Exposure

by makeme123

Summary

Carm's trying to make it into photography.. Laura needs to pass her psychology class and Carm happens to be great at that subject. Only problem.. they cant stand each other.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Carmilla watched nervously as her professor thumbed through her portfolio. She tried to act like she didn’t care- but this was one class she actually did give a shit about. She ran a hand through her dark hair and began to chew on her bottom lip.

Her professor slowly flipped the page, tapping her chin with her finger slowly, before flipping another page. “They are good.” Her professor spoke lazily, flipping the page again.

Carmilla smiled slightly, feeling a bit relieved. Coming from Professor Maxfield, that was a huge compliment. She had work published in multiple magazines, as well as installations of her work in galleries across the country. If she said your work was good, it was.

“But..”

Immediately her smile was replaced with a frown.

Carmilla’s professor shut the portfolio and handed it back to her, “Its lacking emotion.”

Carmilla stared at her blankly.

Her professor sighed, “Look. You've got the skill. Technically, everything is great. But there is nothing behind it. They are just photos.” She shook her head, “They are pretty. But I want more than pretty. I want to feel something.”

Carmilla clenched her jaw. She had spent all semester working on getting those photos and in a few seconds her professor had completely dismissed them. Carmilla watched her professor walk out of the room, leaving her standing there completely frustrated. She had to figure out what her professor meant if she was going to convince her mother that she could actually make living doing this.

She dropped the folder on the table in front of her and slowly opened up the cover, looking back over her own photos. Maxfield was right. Lines, lighting and angles… they were all there. But they were just pictures.

Carmilla sighed and shut the book harshly. She didn't know what she needed to do to give it that extra thing. But she needed to figure it out.

Looking up at the clock she realized she had completely missed her first class of the day. What made it worse was the email she had gotten that morning from the professor of that same class asking her to meet with him.

Coffee.

If she was going to have to deal with anyone else that day, she was going to need coffee. A lot of it.

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"College is hard." Laura grumbled as she dropped down onto the bench next to Lafontaine.

"Uh huh" they replied without looking up from their book.

Laura slid the straps of her backpack off her shoulders and set it on the ground, "Did you even hear what I said?"
"Uh huh" they repeatedly automatically.

Laura rolled her eyes before smirking, "oh look, there's Perry." She said cheerfully.

Lafontaine automatically looked up with wide eyes, "Where?" They looked around before realizing Laura was completely lying. They glared at her playfully, "very funny."

Laura chuckled and tilted her face up towards the sun.

"Now that you have my attention, what did you say?" Laf shut their book and set it down on the bench, finally giving Laura their attention.

Laura smiled over at them, "I was just saying... College is hard."

Laf rolled their eyes, "Come on Hollis, you've been doing this for a year now. That shouldn't be a surprise."

"I know but seriously, this semester is killing me." Laura pouted and let out a sigh.

"Let me guess, Professor Shields class?" Laf grabbed their book and started shoving it in their bag.

"How'd you know?" Laura grabbed her backpack, catching on that Laf was getting ready to leave their bench.

"Everyone struggles in his class." They slung their bag over their shoulder, "coffee before our next class?"

Laura groaned and nodded, standing up to follow Laf towards the coffee kart. She was watching her feet as she walked and didn't notice the girl walking right towards her, also not paying attention, until they collided.

"Goddammit!" The stranger growled as coffee spilled all down the front of her body and a folder clutched in her hands.

"Oh my gosh!" Laura's eyes went wide as she lifted her head to look at the person she had just slammed into, "I'm so sorry!"

Her words died out at the end as she took in the girl's features. Raven black hair, falling in soft curls unevenly over her shoulders, dark eyes that seemed to hold more years of life than seemed possible, lips so red the contrast against her pale skin should have been off putting but it only made her that much more gorgeous.

Realizing she was staring, Laura cleared her throat and stuttered out a continued apology, "I really am so sorry, I wasn't paying attention--"

Dark eyes snapped up in a glare, "No shit, Sherlock." The dark haired girl grumbled and pried the wet shirt that was now clinging to her away from her skin. She held the folder out to her side and looked around before deciding to wipe it off on her pants that were thankfully still dry. She looked Laura up and down quickly before shaking her head and walking away as she mumbled to herself, "Fucking great."

"Making friends I see." Laf commented as Laura watched wide eyed at the very angry girl walking away from them.

Laura huffed in shock at how rude the girl had been before replying sarcastically, "Oh you know me,
completely suave and not at all awkward. Especially when dumping hot coffee on strangers."

Laf patted her on the back, "Aw frosh, it has been a rough day for you, hasn't it?"

Laura frowned and gripped the straps of her backpack, "You have no idea."

Carmilla stared at herself in the mirror with a frown. She knew she should have stayed in bed that day. Her shirt was soaked with coffee and completely see through. The see through part didn't bother her, it was the damp stain she was going to have to deal with the rest of the day.

A girl walked into the bathroom and stalled immediately at the stare Carmilla was giving her. A mumbled "sorry" followed by a quick exit left her alone in the bathroom once again.

She shook her head looking over her reflection once more, "fuck it." She slung her bag over her shoulder and walked out of the bathroom.

She sauntered into the classroom and up to the professor at the front, "You wanted to see me?" She asked lazily.

Her lack of respect for authority figures was something that drove her mother crazy, but somehow it made her professors enjoy her in class more.

"Ah, Miss Karnstein." Her professor set his pen down and leaned on the podium in front of him, "Nice of you to show up. 20 minutes after class has ended."

Carmilla shrugged her shoulders, "If you wanted to tell me you missed me you could have just included that in your email."

Her professor chuckled and shook his head, "I'm afraid not." His expression switched to a more serious look, "You're failing my class."

Carmilla scoffed, "That's impossible. I'm your best student. Probably your favorite too."

She wasn't wrong.

"I'm not saying they are, but even if those statements were true, it doesn't make up for the fact that you haven't completed a single assignment this entire semester." He watched as she rolled her eyes, obviously not grasping the seriousness of the issue. "And as much as I enjoy your presence in class on the days you actually decide to show up, I really don't want you to have to repeat it."

That seemed to be the ticket to get her attention as her disinterested expression switched to a scowl.

Two professors in one day. She really should have stayed in bed.

"If you want to make up the credit and have a chance at passing, you need to start showing up to class. And there is a peer tutoring program-"

"I don't need a fucking tutor." She snapped. She knew immediately it was the wrong move but couldn't help it. She was already frustrated from her conversation with her last professor.

Her professor gave her a look to tell her she was dangerously close to crossing a line, "As i was saying, a peer tutoring program that I think you would be great for. I have a few students in lower level classes that could use some help."
"You can't be serious." Her eyebrows shot up. She was not a people person and anyone that spent 2 minutes with her would know that. Her being a peer tutor was the stupidest idea she had ever heard.

“I can be and I am.” The professor replied firmly. “I’m giving your information to one of my other students that needs a little guidance to pass her own class. Her grade will determine your grade.”

Carmilla shook her head angrily as she rolled her eyes and turned around to storm out of the classroom.

“I don’t offer this to just anyone Carmilla, don’t make me regret offering it to you.” Her professor called after her as she walked out the door.

Only a few steps out of the classroom and she was met with a thud to her chest and a pile of books dropping onto her feet.

“Seriously?” Carmilla grumbled as she saw the familiar girl standing in front of her, cheeks flushed and a panicked look on her face.

If it was possible to die from embarrassment, Laura Hollis would be dead right now.

Laura’s mouth dropped open wanting to apologize but realized it was the same girl she had spilled coffee all over earlier and couldn’t form the words. How was this happening twice in the same day?

“You just going to wait for me to pick them up for you, princess?” Carmilla’s tone was dripping with sarcasm and annoyance. As if this day couldn't get any worse.

“I—I was just..” Laura bent down and started to gather her books, she stood up clutching them to her chest awkwardly, “I didn't mean to, I mean, I'm not running into you on purpose or anything.” Her voice seemed nervous than she expected it to. She wasn't sure if that was because she felt like she was about to get murdered or if it was just because its what happened to her when she was around, well, gorgeous women. Rude or otherwise.

“No?” Carmilla glared at her before stepping around her, “Then maybe you should watch where you’re going, cupcake.”

“Jerk.” Laura muttered under her breath, her eyes following the mystery girl as she walked away, once again.

“I’m sorry?” A deep voice startled her into nearly dropping her books again.

Laura whipped her head around quickly to see her professor standing in front of her. “Oh no, not you! There was, someone else.”

Professor Shields chuckled before ushering Laura to follow him down the hallway. “It's fine, Miss Hollis.”

Laura smiled sheepishly and readjusted the books in her arms, “In your email you said you wanted to see me? Did I do something or..?” She trailed off, following him down the hallway.

“No. I’m just a little concerned with your grade.” He nodded at another passing professor and kept walking.

“I know.” Laura wasn't sure if she should apologize or just promise to do better, “I swear I’ve been studying-“
“I know. Which is why I’m going to suggest a tutor.” He fished in his pocket for the keys to his office, “Silas has a great peer tutoring program and I have a student that would be happy to help you. If you’re interested.” He pushed open the door and walked inside, not bothering to watch to see if Laura followed.

“No, yeah, of course. I really just want to pass this class and I think a tutor would be a great idea because I know sometimes its better to be able to work with someone instead of alone and I think that would be great.”

“Laura.” Professor Shields cut her off with a sigh.

Laura clamped her mouth shut knowing full well she had been ranting. She hugged her books to her chest and rocked back on her heels as she watched her professor grab a note pad and start writing on it.

He ripped the page and handed it to Laura before sitting down at his desk and booting up his computer, “Despite her lack of people skills, she’s probably the smartest student I have.” He looked over the top of his glasses at her, “Keep that in mind if she becomes… difficult.”

After that his attention turned to his computer and Laura took it as her cue to leave. She tucked the scrap of paper into one of her books and made her way out of the building. She would have to contact her later, right now she was late for a date.

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“Heeey, sorry I’m late.” Laura scooted into the booth next to Danny and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek.

Danny smiled down at her and put her arm on the back of the booth around her shoulder, “It’s ok, I already ordered your favorite.” She wrapped her hand around Laura’s shoulder and pulled her closer, “Everything ok?”

Laura just smiled up at her, “yep.”

*Lie number one.*

“Just lost track of time talking to Laf.”

*Lie number two.*

The waitress came by and set down two plates on the table, along with the check.

Laura shifted a little in the booth, putting some space between her and Danny before picking up her fork and starting to eat. She usually was very much against lying and she honestly felt bad that she was doing it but it just kind of started happening.

She had met Danny in her English Lit class last year. Danny was Laura’s TA and she instantly had a crush on her. It took a few months before Laura realized Danny was interested too. Not that Danny wasn’t giving her all the signs, its just that Laura can be oblivious sometimes. Especially in that department.

Things had started out great. Danny was smart, beautiful, full of drive and a desire to right wrongs and help people… everything Laura thought she wanted. But at the beginning of this school year Laura had started to notice things here and there that were starting to really bother her. *Like…*
“Babe, just cut it with a knife.” Danny chuckled and reached over with her own knife to cut the stack of pancakes on Laura’s plate.

*Like that.*

“Danny, it’s fine.” Laura pushed Danny’s hand away, forcing a smile.

Laura understood that it was just Danny caring about her, but sometimes it felt like Danny was her parent. Not her girlfriend. And having grown up with an overprotective father, she was done with someone watching her every move to make sure she was okay. She was a big girl, she could cut her own darn pancakes.

Laura’s utensils hit the plate with a loud clank, “I have to make a call.” She stood up abruptly and walked hurriedly out of the diner, leaving a shocked and slightly confused Danny in the booth.

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Laura stepped outside and took a deep breath. She was probably just on edge from being stressed about her grades. Danny was just being helpful, nothing to be upset about. She was just overreacting.

Taking the scrap of paper she had shoved in her pocket before leaving her place, she flipped open her phone… yes she had a flip phone… and typed in the number scribbled on the paper.

It went straight to voicemail and Laura was getting ready to leave a message when it politely informed her the mailbox was full. She hit the end button and decided to send a text instead.

It took her a minute to decide what to say to this stranger but decided on something quick— Hi I’m Laura, i’m failing, help me please.

Ok, it was more wordy than that, this is Laura Hollis, after all. But that was the general idea.

She shut her phone and turned back to the diner, seeing Danny watching her from their booth through the window. With a sigh she headed back inside and slid back into the space next to her girlfriend.

Danny gave her a small smile before looking down at her plate and pushing around a piece of pancake with her fork. Laura immediately started feeling guilty. She knew Danny cared about her— even if sometimes the way she showed it was a little overwhelming. It wasn’t fair to shut her out.

“I’m failing one of my classes and my professor suggested a peer tutor and I was nervous and embarrassed to tell you and thats who I just left to text to set up a tutor session because I really don’t want to fail and I really don’t want to lie to you either so when you asked me earlier if everything was ok, thats what was going on.” Laura sucked in a breath, having depleted what her lungs had been holding before her nervous rant.

Danny just gave her a small smile and leaned over to kiss the top of Laura’s head before going back to eating her pancakes.

“You’re not mad?” Laura asked, turning slightly to face her better.

“Why wold i be mad?” Danny asked as she took another bite.

“I don’t know?” Why had she thought Danny would be mad? “I just thought— I guess I don’t know what I thought.”
“Look,” Danny sat down her fork and turned a little as well to face the brunette, “Do I wish you would have just told me? Yes. Do I wish you would have let me help? Yes. But I get it, and I’m just glad you’re telling me now.” She reached out and took Laura’s hand in her own, “You know part of being your girlfriend means you can talk to me about this stuff, right?”

Laura let out a sigh, feeling even more guilty after Danny reacted like the perfect girlfriend to the situation, “Yeah I know, I’m sorry.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Danny brushed her thumb along the back of Laura’s hand, her eyes soft and completely sincere.

Laura smiled, realizing she should feel lucky to have Danny as a girlfriend. She could do a whole lot worse. “No, I think once I start these tutoring sessions I should be ok. Thank you though.” She leaned forward, her hand sliding into place in red hair, bringing Danny’s lips down to meet her own.

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Laura rolled over at the sound of her phone chiming. She glanced at the clock and saw the flashing red numbers telling her it was just after 2 in the morning. She groaned and reached for her phone next to her bed. Rolling on her back and held the phone open above her face, trying to let her eyes adjust to the light binding her from its screen.

Just as her eyes were adjusting the phone slipped from her hand and smacked her in the face.

“Ow!” She sat up quickly, her hand coming up o pat her face gently where her phone had assaulted her. She reached over and clicked on the lamp next to her bed and looked around for her phone. She glared at it when she saw it laying on her yellow pillow.

“Who is even texting me this late?” she grumbled as she grabbed it and held it in front of her once again, this time, staying sitting up.

unknown: Library couches. tomorrow at 3

Maybe it was the fact that she had just woken up, or the blow to the head from her phone a second ago, but Laura reread the text and stayed just as confused as she was the first time. Until she remembered the text she had sent of to her peer tutor earlier that evening.

She sat up a little taller, feeling excited to have gotten a reply- even if it was at an odd hour. She shot back a text confirming and letting them know she was excited to get started.

She didn't receive a reply.

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The next day Laura made through her morning without spilling coffee or assaulting anyone with textbooks, so it had been a pretty decent day. She was finishing up her last class for the day, copying some notes at her desk when Perry interrupted her concentration.

“I haven’t seen you at home lately. Everything ok?” Perry’s eyebrows raised high on her forehead, her hands clasped together on top of the desk. She watched Laura scribble down some notes, with barely legible handwriting, before she met her eyes.

“Oh yeah, I’ve just been super busy trying to get caught up with class.” Laura forced a smile, “And I’ve been crashing at Danny’s on the nights she helps me study.”
“I see.” Perry hummed to herself, leaning back in the desk. “Do you think you’ll be home Wednesday?”

Laura didn’t bother looking up, she was just about done and was already running dangerously close to being late to meet her tutor. “Um, maybe. I don’t know yet, why?”

She smiled to herself and sat up after finishing copying the last bit of Perry’s notes before sliding her notebook back across the desk to the red head sitting beside her. She started packing up her own bag when she noticed Perry was lost in thought, “Everything ok, Perr?”

“Oh? Hmm?” Perry glanced over, “Oh! Yes.” She nodded quickly. “Lafontaine and I were just going to have a movie night and I wanted to see if you would be able to join us.”

Laura tried not to roll her eyes but it was difficult in moments like these. “I promise it’s okay for you guys to have a movie night without me.”

Perry, Laf and Laura had all gotten an apartment just off campus together at the beginning of their second year. It had been great— Laf was brilliant and was usually up for helping Laura with studying when they could. And Perry was good about not letting Laura only eat cookies and hot chocolate all the time. The only downside was how oblivious the two red heads were to the fact that they belonged together.

“I wouldn’t want to interrupt, anyway.” Laura threw her bag over her shoulder, “I’m late for a tutoring session though, so I’ll catch you later, ok?”

Perry smiled warmly and waved her off before squaring her shoulders and letting out a sigh. Laura chuckled to herself as she walked quickly towards the library.

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Laura rushed into the library, hands gripping the straps of her backpack tightly and made her way through the stacks of books back to where a group of couches sat. She was only a few minutes late, so she wasn’t too worried.

She came around the corner and stopped abruptly as her eyes locked on the scene in front of her. Sitting on one of the couches, where she was meant to be meeting her peer tutor, was a pair of students making out.

Spiritedly.

Laura rolled her eyes and let out a quiet groan at the sight. Really? The library? She glanced around the rest of the space and realized she was now the third wheel in the otherwise empty area. She made a face of annoyance at the couple still going at it before turning around and slowly walking through the nearby rows of books.

Maybe her tutor walked into the same thing and decided to walk around.

Not seeing anyone else looking like they were looking for her— Laura pulled out her phone and opened up the text conversation from the night before.

Laura: Hey! Sorry i was running late but I just got to the library. you here already?

She heard a text chime from the other side of the shelves and made her way towards it. She walked around the corner and was back in the clearing with the couches. And the pair of faces apparently stuck together.

Laura checked her phone to see if she had gotten a reply.
Nothing.

She typed out another quick text.

*Laura: Where are you?*

Once again the text chime sounded and Laura’s eyes went wide. The sound had come from the lap of one of the students sitting on the couches.

*Of course.* Laura thought to herself. She glanced around, not sure what to do. They were obviously ignoring the phone, so sending another text wouldn't help. But she really needed help with this class, so she didn't just want to leave.

Laura took a step closer to the pair of students that were clearly ignoring her and cleared her throat. When they didn't move she did it again, a little louder.

She watched as the blonde that had her back to Laura separated herself from the other girl on the couch. She couldn't see their faces, but the angry grumble let her know they weren't exactly happy about the interruption.

“Um, Hi.” Laura cleared her throat again awkwardly as the blonde turned around to look at her. She immediately recognized her from her anthropology class, Elsie, she was pretty sure.

So her tutor must be the other girl. The girl she hadn't quite seen yet.

“I’m Laura. You must be, Carmilla?”

“Must I be?” A raspy voice responded sarcastically just as Elsie leaned back, unblocking Laura’s view from the other girl on the couch.

Laura’s jaw dropped when she saw who had responded. Same dark hair, fair skin, and red lips… along with the same frown she had seen twice before.

“You?” Laura asked, realizing her peer tutor was in fact the same girl she had spilled coffee on and attacked with her books the day before.

Carmilla raised an eyebrow and looked Laura up and down before throwing her arm on the back of the couch, “You’ve got to be kidding me.”
Pleasure Principle

Chapter Summary

study sessions continue.

Two weeks. It’s been two weeks since the universe played its greatest practical joke on Laura and made Carmilla Karnstein her tutor. Grumpy, abrasive, sarcastic, broody, apathetic, yet infuriatingly smart, Carmilla Karnstein.

“Are we really going to do this every time?” Laura huffed as she walked back to their usual meeting place in the library.

She had completely forgone her usual polite entrance of clearing her throat and acting apologetic for interrupting whatever make out session was happening. But by now, she was done with it. And if she had to pretend to be anything other than completely annoyed at what she continuously walked in on, she might actually kill someone. Which would be bad. But, seriously. Did this have to happen every time they met up in the library? And where was she even finding these girls?

Carmilla pulled away from yet another ‘study buddy’ and smirked at Laura. She wiped her bottom lip with her thumb slowly, “Jealous, cupcake?”

Laura just rolled her eyes and dropped her backpack on the ground before dropping down into one of the chairs. She started pulling out her notes as Carmilla said her goodbyes. It was the same every time. Flirty smile, wink, squeeze of the ass, then they went on their way.

“Like I would be jealous of your nameless conquests, anyway.” Laura finally commented as Carmilla sat back down on the couch, clearly pleased with herself.

“Nameless?” Carmilla raised an eyebrow, “What makes you think I don’t know their names?”

Laura thought about it for a second, “Cause you have a tendency to call people by sugary substances.”

“Only you, creampuff.” Carmilla smirked before opening up her own backpack and pulling out a notebook covered with more doodles than actual notes.

“Right.” Laura scoffed, setting her elbow on her knee and leaning her chin into the palm of her hand as she looked over the notes in front of her.

“Elsie, Natalie, Megan..”

Laura looked up confused until it donned on her what Carmilla was doing.

Carmilla flipped through her notebook, continuing her list lazily, “Sarah. Mmm, Sarah. I should text her—”

“Alright, I get it.” Laura groaned. She watched her for a minute as she realized Carmilla was right. As much as Laura hated the nicknames Carmilla gave her, and the fact that she had never once called her Laura in the short time they had known each other, she had to admit she hadn’t heard her use the
nicknames with anyone else. At least not of the dessert variety. “So why give me stupid nicknames then?”

Carmilla just shrugged without looking up, “Cause I know it annoys you.”

Laura bunched up her face in annoyance and glared at Carmilla silently.

The lack of response caused Carmilla to glance up and her bored expression shifted to a smirk almost immediately, “And that bunched up little face you make when you’re angry is hilarious, buttercup.” Carmilla chuckled and grabbed a pen from her bag and started doodling swirls on her current page.

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“Ok, wait.” Laura tapped the end of her pen against her chin as she narrowed her eyes, clearly thinking hard about what Carmilla had just said. “Say that again, but, in english.”

Carmilla rolled her eyes, “It’s really not that complicated.” She leaned forward, pointing to a paragraph in Laura’s Psychology textbook. “Classical psychoanalysis conceives of a struggle between the pleasure principle and the reality principle.” She looked up at Laura who clearly had no idea what she was saying, “So we are talking about motivations that come from instinctive impulses, versus motivations fueled by self-esteem, or ego.”

"Can you give me an example?" Laura grumbled, knowing she was just as unhappy about the fact that she wasn’t understanding as Carmilla was.

Carmilla took a deep breath and buried her face in her hands for a moment. Then her head popped up, "when do you eat?"

"When I'm hungry." Laura shot back sarcastically. *Carmilla wasn't the only one who could make jokes.*

"Exactly." Carmilla pointed a finger at her.

Oh.

"That is an instinctive impulse. Hunger is your motivation. Eating is how you avoid pain. Thus, Pleasure Principle."

Carmilla wasn't the most patient person. Which was painfully clear the moment these tutoring sessions started. But randomly she would get talking about psychology and her mood would shift. You could see the wheels in her head turning, she was completely fascinated by this stuff.

This was one of those moments.

"Now go back to 16 year old Laura. What would drive her to want to date the quarterback of the high school football team?"

"Ew. Nothing." Laura gave her a look of disgust.

Carmilla raised an eyebrow curiously, "Come on, little Laura, shy and studious didn't have a crush on the star football player?"

"No." Laura said flatly, clearly unamused by the teasing.

Carmilla chuckled, "Alright fine, hypothetically then." She said it like she didn't quite believe what Laura was saying.
"I'll hypo your theoretically" Laura muttered.

Carmilla raised her eyebrow again at the comment.

*Ok. Note to self: get better at comebacks of you're going to try to go up against Carmilla.*

"Alright fine." Laura grumbled, leaning back in her chair, "hypothetically... One would want to date the quarterback for a sense of popularity. To feel good about them self."

"Which would be driven by..." Carmilla tilted her head to the side, waiting for Laura to finish her sentence for her.

"Ego?" Laura answered hesitantly.

"Are you asking me or telling me?"

"Telling?"

"You don't sound so sure."

"I’m telling you.” Laura stated more firmly, “Ego is the motivation, meeting the demands of the external world.”

“Reality Principle.” Carmilla responded, apparently satisfied by her answer.

There was a moment of silence that lingered between them, Laura was feeling pretty good about herself when she felt a hand grip her shoulder and a kiss being planted on her cheek.

“Hey you.” Danny said sweetly, squeezing Laura’s shoulder and moving to sit on the arm of the chair.

“I guess I should have said Amazon Warrior instead of quarterback.” Carmilla rolled her eyes and buried her face in her book. A gesture Laura didn't miss.

“Oh, hey, what are you doing here?” Laura asked, turning to look up at Danny.

“I thought you said to meet you at 6?” Danny asked, checking the watch on her wrist.

“Oh my gosh. Is it 6 already?” Laura grabbed Danny’s arm and pulled it down so she could look at the watch too.

Danny just chuckled, “Yeah, a little after actually. You ready to go? I’ve been looking forward to movie night all day.”

Carmilla made a gagging sound and both Laura and Danny looked over at her, honestly having forgotten she was there.

“Oh, sorry. I just got really nauseous all of a sudden.” Carmilla muttered looking between the two.

“Oh, thats too bad. Maybe you should lay down.” Danny responded sarcastically.

Laura stifled a laugh, completely happy that even if she sucked at comebacks, apparently Danny could dish them out at her annoying tutor.

Carmilla narrowed her eyes and turned her attention back to her book with a huff.
Danny leaned closer to Laura to whisper in her ear, “So, she’s kind of intense.”

“Yeah, you have no idea.” Laura smiled up at her. “But let’s not get hung on my jerk-face tutor.” She shut her book and started packing it away in her bag, “I think my brain has melted with all this psychology talk. Let’s get to that movie night.”

Danny took hold of Laura’s backpack and swung it over her shoulder before standing up. Laura gave her a small smile as she stood up and rubbed her hands on her thighs, feeling slightly awkward at Danny not letting her carry her own bag.

“So, I guess I’ll see you Thursday?” Laura shrugged, watching Carmilla.

“Can’t wait, sweetheart.” Carmilla drawled without looking up from her book.

Laura just rolled her eyes and started to follow Danny towards the exit.

“Is she always like that?” Danny asked, taking hold of Laura’s hand.

“Who, Carmilla?” Laura asked while letting Danny lead her out of the library.

“Mmhm.” Danny nodded, her face thoughtful.

“Well yeah, pretty much. I know she’s kind of a jerk but I just ignore it because she’s smart. You kind of get used to it after a while, though.” Laura shrugged.

“No, not that.” Danny slowed down her pace noticing Laura’s legs were having to move twice as fast as her own to keep up, “I mean the flirting.”

“Oh please.” Laura laughed at the idea.

When Danny didn’t say anything else Laura looked up at her and saw she was actually serious.

“Trust me, she wasn’t flirting.” Laura didn’t think so, at least. She knew Carmilla flirted with just about anyone she felt like flirting with, but she hadn’t with Laura. At least not seriously. She was just being a jerk. Right?

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“Oh. Hey guys.” Laf walked into the apartment and shut the door with their foot as they walked over to the table to set down a large cardboard box. “I didn’t know Danny was joining movie night.”

“Yeah, is that cool?” Laura turned slightly from her position tucked under Danny’s arm as they snuggled on the large arm chair in the room.

Laf just shrugged their shoulders and went back to their box.

“What’s in the box?” Laura tried to change the subject as fast as she could. For some reason Laf had never liked Danny and had never really tried to hide it.

“Just some stuff for my Bio class.” Laf shut the box and pushed it to the center of the table, “Don’t worry, nothing that will explode.”

Laura narrowed her eyes at them, trying to decide if she should believe them or not.

“I’m not lying this time!” They walked over and dropped down into the couch that sat next to the recliner, “Where’s Perr?”
“Right here.” Perry walked out of her bedroom clearly distressed.

“Everything ok?” Danny asked as soon as Perry was in the room.

Laf looked over at Danny quickly, they were going to ask the same thing but Danny had beat them to it. “Yeah Perr, whats wrong?”

“Oh nothing, just nervous is all.” She stopped once she was in the room and started to play with her fingers nervously, “We are starting a new section in my art class tomorrow and I just know its going to be a challenge.”

“I didn't know you took art.” Danny sat up a little bit on the chair, moving a bit so her and Laura would fit together a bit more comfortably. As adorable as the height difference was in theory, it sometimes made things a bit more difficult.

“Oh yes!” Perry’s nervousness shifted to excitement, “I just love how wild it can be.”

The rest of the room gave her skeptical faces, not really getting what she meant.

“Usually I just love the rules, you know? Organizing, order, systemization..” Her eyes were wide as her arms gestured wildly with what she was saying, “The freedom of art is just so exhilarating!”

Laura laughed knowing how serious Perry was being. The fact that she thought art was ‘wild’ summed her up perfectly. “So what wild thing are you doing tomorrow?”

“We are going from sketching fruit in a bowl, to people!” Perry exclaimed, “I’m so nervous but so excited!”

“As long as you don't pull a Van Gogh and cut your ear off.” Laf snickered from their spot on the couch.

“Very funny Lafontaine.” Perry pressed her lips together tightly and shook her head, “Alright, so what movie are we watching tonight?”

Perry made her way over to the couch and sat down next to Lafontaine, close enough that their thighs pressed together. Laura watched as the two red heads smiled at each other shyly before settling back into the cushions before pressing play on the remote.

——

“Good morning, Carmilla!” Perry was straightening out her pencils and adjusting her easel when Carmilla took the seat next to her.

“Is it?” Carmilla grumbled as she leaned back in her chair and took a sip of her coffee.

“You look like you just woke up.” Perry commented, taking in Carmilla’s appearance.

Carmilla pushed her sunglasses up on top of her head and glared at the red head next to her, “I did.”

Perry decided against informing Carmilla that it was in fact 1 in the afternoon. It was probably in her best interest not to make her angry. So far they had managed to get along surprisingly well, and Perry wasn't about to mess that up over poor sleeping habits.

“Aren’t you excited for the new section?” Perry asked, straightening her pencils once again.

Carmilla glanced over at her, slightly surprised at her excitement over what their class was going to
be spent doing that day. “You do know what today is, right?” Carmilla asked, raising her eyebrow.

“Of course!” Perry smiled, “No more fruit! Just in time too, I think the banana was starting to go bad.”

Just then their professor cleared his throat and launched into the importance of lines and shading to give a realistic view of their subject. A model for their assignment that day walked out and into the center of the room. The students were set up in a circle so everyone could have a good view of their subject to sketch.

Perry was paying close attention to their professor, and Carmilla was paying attention to Perry, sure she had no idea what was actually about to happen.

The model stood in the center of the room wearing a large bath robe. He was probably just another student trying to earn some extra credit by volunteering to be there. He had a goofy grin and kept winking at the girls in the class. It was enough to make Carmilla groan and roll her eyes.

The professor stopped talking and all eyes were on the model. Perry’s pencil was at the ready, set to start sketching on the pad set in front of her. Her eyes were locked on the man standing in the center of the circle, an excited smile on her face.

“Kirsch?” The professor prompted.

“Oh. Right!” Kirsch smiled wide and undid the tie around his waist and promptly dropped the robe to the floor. He put his hands on his hips and turned his head to the side and lifted his chin in a power stance.

“OH MY GOD!” Perry’s eyes practically bugged out of her head as she realized Kirsch was completely naked. Her pencil went flying across the room and her hands shot up to cover her face as she nearly fell out of her seat.

Carmilla let out a loud laugh, her head falling back in pure amusement at the red heads reaction.

—

“You doing okay there, Curly Sue?” Carmilla smirked as she clapped her hand on Perry’s shoulder.

Perry’s face was completely void of expression. Carmilla wasn’t sure when the last time she even blinked was. Her eyes were locked in front of her, staring at nothing, “I didn't know thats what todays lesson was going to be about.”

“Well I think you did exceptionally well.” Carmilla’s voice was full of sarcasm as she observed the drawing sitting in front of Perry.

“I panicked.” Perry finally looked over to Carmilla, her eyes wide. She honestly had tried to sketch Kirsch, but after peeking out from behind her sketch pad 2 or 3 times to be met with his goofy grin and wiggling eyebrows as he flexed completely naked, she just couldn't do it anymore and basically had a glorified stick figure on the pad in front of her.

Carmilla chuckled and slung her bag over her shoulder, “Would a brownie help?”

Perry just nodded, her eyes still wide. It was going to take her some time to get over what just happened.

Carmilla walked with Perry out of the classroom and towards the coffee kart, “Just think, only
another week or so of that.”

“We have to look at that again?!” Perry was finally showing some emotion, and it was pure horror.

——

Perry crumpled up the paper bag that had held her brownie and set it aside on the table, feeling much better than she had just a little while ago. She pulled out a notebook and set her bag on the bench next to her.

“How’d your art class go today?” Laura asked as she walked up and sat down next to Perry.

The quad was buzzing with students. Some running to classes, others barely shuffling to classes. The few picnic tables set around the area were occupied with more students napping in the sun than with students eating or studying.

“It was…” Perry sucked a breath, trying to think of the right word. “Revealing.”

Laura just looked at her curiously, not sure what she meant by that.

Perry pointed over her shoulder towards the coffee kart, “But then Carmilla bought me a brownie and we—“

“Wait, what?” Laura cut her off abruptly, “You know Carmilla?”

“Mmhmm.” Perry nodded with a smile. “How do you know her?”

“She’s the girl I told you about.” Laura frowned, “The tutor from hell.”

“Oh she’s not that bad.” Perry retorted cheerfully.

“No?” Laura huffed, “She’s always making out with some random girl in the library, she steals my studying snacks, talks to me like a child if i don't understand something, and she only replies to my texts at like, 2am. Which isn't surprising considering she’s probably off scandalizing entire sorority houses every night.”

“Well, there’s no denying it’s a little inconsiderate.” Perry shrugged.

“Inconsiderate?” Laura replied, baffled.

“Have you really given her a chance? Maybe she gets low blood sugar, and has severe insomnia and gets most of her studies done at night?” Perry knew it was a stretch but just wanted to give Carmilla the benefit of the doubt. Sure she was a little abrasive, but not completely cruel.

“Seriously? I’ve been thinking of talking to my professor, asking for a different tutor.” Laura shook her head, she couldn't believe Perry knew Carmilla and could still defend her. “With her attitude its a surprise she hasn’t gotten in more trouble with teachers already. She so has it coming.”

Perry looked over her shoulder quickly before frowning at Laura, “Well, its not that I don’t understand, but don't you think you oughta talk to her first? A lot of problems can be solved through good communication.”

Laura just shrugged and waved as she noticed Laf walking across the quad towards them. She was done worrying about Carmilla right now and just wanted to enjoy a break with her friends.

Carmilla stood next to the coffee kart with a cup in each hand. She had left Perry at the table to get a
refill of her coffee and another cup of hot chocolate for the red head when Laura had shown up. She had started back to the table just in time to hear Laura’s opinion of her. Which she had to admit, wasn't completely unfounded.

She *had* been bringing girls to the library to annoy Laura. She had also been stealing the small bags of gummy bears Laura somehow always had with her. *In her defense though,* she only ate the white and green ones and would leave the rest. But for some reason, hearing Laura’s opinion of her actually hurt her feelings.

*That was something she hadn't expected.* The thought of it threw her off enough that instead of walking over to the table to either tell Laura off, or make her feel bad, she just nodded a goodbye at Perry when she had looked over her shoulder, and left.
(not)Getting Along

Chapter Summary

I suck at summaries...

Chapter Notes

Thanks for all the awesome comments and notes and stuff! it honestly makes me want to write more haha so keep them coming so I have the desire to keep writing :)

Carmilla stood by herself in the dark room watching as the chemicals lifted the photo from the paper. Seemingly like magic, a picture started to form, starting like a blotch of ink, bleeding across the page, slowly revealing lines and shapes.

It was her favorite part of the whole process. Watching something appear from nothing. An idea of what was supposed to appear, but you could never really be sure until the solution did its job and bled the picture to life.

Carmilla loved being surprised by the unexpected. She also loved when the vision she had as she took the photo appeared exactly like she had imagined it would.

She let her photos dry on the line hung across the room as she swirled the chemical mixture mindlessly.

'With her attitude its a surprise she hasn't gotten in more trouble with teachers already. She so has it coming.'

Why had it bothered her so much? It was true. Probably. It's not like Carmilla had made any effort to be anything other than her usual grumpy self around Laura. Plus, why did she even care what Laura thought? She didn't even like Laura. She was cheerful and bubbly and always had way too much energy.

She shook her head and went through the motions of collecting her photos and sliding them into the plastic pages of her folder gently, ready to show her professor. She had tried to take the criticism she had received from prof Maxfield and put more emotion into her photos. She hoped they would live up to expectation this time.

—

"What's the emotion you're trying to express here?" Maxfield questioned, gesturing to the photo sitting on the open page in front of them.

Carmilla stared down at the page silently.

Maxfield sighed, "This is a fantastic photo. The framing, line of focus, everything is perfect."
Carmilla smiled. *Finally she hadn't fucked it up.*

"But it's boring." Maxfield continued.

*Not again...*

"Make me *feel* something, Carmilla." Her voice was encouraging, not degrading.

Something Carmilla was grateful for.

"Make it impossible for me to look away." She gripped Carmilla's shoulder gently. "*You* have to feel something before I will."

Carmilla left the classroom not angry, but disappointed. She had really thought she had done better this time.

Carmilla was lost in her own thoughts, hands gripping her backpack straps tightly, her head down as she watched her feet make their way down the hall. She didn't notice the blonde chasing her down the hallway until a hand was gripping her arm.

“*Headed to the library?”* Elsie said with a flirty smile.

Carmilla nodded, instantly remembering Laura’s words that had been stuck in her head all day for some reason.

“*Yeah.*” She said flatly as she let her arm slip from Elsie’s grip and kept walking.

____

After her little talk with Perry about Carmilla, Laura decided she should probably take her advice before running off to complain to her professor. She was an adult after all. Maybe she had to act like it, even if she really didn’t want to. So she made her way to the library to meet Carmilla for their usual Thursday tutoring session, ready to lay down some rules.

Laura rounded the corner and dropped her head low as she brought a hand up to cover her eyes, “I swear, If I open my eyes and someone is attached to you face I’m gonna start spritzing you both like... cats.” Her hand lowered mid sentence to find Carmilla sitting alone on the couch.

*Well, thats a first.*

Carmilla was sitting with a folder open on the table in front of her. She was flipping through the pages angrily, shaking her head and mumbling to herself.

“What, no ‘study buddy’ today?” Laura quipped as she sat down in her usual chair, glancing over at the folder and noticing the red marks on each page.

Carmilla looked up with a glare before slamming the folder shut and throwing it to the opposite side of the couch.

“Did you wanna talk about it?” Laura asked, raising her eyebrows at Carmilla.

“No.” Carmilla muttered, pressing her fingers to her temples.

“Cause I can relate to the whole, my professor hates my work and is unnecessarily mean, thing.” Laura shrugged half heartedly, really only trying to tease Carmilla a bit and lighten the mood.
“But I so had it coming, didn’t I?” Carmilla spat back at her.

oh.

“Look, I didn't mean it like that.” Laura actually did feel bad now. She had no idea Carmilla was going to hear her rant to Perry, and in all honesty, she didn't actually want Carmilla to get in trouble. She just wanted her to stop being such a jerk.

“Please.” Carmilla scoffed, shaking her head.

Laura sighed, glancing around the library. “Really though, everything ok?” It felt weird to be sincere with Carmilla. But it was even weirder that Carmilla wasn't being completely apathetic. Besides her constant sarcasm, this was the most emotion Laura had ever seen Carmilla have.

“You wouldn't understand.” Carmilla sighed heavily before reaching for her bag and muttering, mostly to herself, “Its like an undersea anchor; impossible to escape.”

“Ah.” Laura made a face of understanding. She leaned back in her chair, “Worried you aren’t, uh, living up to expectations, huh?”

Carmilla’s scowl lessened and she slowly looked over at Laura. Her hair fell loosely over her shoulder, covering part of her face as she took in Laura’s expression, trying to figure out if she was being sincere or not.

Laura just pressed her lips together before gesturing to herself, “Only child of a massively overprotective dad here.”

Carmilla looked back down to her bag, realizing maybe Laura did understand more than she thought.

“And I didn't even have to get all Coleridge-y about it.” Laura joked.

Carmilla puffed out a breath and actually smiled as she pulled her Psychology book from her bag.

Laura smiled back, actually quite proud of herself for getting Carmilla to do something other than frown or scowl. Giving it only a quick thought, Laura reached into her bag and pulled out the small bag of gummy bears she had stashed in there and tossed it over to Carmilla.

Carmilla caught them, barely, and slowly opened the pack and tossed a white gummy bear into her mouth. She looked back at Laura who was watching her with a small smile.

Laura had never noticed before, or maybe she had noticed but hadn’t let herself dwell on it, but Carmilla was incredibly beautiful. Without the scowl, which Laura had thought to be permanent, Carmilla’s features were actually quite soft. Her eyes were lighter than she had thought, something in them made her seem wise. It seemed silly to think so, but it was the only way Laura could think to describe it.

Usually Laura was just completely frustrated with her and trying to keep herself from strangling the dark haired girl. This random moment of actually getting along was strange, but kind of nice, and suddenly Carmilla seemed different than she had at first.

Maybe she wasn't as harsh and mean as Laura had thought.

Laura still couldn't stand Carmilla as a person, of course. But getting along was better than actively hating each other. Especially when her grade was dependent on them actually spending time together.
“Hey… guys.” Danny was suddenly standing next to Laura, a little surprised at what she had walked in on.

For as much as Laura ranted about how awful Carmilla was, they sure did seem to be getting along. Which Danny definitely noticed.

Carmilla kept her eyes on Laura until the brunette looked away and up at her girlfriend. Then she rolled her eyes in annoyance and sunk back into the couch and opened her book on her lap.

“Hey, Danny.” Laura greeted her a little awkwardly. “What are you doing here?” She looked over to the clock on the wall, sure it had only been few minutes since she had gotten there herself. There was no way it was time for her to leave yet.

“I knew you’d be here studying, and thought I’d just come share a table.” Danny dropped her backpack and leaned down to give Laura a kiss on the top of the head. “You won’t even know I’m here.”

—

Carmilla rolled her eyes for probably the thousandth time in the last hour and clenched her fists, hoping she had the self-control not to punch the ginger giant that was doing a terrible job at ‘just sharing a table’.

Laura looked between the two girls and could tell the tension was high. “I think what Carmilla was saying is that—“

“No, I know what she was saying but she wasn’t explaining it right.” Danny cut her off, pulling the textbook towards her on the table.

Danny had basically hijacked their tutoring session in an attempt to help Laura understand what they were talking about. It backfired. Immensely.

Laura was starting to get frustrated, not only with the fact that she had no clue what they were talking about anymore, but also that Danny had just completely taken over. As impatient and snarky as Carmilla was—she knew what she was talking about. And actually had a knack for explaining things in a way Laura could understand.

Danny on the other hand…

“See? Didn’t that make more sense?” Danny asked, leaning back slightly.

Laura’s face was scrunched up, her eyes narrowed, and lips parted. She had no clue what Danny had just said. Confusion. That’s the land she was now living in.

“You know what.” Carmilla cleared her throat and shoved her book in her bag. “I just forgot that I have to be… anywhere but here.” She stood up and stomped away angrily.

“Oh. That’s too bad. No, come back.” Danny called after her sarcastically.

Laura sighed watching Carmilla walk away. This day had been a disaster, and Danny’s comments were just making things worse. “Don’t.” She shook her head gently and tapped Danny’s leg with her hand.

Danny looked back at her a little surprised by her sudden caring attitude towards Carmilla. “What? Why not?”
Laura thought back to what had happened earlier. Carmilla had already been upset about something before Danny had even shown up and and basically told her she was tutoring wrong. “She’s just had kind of a rough day is all.”

Laura was trying to be casual about it, not wanting to do anything to upset Danny, but also feeling bad for how things had gone down with Carmilla. She didn't deserve to be made fun of. At least not right this second.

“Oh no. You are entirely too sweet.” Danny jeered, bumping her shoulder into Laura as she smiled down at her.

“Yeah, yeah.” Laura rolled her eyes and shut her text book, “Come on, lets go get pancakes.” She went to put her things away and noticed the folder Carmilla had thrown, still sitting on the far end of the couch.

Danny chuckled, “I would love to be an enabler for your sugar addiction through copious amounts of maple syrup, but I have a last minute summer society meeting I should be getting to.”

“Oh, sure.” Laura responded flatly. If she was being honest, she was a little frustrated Danny had interrupted her tutoring session, caused it to end early, and then had to leave anyway. What was the point?

“But I actually came by in the first place so I could walk you home.”

Ah. There it is.

“You know, I am capable of getting home by myself.” Laura’s tone was joking but she was started to feel even more annoyed.

“I know, I just like making sure you get there safe.” Danny stood up and was about to grab Laura’s bag when Laura practically lunged for it. “Woah, you ok, Hollis?”

“Yeah, Danny. I’m good.” Laura huffed, “I’m actually good to walk home by myself so you can run off to your meeting.” She threw her bag over her shoulder and moved around the table to grab the folder Carmilla had left behind.

“Did I do something wrong?” Danny asked hesitantly.

Laura took a deep breath. She knew it wasn't worth fighting about. Danny was only trying to help.

“No, sorry.” Laura let her breath out, “I’m just stressed about psychology. But really, I want to walk by myself.” She forced a smile as she stepped back towards Danny. “Clear my head and stuff.”

Danny gripped the strap of her backpack and ran her hand along the fabric, “Alright. Just- let me know when you make it home?”

Laura nodded, “Of course.” She pushed herself up on her toes as Danny leaned down a bit. But instead of giving her a kiss on the lips like Danny was expecting, she pressed her lips to Danny’s cheek quickly before dropping down and hurrying towards the door alone.

——

"Ugh!” Laura burst through the apartment door, "She's infuriating!"

Laf turned quickly from the kitchen table to watch Laura scrunch up her face and shake her fists angrily out in front of her.
"Uh, everything ok frosh?" Laf asked, spooning another mouthful of cereal into their mouth.

"No." Laura grumbled, more pouty than angry this time. She dragged herself over to the table and dropped down in a chair, burying her face in her arms.

"Go ahead, tell your good friend Laf what's wrong." They said through a mouthful of food.

Laura turned her head to the side, still resting on her arms, "I just don't get it. She’s been driving me crazy for weeks, on purpose i’m pretty sure. But then I was a total jerk and I think she forgave me cause then things went back to normal, but only, better than normal. Ya know?"

Laf nodded, "Danny?" Laura had vented to them about the issues she was having with Danny and knew she was having a hard time.

"No, Carmilla." She muttered and hid her face in her arms again. "And I get that she means well but she's just— sometimes she treats me like a child and it's just-- ugh! It's overwhelming."

"Carmilla." Laf replied, honestly trying to follow Laura's train of thought.

Laura sat up quickly, "No, Danny!" She gave Laf a look like they should have known who she was talking about.

Laf’s face twisted into a look of confusion, "ok let me get this straight." They set their spoon in their bowl and pressed their palms together, "You're upset because you think Carmilla isn't the jerk you thought she was, and mad because Danny, your girlfriend, is caring and thoughtful and constantly there for you?"

"Yes." Laura replied like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"You are such a strange, small person." Laf shook their head and chuckled.

Laura sighed to herself as Laf shook their head and went back to eating their cereal. Maybe she was being silly. About it all.

She remembered the folder she had grabbed on her way out of the library and pulled it from her bag, and set it on the table.

She started flipping through the pages slowly…. "Woah."

*click*

Carmilla smiled as the familiar sound broke the silence. She lowered the camera in front of her and took a deep breath, finally feeling better after the shitty afternoon she had just endured.

She reached down and grabbed her bag, throwing its strap over her shoulder and continued to walk down the path that led through the trees with her camera in hand.

Not too far off campus was an old park that had been forgotten for years. You had to climb through a small hole in a chain link fence to get to it. The grass and trees were overgrown, weeds and vines climbed the poles of the rusted swing set and playground.

A small pond that had once been the perfect place to throw bread crumbs to ducks was now hidden behind wild tree branches. No ducks now, but water from the small stream still flowed heavily through it, filling the area with sounds of running water.
Carmilla climbed over a large fallen tree branch and kicked a rock, rolling it into the small pond in front of her.

The ripples started to flow outward from where the rock had dropped in, creating small waves. The reflection of the trees and world around the pond started to blur as the ripples grew larger, filling the pond with broken images.

The sun was low enough that it cast an orange glow over the water, reflecting light and color through the lens of Carmilla's camera.

*click*

—

“You’re home early.” Will greeted as Carmilla walked in the door and threw her keys on the counter.

“What are you doing here Willy boy?” Carmilla walked right by him to the fridge, grabbing a beer and popping the cap off on the edge of the counter. She turned around and leaned her hip against the counter, bringing the bottle to her lips.

“Laundry.” Will shrugged and lifted a laundry basket in his hands.

