman immediately swept the two girls up into his signature bear hug, lifting them both from the ground a bit in his excitement.

“It took you longer than I expected but dammit, I knew this day would come!” he exclaimed, his voice already thick with tears.

“Language, Dad,” Laura laughed.

He ignored her, squeezing them both tighter for a few moments before he backed off. But even then he was too excited to just stand there, wrapping Laura up in a solo hug and repeatedly kissing the top of her head before doing the same to a rather startled Carmilla.

“Now if you’ll excuse me,” he said, clearing his throat and smiling at Carmilla. “Your mother owes me fifty bucks.”
“Wait what?” Laura blurted, but Carmilla had burst out laughing and Sherman had already walked away. Laura swatted playfully at Carmilla’s shoulder. “It’s not that funny.”

“Are you kidding?” she laughed, wrapping her arms around Laura’s waist and pulling her in to brush a soft kiss over her lips. “It’s hilarious. My mother hates losing.”

Laura rolled her eyes as she wrapped her arms around Carmilla’s neck, leaning back in and pausing with just a few inches left between them.

“So meeting the parents went well,” she said slyly, and they were both laughing too hard to properly kiss after that, but they tried anyway.

Laura was awoken by the sound of the Imperial March from Star Wars.

She was jostled in bed by Carmilla scrambling to grab the phone, clearly trying to keep it from waking her up, so Laura indulged her and kept her eyes closed, pretending to still be asleep. She shivered involuntarily when Carmilla’s movement shifted the sheets, reminding her that she was naked. They were naked. She closed her eyes tighter and tried not to grin.

“Hello, Mother,” Carmilla whispered, turning her head away from Laura to try to keep quiet. Carmilla’s room was so quiet, in fact, that Laura could easily hear Lilita Morgan’s words on the other end of the phone.

“I’m sorry, did I wake you?”

“It’s only eight in the morning, Mother, of course you woke me.”

Laura smiled a bit, curling closer to Carmilla’s side to share the warmth of her skin and sighing when Carmilla started idly carding her fingers through Laura’s hair.

“I’ll be quick, then. Sherman and I have worked everything out with J.P. and Betty. They’ve elected not to inform anyone that the engagement was initially fake for obvious reasons.”

“How’d they take it?” Carmilla asked through a yawn.

“J.P. was very excited and sends his congratulations. He may have started to cry.” Carmilla shook a bit with a suppressed laugh and Laura’s grin grew wider. “Betty was just relieved that there’s less work for her to do.”

“Classic Betty,” Carmilla sighed, and her mother tutted. “Is that all then? I didn’t get a lot of sleep last night.”

“What are you talking about? It was barely eleven when you and Laura left the after party last night.”

“Yeah, well, we were kinda too busy to sleep. What do you want, a play by play?”

“Oh. Oh. No. Sorry. Go back to sleep.”

“Thank you.”

“Carmilla.”
“Yeah?”

There was a pause.

“You sound happy.”

Laura could practically feel Carmilla’s gaze on her, could hear her smile when she replied.

“I am, Mother.”

Lilita sighed, the sound a hiss of static through the phone.

“Good. Good. Call me later, will you?”

“Of course.”

“Right. Get some sleep.”

The line went silent and Carmilla shifted, placing the phone back on the nightstand. Then she settled back into the pillows, wrapping her arms around Laura and pulling her close.

“I know you heard all that,” she whispered into the small space between her lips and Laura’s forehead. Laura opened her eyes to find Carmilla staring at her, equal parts mischief and adoration in her gaze. Laura grinned sheepishly.

“I’m glad you’re happy,” she replied softly.

Carmilla pulled Laura into a long, slow kiss, humming contentedly against her lips.

“Come on, my mother told us to go back to sleep,” Carmilla murmured when they parted, tucking Laura in under her chin and pulling the sheets up over them properly.

Laura had never been so perfectly happy in her entire life.

“I love you, Carm,” she said, the words pressed into the skin right above Carmilla’s heart.

“I love you too, Laura,” Carmilla murmured right back, lips moving against the top of Laura’s head.

It was real. It was real. It was real.

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