“Doesn’t your fancy brotherhood of the dimwits house have a washing machine?” Carmilla asked raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah, but it makes everything smell like feet.” Will made a face of disgust, “I think its Theo’s fault.”

Carmilla shook her head and walked over to the couch and dropped down into it. She threw her feet up on the coffee table in front of her and took another sip before letting her head fall back on the couch with a sigh.

“Everything ok, kitty?” Will asked, walking over to the couch with his basket of clothes.

“You know I hate when you call me that.” Carmilla didn't bother to move or even open her eyes.

He knew thats what she said every time he used the nickname, but he also knew she secretly liked it. Will was also smart enough to know that her deflecting the question was her way of saying she didn't want to talk about it.

“You know..” Will pulled out a piece of clothing from the basket to fold, “My fancy pants fraternity has a party coming up in a couple weeks. You should come.”

Carmilla scoffed at the idea, “Like I'd willingly walk into that house of filth.”

“Uh, hate to break it to you, kitty,” Will looked around the apartment, “But you aren't exactly winning any awards for cleanliness here.”

This time she opened her eyes and rolled her head to glare at him. “Tell me why I let you come here again?”

“Alright, message received.” Will tossed the folded clothes back into the basket and gripped the edges, “Its an open invitation. At least think about it.”

Carmilla watched him walk out the door, leaving her alone in her apartment. She took another swig of her drink before setting it on the coffee table in front of her, and standing up to go grab her bag.
She brought it back to the couch and started to pull out her books form the day. They were stacked on the table in front of her before she realized she was one short. Her folder of photographs she had just shown Maxfield wasn't there.

“Shit.” She breathed out, remembering she hadn't grabbed it before leaving the library.

"Miss Hollis." Professor shields called as Laura was about to walk out the door with the rest of her class.

She turned around and made her way through the sea of students leaving the auditorium.

"I saw your score from last nights online quiz." Shields followed up, leaning one arm on the podium in front of him with a smile. "Well done."

"Thanks." Laura smiled happily.

"I take it the tutoring sessions have been helping?" His voice seemed almost surprised by his own words.

"I guess so." Laura shrugged, "I'm doing better, right?"

Shields just nodded thoughtfully, "And Carmilla? Isn't making things too difficult, I hope?"

"Uh, no, not really." Laura tried to think of the best thing to say without completely lying. "I mean, she isn't exactly happy, to be helping. But you were right, she's smart."

Shields just chuckled and looked to the door as more students started to filter in for his next class, "Well if anyone can break through the rough exterior, it'll be you."

Laura smiled, taking that as a compliment. “Can I ask you something?”

“hmm?” Prof Shields hummed in response, starting to go through his binder in front of him to get himself ready for the next class.

"Is there— I mean, you said— I just..” Laura had no idea how to ask this.

“Today, Miss Hollis. Preferably before I have to start class.” Prof Shields looked up, giving her his full attention.

“Why is Carmilla even doing the peer tutoring thing? Its obvious she would rather be doing absolutely anything else. So I just wondered if you knew why.” Her words nearly jumbled together with how quickly she was talking.

Her professor nodded in understanding, “You weren't the only one with a struggling grade. Its a win-win situation. You get help, and she gets class credit.”

Laura pressed her lips together tightly, finally understanding why Carmilla always seemed put out to help her, but still showed up anyway. Her professor started talking to the students taking their seats so Laura turned and headed towards the door. She turned the corner and bumped into someone's shoulder.

"We have got to stop meeting like this, cupcake." Carmilla said flatly.

Laura stepped back quickly, remembering the last two times she had ran into Carmilla.
“You’re jumpy.” Carmilla raised an eyebrow but made no move to keep walking by.

Laura sighed, grateful Carmilla’s reaction today was a lot less hostile than usual but not quite sure what to say or do.

Carmilla eyed her up and down curiously, “Worried you won’t be able to pass the midterm?”

“What? No!” Laura answered quickly “And, I have plenty of time to study anyway. I’ll be fine.”

“I know.” Carmilla smiled.

oh? Laura couldn't help it as the corner of her lips twitched up in to a smile.

“You have a brilliant tutor.” Carmilla’s smile switched to a smirk.

Laura’s smile dropped and she rolled her eyes. Of course she would take the credit.

“So no reason for all this.. twitchiness.” Carmilla drawled, using her hand to gesture to Laura.

“There is no twitching.” Laura spat out, “There is an absence of twitching.

“Clearly.” Carmilla chuckled and went to walk past Laura into her classroom when Laura took hold of her forearm. Laura let go as soon as Carmilla turned her head to look at her.

“I uh— I’m actually glad I ran into you.” Laura stammered, “You forgot..” She swung her bag off her shoulder and unzipped it, reaching in and pulling out Carmilla’s folder. “This yesterday.”

Carmilla held eye contact with Laura for a moment before glancing down to see what she was holding in her hand. Her eyes went back to Laura’s quickly as she reached out and pulled it from her grip.

“Thanks.” Carmilla muttered quietly. Her teasing attitude was completely gone as she held tightly to her folder, watching Laura for any indication of if she had looked inside or not.

“Sure.” Laura shrugged with a small smile, “I mean, they are really good Carm.”

Carmilla’s jaw clenched.

Laura noticed immediately and tried to backtrack as best she could, “Uh, I mean- I wasn't looking or anything. Well I was, but they are really good so I didn't think you'd mind. I had no idea you—”

“These aren't yours to look at.” Carmilla lifted the folder angrily. Her voice was eerily calm, but here eyes were narrowed and anger was practically seeping from her.

“I know, I didn't think..” Laura rubbed her hand along her arm nervously.

Carmilla just kept glaring, making Laura even more nervous. “Tell you what. You butt out and don’t touch things that don’t belong to you. Otherwise this, tutoring thing we have going on, ends. And you’re on your own.”

“Oh this is not happening.” Laura stood up straight. She had no reason to let Carmilla treat her this way. She was honestly trying to be nice. Sure, she maybe shouldn't have looked through her folder, but they were just pictures after all. “I’m just as happy about this tutoring situation as you are. But don’t try to pretend for a second that you don’t need me as much as I need you.”
Carmilla looked a little taken back (albeit, still angry) by her words and Laura instantly started second-guessing herself.

“I mean, you don’t need me, but the tutoring. So just quit with the whole, asshole routine or I’ll just talk to professor shields to get a different tutor.” Laura’s eyes narrowed as she finished, hoping Carmilla caught on to how serious she was actually being.

Carmilla scoffed, “You whining to Shields? I’d pay to see that.”

“Think I wont?” Laura gave her a challenging look and turned like she was about to walk back into the classroom.

“Be my guest.” Carmilla bit back, just as serious.

There was a moment of silence as they glared at each other, then someone clearing their throat brought them out of the staring contest.

“Sorry, uh, am I interrupting something?” Laf said hesitantly, walking up to the pair standing in the hallway.

“Really not.” Carmilla glared at Laura before brushing past her, “I need to get to class.”

“oookay.” Laf drew out watching Carmilla walk away before turning to look at Laura with a questioning look.

“Ignore her. She’s a sociopath.” Laura said it loud enough for Carmilla to hear as she disappeared into the classroom.

“So, what was that all about?” Laf asked with a chuckle.

“Who knows?” Laura threw her arms out, “I was just trying to be nice and she freaked out.” So much for getting along…
Classical Conditioning

She wasn't sure how long she had been pretending to be asleep, but it was Saturday morning and she was going to stay wrapped up in her comforter for as long as possible. Which seemed to be ending sooner than Laura was willing to accept.

She heard the door click shut quietly and a slight tug on the blankets wrapped tightly around her.

Laura buried her face into her pillow with a sigh, "Perry we've talked about this. You can't clean my sheets when I'm still in them."

Then she felt the mattress dip and an arm wrap around her. Laura rolled over completely surprised by the action- Perry would definitely not be trying to snuggle with her.

"Is that something Perry has tried to do before?" Danny whispered as she snuggled closer to Laura.

Laura let out a sleepy chuckle and turned to face Danny, "Morning."

"Morning to you too, Hollis." Danny replied with a smile.

Laura relaxed a bit and let Danny pull her in closer. They hadn't really talked since Laura got mad at her in the library on Thursday. Having had time to cool down, Laura realized Danny was just being Danny. Wanting to take care of her. She couldn't really be mad about that, could she?

Danny's smile faltered slightly as she let out a breathe, "Is everything ok? With us I mean?"

Laura felt herself stiffen. How was she supposed to answer honestly when she wasn't sure herself? She forced herself to take a deep breath and relax, tilting her head to look up at Danny's worried face. "I'm sorry I've been kinda… off lately." She sighed, "I guess this semester is just stressing me out more than I thought."

Danny just nodded and wrapped her arms tighter around Laura.

Laura sighed and tried to let herself get comfortable in Danny's arms. But something felt different. Laura knew what they had was great. She knew Danny was great. That hadn't changed. And even though she couldn't quite figure out what it was- something had changed.

"Well Hollis, should we get up and greet the day?" Danny asked, rubbing her palm up and down Laura's back gently.

Laura let out a sigh and closed her eyes, "Can we just stay here another minute?"

"Sure." Danny pressed a kiss to the top of Laura's head and relaxed into the mattress.

Laura tried to figure out what was different this morning but couldn't quite place it. Danny still felt safe, comfortable, like she always had. Maybe it wasn't Danny that was different, maybe it was Laura. Maybe safe wasn't what she wanted anymore. At least not in the way it felt in that moment.

——

"Oh my god." Perry muttered quietly, "oh my god."
Carmilla let out a sigh, "you've been saying that for half an hour, red."

"I'm sorry." Perry squeaked, "I just- this is just really difficult."

“Come on, its only Monday. Its not healthy to be this stressed out already.” Carmilla’s eyes squinted as she focused her attention on the sketch pad in from of her, trying to get the lines just right.

“Oh no, this is my usual level of anxiety on any given day.” Perry peeked around the side of her sketch pad quickly before hiding behind it again, working on the shape of her drawing.

Carmilla chuckled and looked back to the center of the room, “Hey beefcake, quit moving!”

“Oh, sorry!” Kirsch gave her a goofy grin before once again standing like a statue, his face serious as he concentrated way too hard at the simple task of standing still.

Perry drew a few more lines and frowned, knowing she had to look at the model again. She peered around at him before going back to her drawing, “Laura said your study sessions have been quite helpful.”

“Oh has she?” Carmilla smiled for a second before forcing her face to go neutral again. She hadn’t talked to Laura since last week when she gave her back her folder. She had ignored her texts over the weekend and hadn’t even gotten back to her about their usually study session for the next day.

She wasn’t sure why it bothered her so much that Laura looked through her pictures. Maybe because they were personal? Maybe because Maxfield said they weren’t good and she was embarrassed? Whatever. Enough thinking about Laura.

“How’s your self portrait coming along? Run out of red paint yet?” Carmilla joked, glancing over at Perry and stifling a laugh at seeing the picture of Kirsch on her sketch pad, where his ‘private’ area was conveniently still blank and had yet to be drawn.

“I thought drawing Kirsch here was going to the hardest part of this class, but the self portrait for the midterm has been quite difficult.” Perry turned to look at Carmilla with a distraught face, “And you’re right. I do have a lot of very red hair.”

Carmilla actually laughed at how sincere Perry was being. She never would have imagined she would get along with her. She may be high strung, but Carmilla found her to be hilarious, even if it was on accident most of the time. She admittedly didn’t like many people, but she did like Perry.

——

Laura sat in her usual spot in the back of the library. She was tapping her pencil furiously on the arm of the chair, glancing up at the clock every few seconds. She hadn't talked to Carmilla since she blew up at her about her folder the week before. But she figured silence was a good thing in this case, and that things would go back to normal on Tuesday.

They would deal with each other long enough to get through yet another tutoring session and then go their separate ways until the next one. But so far, Carmilla was a no show.

——

"Mother, this really isn't a good time." Carmilla's jaw tightened and she glanced around at the
students passing by.

"Darling, what was I do to when you ignored all my requests for you to come see me." Carmilla's mother crossed her arms over her chest sternly.

Carmilla rolled her eyes, "I'm your daughter, not a member of your faculty that will respond to orders in an email."

"Watch your tone." Hers mothers voice was cold, clinical. If you didn't already know she was Carmilla's mother, you would assume they were strangers. "I expect you to take your studies seriously. Failing Professor Shields class is an embarrassment. Not only for you, but for me as well."

—

Laura looked at the time on her phone and let out an annoyed sigh. 30 minutes late. How long was she supposed to wait before she should assume Carmilla wasn't coming?

30 minutes.

Laura started packing up her things and shoved her phone in her pocket. She stomped silently (she is in a library, after all) towards the door but slowed her pace as she got closer to it. She could see someone standing outside the doors, and she was pretty sure it was Carmilla.

She was talking to someone and based off of her posture and body language, she wasn't very happy.

As Laura got closer she realized who it was. The Dean. She looked around the library but no one was paying attention to her, or the pair talking in hushed but angry voices outside the library doors.

Laura looked back and watched as the Dean stoop up tall and looked down her nose at Carmilla. Her actions made it seem like she was scolding Carmilla, talking down to a child. Which didn't seem out of character at all.

Laura had never had to deal with the dean herself, but she had heard stories. She was six feet of power suited, middle aged glamazon that had the ability to make you feel like she was going to suck your soul out through your eyeballs. Extremely intimidating, not just to students, but for professors as well. No matter what she was doing or who she was talking to, she had a knack for making you feel like a disappointment.

Even from her hiding place behind the door, Laura found herself feeling inadequate- for what she wasn't even sure.

Laura bit her bottom lip watching Carmilla's posture deflate. If she was feeling this crappy just by being near the dean, how must Carmilla be feeling getting a personal chewing out from her?

She didn't have much time to think about it because suddenly the door was opening and Carmilla was standing practically right in front of her.

"I uh, hi! I wasn't doing anything." Laura stammered, gripping the strap of her bag and looking around nervously.

"Sure. Cause that's not the face of someone eavesdropping at all, spaz." Carmilla rolled her eyes and started to walk past her. "You leaving or are we still doing this?"
"Oh, yeah, I just wasn't sure cause you were late." Laura turned to follow Carmilla. "What was that about?"

Carmilla looked over her shoulder at Laura who was still following her but didn't say anything. Laura sat down as they got back to the couches, attention still on the clearly upset girl now sitting on the couch

"She didn't like something I said." Carmilla said it casually as she started going through her book bag.

"What, in like a lecture or something?"

"Doesn't matter. It's shape up or get out." Carmilla shrugged, feigning indifference. Things were a little more complicated than that. Her mother being the Dean definitely made it a struggle to be there sometimes, but Carmilla actually really enjoyed learning and would probably be devastated if she really had to leave.

"Get out?" Laura looked completely baffled, "how can you act so casual about that?"

"Aw, afraid you'll miss me, cupcake?" Carmilla flirted sarcastically. Wearing her signature smirk and raising an eyebrow. Sarcasm had always been her defense mechanism and her own personal way of avoiding actually feeling things. Why hold back now?

Laura scoffed at the comment before completely ignoring it, "That's not fair." Laura blurted out, "Students struggle all the time, just because she's the dean doesn't mean she can single you out and threaten you like that."

"Really creampuff, it's not worth getting all worked up about." Carmilla looked around, noticing Laura's volume was attracting a few stares from other students studying.

"Whatever." Laura shrunk in her chair, "I just hate when people abuse their authority instead of use it to help people. All these professors that could care less about the kids here, why teach if you just don't care?"

"Well you know teachers, they are only in it for the money." Carmilla joked.

Laura glared at Carmilla, "I'm being serious here and all you can do is make crappy jokes. Are you really so damaged that you're incapable of caring about anything?"

"Do you really think caring would actually do anything about it?" Carmilla scoffed, "Because I’m sure if you stay pure of heart and really believe that, that’ll make a difference."

"Well, it's better than lounging around all day and pretending to be all cool and disaffected when really you're just miserable and alone."

Laura was starting to get frustrated at this point. How could Carmilla just not care? And why was she being such a jerk when all Laura was trying to do was tell her how unfair the dean was being? She was on her side for heavens sake!

"And you really think you could do a lick of actual good? It's the way things are and always will be. They have the power, and they use it." Carmilla shook her head and leaned back in the couch, "You're a child. And you understand nothing. Not about life. Not about this place. And certainly not about what it takes to survive in a world that—you know what? The sooner you stop playing super hero trying to change the world, the better."
Laura didn't understand. She didn't understand that it was more than just an upset teacher. *It was her mother.* Her mother, who had always pushed Carmilla to do more, to be better... Out of love, *or something else,* Carmilla had never been sure. But she was sure of one thing. That wasn't about to change just because some naive girl thought it was unfair.

Laura watched as Carmilla's expression shifted. The words she was saying said one thing- that she didn't care and there was no point in trying. Her face said something completely different. She did care, but something was holding her back from allowing herself to actually try.

"No." Laura spoke up finally.

"What?" Carmilla eyes shot up to Laura's as she answered automatically. Honestly surprised by her response.

Laura shrugged a shoulder like it was the easiest decision she's ever made. "No. I’m not just gonna not care. Maybe you’re right. Maybe I am a child. A girl who never left her city limits before she got here. Who thought that university was gonna be some big adventure full of books to read and parties to dance at. Who thought classes would be full of teachers who loved doing their job and would make learning exciting. Well, it turns out the world doesn’t work exactly how I thought it was going to. Parties are full of numbskulls getting hammered and kids are failing and dropping out and nobody seems to care so.. maybe thats just the way it is, but that does not mean I have to accept it. I deserve better. Hell, even you deserve better."

Carmilla's expression softened. How could it not? Laura was so sure about what she was saying. The amount of passion in that tiny body was quite inspiring. And as apathetic as Carmilla pretended to be, hearing Laura say she deserved better, made her actually believe it. *Even if only a tiny bit.*

Laura opened her book and set it on the table in front of them, still full of determination left over from her rant.

Carmilla pulled out her own books, still thinking about what Laura had said. With what felt like constant failure in her photography class- the one subject Carmilla was actually trying to do well in, it seemed pointless to really try in her other classes. Her mother was right, too. Failing Shields class was embarrassing for her. She was good at psychology. And she even enjoyed it. So why had she given up on trying so easily?

Then here was Laura. Struggling in the same class, and working her ass off just to pass.

"What are you doing?" Carmilla shifted in her seat slightly. Laura had pulled out her laptop and was typing away furiously on it.

"Emailing my editor." Her eyes were locked intently on the screen, the tip of her tongue stuck out the side of her mouth in concentration. "I write for the school newspaper, not that you care, but I just got an idea for a series."

Carmilla watched her closely, Laura’s eyes were full of passion, her lips twitching Into a smile as her typing gradually slowed. Her eyes traced the screen, rereading what was in front of her, before she hit a key with a triumphant attitude and shut her laptop.

“Now, I know this isn't your favorite thing in the world, but I am not going to be one of those students that fails out of college." Laura pushed her laptop aside and put her attention back on her textbook.
"Why are you even in this class?" Carmilla hadn't thought about the question, it just seemed to come out. Laura had spent less than a minute typing out that email and already Carmilla could tell that was what she was meant for. Journalism. The way her eyes lit up, the confidence that poured from her. It was just so... Laura.

"Psychology?" Laura looked over at her slightly confused by the question.

Carmilla just nodded, keeping her face neutral.

Laura shrugged, "I thought understanding people would make me a better journalist."

"Is it working?" Carmilla asked putting her attention to the book in front of her.

"Well I can barely understand this book, and people are way more complicated. So you tell me." Laura pouted, resting her forearms on her knees.

Carmilla chuckled quietly and that ended the conversation. The study session went by fairly uneventful after that. They didn't talk much, Carmilla would pose a question and Laura would search for the answer in her text book. It was definitely different from their previous sessions that was all examples and explaining. But Carmilla was a little distracted thinking about Laura's words from earlier.

During a particularly quiet moment of studying, Carmilla glanced up and saw the familiar red head making her way towards them. Not missing a beat she packed her bag and stood up to leave.

Laura didn't realize what was happening until Carmilla was already walking away. She was confused at first, then she saw Danny and let out a sigh watching the dark haired girl walk away and her girlfriend walking towards her.

She wasn't sure what made her stomach churn, Carmilla leaving without a goodbye or Danny approaching. Either way, it didn't seem like a feeling she should be having. Laura shook off the feeling the best she could, blaming it on basically yelling at Carmilla earlier and making the rest of their study session a little awkward. That was probably all it was, anyway.

Danny sat down on the arm of Laura's chair and let her arm wrap around the small girls shoulder, nodding toward Carmilla, "What's her problem?"

Laura watched Carmilla walk out of the library and let out a sigh, "I don't know. Long day I guess. We kind of had a fight, but not really."

"A fight?" Danny looked over towards the door then back to Laura, "what about?"

"I'm actually not sure." Laura scratched her head, "She's... Complicated."

"Alright." Danny could tell there was more to it but knew things were already shaky between her and Laura and she didn't want to give her another reason to push her away.

"You here to walk me home?" Laura breathed out only half annoyed.

"If that's ok?" Danny asked, watching her carefully.
"Might as well." Laura shrugged and stood up and sling her backpack over her shoulder.

They were walking down the front steps of the library when Danny finally spoke up again, "Are you free this weekend? I thought maybe we could go out, have some fun before midterms."

"That actually sounds awesome." Laura smiled and let Danny take hold of her hand, "But it'll have to be Saturday. I told Perry I'd go to her art midterm presentation thing happening Friday."

"Saturday's great." Danny smiled down at Laura before remembering what they had talked about at their last summer society meeting, "oh crap."

"What?" Laura tugged Danny's hand gently, glancing up at her.

Danny sighed, "The Zetas are throwing a party Saturday and the Summers decided— well, Mel decided, we should be there to keep an eye on things. After the last one, you never know what's going down with the Zetas."
"Yeah, I'm pretty sure I was pulling tiny fish from my hair for days after the last one." Laura let out a laugh, "But that's actually perfect. What's more fun than a college party, right?"

Danny pouted slightly, slowing down her stride as they got closer to Laura's apartment building, "Well I was kind of hoping it could just be the two of us. It's been a while since we've, I don't know, connected?"

Laura grimaced at Danny's words, she was right, and for some reason- it hadn't bothered Laura like it probably should have. She knew Danny was smart and had probably noticed the distance growing between them. As much as Laura was trying to get over the little things that had been bothering her, she couldn't quite let them go so easily.

"Well, this weekend we can party with the Zetas, then after midterms we can go out and celebrate our hopefully passing grades." Laura tugged Danny's hand, pulling her low enough so she could plant a kiss on her cheek while standing on her toes. "Just the two of us." She smiled wide at her, probably trying to convince herself she was happy about it more than she was trying to convince Danny.

Danny just nodded before the two of them said quick goodbyes and Laura all but ran inside her apartment building.

——

*click*

Carmilla lowered her camera slowly, keeping her eyes on the view in front of her.

Sleep lately hadn't been coming easily. She often found herself walking down empty streets, through deserted parks and a bare campus. Filling the time until the sun came up.

Tonight she had found herself walking through a quiet neighborhood, streetlights lining the streets, houses that looked all looked the same. Same yards, same shutters on the windows, same cars, fences and lives.

She had stopped at the house at the end of the block. It was different than the rest. The lawn wasn't
kept, rose bushes were overgrown with thorns and roses draped violently over the edge of the fence. Petals had fallen, covering the browning grass in hues of pink and red. The paint on the fence was dull, chipped, the wood nearly rotted. The wind blew lightly and the gate creaked as the air pushed it open. Its hinges aching with every movement.

The car parked in the drive way was old. Rusted. It wasn't shiny or well maintained like the rest down the street. It had been driven. Through mountains filled with trees covered in leaves— red, yellow, green, as cool autumn air blew them from their drying branches. It had seen beaches along the coast line, parked in the sand for afternoon picnics under palm trees. It had been to country side rodeos, where the cars lines up in empty fields and the sounds of the county fair could be heard. Laughter, music, flashing lights and the roar of carnival rides.

It had been someones first car. The car someone had learned to drive in. The car someone had their first date in. Even their first kiss, maybe.

At least thats what Carmilla imagined could have been.

*click*

The fog from the cool air surrounded the house, giving it an eery feeling. The only light coming from the street lamps lining the road, and the porch light, on the house that Carmilla had stopped at.

The other houses were completely dark. Families asleep, unaware of the world still turning while they dreamed.

But this house was different. The porch light was lit. It was the only thing about the house that seemed alive. That seemed to be payed attention to. Whoever lived there clearly didn't care about the yard, the state the house was in, the rotting fence or the rusted car. But that light, illuminated the front door, almost as if to invite someone to come home.

*click*

Carmilla let her camera hang from its strap around her neck as she gave the house one more look before walking back up the street. Her path seemed to glow under the streetlights surrounded by fog. Walking through the clouds in a city that was fast asleep. She couldn't help but think about that house and wonder who they were waiting for. Who had the light been left on for? What kind of person would choose to leave the light on in the first place, just in case?

Her boots made heavy steps as the morning grew closer. The fog started to disappear as the sun began to rise. Condensation held to the grass under her feet and dripped from leaves still clinging to the trees. She zipped her jacket up and shoved her hands into the pockets, trying to regain some warmth. She hadn't realized she had been walking all night until the sun started to peek from behind buildings to spread a blanket of light across the city. She watched her feet make their way along the pavement with easy steps back to her apartment.

Finally feeling like she might be able to sleep, Carmilla decided she didn't need to go to her Wednesday classes anyway. She got to her apartment and pulled her keys from her pocket, unlocked the door and kicked off her boots as soon as she was inside. She gently pulled her camera from around her neck and placed it on the kitchen table.
Walking back to her bedroom she didn't waste time taking her pants off and dropping them on the floor before crawling into her bed and pulling the heavy comforter over herself. She settled into the mattress and let out a sleepy sigh as she closed her eyes.

_Maybe one day someone will leave a light on for her to find her way home._

_Laura Hollis was probably the type to leave the light on for someone…_

With that final thought Carmilla drifted off to sleep as slivers of light made their way through the cracks in her blinds, reflecting off the dust particles swirling in the room around her.

——

Laura made her way through the library slowly. Midterms were coming up extremely fast and she was beyond stressed. This was their last study session before the weekend, then it was a week full of tests and papers due and Laura was no where near ready. She rounded the corner slowly, peering around the shelves to see if she was going to have to break up yet another make out session but was pleasantly surprised to see Carmilla alone.

Her feet were thrown up on the table in front of the couch, ankles crossed and toes tapping side to side to what must have been a musical beat. She had headphones her ears, her head leaned back on the cushion behind her back and her arms were crossed lazily over her chest.

For a college students with midterms coming up, she looked rather relaxed.

Laura made her way over to her seat and set her bag down without a reaction from the dark haired girl. She wasn't sure exactly what to do. Things on Tuesday were kind of awkward with Laura pretty much yelling at her and she didn't want to make things worse, so she just pulled out her book and set it in her lap.

She watched Carmilla for a minute while she tried to decide what to do. Carmilla’s hair fell back loosely and spread across the couch cushion. It always looked so soft and suddenly Laura had the urge to run her fingers through it just to prove to herself that it wasn't actually silk. Carmilla must have liked the song that came on because her lips twitched up into a smile, which was a rare sight. A smirk or a scowl, those were her signature looks.

Laura couldn't help but smile herself, thinking she looked rather beautiful that way. Relaxed. Happy — or at least content.

Deciding it was probably getting a little creepy of her to just watch her tutor listen to music she cleared her throat rather loudly and tapped her foot against the leg of the table, causing it to jostle Carmilla’s feet that were set on top of it.

"Ah, cupcake. You're late." Carmilla smirked, stretching her arms up over her head before tugging the headphones from her ears.

Laura just rolled her eyes, a habit she picked up from Carmilla, no doubt. "By like 5 minutes. And you didn't even notice."

"Of course I noticed." Carmilla's tone was flirty as she dropped her feet from the table and reached into her bag. She pulled something out and tossed it on the table in front of Laura.
“Whats this?” Laura raised an eyebrow and cautiously looked at the cards sitting on the table in front of her, wrapped in a rubber band.

"Flash cards." Carmilla said flatly, "They don't bite." She followed up, noticing Laura's hesitance to do anything other than stare at them.

"That's, uncharacteristically considerate of you." Laura's face scrunched up slightly confused at the gesture. It was a little strange for Carmilla to be nice. By choice. Sure they had their moments where they weren't at each others throats— but nice, that was new.

"Yeah well, I just don't want you failing and dragging me down with you." Carmilla grumbled, slouching back in her seat.

There was the usual grumpy Carmilla she was used to.

"Oh.." Laura laughed sarcastically, "yeah, of course not."

"Whatever." Carmilla rolled her eyes, internally chastising herself for whatever possessed her to make more of an effort with Laura.

Laura just chuckled at Carmilla's less than convincing tone and pulled out her book and notes. She shot a glance over to Carmilla and narrowed her eyes at her, trying to study her if only for a second.

Of course Carmilla decides to start acting like a halfway decent human being the moment Laura decided to stop caring all together. The plan was to study, use Carmilla's brain, try to ignore her sarcastic comments and start passing this class so she can quit with the tutoring sessions and get little miss broody out of her life.

So to say this sudden kindness was unexpected would be an understatement.

Laura picked the cards up and turned them over in her hand slowly.

"They're study cards or whatever. To help with memorization." Carmilla leaned forward and took the cards from Laura's hands. She pulled off the rubber band and started shuffling through them, "You're annoying but.. if you fail the midterm, Shields will probably replace you with someone even more ocd for me to tutor. The devil you know, you know?" She extended her hand out again, waiting for Laura to take the cards back.

"Uh, thank you." Laura spoke slowly, taking the cards from Carmilla and looking through them for a moment.

Carmilla shrugged, leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees and interlocked her hands in front of her. She glanced down towards the book in front of her and bit her bottom lip while she read.

Laura set down the cards and scooted forward in her chair, getting slightly closer to Carmilla, "Sooo, in the spirit of this newfound closeness, maybe you could tell me where you go to take your pictures?"

Laura looked at her with hopeful eyes. The few pictures she had seen were quite incredible. She couldn't imagine a place like that existing right here in the middle of the city. And if Carmilla was suddenly feeling friendly, she didn't want to miss the chance to find out more about her.

"mmm." Carmilla hummed, looking up through her eyelashes at Laura with a small smile, "well I have to keep some of my secrets. Otherwise I'll lose my air of mystery, won't I?"
Laura felt her body shiver under Carmilla's stare. Something about it felt different today. She chuckled nervously before diving right in to asking about Pavlov's approach to classical conditioning.

Carmilla just smiled at Lara's attempt to ignore her comment and started explaining Pavlov’s experiment with dogs, conditioning them to react to a specific sound—

Laura honestly wasn't even paying attention to what Carmilla was saying. She could see her lips moving and her eyes doing that thing they did when she was getting really into what she was taking about, but she may as well have been speaking Latin.

Laura nodded like she was paying attention. Was that..? Was she just flir…? She half way giggled and shook her head to herself at the thought.

"No?" Carmilla looked at her with a confused expression. "Why are you shaking your head at me?"

Laura's eyes widened as she realized what she was doing and started stumbling over her words, "sorry I was just, can you say that again?"

"Seriously cupcake, your lack of focus may be the reason your failing. Whatever you're thinking about better be more interesting than dogs that salivate at the sound of a bell." Carmilla rolled her eyes but started explaining from the beginning.

I think she might be. Laura thought to herself before forcing herself to pay attention to save herself from being embarrassed yet again.
“Perr, calm down, its going to be great.” Laf watched as Perry kept pacing in the kitchen, something she had been doing for the last 30 minutes.

“Calm down?!” Perry stopped pacing and her body went stiff, she was shaking with how tense she was, “Telling someone to calm down never helps them calm down!”

“Uhh, Laura, are you ready yet?” Laf called down the hallway, “I think Perry is about to combust with nervousness.”

“Coming!” Laura called out from her room. She was going through her closet trying to find something to wear. What did one wear to their best friends midterm art presentation thing? Anything, Laura. One could wear literally anything. She grabbed a button up and threw it over her tank top, doing up the buttons as she rushed down the hall towards her waiting roommates.

“Finally, gosh.” Laf sighed, “We are going to campus not the opera.”

“Oh shut up.” Laura glared at them playfully, “I literally took 10 minutes to change my clothes.”

“I think you look great!” Perry’s voice was an active higher than usual, which was impressive, but let the other two know it was time to stop making jokes and get going.

“I’m glad we are doing this.” Laura locked the door and jogged to catch up to the pair already making their way towards campus, “Its been a while since we all hung out, the three of us.”

“Is it really considered hanging out if its for Perry's midterm?” Laf asked, bumping their shoulder into Perry’s, trying to lighten the mood.

“Oh my gosh, you're right.” Perry murmured, “I’m getting graded on this. What if I did terribly? What if you cant even tell which is mine? Its supposed to be a self portrait but what if my self doesn't look like myself—”

“Woah, Perry, calm down.” Laura held up her hands in a ‘slow down’ gesture.

“Oh man. Wrong thing to say completely, frosh.” Laf brought their palm up to cover their face. “No. Its fine. I’m fine.” Perry’s voice got impossibly higher and her pace towards the school doubled. “Everything is fine.”

“Beefcake.” Carmilla looked Kirsch up and down, “I didn't recognize you with your clothes on.”

“Carm sexy!” Kirsch bounced over towards her, wrappings big arms around her and lifting her into a hug tightly against his chest.
“oomf!” Carmilla’s lungs emptied of air with how tightly Kirsch was squeezing her, “Put me down before I feed you your own spleen.”

“Woah, angry hottie.” Kirsch chuckled and set her down, his goofy grin never leaving his face.

Carmilla glared at him and readjusted her clothing, “What are you even doing here?”

“Well I wanted to come see all the awesome pictures of me, but they all look like other people.” Kirsch looked around the room with a puzzled look, “I hate to say it, but you guys aren’t very good at art.”

Carmilla chuckled and patted him on the shoulder, “Keep looking big fella, I’m sure there’s a drawing of you in here somewhere. Did Willy boy come with you?”

“Oh yeah!” Kirsch beamed, “Little bro is around here somewhere! I’ll find him for you!” He basically bounced off to look for Will (and a drawing of himself, probably).

—

“Perry, why are we looking at pots?” Laura tilted her head to the side, changing the angle she was looking at one very poorly sculpted pot.

“Well the midterm presentations are for all the classes in the visual arts department. Sculpture, drawing, architecture, photography, painting…” Perry looked over at Laura, trying to hide her worried expression, “I just thought we could show our support for the other students before seeing my project.”

“Perry, come on.” Laf whined, “We came here to see your work, not a bunch of pots that look like melted goblins.”

“Wait, did you say photography?” Laura asked, finally looking away from the pot in front of her.

“You’re right, Lafontaine.” Perry sighed, “Lets go see my self portrait.”

Laf and Perry started walking out of the ceramics room with Laura following behind. She figured it was better to just follow along if Perry was finally going to let them see her work instead of try to ask about the photography again.

They walked into the classroom that held all the self portraits from Perry’s class and they slowly made their way around the room. Obviously some students were more gifted than others. A few of the drawings looked similar to what you would find on the refrigerator of a proud parent with a 6 year old. Perry had to swat Laf’s arm a few times to get them to stop snickering.

‘art is about creative expression’ Perry chastised them. And she was right. They shouldn't make fun of it just because it didn't fit a specific mold of what art should be. Besides, Laf had zero artistic abilities, thats why they stuck to science. It was easier for them to measure liquid into a beaker than to draw a face.

“Well, here it is.” Perry gestured with her hand to her project.

Lafontaine and Laura stepped in front of it to take a look. Perry wrung her hands nervously waiting for their responses.

“Wow Perr, how did you do that?” Laf asked, leaning forward a bit to get closer to her drawing.
“Yeah, that looks really, really good.” Laura smiled wide at her.

Perry sighed in relief at the sincerity in their voices, “Really? You think so?”

“Definitely.” Laf beamed at her, “The way you drew your eyes, it’s like I’m looking at you!”

Perry felt her face start to heat up, “I was afraid it didn’t look enough like me—” she started but was quickly cut off.

“Are you kidding?!” Laf’s eyes widened, pointing to parts of the picture as they explained, “You drew your face! That’s your face! Your eyes are beautiful, they like, shine. And I love your hair, it’s so—.”

Laura took a step back and watched Laf go into detail about every tiny aspect of Perry’s drawing. Basically telling her she was beautiful in every way possible by describing her drawing. It was rather adorable, until she felt like she was intruding on some personal moment. She decided to keep making her way around the room to give the pair of red heads some space.

There were other students walking through the room, looking at drawings, laughing at them, explaining them... you name it. Laura figured other students had the same idea as Perry and were using the excuse of looking at the other projects to avoid looking at their own.

Laura was just about back to where Laf and Perry were talking when a picture caught her eye. She stopped walking and turned to face it.

“Woah.” Laura breathed out quietly. She wasn’t sure how she was supposed to feel about it, but she couldn’t look away.

Each portrait had its own uniqueness to it. Some added color, some had backgrounds, or objects included. Some were just of faces, or ended at the shoulders, or showed the entire body. Some seemed more like cartoon characters or comics while others strived for realistic qualities. As long as it was the students version of themselves, that’s what mattered for the assignment. Self portrait. Pretty simple idea. But this one was anything but simple. It was Carmilla.

The portrait was done in what had to be pencil, on a large white sheet of paper. It was simple, clean, but extremely intricate and detailed all at the same time. It looked exactly like her. Almost every detail was what Laura pictured as reality in her head.

Her hair was down in soft curls that fell over one of her shoulders messily. Laura felt her fingertips tingle wanting to reach out and brush her fingers through it. She instantly felt silly at the idea. It was just a drawing. And even if it wasn’t, its not like she would run her fingers through Carmilla’s hair, anyway.

She took a step forward to get a better look at the details. Carmilla’s eyebrows were penciled in darkly, the same curve and lift to them that Laura was used to. Even in a drawing, Carmilla was smirking at her it seemed. But her lips weren’t twisted up in the flirty way she had learned to expect. They weren’t smiling, or frowning. Slightly parted but neutral, giving her more of a peaceful look. Even the small wrinkle that curved around the corner of her lip was there.

Laura paused, stepping back slightly. How did she even know to look for that?

Her eyes were dark, and even drawn with pencil had an intensity that made them hard to look at, then impossible to look away. Laura felt herself stuck there, looking at these eyes drawn by Carmilla. They were her eyes. Laura had remember thinking they were beautiful, but knew there were a handful of reasons why she couldn’t just stare at them for long periods of time. So seeing Carmilla’s
eyes, without Carmilla being able to see her, was, different. She wasn't sure that was the right word, but she didn't want to think about it too much either way.

Her jawline was drawn sharp, clear lines guiding you down her neck, to the hollow space at the base of it. Collar bones that drew your eyes across her chest to her shoulders and down her arms to her hands. The drawing continued down her body until the bottom of her ribs, then faded away.

But that wasn't all of it. That wasn't how Carmilla saw herself, apparently. Because that was only half of the drawing. The likeness was almost exact through the penciled eyes, the nose, the hair, but near the jaw things changed. The left side of the drawing— the face and body continued like that. Almost an exact image of the Carmilla that Laura knew.

The right side of the drawing, was different. Just under the cheek bone on the right side, it was like the skin had melted away, revealing her skeleton. It wasn't bloody, or gruesome, it was actually quite beautiful. It was clean, clinical, accurate. Bones and attachments of the jaw, connecting to the skull. Half the neck had been drawn in flesh, the other half displaying the vertebrae of her neck. On the right, the clavicle, the joints of her shoulder, then her humerus were all exposed. Down the center of her chest you could see half her sternum and the ribs curving, making up the structure of her body.

What was so amazing about it was that it didn't seem like a drawing that had been cut in half by two separate views then sewn together to form one picture. They melted into one another, mixing pieces of clothing ripping into ribs. A necklace hanging loosely on her neck, draping down low on one side then slowly disappearing on the other. Skin shifting to skeleton and skeleton to skin.

Her face looked so peaceful while the rest of her was fighting a war, being torn apart. Two different realities. External verses internal.

Laura tilted her head to the right and narrowed her eyes, then tilted to the left. Something was telling her she wasn't seeing the whole thing and she was itching to figure out what she was missing.

Then she saw it. She looked at the hands that had been drawn at the ends of each arm and felt her chest clench. The arm on the right of the picture, like the rest of the body, was made of bone. Extended with the hand held open, boney fingers outstretched gently. The arm on the left side, matching theme, was body and flesh. Her arm looked strong, yet thin, falling low to the side of what body would have been. But this hand was different.

At the center of the forearm, flesh started to melt away to match the other side of the drawing and instead of outstretched fingers and an empty palm, the hand was holding something gently.

*Her heart.*

The place in her chest where her heart should have been was hollow. It was only ribs and empty space. Looking close enough she noticed the cracks drawn across the ribs where the heart should have been housed. They matched the cracks drawn on the heart, being held so incredibly gently by her own hand.

It was haunting. It was beautiful.

“Huh.” Laf stepped up next to Laura and folded their arms over their chest, “Now that is a drawing. Am I right, L?”

“Hmm?” Laura turned her head towards Laf, waiting the last second to have her eyes follow, “Oh, right. Yeah, it’s umm..”

“Creepy.” Laf stated.
“Oh, well I was going to say incredible.” Laura shrugged, “But I guess I can— I can see why you would say..”

Laf looked over at Laura with a curious look, “You feeling ok?”

Laura looked back to the drawing, “Yeah, I’m good.”

Perry stepped up next to them both, “Are you guys finished or should we look around some more?”

“Lets keep looking.” Laura spoke softly, her eyes stills canning Carmilla’s self portrait slowly. There was so much more to this girl than she thought. Anyone that can draw something like that… Laura just found herself being even more curious about the mysterious, brooding girl than she was before.

Laf and Perry started walking towards one of the other classrooms, calling back for Laura to keep up. She nodded, intending to follow, until she noticed the title of Carmilla’s self portrait.

-Broken

Laura puffed out a sigh through her nose, her jaw dropping slightly, still blown away by the drawing in front of her. She looked it over once more before following after her friends thinking only one thing—

She made broken look beautiful.

“I didn't know you still went out there.” Will commented, not looking away from Carmilla's photograph hanging on the wall.

Carmilla shrugged, studying the picture as well "Not very often.”

Which was totally untrue. That forgotten park was one of her favorite places. It always had been, but even more so now that it was fenced off from the world. Now it seemed like her own private escape from reality.

"It looks different." Will finally turned to look at her.

"Yeah well, that's what happens when people stop caring about things. They change." That was a loaded statement. More so than Carmilla had intended. But it didn't make it any less true.

"Change isn't always bad though." Will must have caught on to the underlying meaning in her words, "I like it this way." He looked back to the picture, "it's like now it's free to be itself."

Carmilla just nodded but didn't say anything.

"And anyway, even with the change, the right people will still care. I mean you still like it, even with it like that.” Will gestured to the photograph and shrugged.

Carmilla chuckled and throw her arm around his shoulder, pulling him into a slight head lock, "Alright, Dr Phil."

Will laughed, the mood lightening immediately. He saw kirsch waving to him from the doorway and held up his hand in a gesture to tell him to wait. "I take it moms a no show?"

Carmilla loosened her grip and tried to seem like she hadn't noticed, but Will saw the slight
before she wiped it off her face, "yeah but that was to be expected." She nodded her head toward Kirsch, "You should go though. Before the puppy wets himself in excitement waiting for you."

Will chuckled and shoved Carmilla's side gently before walking backwards a few steps towards Kirsch "I'll see you tomorrow though, right?" "For your bro-tastic party? We'll see." Carmilla shook her head and waved as Will turned and jogged over to Kirsch.

She let out a sigh as the familiar ringtone she had set for her mother went off in her pocket. She started towards the door as she pulled it out of her pocket slowly. Talking to her mother was hard enough, doing it around a classroom full of her peers was something she definitely didn't want to endure.

—

"What's she doing here?" Laf hit the back of their hand against Laura's arm to get her attention as they made their way to yet another classroom.

"Who?" Laura turned to look where Laf’s eyes were locked and immediately her expression shifted to one of confusion.

"I thought you said it was just going to be the three of us?" Laf grumbled as Danny approached.

Laura watched as Danny walked towards her, she heard Perry whisper harshly at Lafontaine 'shh, that's Laura's girlfriend, be nice’ and felt like it was a reminder for her to be nice, too.

Danny smiled as soon as she saw Laura, "hey you!"

"Hey Danny." Laura's voice wasn't as excited as Danny's, "what are you doing here?"

Danny immediately wrapped her arms around Laura in a hug, "I just thought I'd join you guys for Perry’s art thing."

Laura gently pushed herself out of Danny's embrace and took a step back, "I thought I told you I was going with Perry and Laf and that i’d see you tomorrow for the party?"

Danny's smile faltered, catching on that Laura wasn't exactly excited to see her, "I know, I just thought- I didn't think it would be a bad thing?"

"No yeah, it's fine." Laura shook her head to herself, it wasn’t a bad thing. At least, it shouldn't be. "We were headed…" Laura pointed towards the next classroom and started walking that way, not bothering to finish her sentence.

Danny followed a little behind, a little defeated and disappointed at Laura's reaction to her arrival. She really didn't understand what was going on with them but could tell it wasn't good.

Perry looped her arm through Laf’s and pulled them in the direction of the classroom to follow behind Danny and Laura. They let out a groan at the sudden addition to their trio, but smiled to them self at how natural it felt I have Perry’s arm looped through their own.

—
“Hello mother.” Carmilla answered the phone as soon as she walked down the hall to an empty area.

“Darling.” Her mothers voice seeped through the phone, “I’m sorry I wasn’t able to make it to your little presentation tonight.”

Carmilla sighed. She wasn't sorry, and they both knew it. The last thing her mother wanted to do was support her efforts to become a photographer. “Its ok, mother. I’m sure you’re busy with something important.”

“I’m glad you understand. Perhaps I can make it to the next one.”

Carmilla could tell her mothers attention was somewhere else and let the conversation end. No point in dragging out a phone call neither of them wanted to be a part of.

Shoving her phone back in her pocket she decided she was ready to go home. She had made her appearance for her grades sake, and now she just needed to grab her jacket from inside and she could go home.

—

Danny gave Laura's hand a squeeze as they walked down the hall, Perry and Laf trailing behind them.

"Hey little nerd hottie! Nerd hotties friends." Kirsch greeted with his lopsided smile as he walked towards them, Will at his side.

"Oh goodness." Perry muttered quickly, bringing a hand up to cover her reddening face.

Laf turned their head to look at Perry curiously, "you alright, Perr?"

Before Laura could say anything Danny glared Kirsch's way, "what do you want, popped collar?"

"Hey, be nice." Laura spoke up, letting go of Danny's hand to wave at him. "Hey kirsch, what's up?"

"Me and my bro Will saw you guys and we wanted to make sure you got the invite to the Zeta party tomorrow!" Kirsch turned and gave Will a fist bump. “Its going to be awesome!”

"I really don't think I'll be attending." Perry muttered, her hand still over her eyes.

Everyone turned to look at her a little confused. Except Kirsch, he just flexed his pecs at her and wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

"Uh yeah," Laura turned from watching Perry to look at Kirsch with a smile, "we'll be there."

"That mean you too, summer psycho?" Kirsch asked teasingly.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to call me that, Wilson." Danny glared at him in annoyance.

Kirsch dropped his jaw, "Woah, not cool Lawrence."

Laura rolled her eyes and decided she didn't want to be a part of this little battle happening and
headed into the classroom, leaving the rest of them standing in the hallway.

Danny insulting Kirsch, Perry turning darker shades of red by the second every time Kirsch smiled at her, a confused yet perfectly happy Laf stood there with Perry’s arm looped in theirs and Will just chuckled watching the taller ones go at it with insults.

Laura made her way around the room full of photographs slowly. She'd be lying if she said she wasn't looking for a specific one. Finally finding the one she was looking for she stopped to look at it. She was further away from it, a few students stopped in front of her blocking part of her line of vision, and other students slowly walking by making their way around the room.

It looked like the same place in the photos she had seen in Carmilla's folder. The one she had gotten in trouble for looking in. It made Laura wonder what was so special about this place. She could clearly see it was beautiful— the tall grass, winding tree branches and flowing stream- but what about it made Carmilla keep going back to it?

The main focus of the photograph was on an old fence. The wood was aged and cracking, one beam broken with slivers poking every which way. Behind the fence you could make out an old swing set with vines climbing the poles, dirty and worn seats attached to rusted chains. A large tree with swirling branches that reached over top the lazy pond.

The colors stood out more than anything else. The grass was impossibly green, the leaves on the tree matching. The sunset in the sky an array of oranges and purples and blues. The light reflecting off the water, making it shimmer even in the photograph. The brown wood of the broken fence cracking and rough with age.

"I've seen better."

Laura heard the low sultry voice next to her, causing her to jump a little in surprise. She turned her head to see Carmilla standing beside her, her eyes scanning her own photograph on the wall.

"Oh, so you're not going to yell at me for looking at this one?" Laura asked, a little more sarcasm in her tone than she had intended. The sound of Carmilla's chuckle made her happy for it, though.

"We'll see." Carmilla crossed her arms loosely over her chest and kept her eyes on the photo.

Laura watched her for a second before looking back to the photograph as well, "Where'd you take this anyway?"

Carmilla smirked and turned to look at Laura, "Wouldn't you like to know."

"Well yeah." Laura scoffed, turning to match Carmilla's gaze, "That's why I asked, genius."

Laura wasn't sure why it was suddenly so easy to tease Carmilla. Maybe it was that they weren't in a library studying, or maybe it was the way things had felt different around Carmilla in general since the start of their last study session. Either way, the banter was more fun than frustrating lately, and Laura had to admit she enjoyed it.

Laura watched Carmilla's smirk switch to a small smile, something about her eyes felt softer than usual and she didn't miss her stare flicker quickly to her lips then back to her eyes.

"Babe, are you ready to go?"

Laura's attention was quickly pulled to the doorway behind her where Danny was walking in, clearly annoyed with whatever had been happening in the hallway.
Carmilla watched Laura turn to look at Danny and felt a slight twinge of annoyance that Laura's attention was no longer on her. Although she knew she didn't really have claim to it to begin with.

"See you around, cream puff." Carmilla drawled as she turned to leave, sensing whatever kind of moment they were having was ending.

Laura couldn't help but smile at the nickname. That was something that had changed too. Lately they felt like actual nicknames instead of insults, and they didn't annoy Laura quite that much anymore. She was actually used to it at this point and had started to like them and the fact that they were sort of reserved for her. (Although she would never admit it.)

Carmilla walked past Danny and out the door. Laura heard the faint remark of 'xena' and saw Danny glare at Carmilla with a quick reply of 'fang face'.

Their animosity had always been annoying, and she didn't quite understand it- but even Laura had to admit moments like that were still entertaining to witness.

Laura watched Carmilla leave then turned to look back at the photo, trying to decide what to say to Danny. It was weird, Laura had never been to this place before, but somehow the photo captured the sense of calm. Something she figured Carmilla probably felt about it, too.

"I think I'm just going to finish the night with Laf and Perry." Laura commented, not turning to look at Danny who was now standing next to her.

"You sure?" Danny asked, putting her hand on the small of Laura's back, "I though we could grab some food and go back to my place—"

"Yeah, I'm sure." Laura side stepped out of Danny's touch before turning towards her, "I'll just see you tomorrow at the party, ok?"

She didn't wait for a reply, seeing Danny's frown was enough to know it was pretty obvious something was wrong and both of them knew it. Instead Laura just walked out the door and took hold of Laf's free arm and started leading them out of the building to head back home. She knew she needed to talk to Danny but just didn't feel like she had the energy for it that night. Plus, she needed to figure out what it was she wanted to say. Which meant she needed to figure out what the heck was going on and what she was feeling. So yeah, talking. That would have to wait.
Carmilla exhaled and dropped her arms down on either side of her, her phone bouncing out of her hand and onto the mattress. Since last night she couldn't help but wonder how the night may have played out if Laura’s giant girlfriend hadn't shown up. There were definitely having a moment—at least it felt that way to Carmilla, even if she didn't know what kind of moment it was.

She wasn't even sure why she was even thinking about it still. It lasted all of 5 minutes. Plus, Laura had a girlfriend. She wasn't sure why that mattered either. She was just her tutor, after all. They weren't even friends, not really.

Despite all that, when she received a text that evening, she half expected (half hoped) it was Laura. When it turned out to Elsie, she didn't really care one way or another. Sure she liked Elsie well enough, she had fun with her, but that was it.

Elsie: i'll look for you at the zeta party ;)

Carmilla: won't be there blondie

Elsie: aww :( just in case you change your mind

Elsie: (...)Incoming photo...)

That was when Carmilla dropped her phone and sighed. It had been a while since she had spent time with any of her study buddies. Except Laura. But that was different, they actually studied. Also, Elise did have on quite the outfit. It would be a shame for it to go to waste.

——

“You guys sure you don’t want to come?” Laura walked into the kitchen, tucking some hair behind her ear and going straight for the package of cookies on the counter.

“Youh,” Laf shrugged and nodded at Laura, asking for a cookie, “Perry was being weird and said something about Kirsch and art and naked. I’m not sure it was an actual sentence or if her brain was short circuiting but I think we are just going to stay in and order pizza and watch a movie or something.”

“Well, I may be home early and join you.” Laura shoved a whole cookie in her mouth and still managed to pout.

“Trouble in paradise?” Laf chuckled and took a bite of their cookie.

“Tell me what to do?” Laura whined, slumping over onto the counter.

As if on cue, Danny knocked twice on the apartment door before opening it and letting herself in. Laura immediately stood up, eyes wide looking at Laf, while they just stifled a laugh.
“Hey Hollis, you ready?” Danny walked in and wrapped her arms around Laura in a hug.

It was awkward. Everyone in the room felt it.

“Uh yeah, let me just grab my phone.” Laura forced a smile and disappeared down the hall towards her room. She walked in her bedroom and shut the door behind her, leaning her back up against it and letting out a sigh.

What was up with her? She was actually looking forward to this party. She needed a break, desperately. She’s been staring at a computer screen and texts books so much for midterms she’s sure her brain has started to melt. And earlier that day, she had actually been looking forward to spending it with Danny.

After whatever had happened the night before at Perry’s art midterm thing, Laura really thought about her relationship with Danny. She even made a pro’s and cons list. No joke. Ultimately she realized that Danny was a great girlfriend— Caring, smart, driven, thoughtful, and the list went on. She figured whatever awkwardness or distance that had been building was just because of stress, and a party was the perfect way to get over that.

So why as soon as she was around Danny, did things feel so off still? She had made up her mind to make it work. So why wasn’t it working?

Laura grabbed her phone and mentally talked herself back into giving it a go and not letting the small things bug her, to focus on the great things and just have a good time. Reconnect. So as soon as she was back in the kitchen with Laf and Danny, who were doing everything possible not to talk or even look at each other, Laura laced her hand with Danny’s and pushed up on her toes to greet her with a kiss.

Danny was honestly a little taken back at the sudden change of attitude but smiled anyway. She was sure things were going south, and fast, and there was nothing she could do to save it. So this change in greeting was just what she needed to give her some hope that maybe things would be okay.

Laf just rolled their eyes and went to make some popcorn as Laura pulled Danny out of the apartment.

—

“Hey you!”

Elsie’s hands were on Carmilla almost the second she walked in the door. Carmilla just raised and eyebrow and turned her head when Elsie had attempted to kiss her, making her lips land on her cheek instead of their intended target.

“I’m glad you came.” Elsie purred as she leaned on Carmilla’s shoulder, letting her hand drag down her cheek instead of their intended target.

“I’m glad you came.” Elsie responded coolly, looking around the room. “Tell you what.” Carmilla started, peeling Elsie’s wandering hand off her stomach before she could move it any further, “Why don’t you go get us some drinks and I’ll come find you in a minute.”

Carmilla didn’t wait for a reply and started walking away from Elsie, letting her leather jacket slide off her shoulders. Carmilla sauntered through the room taking note of who was there while she scanned for her brother. She saw Kirsch towering over everyone else, talking to a group of girls and knew Will couldn’t be too far away.
“Beefcake.” Carmilla spoke loudly, trying to match the sound of the music pumping through large speakers in the other room.

“Carm sexy!” Kirsch raised a plastic cup in the air towards her, his drink sloshing over the edge.

“William?” She asked, eyebrows raised.

Kirsch nodded towards the kitchen and Carmilla started making her way there. She walked in to find Will leaning his back against the counter, flirting with a girl tucked closely into his side. She watched as the girl patted his arm and threw her head back to laugh at something he said. Will looked rather pleased with himself and Carmilla almost felt bad for what she was about to do. *Almost.*

“Willy boy.” Carmilla smirked his direction from the doorway of the kitchen.

Her turned his head with a smile, “Kitty, I see you decided to join the fun.”

“Carmilla?” The girl tucked in Wills side took a step back from him and bit her lip, her eyes locked on Carmilla.

Carmilla winked at her, “Hey Natalie.”

Will’s smile disappeared almost immediately, catching on to the situation. He rolled his eyes and made a face of disappointment at Natalie who was now giggling from Carmilla’s attention.

“Seriously?” Will pushed himself off the counter and walked over to Carmilla, taking her arm and leading her back into the other room, “Maybe this would be easier if you just pointed out the girls you haven’t hooked up with already.”

Carmilla chuckled, “What is it Willy boy? Afraid you can’t compete?”

“Please!” Will looked genuinely hurt by her comment, “I have game.”

“Sure.” Carmilla smiled, taking a cup and filling it from the keg and handing it to Will.

“I do.” His eyes went wider, completely serious.

“Uh huh.” Carmilla nodded and filled her own cup, bringing it to her lips and taking a sip.

Her and Will launched into their typical brother sister banter for a few minutes before Kirsch came strutting over, a girl under each arm.

“Bro! We need a 4th for beer pong! You in?” Kirsch smiled goofily and nodded his head at Will.

Will looked to Carmilla and was met with a shrug. “I’ve got a girl walking around somewhere with a drink for me anyway. Go ahead.”

Will shoved her shoulder playfully before taking one of Kirsch’s girls and draping his own arm over her shoulder and walking off. Carmilla chuckled as she took another sip of her drink and turned around to scan the room again, seeing Elsie staring at her from a couch in the other room. She let out a sigh before setting her now empty cup down and making her way over to the couch.

—

The music was loud. *Really loud.* Laura was 3 drinks in, not even sure what it was she was drinking. It didn’t matter though. Kirsch kept handing her red plastic cups and she kept taking them. The Zeta house was packed with people Laura knew or recognized, and a lot more that she didn’t. That didn’t matter either.
She took her newest drink, (it was a purplish color and Laura knew she probably shouldn't drink it) and downed a couple gulps before pushing her way through the large room. Bodies pressed against her, the smell of sweat filling the room. The combination of whatever she was drinking and the smell made Laura’s stomach churn as she pushed past another couple making out against the wall.

She shook her head to herself and took another drink, finishing her cup and throwing it on the floor like the rest of the party goers had been doing. At first she had been very against it, making a mess and all, but this far into the night she just didn't care anymore.

“Laura!” Danny called out, pushing aside a few people in her way.

Laura heard her name muffled in with the music but just kept walking. She just needed to sit down.

She usually had a 1 drink rule at these kinds of parties but for some reason it didn't stick this time. The drive over had been fairly quiet. Danny drove, her hand interlocked with Laura’s as Laura watched out the window. Danny kept sighing, loudly, and it just bugged Laura to no end. Which made her frustrated that the tiniest things were setting her off.

They had gotten there when the party was already in full swing. She's pretty sure there was even a kiddie pool full of creamed corn on the front lawn. The music was thumping loudly, people were grinding on each other, and plenty of alcohol had been consumed at that point.

Laura let Danny lead her into the house by her hand, immediately being thrust into the cloud of body odor and who knows what else. Kirsch had greeted them happily, which annoyed Danny and started her first rant of the night on how irresponsible and immature the Zetas were.

Laura got that the Summer's and Zeta’s weren't exactly friends, but Danny was just really aggressive about it. Kirsch was Laura’s friend. She should be nicer. Shouldn't she?

The party had started out like any other party. Danny went to grab them drinks and while she was gone, Laura stood awkwardly in the room, looking around for people she knew. She waved at a few classmates and tried to to the cool 'head nod' towards a couple friends but she couldn't deny she was an extremely awkward person sometimes and even if in her head she looked cool, it probably didn't translate.

Glancing back to the direction Danny had left to she saw her read hair and a wide smile coming from her girlfriend as she stood in line for drinks. Laura gave her a smile back, the first real one of the night. She momentarily wondered if it was because they were an entire room away from each other, but tried to just focus on the list of pro’s she had made earlier than night, reminding her how great Danny was.

That was when she saw her. Her gaze had started scanning the moving bodies filling the room when the crowd seemed to part and Laura noticed the dark eyes already locked on her.

Carmilla was sitting on a couch with a bored expression on her face. One hand held onto a red plastic cup that was resting on her thigh, the other arm was thrown on the back of the couch lazily. Laura felt her face heat up and she wasn't sure if it was from catching Carmilla looking at her, or if the heat from the overly crowded room was finally getting to her.

They kept eye contact for a moment and Carmilla’s lips twitched up into a smile. Laura felt herself smiling and rolling her eyes. It wasn't out of annoyance, but rather playfulness. Carmilla took a sip from her cup, never breaking eye contact and Laura seemed content to just watch her sip her drink. That is, until the girl sitting next to Carmilla, that Laura hadn't noticed until now, scooted closer to her and put her hand on Carmilla’s thigh.
Laura’s smile fell and she swallowed hard as she watched Carmilla’s expression shift back to one of boredom and she looked back to Elsie. Who was now dragging her hand slowly up Carmilla’s thigh and leaning in to whisper something in her ear.

“Babe?” Danny tapped a cup against Laura’s shoulder, pulling her from the trance she was in watching Carmilla and Elsie on the couch.

Laura turned and smiled at Danny (It wasn't a real one this time) and took the drink from her hand. She took a couple big gulps while Danny watched her with wide eyes before pulling the cup from her lips and wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

“You alright there, Hollis?” Danny asked with a joking tone.

Laura knew she was joking, but it felt just like everything had lately. Like she was judging her choices and trying to take care of her.

“It’s a party, isn't it?” Laura replied, bringing the cup back to her lips.

Danny took her own sip and turned to talk to someone she knew from class that had bumped into her.

Laura brought her cup down and watched Danny with her friend. This wasn't working. She couldn't force herself to have feelings for her or make the relationship work just because she wanted it to. Because it wasn't working. It had, once. But no matter how much Laura wanted it to, it just didn't anymore.

Laura looked back towards the couches but the spot where Carmilla was sitting was now empty. Laura looked around the room quickly but didn't spot her anywhere and was surprised when she realized she was disappointed by that. With Danny reaching for her hand, she felt her stomach tighten in knots and she knew she couldn't do this for much longer. As soon as Kirsch offered her another drink, she accepted. *Happily.*

—

So here she was. Not drunk, but definitely buzzed. Buzzed to the point where if Danny caught up to her she wasn’t sure what she would say. So even though she could hear Danny calling to her through the crowd, she just kept pushing her way through bodies. Laura wasn't paying attention to who they were, she really didn't care, she just wanted to get lost in the room somehow.

“Laura!” Danny’s hand was suddenly gripping her arm, “Did you not hear me? I've been calling your name.”

Laura turned around and licked her lips, wishing she had another drink. Something to busy her mouth so the things she was thinking wouldn't come spewing out.

“I heard you. I just didn't really feel like talking.”

Like that.

“Is everything ok?” Danny asked, stepping closer, her face shifting to show pure concern.

It should have been a good thing. Laura should have found it sweet or endearing, but it just made her more frustrated. She reached out and took a cup from someone's hands, not caring who’s it was or what was in it.
Danny watched Laura take a swig, her eyebrows pushing together, “I think you’ve probably had enough.” she reached out and pulled the cup down from Laura’s mouth. “Maybe we should get going.”

Laura rolled her eyes and turned to walk away from Danny but a strong hand on her arm stopped her again. Laura turned around quickly, her voice much louder than she meant for it to be, “You know what, I’m an adult, Danny.”

Danny let go of Laura’s arm and was honestly hurt by the tone of voice Laura was using with her. She was just trying to help. Trying to look out for Laura, her girlfriend. “I know you are.”

“I don’t think you do.” Her voice was loud but not angry, just frustrated. “You always do this—“ She gestured to the cup in Danny’s hand that she just just been drinking from, “I can take care of myself.”

By now most of the party knew something was going on and the room started to get even more full with bodies coming to watch the fight they were sure was about the happen.

Carmilla was leaning against the door frame with a cup in her hand, her arms crossed over her chest when she heard the unmistakable voice of Laura Hollis coming from the center of the room. She could see her from her spot in the doorway, but as the room started to fill up, people weaved in and out of her line of sight of what was going on.

Danny sighed heavily, “Laura, you know how you get when you drink too much. You just have to check with me—“

“Have to check with you?” Laura interrupted, shutting her eyes tightly in disbelief at the words she was hearing. “Because its, like, your job to keep me safe?”

“Yes!” Danny replied quickly.

“What?” Laura’s eyes widened and her voice got quieter. It was too late though—by now most of the party was listening in, and the music had been turned down enough for everyone to hear everything.

The girl that had been talking to Carmilla stood on her toes and peered into the room where the commotion was happening, “Let’s go check it out.” She said with a smile. Clearly the type of girl that watches reality tv and honestly thinks its real.

Carmilla swirled her drink a little, her eyes watching the liquid in the cup as she considered it, “No, I’m good.” She lifted the cup to her lips, ultimately deciding it was none of her business what was going on in the other room.

The girl standing with her shrugged her shoulders and disappeared into the crowd to watch the drama unfold.

“I care about you! Of course its my job to keep you safe!” Danny was clearly starting to notice people watching them and her voice seemed to give off a certainty like she wasn't only trying to convince Laura, but the entire room.

“Well I’m sorry that my making my own decisions and being reckless is making it hard for you to do your job.” Laura bit back, now completely past frustration and just full on angry.

Things had felt off for a while and Laura couldn't place it. This moment, she finally figured it out. Danny wasn't being her girlfriend. She was being her protector. And Laura didn't need that. She
didn’t want that.

“I didn’t mean it like that.” Danny realized this wasn’t going to end the way she wanted it to and started to panic. She stepped forward and tried to gently take hold of Laura’s hands but Laura stepped back, pulling out of her grip.

“Yes you did.” Laura chuckled humorlessly, “You meant that Laura’s too dumb to know what she can and can’t handle and needs to be protected by the big strong grownups. That’s all anyone ever wants to say to me. My dad, my roommates, you. Everyone.”

Danny shifted her weight nervously and tried not to look at the faces staring at her but couldn’t help it. They all looked like they were watching some kind of entertainment. Like this was just part of the party. It made her feel sick.

Laura took a deep breath and copied Danny’s action and glanced around the room. She felt her face heat up and she reached forward and took hold of Danny’s wrist and started pulling her through the crowd.

The people filling the room had the decency to look sheepish at their blatant attempt to catch every word of what was clearly a private conversation as Laura tugged Danny out of the room into the kitchen. With most everyone in the room they had just left, the kitchen was pretty empty and the look Laura gave the few stragglers was enough to get them to leave.

Laura let go of Danny’s wrist and turned to face her. This wasn’t the time or place she would have wanted to do this, but it seemed it was happening no matter what she wanted.

“Look.” Laura sighed, “I like you.”

The words were meant to be a comfort of sorts, but Danny looked hurt by the statement. She knew what was coming, and she hated it.

Laura saw Danny’s reaction and hoped her brain would string together words in a way that made sense despite the alcohol heating her insides and making her head feel slightly fuzzy.

“I like that you’re smart and strong and all kinds of righteous but I don’t need a dad.” Laura took in a breath, “I’ve already got that one covered.”

Danny stepped forward, taking hold of Laura’s hand, “Laura, I can fix this, I can change—“

“No.” Laura breathed out, trying not to cry, “You can’t. You shouldn’t have to. Danny, there’s nothing wrong with you. Or me.” She let her thumb brush against the back of Danny’s hand as she dropped her gaze to the floor. “This is just me and you, needing different things, y’know?”

Danny’s eyebrows came together and she shook her head gently side to side. She knew Laura was right. She felt that things were off, too. And as much as she cared about Laura, she knew it just wasn’t working. That didn’t make it hurt any less, but she understood it.

“Ok, fine. I’ll—I’ll back off.” Her voice was solid but Laura could tell she was forcing it to stay that way. They stood there a moment before Danny let out a sigh, “So.. I guess I’ll see you around.

Laura finally looked up, locking eyes with the red head and nodded. She didn't know what else to say. She wasn't sure if she said anything else that she could do it without crying.

She did care about Danny. She was Laura’s best friend. Of course it hurt knowing things were changing and their relationship— friendship, wouldn't be the same after this. Laura wasn't only
losing a girlfriend, she was losing her close friend. And that sucked.

“Okay.” Danny sighed before leaning forward and leaving a kiss on the top of Laura’s head.

Laura closed her eyes and waited until she could be sure Danny had left the room before opening them again and taking a deep breath. The air seemed to catch in her throat and she felt like her lungs wouldn't fill up all the way. Her chest felt heavy and alcohol or anxiety— her head was starting to feel dizzy.

Laura turned towards the door that led outside to a deck just off the kitchen and pushed the doors open, walking out to the deck railing and gripping the cold wood tightly. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath through her nose, finally feeling her lungs expand.

For as much as she was dreading that conversation and sure, she probably could have picked a better venue, she actually felt relieved. Lighter. It was scary, being alone again. But she knew it was the right thing to do. For them both.

"Eventful party, huh?" Carmilla leaned her hip against the railing and let her hand land flat on the smooth wood, her finger starting to trace invisible patterns.

"Shit— Carm." Laura jumped and turned to face the dark haired girl as she clutched her chest.

"Sorry cutie, didn't mean to scare you." Her voice was quiet as she turned to face the railing completely, leaning down to rest her forearms on the wood and tilting her head up towards the sky.

Laura took another breath, trying to calm her heart from being startled. She looked Carmilla over slowly before glancing around the deck to see where her latest study buddy was. Laura had lost count of the girls that had been hanging off of Carmilla all night and was surprised to find she was actually alone.

"Having fun?" Carmilla asked, breaking the silence.

Laura snorted, "oh yeah. Loads." She turned to match Carmilla’s stance, leaning her arms on the railing and lookout out over the yard full of people below them. "I take it you heard—"

"Not really." Carmilla shrugged, "Wasn't any of my business."

"Oh." Laura looked over at her surprised.

Carmilla felt Laura's eyes lingering on her and rolled her own as she sighed, "Look, I may be an ass most of the time but I'm smart enough to know when I should butt out." She turned to face Laura, leaning her weight on an elbow still on the deck railing.

Laura just nodded and turned to look back to the yard below them. She wasn't sure if she felt grateful or hurt for Carmilla's lack of interest in her fight and breakup with Danny. Even with the loud music thumping in the background and people yelling from every direction, Laura felt herself finally feeling calm for the first time that night. She had come outside hoping to be alone but ultimately was glad Carmilla just happened to be here.

Carmilla had this ability to just be there without it feeling like she was hovering. Like they were just sharing the same space. It was the comforting feeling of alone time— without actually feeling alone.

Laura turned to face Carmilla who was still watching her and was trying to figure out how to express that. How to say thank you for doing absolutely nothing, when she found herself lost in just looking at Carmilla.
She would have felt weird about it, but Carmilla was doing the exact same thing. Just looking at her. Her expression was a new one, it was unreadable, and it made Laura curious about what she was thinking.

"There you are." Elsie came strutting through the doors and immediately pressed herself into Carmilla's side possessively as she eyed Laura up and down.

Carmilla's posture deflated at the interruption and her expression changed again. She let her arm move to wrap around Elsie's shoulder carelessly but kept her eyes on Laura until Elsie spoke again, bumping their hips together.

"I want another drink." Elsie pouted, wrapping her arms around Carmilla's waist. "Have you had enough fresh air yet?"

Carmilla sighed and turned her head to look at Elsie, "Sure. Let's go in."

Elsie smiled and stepped back, taking hold of Carmilla's hand and started dragging her back inside.

Laura watched Carmilla go and couldn't help but think she didn't look all that interested in Elsie. Not like she had the first time she had caught them making out on the couch in the library, which made her feel...


"Later, cupcake." Carmilla called over her shoulder as she disappeared back into the house.

Laura sighed and slouched against the railing.

When had Carmilla become a calming energy in her life? And what was that look Carmilla was giving her before Elsie showed up?

"I need another drink."

—

"You going to the dinner with mom and Mattie?" Will asked, leaning closer to Carmilla so she could hear him over the music.

They were both leaning their backs against the wall, side by side, watching the crowd get more drunk and stupid by the second. As siblings they had their differences, but sometimes they seemed like almost the same person. This was one of those moments.

"Haven't decided yet." Carmilla shrugged, crossing her arms over her chest.

Will had done the same thing, at almost the same time, leaning further against the wall, "Just because you and mom don't get along doesn't mean you shouldn't get to see Mattie while she is in town."

Carmilla turned her head towards him, "I'll go if you go."

"I was already going." Will rolled his eyes and made a teasing face at Carmilla.

Carmilla chuckled and bumped her shoulder into his before they both looked back out to the room. "We are surrounded by idiots." Carmilla muttered, earning a chuckle from Will.

"Bro!" Kirsch came out of the crowd with a serious expression, "you have to help me."

Will pushed himself off the wall and stepped towards Kirsch, "what's up?"

"Little nerd hottie is trying to roll the keg outside so she can have it to herself." Kirsch's eyes were wide, "I've never seen her like this. Its kind of awesome, except for the whole, not sharing the beer
Carmilla overheard and curiously turned to where the keg was sitting. Sure enough, Laura was trying to tip it on its side, no doubt to try and roll it away from the angry frat boys trying to pull her off of it. She had to give Laura credit though, even with 4 big frat boys pulling at her, Laura had a solid grip on that thing and if her face expressed anything, it was that she was determined to succeed in her goal. No matter how crazy it was. She was little, but man was she a force to be reckoned with. Even when drunk. *Maybe especially when drunk.*

“I’ll be back.” Will grumbled as his shoulders slumped. He was just as big a fan of parties as Carmilla was. Meaning not at all. He usually ended up being the responsible one breaking up fights and calling sober drivers for people to get home safely. So it wasn't a surprise Kirsch had come to him with the newest drama of the party.

“Don’t bother, I’m headed out.” Carmilla pushed herself off the wall and punched Wills shoulder before disappearing down the hall to the room where all the coats were stashed.

She came back out, pulling her leather jacket over her shoulder when Elsie appeared, smiling at her.

“Want some company?” Elsie asked in a flirty tone.

Carmilla shrugged and Elsie took that as a yes, taking hold of her arm as they headed for the door.

“I don’t need a driver.” Laura sputtered as she tripped over her own feet, “I’ll just walk.”

Carmilla turned her head and watched Laura stumble through the room as she held the door open for Elsie. She didn't realize she had been standing there watching Laura for more than a casual moment until Elsie was in front of her with an impatient look on her face.

“Are we getting out of here or not?” Elsie put her hands on her hips and tilted her head waiting for an answer.

Carmilla raised an eyebrow at Elsie’s attitude before giving her a casual wave of the hand, “I changed my mind.” With that she turned around, leaving Elsie on the doorstep with her jaw dropped.

“Oop! Sorry!” Laura practically knocked over someone walking by her and continued to cling to them in an effort not to fall over. She had lost count of how many drinks she had and was just happy she hadn't thrown up yet.

“Going on an adventure, tiny one?” Carmilla gave Laura a half smile and took hold of her wrists, pulling her off the stranger and helping to steady her on her own feet.

“Carm!” Laura smiled wide before frowning, her eyebrows pushing together and her bottom lip jutting out slightly, “You aren't going to tell me I’ve had enough too, are you?”

Carmilla couldn't help but smile wider at the girl she was holding onto still. She was adorable. *Plastered,* but adorable. “Quite the opposite, actually. Lets go get another drink in the kitchen.”

She pulled her into her side and threw Laura’s arm around her shoulder, wrapping her own around the girls waist to help steady her. Laura smiled and let her weight fall onto Carmilla as they walked towards the kitchen. Once there, Carmilla leaned Laura up against the counter and placed Laura’s hands on the edges in an effort to get her to support herself.

“How does some warm toast sound, cupcake?” Carmilla stepped backwards slowly, watching to see if Laura was in fact going to hold herself up. When the brunette seemed solid enough against the
counter, Carmilla went through the cupboards until she found some bread. Pulling it out of its bag she looked around but didn't see a toaster. “Or, how about some room temperature bread?”

She handed the bread to Laura who swayed slightly at letting go of the counter with one of her hands. Regaining her balance she took the bread and happily took a bite. “You’re a really good cook.” Laura murmured around a mouthful of bread.

Carmilla couldn't help but laugh at the statement as she walked over to the fridge and grabbed two bottles of water and walked back to stand in front of Laura. She watched the brunette eat her piece of bread then reach for another. How much had she had to drink? Carmilla knew she wasn't this drunk when they had talked on the balcony, so she must have gone hard after that.

Making the move to ditch Elsie and help Laura was definitely out of character, but she honestly just felt bad for her. She had broken up with her girlfriend in front of a bunch of strangers in the middle of a party. That had to suck. So Carmilla sucked it up and decided to be human for once.

“What do you say we get out of here?” Carmilla asked as Laura took another large bite of bread.

“Carmilla Karnstein.” Laura gasped and clutched her chest with her free hand, “Are you trying to seduce me?” Laura narrowed her eyes and gave Carmilla a goofy smile before giggling.

Carmilla chuckled and shook her head, “You caught me.” She grabbed hold of Laura’s arm and threw it over her shoulder again, gripping around her waist and started making her way to the front door. “Annoying drunk girls that never shut up are exactly my type.”

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“Oh my god.” Laura mumbled, her face buried in her hands, “Pull over, pull over!”

“Don’t you dare puke in my car.” Carmilla pulled off to the side of the road and threw the car in park.

Laura scrambled for the handle and threw the door open, nearly falling out of the car as she made her way to the grass. She leaned over, her hands on her knees and took a few deep breaths. A minute later she felt a tap on her shoulder and looked up to find a bottle of water in her face.

It had taken more time than Carmilla wanted to get Laura out of the party and to her car down the block. The cold air and the walk helped to get Laura out of the slurring and sloppy drunk phase but she was still very much the opposite of sober. They had been in the car all of 5 minutes before Laura felt like she was going to puke up everything she had ever ingested in her entire life.

“Sorry.” Laura whined as she took hold of the bottle and uncapped the top to take a sip.

Carmilla shrugged and shoved her hands in her pockets. She rocked on her heels and looked around. It was probably close to 3 in the morning so the streets were fairly empty. They had made it far enough from the house that most of the sounds were of crickets and the wind blowing through leaves of the trees lining the road instead of the dull thud of the music blaring from the party.

Laura put the cap back on the bottle of water and started to crouch down towards the ground. Immediately Carmilla reached out and took hold of one of Laura’s arms to steady her, which was met by a confused look from Laura.

Carmilla let go slowly and put her hand back into her pocket, “I uh, just don’t want you hurting yourself and getting blood all over my car.”

Laura gave her a look like she didn't quite buy the excuse as she sat down on the ground and pulled
her knees up towards her chest, resting her forehead on them.

“Puke and blood all in one night is not my idea of a good time.” Carmilla grumbled and turned to face away from Laura. She was seriously considering leaving her on the side of the road. Why had she decided to help her anyway?

“I just- I just need a minute.” Laura breathed out, taking a few deep breaths trying to push down the nausea.

Carmilla kicked a rock down the road before walking back over to her car and leaning her back against it, watching Laura as she sat on the ground, focused on breathing. She waited a minute before letting out a bored sigh. She opened the back door of her car, grabbed her bag from off the seat and threw it over her shoulder before making her way over to Laura and reaching her hand down to her.

“Come on, cupcake. Lets walk.” Carmilla raised an eyebrow and kept her arm outstretched, waiting for Laura to take hold of her hand.

Laura lifted her head and looked at Carmilla’s hand warily before looking up at her face. Carmilla moved her hand slightly closer to Laura and gave her an expectant look. Deciding this probably wasn't going to end up being some cruel joke, Laura took hold of her hand and let Carmilla pull her to her feet.

She stumbled a bit and felt Carmilla’s hands take hold of her arms to steady her. Once she had her footing she glanced up to catch a half amused, half worried expression on Carmilla’s face before it switched to a smirk and Carmilla dropped her hands.

“Shall we?” Carmilla swept her arm out in a wide gesture to invite Laura to start walking, before falling in step beside her.

They made their way down the street, the cool air and her focus being on walking helped Laura forget about her nausea. She wasn't sure if they were headed in any particular direction but Carmilla seemed to know where she was going, so it made it easy to follow along beside her.

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“Ok, no.” Laura shook her head and took a step backwards, “I know I'm drunk, but I'm not drunk enough to know when we are doing something we shouldn't be.”

“Oh come on.” Carmilla whispered, “Live a little.”

Carmilla pushed on the chainlink fence exposing a section that had been cut, creating an opening they could climb through. She reached her bag through the opening and set it gently on the ground before stepping through and squeezing her body the rest of the way through the small opening. She grabbed her bag and put it back over her shoulder before grabbing the fence and pulling on it, opening the hole a good amount to make it easy for Laura to climb through.

Laura bit her lip and looked up and down the street where they were before looking back to Carmilla, her shoulders dropping and a worried expression on her face.

“Just get your ass through the fence already.” Carmilla rolled her eyes and pulled on the fence harder.

Laura puffed out an unsure breath but did as she was told and climbed through the fence. She was almost through when her pant leg got caught on one of the clipped links and made her fall flat on her
face with a yelp.

Carmilla chuckled and let go of the fence letting it shake and clatter together loudly before walking off, leaving Laura on the ground.

“You aren't even going to help me?” Laura called after her, pushing herself up off the ground and jogging to catch up as Carmilla made her way through tall grass and tree branches littering the small worn path in front of her.

“Nope.” Carmilla called back casually, “Can't have you getting used to it.”

Laura mumbled something under her breath and hopped over a small branch in the path as she followed Carmilla blindly through the dark. The only light illuminating their pathway was the flashlight coming from Carmilla’s phone in front of her. That fact plus the number of drinks she had that night was making it quite the adventure for Laura.

Carmilla’s pace slowed down, which Laura was grateful for, and they stepped out into a clearing. Laura stepped up next Carmilla and squinted, looking around trying to figure out where they were.

Carmilla pulled her bag off her shoulder and pulled something from it before reaching over and hanging the strap on a branch poking out from a tree next to them. Laura watched as Carmilla took a few careful steps forward, bringing something up to her face, then was nearly blinded by a flash going off.

“Oh my god I'm blind.” Laura blinked her eyes a few times heavily as spots of light floated through her vision. She pressed her palms into her eyelids and rubbed gently, trying to regain her sight.

“You're such a drama queen.” Carmilla replied flatly and started walking again.

Laura scoffed and rubbed eyes some more. She couldn't help but smile though. This new playfulness between them was actually really fun. Carmilla was being mean, but at the same time, she wasn't. Laura found it entertaining, even while drunk.

Laura looked around and finally started to realize where they were. The park from Carmilla’s photos. It looked different than what she had seen. Granted, those pictures were taken in the day time.

Laura started following after Carmilla, looking around to see if its how she imagined it would be in real life. It was better. Even in the dark. Maybe because of the dark. They were walking next to the pond, it was full of clear water that was reflecting the light from the moon. She could see the reflection of the large tree branches that hung over the water. The same branches that had been in the picture.

Laura jogged to catch up to Carmilla who was climbing over a branch that had fallen to the ground, “What are we doing here?”

“We are walking.” Carmilla didn't bother looking back as she followed the path she had worn down in the tall grass from her visits before that night.

Laura sighed and figured Carmilla was going to remain as mysterious as usual and just decided to follow along without question. They walked a little ways further around the pond before Laura caught sight of an old picnic table and a swing set not far from it. Carmilla made her way to the table and stepped up on to the bench, pulling the camera up and snapping another photo.

Laura considered going over to the swing set but decided against it as memories of nearly throwing up on the side of the road made their way into her mind. Instead she stepped up on the bench and sat
down on the table, leaning her elbows on her knees and letting her chin rest in her hands.

Carmilla snapped a couple more photos then sat down next to Laura, placing the camera on the table next to her and leaning back on her hands.

“Feeling better?” Carmilla asked quietly, eyes scanning the park in front of them.

Laura rolled her head to the side, still resting it in her hands, “Do you really care?”

Carmilla shrugged. She realized she must care if she asked. She wasn't really the type to waste time pretending when it came to things like that. But at the same time, she had never done or said anything before this night to give Laura the impression that she thought of her as anything other than someone she studied with. So of course Laura wouldn't think she actually cared.

Laura rolled her head back to look in front of her and sighed, “Its pretty here.”

“Mhmm.” Carmilla hummed, pulling out her phone to check the time.

They fell into a silence after that. Watching the moon shift in the sky, the reflection of it moving through the water in the pond. The sky started to change to a lighter color, the stars getting harder to see.

At one point Laura had started to shiver, and upon being asked by Carmilla if she wanted to go, she insisted she didn't want to yet and began rubbing her hands up and down her arms to create some heat.

“Just take it.” Carmilla let her jacket drop from her shoulders smoothly and she pulled her arms from the sleeves.

“Then you’ll be cold.” Laura whined but took hold of the jacket anyway.

Carmilla scooted closer to Laura and helped get it over her shoulders, “When I get cold, then we can go.”

Laura gripped the edges of the jacket and hugged it around herself tightly, the movement of her arms making her bump into Carmilla. She noticed how close they were and went to scoot away when Carmilla tapped her knuckle against Laura's knee and shook her head.

"Its ok." Carmilla looked at her with an unreadable expression.

Laura bit her bottom lip, her eyebrows twitching together momentary as she tried to figure Carmilla out in that moment. The dark haired girl had already turned to look out at the park but Laura didn't miss the small sigh as she settled back in right next to her, their sides pressed together.

It was probably 20 minutes after that when Laura laid down on her side, still saying she wasn't ready to leave, and curled herself up into a ball and fell asleep. Carmilla rolled her eyes as she thought about how difficult it was going to be getting Laura back to her car.

Carmilla was glad Laura hadn't wanted to leave yet. Not only was the park one of her favorite places to be, it was nice actually having company for once. She wasn't sure if it was the cold, how late it was, or how much Laura had to drink that had been keeping the girl quiet instead of her usual chatterbox self, but Carmilla was actually enjoying her company.

Laura shifted on the table in her sleep and Carmilla decided it would probably be easier to get her to
leave if she let her nap for a minute. So she stood up and started walking around the park again. She had been there plenty of times before. Mostly during the day or at sunset, though. So being here this early was different. She could tell it was getting later in the morning when she started to hear more than just crickets. There were a few birds chirping and the sounds from the city that were just past the overgrown grass, trees and beyond the fence, started to make their way to her.

She snapped a few pictures of birds and squirrels running around as the morning light started make an appearance. Morning dew hanging to the ends of blades of grass. Twisted tree branches and fallen leaves. She'd stop and wait, watching for the right moment. The right picture. She wasn't one to snap a ton of pictures and pick the best one later. If she saw something worth taking a picture of, she took one, and moved on.

Pulling her phone from her pocket and seeing it was just after 6 am Carmilla realized they had been out way later than she thought and started making her way back towards the table she had left Laura on. She shoved her hands in her pockets and watched her feet as she walked along the small path around the pond and past the big tree. She should have been able to see Laura at that point, but all she saw was the table.

“Great.” Carmilla groaned as she stopped walking to look around the park. “I lost a drunk Laura Hollis.”

Carmilla let out a heavy sigh and stomped her way over to the table, climbing up on top of it to get a better view of the park. It wasn't that large of a park, but the lack of upkeep made it easy to hide or get lost in.

Standing on the table gave Carmilla a great view of the pond as the colors of the sun rising started to change the dark sky to one filled with lighter hues. She pulled up her camera and took a couple shots until she noticed ripples starting to fill the water. She lowered her camera and saw Laura, leaning against the broken fence, tossing things into the pond.

Carmilla stood there for a moment and just watched her. It was almost as if the emotions Laura was trying to ignore by drinking the night before were finally catching up to her. She looked sad and it made something in Carmilla's chest tighten.

Laura’s shoulders were slumped as her weight was on her forearms that rested on the splintering wood of the broken fence in front of her. She had put Carmilla’s jacket on all the way, instead of just having it draped over her shoulders, and the arms looked to be just a little bit too long. Her hair was pushed over one of her shoulders and hung down, blowing slightly with the morning breeze. She was brushing her toe slowly along the dirt under her feet and occasionally breaking off bits of the fence to drop in the water in front of her.

Carmilla raised her camera slightly before hesitating. She wasn't used to overthinking her photographs. If she saw something worth taking a picture of, she just did. She didn't think about it. But watching Laura as the morning started to creep in around them, made her want to take a picture — and for the first time she worried she wouldn't be able to capture the beauty of what she saw. At least, not really.

“Ready?” Carmilla walked up next to Laura and received a sleepy nod from the brunette before she started leading her back towards the hole in the fence where they had climbed through before.

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“Laura.” Carmilla repeated for the third time, glancing over to the passenger seat. “Seriously, I can't take you home if I don’t know where you live.”
It was no use though, Laura was dead to the world. Head leaning up against the window, Carmilla’s jacket pulled tightly around her, feet up on the seat and knees pulled into her chest. She was even snoring.

“Ugh, its like the universe wants me to be mean.” Carmilla groaned as she slowed down the speed of her car, “If this is what I get for being nice one time…” She checked her mirrors before making a left turn.

She didn't care that she was driving ridiculously slow. It was Sunday morning and there was barely anyone out this early anyway. And driving slow meant less bumps and less chance that Laura would slam her head into the window or wake up.

As much as Carmilla grumbled to herself about it, after seeing Laura standing there in her park, watching a sunrise that somehow made her glow while she was stuck in her own sadness, she couldn't help but want to give Laura a minute of something peaceful. Even if it was just a car ride home.

So she made another turn, slowing her speed a little more, and just kept driving.
Laura couldn't remember a time when her mouth felt this dry. She licked her lips a few times and swallowed dryly as she attempted to roll over. The movement immediately started a rhythm of dull thumping inside her head, echoing in her ears.

She took a deep breath through her nose and squeezed her eyes shut tighter. Maybe if she went back to sleep the pounding in her skull would stop. That's when she noticed how hot she was. It was like the sun's purpose that morning was to shine only on her.

Laura whined and rolled onto her stomach, moving her arms up so she could grip onto the pillow tightly as she buried her face in it and let out a groan. She was tired, hot, and her head was about to explode.

"Oh my god." She grumbled, finally rolling to her side to push herself up into a sitting position, eyes still closed. The comforter fell down into her lap heavily and she squinted at the brightness of the room.

"If I had a dollar for every time a girl in my bed said that." Carmilla's voice was scratchy and low, like she had just woken up herself.

Laura's eyes went wide at the unexpected voice and she pulled the covers up to cover her torso on instinct.

Carmilla just chuckled at Laura's reaction and lifted the cup of coffee in her hands up to her lips as she leaned on the doorframe of the bedroom.

"Oh my god." Laura said again as her eyes darted around the room, realizing she wasn't in her own bed.

"That's two dollars in less than 30 seconds, cupcake." Carmilla smirked at her and ran a hand through her messy hair, "and I haven't even touched you."

Laura's shocked expression switched to a glare as she grabbed a pillow from behind her and threw it towards the doorway. It fell just short of Carmilla and the dark haired girl laughed.

Laura felt a chill run through her at the gravely sound of Carmilla's laugh and couldn't help but smile. She quickly regretted the sudden movement though, as something in her head started to thump harshly. "Ugh, what time is it?"
“Just after noon.”

Laura brought a hand up to pinch the bridge of her nose as she shut her eyes and hung her head forward a bit. "What happened last night?"

"You don't remember?" Carmilla raised an eyebrow, "I'm hurt."

Laura sighed, her eyebrows pushing together as the pounding in her head felt heavier. She pushed the covers off of her and scooted to the edge of the bed to put her feet on the floor. She felt the cool hard wood under her feet and put her hands on her thighs.

Carmilla watched Laura's face turn to confusion again and she hid her smirk behind the mug in her hands.

"Where are my pants?" Laura asked quietly. Her face was quickly going from one of confusion to completely mortified the longer she was awake.

"You really don't remember?" Carmilla chuckled, lowering the cup in her hands and watching Laura carefully.

Laura pulled the comforter back over her lap as she shook her head at Carmilla.

Taking pity on her, Carmilla pushed herself off the door frame and took a step into the room. "They were covered in dirt from your face plant in the park." She pointed to the bedside table where a glass of water and bottle of Advil was sitting, "I wasn't about to let you get into my bed all dirty."

Laura took the glass of water and downed the whole thing, along with a couple pills, in one go. She brought a hand up to rub against her eyes, trying desperately to piece together her night. She didn't remember a park, or face planting, or even how the hell she ended up in Carmilla's bed. Of all the people she could see this happening with, which wasn't many, Carmilla was not one of them.

Laura set the glass back down and looked around the room nervously before stopping to look at Carmilla who was just inside the doorway, "And we- I mean, did we…?" She trailed off, not sure she even wanted the answer to the question lingering in her mind.

“Did we what, cupcake?” Carmilla asked, pretending to be clueless.

Laura covered her face with her hands for a second before dropping them and whispering, “you know…”

Carmilla just tilted her head and gave her a look of confusion, “You’re going to have to be more specific.”

Laura finally caught on to the fact that Carmilla was making fun of her and shot her a glare, “Seriously?”

Carmilla nodded, “Use your words. I know you have them, you never shut up.” She lifted her coffee to take another sip.

Laura huffed out a frustrated breath, “I mean, did we…”

"Get swept away in a dreamlike romance that ended with you calling out my name for hours until you fell blissfully asleep in my bed?" Carmilla took a few more steps forward, giving Laura a seductive look.
Laura swallowed hard, her throat feeling dry again as she watched Carmilla saunter towards her.

Then Carmilla chuckled, breaking the seductive act she was giving her. It made Laura blush with the fact that she was actually considering what Carmilla was saying as a possibility of what happened.

"No, cupcake." Carmilla chuckled, "you got plastered and passed out while I was giving you a ride home."

“Oh.” Laura sighed in relief, "Then how'd I end up here?"

"You passed out before telling me where you live." Carmilla shrugged, taking another sip of her coffee. "You may want to check your phone though, it's been going off for a while."

Carmilla turned and walked back out of the bedroom like having girls in her bed was the most normal thing in the world. Laura figured it probably was, if the antics in the library was any indication of how things usually went for her.

Laura saw her pants on the floor next to the bed and grabbed them, fumbling to find the pocket where her phone was. She pulled it out and sighed, Carmilla was right.

14 New Notifications

Carmilla walked back in, completely ignoring Laura and went straight to the bathroom that was connected to the bedroom, shutting the door slightly behind her but not all the way. Laura watched from her spot on the bed through the crack of the door as Carmilla splashed some water on her face and looked at herself in the mirror.

It surprised Laura, the expression on Carmilla’s face. It wasn't a cocky, ‘I’m so hot’ kind of look. It was more like she was really looking at herself, trying to figure out who she was. Laura’s phone chimed again, adding to the notifications she had yet to look at and it made Carmilla glance her way.

Laura looked away quickly, hoping Carmilla hadn’t caught her staring, and cleared her throat awkwardly as she opened up her phone to see who was trying so hard to find her.

Danny.

“Oh, no.” Laura breathed out, scrolling through the texts on her phone. Suddenly the night before came rushing back into her mind. Showing up at the party, drinking way too much, her fight with Danny— her breakup with Danny. Drinking even more, trying to steal a keg? Then Carmilla.

She remembered Carmilla practically carrying her to her car and helping her climb inside. Pulling over when she didn't feel good. Offering her water, and her jacket, and…

The park. Sitting on the picnic table and feeling Carmilla’s leg bounce quickly up and down when she pressed herself into her side for warmth. The way she gently led her through the tall grass by pressing her hand on the small of Laura’s back as they made their way out of the park.

She remembers Carmilla sitting her down against the fence and jogging away to get her car to come back and pick Laura up so she wouldn't have to walk as far. Then she remembers falling asleep, tugging Carmilla’s jacket around her as she sat in the passenger seat of her car.

She scrolled through the texts slowly— There were a few from Perry, asking where she was, informing her of the late hour, and then screaming at her through text how irresponsible she was being. A few from Danny asking if they could talk, get breakfast, a couple apologies, and a— “can I see you?”
There was more. One from Laf, informing her that Danny had in fact shown up at the apartment looking for her - which then lead to everyone being shocked and worried at the fact that she had never made it home.

The last one, the one that she had just received, was Laf again. Danny was still there, waiting for her.

Carmilla saw Laura’s head duck quickly just as she turned towards the sound that had chimed in the other room. She watched Laura look at her phone, and sigh, more than a few times, at what she was reading. She looked back at her reflection for a second before reaching for her toothbrush.

Carmilla couldn't decide if she was glad or not that Laura seemed to have forgotten the previous night. It was strange. She wouldn't exactly classify it as hanging out, but it wasn't their normal way of spending time together. Carmilla had enjoyed it, and honestly wouldn't hate it if it happened again. But then again, maybe it was better Laura didn't remember, so things wouldn't change.

She wasn't even sure why she had taken Laura to the park in the first place. She never took anyone there. Or why she had volunteered to help her at the party. Come to think of it, Laura had made her do more than a few things that she normally wouldn’t.

Even with all these thoughts running through her head, Carmilla found herself listening closely to the sighs coming from the other room.

Shit.

Carmilla looked back to her reflection and frowned around her toothbrush. She had a crush on Laura Hollis.

“Alright,” Carmilla called from the bathroom quickly, her mouth still full of toothpaste. She spit into the sink and wiped at her mouth with the back of her hand, “It’s time for you to go.”

Laura looked up as Carmilla made her way back into the bedroom rather fast. She looked at her with a pout and immediately the dark haired girl shook her head. Carmilla could not let this go any further. She wasn't sure how this had even happened in the first place. Carmilla didn't do like. She didn't do crushes. She did distant and detached. Not this.

Laura was just someone she was forced to tutor. She was just saving her grade. Doing the bare minimum it took in order for her to pass. Carmilla was definitely not spending her free time making flash cards, or coming up with ways to explain things in a way Laura would understand. She hadn't stopped bringing girls to the library because she cared about what Laura thought, or for the fact that she just hadn't really been interested in anyone in a while since spending time with Laura. She hadn't given up the chance to hook up with a very beautiful and very into her girl in order to drive a drunk Laura home. And she certainly hadn't taken her to park she hadn't taken anyone to in years or spend an extra hour driving around the city at excruciatingly slow speeds just so Laura could sleep.

Nope.

“I guess you’re right.” Laura let out a sigh and looked back to her phone.

Carmilla clenched her jaw, thinking carefully about what to say next. She had to keep Laura at a distance, but she couldn't help the bubbling feeling in her stomach of wanting to ask if something was wrong.

“Isn’t someone looking for you anyway?” That seemed like the safest thing to say.

“Yeah I just—” Laura sighed again and saw Camilla roll her eyes. “I just don’t exactly want her to
“Ah.” Carmilla nodded knowingly. “Well, you don’t have to go home but you can’t stay here. I’ve got things to do, sweetheart.” She cringed at the nickname, telling herself she had to stop doing that. It wasn’t just a casual thing to annoy Laura anymore and she knew it as soon as she said it.

“Well..” Laura dragged it out like she was thinking of something to say, “Maybe I could come with you? Wherever you’re going. I mean if it’s not too intrusive. I promise I won’t get in the way. I’ll even help. If whatever you’re doing needs help, I mean.” Realizing she was ranting she pressed her lips together firmly and gave Carmilla a pleading look. Hoping with everything in her that Carmilla would say yes despite the fact that she was almost positive she was just going to laugh in her face at the request.

Carmilla took a deep breath, actually considering it. Even after practically yelling at herself not to let this girl get to her, seeing her with her bottom lip jutting out in a pout made her forget that internal conversation completely. What would it hurt to let her tag along, really?


“Oh my gosh, thank you!” Laura bounced on the bed with a smile before gripping her head and grimacing.

“Towels are under the sink.” Carmilla waved towards the bathroom but didn’t move from her spot in the middle of the bedroom.

Laura looked at her slightly confused before glancing towards the bathroom a little unsure of what Carmilla was wanting her to do.

“You aren’t tagging along like that, you smell like the basement of an abattoir.” Carmilla turned and started walking back out of the bedroom as she called over her shoulder, “You’ve got 20 minutes then I’m leaving.”

“Rude.” Laura muttered before gripping the collar of her shirt and lifting it up to take a sniff. She frowned, “Rude, but accurate.”

—

“Carm?” Laura whispered through a crack in the bathroom door.

“Hmm?” Carmilla hummed in response not bothering to look over. She was sitting on the end of her bed, leaning over lacing up her boots.

“I uh..“

Carmilla heard the door creek open and sat up, “What is it cupcake, we need to go before the light —“ Her words cut short, the last one coming out in a squeak. She quickly coughed to try and cover it up, feeling her face start to heat up, “Did you uh, need something?” She asked, clearing her throat and locking her eyes on Laura’s face.

Laura’s lips twitched into a small smile at Carmilla’s reaction, despite her trying to hide it. She clutched the towel tighter around herself and shifted her weight nervously, “I just don’t have anything to wear?”

Carmilla took a breath and stood up, looking around her bedroom quickly before stepping over to the closet and opening the door, “You can wear whatever. Just hurry up.” With that Carmilla made her
way quickly towards the door, nearly tripping on the laces of the one boot she had yet to tie.

Laura giggled to herself, actually quite proud of the reaction she had gotten from Carmilla. Even though it was probably more out of surprise than anything else. *Its not like Carmilla would be interested in her anyway.* Laura had seen the girls she brought back to the library and definitely wasn't what Laura would consider to be Carmilla’s type.

Borrowing Carmilla’s underwear seemed just a little too personal for their tutor/student relationship so Laura just opted to put back on the ones she had on the day before. She grabbed a pair of jeans that looked like they would fit and pulled them on. They were a little long, but rolling up the bottoms fixed that problem. Then she grabbed a t-shirt that was hanging up and pulled it over her head. She toweled off her hair and ran her fingers through it to comb it out a bit before hanging up the towel and leaving the bedroom.

The bedroom had seemed to fit Carmilla. It was pretty empty, barely any furniture at all. A night stand next to the bed, a small dresser pressed up against the wall next to the closet, and that was it. Everything was black, down to the sheets on her bed. The maroon comforter had felt like heaven, Laura thought, and was actually the only thing in the room that wasn't black. As she made her way down the short hallway she wondered if the rest of the apartment would look the same.

The first thing Laura noticed was how much nicer Carmilla’s apartment was compared to her own. *Messier,* but nicer. And Laura could only attribute that to the fact that she had Perry keeping their apartment tidy all the time. There was a second bathroom at the end of the hall, right before you walked out into a large living room and kitchen area. There was a small island counter separating the two areas, but otherwise it was just one giant room.

Carmilla was bent over with her head in the refrigerator when Laura walked in. Deciding not to bother her, she started looking around.

She turned to look at the living room area and the first thing she noticed was the books. They were everywhere. There was a big book shelf that covered part the wall immediately to her left, and it was packed with books of all kinds. Books on psychology, philosophy, anatomy, art, photography. Not only that but dozens of novels and poetry books as well. Laura let her fingers brush along the spines of the books as she scanned the shelves.

There were prints hung on the walls. Some black and white, some extremely colorful. All incredibly beautiful. There was a lot of natural light coming into the room from the large window with its curtains drawn back.

In the center of the room was an old wooden coffee table covered in ring lines from drinks that had been placed on top of it. There were scratches littered across it, some seemed intentional, some not. It too, had books set on top of it. A couple open and laid out as if to hold Carmilla's place. Which, if that was the case, meant Carmilla was currently reading at least 5 different books.

On the other side of the coffee table was a large couch. There was a blanket and pillow laid out messily on it. Laura guessed from Carmilla sleeping there since she had accidentally stolen her bed.

For a second she wondered why Carmilla hadn't just dropped her on the couch and slept in her own bed. It's probably what anyone else would have done.

The apartment wasn't dirty- just lived in. Which seemed to fit Carmilla too. Laura thought that she had always seemed like a hurricane that swept in and left her mark before disappearing and leaving a lasting impression. It seemed fitting that her own space would reflect that.
She glanced around and noticed there wasn't a tv. She did see an old record player though and slowly made her way over to it. It was sitting on top of some shelves that were full of old records.

Laura glanced over to the kitchen where Carmilla was either ignoring her or hadn't notice her come in yet. Curiosity getting the best of her, Laura fiddled with the player till the record already set up started to spin, then she lowered the arm onto it, hoping that was how to make it work.

There was a screeching sound and Laura quickly picked up the arm, hoping she hadn't ruined the record.

"Curiosity killed the cat, you know."

Laura turned around quickly to Carmilla's eyes locked on her. She didn't look angry, but an eyebrow was raised as she watched Laura for a second before shoving something in her bag and grabbing her keys off the counter.

"If you're done snooping?" She looked at Laura expectantly and gestured to the door.

“I wasn't snooping.” Laura defended herself, slightly embarrassed that she was, actually, very much so snooping. “And curiosity may have killed the cat, but its how reporters get the best stories.”

Laura gave Carmilla a smile, happy with her clever response as she walked out the door with Carmilla following behind her. Carmilla locked the door and started down the hallway without saying a word.

"So where are we going?" Laura asked as they walked out of the apartment building and towards Carmilla's car.

"You don't get to ask questions." Carmilla unlocked her car and put her bag in the back seat before climbing in.

Laura frowned but decided to go along with Carmilla's made up rule for their outing. She had pretty much crashed whatever plans Carmilla had and was just happy she didn't have to go home and face reality yet.

There was a different kind of familiarity as they started their drive. Laura had gotten used to Carmilla's study habits by now. Her always kicking her feet up on the table, chair or couch around them. Her constant tapping of her pencil or shaking of her leg. The way she swirled her hair around her finger when she was lost in thought. Her tendency to steal her gummy bears and pick through them to get the white and green ones. What was up with that anyway?

Driving in the car together was new, but it didn't feel that way. Laura immediately relaxed into the passenger seat, leaning her head on the window, not bothered by the silence between them. It was comfortable. Which until last night, was not a word she would have used to describe her time with Carmilla.

Carmilla drummed her thumb on the steering wheel as she made her way further from campus. Laura watched out the window, trying to figure out where they were going, trying to ignore the headache still very much present, and the thought of having to go home eventually to face reality.

Carmilla glanced over at Laura then back to the road. They hadn't said anything the entire car ride so far. It was probably her own fault for telling Laura not to ask questions but she knew if she answered the first one it would only lead to more.

She started to tap her thumb on the steering wheel nervously. So far she was doing a terrible job of
keeping Laura at a distance like she had wanted to. It's like the realization that she actually liked Laura made it that much harder not to like her.

—

“This is what you had to do today?” Laura sat up and looked out the window, "Chinese food?"

Carmilla put the car in park and undid her seatbelt. "Just picking something up for Joey. Stay here.” She left the car running as she hopped out of the car and walked inside.

Laura sat there patiently for all of 5 seconds before she started to get antsy. She looked back up at the sign and chuckled, Good Fortune. Clever. She let out a sigh and shifted in her seat. She looked around the car before her eyes landed on the radio. Reaching forward she turned it on and immediately the speakers started blaring music louder than she was ready for. Scrambling to find the control for the volume, Laura started to hit buttons, changing stations until she finally found the one to turn down the volume.

Once the volume was at a level that wouldn't destroy her eardrums, she started flipping through stations. She landed on a familiar song and sat back in her seat, tapping her hand on her thigh to the beat. Laura was just about to get out of the car and go after Carmilla, sure she had been waiting forever (it had been maybe 5 minutes), when Carmilla came walking out of Good Fortune.

A little old lady was following her out chatting quickly with Carmilla just nodding her head and smiling. Actually smiling.

Laura kept being surprised by the smallest things when I came to Carmilla. She would be sure she had her figured out then she would do or say something that would just leave Laura more curious.

Laura tried to think of another time she saw Carmilla smile. She could count on one hand how many times that had happened, and most of the time it was because Carmilla was making fun of someone.

Carmilla waved at the woman standing at the door with an apron on and made her way back to the drivers side of the car. She climbed in, setting a plastic bag in her lap and pulled something out of it.

"That's why we stopped?” Laura asked a little surprised.

Carmilla took a bite and shrugged, "I like egg rolls." She handed the bag to Laura and shifted the car to drive. "And I needed to grab something for Joey."

"Joey?” Laura looked down at the bag now in her lap and her stomach immediately grumbled.

"Plus," Carmilla continued without looking over, "its great hangover food."

Laura twisted her lips in consideration, she was hungry. And it did smell good. She reached in the bag and grabbed an egg roll and took a bite, humming happily as she chewed.

“What the hell are we listening to?” Carmilla glanced over to Laura with a face that looked like she was being tortured as the song on the radio changed to another typical top 40 pop sound.

Laura just smiled shyly around the egg roll still in her mouth while Carmilla rolled her eyes and shook her head. She didn't miss the fact that Carmilla didn't move to change the station, though. She took that as a small victory and decided it meant that Carmilla didn't totally hate her like she pretended to.

—
“Alright, I know you said no questions but we’ve been driving for 20 minutes and you just pulled off onto a dirt road that looks like it came straight out of a horror movie.” Laura leaned forward, scanning out the windows trying to figure out where exactly they were.

Carmilla slowed the car down as they made their way down the windy dirt path. They approached a large fence with barbed wire strung along the top with a huge solid metal gate right in front of them. She pulled off to the side and honked the horn a couple times as she turned off the car and climbed out.

Laura didn't move. She watched as Carmilla went to the back seat to grab her bag and slung it over her shoulder before approaching the giant gate like she was about to walk into a grocery store. It was like Carmilla didn't notice the dozens of signs saying ‘no trespassing’, ‘do not enter’, ‘private property’, ‘electric fence’…

“ELECTRIC FENCE!” Laura yelled, to herself mostly, from the car, pointing after Carmilla.

Once she got to the gate Carmilla turned around and raised her eyebrows at Laura who was still sitting in the passenger seat with a worried expression, “You coming, cupcake?”

Laura huffed as she looked around. If she didn't follow Carmilla she would be sitting in the car in the middle of nowhere for who knows how long. Why was it every time she went anywhere with this girl she ended up in these kinds of situations?

“Bring the bag with you.” Carmilla called out to her and turned back to the heavy gate, gripping the edge and pulling on it to open it up a crack and stepping through.

“Seriously?” Laura looked around worriedly, “Unbelievable.” She muttered to herself as she climbed out of the car, the bag of Chinese food in her hands and stomped towards the barely open gate.

She squeezed inside and found Carmilla waiting for her just on the other side, ready to close the gate behind them. Once through the gate she handed the bag of food to Carmilla and crossed her arms angrily over her chest.

Laura looked around and just got more confused by what was in front of her. The place was littered in junk. Old cars, furniture, garbage, everything. They were in a junk yard. A big one by the looks of it.

“You brought a friend this time.” A burly voice came from behind Laura and she spun around quickly, moving slightly behind Carmilla as if she was trying to hide.

Standing in front of her was a very tall, very hairy man wearing a pair of denim overalls, heavy work boots, and a worn trucker hat. He was chewing on a toothpick, one hand in his pocket, the other running through his beard as he looked Laura up and down.

“Hey Pete.” Carmilla nodded towards the man, reaching into the bag Laura had just handed her.

He nodded back, “Everything’s up in the back for you.” He smiled a toothy grin at Laura before giving her a wink and walking away.

“Ok really, are you planning on killing me and this is just where you brought me to dispose of my body?” Laura asked in a harsh whisper, turning back around to face Carmilla. “Because if I did something to offend you, I’m really sorry but I don’t think it was bad enough to call for murder.”

Carmilla looked up at Laura and chuckled at the wide eyes and serious expression looking back at her. “Relax, cupcake. That’s Pete.” She nodded towards the man walking away towards a motor
home parked between two piles of random junk as she pulled the container from the bag.

“I thought we were meeting a Joey?” Laura asked. This whole day was confusing and the lingering hangover was not helping her figure it out, at all.

“We are.” Carmilla smiled happily before bringing two fingers to her mouth and letting out a loud whistle.

Laura’s eyebrows came together as she watched Carmilla scan the junk yard until she saw it. Barreling around the corner at an alarming speed was the biggest German Shepard she had ever seen in her life. His eyes were wide, teeth showing as he ran at an alarming speed right towards them.

Laura grabbed Carmilla’s arm, eyes wide, and started pulling her back towards the gate, “Carm! Come on!”

Carmilla gave Laura an amused look before pulling her arm free and handing her the container in her hand. She took a few steps forward and crouched down just as the giant dog plowed into her, knocking Carmilla on her back with a loud “oof!”

“Oh my gosh! What do I do?!” Laura yelled jumping back quickly, frantically looking around for Pete or anyone to help. Then she heard Carmilla laugh and dropped her attention to the girl on the ground.

“This is Joey.” Carmilla smiled as she sat up and pushed the dog off of her. She reached up with both hands and scratched behind the dogs ears as its tail wagged excitedly and its tongue lapped at Carmilla’s face. Carmilla shoved the dog away playfully and stood up. She brushed off her pants, glancing over a Laura who was glaring at her.

“I thought we were going to die!” Laura swatted Carmilla’s arm, her glare switching to a smile as she held back the laugh at how terrified she had been.

“He’s harmless.” Carmilla smirked and nodded to the container in Laura’s hand, “And once you give him that, he will be your best friend.”

Laura looked down hesitantly to the German Shepard sitting at Carmilla’s feet, tail wagging and tongue hanging lazily out of its mouth. She opened the container and gave Carmilla a look of disbelief, “This is broccoli.”

“I know.” Carmilla deadpanned.

And it seemed Joey knew as well, and was super excited about it. As soon as she had opened the container, Joey was pawing at the ground, tongue hanging from his mouth as he bounced excitedly in front of the pair of girls.

Laura slowly put the broccoli down on the ground and almost got knocked over by the dog pouncing on it happily.

“See, harmless.” Carmilla shrugged and started walking away into the maze of junk in front of them.

“A dog that likes broccoli.” Laura shook her head and sped up to walk next to Carmilla, “Who knew?”

“You want me to what?” Laura asked, looking at the pile of stuff next to her.
“Break it. Its not that hard of a concept, cutie.” Carmilla lowered her camera and shifted her weight, letting out a sigh.

The German Shepard sitting at her feet tilted his head to the side, like even he understood what Carmilla wanted.

“I still don’t get it.” Laura shrugged, looking to the pile of bottles, plates, and assortment of other glass object next to her.

Carmilla walked over and picked up a plain looking plate, lifted it above her head and threw it down onto the ground in front of her. Laura hopped back as the pieces shattered across the ground. Joey let out a bark and stood up on all fours, like he was ready to pounce.

“Get it?” Carmilla asked, walking back over to the dog and telling him to sit.

“I know how to break things, Carmilla.” Laura replied annoyed. “I just don’t get why you want me to do it.” She put her hands on her hips, giving Carmilla as much attitude as she could muster. If Carmilla was going to be sarcastic and snarky all day, she was going to do the same right back.

Carmilla dropped a hand down to scratch behind Joey’s ears, which the dog seemed more than happy about, as she let out another sigh. “Because the one thing my pictures seem to lack, according to my professor, is emotion.” Carmilla gripped her camera with both hands, lifting it slightly like she was getting ready to snap a photo. “And you seem to be bursting at the seams with it. So I’m using you. Smash the glass.”

Laura took a deep breath and stepped up to the pile of stuff and picked up a empty bottle. She lifted it above her head and looked over to Carmilla, then Joey, before dropping it on the ground.

The bottle bounced a few times before rolling over towards the dark haired girl and dog. Joey stepped forward sniffing at the bottle before popping his head up and panting in Laura's direction.

"That’s all you got?” Carmilla raised an eyebrow and lowered her camera."Come on. Naive, provincial girl like you. Entirely too tightly wound. There has to be more in you than that, just waiting to come out."

Laura made eye contact with Carmilla and something in her voice started to make her chest burn. Carmilla was right. There was more to her than what people gave her credit for. She was more than tiny, sweet Laura Hollis. The girl that always needed protecting.

"Or maybe I was wrong about you.” Carmilla's voice was egging her on, "maybe I should go find the giant red head to do it for you."

That's what did it. Laura glared at Carmilla, remembering the night before, Danny getting after her for drinking. The constant hovering and parenting. The handful of texts from Danny and even Perry, acting like her parents anytime Laura stayed out late.

She grabbed another bottle from the pile and slammed it against the ground, glass shattering everywhere. Joey jumped back, hiding behind Carmilla's legs obviously aware of the shift in energy.

Laura's glare slowly turned to a smile and she lifted a hand to cover her mouth as she let out a giggle and looked back to Carmilla, "That actually felt really great."

"I knew you had it in you." Carmilla smirked and nodded towards the pile, encouraging Laura to keep going.
Laura grabbed another bottle and hurled it towards an old junked car not too far away from them and watched the glass shatter as it crashed into it.

*Danny cutting her pancakes, her dads daily texts to check up on her, Danny always showing up to walk her home, Perry mothering her, people never taking her seriously…*

Carmilla watched her throw one thing after another, enthralled at the tiny girl and the amount of power behind every new throw. She was intrigued, watching as the more glass Laura smashed, the more focused she was. At first she looked so serious, but the more glass she shattered, the bigger her smile got. It was the opposite of what Carmilla was expecting.

Maybe she *had* been wrong about Laura. Sure it had only been a few weeks since the girl had crashed herself into Carmilla’s life- literally. At first it was the last thing Carmilla wanted, but now, it felt like it had been that way for a while. And she didn't mind it. She lifted her camera and waited until Laura had something hoisted above her head with both hands, she was getting ready to throw it to the ground—

*click*

The glass exploded on the concrete and pieces flew across the ground. There was a mixture of colors from beer bottles, dinner plates, vases, and anything else glass that Pete had gathered for Carmilla.

She was glad for the spot he had decided to allow this little experiment to take place. It was at the back of the junk yard and up on top of a small hill. It was where most of the old cars had been stacked, so there wasn't much trash surrounding them. Just large pieces of *junk*. The rusted bodies and car parts littered about gave it a deserted feeling, and Carmilla couldn't wait to see how it translated in her pictures.

Carmilla waited until Laura had gone through most of the glass piled to the side before interrupting, “Alright tiny ball of rage.” Carmilla called out, taking a step towards the brunette and the mess of glass around her.

Laura looked up, a little out of breath from how into breaking the glass she had gotten. It was actually really relaxing. It started with her literally crushing her frustrations, but turned into actually being fun to just get to smash things without having to worry about it.

Carmilla climbed up on the hood of one of the old cars, getting above the collection of glass shards and lifted her camera.

*click*

The afternoon sun mixed with the different colors of glass created a kaleidoscope of color and light. They were like stars that had fallen to the ground. Shining and jagged. A chaotic collection of shimmering glass littered around them.

*click*

Laura stepped back and out of the way, glass crunching under her feet, while she watched Carmilla’s face shift from one of amusement to concentration. Carmilla scanned the ground, considering angles and lighting. It was interesting for Laura to watch. The only other time she had seen Carmilla take pictures was the night before in the park. And it was dark, and she was drunk. So seeing how serious Carmilla was, was different than her usual lack of interest or apathy towards anything and everything.

Laura walked over to the car Carmilla was standing on and climbed up slowly, standing behind
Carmilla, trying to see what it was that the dark haired girl was seeing. Carmilla had crouched down and adjusted the lens on her camera before snapping another picture. Laura bent over, trying to get the same angle as Carmilla had.

“I can feel you breathing on my neck.” Carmilla said flatly, before lowering her camera and turning her head towards Laura.

She hadn’t realized just how close Laura actually was to her until her head was turned and they were mere inches away from each other. Her heart thudded in her chest as she went from annoyed to actually nervous. She was sure it was written all over her face and was grateful that Laura’s attention seemed to still be locked on the ground in front of them.

“I’m just trying to see what you see.” Laura said, tilting her head slightly and narrowing her eyes. “It just looks like broken glass to me.” She stood up and shrugged before hopping down off the car.

Joey got up from his spot in the shade of the car and lazily walked over to Laura, nudging her in the leg with his head. She smiled and reached down to pat his side, brushing her hand along his fur gently.

“Plus, I don’t get what you said before.” Laura added, crouching down to be eye level with Joey. “I liked your photos.”

Carmilla scoffed and watched Laura make faces at Joey as she scratched behind his ears, who in turn tried to lick her face.

“Well forgive me if I ignore your compliment and listen to my professor instead.” Carmilla sat down, letting one foot hang off the edge of the car body, the other leg bent so she could rest her arm on her knee.

“Besides, how does broken glass show emotion?” Laura turned to look up at Carmilla, “It’s just glass.”

Carmilla nodded slightly before hopping off the car, “It’s all about perspective, cupcake.” She let her camera hang on the strap around her neck, shoving her hands in her pockets and started walking away.

Laura stood up and started following after her, Joey at her heels. “Well, can I see?”

“She what?” Carmilla kicked at a bottle cap on the ground as she made her way further into the junk yard.

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“She what?” Carmilla kicked at a bottle cap on the ground as she made her way further into the junk yard.

“The pictures. What else?” Laura stepped up onto an old tool box and hopped off.

The intensity and focus that had been present just a minute before had easily melted away. Joey ran around in front of the two girls, sniffing through piles of things, disappearing, then coming back to make sure his companions were close behind. Carmilla for the moment wasn’t looking for her next shot or worried about angles or things to take pictures of. She was just kicking at random items on the ground, enjoying the cool afternoon and relaxed walk through the junk yard.

Laura was enjoying herself much more than she thought when they had first arrived. Not only had she just smashed her way through a pile of things, but she felt like she was in a completely different world. Whether it was getting her frustrations out through destroying things or the calming energy that seemed to follow, she was completely relaxed and content to watch Joey run around chasing after things and see what random treasures she could find in this place.
"Sure." Carmilla turned and watched Laura try to kick a discarded bucket only to get her food stuck inside of it. She chuckled before whistling for Joey, who was chasing after a bird in front of them.

Joey ran over excitedly and hopped up, his front paws nearly making it to Carmilla's shoulders before she shoved him off and grabbed something from the ground, throwing it across the yard for him to chase.

Laura stumbled, her foot in the bucket for a few steps before hopping on her free foot and trying to shake free of the bucket.

"Well?" She hopped in place and pulled at the item stubbornly hanging onto her foot. Once it was off her foot she tossed it over to the top of a pile and kept walking towards Carmilla.

"Well what?" Carmilla clapped her hands together as Joey came running back with an old shoe in his mouth. She pulled the shoe free and threw it across the yard again before making a face of disgust and wiping her hand on her pants.

"Well can I see?" Laura looked at her expectantly while they both stood there, Carmilla waiting for Joey to return and Laura waiting to see the pictures.

Carmilla turned to her and shifted the camera around her neck, “I have to develop them first.”

"What?" Laura was clearly confused. "They aren't digital?"

"No. It's film." Carmilla raised an eyebrow and kept her eyes locked on Laura.

Laura looked like she was thinking about it for a second. Joey running back excitedly pulled her attention as the dog ran up to her, "I didn't know that was a thing still."

Carmilla watched Laura immediately give Joey the attention he was begging for. Brushing her hand up and down his fur before teasing him with the old shoe- pretending to throw it then giggling when the dog realized she hadn't.

Laura looked up and caught Carmilla smiling at her and felt slightly embarrassed at the attention.

Carmilla must have noticed because she looked away quickly, clearing her throat, "I like it better." She started walking over to an emptier space in the junk yard. "I find it.. Romantic."

Laura followed slowly with Joey making circles around her feet. "Romantic?" She asked, fumbling over the large dog.

For such a big dog, he sure did act a lot like a puppy.

Carmilla whistled and immediately Joey was at her side, sitting at her instruction. She slid her bag off her shoulder and tossed it up onto the hood of a torn up car.

It looked like an old Cadillac that had been stripped for parts. The steering wheel had been torn out, along with the font seats and dash. The doors, tires, and roof were all missing. The only thing that seemed to go untouched was the back seat, still sitting snugly in the frame.

"Mmhm." Carmilla hummed, stepping up inside the old car. "Something about being in the dark room and watching your picture appear. The chemical solution kissing the paper to ease your photo to show itself. Not being able to see the real image until it's in your hands." She glanced at Laura with an unreadable expression before grabbing her bag and sitting down on the worn back seat of the disassembled car. "Romantic."
"Huh." Laura replied, honestly not knowing what else to say. Carmilla's description did make it sound kind of special.

Carmilla was going through her bag while she spoke, just saying out loud what she really felt about photography. It took her to a different world. Imagining the photo as she took it. The excitement waiting for it to come to life as she developed it. She loved the process. "Everything is instant these days. I find satisfaction in having to work for it. Earn it. That's how you know it's special."

Laura had walked over and was leaning on the frame of the car watching Carmilla. This was another one of those moments that completely surprised her. She could tell Carmilla was being completely honest and unguarded for once and Laura found her absolutely captivating.

Carmilla noticed the silence and looked up from her bag to Laura and noticed how intently she was listening. Realizing just how much she was sharing surprised her and immediately she felt the need to brush it off as some sort of joke.

"Just like women." Carmilla added with a smirk, immediately building up the walls she had momentarily let down.

Laura rolled her eyes, knowing full well what Carmilla was trying to do. "You feel that way about your women?" She climbed up into the car and dropped down on the other end of the seat, pulling one leg up and turning to face Carmilla.

“Sure.” Carmilla’s smirk still present, she pulled out a sandwich from her bag and tossed it into Laura’s lap before pulling out one for herself. “Digital is fast. You don't appreciate it. Women are the same way. If she's special, she'll make you work for it. And you'll want to.”

Laura opened up the bag the sandwich was in and pulled it out and took a bite. She was hungrier than she realized. After all that semi-exercise of smashing things, she had worked up an appetite. And one egg roll over an hour ago was definitely not enough to keep her happy.

Carmilla did the same, biting into her peanut butter and jelly, and relaxing back into the old car seat.

"You don't seem like the type to want to work for it." Laura mumbled around her mouth full of food.

Carmilla smirked and wiped some jelly off her lip with her thumb, "That's just because I don't usually have to."

Laura rolled her eyes and dropped her hands holding the sandwich to her lap, "Wow. Full of yourself much?"

Carmilla laughed and Laura found herself smiling at her. Carmilla didn't laugh very often, at least not a real, loud, free laugh. Laura couldn't help but think it was kind of magical when she did.

“I didn't mean it like that.” Carmilla smiled and licked some peanut butter off the edge of the bread.

“No?” Laura looked at her skeptically before taking another bite.

Carmilla shook her head and shrugged, “I guess I just haven't found anyone worth making an effort for. Plus, thats not what people want from me anyway.”

Her voice was light, like she didn't care what people wanted from her. Like she was okay with what people saw and being nothing more than that. But something in her eyes gave her away. Laura saw it and it made her think of the drawing she had seen and how beautifully broken the girl looking at her was.
“Can I ask you something?” The words were out of Laura’s mouth before she could really think about it, but once it was said she figured it wouldn't hurt to at least ask.

“Hmm?” Carmilla hummed, taking another bite.

Laura watched Carmilla carefully. The dark haired girl was avoiding eye contact and seemed far too interested in her sandwich for it to be anything other than her way of protecting herself from being completely vulnerable. The air between them was already much more light than usual, and although Carmilla was trying to play the unaffected and aloof card, Laura could see the apprehension behind the facade.

“I just noticed a theme. With your pictures I mean.” Laura tried to sound casual but she was never one to be subtle. “The broken fence, the broken glass, even your self portrait.”

Carmilla's eyes shot up nervously at the mention of the self portrait. She should have known Laura had seen it. She had talked to her that night at the midterm presentation when she had found her looking at her photograph. It had never occurred to her that Laura would have seen her drawing as well.

“So what’s the question, cupcake?” Carmilla voice was low and unsettlingly steady.

Laura almost regretted bringing it up. Whatever easiness had been between them was slowly slipping away, she could tell by Carmilla’s voice. She was pushing the line and wasn’t sure how much more she could say before Carmilla shut down completely.

“I guess there wasn’t a specific question.” Laura was weighing the options of settling her curiosity or saving whatever bonding moment this was between her and Carmilla. “Just curiosity if there was a reason for it, I guess.” Laura turned her attention to her sandwich, hoping if she played it off like she wasn’t as interested Carmilla may open up more.

Carmilla let out a quick whistle and Joeys head popped up from the ground to look at her. A nod from the girl and he was on his feet, jumping up into the car and making himself comfortable in the space between the girls, dropping his head into Carmilla’s lap. Carmilla brushed along the fur on Joeys back, watching her hand leave trails in the soft hair as she tried to form some sort of answer.

She didn't really have one. Not to say out loud, anyway.

“Do you really see yourself that way?” Laura voice was barely a whisper as it broke through Carmilla’s thoughts.

Dark eyes met soft brown ones as Laura watched her with much more concern than what Carmilla was used to. The gentle look and hint of nervousness on Laura’s face made it impossible to ignore Laura’s question or respond with sarcasm. Something in her eyes captivated Carmilla and all she could do was respond with her own whisper.

“What way?” Carmilla’s hand stilled on Joey’s back as she looked at the brunette. There was a heaviness in her chest that she couldn't explain and as much as she wanted to look away, she couldn’t.

“Broken?” Laura's voice was laced with sadness. She hoped Carmilla thought more of herself than that. She was extremely talented, and so smart, and she knew there was more to her than what she appeared to be. Even though she had only gotten small glimpse of it, she knew it was there. And it broke her heart to think Carmilla believed that about herself. That she was broken. Or only worth what other people saw her to be.

“Maybe.” Carmilla breathed out and she saw the sadness in Laura’s eyes grow, matching her own
that weighed heavily on her heart.

Joey nudged his nose into Carmilla leg, informing her that her hand was still not moving. Carmilla looked down, watching her hand move through soft fur once more.
Laura gave Carmilla a small smile as she reached over to nudge her arm to get her attention, “Even a stopped clock is right twice a day.”

Carmilla smiled slightly at the thought. It was simple, and maybe silly, but it was true. And exactly the type of thing Laura would say.

Laura sat quietly just watching the dark haired girl get lost in thought. She wondered if Carmilla knew she was twirling her hair around her finger or if that was something she did out of habit. When she looked up at her again Laura felt herself blush with the intensity in Carmilla's eyes.

"Hey Carm?" Laura bowed her head slightly, looking at the other girl through her eyelashes.

"Hmm?" Carmilla hummed lowly.

Laura wanted to tell her she wasn't broken. That she was beautiful. But truthfully, as much as she suddenly felt like being around Carmilla was a new feeling of comfort, she didn't know the girl all that well. She had no idea what made Carmilla think that about herself. Why she was so drawn to things that had been hurt, drawn to the feeling of sadness, or why she had built her walls so well that unlike her pictures, they seemed like they could never be broken. Laura wasn't even sure why she wanted to reassure Carmilla in the first place. Up until last night, they barely tolerated each other. Why was it suddenly feeling different?

"Thanks." Laura looked down to her lap and shrugged one of her shoulders, "For letting me tag along today. And last night."

It wasn't what she wanted to say, but they were the only words that would form. The rest would have to wait. Wait until she knew the beauty she saw behind the broken girl enough to tell her why she was still worth so much more than what she thought.

"I thought you didn't remember last night." Carmilla smirked.

Laura gave her an embarrassed smile, "Yeah, about that. Pieces have been slowly and embarrassingly coming back to me."

Carmilla chuckled and ate the last piece of her sandwich before brushing her hands together. "Don't mention it."

Carmilla let out a deep breath before ruffling the fur on top of Joeys head and gently moving his head off her lap. "I'm gonna.." She picked up her camera and twisted it in her hand, hoping that was enough explanation as she stood and hopped out of the car.

This moment was getting much too personal for her liking. And even If she did like Laura, she wasn't ready to be that open with her. Somehow the girl managed to pull it out of her effortlessly, something that kept surprising Carmilla.

Laura watched Carmilla walk away until a quiet whine came from the dog still curled on the seat next to her. She looked down at Joey and shrugged in his direction, "I don't understand her either, buddy." She scratched behind his ears and he happily moved so his head was resting on Laura's lap. "It's kind of fun to try though, isn't it?"

Laura had never questioned what they were before. Carmilla was her tutor. She hadn't even
considered them friends. But this felt like something friends would do. This feeling of uncertainty was strange and quite frankly, Laura didn't know how she felt about it. She had never thought about it before, but maybe being friends with Carmilla wouldn't be so awful.

They had spent a good portion of the afternoon walking around the junk yard, smashing things, taking pictures, watching Joey run around excitedly. There were a few small conversations, nothing too heavy, and none lasting all that long. Carmilla would notice Laura let out a long sigh every once in a while at the sound of her phone going off, but they both seemed content to stay in their own head space. Carmilla taking her pictures and Laura happy to avoid reality for a while.

After finally stopping to eat the sandwiches Carmilla had made while Laura had showered that day, it felt nice to just sit and enjoy Laura’s company. Until that is, Laura had decided to dissect Carmilla and ultimately make her think of things she didn't really want to.

She knew why she was drawn to things that were broken. Its because she felt a connection to them. Broken. Its how she saw herself. She could pinpoint the exact moment it had happened, too. When just like the glass Laura had smashed across the concrete, her heart had shattered, breaking her soul in a way that made her feel like she would never be truly complete again.

But it was too much. Too much to share with a girl she barely knew. Sitting next to Laura, looking into her soft brown eyes made her want to tell her everything. And that terrified Carmilla. She didn't know what it was about Laura that made her feel that way, but the more time she spent around her, the more she wanted to open up. It was a foreign feeling, one that she wanted desperately to avoid.

So Carmilla left her there. Her heart pulling at her with every step she took away from the broken car and pieces of herself that she had unknowingly given to Laura already.

The shadows from the junk piled around her danced in the afternoon light. Bleeding across broken porcelain, metal and lumber strewn around her. She had walked alone for a while now, no sign of Joey or Laura trying to find her and Carmilla wasn't sure if she was glad or sad because of it. So she made her way back to where she had left Laura, snapping photos as she went.

Laura was still sitting in the junked car. Her arms were spread across the back of the seat, her head tilted back as the afternoon sun hit her face. Her eyes were closed and her smile was so warm it outshone the sun. Joeys head rested peacefully in her lap, his tail swinging slowly over the edge of the seat.

It took Carmilla’s breath away, how something so beautiful could look so at peace in a place like this. Surrounded by broken dreams and promises. Objects torn apart and forgotten, Laura shone brighter than the sun and made everything around her more beautiful.

It was the last shot on her roll of film, and Carmilla couldn't have imagined a better way to spend it. As she lowered her camera and took in the scene once more she realized she wasn't going to be able
to get rid of the crush she had developed.

There was no way to avoid it, and Carmilla wasn't even sure she wanted to. There was something about her that drew Carmilla in. That made her fingers tingle like they did before she took a photo she knew was going to come out more beautiful than she imagined.

Even if nothing came of it, maybe it wouldn't be a terrible thing— to get to admire her from afar.

“I was beginning to wonder if you had left us.” Laura smiled lightly from her place in the car. The sound of Carmilla boots hitting the ground had pulled her from her quiet thoughts.

Carmilla gave her a half smile as she approached. She let out a quick whistle and Joey lifted his head to look at her before dropping his head back down into Laura’s lap with a huff.

Carmilla smile turned to a glare as she eyed the dog, “Traitor.”

Joey let out another huff before shoving his body against Laura’s and snuggling against her further. Laura let out a laugh as the large dog quickly invaded her space and nearly knocked her over.

Laura’s phone chimed, something it had been ding quite a bit that day, and Laura frowned at the sound. Carmilla hadn’t been keeping count, but it had be over a dozen texts that Laura had ignored since they had left her apartment earlier that afternoon.

“Allright cupcake, sounds like the world needs you back.” She whistled again, this time louder and Joey sat up quickly, ears perked and eyes at attention. All it took was a nod from Carmilla and he was hopping over Laura and onto the ground to follow after her.

Laura groaned quietly as she stood up and followed the pair back through the maze she had been using as her escape from the world. She pulled her phone out and check who the newest alert was from.

*Laf.* They had finally gotten Danny to leave with the promise that they would have Laura call her as soon as she got home.

Laura knew it was unfair to ignore everyone all day long but was grateful Laf seemed to realize it was something she needed and had been playing referee with Perry and Danny all afternoon. She was sure Laf had gotten them to text less than they wanted and was probably going to owe them something for getting Danny to leave the apartment before she went back home. She would have to remember to do something to thank them.

—

Carmilla pulled the car up to the apartment building and put the car in park. She looked out the window before glancing back at Laura in the passenger seat and raising an eyebrow at her obvious lack of movement.

“You cant hide forever, cupcake.”

Laura sighed, “Thank again. Sorry if I got in the way today—“

“Not at all.” Carmilla cut her off. She cleared her throat before putting the car back in drive.

Laura took that as her sign that Carmilla wasn't going to let her hide in her car any longer and unbuckled her seatbelt and stepped out of the car. “See you Tuesday?”
Laura knew it wasn't a question she really had to ask. It was their usual tutor day, and with her midterm being this week, it would be the only time they met up after her test. Even though the words were boring and predictable and she knew what the answer would be, the feeling behind it was more hopeful. Like it maybe something had changed and it wouldn't be because Carmilla had to but maybe because she would want to.

“Tuesday.” Carmilla nodded and Laura shut the door and made her way towards the apartment building.

Carmilla waited until she had walked inside before letting out a deep breath and pulling away from the curb. She turned on the radio, still on the station Laura had landed on earlier and smiled to herself. Yeah, she had a crush on Laura Hollis. But maybe it wouldn't be such a bad thing. Even a stopped clock is right twice a day.

—

“Where on earth have you been?!” Perry’s shrill voice hit Laura’s ears as soon as she had opened the door.

“Woah, Perr. Give her a minute to like, get inside.” Laf looked torn between defending Laura and supporting Perry in asking Laura were the hell she had been.

Laura took a deep breath trying to remind herself it was only because they cared as she walked over to the fridge to grab bottle of water.

“Lafontaine, she was out all night doing who knows what with who knows who and I just dont think its too much to ask for a text or phone call or carrier pigeon to let us know she's ok.” Perry was whispering, loudly, while Laf used her into the living room and onto the couch.

“So what happened to, 'I may be home early to join you’ from last night?” Laf asked carefully.

Laura knew this wasn't a conversation they were going to let go— especially after her disappearing act and Danny’s attempt at camping out in their living room.

“I just needed some space. To clear my head.” Laura replied casually before taking a sip of water.

“Taking some space means going for a small walk, not disappearing for 24 hours!” Perry was doing a poor job at holding it together and usually Laura would have found it entertaining, but not this time.

Laf sat down next to Perry on the couch and set their hand on her knee in an attempt to calm her down. “We were just worried.”

Laura sighed, all it took was Laf’s sincerity and worried expression to break through the frustration she had been feeling and realize she could have handled the situation better. She walked over to the large chair and climbed into it, crossing her legs and pulling a pillow over them to rest her elbows on. She launched right into the story of the events of the night— Her breakup with Danny, ditching the party, staying at a friends, then spending the day just bumming around. She conveniently left out the part where the ‘friend’ was her broody and antisocial tutor Carmilla, and that ‘bumming around’ meant breaking piles of glass and taking sledge hammers to old toilets and porcelain bathtubs in a junk yard. She was talking to Perry after all and she didn't want her to have a stroke or lecture her about safety goggles and who knows what else.

They both seemed sympathetic if not completely understanding of how Laura handled the situation. Laf seemed more than pleased with the fact that Laura had broken up with Danny, and Perry was
quick to chastise them for their obvious gleefulness. She left them with an apology and made her way to her bedroom before Perry could ask anything else.

Her phone started to ring as soon as she had dropped down onto her mattress feeling exhausted. She opened it up and saw Danny’s name and immediately felt her stomach tighten. This was the conversation she was dreading the most. Talking to Perry and Laf was easy compared to what was coming.

What was she supposed to say to her? She didn't regret breaking up with her, and didn't want to work through it. She didn't even really want to talk. She had just spent the night at another girls house just hours after breaking Danny’s heart, then spent the entire day with the same girl who she's pretty sure barely tolerates her and simply took pity on her. The same girl Laura’s now realizing may be one of the most interesting people she's met and the reporter in her or maybe even just personal curiosity is making her want to get to know her better. Even though Carmilla clearly couldn’t wait to get rid of her. So thats not complicated.

“Hey Danny.” Laura sighed quietly as she put the phone to her ear.

“Hey, Hollis. Can we talk?”
hey guys, thanks for all the notes and stuff! That’s seriously what keeps this story going :) ya’ll are awesome!

Carmilla was so used to feeling annoyed or disliking pretty much anyone she had to have contact with, that it didn’t take much for her to realize she had somehow developed a crush on Laura. But that didn’t mean she had any idea what to do about it. Or how it happened in the first place.

Laura was the exact opposite of who she usually went for. She was happy and bubbly, always positive, constantly talking, always curious and asking questions, sweet, kind, silly without worrying what other people thought, not afraid to go after what she wanted and…

…maybe that was the point.

Someone had finally started breaking down Carmilla’s walls because for the first time in a long time, she had let someone in her life that was more than just something superficial.

She would blame Professor Shields for that, but Carmilla was afraid she would have to thank him too. Because ever since that tiny ball of sunshine found her way into Carmilla’s life, things had started to change, even before Carmilla realized it.

—

Carmilla stood in the dark room alone that morning. She liked to get there before classes started when she had film to develop. It was easier to develop her own photos without idiots that didn’t know what they were doing bumping around the room with her. She had finished with the chemical mixtures and was cleaning up while her prints were drying.

“This is new.”

“Holy shit!” Carmilla spun around, dropping the container she had just washed on the ground. The plastic box bounced on the ground as Carmilla stumbled into the table in the dark room.

“Holy shit is right.” Maxfield chuckled as she tugged on a photo being held to the line by a clothes pin. She walked over to the dim light offering the light glow in the dark room and held the photo up.

“What are you doing here?” Carmilla asked, picking up the dropped container and setting it on the counter.

“You aren’t the only one that likes to be the alone in the dark room.” Maxfield commented before grabbing another photo and examining it like she had the last one. “These are really great, Carmilla.”

“Really?” Carmilla asked quietly, stepping forward to see what pictures Maxfield was giving praise to. Her eyes went wide when she saw which ones were being held under the light, “Oh, actually, those aren’t—“

“Aren’t what?” Her professor turned to her, holding out the photos for Carmilla to take.
“Aren’t the ones I had planned on using for my final portfolio.” Carmilla took them back before walking over to the line of drying photos. She pulled a couple from the line and walked back over to her professor.

Maxfield took them and looked them over while Carmilla watched her carefully. The room was dark but not dark enough for Carmilla to see that her professor was less impressed with these.

“Remember when I told you to make me feel something?” Maxfield pressed her lips together tightly before looking over at Carmilla, “Whatever is going on with those first photos—that what I was talking about.”

She turned and walked out of the dark room, leaving Camilla speechless. Carmilla looked down at the photos in her hand. They were good. Really good. The color was incredible, the lines sharp, she had been excited to show her professor and what had just happened was no where near what she was expecting. She went back to the line and let her eyes trail along the photos still hanging up before picking up the ones her professor had looked at first.

The difference was obvious. It would have been to anyone, not just someone who knew good photography. Half the photos were ones she had taken on her own. It didn’t matter the subject or the location—the ones she had taken when Laura was with her were better. By far.

At least Carmilla was right about one thing. Laura was the key to putting emotion into her photos. Even without being in the photo herself.

She looked over the ones her professor had liked. They were from the junk yard—glass shards littered the ground. Their bright colors a stark contrast to the rusted cars in the background. The light from the afternoon sun reflected off the glass scattered on the ground, casting reflective light across anything large enough to become a backdrop for its glow. Specks of light and color covered cars, broken doors and old forgotten treasures. They had become the canvas for a new treasure. A painting that shifted with the sun. Giving new life to broken pieces from past lives.

She shuffled through the photos, one by one until she landed on one that had Laura in it. Usually Carmilla liked to keep her photos fairly simple. Letting the scene speak for itself. Not letting people, faces or bodies distract from what else was there. But the photo with Laura in it was stunning.

She kept going and stopped on the photo she had taken of the quiet house at the end of the block. The one with the porch light left on. The first time she had fallen asleep wondering about Laura. Even then, with the girl on her mind, had changed the way her photos turned out.

What was it about her that made that possible? Carmilla pulled photo after photo off the line, examining them then dropping them in a pile to reach for the next one.

Laura’s arms lifted above her head, glass clutched in her hands tightly, the muscles of her arms accentuated by the light of the afternoon. Her face was steady, her eyes determined, her lips pulled down into a slight frown. She was powerful. She pulled your focus, like it was an unwritten rule that she be the center of your attention. The shattered glass at her feet, the chainlink fence twisted and decaying behind her only added to her beauty. A sun amidst the stars.

Carmilla got to the last photo and held it gently in both hands. It was hard to believe she had taken it. She brushed her thumb over the image, like she was somehow trying to let her fingertips feel the softness of the girl within the picture. She let out a deep breathe and dropped the final picture on the top of the pile.

For as much as she was trying to ignore her feelings for Laura, one look at these photos and it was
obvious the way she felt.

The entire drive to the junk yard Carmilla had been arguing with herself about what to do. Maxfield was right, whatever was happening when she took those photos was making her work better. But could Carmilla really take whatever feelings she was starting to have for Laura and just use them for her photos? Or would that just be a bonus of trying to figure out exactly what it was she felt for Laura? Did she even want to let this thing with Laura go on more than it already had?

Joey didn't have the answers for her. He just tilted his head and whined quietly when Carmilla asked for his opinion. Typical. He was never much help in these situations.

Carmilla sat in that ripped up car, Joeys head laying lazily on her lap, with a book in her hand that she was only pretending to read. She couldn't stop thinking about Laura and the whole thing was just confusing. She had been so good at keeping people at a distance. The fact that Laura had seemed to bypass that so effortlessly made Carmilla even more curious about the girl, which only fueled her desire to be around her.

After finishing with her photos that morning Carmilla decided that was enough school for one day. She didn't have her own midterms until later in the week and didn't feel the need to study anyway.

She knew Laura was taking her midterm that afternoon, but maybe she could spend some time with her once she was finished. Would that be too obvious? They already had plans to study on Tuesday, surely she could wait one more day.

Joey let out a yawn before standing up and stretching his front legs out and hopping down from the seat. Carmilla watched him, shutting her book and bringing her foot up onto the seat so she could rest her chin on her knee. She knew it was pointless to try to pretend she wasn't thinking about Laura. Ever since she had seen her pictures come to life in that dark room, she knew it was useless.

Laura tapped her pencil furiously on the edge of the desk while she chewed nervously on the nail of her thumb on her other hand. She had managed to study for 4 whole hours after Carmilla had dropped her off at home (after plenty of scolding from Perry and the most awkward phone call of her life with Danny) before passing out from exhaustion. As soon as she woke up Monday she felt nervous and nauseous—were phantom hangovers a thing? Cause it sure did seem like this was one really long, awful hangover that just continued to mock her poor life choices. Despite that, she was determined not to fail her midterm.

Laura had made it through her other classes that day only mildly distracted by the feeling that she wasn't prepared for her midterm that afternoon, and the looming ‘coffee date’ with Danny she had agreed to once her midterm was finished. Half a packet of cookies and a grape soda later, she was walking into the auditorium hoping her sugar high and Carmilla’s tutoring was going to pay off.

She had been sitting in there for 50 minutes, it was her and 3 other people still taking their tests, and the more she tried to focus on her paper, the more her brain wanted to shut down.

*Who the Hufflepuff was Sigmund Freud?! Was he one of those guys with the tigers? What does that have to do with Psychology?*

“Times up.” Professor shields took his glasses off and rubbed at the inside corners of his eyes tiredly.
It seemed like he enjoyed midterms just about as much as his students did.

Laura let out a groan and dropped her head down onto her desk with a thud. At least she had managed to finish most of the test, only being short by a few questions. She packed up her bag and secured it on her shoulders before dragging her feet to the front of the auditorium and handing over her test with a forced smile that looked more like a grimace.

Professor Shields seemed sympathetic but also amused at Laura’s lacklustre attitude over her test and simply gave her an encouraging nod as he added her test to the pile already in front of him.

Laura walked out of the room, hands clutching the straps of her backpack, replacing one anxiety with the next. Her focus on her midterm had made her completely forget about meeting up with Danny for coffee, until she walked out into the hall and towards the exit of the building. She hoped Danny wouldn’t be waiting outside for her, that would at least give her 5 minutes of a break as she walked to the coffee cart on campus. What she saw on exiting the building was the last thing she expected though.

Carmilla was lazily leaning her back against a tree just outside the building. Her hands were in her pockets and despite the fall air that had just started to actually feel cool enough for a jacket, she had on a simple pair of black ripped jeans and a tank top that hung loosely on her shoulders. Even more surprising was the German Shepard sitting happily at her feet.

Of course she wasn't alone though. Flipping her hair over her shoulder and leaving flirty touches on Carmilla’s arm as she spoke was the new flavor of the week. For whatever reason, Carmilla had stopped bringing her ‘study buddies’ to their tutoring sessions in the library, which Laura was grateful for. But apparently Laura had gotten used to seeing Carmilla without a girl hanging off her arm and this view sent a wave of frustration through her.

Laura brushed it off as the unpleasant memory of having to break up countless make out sessions, but something in the back of her mind told her it might be more than that.

The new girl tried to pet Joey but the dog moved away, clearly uninterested in the girls attempt to bond. This made Laura snort quietly, watching the awkward interaction. Both Joey and Carmilla seemed completely unaffected by the girls presence and that made Laura feel a little less jealous.

Wait. Jealous?

She didn't have time to think about it though, because Carmilla turned her head and made eye contact with her and Laura’s smile grew without her permission. Seconds later the large dog was bouncing his way to the brunette, completely abandoning the new girl trying to cozy up to Carmilla.

Carmilla followed, completely ignoring the other girl, leaving her with a frustrated and embarrassed pout on her face.

"Hey buddy." Laura directed her smile at the dog, crouching down to pet him. She laughed as he knocked into her happily, leaving slobber on her face. Laura stood up and wiped at her face as Carmilla walked up to her. "Please tell me you didn't dognap Joey and need me to hide you both.”

Carmilla shook her head, giving Laura a small lopsided smile, “We were going on an outing and Joey suggested we invite you.” She reached down and scratched the top of Joeys head.

Laura tried to hide her smile as she put a hand on her hip, “Joey suggested?”
Carmilla shrugged, managing to keep her face neutral. She was about to say something else when she saw a familiar face and red hair making her way towards them. She cleared her throat and dropped her stare to the ground.

Laura noticed the playful energy disappear and worried she had done something. She looked to where Carmilla’s attention had been and felt her stomach drop. Danny hadn’t seen her yet, although she would soon, so if she was going to make a decision about what was going to happen next it would have to be quick.

“Well, Joey.” Laura bent over and squeezed Joeys face in her hands gently, “Where are we off to?”

Carmilla still wasn’t sure what she was doing as they made the drive back to town. She felt especially awkward when Joey followed her obediently across campus, bringing more attention to herself than usual. She wasn't about to leave him in the car though, and with every step it was becoming more clear she hadn't really thought her plan through all the way. Honestly, did she even have a plan? She was regretting her spur of the moment decision, that is until a very attractive girl Carmilla vaguely remembered from one of her classes approached her and went all baby talk on Joey.

She pretended to listen to the girl as she waited for Laura to come out of the building. She was sure most of her class had exited already and Carmilla started to worry she had missed her completely. But then she glanced back towards the building and saw Laura's bright smile.

Carmilla knew she should probably be careful about whatever it was she was doing. She didn't want to give Laura the wrong idea— she still hadn't figured out her own feelings or what she was going to do about them. And she didn't want to hurt Laura by just using her for her photos. But that smile drew her in and whatever problem her mind was stuck on earlier that day seemed to fade into the background.

Approaching Laura she tried to keep herself from smiling, but did a poor job and was only able to keep it to a small half smile. Carmilla noted Joey’s excited response to getting Laura’s attention— although he was terrible with advice, the dog was an extremely good judge of character.

“We were going on an outing and Joey suggested we invite you.” Carmilla reached down and scratched the top of Joeys head, giving herself something to do to try and get rid of the nervous energy filling her body.

Laura had already gotten Carmilla to do things she otherwise wouldn't without even trying. Trying to remain cool and disaffected when her insides were twisting at this revelation of feelings was going to be a challenge.

“Joey suggested?” Laura tone was playful and Camilla noticed the upwards twitch of her lips before she pulled the bottom one between her teeth.

Carmilla shrugged, getting ready to say something flirty, deciding it wouldn't hurt and Laura probably wouldn't think it was out of the normal anyway. Until she saw the red hair. Then her confidence left her completely, she cleared her throat and her eyes dropped to the ground.

Carmilla knew Laura had been avoiding Danny— at least thats what she assumed after their big fight at the party. But she had only heard half of the argument before leaving to go outside and neither her or Laura had brought it up at the junk yard. Maybe Carmilla read the entire situation wrong and they were still together.
This is exactly why Carmilla didn't do feelings. They were too complicated.

It was that moment that Carmilla felt stupid about the whole thing and decided it was better to use whatever she was feeling to ace her photography class but not actually let Laura get to her. She would keep her distance.

But then Laura was walking with her and Joey across campus, they were climbing into her car, and Carmilla realized she was right back at square one.

Not sure how she had even ended up in this situation but even less sure of what she was going to do about it.

All it took was a quick text telling Danny something had come up and they were off. Laura had seen Danny read the text and saw firsthand the disappointed expression on her face. She should have felt guilty about it, but didn't.

She knew she had made the right decision to end things with her, and doing it again over coffee wasn't going to be good for either of them. Danny would understand. Eventually.

So instead of coffee and breakup part 2, Laura was climbing into the passenger seat of Carmilla's car and putting on her seatbelt before even questioning what they were doing. So far she had been pleasantly surprised by how her time with Carmilla had gone lately. Sure it always started out a little iff— but by the end of it, it was actually pretty great.

It was always a little different and little unexpected with Carmilla. Laura was so used to people telling her not to do things—having someone practically pushing her into new situations was different. It's not like Carmilla didn't care, at least Laura thought she might, at least in her own way. It was just more "of course glasses are a good idea, cupcake. We are smashing glass after all." And less "if there even the tiniest chance you could get hurt then I don't think you should do it". Which was refreshing.

Carmilla wasn't holding her back in an effort to keep her safe or protected. And she was actually quite good at pushing her to do things outside of her comfort zone. Even if it did always feel like they were just one step away from doing something completely illegal. Laura was pretty sure they hadn't gone that far. Yet.

“So where are we headed this time?” Laura turned to face the back seat, reaching her hand out to pet Joey as he stuck his head between the two front seats.

Carmilla looked at her out of the corner of her eye and raised an eyebrow but stayed quiet.

It took about 5 second without an answer before Laura was launching into her next question, “Does Pete know you have Joey? We aren't going to getting trouble are we? I mean he seemed cool with you being at the junk yard so I guess it would make sense that he would be cool with you taking his dog too.”

“Joey’s mine.” Carmilla commented, checking her mirrors before making a left turn.

Laura looked at Carmilla curiously, “I didn't know that. I thought you'd be more of a cat person.”

Joey snorted at the comment and pulled his head away from Laura’s hand grumpily.

Laura scrunched up her nose in the dogs direction and leaned her shoulder into the seat, “Why was
he at the junk yard then?"

Carmilla chuckled softly and glanced over at the girl in the passenger seat, “You really are a journalism major, aren't you?”

Laura felt her cheeks start to warm, slightly embarrassed with how quickly she had filled the silence with nonstop questions, “Well, yeah.” She shrugged with a shy smile.

“Pete likes the company, and it keeps Joey stuck in the apartment less when I’m busy.” Carmilla reached her hand behind her and Joey immediately licked at her open palm happily, before shifting on the seat so his face was pressed against the window.

Carmilla rolled the window down and Joey stuck his head out, the wind blowing his fur and causing his tongue to flap out of his mouth. Laura giggled watching the dog bite at the wind and the sound of it made Carmilla smile.

It was crazy how the simplest things seemed so much more carefree with Laura there. Carmilla had driven this road dozens of times, had the view of Joey sticking his head out the widow in her side view mirror, her hand making waves in the wind as her own arm stretched out of the car. She didn't think just having someone sitting next to her would change the way that all felt. But it did.

——

Joey let out a whine as he lowered his head into the seat nervously, causing both girls to jump. They had been siting in front of the house for a while now completely silent.

"How did you even find this place?” Laura asked shifting in her seat. Maybe this outing with Carmilla wasn't such a good idea after all.

Carmilla's elbow was resting on the door, her fingers slowly twisting her hair into a tight curl as she scanned the old house. It was perfect for what she wanted. But it was creepy as hell.

"It actually belongs to my family." Carmilla took a breath and undid her seatbelt before reaching in the back seat, patting joeys head then grabbing her bag. "It's been empty for years though."

Carmilla opened the car door and stepped out onto the soft ground. The driveway had been taken over by weeds and grass. Upon arriving, Carmilla wasn't even sure where it was and just opted to park on the lawn.

She slung her bag over her shoulder, gripping the strap that fell across her chest tightly as she took a few tentative steps towards the house.

It was an old house, 4 huge pillars lining the front that held up the second story wrap around deck. Tall Windows with shutters on their sides—at least there were a few still attached to the house. Some had fallen off or were hanging by hinges. Some had been boarded over in an attempt to close off the house. But years of weather and trespassers had left a few windows uncovered.

The porch was weathered and worn down, matching the side of the house with its chipping paint. The woodwork that was once impeccable and detailed was twisted and rotted with age.

Leaves, weeds and plants from years of abandonment covered the yard surrounding the house. A few tall trees swaying with the weight of their branches creaked quietly. They had to be over a hundred years old.

Carmilla pulled her camera from her bag and looped the strap over her neck. She tugged her hair out
from under the strap and let it fall loosely back over her shoulders.

*click*

Laura watched Carmilla approach the house and turned back to the dog still laying in the back seat, "well, ready we follow?"

The dogs ears perked up and Laura took that as a good sign, until a paw came up in an effort to cover his eyes as he buried his face into the seat cushion.

"Some guard dog you are.” Laura mumbled as she climbed out of the car. She opened the back door to let the dog out— he didn't budge. So with a sigh she walked to the front of the car and watched Carmilla who had just stepped up to the porch.

Carmilla stopped at the bottom of the stairs and kicked over a couple rocks on the ground near the porch. The 3rd overturned rock revealed a key pressed into the ground. Carmilla smiled to herself as she picked it up and walked up to the big double doors after making her way up the few steps onto the porch. Her hand brushed down the seam of the doors before her palm found its place on the doorknob. She turned the key in the lock, hoping it would still work.

She gripped the handle tightly, turning the knob with one hand while using the other to push against the door to open it. It took a few pushes before the hinges groaned and the door creaked open slowly. She was surprised the key actually worked, but that was a lot easier than finding a window to climb through.

“Please tell me we aren't actually going inside.” Laura crossed her arms over her chest and rubbed her palms on her upper arms. Her skin had goose bumped and she wasn't sure if it was from the cool fall air or the spook factor of the house.

Carmilla turned around and gestured with a nod of her head for Laura to follow her, “We have an hour till sundown. I don’t intend to waste it.” With that she took a step forward, crossing the threshold into the house.

Laura watched Carmilla disappear into the shadows of the house and before she knew what she was doing she was stepping up onto the porch and following her blindly into the large house.

She took a step in and stopped to let her eyes adjust. Light came in through cracks in boards and windows- shattered, dirt covered, or intact but the room was still dim. Dust swirled through the room, particles catching light and glistening. The large room Laura was standing in had once served as a parlor. It had a large entrance, couches and chairs lined the walls of the room. An incredible chandelier hung in the center of the room, complex arrays of crystal prisms dangling from its copper frame to illuminate the room with refracted light.

Cobwebs hung from the crystals above her and filled the corners of the room. Dried up leaves littered the floor, no doubt having been blown through broken windows over time and the countless autumns the house had seen. Dust covered the furniture, turning what was once bright and crisp fabric into dull and dreary colors sagging and clinging to their frames.

The walls were lined with mirrors of all shapes and sizes. The frames more intricate than anything else in the room. Hand crafted encasing clinging to warped and filthy mirrors. It seemed odd to Laura, that there were no paintings, pictures or portraits. Only mirrors. But even covered in dirt, they would catch the reflection from the crystals on the chandelier and rainbows of refracted light would stretch across dull wall paper and worn carpet.
On the other end of the room, Carmilla stood in a wide doorway that lead to what looked like a dining room. Laura crossed the room and stopped just being Carmilla, watching as she lifted her camera and snapped a picture.

The long rectangular dining table was still set as if it was waiting for the owners of the home to come home for dinner. Plates lined the long table, silverware, wine glasses and napkins all laid out delicately. Candle sticks stood in the center of the table, the wax melted down, and droplets left on the cloth covering the hard wood.

It was as if whoever had lived here had vanished in the middle of living life. Preparing for dinner one second, gone the next.

“Who did you say lived here?” Laura whispered as she peered into the dining room.

Carmilla lowered her camera and turned her head to look at Laura, “I didn’t.” Her voice was a low whisper.

“Great. Cause thats not creepy at all.” Laura rolled her eyes and smacked Carmilla’s arm playfully.

Carmilla laughed before stepping further into the dining room. She ran her fingertips along the table leaving a trail in the dust as she looked around the room. “I’ve heard stories, about this house.” She looked over her shoulder at Laura before disappearing through a doorway.

Laura followed and found herself in a kitchen. The sun was still up and lit the house well enough that it was easy to see their surroundings. The sounds from the world outside gave a feeling of normalcy that clashed heavily with the abandoned state of the interior of the house. Feelings of nervousness came in waves— mostly when turning corners or noticing a spider or something more out of place than the rest of the house. Besides that, the house wasn't actually as creepy as Laura expected it to be.

“This is the first time I’ve been here though.” Carmilla walked over to the sink and turned the handle — nothing happened.

“Its beautiful.” Laura commented, leaning on a counter then pulling away quickly. She made a face of disgust and brushed at her elbow that was now covered in dust.

“Oh huh.” Carmilla smirked, “Its a dump.”

“Well now maybe.” Laura teased, “But I’m sure it was awesome back in the day.”

Carmilla kept walking through another door way and smiled as she entered the room. This room was large just like the one they had first been in. It must have been a library or music room— There were large shelves lining the walls, empty now, but Carmilla could imagine them full of books. There was a Grand Piano tucked away to one side of the room. The keys were towards the center and Carmilla brushed her fingers along them as she walked by. She stopped at the end of the piano and hit a few high keys. It was out of tune and as she made her way down the keyboard a few keys failed to make sounds.

Near the end of the piano was the beginning of a staircase. It spiraled behind the piano and around the room, the stairs leading to the second floor balcony that looked over the music room before disappearing down a hallway. The railing was a smooth dark wood with intricate carvings along the railing posts. The stairs were carpeted with a dark red fabric. Even with the dust from years of being unused, the color was deep and vibrant, inviting her to follow the pathway that led upstairs.

On the wall at the top of the stairs was a stained glass window. Yellows, reds, and oranges filled the
frame creating a picture of the sun. Its placement caught the light from the setting sun perfectly, casting a colorful image on the wall that seemed to rotate around the room as the position of the sun changed.

“Woah.” Laura breathed out as she stepped into the room. “This place just keeps going, does it?” She walked to the center of the room and spun in a circle slowly, taking in the tiny yet complex details throughout the room.

The carved detail along the frame of the book shelves, another extravagant chandelier, the balcony overlooking the room, the spiral staircase, hardwood floors… Laura wished she could have seen the house while it was being lived in. Everything looked like it was from a movie or straight out of a dream.

She couldn't imagine what it was like when it was clean— the colors of the fabrics bright, the beautiful hard wood floors polished, the shelves full of books and piano vacant of dust.

*click*

Carmilla was bent over the piano, the lid held open to reveal the wires and sound board inside its body. Some wires were snapped, curling chaotically or hanging loosely, while the rest remained taught and firm in place. The black and white keys laid out perfectly still, the cast iron frame of the piano solid and smooth. She blew out a puff of air and dust swirled from its home on the keys, spiraling into the air and catching the sunlight.

*click*

“What are they?” Laura head was tilted back, her eyes watching the crystals on the chandelier closely, “The stories, I mean.”

Carmilla lowered her camera and looked over at the other girl, captured by the look of awe on her face. She watched Laura until she took her eyes off the crystals above her and looked at Carmilla, a curious childlike expression. Carmilla tilted her head and squinted her eyes at Laura.

Was this girl for real?

Laura just smiled at her, her lips parting, a crinkle around the edge of her mouth forming. Carmilla ignored the itch in her fingers to snap a photo. So far the only photos she had taken of Laura were when the girl didn't know it was happening. Moments when she was just being Laura.

Carmilla adjusted the strap of her camera so it hung loosely at her side. She took a few steps towards Laura, then moved to stand behind her, leaning over her shoulder slightly to speak close to her ear. Laura turned her head slightly to the side, curious as to what Carmilla was going to do.

“The house belonged to my fathers family. Its been in the family since around the 1800’s.” Carmilla pressed one of her hands against Laura’s low back, prompting her to slowly move in a circle. “The story goes, my great great great grandfather lost his wife in a tragic accident, leaving him a single father of a young girl. But being wealthy and attractive, it didn't take long for him to find a new wife.”

Laura felt Carmilla press her hand gently on her back and took another step, following her lead to spin more.

“To all but my grandfather, his new wife was cold, cruel and completely obsessed with beauty. His young daughter was the perfect child- caring, kind, warm and most of all, beautiful. Which was threatening to his new wife.”
A gust of wind blew outside, causing a tree branch to scratch against the frame of the house. Air flowed through a few broken windows, picking up dried leaves from the floor and brushing them along the hard wood. The hair on Laura's arms stood on end as goosebumps spread across her skin. From the cool air, the story, or Carmilla's feather light touch she wasn't sure.

"When my grandfather died unexpectedly, from a cause the town Doctor couldn't name, things began to get unbearable at the estate. The widow, now stepmother, was cruel to those who served her, and even more so to her grieving step daughter."

Carmilla led Laura over to one of the large mirrors on the wall. It was partially shattered and their reflections were warped by the cracked glass but Carmilla held Laura's stare intently.

"The new wife grew jealous of her stepdaughters beauty and threatened to kill her. So she fled. As soon as the step daughter was gone, the wife replaced any portrait of the young girl with a mirror. That way she could bask in her own beauty instead of be constantly reminded of the young girl who's brightness outshone her own."

Carmilla stepped closer, her hands landing gently on Laura's hips as her front barely pressed against Laura's back. Laura swallowed hard at the intense energy surrounding them. Carmilla's stare, the gentleness of her fingertips like she was nervous to touch her, Carmilla's breath landing on the back of her neck and blowing stray hairs against Laura's skin.

"The young girl ran, afraid for her life." Carmilla whispered directly in Laura’s ear, earning a shiver from the girl.

It was as if in the span of the few minutes Carmilla had started the story that the sun had dipped lower in the sky, making it noticeably darker in the house. The air grew cold and the light coming into the house lessened, casting shadows across the room.

There was an entirely different feel to the house without the sun filling it's rooms. It was eery, and with every word Carmilla spoke, Laura could feel herself grow more nervous.

"Until she was deep in the woods," Carmilla voice went quieter, "she came upon a house. Inside, 7 lumberjacks—"

"Wait." Laura spoke up, the nervousness on her face relaxing slightly.

"Sleepy, happy, dosey, sneezy.." Carmilla chuckled before stepping back away from Laura.

"You're ridiculous." Laura turned and glared at Carmilla while she shook her head.

"I had you pretty good there." Carmilla smiled and adjusted the strap around her neck, pulling the camera in front of her again.

Laura had to laugh at herself, she had totally fallen for it and had easily been sucked into the story. Something about Carmilla's voice seemed to capture her attention no matter what she was saying. It was the same way when they studied— Laura wondered if that's why her grade had improved. Even if she wanted to ignore her, she could never quite tune Carmilla out.

Carmilla snapped another photo with the shadows filling the room differently than they had before while Laura tried to stay out of her way.

Watching Carmilla be distracted with her camera, Laura decided to make her way upstairs. The deep red carpet lining the stairs felt soft under her silent footsteps as she moved upwards.
Carmilla turned and saw Laura taking slow careful steps. She was half way up the staircase, directly above the piano, her fingers gripping gently to intricately carved wood railing, sliding upwards gracefully. The last remaining light of the setting sun shone perfectly through the stained glass window at the top of the stairs. The colors cast a warm light that surrounded Laura completely, making her glow.

*click*

Something about watching Laura ascend the stairs silently, the light kissing her golden hair, the look of curiosity and pure contentment on her face made Carmilla's heart pick up speed.

It was always the simple things that caught her eye when she took her photos. Until now, she had no idea it would be the same kinds of things that caught her heart.

*click*

Laura heard the shutter of the camera and turned to look behind her with a mischievous grin, “Coming?”

Carmilla lowered her camera and returned a smile without thinking. Laura started running up the remaining stairs and around a corner out of sight. Carmilla chuckled and shook her head before following Laura up.

Upon turning the corner, Laura was nowhere in sight. Carmilla tilted her head slightly trying to listen for sounds to figure out where she had gone.

"Alright cupcake, trying to get me back is useless." Carmilla stepped carefully down the long hall, leaning forward to look through open doorways as she went. She was on her third door when she heard a floorboard creak.

Laura jumped through the doorway, hands out in front of her, "boo!" She yelled with a wide smile. Carmilla gave a bored sigh and blinked slowly at the girl.

"Alright fine." Laura rolled her eyes in defeat and turned away from her, "but I found a door that's locked. It's the only one." Laura led Carmilla to the end of the hall to the last door.

It had a brass handle with an intricate pattern carved into it. It looked like a tree, its branches curved and weaving across the small space. Below the handle was a keyhole. Carmilla tried to turn the knob but it wouldn't move.

"Told you." Laura said smugly, "Locked."

"Alright fine." Laura gave a bored sigh and blinked slowly at the girl.

Carmilla turned and gave her an annoyed expression, "Find a key then."

Carmilla stepped back and looked around the hallway to see if there was anywhere a key could be hidden. She kicked at the carpet on the ground, using the toe of her boot to turn up the corner. When she looked back up, Laura was hopping up and down next to the door with her hands above her head.

"Cupcake?" Carmilla raised an eyebrow and watched her curiously, "What on earth are you doing?"

"My dad—" Laura hopped up, arms raised, "Used to—" *Hop* "Put the keys—" *Hop* "above the door —" She landed with a smile as something clattered to the floor, turning to face Carmilla with a wide smile, "So I couldn't reach."
Laura bent over and picked something up, when she stood back up she held out a small key in her hands.

“Lucky guess.” Carmilla took the key from Laura and went to unlock the door.

Laura just smiled to herself and waited for Carmilla to open the door.

The door creaked loudly as she pushed it open and stepped inside. This room was unlike the others. The other rooms in the house had been left as though no one cared. Belongings still out, nothing covered or cleaned. This room seemed to have been cared for. There were white sheets thrown over the furniture and everything tucked away neatly.

Carmilla tugged on one of the sheets and it fell away to expose a tall wooden dresser. The wood was clean and smooth as she brushed her fingers across it. She tried the drawers but found them empty.

Laura had walked to the other side of the room, tugging on another sheet, it fell to the floor, a vanity underneath. A small stool sat in front of the wide mirror and set of small drawers. A silver hand held mirror lay glass down on the top of it, next to it a matching silver case.

Laura opened it up and found remnants of makeup inside. She sat down on the stool and opened up the drawers slowly. Most were empty, the last one held a book.

She pulled it out and opened it up with a smile, "Hey Carm, check this out."

She stood up and walked to the center of the room and sat down on the edge of the large 4 post bed. The mattress creaked when Carmilla lowered herself next to Laura and leaned over to look through the book.

Carmilla pulled her camera up and over her head and set it on the bed behind her. For such an old bed, it was actually quite soft.

Laura moved the book so it was open on both of their laps and flipped back to the beginning. "It's full of old photographs." Laura spoke softly like even a harsh tone could damage the delicate photos in front of them.

They were mostly taken in the very house the two girls were exploring. But seeing the difference in life that inhabited it was breathtaking. They could see the years change as they flipped through the pages. Children grew older, clothing styles changed, decorations in the house updated. It was like watching a century of time happen right before their eyes. Towards the end of the book the pictures became more clear.

"Wait." Carmilla gripped the edges of the book and brought it closer to her face, "I know them."

"Who?" Laura whispered and shifted so her face was right next to Carmilla's, peering into the book at a photo that was probably only 20 years old.

The darkness of the room made it difficult to see details in the photos. The room was now only being lit by the sun barely still showing over the horizon.

"Those are my grandparents." Carmilla whispered, lowering the book to her lap again. She flipped the page quickly, inhaling sharply at the new photo in front of her. “And.. that’s my dad.”

Laura smiled and looked at the picture closely, "Does he still look like that?"

Carmilla's finger brushed against the photo paper, almost like she was trying to touch something
inside the picture. She flipped the page without saying anything to another photo of the same man, this time he looked older.

Laura noticed the silence and turned to Carmilla and immediately saw the slight frown and furrowed brow.

"Carm?" She asked hesitantly, paying attention to the girls features.

"Hmm?" Carmilla forced her face to be neutral but swallowed hard, her throat completely dry.

Laura moved her hand to Carmilla's leg and gave it a gentle squeeze. "um, you ok?"

This felt beyond awkward. Laura still wasn't sure they were even friends, and she could tell Carmilla was upset. How do you know how much comfort to offer someone you aren't even sure is your friend?

Carmilla cleared her throat and shut the book gently, sliding her palms over its cover until her fingers could curl around the edge. "Yeah. I just haven't seen him since I was a kid."

Laura took her hand back slowly, still tying to figure out what to do in this situation.

"It's just weird, is all." Carmilla shrugged, shaking off whatever sadness that had been lingering.

Laura held Carmilla's gaze for a moment, she actually looked unguarded for once. Something about the way Carmilla was looking at her seemed different. And it didn't feel like it was just the photos. This look was new, but had started the day before, at the junk yard.

By now Laura had picked up a few things about the dark haired girl— sarcasm was her way of avoiding feelings, she was meaner when she felt threatened, she had walls a million miles high and no intention of letting anyone breach them.

But with the way she was looking at her… *it wouldn't hurt to try, right?*

"You know if you want to talk about—"

Laura was cut off by the sound of the piano at the bottom of the stairs. Both girls heads whipped to the direction of the door. Whatever was happening between them just now halted abruptly. It was only a few keys, hit in a random sequence- but it didn't matter, they were both upstairs with no one around for miles.

Laura laughed nervously, "Very funny, Carm."

Carmilla kept her eyes locked on the door and stood up slowly, whispering back, "Wasn't me, cupcake."

Laura's nervous smile dropped, "if you're messing with me, it's not funny."

A few more piano keys were hit, sending a shrill sound throughout the house. Something crashed to the floor- a lamp or decoration, they weren't sure. Both girls jumped, Laura was on her feet and holding onto Carmilla's hand without a thought.

Carmilla's heart started pounding and she had to remind herself to stay focused on the sounds coming from downstairs and not about the hand holding onto hers tightly.

"Would anyone else be here?" Laura whispered, the hand not holding onto Carmilla's taking hold of the girls arm, getting as close to her as possible.
Carmilla shook her head and looked around the room quickly. She noticed the window and went right for it. Laura followed quickly, no intention of letting go of Carmilla anytime soon.

The dark haired girl tried to open the window with one hand but years of being shut gave it the advantage and it didn't budge. She cursed under her breath before turning to Laura, "I need both hands, sweetheart."

Laura nodded quickly but didn't let go. It wasn't until Carmilla lifted their joined hands that Laura really registered what she said and that she hadn't in fact let go. Laura let go with a sheepish look and wiped her palms nervously on her thighs, still standing closely to Carmilla.

After a few tries, Carmilla forced the window open, the wood cracking in protest. She glanced across the front yard, brought two fingers to her lips and let out a loud whistle.

Laura's eyes went wide and her hand flew up to pull Carmilla's away from her mouth, "Are you crazy?!" She whispered harshly, "You just told the murderer where we are!"

Carmilla turned around and grabbed Laura's hand again (both girls felt less nervous immediately) "I also just told Joey where we are."

She pulled the smaller girl across the room to a closet and pulled open the doors. Thankfully there was nothing left inside, because a single article of clothing would have made it impossible for the two of them to fit in the small space. Carmilla pulled Laura in and struggled to shut the doors. The closet doors were made of tilted slats, allowing the smallest amount of light to creep through so they weren't in complete darkness.

Laura's arms were held up in front of her, sandwiched between their bodies tightly, her hands covering her mouth nervously. There was a sound of scratching on the stairway and Laura's palms moved to grip Carmilla's shoulders tightly, bringing their bodies snug together.

Carmilla suddenly couldn't think about anything besides what was happening inside that closet. If they were going to die, she figured there were worse ways than with Laura Hollis holding onto her for dear life.

Laura was trying to control her breathing, puffs of air falling steadily against Carmilla’s cheek. Carmilla knew it wasn't on purpose— there was literally zero room in that closet, but every breath made her body shiver. Laura was focused on the closet doors, eyes locked on the crack between the two doors that she didn't notice Carmilla’s eyes studying her face.

She couldn't help it, it was the closest she had ever been to Laura and if she thought she was beautiful before…

Her long eyelashes fluttered quickly, freckles speckled across her tan cheeks, her honey brown hair looked like silk, her lips looked pink and soft. Carmilla licked her own lips as her eyes scanned Laura’s features. Her eyes were breathtaking, and despite the situation, seemed warm and caring. Like she could see the good in anyone.

Maybe she would see the good in Carmilla.

Being pulled from her daze, the girls heard barking. It started far away, on the other end of the house and slowly grew louder. They heard heavy, uncoordinated steps up the stairs followed with what had to be Joey barreling into a wall or door.

Carmilla smiled, pictured her large dog fumbling through the house to save the day. Laura noticed and her attention was finally pulled away from the closet doors behind Carmilla. She tried to hide her
own smile as she took in their surroundings and the situation now that Joey was on his way to save them.

“Shhh.” Laura chastised, trying to fight a smile, “We aren't saved yet.”

Carmilla made a serious face mockingly and nodded, their forehands nearly hitting in the process. Laura shifted slightly, their bodies pressing together differently as they readjusted their positions in the closet as Joey got closer. Laura's hand fell to Carmilla’s hip causing Carmilla to take in a sharp breath.

Then he was there, just outside the closet. Fierce barking followed by shrill squeaking.

Laura threw the closet doors open, Carmilla nearly falling on her back because of it, and they both came stumbling out of the closet. Laura was ready to let out a war cry and go Warrior Princess on their attacker when she saw what exactly they had been hiding from.

In the corner of the room sat a terrified, tiny, fluffy squirrel. It was back against the wall with Joey trapping him there.

Laura let out a loud laugh and Carmilla turned around to see what was happening. She saw the scene and brought a hand up to cover her face and shook her head, “Let him go, Joey.” she breathed out relived and snapped her fingers.

Joey immediately stopped his growling and began panting happily as he made his way over to the girls still standing just outside the closet. The squirrel ran frantically for the window, escaping onto the ledge before running and leaping onto a tree branch near the house.

Laura was still laughing and brought a hand up to hold her chest over her heart, “Oh my gosh I almost had a heart attack over a squirrel.”

“Your face was priceless.” Carmilla smirked and made her way to the bed where her camera was still sitting.

“Oh please.” Laura teased, her hands landing on her hips, “I felt how fast your heart was beating in that closet.”

Carmilla was glad she was facing away from Laura as soon as she felt her cheeks warm up. If Laura only knew the real reason her heart had been beating so quickly.

“Right, you got me.” Carmilla tried to play it off casually, putting the camera strap back around her neck.

She wasn’t sure which would be more embarrassing— admitting to be scared of a squirrel, or admitting that just being near Laura made her heart pound like she was running laps. Deciding to blame it on the squirrel, Carmilla took one last look around the room before walking over to the window and closing it.

Laura sat on the edge of the bed with Joey at her feet, scratching his head gently as Carmilla walked around the room, throwing sheets back over furniture and getting ready to leave. Instead of putting the photo album back, Carmilla tucked it under her arm and made her way to the door.

“As much fun as this has been..” Carmilla pressed her lips together and nodded towards the hallway.

Joey hopped up and took off down the hall, barreling down the stairs quickly. Laura stood up and followed Carmilla out of the room, shutting the door behind her. They made their way back through
the house and out the front door. Once on the porch Laura stopped on the deck and leaned against railing.

Carmilla shut and locked the door and went to stand next to Laura. Joey was running around in the yard, digging into the ground and looking for the next best stick. Carmilla looked at Laura who was watching the dog with a smile before leaning her forearms on the railing and tilting her head to look up at the sky.

“Its comforting.” Carmilla interrupted the silence quietly after a moment. It was mostly a thought she was having to herself that had accidentally come out of her mouth.

Laura looked over at her before matching her position, leaning on the railing. “What is?”

“The stars.” Carmilla replied without taking her eyes off the lights above them in the sky.

The house was about an hour outside of town, the next house wasn't for a mile or so. The usual light pollution from campus wasn't there to hide the stars above them.

Accident or not, the words were already out there, she might as well continue.

“To think how small we are in comparison. All the lives we've led, people we've been... nothing to that light.” Her voice was smooth and sounded as though she was speaking of something secret. Something magical.

Laura looked at the girl next to her, tapping her fingers together in front of her as she considered what Carmilla was saying, “You sure you’re not a philosophy major?”

Carmilla chuckled softly before standing up and pressing her palms on the railing in front of her, “Well, cupcake. I shouldn't probably be getting you back.”

“I suppose so.” Laura let out a heavy sigh, she knew she couldn't keep ignoring reality by tagging along with Carmilla, but she had enjoyed it while it lasted.

Carmilla whistled as she stepped down off the porch and walked over to her car. Joey immediately ran over and hopped into the back seat before Carmilla shut the door behind him. Laura made her way down the steps slowly and over to the car, slightly surprised when Carmilla opened the door for her and waited for her to climb in before shutting it gently.

She thought back to their first meeting and how different things were already. It went from Carmilla swearing at her under her breath, to her actually being kind without being told to be. Laura smiled to herself while she watched Carmilla walk around the car to get in the drivers seat. The smile Carmilla gave her as she started the car confirmed what she should have already known— of course they were friends.

Carmilla started up the car and shifted into drive. She saw Joey get comfortable in the back seat and turned to look at Laura before looking back to the road. Carmilla couldn't help but smile, the memory of the day playing over as she drove.

Laura was beautiful, and being so close to her that night made Carmilla realize she couldn't just ignore her feelings. The way her heart was pounding against her ribcage, the simplicity of a touch making her whole body feel more alive. The constant itching in her fingers to capture every moment, every look, every smile.

Laura had somehow found her way into Carmilla’s world without her even noticing. She had started
to break down the walls Carmilla had desperately clung to before she knew what was happening. It seemed almost ironic that at the same time, it felt like Laura was somehow putting the pieces back together.
So I'm headed to do some traveling for the next couple weeks so this is probably the last chapter update until December when I'm back in the states.. just fyi :) 

Thanks again for all the kind messages and comments! You guys are awesome!

Laura sat there watching Carmilla chew on the end of her pencil as she went over the notes from class. Something was different but she wasn't sure what. It was weird.

It was something about Carmilla that was different. Laura knew that much. But, she was still acting like Carmilla. Snarky, sarcastic, flirty, the usual. Same smirk, same eye roll, same complete lack of people skills or ability to care about it. But something was different.

"Like the view, sweetheart?"

Laura's eyes narrowed for a second before she looked away. It was the delivery. Or maybe the follow through? The flirty words were the same, but the way she said them was different. Almost like she was nervous. But that would be crazy.

"You're being weird." Laura said flatly, leaning her chin on her hand.

They had been in the library for an hour now and her posture was suffering dramatically. Her elbow rested on her knee, back slouched over and in another five minutes she probably wouldn't be wearing shoes anymore.

"What are you talking about?" Carmilla rolled her eyes before leaning back against the couch.

"See, right there." Laura sat up and pointed to her, "you weren't committed to that eye roll."

Carmilla raised an eyebrow, "are you complaining about the sincerity of my eye roll just now?" She was truly dumbfounded. Laura had a tendency to surprise her, but this was strange, even for her.

Laura realized she probably did seem crazy and pouted slightly before turning back to her book.

Carmilla worried her bottom lip between her teeth for a second. Apparently not being obvious about her crush wasn't as easy as she thought. She had finally accepted her feelings- but had no intention of doing anything about it. Last time she opened herself up to the possibility.....

Let's just say it didn't end well.

She leaned forward and snatched the bag of gummy bears off the table and before Laura could protest, popped a green one in her mouth.

At least that wasn't different, Laura thought to herself.

"Are you even paying attention?" Carmilla tossed another green gummy bear in her mouth.

“I’m trying.” Laura slouched even further in her chair, “Its just easier when you give me examples.”
Carmilla nodded as she chewed the gummy in her mouth, her eyes scanning the room slowly. “Alright.” She pushed herself up off the couch and leaned over close to Laura as she walked by, “Pay attention.”

Laura sat up and shifted in her chair to watch Carmilla. She made her way over to a table where another student had been studying alone and sat down across from him. The student looked up briefly before looking back down to his book.

Carmilla crossed her leg over her knee and threw her elbow up over the back of the chair, she turned and gave Laura a wink before turning back to the stranger and saying something.

Laura wasn't close enough to hear what was being said, but watched Carmilla carefully anyway. As soon as the dark haired girl had the boys attention, she shifted her posture. She uncrossed her knee and put her elbows on the table in front of her. Laura still wasn't sure what she was doing but curiosity made her watch intently.

It took a minute before Laura saw it. Carmilla was mirroring the strangers movements. Not too obviously, but anytime he shifted his position in his chair, she did the same. He scratched his face, she copied. He smiled, she smiled. Pretty soon she would do her own movements the boy ended up copying them back, just like she had.

After a couple minutes Carmilla put her palms on the table and pushed herself up and out of her seat, leaned over the table and whispered something to the boy that received a cough and red cheeks, before she turned and walked back over to Laura with a little extra sway in her hips.

“Alright, cutie.” Carmilla dropped back down into her spot on the couch and threw her feet up on the table in front of her. “Your turn.”

“Go have him rate me.” Carmilla said casually, “On a scale of 1 to 10, how much did he enjoy my presence?”

“Seriously?” Laura raised an eyebrow. Was this really just all to feed her ego and prove she could get anyone she wanted? Laura was already well aware of her flirting skills.

Carmilla nodded before grabbing the bag of treats again and picking through them. Laura let out a sigh before turning in her chair to look at the boy still sitting at the table. Shaking her head to herself she got up and walked over. In true Laura fashion, she awkwardly asked him to rate Carmilla.

There had to be a better way to do this.

“9.” Laura mumbled as she fell back into her seat.

“And I wasn't even really trying.” Camilla teased with a flirty smile.

Laura just rolled her eyes, “What was the point of that?”

Carmilla was scanning the room again as Laura waited for an answer. A smile grew on her face before she stood up again and left Laura without a response. Once again, sitting across from someone at a table that had been studying alone.

Once again Laura watched from a distance, only this time Carmilla seemed more herself. She could tell her attitude was the same as it had been with the first boy. They talked just as much, and everything was actually fairly similar. Except one thing. Carmilla hadn't moved much. Once she had
gotten comfortable in her seat, she stayed that way. She didn’t smile every time he did, and she didn’t shift with each of his movements.

After a few minutes Carmilla was back and nodding in the boys direction. Knowing it was her turn, Laura got up and repeated the awkward conversation of asking for a rating.

This whole thing seemed ridiculous and she didn’t quite get the point. But when the second boy gave Carmilla a 6, it made Laura surprisingly happy. Returning to her seat with a smug smile, she was more than elated to pass on the news of the poor rating.

“Why do you look happy about that?” Laura asked with a frown. She was disappointed Camilla didn’t seem to care about the poor rating

“Cause that was the point of the experiment.” Carmilla smiled and threw her arms up over the back of the couch.

Laura gave her a bored expression, “Care to share with the class?”

“The Chameleon Effect.” Carmilla instantly shifted into tutor mode, taking what she was saying very seriously for once, “In interpersonal relations, often times mimicking another’s body language can increase our likability.”

“Oooh.” Laura breathed out, finally putting the pieces together.

“By understanding human behavior and simple things like that, you can manipulate people and situations in your favor.” Carmilla leaned forward, shutting her book on the table. “Social Psychology is probably the most fascinating section of your class.”

“Why’s that?” Laura did the same without realizing.

Carmilla chuckled at the experiment coming to life on its own without Laura even registering what was happening, “Because its no longer just about one person. Its about that person and how everyone around them influences their thoughts, behaviors and feelings. Who you are alone, is not who you are with others.”

“Does that mean you are never truly yourself with other people? Because you change depending on your social surroundings?” Laura was genuinely curious. Was she different with different people? Was Carmilla?

“Not necessarily.” Carmilla shrugged but was giving this more thought than she was letting on, “I think we give certain parts of ourselves to certain people.”

“So only you get to see your whole, complete self? No one else?” This was bordering the line of getting too deep for Laura to really understand, and her scrunched up face made that fairly obvious.

“I think when you find the right person, all your parts come together, and instead of pieces, they get the whole.” Carmilla’s voice was no longer the one she used when she was taking seriously about a school subject she actually enjoyed, it had more of a romantic tone to it.

Laura stayed quiet, she could tell Carmilla was thinking about something by the way her hand reached up and started twirling a strand of hair.

“Like with a photograph.” Carmilla started, her eyes cast downwards but not seeming to focus on anything in particular. “The exposure when you take a photo—you can overexpose something or underexpose it and even though its the same picture, it’ll look completely different. Just like people,
picking consciously or unconsciously which parts of themselves to highlight at different times. With different people.”

She glanced up slowly and looked over Laura’s face. Something flashed in her eyes with the way she was looking at her, but as quickly as it had appeared, it was gone. Laura watched her closely, their eyes locked as this new Carmilla once again left Laura feeling like something was different.

“But if you get the right exposure,” Carmilla smiled shyly at her, like she knew she was getting carried away but couldn’t help herself, “you get to see the whole picture, everything highlighted equally.”

“Have you ever had that?” Laura asked absentmindedly, halfway regretting it immediately. Even thought she considered her and Carmilla to be friends, she was pretty sure they weren't at that level yet.

“Once.” Carmilla let out a breath and gave Laura a sad smile before looking at her hands in her lap, “At least.. I thought I did.”

“What happened?” Laura couldn't help herself. As vulnerable as Carmilla looked, she couldn't help but want to know more. Carmilla was always a mystery. Even when she thought she had her figured out. She would do or say something and all bets were off. And right now the walls were clearly down and Laura wasn't going to waste it.

Carmilla seemed to think about the question for a moment, her smile fading completely and being replaced with a somber expression. “She didn't like the picture once she saw the whole thing.”

“She was an idiot then.” Laura blurted out like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Carmilla chuckled, the mood lightening slightly. “I’m not so sure about that, but thanks for the confidence cupcake.” Carmilla leaned forward, resting her forearms on her knees and gave Laura a genuine yet sad smile.

Laura locked eyes with dark ones, only slightly embarrassed by her immediate response but tried to offer Carmilla a reassuring smile anyway.

She wondered if maybe this different Carmilla was exactly what they were talking about. Maybe she was showing Laura a different side of herself, changing the exposure? Laura wasn't sure how that worked exactly— She knew just as much about photography as she did Psychology. Just enough to not be completely useless. And maybe this was progress. Maybe this was what being friends with Carmilla was like.

Whatever it was, it was nice. When Carmilla wasn't being a complete ass, she was actually really sweet. And spending time with her hadn't been entirely awful, either. Sure there was the sarcasm but lately it had become more playful than mean. And to be honest, Laura didn't mind the view.

It was like now that Danny was out of the picture, it was becoming more obvious how attractive Carmilla actually was. From a purely observational and platonic perspective, of course. Especially when she was passionate about something. It was kind of amazing to watch her take pictures. The way she would squint her eyes before lining up a shot, her bottom lip getting trapped between her teeth the second before she took a picture. The amount of focus and that poured out of her and she had a habit of running her hand through her hair that was almost hypnotic.

“You alright, L? You’re looking pretty flushed.”

Laura hadn’t even noticed Lafontaine walking towards them until they were already talking. The
smirk on Carmilla’s face made it painfully obvious she hadn’t realized how long she was staring at the dark haired girl either.

“What?” Laura squeaked before clearing her throat and trying again, “What did you say?”

Carmilla raised an eyebrow but her smile disappeared quickly when Laf plopped down on the other side of the couch, shifting her slightly on her cushion.

“You’re face, its red. Like, tomato red.” Laf gave her a curious look before pulling their backpack to their lap and unzipping it.

Carmilla watched as they started to pull out numerous books and set them on the table in front of them, encroaching on the space her feet were comfortably sitting.

“You going to Danny’s meet tomorrow?” Laf didn't look up and missed the uncomfortable grimace on Laura’s face followed by a frown on Carmilla’s, “Its the last one of the season and me and Perr were going to go if you want to join.”

Laura sighed, “Yeah I’m not sure she’d be particularly happy about seeing me in the stands this time.”

“Oh. Right.” Laf finally looked up, “I forgot about the whole…” They swirled their hand around in front of them like thats all it took to explain the entire drunken breakup.

Carmilla cleared her throat, “Um, not to be inhospitable, but why the hell are you here?”

Lafs smile got wider, “Really?” Carmilla’s lack of interest reminded them of her original question, “Right, not the point. Well Laura’s been avoiding the house or something lately cause we barely see her and I needed some help with my English homework.” Laf smiled at Laura, “And since I knew you’d never miss a study session with your broody tutor, I figured I’d come wait till you’re done then force you to help me.”

Carmilla’s brow furrowed at ‘broody tutor’ and she felt herself getting completely frustrated. If it wasn’t one red head ruining things, it was another.

“Uhh..” Laura looked over at Carmilla hesitantly trying to read her thoughts with this new situation. “I don’t think—“

“Don’t worry, I wont be waiting alone.” Laf pulled a book to their lap and leaned back into the couch.

“And what exactly does that mean?” Carmilla nearly growled.

“Perry is on her way, too.” Laf threw their feet up next to Carmilla’s, “so what are we talking about?”

Carmilla glared at Laf for a moment before dropping her feet to the ground and shoving her things in her backpack. She looked at Laura for a second before huffing out a sigh and walking towards the exit, throwing her bag over her shoulder.
“I didn't mean to make her uncomfortable…” Laf gave Laura a confused look and shifted on the couch.

“I know, its just..” Laura sighed, “We were talking about something and I don't really know the details but I think it was kind of serious but.. yeah.”

Laf raised their eyebrows and gave Laura a knowing look.

“What?” Laura asked, shaking her head.

“Oh nothing, crushes-on-tutors.” Laf smiled smugly.

“Pfft.” Laura’s face scrunched up and she shifted uncomfortably in her chair, “What, I don't.. I just..” She rolled her eyes at herself for how flustered she had actually gotten from Lafontaine's comment. “We’ve barely been friends for like, three days.”

Laf gave her a look like they didn't quite believe her but their attention quickly shifted when they saw Perry making her way through the library shelves with a stack of books in her arms. Their feet dropped to the floor quickly and they stood up, flattening out the non existent wrinkles in their clothes.

“Perry!” They realized they were a little loud for the library and quieted their voice a little, “Hey.”

Laura leaned back and mumbled, “You're one to talk about crushes.”

“What was that sweetie?” Perry placed her books down gently, taking a seat next to Laf, “You were mumbling.”

Laf’s eyes went wide as they sat down, looking at Laura and hoping she wouldn't repeat herself. They knew she was probably right but they were only just now coming to terms with the fact that best friend Perry, the girl they’ve known literally since birth, was most likely their soulmate. It was exciting and terrifying and a feeling Perry most likely didn't reciprocate. At least, they weren't sure.

“Oh nothing.” Laura sighed as she started packing up her things.

“Wait.” Perry sat up straight, her lips pressed together tightly, “Where are you going? I just got here.”

“Yes, sorry.” Laura stood up and threw her bag over her shoulder, “I just.. have.. stuff.” She shrugged knowing her excuse was flimsy but started walking away anyway.

The past few days had seemed much longer than what they were. After spending nearly 24 hours with Carmilla after breaking up with Danny, then her midterms Monday, another outing with Carmilla and then more tests and classes again today, Laura had been doing a pretty good job of avoiding pretty much everyone. She didn't want another lecture from Perry about being responsible, she didn't want to say something she regretted, so just staying clear until things settled down seemed like the safest bet.

“I just don't understand.” Perry whined, obviously taking the lack of Laura’s presence lately personally.

Laf sighed and patted Perry’s back gently, “She just needs sometime to get over stuff, ya know?”

They understood what Laura was doing and quite frankly didn't blame her. They loved Perry but even they thought she could go overboard sometimes. She meant well— but it was kind suffocating when she meant well in your direction.
“Look on the bright side,” Laf smiled encouragingly, “She totally has a crush on her tutor so that will help get over the drama of Danny—“

“What?!” Perry looked mortified at Laf’s comment.

Laf knew Perry could be dramatic, but the reaction to Laura having a crush was downright nuts. “I mean, she hasn’t admitted it yet and we both know Laura can be a little slow on that front so she may not even realize it yet but the signs are there.”

“No, no, no, no..” Perry mumbled to herself as she picked up her stack of books and hugged them to her chest. She made her way out of the library slowly in a daze, shaking her head to herself.

Laf sank back into the couch and tossed their arms up in defeat, “It’s really saying something when I’m the normal one in the group.”

Carmilla closed an eye and stuck out her thumb towards the model in the center of the room. She moved her hand, squinting her one open eye, biting down on the pencil stuck between her teeth. She had another pencil behind an ear, and one in the hand that wasn’t held up in the air.

Perry watched Carmilla with a tight lipped expression, her own pencil moving randomly across the page in front of her.

“You going to tell me why you’ve been staring at me all class?” Carmilla mumbled around her pencil as she turned her attention back to the sketch pad on front of her. “And don’t tell me it’s because of our model because Sara Jane here is a serious improvement compared to the beefcake.” A smirk broke out on her face and she sent a wink in Sara Jane’s direction.

Perry narrowed her eyes at Carmilla before turning away, her neck stiff, hand pressing much too hard against paper. The point of her pencil snapped and she let out a frustrated huff.

“Oh, the silent treatment.” Carmilla’s eyes were locked on her sketch still, taking a second to look over the paper at SJ before going back to the drawing. “Something many women have tried on me. Doesn’t work, red.”

Perry went through her pencil case and pulled out another pencil and looked back to her sketch pad. Her eyes went wide and the frown on her face grew as she saw what she had sketched. Nothing. Well, not nothing. Mostly random lines and swirls. Staring at Carmilla had worsened her drawing abilities, dramatically.

She ripped the current page out of her pad and folded it neatly before setting it aside to recycle later. She took a deep breath and studied the model in the middle of the room before focusing on her paper more seriously.

“I’m not talking to you.” She chirped with her chin in the air and eyebrows raised, “But if I was, it would only be to tell you I don’t like what you’re doing one bit.”

Carmilla’s eyebrows furrowed slightly as she scanned her sketch, “Are you talking about the shading? Because I know it’s off on this side here but that’s no reason for you to be mad at—“

“I’m talking about Laura!” Perry’s voice was raised and her arms went stiff at her sides, her hands clenching.

The entire class turned to look at the sudden interruption in the otherwise quiet room. Perry
immediately shrank behind her sketch pad at the attention. Carmilla had no idea what was going on and just looked around the room with a bored expression before glaring at anyone still watching them until they were once again free to converse without an audience.

“What are you talking about?” Carmilla dropped her hand and slouched on the stool. “I’m just tutoring her.”

Perry scoffed, “Oh please.”

Carmilla knew what was coming next. Judgment. It didn’t matter what she said or did, people always thought they knew who she was. She thought Perry was different.

“I know how you are with your parties and, and, girls.” Perry stuttered slightly. She heard the words coming out of her mouth and knew they were hurtful, but this was about Laura, she had to do something.

“I’m a popular girl, I get a lot of invitations.” Carmilla’s jaw was set and she was speaking through gritted teeth. As much as she didn’t want to let Perry’s words get to her, she had to admit it stung. Having someone she considered a friend (something she had very few of) talk about her this way.

“And this nonsense, with Laura?” Perry’s sketching started getting more harsh, the pencil pressing firmly on paper, “Taking her on these little adventures, possibly dangerous adventures, and making her think you actually care.”

Perry’s pencil snapped again and she let out another frustrated breath, turning to face Carmilla. “Because if you think this is some kind of joke, just playing some game, it is in such incredibly bad taste.”

“Look,” Carmilla stood up and set her pencil down, “Just because I’ve let her tag along a few times doesn’t mean I’m doing anything—”

“So it is a joke?” Perry was up on her feet talking in a harsh whisper. “Because I do not approve.”

If the two girls really thought no one was paying attention to them they were stupid. Pencils around the room had slowed and everyone was quiet. Even Sara Jane had moved from her statue like position in the center of the room to see them better and she had managed to stay nearly perfectly still for the first 40 minutes of class.

“What exactly don’t you approve of?” Carmilla glared at the red head and tried to take a deep breath. That was about the point that the rest of the class started packing up and giving them awkward looks as they left the art room. Carmilla didn’t wait for Perry to answer. She already knew what it was going to be. She quickly grabbed her things and started walking out of the room as she shoved them in her bag.

Perry let out a sigh and packed up her own things as quickly as she could while still keeping her bag fairly organized. She rushed out the room and shuffled quickly after Carmilla who was moving fairly fast compared to her usual lackadaisical saunter.

“Carmilla.” Perry pleaded after her, “Wait, I didn't mean for it to sound that way.”

Carmilla turned on her heels, startling the red head who stopped abruptly before running right into her.

“Oh no? What did you mean to say then?” Carmilla snapped, “That I’m not good enough for your
precious Laura?"

“No! That's not it at all!” Perry managed to actually look sincerely apologetic. She knew she had completely barreled over Carmilla’s feelings for the sake of trying to protect Laura.

“Then what?” Carmilla spun back around and started down the hall, a little slower than before.

Perry quickly moved to walk with her, her legs moving quickly to keep up with Carmilla, “Laura’s just… She’s one of my best friends and I just worry about her.”

Carmilla could hear it in her voice, she was sorry and it really had been less about Carmilla and more about Laura. But it didn’t change what Perry had said and how it seemed she thought of her. All it had done was reaffirm what everyone else had told her before— she wasn't enough. Something was wrong with her.

“You know Perry, I like you.” Carmilla stopped and turned to face her. Her voice was calmer but still sounded firm, like she was consciously controlling it. “You’re kind of a spaz and entirely too uptight but I always got the vibe that you were a good person and willing to give people the benefit of the doubt.”

Perry shrank slightly knowing it was a compliment but that in this instance, she had done the exact opposite.

“So what is it about me that makes me so bad for your Laura?” Carmilla watched her for a second and when a response didn't come she rolled her eyes and walked out the door and towards the quad.

Perry followed after her quickly again trying to come up with an answer for her. “Laura is just— Its not you, Carmilla. Its..”

“It’s what?” Carmilla dropped her bag on a picnic table and leaned her hip against it, crossing her arms over her chest. “Laura isn't smart?”

Perry looked shocked, “No, of course she—“

“She doesn’t know how to make decisions?”

“She does, its just—“

“She’s not capable of taking care of herself?”

Perry sighed, she understood Carmilla’s point.

“Laura’s a big girl. She doesn't need your mothering to survive.” Carmilla stood up, taking her weight off the table and dropping her arms to her sides, “And as for me… You know nothing about me so you don’t get to judge me or what I do.”

Perry looked completely solemn, Carmilla was right. And in an effort to parent Laura, which she clearly didn't need (a point she was understanding thanks to Carmilla), she had judged and hurt Carmilla in the process.

“Carmilla, I’m sorry.” Perry apologized, taking a step towards her.

“Don’t.” Carmilla held up hand in front of her. She wasn’t so much angry anymore as she was frustrated. She wanted to be frustrated with Perry, but she was actually more upset with herself.

There’s a reason Perry had said the things she did. Why she thought what she had. Carmilla had a
certain reputation. Parts of it may have been true, but not all of it. Even still, Carmilla had done nothing to set the record straight during her time at Silas. In fact, she was probably guilty of perpetuating it even further. Her reputation served her well, the true parts as well as the fabricated pieces. And honestly, it had never felt like a bad thing or bothered her, letting people think certain things about her— until now.

“Hey guys!” Laura called out from across the quad as she made her way towards them.

Carmilla and Perry both turned to look her direction, trying to hide the mutual discomfort with the current conversation she had just interrupted.

“Hello sweetie.” Perry greeted with the biggest smile she could muster (it wasn't that big).

“Hey Laura.” Carmilla nodded her head but dropped her eyes to her bag that was sitting on the table.

Hearing her name coming fro Carmilla sounded strange. The tone was serious but the care in sounding out every letter seemed to roll of Carmilla’s tongue differently than when other people said it. Laura chuckled playfully, trying to ignore the flutter that bubbled in her stomach.

“Laura?” she smiled brightly at the two girls before turning back to Carmilla, “What no cupcake, pop-tart, creampuff… or, other edible desert?”

Ok, she was flirting. And even though it was in front of Perry, Laura thought she was actually doing a good job of it. Ever since Laf’s comment about a crush the day before, Laura had been considering it. What it would be like to have a crush on Carmilla. Ultimately she decided it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world but that it would probably go forever unreciprocated because, well, its Carmilla. And she could have anyone she wanted. But Carmilla was a flirt, so what would it hurt to flirt back a little?

“Oh, right.” Carmilla looked like she was slightly lost, “I thought they annoyed you?”

Maybe she wasn't as good a flirt as she thought.

“Not really.” Laura shrugged still smiling, “I guess I got used to them.”

Lies. She wasn't only used to it, she actually kind of liked it. Camilla only used them with her and she thought it was kind of cute. Or something. God this crush business made her stupid sometimes. Was it like this with Danny? She didn't think so.

“Good to know.” Carmilla tried to smile but couldn't even force it. It was then she realized she may have messed up her chance with Laura before she knew she even wanted one. “I gotta.. I should go.”

Carmilla let out a heavy breath and grabbed her bag and took off without another word. Perry sighed, watching her walk away before turning back to Laura and clasping her hands in front of her.

“Brownie?” Perry asked with a forced smile.

“Sure.” Laura nodded and started walking with Perry towards the coffee kart, “Is she ok?”

“Who Carmilla?” Perry’s voice went higher than normal. She was a terrible liar and didn't exactly want to admit to what her and Carmilla had been talking about when Laura walked up.

“Yeah.” Laura stepped in line and rocked on her feet watching students moving about around them. “I hope I didn't do anything to make her upset. She left like that yesterday too.”
“She can just be moody.” Perry’s voice cracked and she felt like her whole body was breaking out in to hives from not being completely honest.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” Laura let Perry buy her a brownie, she was really insistent on paying for some reason.

That was two days in a row Carmilla had stormed out quickly without at explanation. Laura wondered if maybe she had done something wrong. She couldn't think of anything, though. Then again, Carmilla had been acting weird lately. She shrugged it off and figured she would wait and see if she was still being weird the next day at their regular tutoring session.

——

“Really Carmilla, must you always be late?” Lilita didn't bother looking up from the menu when Carmilla slid into her seat at the table.

Will gave her an understanding look and held the menu tightly in his hands.

“Sorry, mother.” Carmilla set her bag down at her feet and scooted in at the table, “I thought Mattie was going to be here?”

Carmilla’s mother lifted her wine glass and let the red liquid swirl around inside of it before taking a sip. “She’s on her way. She had the decency to call and let us know she would be arriving behind schedule.”

Carmilla scoffed quietly and shook her head. She leaned towards Will and lifted her own menu to cover her face, “I’m late but Mattie is behind schedule. Typical.”

Will gave her a smile and tried to hide his chuckle by clearing his throat.

“You know how I hate your mumbling, Carmilla.” Her fingers gripped her glass delicately but everything else about her posture was cold and stiff.

With perfect timing, Mattie burst into the restaurant with an entrance only she could get away with. “Hello lovelies!” She practically waltzed over to their table that was now full of smiles.

“Mattie!” Carmilla was on her feet and embracing the beautiful woman before she had the chance to set down her bag.

Mattie chuckled and hugged her tightly, “Don’t you Mattie me, you little monster.” She pulled away, gripping Carmilla’s shoulders and holding her at arms length, “I haven't heard from you in months!” She gave Carmilla’s arm a playful slap before moving to give Will a hug just as warmly.

“Hey Mattie.” He smiled and wrapped his arms around her shoulders, picking her up slightly before setting her back down on her feet.

“Really William, every time?” She laughed as he set her back on the ground before they all took their seats.

Mattie sat next to their mother and leaned over to exchange a quick kiss on the cheek as greeting. It was the warmest thing any of the children got from Lilita Morgan, and it definitely didn't happen often.

“Glad you could join us.” Lilita pressed her lips tightly together and sat up straight, “How long are you in town for dear?”
“Just a few days this time.” Mattie winked at Carmilla across the table and picked up her menu.

Mattie was someone every bit as intimidating as their mother when she wanted to be. She dressed impeccably, always looked like she was ready to take over whatever business she was walking into and was impossibly intelligent. On the flip side, she had a playful side that matched Will and Carmilla's and a wit that even gave the dark haired beauty a run for her money. She was just as charming as she was beautiful, and commanded a room like it was simplest of tasks.

Somehow she also had the talent of balancing the tension when they all got together as a family. She was able to please their mother effortlessly without seeming like a suck-up or throwing her siblings under the bus in the process. Without Mattie, their dinner that night would probably have ended with someone being murdered.

Lilita caught Mattie up on all things Silas University while both Will and Carmilla hoped their classes and grades wouldn't be brought up. They were well into Fall Semester and with fall comes holidays. And Parties. And lets face it, its college so parties weren't hard to come by in the first place. Will was scraping by, passing all of his classes but just barely and Carmilla… Well Carmilla was tutoring a tiny ball of sunshine to save her grade and praying to all things holy her photography professor would feel something with these new photos she had been taking. Most her other classes weren't too difficult to keep a passing grade in and she was a good test taker even is she didn't know the information as well as she should.

“And what about your photography?” Mattie sat back in her chair and set her napkin on the table next to her empty plate.

“It’s great actually.” Carmilla finished chewing the bite of her food she had just taken, “My professor says I’m improving and that my photos have a new depth to them.”

“Does that have anything to do with your new ‘photo assistant’?” Will smirked and licked his spoon clean.

Carmilla shot him a glare and kicked him under the table. She may have mentioned the fact that Laura had been joining her recent photo shoots when he seemed worried about her going out to random places alone. She should have known he wouldn't keep it to himself and if it wouldn't make a scene she would have strangled him right there for bringing it up in front of their mother.

“Oh really?” Mattie raised an eyebrow and leaned forward with a smile, giving her attention to Carmilla, “Do tell.”

“She’s nobody.” Carmilla’s stomach sank as soon as the words were out of her mouth. That wasn't true. “She’s just a friend.” Those words were true but only made the sinking feeling shrink marginally.

Their mother stayed silent as Carmilla’s siblings began to pester her for details of this mystery person. Carmilla tried to deny it was anything more than taking pictures but her cheeks were pink and her words stumbled over themselves in a way that was completely uncharacteristic of her.

“Does our little monster have a new play thing?” Mattie teased, wiggling her eyebrows at the girl across from her.

“It’s not like that.” Carmilla chuckled, hoping if she played it off casual they would move on to a less complicated subject.

“Aw kitty, is she playing hard to get?” Will joined in on the teasing happily.
“No one is playing anything.” Carmilla shook her head, feigning indifference, “She’s just a girl that tags along to take pictures sometimes. We are friends. Thats it.” She shrugged and picked upper fork, pushing around imaginary food on her empty plate.

Mattie laughed and leaned back in her chair, “Oh please, we all know you don’t do friend. Its only a matter of time before you get what you want, get bored of her and move on.”

Will nodded and laughed in agreement, giving carmilla a light shove to the shoulder playfully. Carmilla tried to play along, act like what they were saying didn’t bother her but for some reason it did.

She had no intention of using Laura for anything. Sure it had started that way with her pictures, but now she just honestly enjoyed her company and getting to know her slowly. As far as getting what she wanted and getting bored… Carmilla was exactly sure what she wanted from Laura. Or if there really was anything that she did want from her. And getting bored of Laura seemed quite impossible.

“I think that’s enough.” Lilita spat out in an annoyed tone. She folded her hands in her lap and nodded towards the waiter who immediately scurried over to be told to bring the check.

Will immediately shrank in his seat at the scolding and Carmilla went from slightly flustered to completely frustrated. Mattie just offered Carmilla a smile before turning to their mother.

“I’ll be doing business in Paris the day of your dinner so I wont be able to attend but I hope it goes well.” Like usual, Mattie relieved the tension at the table and was able to direct their mothers attention to something other than seething about her daughters love life (or lack thereof).

“I completely understand. You’re a busy woman with responsibilities, I wouldn’t have it any other way.” Their mother smiled sweetly, but less sincere than what you would expect from a parent, “Carmilla, on the other hand.”

Lilita and Mattie turned to look at Carmilla who was slouched in her chair examining her nails lazily.

“Yes I know.” Carmilla grumbled, shifting in her chair, “Responsibilities, expectations, I wont ruin your little—“

“Stop with the attitude.” Carmilla’s mother snapped. Usually she was the perfect example at controlling her emotions but it seemed Carmilla had pushed just a little to far this time.

Carmilla stilled and slowly sat up in her chair, swallowing nervously. Sure she liked to put on a front like she was big and bad but when it came to her mother, she still felt like a child most times.

“You will be there and you will behave.” Lilita signed the check and shoved it back into the hands of their waiter before standing and collecting her things from the back of the chair. She leaned over and gave a quick kiss to Mattie’s cheek before straightening her posture and speaking to her, “Always lovely to see you dear. William.” She nodded at Will with a tight lipped smile before barely glancing at Carmilla before she turned and walked out of the restaurant.

—

Joey nearly shoved his way out of the apartment and into the hallway as soon as Carmilla had the door unlocked and cracked open. She let out a heavy breath and shoved him back into the apartment before closing the door behind her and walking over to the table. She set her bag on the table, took off her leather jacket, hung it on the chair and walked out of the restaurant.

Joey weaved around her legs nearly tripping her on her short journey and she grumbled frustratedly
before bending over and petting him, hoping some attention would help him settle down.

Once the large dog seemed satisfied, he trotted off to the dog bed on the floor in the corner and laid down with a loud huff. Carmilla grabbed a beer and popped its cap off, walked over to the couch and dropped down into the large cushions. She took a sip and let the cool bottle rest on her knee.

It had been the day from hell. *What was everyones problem?*

She took another sip and shook her head, “You don’t think I’m incapable of maintaining an actual relationship with another person do you?”

Joey’s head popped up and his tail wagged quickly. He tilted his head and scooted forward on his bed while his tongue came out, wetting his nose as his attention stayed on Carmilla.

“See?” Carmilla called out to her empty apartment, she lifted her hand to gesture towards the large dog in the corner, “He doesn't think me actually liking someone is a huge joke!”

Joeys ears shifted and he lowered his head, resting it on his front paws while his eyes stayed locked on the girl on the couch.

Maybe she should have seen the irony in the fact that her dog was basically her only real friend, but she was just frustrated with the theme of the day. Everyone thinking less of her because up until now, she had let them. What made now so different? Why did she suddenly care what people thought of her?

_Laura._

She cared because she was afraid Laura thought the same things.

Her eyes dropped to the book sitting in the coffee table in front of her. She hadn't opened it since the first time in the old abandoned house, and it just sat there, staring at her. Leaning forward she flipped the front page open and looked at the picture for a second.

It was her grandparents— they looked young, happy, sitting at the table in the large house now empty.

Feeling silly about the hesitant feelings about a simple book she stood up and walked over to the fridge, opening the door and staring inside. She tapped her fingers on the door as the cold air escaped and filled the space around her. She kept her feet in place but looked over her shoulder to the book still sitting open on the table.

She slammed the door and made her way back to the couch, took a large gulp of her beer and pulled the book to her lap. She flipped to the back of the book, ignoring the time warp between the encasing and stared at the face looking back at her.

Her father. He looked to be her age, *they had the same smile*. She already knew that, though. It was one of the reasons her mother hardly looked at her. She guessed the photo was taken before her parents had even met and wondered if thats why he looked so happy. Her mother had a talent for sucking the joy from you.

She wondered what he was like. What his voice sounded like, what he liked to do for fun, was he smart, funny? She wondered if the few memories she had of him were actually memories or just things she made up to make the empty space in her chest hurt less when she thought of him.

Maybe thats where it started. Not letting people get close to her. The less she allowed people in her
life, the less it hurt when they left. Maybe it was better for everyone if she dropped the idea of things being different with Laura.

Who was she kidding, everyone else knew it was ridiculous anyway.

—

Before she knew it Carmilla was waking up, a heavy weight on top of her, dry mouth and a crick in her neck. She blinked slowly and tried to take a deep breath despite the heaviness pressing on her chest. Mumbling something even she didn’t understand she finally opened her eyes and was met with a giant ball of fur in her face.

“Joey, get off.” Her voice was low and scratchy as she tried to shove the large German Shepard off of her.

Instead of obeying he simply shifted his weight and started licking at the girl's face happily. Carmilla squirmed underneath him for a minute, trying to unpin her arms from her sides and shove him off of her. Hopping the couch he ran straight for the door. Bouncing on his front feet, he took the leash wrapped around the door handle and pulled it free, clearly ready to go out.

Carmilla sat up and tried to stretch out her back and neck from the uncomfortable position on the couch she had somehow ended up in. Since she had fallen asleep in her clothes she just grabbed her boots and pulled them on before shuffling to the door while rubbing her eyes with the palm of her hands.

She didn’t bother connecting the leash to the collar before opening the door. She figured the fact that Joey had it held in his mouth was good enough. Joey ran out the door and down the hall, waiting for Carmilla to catch up and let him outside. As soon as the door that lead out of the building was open, Joey was out on the lawn, rolling in the grass and sniffing for the best place to relieve himself.

Carmilla sat down on the front step while watching him and pulled out her phone. It was 7am and she felt it. She waited for Joey to finish playing around and rubbed her arms with her palms. It looked like it was going to be a nice day but the air was still cold from the ever looming presence of fall.

Letting out a sigh she pushed her hands onto her knees to help herself stand up and blew out a whistle. Joey immediately looked up and ran over, leash flapping in his mouth still. She gave him a scratch behind the ears before opening the door and leading him back inside.

It was Thursday which meant she had her final midterms that day. And a tutoring session with Laura, something she usually looked forward to but after yesterday, she was actually kind of dreading it.

Joey was back in his dog bed without much prompting and Carmilla decided she needed a shower before coffee so she made her way into the bathroom and turned on the water. She stripped of her clothing as the room filled with steam, fogging up the mirror and warming her previously chilled skin.

She pressed her palm into the mirror and swirled it in a circle, clearing the fog enough to see the reflection of her face.

“What are you doing Karnstein?” She examined her own reflection, hoping it would somehow give her an answer.

She hated admitting that everyone’s words the previous day were getting to her. She knew what she felt for Laura was different. And everyone was right. She usually was in the game of keeping things casual, keeping her feelings out of it and getting out before anyone got too attached. So could she
honestly treat Laura differently? She knew she wanted to. But was it possible?

——

“Shit.” Carmilla mumbled as she threw the door open and stomped out of the building.

Maybe skipping classes as often as she had wasn't the best idea. She had managed to take her Psychology midterm without much trouble, her art and photo midterm had already been taken care of with the presentation the weekend before, but History and Math… not so good.

She’s pretty sure she just majorly failed her math midterm and was praying her teacher would offer a retake option. Or extra credit. Or accept a bribe. Either way she knew her mother was going to be pissed, and would make an appearance sooner or later to make sure to tell her as much.

This day couldn't get much worse. Until it did.

The Imperial March sounded from her pocket and Carmilla knew exactly who was calling.

Weighing the options of getting yelled at now or later, Carmilla decided later and hit the ignore button. That was the moment the skies opened up and rain started to fall like it was on a mission.

If Carmilla didn't know better she would have blamed her mother for it. Perhaps she honed some magic powers that controlled the weather and was punishing her for ignoring her phone call.

Whatever. Carmilla was done with it. And already soaking wet. Stomping across campus to the parking lot she muttered under her breath to herself. How had a week that had started off relatively good flip to be this awful in a matter of a day?

It was once she was inside her car that she remembered Laura was probably already waiting for her at the library.

And she had 3 missed calls from her mother.

And a new email from her psych professor.

Shit.

——

“Little nerd hottie!” Kirsch yelled from down the hallway before jogging Laura’s direction.

Laura had been sitting in the Lit building, reading while waiting out the rain until she had to make her way over to the library to meet up with Carmilla. She looked up from her book and couldn't help but smile at the goofy grin racing towards her.

“Hey Kirsch, what are you doing here?” Laura folded over the corner of her page and shut her book, letting it rest on her lap.

“Class and stuff.” Kirsch shrugged and dropped down on the floor next to Laura. He tried to match her position and sit cross legged with his back against the wall, but his legs were much longer than Laura’s and made the sitting position a little awkward. Finally giving up he stretched his legs out in front of him and crossed his ankles.
Laura giggled at how proud of himself he seemed, “Did you need something or are you just here to keep me company?”

“Oh right!” His excitement was back as he shifted slightly to face Laura more, “So there the post midterm carnival happening and I just wanted to make sure you were going to be there cause I really want you to meet my new lady friend.”

"Oh for sure." Laura smiled up at him, "I think a bunch of us were going to go together. And i'd love to meet your new 'lady friend'."

"Sweet." Kirsch nodded his head, "I think you'll really like her. She's cute and smart and likes pink.." "I'm sure she's great, Kirsch." Laura looked up at the clock on the wall, "but I've got to run so I'll see you there alright?"

"Oh great!" Kirsch waved from his spot on the floor, "Later little nerd hottie!"

Laura made her way through the building, no sense in walking outside in the rain for longer than she had too. It should have crossed her mind as a possibility of running into Danny. She was a lit TA after all.

Rounding the corner and about to walk outside Laura didn't register the tall red head right in front of her until it was too late.

"Laura, hey." Danny looked both excited and nervous about running into Laura. They hadn't seen each other since their breakup (even though Danny tried more than once to plan coffee) and she wasn't sure where exactly they fell on the scale of friendship.

“Heey, Danny.” Laura breathed out uncomfortably, “How are you?”

“Oh, I’m good.” Danny nodded but the words didn't quite match the look on her face. “Just crazy busy right now. You?”

“Same.” Laura gripped the straps of her backpack and looked past Danny to the doors that led outside. She wasn't exactly running late, but she could use it as an excuse to get out of this awkward moment, right? "How was, um, how was your meet yesterday?"

"It was good." Danny smiled proudly, "Beat a personal record, so thats cool."

"Cool, cool." Laura shifted her weight on her feet. Man this was awful.

“Are you— “

“I was just— “

They both stopped and smiled awkwardly at rambling over one another. Laura couldn't help but remember how not too long ago they were so in sync and how different it felt now. Had it really only been a week since they broke up? It felt like it had been so much longer. Even though Laura had been avoiding a moment like this maybe it wasn't such a bad thing. The absence of a weight on her chest just reaffirmed she had made the right decision and maybe they could get back to being friends.

“I saw your article in the paper today.” Danny smiled and reached out to give Laura’s shoulder a
“Oh, yeah, it wasn’t much but its a regular thing now so at least there’s there.” Laura shrugged the shoulder in Danny’s grip, trying to brush her hand away without being too obvious.

“It’s great, Laura.” Danny dropped her hand and wiped her palm on her thigh nervously before shoving her hand in her pocket.

“Thanks.” Laura smiled and let out a sigh, “Sorry I don’t have time to talk, I just have somewhere I need to be.” Laura took a slow step towards the door.

“Tutoring, right?” Danny frowned slightly before forcing a smile, albeit a small one.

“Yeah.” Laura took another step and turned to walk backwards so she could face Danny still, “But maybe we could catch up later?”

Danny’s smile widened, “Really?”

Laura tried not to feel guilty about the fact that even though Danny was clearly excited about the idea, she was not.

“mmhmm.” She nodded and kept moving to the door.

“Are you going to the Carnival this weekend? Maybe we could go together?” Danny asked, her face full of hope.

“Um yeah but a bunch of us were going to go together so maybe I’ll just see you there ok?” Laura smiled and lifted a hand to wave as her back pressed against the door, pushing it open. She didn’t wait for a response from Danny and hoped she didn’t take the obvious denial too hard.

Carmilla grabbed the lapels of her leather jacket and shook it out. Drops of water flying off its material and creating wet marks on the carpet below her. She ran a hand through her wet curls that did the opposite of her attempt to tame them. Fall was being cruel this year. Warm yet crisp weather one minute, frigid air and gloomy skies the next. She had almost left her jacket at home this morning, she was grateful she hadn’t. Even if the first half of the day it had been a nuisance in her arm or constantly forgetting it on the back of her chair after class.

Weather. Why was it even a thing?

She started making her way to the back of the library like she did every Thursday. She was late thanks to being distracted after her midterm and expected Laura to give her a hard time for it, so when she turned the corner and was greeting with arms wrapping around her she was more than a little surprised.

Caught off guard she stumbled a little, but the tiny body pressed up against her held her steady. There was a jump in her chest and a flutter in her stomach, an a warmth that started to rise up the back of her neck. The goosebumps now running across her skin could have been blamed on the cold weather and her damp clothes but she knew that wasn’t the real reason her body was reacting.

"To what do I owe the invasion of personal space?” Carmilla's arms were trapped at her sides and she was doing her best not to show how much Laura being wrapped around her was affecting her.
Laura let go and stepped back with a wide smile, "You're soaked!"

Carmilla tried not to focus on the pull of warmth leaving her body as soon as Laura had let go. Instead she went to prying her jacket off her shoulders and down her arms.

"The fact that I didn't bring an umbrella cannot be the reason for this amount of cheer, cupcake." Carmilla draped her wet jacket over a chair and pulled on the fabric of her shirt clinging tightly to her body.

Laura's smile fell slightly as she licked her lips and swallowed heavily. Her eyes grew a little wider as they trailed the length of her body. Ok yes, Carmilla was attractive, this wasn't news to Laura. But Carmilla standing in front of her, a shirt mostly see through and clinging to her body like that was its sole purpose in existing, her hair wet with drops of water clinging to the ends of curls just waiting to drop off and leave wet trails along her skin. *That* was new.

*And wow.*

"Cupcake?" Carmilla lifted a hand and shook out her wet hair, water dripping to the floor and somehow making the mess of curls fall even more attractively around her shoulders.

"Right, no, of course not." Laura shook her head to bring herself out of her state of staring. She turned back to the table that sat near their usual couches and grabbed the student paper that had been sitting on it and shoved it in Carmilla's hands.

Carmilla saw what she was excited about immediately but decided to mess with her a bit.

"You're really invested in the mystery behind the giant mushrooms growing on campus?" Carmilla lowered the paper only to have Laura lift it to her face again.

"Look again." Laura smiled widely, rocking on her heels in excitement.

"Right. The theater kids getting a little too into their rehearsals and nearly burning down the Lustig."

"Seriously Carmilla?" Laura frowned and put a hand on her hip.

"Oh! You mean this little article here by one Miss Laura Hollis?" Carmilla smirked, "why didn't you just say so?"

Laura shook her head and tried to hide her smile, she knew it would only encourage the teasing, "I know it's not exactly calling out the injustice of terrible educators, but still."

"It's great, Laura." Carmilla smiled at her before looking back down at the paper to read her article.

This time Laura couldn't hide her smile. Those were the exact words Danny had used, but they sounded so different coming from Carmilla. Laura was sure Danny had meant it, she was always sincere, but even still it sounded like something you said out of politeness coming from Danny. Almost obligatory.

But when Carmilla said it, it was purely because she meant it. Because she wanted to say it, not because she was meant to.

She watched Carmilla's eyes move quick as she read through the article and suddenly got nervous about her work. She started to fidget with her fingers while she tried to read Carmilla's thoughts.

"It's a highlight piece." Laura cleared her throat, "My editor thought that instead of talking badly
about university professors and risk getting shut down, I focus on highlighting those especially great ones. He said it can be a weekly thing, and who knows, it may inspire some professors to up their game to get chosen."

"Not only does he have the respect of his students and faculty alike, but has made extensive improvements to the department…” Carmilla trailed off but her lips kept moving as she finished reading.

Laura beamed at Carmilla once she finished reading the article, waiting for a critique.

"Who knew you had such a way with words?" Carmilla gave her a crooked smile and handed back the paper.

"I can make sense sometimes." Laura smiled and grabbed the paper from her.

This girl was quicksand. In the best possible way. Not two minutes ago Carmilla was having the worst day she'd had in a while. She had been convinced (by more than just herself) that there was no way anything good could come from her feelings for Laura.

Yet here she was. Smiling like an idiot at this beautiful girl. The more she fought it, the more she got pulled in.

Quicksand.

--

"There's only so many examples I can give you with people in the library." Carmilla grabbed the little baggie of gummy bears and like usual, found a white one and popped it in her mouth. "Do you buy these by the gallon or something?"

Laura glared and plucked the bag from Carmilla's hand quickly, “Maybe. They were on sale, if you must know. And they travel better than chocolate.” Laura ate a few herself, leaning back in her chair. "Why do you only eat the white and green ones?"

Carmilla leaned forward and shut her textbook, "You're the investigative journalist. I'm sure you'll figure it out."

Laura scrunched up her nose but threw the bag back into Carmilla's lap. Things were quiet for a moment, Carmilla sifting through the bag for her usual color of gummy bear while Laura watched her.

This was about the time they usually ended their tutoring sessions but neither were making a move to leave quite yet. The comfortable silence was getting dangerously close to being awkward till Laura cleared her throat and reached forward to tap a folder sitting on the table in front of them.

"Are these your pictures from the other day?" Laura raised her eyebrows hoping this time she wouldn't get in trouble for wanting to look.

Carmilla glanced at the folder and nodded, throwing another gummy bear in her mouth. She kicked her feet up on the table and made herself comfortable.

"Can I look?" Laura asked slowly, "I mean you said I could see them but that was before, so if you changed your mind that's ok, I was just curious how they turned out but if they are private——“

"Cutie, slow down before you hurt yourself." Carmilla didn't bother looking up, "Go ahead."
Laura smiled and twisted the folder to face her but kept it laid out on the table. She opened it to the first page and was met with the picture she had seen before. The park. She flipped a couple pages till she landed on a photo she hadn't seen yet.

She made her way through the folder, flipping pages slowly and stopping to examine photos. It was amazing to see how Carmilla had captured moments. Laura had been there for a lot of the pictures, but what Carmilla captured in her photos was beautiful compared to what Laura had seen in the moment they were taken.

The junkyard looked like another world- not like the home of piles of trash like Laura had seen. The broken glass was so much more than broken cups and plates. It was colorful and unique and bright. The abandoned house wasn't old and dirty, it looked like a painting, a memory, a story she couldn't wait to hear.

Carmilla listened to the crinkling of plastic pages turning. Her pictures held gently inside, revealing more of herself than Laura probably knew. She watched out of the corner of her eye as Laura's facial expressions shifted from page to page. A smile, a frown, a look of curiosity, of surprise.

Suddenly remembering the pictures she had taken of Laura were near the back of her folder, Carmilla's eyes widened and she leaned forward quickly hoping Laura hadn't gotten that far yet. She wasn't sure how Laura was feel about being the subject of her photographs. Even if they were stunning. She hadn't been given permission to take her picture and if felt almost like she had invaded her privacy somehow.

Laura's finger was gripping the corner of the page and slowly lifting. Carmilla saw the next page before Laura could and quickly slapped her hand on top of the page, stopping Laura from turning it.

Laura jumped back in surprise, her eyebrows pressed together in worry as her eyes searched Carmilla's.

"I just uh.." Carmilla shut the folder and slowly slid it back away from Laura, "the rest aren't, they aren't really..."

"That's ok." Laura smiled and pressed her palms against her knees. She could tell Carmilla was nervous about them for some reason and didn't want to push her luck. "Those are really good, Carm. I can't believe you could turn a pile of broken glass into that." She gestured towards the folder and smiled.

Carmilla looked down at the folder bashfully, "Well, you helped."

Laura just laughed quietly and watched Carmilla's cheeks go slightly pink. Was she blushing? She was, and it was adorable.

Laura's phone chimed and she quickly pulled it from her bag and flipped it open to read the new message. She let out a sigh and her posture deflated.

“Everything ok?” Carmilla asked, watching Laura worry her lip as her fingers hovered over her keypad.

“Um yeah, Perry just wanted me to…” She trailed off, not sure if Carmilla actually needed or wanted to know what the text was about.

Carmilla rolled her eyes. Of course. It wouldn't be a moment without a red head butting in. She started packing up her things, figuring Laura would be taking off any minute to attend to ginger 1.
“Hey Carm?” Laura shut her phone without replying and set it on the table in front of them.

“Hmm?” Carmilla didn't look up as she fit the rest of her things in her bag and leaned over to grab her jacket.

“So… There’s this party Saturday— well it’s actually a carnival but it’s kind of the same thing. I mean there will be rides and stuff but it’s supposed to be really fun. Like a post mid-term thing and the whole school is going to be there…” Laura paused to take a breath, “And I was thinking that we could go together? You know, maybe hang out for a while there. Maybe even look at the stars?”

Carmilla stopped moving, her hands gripped on the edges of her bag. Did Laura just ask her out? Was this really happening?

Quicksand.

When Carmilla didn't respond right away, or even look up or that matter, Laura started to panic slightly. “I mean, we’ve been running out of people to pick apart here at the library too so maybe we could use it as a chance to get a new group of people to watch for this whole social psychology thing we’ve been talking about?”

Carmilla lips twitched up into the hint of a smile, she had gotten good at knowing the difference between rambling because she was Laura, and rambling because she was nervous. This was definitely nervous rambling. Carmilla finally looked up with a smile and was met with a shy look from Laura.

“I think I might like that very much.” Her voice was soft, and quiet, no hint of sarcasm. Her eyes locked on Laura’s and she watched as her chest rose with a deep breath and her lips curved upwards into a smile.

Laura felt like she was stuck there, looking into Carmilla’s dark eyes. Her voice was mesmerizing and the way she was looking at her made something in her stomach tighten. She took in a deep breath before remembering she hadn't actually said anything back to Carmilla yet.

“Okay! So Saturday then.” She let out her breath and stood up quickly, throwing her bag over her shoulder, grabbing her phone and giving Carmilla an awkward wave before heading out of the library.

Carmilla watched her walk away mumbling something to herself and let out a chuckle. She leaned back into the couch and twisted her lips to the side thoughtfully, “Yeah… Saturday.”
"You wanted to see me?" Laura shifted the book in her arms and held it tightly to her chest. She thought she had done well in her midterm but Professor Shields asking her to stay after class didn't seem like a good sign.

"Yes, I wanted you to take a look at your exam." Professor Shields flipped through a stack of tests till he found the one with Laura's name on it. Swirly 'L' and finished with a smiley face. Laura took the test and reluctantly let her eyes fall on the red mark in the top right corner.

"Are you serious?" Laura asked, wide eyed.

Professor shields chuckled and held out his hand for Laura to return her test.

"But thats an A right? 93 is an A, Isn't it?" Laura asked, still a little shocked.

"It is.” He placed Laura's test back in its place, "It seems you've improved."

"Uh, yeah!" Laura was over being shocked and had moved onto being extremely excited.

"With the improvements you've made I wanted to give you the option of putting a stop to the tutoring.” Shields attention was only half on Laura and half on the new students entering the room for his next class.

Stop tutoring? But that would mean no more Carmilla, wouldn't it? Sure Laura considered them to be friends but up to this point it was mostly based on circumstance. They had become friends because Carmilla didn't have the choice not to spend time with Laura. Given the option would she still spend time with her?

"I think I'd like to keep up with the tutoring." Her words came out fast, like if she didn't say it right away she might not have the option anymore. "I mean, it's been really helpful."

"Very well." He offered her a small smile before moving around her to get ready to start his class, "I just wanted to give you the choice."
And just like that he was diving into his next class, leaving Laura to make her exit while overthinking what had just happened.

Was it fair to trap Carmilla like that? Was it fair to trap Carmilla like that? Was it fair to trap Carmilla like that? Was trap even the right word? Was she being silly in thinking Carmilla wouldn't hang out with her without being forced to? She did say yes to the carnival, after all. But that was after Laura had brought up using it as a study date to watch people. Why had she done that? Or right, cause she's an idiot.

—

Carmilla had slipped in while Laura was talking to Professor Shields at the front of the room. Like usual she made her way up to the back of the auditorium and dropped down into one of the seats near the wall. She kicked her foot up onto the seat in front of her and sank down low in it.

Showing up to class was such a boring way to spend her day and it was severely cutting into her regular naps.

She had yet to call her mother back and honestly had no intention to. Her mother would find her if she really wanted to. But the email from Shields was something she was actually nervous about. Especially seeing the face Laura was making up front.

For the first time in her life Carmilla wished she had sat closer to the front so she could hear what they were talking about. The only thing she could think of was Laura's test. Had she done poorly and now they were both in trouble? If that was the case it wasn't Laura's fault at all. It had to be her fault.

She was about to march down to the front of the room and take the blame but Laura turned and left before she could. Carmilla would have to set the record straight after class, then. Maybe she could get Laura a retake.

—

"She what?" Carmilla's mouth hung agape at the news.

"Next time you start demanding a retake make sure they actually need it first." Shields shook his head and packed up his things.

"If she passed, why did you want to see us both?" Carmilla's asked slightly confused. She had never been asked to see a teacher for being good before.

"I wanted to congratulate Laura, and give you the option of stepping down as her tutor." He grabbed his bag and gestured for Carmilla to follow him out.

"Step down?" Carmilla followed him into the hallway, avoiding crashing into other students making their way to class.

"Your attendance over the past few weeks has been great, and with the obvious success of you taking the time to tutor Miss Hollis, I believe you've more than earned the extra credit needed to bring your grade up." He pushed open the door leading outside and let Carmilla lead him out, "If you keep up the attendance and class participation you're going to pass without a problem."

"What about Laura?" Carmilla asked, gripping her jacket and pulling. It tighter around herself.

"I can assign her another tutor."

"I can assign her another tutor."
"That's ok."

"What's ok?" Shields asked, pulling open the door to the administration building.

"I'll keep tutoring her." Carmilla shrugged and followed him in.

Shields stopped walking and turned to her with a perplexed expression, "Really?"

"Yeah, really."

"Even though I'm telling you that you don't have to?" He seemed positively lost at the idea of Carmilla volunteering to do extra work.

Carmilla scoffed, "Yeah, what's the big deal?"

He looked at her for a second trying to decide if she was being serious or not. He was well acquainted with her sarcasm and overall lazy attitude so he knew full well this was out of character.

He nodded slowly before starting down the hall again, "No big deal. Makes my life easier, actually. Now I don't have to find her a new tutor."

Carmilla was following slowly but noticed they were fast approaching the deans office, "Great, that all then?"

She didn't wait for an answer after seeing her mother through the open office door. They made eye contact and Lilita was on her feet the same time Carmilla turned and rushed back towards the doors leading out of the building.

Shields watched the Dean speed walk past him after Carmilla. He turned just in time to see Carmilla smash open the doors and make a break for it. He let out a chuckle and shook his head. There was the Carmilla he enjoyed so much.

——

“How about this one?” Laura turned around and pulled gently on the hem of her shirt as she looked down at her outfit.

“What— is that even yours?” Laf raised an eyebrow and leaned back on their hands on Laura’s bed.

Laura looked down at the shirt and smiled, “Well no. I kind of borrow it from someone and just haven’t given it back yet.”

“Its Carmilla’s isn't it?” Laf grinned knowingly.

“What? Why would you—“ Laura looked up embarrassed and noticed Laf’s smug grin and let out a laugh, “Ok yeah, it is. How’d you know?”

“Because your face did that thing.” Laf stood up and walked to the closet and started sifting through the things hung up.

“That thing?” Laura’s eyebrows pushed together as they ignored Laf pulling things from the closet and dropping them to the floor.

“Yeah, you know, that thing it does when you talk about Carmilla.” Laf held up a dress to Laura and looked it over before tossing it to the ground.
“Thats crazy, my face doesn’t do a thing.” Laura scoffed but was suddenly worried that Laf was right. Did her face do a thing? Because lately she had noticed her heart did a thing…

“This.” Laf lifted a hanger, “Wear this.”

Laura grabbed the hanger and held the dress up against herself with a frown, “This will be too cold.”

“Not if you wear this, and this too.” Laf tossed some tights and a sweater on the bed and placed their hands on their hips with a grin.

“You’re good at this.” Laura looked at the outfit they had picked out and smiled at them. “And my face doesn’t do a thing.”

“Sure it doesn’t, frosh.” Laf grinned and turned and walked out of the bedroom with a little extra strut.

Laf walked into the kitchen and grabbed a brownie from off the counter and took a bite. They hummed at how good they tasted but frowned when they saw Perry sitting on the couch with a worried expression. Stress baking. Tasted so good, but the pouting was always a little distracting.

“Everything ok Perr?” Laf shoved the rest of the brownie in their mouth before making their way over to Perry and sitting down next to them.

“Of course. Why wouldn’t everything be ok?” Perry’s face was strained in a grimace trying to be a smile.

Laf twisted their lips to the side and ran a hand through their hair, “You know, I think you’re pretty great.”

“You do?” Perry turned quickly, the worry clear in her eyes.

“Yeah.” Laf nodded assuredly, “Like, I think its great that you have a big heart and care about a lot of people.” Then scooted a little closer to Perry and put their arm around her shoulder, “And I think its great that your friends are so important to you and you’d do anything for them. And I think its great that you do you best to help people.”

Perry gave them a small smile, her face relaxing with each new compliment.

“But you know what I think is the greatest?” Laf asked, tilting their head and giving Perry’s shoulder a squeeze.

“What?” Perry asked innocently, her expression more curious than worried now.

“Your brownies.” Laf grinned.

“Oh, you.” Perry giggled and leaned her shoulder into them.

“Feeling better?” Laf asked, smiling brightly as Perry’s smile started to grow bigger.

“Much.” Perry smiled brightly at Laf before leaning over and placing a soft kiss on their cheek.

Laf looked down bashfully, their smile wide and cheeks dangerously close to matching their hair color while Perry let out a giggle and stood up.

“Oh my!” Perry dashed towards the kitchen, “I left this place a mess!”
Laf chuckled as they watched Perry make quick work of gathering dishes and wiping the counter. She must be feeling better if she’s moved on from baking to cleaning.

This is stupid. Carmilla drummed her fingers on the steering wheel as she let out another heavy sigh. She had been sitting outside Laura’s apartment for a good 10 minutes trying to decide if she should go in and knock on her door or just text her letting her know she was there. It wasn't a date. Or was it? This is so stupid.

She pulled her phone out and hovered over Laura’s number with her thumb for a second before pressing it an putting the phone to her ear. Calling seemed like fair middle ground between a text and knocking.

It was on the 4th ring when Carmilla starts regretting her choice to call. Was she early? Had Laura changed her mind?

There was the sound of shuffling, what sounded like Laura tripping then an out of breath, "hello?" Broke through the phone.

"Um, hey." Carmilla greeted, still completely unsure she made the right choice in calling.

"Perry stop doing the dishes, we have to go!"

"I'm sorry?" Carmilla spoke slowly, sinking back into the drivers seat.

"No sorry, not you!" Laura was back and this time probably talking to Carmilla, "Perry was just- oh never mind. What's up?"

Carmilla chuckled at Laura's attempt to seem calm but she could practically imagine her face scrunched up and fingers clenched. "Did you want me to come up? I'm outside and wasn't sure if..

"Oh! No! That's great!" Laura exclaimed a little less frazzled and more excited, "I'll gather the troops and we will be down in a minute!"

Carmilla sat up quickly, "wait, we?"

But it was too late. Laura had already hung up and Carmilla was left to try to figure out this increasingly confusing evening on her own.

A few minutes later Laura followed behind the ginger twins as they made their way towards Carmilla's car.

"I still don't understand why we are going with you." Laf walked ahead of Laura, "isn't this a date?"

"No, I don't think so." Laura whined, "I mean I thought it might be or could be but then I said we could go as a way to study so I don't know if she thinks it's a date or studying and I don't want to assume it's a date I she doesn't think it is and look like an idiot."

"So in order to not look like an idiot, you are bringing your two roommates with you, and your psych textbook?" Laf shook their head in disbelief.

"I panicked." Laura grumbled, ushering the two red heads towards the car.

"Well I'm excited." Perry chirped happily, "I love carnivals!"
Laura waved to Carmilla as they got closer to the car and smiled when Carmilla lifted her fingers off the steering wheel in a half assed gesture of waving back.

"Shotgun!" Laf called out as they stepped up to the car.

Carmilla heard their claim to the front seat and her jaw dropped and her hands gripped the wheel tighter.

Seriously?

"Seriously?" Laura turned wide eyed to face Laf.

Laf just shrugged and reached for the door handle, "I get car sick in the back."

"Oh my god." Laura was a mixture of embarrassed and flustered over this whole thing already and she hadn't even gotten into the car yet.

Carmilla watched straight faced as Laf climbed in the front seat and put on their seat belt. Laf turned to face her with a goofy grin and was met with a few slow blinks before Carmilla rolled her eyes and sighed before looking straight ahead.

"Hey Carm!" Laura greeted as she climbed in the back seat, trying to hide her disappointment in Laf stealing the better seat, "I hope you don't mind us giving these guys a ride?"

"Why would I mind?" Carmilla turned around ready to give her signature smirk to Laura. Then she saw the textbook and had to fight the urge to frown. She turned back to the front and sank a little lower in her seat. Her voice changed from light and playful to down right closed off. "We are just going to study, right?"

She was hoping Laura would correct her, tell her they were hanging out more than studying, that she had in fact asked her out like Carmilla had originally thought. But Laura didn't say anything. And because Carmilla was focused on driving, she didn't catch the disappointed look on Laura's face through the rear view mirror.

Laura sighed and looked out the window. Guess that answered that question. Perry gave her leg a gentle squeeze and tried to offer her a smile but Laura just turned back to the window and watched as the carnival lights drew closer.

They pulled into the campus parking lot and as soon as the car had shut off Laf and Perry were jumping out of the car. Apparently they loved carnivals.

Carmilla climbed out and pulled her leather jacket over her flannel and grabbed a beanie and shoved the end of it in her back pocket. It wasn't too cold out with the sun still up but nights were definitely starting to cool off now that it was nearing the end of October.

"Ready?" Carmilla asked, shutting her door and locking the car.

"Yep." Laura smiled and gripped her hands together behind her back.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Carmilla raised an eyebrow as she looked through the window at the psych book sitting on the back seat.

Laura smiled and started walking towards the carnival before spinning around to walk backwards, "Nope."
She was determined to turn this night around. There may have been a massive mix up due to her uncanny ability to talk when she should really just shut up, but it only took a minute into the drive over for her to decide she was going to fix it.

**Step one: get rid of any sign that she was actually doing homework on this outing.**

**Step two: well... She hadn’t really figured out what step two was. But once she figured it out, boy was she going to rock at step two.**

Carmilla took a few long strides and caught up with Laura just before walking into the carnival. She still wasn’t sure what was going on. Laura had brought chaperones in the form of the ginger twins but they had already seemed to have disappeared into the craziness of the carnival. She had also brought her book, which she suddenly decided she didn't need.

If there was ever an award for sending mixed signals, Laura Hollis would be the winner. Every time.

"Where to first, cutie?" Carmilla asked, stopping to look around the chaos of lights and music.

She had to admit, the university did know how to throw a party. There was a Ferris wheel, carousel, inflatable obstacle courses, cotton candy, hot dogs, dozens of carnival games, even a petting zoo. And that was all within the small space Carmilla could see from where her feet were firmly planted.

When Laura didn't answer she turned to make sure she was ok and couldn't help but laugh at the sight.

Laura's eyes were wide, her smile even wider, and it looked like she wanted to do everything all at once and would never be able to choose where to begin.

"Oh no, cupcake." Carmilla shook her head. "We are here to study, not have fun, remember?"

"Oh come on grumpy, one ride won't hurt." Laura was determined to get that first step out of the way. Not there to study. Not at all. She just had to make Carmilla believe that.

"Fine." Carmilla said flatly, "One ride."

"Yes!" Laura made a fist and pumped it in the air in victory, "To the ferris wheel!"

"Nope." Carmilla quickly shoved her hands in her pockets, "Any ride but that one."

Laura gave her a sad look but quickly saw she wasn't going to change her mind, "Fine. Carousel then." She smiled and started walking towards it, "I want to see you ride that giant panther."

Carmilla rolled her eyes and started to drag her feet to follow after Laura. Her composed demeanor was going to be hard to keep up with if she was going to have to watch Laura bounce around excitedly all night. She was pretty adorable and every time she turned with that wide smile of hers, Carmilla felt her hard exterior melting just a little bit more.

——

"You sure they won't mind is ditching them?" SJ asked as she looped her arm through Kirsch's.

"I have a feeling they won’t mind at all." Laf grinned and led the group away from Laura and Carmilla who were settling down at a table with a bag of popcorn.

Perry looked over her shoulder with a worried expression. Carmilla hadn't said a word to her all
night and she didn't really blame her. She had been awful to her. And even though Perry was still worried for Laura, she decided to take the advice she had given Laura not too long ago and try to give Carmilla a chance to be more than her reputation. Reluctantly she followed Laf, kirsch and SJ to the row of carnival games.

"Babe, watch." Kirsch smiled as SJ before taking a small ring and tossing it forward, trying to loop it around the top of one of the glass bottles placed together.

6 rings later and they were all on the ground and not on bottles. SJ giggled at the confused expression on Kirsch's face. Apparently he thought it was going to be easy to win her a stuffed animal.

Laf shook their head, "this games impossible." They scoffed, "it's rigged to take your money and leave you with broken confidence."

"I think you're right dude." Kirsch turned to look at them, "I threw those rings like, perfectly bro, and none of them landed right."

Perry and SJ smiled at each other before SJ patted Kirsch's back, "why don't we go try a different game. I don't like those prizes anyway."

"Don't worry babe, I'll get you the best prize here." Kirsch smiled and started leading them to another game.

—

"Ok, this one should be easy." Laf grinned at kirsch while Perry and SJ stood behind them with amused expressions. "You just have to get the ball to land in one of the cups and you win the goldfish."

"I'll bet you I win before you do." Kirsch narrowed his eyes at Laf and held up one of his ping pong balls.

"You're on." Laf nodded confidently as they lined up their shot.

—

"Ok maybe it's harder than I thought." Laf frowned and shoved their hands in their pockets.

Perry covered her mouth to hide her snickering at how disappointed they were. This truly was a sight. Kirsch and lafontaine competing (poorly) for silly carnival prizes. They were already down $30 worth of games lost, they should have just paid for the prize instead of playing these silly games just to keep losing.

"Oh! Dude!" Kirsch lit up as he saw the next game, "this one will be easy!" He grabbed SJ's hand and tugged her to the next booth.

Laf and Perry followed a little less excited. Laf stepped up next to kirsch and SJ nudged perrys shoulder.

"Maybe we should be the ones trying to win them prizes." She whispered with a smile. "At this rate we will be here all night."

Perry just nodded and smiled watching the pair step up for their shots.
A stack of milk jugs sat on a table in front of them. All they had to do was knock over the stack and they would win. Easy enough, right?

Kirsch sent a wink over his shoulder to SJ before he wound back his arm. He threw it forward, launching the softball with impressive force and even more impressive speed. It would have been more impressive if he had hit *any* of the milk jugs, though.

"Ha!" Lafontaine belted, pointing at his still standing stack with a huge smile.

"Shut up." Kirsch frowned and tried to secretly look over his shoulder at SJ. His frown deepened when he saw her trying to fight the smile on her face from him completely missing his Target. "You try it. It's not that easy."

Laf stepped up to the counter and picked up a softball and tossed it straight up in the air a couple times before squaring their feet and pulling their arm back. Their tongue poked out of the corner of their mouth and one of their eyes closed.

Kirsch watched with pursed lips and crossed arms at their slow set up. There's no way they can throw harder then him. No way.

Lafs took a breath then gently tossed the ball underhand towards the stack of bottles. Kirsch's mouth dropped open as it went right to the stack and knocked down the bottle sitting on the very bottom row right in the middle.

The bottle barely teetered before falling over, the rest stacked on top crumbling down after it.

"No way!" Kirsch hollered, cheers from behind them being louder than his cry of disbelief.

Laf lifted their hand in the shape of a gun and blew on their finger to brag about their shot. "Brain before brawn big guy."

"That was amazing!!" Perry yelled as her arms wrapped around lafs neck in a hug.

Laf chuckled and wrapped their arms around her waste and whispered, "think so?"

"Yes!" Perry smiled as she pulled back. "That was very impressive"

Laf smiled bashfully, "it was nothing really. It's more about placement of the ball than force."

The game attendant walked over and handed them their prize. A small teddy bear holding a heart between his paws. Laf immediately took it and handed it to Perry with a wide smile.

Perry accepted it and hugged it to her chest with a smile as kirsch and SJ walked over.

"Come on." Kirsch nodded toward a few games they hadn't tried yet, "you're not the only one that needs to win their girl a prize." He wiggled his eyebrows before leaning over and giving SJ a kiss.

Lafs face started turning red and they immediately followed after Kirsch who had already started walking to another booth.

SJ gave Perry a smile and Perry started turning redder than Laf's and couldn't even begin to hide the smile on her face.

"Oh we aren't- I mean they aren't my.." Perry stammered with a high voice.

"Uh huh." SJ teased, "all I know is they've both been playing these dumb games for forever and as
soon as they won a prize they immediately gave it to you."

Perry felt a flutter in her stomach as she walked with SJ, teddy bear clutched in a hug against her chest. "We are just best friends. We've known each other forever."

"You can still be best friends and be more." SJ shrugged before skipping up to grab onto Kirsch's hand.

Perry thought about it for a second, the possibility of it all. Lafontaine had always been her best friend. Her person. It's just the way it was. But maybe... the idea of being more wouldn't be so bad. She hid her smile in the fur of the teddy bear in her hands as she sped up to walk with Lafontaine, bumping their shoulder playfully once she caught up. Lafontaine gave her the warmest smile back and Perry could feel how much they loved her simply by the look in their eyes.

Yeah, maybe it wouldn't be too crazy to think about it.

——

"How about them?" Carmilla asked before throwing another popcorn kernel in her mouth.

Laura sat on the edge of the table, her legs hanging over the side and her feet swinging back and forth slowly. She reached over into the bag of popcorn in Carmilla's hand and grabbed a handful.

"I don't know how you can just..." Laura shrugged and filled her mouth with popcorn, "tell just by watching someone."

"Come on, it's totally obvious." She tossed another piece in her mouth before hopping up on the table next to Laura.

They had been there for an hour and so far things were going pretty great. Laf and Perry have reappeared with kirsch and SJ. The blush on Perry's face at the new couple joining them was a shade of red Carmilla had never seen before.

No matter how much teasing and prodding, Perry couldn't manage to string together a coherent sentence while looking at either of them. The best part was Carmilla and the art models were the only ones that knew why.

After embarrassing Perry a good amount, they all went on a few rides together. Correction... Perry, Laf kirsch, SJ and Laura had gone on a few rides. Carmilla stood nearby and pretended to look bored.

She actually couldn't take her eyes off Laura, though. And even though she wasn't a fan of rides, she was definitely becoming very a fan of watching Laura go on rides. She was so innocent, and happy. Her laugh carried with it a lightness then made Carmilla smile even if she was trying not to. She could pick out Laura's laugh from anywhere. If didn't matter how loud it had gotten or if she lost sight of her. The sound of Laura laughing was like her own personal homing beacon.

With all the rides and lines, talking came and went fairly easily. Kirsch, SJ and the ginger duo seemed to be extremely good at dominating whatever discussion was happening at the time and that left Carmilla and Laura to steal glances and hide smiled from each other while they pretending to listen to whatever the Reds were saying.

This was actually the first time since walking into the carnival that Laura and Carmilla were actually alone and Laura couldn't help but notice how comfortable it felt.
It started with Carmilla making fun of people, naturally. And then morphed into people watching. It wasn't exactly the turn Laura was hoping for, but it definitely didn't feel like studying even if they technically were.

"You can't just say he's only doing it to impress the girl." Laura argued. Taking another handful of popcorn.

"Oh please. Watch him." Carmilla scooted closer to Laura so their thighs were pressed together and their shoulders bumped gently.

Laura tried to focus on the couple they had been talking about but couldn't get her mind to focus on anything but the warmth of Carmilla's body. The sun was just about set and the air was growing colder and Carmilla's warmth was an obvious contrast to the fall breeze surrounding them.

Laura slowly leaned into Carmilla, pressing their bodies slightly tighter together and watched out of the corner of her eye as Carmilla's lips turned up into the slightest smile at her movement.

Step two... Sure, this could be step two. It seemed to be working so why not?

"See?" Carmilla turned to look at Laura and was surprised to find the girls soft brown eyes already on her.

Laura locked eyes with Carmilla and smiled shyly before turning to look where she was supposed to be looking in the first place. Carmilla watched her turn her head and her cheeks turn pink before turning back to the couple herself.

"He looks perfectly happy to-" Laura's posture stiffened then deflated, "oh."

Carmilla chuckled and leaned back on the palms on her hands on the table, "Told you. Changing ones own actions to appease or impress another person, thereby ignoring ones own wants and desires."

Laura rolled her eyes, "you could have just said, guy does something he doesn't want to to impress a girl."

"I could have." Carmilla smirked and twisted her leg so her knee bumped into Laura's playfully. "But it's Maslows heigharchy of needs."

Laura turned her head around to stick her tongue out at Carmilla quickly before hopping off the table, "I'm going to grab more food. Want anything?"

Carmilla was up and on her feel faster than Laura had ever seen her move, "I got it."

Laura gave her a questioning look, "you sure? Cause you got the popcorn."

Carmilla took a step forward into Laura's space and leaned closer to her ear, "I'm sure."

Laura shook her head but had a smile. At least playful flirty Carmilla was back and whatever bad mood that had been lingering in the car was gone. She hopped back up on the table and pulled her cardigan tighter around herself as she watched Carmilla disappear into the crowds near all the food trucks.

"Laura, hey!" Danny zigzagged between people to approach Laura, "there you are, I've been looking for you."
"You have?" Laura looked around to see if Danny was with anyone before realizing she wasn't.

"Well yeah silly." Danny smiled wide and was quick to sit next to Laura and put her arm around her shoulder.

"Um, well you found me." Laura smiled awkwardly and twisted slightly to face Danny, causing her arm to move away from her shoulder hesitantly. She glanced into the crowd in front of them to see if she could spot Carmilla but couldn’t.

"Yeah, I ran into Kirsch and his new girlfriend and they said you might be over here." Danny leaned back on her hands and smiled down at Laura. "She's kind of..." Danny pursed her lips and looked thoughtful trying to come up with the right word.

"She's what?" Laura asked slightly annoyed. She liked SJ. Sure she was a little more party girl than Laura was, but she was nice and funny and kind of perfect for Kirsch.

Danny noticed Laura's tone and knew things were already going poorly. Why were things so hard for them now? Things used to be effortless, almost perfect.

"Never mind." Danny forced a smile hoping desperately she could turn things around quickly. "So, do you want to hit the Ferris wheel or.."

Danny's face twisted into confusion and her words died off slowly as soon as she saw Carmilla approaching. She quickly looked down at Laura and noticed how quickly Laura's face lit up with a smile as soon as she saw the dark haired girl.

"They had pretzels or cotton candy so I took an educated guess that given the opportunity to eat something made purely of sugar, you would take it." Carmilla was adjusting the food in her hands and didn't look up until after she had finished talking. Her playful smile shifting to annoyance at seeing the red head so close to Laura.

She slowly handed the cotton candy to Laura without saying anything else. Laura took it happily and took a bite before hopping off the table and stepping towards Carmilla.

"Wait, did you guys come together?" Danny asked, poorly hiding the hurt on her face.

"Well, yeah." Laura shrugged. She didn't want to say more, especially after turning a would be date into a study session then trying to reverse it. She wasn't sure what words were safe to use in this moment, or why Danny seemed so surprised at the thought of them being there together.

Carmilla raised an eyebrow and pulled off a piece of pretzel to eat silently as she watched the exchange between Laura and Danny.

"What?" Danny's eyes dropped to the ground and her voice was a whisper, like she was talking to herself.

“I thought I told you a bunch of us were coming together and…” Laura trailed off, finally catching onto what Danny had thought was going to happen tonight.

Danny sighed, “Oh my god.” She turned to look away from the two girls in front of her, “I cant believe I thought.. No, instead, I get to watch first hand you two..” She couldn't even finish the sentence she was so hurt, or angry, or both.

“Seriously?” Laura looked from a silent Carmilla to a furious Danny, “You’re mad because, what? I am spending time with other..” friends? crushes? “…people? And, wait, cant believe you thought
“Nothing.” Danny answered immediately. Clearly aware that she had read the entire situation wrong. What she thought was going to be a night spent trying to rekindle things between Laura was clearly not that at all.

“Did you think that we’d run into each other here and we’d…?”

Oh man this was a mess. The kind of thing where you know you should look away but just can’t. Laura felt awful but also kind of frustrated that Danny just didn't get that they weren't going to be getting back together. Carmilla was trying to stay out of it but still trying to read the situation still not knowing what her and Laura were, or could be. And Danny.. well Danny was mad. Mostly at herself, partly at Laura, and for some reason, a good amount at Carmilla.

Danny ran her hand through her hair, “No, not anymore I don’t. I can’t believe your nerve.”

“Can’t believe my nerve?” Laura was truly surprised by Danny’s reaction. Her jaw dropped and her eyes went wide. “I’m not the one getting angry over nothing!”

“Well, you’re not the one who got thrown over for Elvira, mistress of the snark!” Danny spat back angrily.

Carmilla made a face at the jab but continued to stay silent, picking at her pretzel. She knew it wasn’t her fight and as much as she would love to put Danny in her place, she had a feeling it was Laura that needed to do it.

“Okay, that is so unfair.” Laura’s voice didn’t sound angry anymore, just annoyed. This was definitely not part of her plan for the evening.

“No, you know what?” Danny breathed out trying to calm herself down, “I’m not having this conversation.” She ran her hand through her hair again and turned to walk away.

“Come back never.” Carmilla mumbled under her breath before taking another bite of her pretzel.

Danny turned around to glare at Carmilla. She wanted to say something but the words wouldn’t come. Turning her attention to Laura she closed her eyes for a second before opening them and looking directly at her, “Next time you see me.. Pretend you don’t.”

Laura actually looked hurt at the words. She knew things were different between them, that it would take some time to get back to being friends, but this was worse than she thought. She didn’t know what to do and didn’t want to say anything she would regret so instead she reached down and grabbed Carmilla’s wrist and started pulling her into the crowd. She looked over her shoulder and saw Danny storming off in the opposite direction.

Laura dragged Carmilla along without much protest and quickly decided where she wanted to go. She needed a second to breath without all the chaos closing in on her. Carmilla had started the outing by saying there was no way she was getting on the ferris wheel, but Laura was sure she would make an exception right now.

“No, cupcake, stop.” Carmilla started to pull against Laura the second she realized where they were headed. Her head fell back to look at the tall wheel in front of them. The lights were blinking every color you could imagine, the carnival music and sounds of games being played in the background started to blur together as they got closer.

“Its just a ferris wheel, Carm.” Laura didn’t bother looking back or she would have seen that it wasn't
just anything, and Carmilla looked absolutely terrified.

“No Laura, I’m serious.”

That should have been the sign for Laura to pay attention. Carmilla using her actual name. It didn't happen often and when it did it was because there was a certain amount of heaviness or importance in whatever the moment was.

Carmilla’s throat started to feel like it was closing off and her breathing grew labored. She should have been able to pull her wrist from Laura's grip but as soon as Laura handed the operator their tickets it was like her body was no longer attached to her brain and all she could do was panic without being able to act on it.

Before she knew it she was sitting in the seat, a bar being clamped over her lap and the contraption was jerking forward, her seat swinging and lifting at the same time.

*Shit shit shit* was all that was going through Carmilla’s mind. With every wrench forward her seat made, her grip on the bar over her lap tightened. Her knuckles were white and her hands already hurt from how tightly she was holding on and it had barely been a minute. Her eyes were clamped shut and she was trying to remind herself to actually breathe. This was already embarrassing enough, passing out would only add to it.

“Oh my gosh, she hates me.”

Laura could have been talking this whole time, Carmilla wasn't sure. This is the first time her voice cut through the panic and even though Laura clearly had no idea what was going on yet, her voice somehow made the panic in Carmilla’s chest lessen.

“I mean I said maybe i’d see her here not ambush me and we can—“ Laura turned to Carmilla and finally saw how stiff her body was, “Carm? You ok?”

Carmilla eyes were shut tight and her breathing was actually at a good pace finally and it didn't feel like he lungs were collapsing. She opened her mouth to reply but the words got stuck in her throat. *No she wasn't ok.* This is exactly why she had started this night out by saying she wouldn't set foot on this death trap.

Laura suddenly felt awful. Carmilla had tried to tell her she didn't want to get on the ferris wheel but in her moment of rage she hadn't listened. More than that, she completely ignored her. She leaned forward to see how far up they were, thinking maybe it wasn't too late to stop the ride and get off, but the movement rocked their bench and Carmilla’s hands tightened on the rail and she shifted quickly and nervously trying to lean back and stop the sudden forward movement.

“Sorry! Sorry!” Laura leaned back, trying to stop the swinging and slid her hand over to where Carmilla’s was gripping the bar and gently placed hers on top of Carmilla’s, “Its ok, I promise.”

Carmilla swallowed hard and without thinking let go of the railing and turned her hand over, lacing her fingers with Laura’s.

Laura’s eyes went wide watching their hands clasp together and she was grateful Carmilla’s eyes were closed so she wouldn't see the scarlet hue of her face. She lowered their hands to her lap and brushed her thumb along Carmilla’s hand in what she hoped was a soothing manner.

“I’m sorry, I didn't think you were that serious.” Laura was watching Carmilla and felt helpless in this situation. She couldn't stop the ride, she couldn't get them back on the ground, and she had no clue how to make Carmilla feel better. “I didn't know you would.. I just didn't know.”
“It’s fine.” Carmilla was finally able to breath out through a tense jaw. Her whole body was starting to hurt with how tight her muscles were and she couldn’t figure out how to relax them.

“As soon as we pass the operator I’ll make him stop the ride so we can get off.” Laura leaned forward again to check their height before remembering that it would make them swing.

“Cupcake.” Carmilla’s grip tightened on Laura’s hand, “Just stop moving.”

“Ok.” Laura whispered, leaning back into place. This was definitely hurting her 2 step plan of making this an awesome night with Carmilla. She let out a sigh and dropped her head backwards to let it rest on the back of their seat when she suddenly got an idea. Sure they were pretty high up and moving excruciatingly slow, but maybe she could distract Carmilla enough that it wouldn’t be so bad.

“Hey Carm?” Laura asked quietly, looking over at Carmilla.

She was taking deep breaths and even with her eyes closed she looked like she was concentrating. Her head turned slightly at the sound of Laura’s voice and the tension on her face lessened a bit. Something Laura considered a good thing.

“Hmm?” Carmilla hummed out, afraid if she tried to speak the words would get stuck again. She lessened the tightness of her grip on Laura’s hand but still kept it firmly in her own.

“I was just noticing— well it’s dark out now and I was wondering if you could show me where the big spoon is?” Laura smiled as soon as the obvious fear on Carmilla’s face shifted to confusion.

“The what?” She asked with a scoff.

“The big spoon.” Laura slowly scooted a little closer, trying desperately not to rock their seat. “You know, in the stars?”

They were nearing the top of the ferris wheel. It had been a slow ride so far, mostly from constantly stopping to let riders on or off. They hadn’t made a full circle yet, or even made it half way.

“You mean the big dipper?” Carmilla’s eyes opened and she looked over at Laura amused.

Laura’s smile widened as soon as dark eyes were locked on hers. Distracting her was working, and what better way than to let Carmilla prove how much smarted she was than Laura.

“Right, that.” Laura chuckled and kept playing along. She knew what the big dipper was. And how to find it. She actually knew a lot more about constellations than she was letting on. Thanks to a freshman astronomy class, she could probably give Carmilla a run for her money, but decided if playing clueless was helping ease the fear, it wouldn't hurt to keep up the charade.

Carmilla took a deep breath and tried to swallow down the remaining nervousness. Maybe if she didn't think about how high she was, it wouldn't be as scary. Just focus on the brightness of the stars. Just focus on Laura. Same thing, really.

“Alright.” Carmilla leaned her head back and slowly let go of her death grip on the railing in front of them and lifted her free hand to point above them. “See those 4 stars there? Those form the bowl of the Big Dipper.”

“Oh, right, I see it now.” Laura wasn’t even looking at the stars though, she was watching Carmilla. Relieved that the scared expression that was there just moments ago was slowly melting away as her eyes searched the stars above them. “What about the little dipper?”
Carmilla’s lips twitched up into a crooked smile. She could feel Laura’s eyes on her and knew what she was doing. Before anything else could happen, the ferris wheel jolted to a stop, their seat swinging haphazardly because of it. Carmilla eyes clamped shut once more, her hand going back to gripping the lap bar.

Laura frowned and gave Carmilla’s hand a squeeze before scooting closer once more. Their bodies pressed together, Laura tried to unlock their hands so she could put her arm around Carmilla, hoping that if she held onto her tightly, it would help somehow.

The release of her hand made Carmilla eyes open quickly and her head turn towards Laura. “Don’t.” Carmilla whispered, “Don’t let go?”

Laura immediately tightened her grip on Carmilla’s hand and shook her head, “Never.”

Carmilla swallowed hard and nodded back, licking her lips and keeping her eyes locked on Laura. She knew with anyone else she would be embarrassed for relying so much on the support of someone else. But the look in Laura’s eyes made her feel ok for needing her in that moment.

“Thanks,” She breathed out a slow breath, “I just don’t like heights.”

“Thats ok.” Laura shrugged with a smile, “I don’t like spiders.”

Carmilla chuckled and immediately felt lighter. Her hand gripping the lap bar let go and she rubbed her palm on her thigh, keeping her eyes on Laura’s goofy smile. She really was the most adorable thing Carmilla had ever seen.

“No, I’m serious.” Laura’s face was serious and she turned slightly so her knee was pressing into Carmilla’s thigh, “I found one in the corner of my room and I looked away for one second, seriously one second, and when i looked back it was gone.” She shook her head at the memory, “I couldn’t sleep in my room for a week.”

Carmilla gave her a small smile, “How old were you?”

“Oh this was a week ago.” Laura smiled, “I only went back to my room because Laf was such a blanket hog.”

Carmilla let out a laugh, her shoulders shaking loosely and her head dropping forward a bit as she tried to hide her smile a bit.

“Feeling better?” Laura smiled at her, trying to ignore the flutter in her stomach at Carmilla’s laugh and knowing she was the cause of it.

“A bit.” Carmilla looked up at her, “Thank you.”

Laura shrugged and glanced back up towards the sky, “You shouldn't be thanking me, its my fault we are up here in the first place.”

“Its not so bad with you.” Carmilla said it before she knew it and blamed it on the height and not being able to filter her thoughts and stay calm at the same time.

Laura’s lips pressed together before she bit her bottom lip to try to keep from smiling, “You know, I never understood why falling stars were lucky. Wouldn't they be the opposite of lucky? Falling from the sky and everything.” She looked back up into the sky. It seemed she enjoyed those lights better than the flashing ones below them. There was something about sharing the sky with the stars, and
Carmilla took another breath, her lungs feeling free and the tightness in her chest no longer from panic, but from feeling Laura's thumb brush gently across her skin. She looked up in the same direction Laura's eyes were, "Maybe they are the lucky ones because they are doing more than what everyone has told them they are meant to do."

"Burning into nothing?" Laura asked, scooting closer to Carmilla so their bodies were pressed together. With the sun down and being up in the air unprotected, she was starting to feel the briskness of the fall air.

"The rest of the stars are fixed, set to stay in the sky where they shine. Maybe the ones that fall, the ones that burn out brightly are the lucky ones precisely for that reason." Carmilla glanced over at Laura out of the corner of her eye, relaxing more and more at the closeness they were sharing. "They burn so brightly that the sky can't hold them back."

"Interesting." Laura whispered as she leaned her head on Carmilla's shoulder slowly, still keeping her eyes on the sky.

Something was different up on top of the Ferris wheel. Maybe it was nerves, the stars or the cold air—but suddenly everything felt lighter. It felt natural to be so close to Carmilla, holding her hand and resting on her shoulder.

The way she was talking was so different than normal. Unguarded and thoughtful. It reminded her of their day spent at the junk yard. It was so relaxed, no pressure.

"If you think about it, it's the falling stars we wish on." Carmilla continued, turning her head slightly to breathe in Laura who was now so close to her she could practically feel her body buzzing because of it. "They are the stars that make us think of our wishes and dreams. Maybe they are lucky simply for that. For inspiring something in people that are millions of miles away."

Laura smiled and tilted her head slightly to look at Carmilla's face, "You're kind of a sap."

Carmilla scoffed like she was offended, "I am not." She lifted her shoulder, bumping Laura from her place on top of it.

"You so are." Laura smiled sitting up.

Carmilla frowned through a smile and glared playfully at Laura.

"But I like it." Laura grinned at her before bumping her knee against Carmilla's leg.

Their ferris wheel ride had started up again during their conversation and must have finished getting a new set of riders onboard because it was now rotating at a regular pace instead of stopping and starting abruptly. They were nearing the bottom and Laura was trying to decide if she should ask the operator to stop the ride so she and Carmilla could get off.

Before she had time to make a choice they were passing the bottom and Carmilla didn't even seem to notice.

"So why photography?" Laura asked as they started moving upwards again. Talking had seemed to
keep Carmilla distracted enough before, hopefully it would work again.

"What do you mean?" Carmilla must have noticed they were moving higher cause her voice wasn't as steady and her eyes were looking straight ahead.

"Well I saw your sketch and you're really good. Like, you could probably sell your art if you wanted good." Laura didn't want to let go of Carmilla's hand but was starting to get cold. She used her free hand to rub quickly up and down her arm, trying to create heat from the friction. "So why photography instead of art?"

Carmilla considered the question carefully for a moment, "I actually took art so I'd be better at photography."

They were nearing the bottom again, having made their way past the top once more and Carmilla let go of Laura's hand.

Laura frowned at the loss of Carmilla's hand but figured she was ready to get off the Ferris wheel. She hadn't wanted to get on in the first place and no amount of flirting or talking was going to keep her on longer than she had to be.

When they passed the operator once more Laura turned towards Carmilla surprised and saw her pulling her jacket off her shoulders.

"With art, you get to create a world." She pulled her jacket off and twisted in her seat and reached over to put it around Laura’s shoulders, “With photography, you get to find the beauty in a world already created.” Carmilla tugged on the collar of her jacket once it was around Laura’s shoulders and smiled at the smaller girl.

Laura gripped the edges of the jacket and pulled it tighter around her while offering a quiet ‘thanks’ as her eyes dropped to her lap, sure that her cheeks were red.

Carmilla pulled her beanie from her back pocket and pulled it over her wild curls.

“Being forced to create something worth looking at, makes me appreciate everything already around me more.” Carmilla leaned back into the seat just as they were reaching the top again. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying not to panic like she had before.

A hand slipped into hers and fingers gripped gently. Carmilla opened her eyes and saw Laura’s hand laced with her own on her lap and let out a slow breath.

“I like that.” Laura looked out over the carnival below them, “Creating beauty so you can learn to appreciate beauty already created.”

They were nearing the bottom slowly and this time they would probably be getting off. There had been a few stops of the ferris wheel already, no doubt emptying the cars just before theirs. Laura felt disappointed knowing once they step out of their little seat whatever was going on would probably change. For some reason being scared had helped Carmilla open up more than normal and she just knew as soon as her feet were firmly on the ground, the walls would come back up.

The ride came to a halt and the seat swayed a little but for the first time Carmilla didn't squeeze Laura’s hand tighter from being scared. Instead she slowly let go and reached for her back pocket while the operator unlatched the lap rail and opened it up to let them out.
Laura stood up but felt Carmilla grip onto her hand gently and pull it back towards her. She turned around to see Carmilla still sitting, her free hand reaching forward with a strip of tickets between her fingers.

“How about one more go around?” Carmilla smiled at Laura while the operator took the tickets and waited for Laura to sit back down.

“You sure?” Laura asked, sitting down and holding onto the lap bar once it was back in place.

“I’m sure.” Carmilla smiled as she slipped her hand back into Laura’s, “So why journalism?”

The ride jerked forward and Carmilla’s cool demeanor switched to scared once more. Laura couldn’t help but chuckle at the sight. This bad ass girl trying to be cool but failing every time the Ferris wheel moved. Laura gave Carmilla’s hand a squeeze, scooted closer to her and just looked at her for a second.

Eyes closed, slow breaths and furrowed brows… she was adorable when she was scared.

They ended up paying for 2 more rounds on the Ferris wheel and probably would have gone for a third if they had any tickets left. They talked about random things mostly. Classes, psychology, the stars… and enjoyed the comfortable silence that surrounded them between topics. It was nice, just being. And by the end it felt like Carmilla was holding Laura’s hand purely because she wanted to, and not because she was scared.

Laura nearly tripped as she stepped off the Ferris wheel, but thankfully Carmilla still had a hold of her hand and held her upright.

“See that wasn’t so bad, was it?” Laura asked as they walked through the crowd, completely aware that Carmilla hadn’t yet let go of her hand.

“Yeah, ok.” Carmilla rolled her eyes, “Once I got over the idea of plunging to my death it was a real treat.”

Laura laughed and was about to say something witty (at least she thought so) when she heard her name being yelled over the noise of the carnival.

“Perry?” Laura questioned, looking through the people surrounding them.

“Of course.” Carmilla muttered as soon as the pair of red heads broke through the crowd with Kirsch and SJ close behind.

“There you are!” Perry looked relieved to have found them until she saw their hands joined together and her eyes just about popped out of her head.

Laura saw the reaction and let go of Carmilla’s hand and walked up to Laf who was leaning over, their hands clutching their stomach. “What happened?”

“I tried to tell them I can eat a lot. Like, I win all the eating contests at the Zeta house. But they just kept trying to beat me.” Kirsch shrugged as she stepped up and clapped a hand on Laf’s shoulder.
Laf lurched forward and groaned in discomfort. “I’m gonna hurl.”

Laura grimaced and turned to Perry with questioning eyes.

“Someone decided that eating 2 hot dogs, a bag of popcorn, a piece of pizza and then a giant slushy was a good idea.” Perry crossed her arms over her chest and looked at Laf pointedly. “That same someone decided it was a brilliant idea to follow the smorgasbord by going on the tilt-a-whirl.”

“It was not a brilliant idea.” Laf groaned again and clutched tighter to their stomach.

“Kirsch said he could give us a ride home since its on the way to his place.” Perry uncrossed her arms and reached over and took hold of one of Laf’s. “So you get that side, i’ll get this one, and hopefully we make it home before they throw up every carnival food known to man.”

Laura have Carmilla an apologetic look before she reluctantly took hold of Laf’s free side to help hold them upright and looked back at Carmilla. "Hold on guys."

Letting go of Laf she ran back over to Carmilla and wrapped her arms around her neck. Carmilla went still for a moment, not knowing what to do. Finally her brain caught up with what was happening and she wrapped her arms around Laura's waist gently and pulled her tighter into her. She could smell the scent of Laura's fruity shampoo and feel her breath on her neck.

Her heart thumped heavily and Carmilla felt like Laura was holding her so close, she wasn't sure who's heart was being inside her chest.

Laura pulled back slowly but kept her arms around Carmilla's neck, "Thanks for coming, I had fun." she smiled, her eyes shining brighter than the blinking carnival lights surrounding them.

"Me too." Carmilla whispered, still nervous about their close proximity.

Laura bit her bottom lip as her eyes dropped to Carmilla's for a brief second before she let go, adjusted Carmilla's beanie slightly and started back towards the group waiting for her, "I'll see you Tuesday?"

"Tuesday." Carmilla called after her.

Then she was gone. The lingering smell of fruity shampoo and her hand still warm from holding Laura's.

Maybe it hadn't been about studying at all.

Laura watched out the window while Laf sat next to her, groaning in pain every minute or so. Perry rubbed circles on their back as they drove back to the apartment. IT was a silent ride for the most part, something Laura was grateful for. She pulled Carmilla's jacket higher around herself and smiled as she looked up at the stars filling the sky. The same stars they had looked at from the top of the Ferris wheel while Carmilla held tightly to her hand.

She saw a shooting star streak across the sky and immediately closed her eyes to make a wish. She made her wish and opened her eyes with a sigh, hoping that maybe the falling ones really were lucky.
Thats when she realized Laf was right all along.

"oh no." she whispered to herself as her head thumped against the window. She let out another sigh with a quiet grumble, "Worst. Crush. Ever."
"You guys make it home before the scientist lost their lunch?" Carmilla asked, packing up her art supplies.

"Oh. Yes. But just barely." She frowned, "I had to clean the bathroom at least 4 times yesterday, the poor thing."

Carmilla just nodded before throwing her bag over her shoulder and standing awkwardly waiting for Perry to finish packing up her things. She was terrible with apologies, and honestly wasn't sure she needed to offer Perry one. But she had returned the silent treatment at the carnival and knew she was one of Laura's best friends and didn't want the red head hurting her chances with Laura. She felt like they were already pretty slim to begin with.

"Did you- did you have a good time?" Perry grabbed her own bag and smiled hesitantly at Carmilla. "At the carnival I mean."

A small smile lifted the corners of Carmilla's lips and she ducked her head a bit to try and hide it. The memory of the carnival had the tendency to do that. Butterflies and shy smiles.

"Yeah, actually." She finally nodded and turned towards the door, "You?"

It was small talk and Carmilla hated small talk but it was better than nothing. And it seemed Perry was just as done with the whole not getting along thing as much as she was.

"Carmilla?" Perry spoke softly.

It was the tone you would use on a child when you had to admit you were wrong about something. It was sincere and apologetic without the words I'm sorry even being spoken yet.

"I'm sorry about before." She followed up as they walked out of the building. "I was terrible and you didn't deserve that and I just wanted you to know--"

"I'm going to stop you right there curly sue." Carmilla turned to her and grabbed the straps of her bag
over her shoulders, "I don't do this whole feelings, bonding and shit." Somehow she was managing to look bored with the whole thing while conveying an easy forgiveness at the same time. "Let's just call it good and move on, ya?"

She raised her eyebrows and nodded at Perry waiting for a confirmation they could put this all behind them and go back to being whatever strange version of friends they were.

Perry smiled immediately and nodded in return, "that sounds wonderful."

"Great." Carmilla turned and headed towards the coffee kart in the quad, "and to prove our mutual agreement on the matter I'm going to let you buy me coffee."

"That sounds fair." Perry chirped and followed after her quickly with a smile, relieved things were already right back to normal.

They were standing in line for coffee when Carmilla spotted familiar girl with honey brown hair making her way towards them. She didn't even care to hide the smile spreading across her face when she noticed the girl was wearing her leather jacket.

"Hey guys." Laura greeted them both as soon as she got close enough, but her eyes never left Carmilla's.

The realization that she did in fact, have a crush on her tutor was messing with her ability to think or act normally. She had spent the entirety of Sunday debating if she could text Carmilla. To return her shirt? Or her jacket? Or maybe to ask a psych question? Or ask if there was maybe a chance she had a giant crush on her back? Cause that would make things so much easier.

But instead she had buried herself in homework and a Harry Potter marathon and tried to not think too much about it. That lasted until About the 3rd Harry Potter movie, then she had an idea.

Dragging Laf and Perry to the nearest grocery store she made a purchase and spent the rest of the Harry Potter movies sorting through colors.

So now here she was, seeking Carmilla out on a Monday because it would be torture to have to wait till Tuesday to see her. And instead of returning her jacket, she was wearing it. And her idea to act cool and try to figure out if her crush was one sided was failing miserably as she smiled at her like a dope while they stood in the quad.

"Hello Laura." Perry looked between the two curiously, "don't you have class?"

Oh right, Perry was there too.

"Oh, yeah I just came to give Carmilla something." Laura said with a smile.

She pulled her backpack off, unzipped the pocket and reached inside. Carmilla and Perry shared a look as Laura searched for her mystery gift. A moment later Laura pulled out a zip lock bag and held it out for Carmilla.

Carmilla let out a chuckle while Perry only looked more confused.

"What do we have here?" Carmilla laughed as she took the bag and held it up. The bag was filled entirely of white and green gummy bears.

Laura smiled wider at Carmilla's reaction and slipped her backpack back on, "They are apoloy gummy bears. For having to kind of ditch you Saturday night so fast."
Carmilla smiled at Laura, completely taken by the girl. "Thanks." She opened the bag and popped one in her mouth happily.

"Sure." Laura shrugged and bit her bottom lip, rocking onto the balls of her feet. "Now you don't have to pick through mine. At least until you run out."

Perry had no idea what the gummy bears were about but was feeling very third wheel-ish in this moment and cleared her throat loudly.

"Oh right." Laura shook her head, breaking out of the stare she had on Carmilla and trying to remember if her eyes had always shined the way there were just then. "I better head to class but I'll see you tomorrow?"

Carmilla nodded and threw another gummy bear into her mouth with a smirk. "Nice jacket, by the way."

"Oh!" Laura's eyes went wide and she started to take off her backpack to give back the jacket.

"You should hang onto it." Carmilla said quickly before Laura got the jacket off, "Cant have you walking around campus without a coat." She tried to save herself by seeming more nonchalant this time.

Laura tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and smiled at the ground, "Thanks, Carm." Laura waved awkwardly and started to make her way across the quad to class.

Carmilla chuckled and closed the bag of gummy bears, tossing it in Her book bag.

"Are white and green your favorite ones?" Perry asked still confused by the gesture.

"No." Carmilla chuckled and stepped up to order her coffee from the kart.

Perry did the same, ordering a hot chocolate and cookie before paying for them both. She stepped over to the side to wait with Carmilla for their drinks and gave her a curious look. "If they aren't your favorite then why would she give you a bag of only those colors."

Carmilla stepped up to grab their drinks and took a sip, feeling the warm liquid travel from her mouth down into her body. "Thanks for the coffee."

"You really aren't going to tell me?" Perry started after her, taking a bite of her cookie.

Carmilla slowed down and smiled to herself, "Red."

"What?" Perry answered quickly.

Carmilla chuckled, "No, red is my favorite gummy bear color."

"Then why the bag of white and green?" Perry took a sip of her drink trying to think it over herself.

Carmilla let out a sigh and and shrugged her shoulders, "Because she doesn't see it yet."

Perry wasn't sure what she meant by that but Carmilla was gone before she could ask.

---

"Do you guys have a party every weekend?" Laura looked up at kirsch as her legs moved twice as fast as his on their walk across campus.
"Well yeah, bro, it's college." Kirsch smiled down at her before slowing his pace slightly, "plus it's like, Halloween. So a party is mandatory."

"Can I get back to you?" Laura's asked as they neared the edge of campus.

"Sure thing little nerd hottie!" Kirsch beamed at her before raising his hand above his head for a high five.

Laura chuckled and rolled her eyes before he lowered his hand so she could reach it. Their hands clapped together and like usual, they parted ways. Kirsch headed to the zeta house and Laura headed home.

Laura walked into her apartment and dropped her bag just inside the door before dropping down face first into the couch.

"Long day?" Perry asked from the kitchen sink where she was rinsing dishes.

Laura didn't move but mumbled into the cushions.

"What was that sweetie?" Perry turned off the sink and wiped her hands on a towel.

Laura sighed and pushed herself up, "Monday's are long."

Before they could continue their conversation Laf burst through the front door, "I've got it!"

Perry jumped from the abrupt entrance and Laura just flopped back down onto the couch.

"Got what sweetie?" Perry asked, making her way over to the couch. She tapped Laura's leg and the small girl shifted slightly to make room for her.

"Our Halloween costumes!" Laf beamed, shutting the door behind them, dropping their bag in the floor and disappearing down the hallway.

Laura flipped onto her side and curled up her legs, "Kirsch did say they were having a costume party at the zeta house this weekend."

"That house is filthy." Perry cringed and watched the hallway waiting for Laf to come back.

"That's perfect!" Laf yelled from their room, "that'll give me enough time to perfect our look."

They came walking out with an arm full of random pieces of clothing, hats and even goggles and glasses and dropped them on the floor in front of them.

"I guess that means I should tell Kirsch we will be there?" Laura asked, lacking lafs level of excitement over the idea.

"Definitely." Laf grinned and placed their hands on their hips.

"Should I be worried?" Perry sighed and eyed the pile of clothes on the floor.

"Not at all." Laf shook their head, "L, you should invite Carmilla."

"Really?" Laura answered quickly, sitting up a bit.

"Yeah." Laf answered absentmindedly, kneeling down to go through the pile of clothes, "I feel bad I cut your date short."
"It wasn't a date. I don't think." Laura's face started to pink and she was completely sitting up now, "but maybe I will invite her."

Laura hopped up off the couch with new energy, grabbed her bag and made her way to her room.

She had accidentally turned a would be date into a study session and was finally turning things around when Laf had gotten sick. Maybe this would be the perfect way to have a re-do. (If she could control her words this time.)

Plus, Carmilla seemed the type that would love Halloween. This could be great.

"No way."

"What? Why not?" Laura was genuinely surprised by her answer.

"Cupcake, can we just focus on the textbook?" Carmilla sighed and leaned back into the couch. She already knew this conversation wasn't over even though she wished it was.

"Don't you like Halloween?" Laura leaned forward in her chair a bit, completely ignoring Carmilla's plea to continue studying.

"Sure, what's not to like?" She threw her arm up in the back of the couch and her feet up on the table.

"Ok but then why were you so quick to say no to the zeta party?" Laura leaned her chin in her hands and watched Carmilla closely.

Studying was most likely over. They could both tell by the shift in the conversation and lightness between them. Of course they hadn't talked about the carnival, the Ferris wheel and especially not the hand holding, but things felt a bit different even if they hadn't talked about it.

"Because college boys getting drunk and girls dressed in underwear pretending to be bunnies and witches and nurses is not my idea of a good Halloween."

Carmilla's look was challenging Laura to try and fight her logic but she actually agreed with her on this one. Laura missed the days of dressing up like a zombie or princess and going door to door with her dad in search of candy. When had it turned into an excuse to be sexy? What if she'd rather be something scary? Or an actual bunny without the lingerie?

"Ok you have a point." Laura pouted and leaned back in her chair.

Carmilla gave a smug smile before looking over at the clock on the wall. Laura saw the action and knew that usually meant their sessions were about to end, which she didn't exactly want to happen.

"So can you explain that Maslows triangle thing we talked about Saturday?" Laura asked quietly, turning her attention back to the textbook and pretending to read.

Carmilla knew if she stayed longer she would miss her 'meeting' with her mother. Honestly though, it's wasn't a hard choice to make.

"So you have your levels of basic human needs." Carmilla started, leaning forward and reaching for the textbook.

Laura had flipped a couple pages to the section and pointed to the pyramid explaining Maslows
hierarchy of needs. Carmilla's hand came down gently on top of hers and slid her hand to point to where she was starting explaining. Instead of moving her hand from Laura's once she was at the righteous spot, she let her hand rest there, both girls eyes trained on the textbook. Carmilla tried to act as calm as possible, but the shy smile on Laura's face that she saw out of the corner of her eye made her heart rate pick up.

Laura could feel her face warming as she tried to look at the words on her text book instead of Carmilla's hand resting gently on top of her own. They were nearing the end of the page when Carmilla lifted her hand and glanced up at Laura, waiting for her to turn the page.

Laura smiled and flipped the page as Carmilla kept talking. She had a few days before the party, maybe that just enough time to convince Carmilla to go.

They kept studying for another hour or so before hearing the closing call for the library over the big speakers. They started packing up their things and Laura passed Carmilla her leather jacket.

"Thanks again, for letting me borrow this." Laura put her bag on her back and waited for Carmilla to finish getting ready to go.

"It looked good on you." Carmilla replied with a smirk, "it would have been a shame not to admire the view a little longer."

Laura smiled bashfully but couldn't think of anything to say back her stomach was fluttering and she wasn't sure her brain was actually functionin correctly. Flirty Carmilla had that effecton her. Even when Laura wasn't sure if she was really flirting or just being Carmilla.

They walked out of the library and down the front steps together. At the bottom Laura paused and turned towards Carmilla.

They looked at each other for a moment before Laura finally broke the silence, "See you Thursday?"

"Thursday." Carmilla nodded and waited for Laura to turn in the direction of her apartment.

Laura gave a quick wave and wide smile before turning the corner and heading home. Carmilla watched her from the bottom of the steps for as long as she was in view. Once she was gone, she let out a sigh and made her way to the parking lot where her car was waiting.

----

"You look like the saddest puppy I've ever seen." Laf dropped down onto the couch next to Laura and handed her a plastic cup.

It was actually pretty lucky Laura had been able to find space on the couch at all. Most of them were full of Zetas making out with random girls, and people already too many drinks in and passed out. The Zetas really knew how to do Halloween.

"Yeah." Laura sighed and adjusted the hood of her puppy dog onsie she was wearing as a costume. She took a sip of the grape soda Laf had given her, "guess I'm not in the Halloween party mood."

"Where's your lady of the night?" Laf asked, throwing back a gulp of their own drink.

Laura's pout grew and she sank further down into the couch. "She isn't coming. Not a party fan or something."

"Bummer." Laf nodded and looked around the room.
Perry was jumping around in the center of some dance circle, her red curls bouncing, smile on her face as she sang along to whatever the song blaring through the speakers was. She was dressed as frankenstein’s bride—skin pale, hair wild in an attempt to get it to stand straight up. She was a match for LaF's costume—mad scientist. Dressed in a lab coat, hair disheveled, goggles, gloves, and some substance in their pockets that somehow produced a fog that crept from their pockets and left a trail of smoke wherever they went.

They had run into Danny earlier, part of the usual summer society habit of camping out at zeta parties to make sure things stayed safe. She and the rest of the sisters were a group costume. A tribe of warrior women of some sort. Bows, arrows, armor, face paint. It was all very impressive.

The Zetas weren’t as organized. Some wore sheets as togas, swimsuits, random pieces of clothes or hats. No one cared though. They had enough pizza and beer that it wouldn’t have mattered if they were all in pajamas. Everyone was just there to party, costume or not.

"You know L," LaF started, getting up from their place on the couch. "You aren't a big fan of parties either."

"What's your point?" Laura looked up at them standing in front of her.

"Maybe you shouldn't be here, and instead, celebrate the way you want to." LaF gave her a knowing smile before hopping through the crowd to dance with Perry.

Celebrate the way she wanted to? How exactly did she want to celebrate? Laura watched LaF and Perry dancing and having fun, the music pumping, lights flashing, everyone was smiling, laughing and enjoying their Halloween. Laura sat there, sipping on her grape soda and suddenly knew exactly what LaF meant.

She shoved her cup at the boy that just sat down and threw his arm over her shoulder. His attempt to flirt was cut short as she stood and left him there with a half empty cup and a confused expression.

"LaF, Perry!" Laura pushed her way through the crowd dancing to get to them, "I'm going to go."

"Really? Why?" Perry asked full of concern.

"She's going to celebrate her way." LaF answered for Laura and gave her a smile before grabbing perrys hand and twirling her in a circle and pulling her back into the crowd.

Laura waved to kirsch and Danny who were standing in a corner together (surprisingly not fighting) before making her exit out of the zeta house.

----

Joey and Carmilla were curled together on the large couch. Laptop on the coffee table, Silence of the Lambs playing on Netflix.

This is how Carmilla did Halloween. Day long marathon of scary movies and pizza.

The blanket wrapped around her had started out just resting on her lap, but by now it was wrapped around her back and draped up over her head, Joey snug against her and head set in her lap.

This was her third movie in a row and she was well into the part of the night where every little thing makes her jump so when the doorbell rang, she nearly leapt off the couch.

Carmilla let out a sigh, annoyed with her lack of bravery brought on my a doorbell and paused the
movie. Joey let out a yawn and barely moved as she wiggled her way out from under him. She grabbed her wallet off the counter and made her way to the door, ready to pay for pizza and get back to her movie.

"You're not the usual pizza boy." Carmilla raised an eyebrow after opening the door.

"Happy Halloween?" Laura smiled and lifted the box of pizza up in front of her.

"How did you even get that?" Carmilla crossed her arms over her chest and leaned on the doorway. "And.. Are those ears?"

The smell of pizza woke Joey and he came trotting to the doorway, picking up speed as soon as he saw the familiar face holding the food.

Laura dropped a hand to pat Joey's head as he stuck it out into the hallway, "I may have ran into the pizza boy at the door and bribed him to let me deliver it to you instead. And I was at a costume party." She adjusted the hood of her onesie and pulled on one of the floppy ears attached to it, "I'm a dog."

"That explains the nose." Carmilla smirked at the face paint completing her costume and reached out to grab the pizza box before turning and walking back into her apartment.

Laura hesitated but figured since Carmilla didn't slam the door in her face it was probably the same as an invitation inside in her books.

"So this is how you celebrate Halloween?" Laura walked into the apartment slowly, "pizza?"

"And movies." Carmilla didn't turn around from her position at the counter. She pulled a slice of pizza out of the box and put it on a plate before grabbing a glass from the cupboard and filling it with water. "And you ditched your costume party to..." Carmilla pursed her lips together and narrowed her eyes as she looked Laura up and down, "deliver pizza?"

Suddenly showing up at Carmilla's seemed like a terrible idea. And not at all thought through. "Well, I um.. I was just... I mean.."

"Are you always this articulate?" Carmilla joked as she walked by Laura and sat back down on the couch.

Yeah, this was a terrible plan and Laura was feeling more flustered by the second. "I just thought I'd drop by and say happy Halloween." Yeah sure, that was believable.

Carmilla smirked at Laura before taking a bite of pizza and putting her glass next to her computer. "You walked 20 minutes to drop by to say something you could have just texted?"

Carmilla was just messing with her now. Finding Laura at her door was quite the nice surprise, and if she was being honest, she hoped she was planning to stay a while.

Laura's eyes went wide at how embarrassed she was feeling about the whole thing. Then she noticed Carmilla start to snicker and she just rolled her eyes and tried to fight a smile. "You're teasing me."

"You make it so easy." Carmilla smiled and nodded towards the counter, "Grab a piece. You interrupted the best part."

Laura smiled and went to grab a slice of pizza while Carmilla got re situated on the couch. Joey jumped back up and dropped his head in her lap as Carmilla took another bite of pizza. As Laura
made her way to the couch, Carmilla pushed Joey off to make room for her, earning a whine from the dog and a smile from Laura.

"What are we watching?" Laura asked, taking a bite of pizza and sitting down next to Carmilla. She sat close, but not close enough for them to be touching.

"Silence of the lambs." Carmilla answered as she took another bite.

"Seriously?" Laura's eyes were wide, clearly not excited about the movie choice.

"What? Not a fan of scary movies?" Carmilla smirked and leaned back into the cushions.

Laura just shook her head quickly, her mouth full of food but wanting to convey how much she wasn't a fan.

"You'll be fine, it's almost over anyway." Carmilla leaned forward and hit play, before taking another bite.

"Fine, but I get to pick the next one." Laura wiped at her lips with the back of her hand.

Carmilla turned to look at her, ignoring what was happening on the screen, "Next one?"

"Yep." Laura smiled wide at her before taking another bite and turning her focus to the computer.

Carmilla looked her over for a moment, not being able to ignore how normal it felt to have her there. It had only been a couple months of mostly studying, but something about Laura just seemed to fit.

By the end of the movie they were both huddled under the blanket, Laura pressed firmly against Carmilla's side with the tendency to hide her face in Carmilla's shoulder anytime anything happened that was even remotely frightening. When the credits started to roll Laura let out a relieved sigh, her whole body relaxing.

"Still up for another one?" Carmilla shifted slightly, their bodies pressing together more comfortably.

"As long as I get to pick." Laura nudged her with an elbow.

"Deal." Carmilla went to stand up, "the only rule is it has to be a thriller or Halloween themed."

Laura leaned forward and started searching for their next movie while Carmilla went to the fridge to grab them both a drink and more pizza.

"I have the perfect one." Laura smiled up at Carmilla as she took the drinks from her and set them on the coffee table. "And it's Halloween themed so you can't say no to it."

"Should I be worried?" Carmilla sat back down, closer to Laura than they had started the night and patted the space next to her. Joey immediately joined them on the couch, his body sprawling over the cushions and his head resting in Carmilla's lap.

"You're going to love it." Laura reached over and grabbed Carmilla's slice of pizza and took a bite before dropping it back on the plate.

Carmilla watched her with a small smile, enjoying how excited Laura was about her movie choice and noticing how at home she seemed to be acting. It should have felt strange, but it didn't. In fact, it was nice. It was like Carmilla hadn't realized something was missing till Laura was there showing her what more she could have. Until now, she hadn't known she wanted more than what was already there.
The beginning of the movie started and Carmilla's smile dropped and she turned to look at the screen. She knew from the music what movie it was but didn't actually believe it till she saw the title flash on the screen.

"Hocus pocus?" She said flatly, turning to look at Laura.

"It's Halloween themed!" Her smile was pure excitement and she was practically bouncing on the couch as the movie got going.

Carmilla shook her head, trying to hide a small smile. While this wasn't exactly her typical movie choice for halloween, she decided it wouldn't be too bad to make an exception just this once.

----

Laura wasn't sure when she had fallen asleep but what she did know is that someone was licking her face. Forcing her eyes open she was met with loud panting from the German Shepard staring at her.

"Hey Joey." She mumbled as she tried to open her eyes all the way.

The apartment was dark, the only light was from the moon shining through the window casting a low glow through the room. Laura watched as Joey went back to his bed in the corner before she remembered exactly where she was.

Somehow during the movie her position had shifted. Carmilla's too. Carmilla was now on her back, head propped up on the arm rest, one arm behind her head, the other resting over Laura's back. Laura had managed to somehow snuggle up between Carmilla and the back of the couch and was using Carmilla's stomach as a pillow. Her arm was draped over her and her leg thrown up over Carmilla's.

There was a blanket covering them both (more so Laura than Carmilla) and the laptop on the coffee table had been shut off and closed.

Laura shifted her head to look up at Carmilla, realizing she must have fallen asleep during the movie and instead of waking her up, Carmilla just let her use her as a human pillow.

She watched her sleep for a moment, thinking to herself how Carmilla was constantly surprising her. One moment she was snarky and sarcastic, the next she was incredibly sweet.

Her plan for that night hadn't included falling asleep in her lap, but Laura's plans usually didn't go like she intended.

She heard her phone buzz as it shook across the table and she moved herself as gently as she could to grab it without waking up the girl underneath her.

6 new texts.

Laura rolled her eyes as she scrolled through them quickly. Perry, her dad, Danny, and more Perry. She shut her phone and was about to let herself go back to sleep when she noticed the time and got an idea.

Slowly she pulled the blanket off of her and stood up as gracefully as she could manage. Once she was up she covered Carmilla with the blanket, freezing in place when the dark haired girl stirred slightly. When Laura was sure she hadn't waken her up she tip toed into the bathroom and flipped on the light after shutting the door.

She caught sight of her reflection and rolled her eyes at herself. She had completely forgotten about
the face paint from the night before.

She quickly washed her face, slipped off the onesie that was covering her jeans and tshirt and made herself as presentable as possible. After Giving herself one last look in the mirror she started making her way back into the other room and lowered herself to sit on the couch next to Carmilla.

"Hey, Carm." She whispered, giving Carmilla's arm a gentle squeeze.

Carmilla shifted slightly, turning to her side and moving closer to Laura unconsciously. Laura let out a quiet chuckle thinking to herself how cute Carmilla was when she slept. She reached out and brushed hair away from her face. Tucking dark curls behind her ear and letting her fingers gently trace the outline of Carmilla's face. Carmilla's lips twitched up slightly and she took in a heavy breath before letting it out slowly and letting her eyes flutter open.

"Hey." Laura whispered as she pulled back her hand from Carmilla's face.

Carmilla looked up at Laura with a sleepy smile, "hey." She rasped, her voice still sleepy.

"Will you go somewhere with me?" She seemed hesitant to ask, especially at such an early hour.

"Sure." Carmilla was still half asleep and trying to register what was going on. She was still trying to wrap her mind around the fact that Laura had fallen asleep on her earlier that night and instead of waking her she spent the remaining hour of the movie brushing her fingers gently through honey colored hair while she slept.

"Great." Laura smiled wide and stood up and started putting on her shoes.

"What, now?" Carmilla pushed herself up to sit on the couch and stretched her arms above her head with a yawn.

"Yeah, and bring your camera." Laura had her hand on the door, clearly ready and excited to go.

Carmilla narrowed her eyes at Laura, "Anyone ever tell you you're kind of strange?" She pushed herself off and started walking to her bedroom.

Laura shrugged with a smile, "Pretty often actually."

A minute later Carmilla came walking back, looking flawless and not at all like she had just woken up from a 4 hour midnight nap on the couch. She had her leather jacket and boots on, her messy curls falling around her shoulders as she ran a hand through them as she approached Laura.

"Lead the way, cutie." She winked at Laura and lifted her hand that was holding her camera.

"Um, can we- I mean, can you drive?" Carmilla was somehow less intimidating while she was sleeping. All soft features and quiet breathing. Awake she was a force that Laura found herself drawn to yet unsure of. She was still such a mystery, being around her made Laura nervous. Butterflies and shaky hands. Words that wouldn't form and a curiosity that just pulled her even closer to the dark haired girl.

"On one condition." Carmilla stepped back to grab her keys from the counter.

Laura raised her eyebrows as if to ask what the condition Carmilla had was.

"Joey gets to come." Carmilla let out a quiet whistle and the German Shepard lifted his head quickly before racing to the doorway where the girls were standing.
"He was already invited." Laura smiled and opened the door, leading the way out to Carmilla's car. As soon as they stepped outside the cold air hit their faces and their breathing turned to clouds escaping their lips. The sun wasn't up yet and the grass was tipped in frost from the frigid air. Winter was just around the corner and the early morning surroundings were reminding them of that.

--

After a 15 minute drive Laura pointed to an old dirt road barely visible and told Carmilla to pull off there. With a wary look Carmilla parked the car on the side of the road and killed the engine.

"Is this payback for the junkyard?" She asked scanning the area.

The road clearly hadn't been used in quite some time. It wasn't really even a road. Just two worn down tire tracks in the dirt, the view blocked by trees and tall grass, a car wouldn't be able to fit anymore. It seemed they would have to go the rest of the way on foot.

"Just trust me." Laura smiled, clearly excited, as she turned to ruffle joeys fur before she opened her door and hopped out.

Joey turned to look at Carmilla and let out a whine.

"I know." Carmilla unbuckled her seatbelt and turned to scratch the dogs ears. "I kinda like her too."

Joey just moved his head to bump into Carmilla's arm before whining again.

Carmilla let out a sigh before climbing out of the car and letting Joey out. She hung her camera around her neck and shoved her hands in her pockets as she followed after Laura who had already started down the path.

The sounds of rocks and dirt crunching under her boots filled the area around them. The sky was getting lighter and birds were beginning to chirp to greet the morning. Joey ran down the overgrown path, disappearing into tall grass and leaping back into view a moment later.

"So where are you taking me?" Carmilla asked as her stride fell in line with Laura's once she caught up with her.

"It's a surprise." Laura whispered.

Something about the cold air, sky still filled with stars and the abandoned path made it feel like they were living within a secret. Her heart was pounding but it wasn't from the walk- Laura was nervous. The intimacy of it all, hoping Carmilla would like it, things between them changing...

A couple months ago- even a couple weeks ago, Laura would never have imagined she could just show up at Carmilla's apartment unannounced and have it be a good thing. Let alone show up and basically fall asleep on her during a movie. It didn't matter that the tutoring had started all of this, it wasn't about that anymore. At least not for her. She didn't know for sure when it came to Carmilla, though.

With that thought her excitement shifted to worry. Maybe it was all about the tutoring for Carmilla. Maybe they weren't actually friends like Laura thought. She could have found out when Shields gave her the option to stop the sessions but selfishly she didn't want to take the chance of having to give it up. Of having to give Carmilla up.

"Woah."
Laura was pulled from her thoughts when Carmilla stopped walking abruptly and breathed out her response to what was in front of her.

"You like it?" Laura asked, stepping next to Carmilla.

"How did you even find this place?" Carmilla adjusted the camera and lifted it to snap a picture.

"I was riding my bike and just happened to find it while exploring a bit." Laura shrugged and slowly turned to look at the girl next to her. "I thought maybe it would fit into your theme of broken things. I mean, if you want. They are your pictures so you don't have to, I just thought-"

"Laura." Carmilla chucked and turned to her, "it's really amazing."

Laura couldn't help but smile at the sound of her name coming from Carmilla's lips. It didn't happen often but when it did she always noticed the different inflection in the way Carmilla said it. It sounded different. Special. Like a secret she intended to keep forever.

"Yeah?" She asked bashfully.

"Yeah." Carmilla chuckled, her eyes locked on Laura's.

They could have been standing there staring at each other for an hour for all they knew. It wasn't until Joey came running back to them that they noticed the sun was starting to rise, changing the entire scene in front of them.

Carmilla lifted her camera again and let out a slow breath before snapping another picture.

*click*

It was an old abandoned green house. A large structure made entirely of glass and metal framing.

There was a tall entry way, a door fit in the center, framed by glass on the sides and above the entrance. Above the doorway the glass was shaped into an archway, metal framing with designs curving along the top and climbing upwards in the center, curling and flowing into an intricate design at the peak of the arch.

On either side of the entryway, branched extensions of the greenhouse, shorter than the entrance, but they stretched out making the house seem wide. Long rectangular windows curved making the extensions seem rounded instead of square.

The light from the sunrise cast a warm glow on the trees and grass around them. The frost that had been there only a moment earlier melting, droplets clinging to blades of grass. The dew catching the light from the sun and making everything around the green house sparkle.

*click*

Carmilla took a few steps forward and caught the view of the sunrise reflecting colors on the glass. The whole thing was magical.

Broken windows from weather or wear, some from unkept vines pressing too tightly against the glass. Shattered pieces littered the ground, reflecting light and trapping the colors of the sunrise.

"Come see the best part." Laura was excited now and practically skipped towards the open doorway that led into the glass structure.

She slowed at the doorway, watching the ground carefully for broken pieces of glass, placing her
steps purposefully. She brought her hand up to the door frame, her head tilted down and to the side. Carmilla watched as her profile came into view, the light breaking through glass walls, making Laura shine even brighter than she did on her own. Her hair seeming golden and glowing as it fell over her shoulder with her head turned towards the ground.

*click*

"You coming?" She turned back just as Carmilla lowered her camera.

Carmilla nodded and started making slow steps to follow after Laura, watching where she walked. Once she was next to Laura in the doorway she understood what she meant by it being the best part.

The entire interior of the glass house was full of flowers. What was once kept and organized, was now overgrown and chaotic. But in the most beautiful way imaginable.

Despite the cold weather of fall, the plants inside were in full bloom. Roses of every color- red, white, pink, yellow and any color in between grew on long vines that had taken up an entire wall. Tulips, daffodils, daisies, and lilies filled the rest of the room.

Green vines wrapped around supporting beams and grew in and out of broken windows. Everything was green and vibrant and so alive.

The rising sun seemed to call out to the plants as they appeared to be stretching towards the light breaking through the glass, yearning for its warmth.

*click*

Carmilla was in awe. It was incredible. The contrast of the run down green house, randomly placed shattered windows and glass too dirty to see through, matched with the array of life growing inside of it, thriving and beautiful was breath taking. Light littered the inside randomly, shining through broken panes and sheets of glass not too dirty. It sent rays of light as spotlights on different plants and corners of the building.

Carmilla stole a glance at Laura and couldn't help but think her smile was just as beautiful as the sight in front of her. Without a word Laura turned to look at Carmilla, her smile growing at seeing her reaction to the hidden world she had found here. Silently she stepped into the green house and down what used to be an isle between growing boxes. Carmilla stepped in after her and moved left, down a path parallel to the one Laura had taken.

Together they walked down their paths slowly, smelling the flowers and taking pictures without talking. The sun was slowly rising, changing the colors and entire feeling in the place they were sharing. Laura would stop to watch when Carmilla would take a picture.

Her eyes would narrow as they focused on lining up the shot. Her tongue would poke out of the corner of her mouth, and her lips would move into a slight smile just before she took the picture.

Laura was fascinated with how her entire demeanor changed. It wasn't that Carmilla got 'serious', but more so you could tell she was seeing something incredible- even if you couldn't see it too.

Carmilla would stop and watch whenever Laura stopped to smell a new flower, which seemed to be every new one she passed. She could see it in her eyes, she was completely captivated by the beauty around her. And Carmilla was captivated by Laura's beauty.

*click*
She was like Midas. Her world was golden and everything she touched turned beautiful.

Carmilla felt her heart ache at the simplicity of it. Laura had unknowingly touched her heart, mending cracked pieces and maybe making broken beautiful.

--

"This place is amazing." Carmilla pulled her foot up on the bench and rested her arm on her knee as she looked around.

"Yeah." Laura breathed out, looking around her from her spot on the dried up fountain in the center of the greenhouse. "It's really pretty in spring. There's even more flowers than there are now."

"You come out here a lot?" Carmilla looked down at Laura, letting her leg swing back and forth lazily.

The sun had risen and they had already spent about an hour walking through the greenhouse. It wasn't until they sat down on the old fountain that they started talking.

The silence before now had only made Carmilla like Laura more. Her ability to quietly appreciate everything around her, taking a moment to see the beauty in what others would call weeds.

"Not a lot." Laura shrugged and picked at the weeds growing between the cracks in the old concrete fountain. "It's a long bike ride. But when I need some time alone it's nice."

Carmilla just nodded, seeing it was special to Laura even if she wasn't saying the words.

"Thanks for letting me see it." She spoke quietly, watching as Laura's cheeks linked slightly and she bit her bottom lip gently.

Laura reached out and picked a daisy, suddenly feeling flustered, "You'll have to let me see the pictures you took. Maybe let me have one?" She started picking at the petals, one by one.

"Sure." Carmilla smiled, their eyes locked on each other.

The tension seemed to shift suddenly. Walking through the greenhouse there had been a feeling of flirtation. Stealing glances and shy smiles as they watched each other through spaces between vines and flowers. Quiet chuckles at faces made when smelling the less sweet aromas of some of the plants.

Now the tension was thick with something else. Laura was suddenly very aware of how romantic the setting could be. Had she brought Danny here while they were dating she was sure they wouldn't just be talking. And although she knew she had a crush on Carmilla, this is the first time she thought about what acting on that would mean.

It would mean instead of staring at her lips, she could be kissing them.

"Is that rain?"

"What?" Laura was completely zoning out she hadn't even realized she was staring, or that it had started to rain.

Carmilla stood up and brought her fingers to her lips to let out a loud whistle. Upon arriving, Joey had jumped out of the car and disappeared into the tall grass. He would return every once in a while to check on his humans before running off again.
"We should get going before it starts pouring." Carmilla hopped off the bench and started making her way to the entrance. She stood in the doorway watching for Joey and looking at the sky trying to decide if it would be better to wait it out or just leave.

Joey came running back and stopped next to the car like he knew what she was thinking. Laura stepped up next to her in the doorway and gave her a smile.

The rain was starting to come down harder now, drops landing on the glass surrounding them in different tones and sounds. Water fell through broken windows and splashed onto vines, flowers and branches. The sun still shone through breaks in the cloud cover and the water refracted rainbows of light through the greenhouse. The flowers shimmered brightly as the rainstorm sang around them.

"Ready to run, cupcake?" Carmilla asked playfully as she took hold of Laura’s hand.

Laura smiled and nodded as Carmilla started to pull her out into the rain.

"Wait!" Laura let go of Carmilla's hand and turned back to the greenhouse, "I forgot my phone!"

Carmilla stood in the doorway as Laura dodged plants and rain as she made her way back to the fountain where she had left her phone. When she turned around and started back, she paused and tilted her head up and stretched out her arms. Her eyes were closed and a smile was wide on her face.

*click*

When she opened her eyes again her smile was mischievous like before and she made her way quickly to Carmilla. As soon as she was in the doorway with her she ran past her out into the rain as fast as she could.

"Race you!" She giggled as she made a mad dash for the car.

This girl is something else. Carmilla sighed and tucked her camera under her shirt to keep it dry and made her way to her car (not nearly as quick as Laura). As soon as the door was open Joey jumped in and climbed into the back seat and Carmilla set her camera down on the dash. Before she could climb in she felt a hand take hold of hers and pull her away from the car.

"You're missing it!" Laura laughed as she pulled Carmilla in a circle in the large open area between the car and greenhouse.

"Missing what?" Carmilla yelled back as the rain picked up, hitting the ground heavily and quickly soaking them both.

"This!" Laura smiled and twirled around, her arms outstretched and face turned up towards the falling rain.

Carmilla just stood there watching as Laura spun around laughing in the rain. When Laura noticed Carmilla just watching her she walked up to her and took hold of both her hands, bringing them between them both.

She stepped closer to her so there was only inches between them and smiled, "It's only fun if we both look silly."

"Not going to happen, sweetheart." Carmilla kept a straight face and shook her head. Her heart was pounding from how close Laura was and the flecks in her eyes confirmed what she already thought.
This girl was golden.

Laura pouted and gave Carmilla's hands a squeez. "Please?"

"Ugh." Carmilla groaned and rolled her eyes, "Fine. But if you tell anyone.." She lifted a hand to point at Laura as if to threaten her.

Laura's pout switched to a smile and she let out a giggle while lifting her hand and making the gesture of locking her lips and throwing away the key.

Laura started twirling again, and although Carmilla started copying her begrudgingly, after a few minutes they were both laughing as they twirled around and jumped into puddles as the rain fell loudly around them.

--

45 minutes later Laura stumbled into her apartment, clothes drenched and hair dripping from the downpour of rain she had just spent a good 20 minutes dancing in.

Laf was standing at the stove with a spatula in hand. They quickly looked over at her then down the hall towards her bedroom and then back to Laura. "How long have you been up?"

"A while." Laura smiled and started taking off her shoes.

"You're soaked." Laf looked at her confused.

"You are really observant in the morning." Laura chuckled as she grabbed a muffin off the counter and made her way to her bedroom. Her clothes sloshed and she left a trail of water as she went, but she didn't really care.

Laf just shook their head and went back to cooking their breakfast with a chuckle.

Laura peeled off her wet clothing and dropped it in the basket of dirty clothes before jumping into the shower. The hot water filled the room with steam as she stood there soaking in the warmth and ridding herself of the cold chill from the fall rain that morning.

Once the shower turned cold she hopped out and threw on a pair of flannel pajamas and climbed into her bed. She pulled the comforter up under her chin and sighed happily as she relaxed into her self mattress.

What started out as a pretty lame Halloween, turned out to become one of her favorites.
Crossing Lines

Chapter Summary

Just another week of hollstein...

Chapter Notes

I'm back from my trip!! So updates should be more normal now hopefully. Thanks for being patient! and for all the wonderful notes and comments! Its seriously what keeps me writing :)

"Laura sweetie, are you going to sleep all day?" Perry was standing in the doorway to Laura's room, the door wide open and a hand on her hip.

"Hmm?" Laura rolled over to face her, "what time is it?" She asked sleepily as she rubbed at her eyes with her palms.

"It's nearly noon!" Perry threw her arms up in the air, "we are leaving for the farmers market in 10 minutes if you want to come!" She called out down the hall as she made her way to the kitchen.

Laura groaned and rolled back over, pressing her face into her pillow. She had only just gotten home from the greenhouse about 2 hours ago and was still exhausted. As comfortable as Carmilla was as a human pillow, between the late night movie and beating the sunrise that morning, she hadn't gotten that much sleep. Luckily it was Sunday and she knew if she got up now, she would be able to take a nap later.

So with as much energy as she could muster, she rolled out of bed and changed clothes before dragging her feet out to the living room.

"She's alive!" Laf joked as they pulled their rain coat on.

"Oh good!" Perry smiled as she walked in and saw Laura standing with Laf, "I was afraid you were going to miss the last market day of the season." 

"Of course not." Laura said through a yawn, "It's tradition."

"Well you better bundle up, it's been raining all morning." Perry pulled on a pair of gloves before pulling a rain poncho over her large coat.

"Oh she knows." Laf wiggled their eyebrows at Laura and gave her a knowing grin.

"What was that?" Perry asked as she adjusted her earmuffs.

"Nothing!" Laura answered quickly before Laf could get a word out. "Let's go before all the good food is gone!" She practically pushed Perry out the door before grabbing her jacket from the hook by the door and following her out, glaring at Laf on the way.
"I don't get it." Laf tossed a grape in their mouth and kept walking lazily next to Laura while Perry shuffled from table to table to see what everyone was selling.

"What's there to get?" Laura reached over and took a grape from the bunch in Laf's hand and popped it in her mouth.

Post Halloween farmers market was barely a tradition. They did it Laura's freshman year and decided then to always do it. It was the last day the market ran before closing up for the winter months. Just like last year, Laura and Laf followed behind as Perry ran about buying flowers and fruit and breads and whatever else she found that looked good.

"You went on a non date-date to the carnival. Then had a movie night sleepover followed by a sunrise adventure and you aren't sure she's into you?" Laf's eyebrows came together as they threw another grape in their mouth.

Laura just shrugged. The way Laf explained it sure did make it seem like they were more than just tutor buddies. But Laura couldn't help but feel nervous and confused about the whole situation. If Carmilla really did like her like Laf was saying, why hadn't she made a move yet? It's not like there hadn't been plenty of opportunities. And Carmilla wasn't the shy type when it came to girls. At least not from what Laura had seen.

"So why haven't you gone for it?" Laf stopped walking as Perry stopped to haggle over some freshly baked bread.

"Huh." Laura stopped next to them, sticking her hands in her jacket pockets, "good point."

Laura knew she liked Carmilla, so why hadn't she gone for it? By her logic before, maybe Carmilla doesn't think Laura is interested.

"If I do and she turns me down, it's going to make tutoring super awkward." It was a lame excuse, and they both knew it.

"Didn't you have the option to stop doing that?" Laf asked as they started to follow Perry down the row again, "if it gets weird just stop the tutoring."

"She doesn't know I had the option to stop." Laura whined, "so if I stop after getting turned down it will be super obvious. Which would just make the whole thing so much more embarrassing."

Laf just nodded while thinking over the situation. There had to be a logical way to figure all this out.

"Plus," Laura continued quietly, "even if she doesn't like me like that, I kind of like having her as a friend at least."

Laf let out a chuckle, "oh frosh, you've got it bad."

"Ugh" Laura groaned and covered her face with her hands, "I know."

How had the girl she couldn't stand, who was mean and sarcastic, obnoxious and broody become the girl that was constantly on her mind?

Laura's phone started to ring in her pocket and from the song she knew exactly who was calling. She pulled it out and held it to her ear.
"Hey daddy." She smiled as soon as she heard his cheerful chuckle.

"Laur-bear!" Her dad greeted her happily. "How's my little girl?"

"I'm good. Just out at the market." She held up a hand to Laf and pointed to where she was going to go talk to her dad, a quieter corner away from the crowd of people.

"Yep, still planning on coming home for Christmas." Laura couldn't wait for Christmas. It was her favorite holiday and getting to go home for two weeks sounded amazing. She missed her dad and her own room. "I'm still not sure how long I'll be staying, but most likely close to New Years."

They talked a few more minutes about holiday plans to go find their own Christmas tree, holiday traditions, what family gatherings they would be going to and how excited her dad was to have her home for a bit before they hung up and Laura found her way back to her roommates.

"How's papa Hollis?" Laf asked, now carrying a few bags in their arms.

"He's good." Laura smiled and relieved Laf of one of the bags, "Just his daily phone call to make sure I'm still going home for Christmas."

"Oh that's so sweet." Perry smiled and handed Laf another bag.

"Yeah, he's excited." Laura started leading the way back to their apartment, "I am too."

"Well we will miss you around here." Laf added, nearly dropping an armful of items as Perry lunged forward ready to save them.

"Yeah well, it's barely November so you'll get plenty of me until then." Laura laughed and turned around to watch Perry scold Lafontaine for not being more carful.

—

Laura's Monday class had gotten out early so she decided to head to her next class and just spend the extra time working on her next article due for the paper. She was almost across campus when she remembered Perry had a class with Carmilla that would be ending soon and that maybe it would be a good thing to stop by and say hi.

It had been radio silence since the morning at the greenhouse, but by now Laura knew that's kind of how things went with Carmilla. She wasn't the biggest on verbal communication. Or communication at all, in fact. It didn't change the fact that she really wanted to see her again, or that all she had thought about since that morning was Carmilla.

—

"You're crazy, cream puff!" Carmilla yelled as Laura landed in yet another puddle. Water and mud sprayed everywhere, soaking Laura's clothes but making her smile grow wider.

Laura had always loved the rain. Ever since she was a little girl. At the first sign of a storm she would get her rain gear on- rain boots, coat, and a little umbrella with elephants on it. She would sit by the window and watch waiting patiently for the clouds to rip open and the rain start to fall.

She loved the way it smelled, how you could always tell when it was about to happen because the shift in the air. She loved the way it looked, everything shining and clean, water drops cascading down hard surfaces and soaking into the ground.

"Come on, try this one!" Laura pointed to a rather large puddle on the side of the road she hadn't
jumped in yet.

Carmilla pulled her coat around her tighter and ran a hand through her drenched hair. Pushing wet curls from her face she smiled at the small girl.

"If I jump in this puddle will you let us leave?" Carmilla stepped up to it slowly and raised an eyebrow at Laura.

As adorable as the other girl was, it was quite cold and Carmilla was in no way dressed for a rainstorm in October.

"Promise, last one then we can go." Laura smiled and pushed her own wet strands of hair from her face.

Carmilla shook her head to herself, feeling childish jumping through puddles and running around in the rain. Joey on the other hand, seemed to be enjoying himself as much as Laura was.

Carmilla lifted her foot and tapped her toe on top of the puddle, adding to the ripples already flowing from the steady fall of rain, filling the puddle more by the second.

"Ok let's go." She turned around and took a step towards the car but stopped abruptly when a hand came to wrap around her wrist.

"No way!" Laura turned her back around and pulled her over to the puddle, "you have to jump. For real."

Carmilla let out a sigh before reaching over and taking hold of Laura's hand, interlocking their fingers. "Together? On three?"

Her voice was low and quiet compared to the harsh rain fall and echoes of dripping water on the glass house not far from them.

Laura looked into Carmilla's eyes. Trails of rain drops making their way down her face, dripping from the edges of her jaw. Her body shivered and she wasn't sure if it was from the cold rain or the look in Carmilla's eyes as they stared at each other in that moment.

"Together." Laura gulped, barely loud enough for Carmilla to hear her.

The tension from earlier returned immediately as Carmilla pulled her closer and brushed her thumb over the soft skin of her hand. She leaned in close to Laura until her lips brushes against the shell of her ear.

"One." She breathed out, hot air tickling Laura's neck causing her skin to goose bump.

"Two." Laura replied breathlessly, trying to keep her composure. Despite the cold rain and soaked through clothing, she felt a heat start from her center and spread through her body.

"Three." Carmilla whispered before pulling back and tugging on Laura's hand as she leapt into the puddle.

Laura followed without a thought, water splashing around them, a laugh ripping out of her throat as she toppled over onto Carmilla as they both fell to the ground.

The puddle had been deeper than they realized and they had landed in water that covered them up to their knees. The unexpected drop caused Carmilla to loose her balance and she fell to the ground,
Carmilla looked stunned while Laura just laughed loudly at their position on the ground. Half their bodies hidden under water in the large puddle, the other half tangled together in a wet mess.

Joey barked excitedly and ran over to the girls on the ground, licking wet kisses on their faces as they struggled to get up off the ground.

Once standing Carmilla took hold of Laura's hand once again and continued to laugh as she pulled her to the car and out of the rain.

Laura was sure she hadn't heard the dark haired girl laugh that hard, but thought it might be her new favorite sound.

—

"Laura? Everything ok?" Perry repeated, gripping Laura's arm gently.

While she was lost in her memory from the day before her feet had brought her to the classroom where she knew Carmilla would be.

She quickly looked around for the dark haired girl that usually left class with Perry but didn't see her.

"Oh hey Perry, how was class?" She asked without much thought, she was still scanning the area for Carmilla.

Perry smiled and looped her arm through Laura's and started to pull her away from the classroom. "She wasn't in class today."

"Who?" Laura asked, her head still facing the classroom while her body was being pulled further from it.

"Carmilla." Perry kept walking, "She never showed up.

"Oh." Laura finally looked at Perry with a slight frown, "why not?"

Perry just shrugged, "Not sure."

"Oh, well, how was class then?" Laura asked, trying not to seem too disappointed.

But she was. More than she wanted to admit.

—

Tuesday.

Tuesday meant a tutoring session. A tutoring session Laura had shown up 20 minutes early for. So for the last 20 minutes Laura had fidgeted non stop in her seat. Tapping her pencil on the table, chewing on the eraser, and furiously eating gummy bears as she watched down the isle where Carmilla usually came sauntering through all leather and eyeliner.

Damn that leather.

Laura had decided it was time to girl the hell up. She liked Carmilla, why not do something about it? Especially with the encouragement from Laf that Carmilla had to at least be little bit interested because, 'you're the only person i've ever seen her spend more than 5 minutes with without getting
those murder eyes’. Which, ok, wasn't super reassuring, but it was something.

—

Carmilla didn’t let go of Laura’s hand until they were at the car and honestly didn’t have a choice. She dropped her hand as they went their separate directions to climb inside and out of the rain. Carmilla opened the door and Joey immediately jumped in and climbed into the back seat, panting happily.

Laura jumped in the passenger seat and shut the door behind her, out of breath from laughing and running. “Ok, I promise that wasn’t on purpose.” She laughed as she pried wet clothing from her skin.

“I’m having a hard time believing you, cupcake.” Carmilla chuckled as she pushed wet curls out of her face and tried to catch her breath. “Jump in the puddle she said. I’ll be fun she said.” Carmilla teased, shaking her head and smirking at Laura.

“Oh please.” Laura laughed and shoved Carmilla playfully in the shoulder, “I’m positive I heard you laughing. Don’t even try to deny you didn't enjoy it.” She crossed her eyes and sputtered as a wet lock of hair made its way between her lips.

Carmilla’s smirk softened to a smile watching Laura try to rid the hair from her face but failing. Leaning over the center console of the car, Carmilla reached out and gently brushed the hair from Laura’s face, tucking it behind her ear. The rain was still falling heavily, water on metal echoed as they sat there in the car in the early hours of the morning.

Laura took in a sharp breath as Carmilla’s cool fingers lingered to brush across her cheek. When her eyes came up to look at the dark haired girl, she didn't miss that Carmilla’s eyes were scanning her face. Lingering on her lips longer than anywhere else.

“Carm?” Laura breathed out quietly. Butterflies and laughter was now breathless pressure on her chest. The sound of rain and Carmilla’s breathing filling her entirely.

“Yeah?” Carmilla swallowed heavily. It wasn't on purpose, at least she didn’t think so, but she was slowly inching closer to Laura. She watched as her cheeks began to pink and her tongue slowly brushed over her lips unknowingly.

Laura felt her heart rate spike and her breathing grow heavier. Was this really happening? Her eyes fluttered shut as a thumb brushed tenderly along her jaw before fingers were sliding around the back of her neck, fingertips scratching gently through wet hair.

A rumbling of thunder matched the rumble in her chest as Carmilla leaned forward, almost afraid to breathe. She watched Laura’s eyelids flutter closed and her lips part with the quietest of breaths before she dampened her own lips with her tongue. She didn't know what she was doing, but she didn't want to stop. Feelings in general— were terrifying. What she felt for Laura, even more so.

That's when she froze. She could feel Laura's breath on her lips, just inches away. Damp locks between her fingers and suddenly the breathless feeling in Carmilla's chest brought on by butterflies felt more like crows, their talons ripping into the cracks already formed in her heart.

She couldn't do this. It should have been easy. Lean forward and kiss the girl. But this wasn't just some girl. This was Laura. She was different. So it made this different.

But why? It was a stupid question, and she knew it. It was different because she cared. Because she went against everything she had told herself as soon as these feelings started and let Laura find her
way into her heart. She couldn't help it really. Just like she couldn't help anything that brought her to that exact moment, breathing the same air as the beautiful girl that pulled her in like quicksand.

It was too much, the way she felt. It was familiar, she had been here before. The last time she had opened her heart, it had been ripped to pieces. Shredded without a second thought. She knew although she had somehow managed to piece things back together enough for her heart to regain a beat, this would be different. She wouldn't be able to recover if Laura broke her heart. So she paused, studying the face in front of her, wishing she could kiss her instead of knowing it would probably be the beginning of her end.

But Carmilla's pause had lasted too long. She knew it as soon as she saw Laura's eyebrows twitch together slightly in confusion. Their lips should have met by now.

Should have.

Panic filled her body and Carmilla didn't know what to do. Was it possible to get out of this situation without ruining everything?

As if Joey could read her mind he clumsily moved from his spot on the back seat and let out a quiet bark as he stepped between the seats, awkwardly crashing between the two girls as he tried to climb up front.

Laura pulled back with a laugh just like the one that filled the air as she danced in the rain and Carmilla's sighed. Relieved Laura didn't have to know of the demons echoing memories of heartache in her head. The poorly stitched up pieces of her heart, aching to let her in, but terrified at what that would mean. To love someone again would mean the possibility of losing them. And Carmilla was sure she didn't want to lose Laura.

So she would draw a line. Allow herself a lever of closeness, but not cross the line to where she could end up being destroyed again. Being broken once was bad enough. A second time would be unbearable.

Laura pulled Joey into her lap (he was almost bigger than her, it seemed) and laughed nervously, "I guess he's ready to go."

Laura smiled shyly at Carmilla, still trying to catch her breath from what she was pretty sure was about to happen. Carmilla looked completely flustered and she couldn't help but think it was adorable.

Carmilla forced a smile before reaching out to pet Joey, a silent thank you in her eyes, before she turned on the car and pulled back onto the paved road.

Laura's head whipped up quickly at the sound of someone clearing their throat. Her wide smile anticipating seeing Carmilla fell slightly when instead she was met with a hesitant wade from Danny.

"Studying alone today, Hollis?" Danny's voice seemed unsure but hopeful.

Their last encounter hadn't exactly gone well and they hadn't talked since their joint decision to storm off dramatically into the crowd at a carnival. But if Danny was being nice, Laura could return the gesture.

"Oh uh, just waiting for Carm." Laura winced at the nickname and the familiarity it suggested. After all, that's why all the dramatics last time, "Tutoring and stuff." She shrugged, trying to seem casual
about it.

It was casual. So far. Even if there was constant flirting and spending more time together and an almost kiss..

"Does she usually keep you waiting?" Danny joked, trying to lighten the obvious awkward tension.

Laura looked confused and glanced up at the clock. No way. She had been waiting an hour and didn't even realize. How is that even possible?

Because she was daydreaming about her lips, that's how.

"Oh uh, not really." Laura sighed, "She's probably not coming at this point, huh?"

Danny shrugged, "I could.. Keep you company? If you're planning on studying, that is."

Laura could tell Danny was trying, and not in a possessive girlfriend way, but the way things were before, when they were friends.

"Sure." Laura smiled up at her and pulled out her book.

Danny sat down with a smile and pulled out a stack of papers to start grading. For the next hour they sat in silence, Danny marking homework, and Laura going over her notes until Danny started to pack up her things.

"Done?" Laura asked, leaning on her elbow lazily. Psychology wasn't nearly as fun without Carmilla.

"For now." Danny smiled as she stood up. "Summer's meeting. Thank for letting me.." She gestured to the table between her and Laura.

"Anytime." Laura said sincerely. "You're great company."

"Thanks Hollis." Danny took a step back and brought her hand up in a wave, "see you around."

Laura waved and watched her disappear into the book shelves before letting out a sigh and closing her book. It felt nice to feel normal around Danny, if anything it was a start. Even if she didn't get the chance to ask Carmilla out for real, at least one good thing came out of the day.

——

Wednesday. And this was getting ridiculous.

Was Carmilla avoiding her?

Laura had sat through psychology, not hearing a single word from the lecture, giving herself yet another pep talk for when she saw Carmilla. Which should have been right after class.

It's been a pretty constant ritual, Laura would leave class as Carmilla would be walking in. She would say something flirty, Laura would blush, Carmilla would wink and disappear into class to leave Laura flustered in the hallway.
But not today.

Laura had purposefully packed up her things slower than a sleeping snail. When professor shields gave her a curious look before starting his next lecture, she just let out a sigh and made her way silently out into the hall.

Carmilla was a no show. Yet again. And Laura was running out of ways to convince herself making a move on the brooding tutor was a good idea.

After waiting another 10 minutes out in the hallway, hoping maybe she was just running late, Laura let out a huff and made her way to the exit.

——

Thursday.

"That's it." Laura muttered to herself before standing up and shoving her things in her book bag. She grabbed her coat and threw it on quickly before dragging her bag behind her as she stomped towards the library doors.

Getting stood up twice in one week for tutoring was more than Laura was going to let Carmilla get away with. Honestly, only a small part was upset about the lack of tutoring. Most of the frustration came from the constant butterflies she's had since Sunday with nothing to do about them.

Maybe if she saw Carmilla they would either go away, or swarm enough to force her to do what she had been wanting to all week.

It wasn't until she knocked loudly on Carmilla's apartment door that her frustration switched to complete nervousness. She heard Joey bark on the other side of the door and the faint sound of Carmilla mumbling.

Rolling her eyes, Laura knocked again. “I know you're home. I can hear you.”

Another bark and a dull thud on the door, which Laura guessed was a pillow being thrown.

“I’m not going away.” Laura called out again, crossing her arms.

A muffled “Its open.” passed through the door and Laura reached for the handle.

She pushed open the door and stepped inside confidently, “If this is because of what happened Sunday…”

Laura stopped as soon as she was through the doorway. The curtains were drawn and although it was mid afternoon, the entire apartment was dark. Joey came trotting up to her happy, bumping into her legs and hopping up onto her. Laura looked around and even with her eyes adjusting to the dark room she couldn't see anyone else.

“Carm?” Laura called out hesitantly. She couldn't have invited her in then just disappeared, right? Her attention was pulled to the couch when she heard a few quiet sniffles and a sigh.

“Morning, cupcake.” Carmilla rasped from her spot on the couch. Her voice was scratchy, and not in her usual seductive way. She had her blanket covering her and pulled up tight under her chin as she laid on her side. The coffee table in front of her was littered with empty mugs and used tissues.

“Its afternoon.” Laura tried not to chuckle at Carmilla’s state. For someone usually so put together
and flawless… she was a wreck.

“Even better.” Carmilla mumbled before pulling the blanket up over her head.

“Aww, is this why you haven't been at school or made it to tutoring? Cause you’re sick?” Laura asked, brushing tissues off the couch so she could sit down by Carmilla’s feet.

“Oh shit.” Carmilla pulled the blanket back down to her chin, “I didn't mean to bail.” she sniffled a few times before grabbing a new tissue and blowing her nose.

“No its fine, I just thought…” That you were mortified we almost kissed or maybe almost kissed and were avoiding me. Laura shook her head and looked around the apartment.

“Thought what?” Carmilla shifted to sit up, her back against the arm rest of the couch. She took in a deep breath, immediately regretting it as the ache in her lungs made her chest rattle with a cough.

“Nothing, doesn't matter.” Laura frowned at a clearly miserable Carmilla. Her nose was red, her eyes puffy, hair that was usually messy was down right disastrous. “You look awful.”

“Gee thanks.” Carmilla mumbled sarcastically.

Laura laughed at Carmilla’s poor attempt to seem hurt, “Why are you in here and not in bed?”

“Its too far away.” She grumbled and wrapped the blanket around herself tightly.

“Wait, is this because I made you stay out in the rain?” Her eyes went wide as she realized this was because of her, “This is my fault! I’m so sorry, I shouldn't have made you stay in the rain. You didn't even want to and I just—“

“Alright, just stop this before I get queasy.” Carmilla cut her off, climbing up off the couch slowly. “Me being sick, is not your fault.”

“Really?” Laura shrank, watching Carmilla walk to the sink to fill up a glass of water, blanket sill wrapped around her.

“Yeah.” She nodded before taking a sip and setting the glass down.

Laura sighed and looked around, “Okay, but you have to at least let me help you get better.”

“Oh yeah?” Carmilla scoffed, “Do you have a magical ‘get better’ pill?”

“Nooo..” Laura stood up and walked over to the window, pulling open the blinds abruptly, “But I make a mean chicken noodle soup.” She turned around and smiled, hands on her hips.

Carmilla groaned and lowered herself onto the counter, her cheek resting on the cool surface. She didn't have the energy to argue, she barely had the energy to stand. She knew this was a losing battle and let out a sigh. “Fine.”

“First.” Laura smiled and started walking towards the hall and down to Carmilla’s room, “When was the last time you showered?”

“What are you trying to say Hollis?” Carmilla groaned as she made her way back to the couch and dropped back down into the cushions, covering herself with her blanket.

A few minutes later Laura was back and pulling the blanket off of Carmilla. The dark haired girl curled her body up on the couch and glared at the smiling brunette above her.
“Oh come on grumpy, it’ll make you feel better.” Laura tossed the blanket on the end of the couch and reached out and took hold of Carmilla’s wrist, pulling her up and off the couch.

“Remind me why I let you in?” Carmilla grumbled between sniffles as Laura led her down the hallway.

Laura pushed her through the doorway to her room and leaned on the frame, “The bath is already ready, you don’t have to do a thing but climb in. And while you get cleaned up I’ll start on the best chicken noodle soup you’ll ever eat.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.” Carmilla smirked before grabbing the hem of her shirt and starting to pull it off as she disappeared through the doorway into the bathroom.

Dropping her clothes on the floor, she had to admit even just being in the room filled with steam from the warm water already felt great. Carmilla pulled her hair up into a messy bun before shuffling over to the bathtub. She smiled as she saw the extreme amount of bubbles floating in the tub. Did she even own bubble bath? She climbed in and sank down into the water, covering herself with bubbles up to her neck. Letting out a sigh she closed her eyes and let her head drop back on the cool porcelain of the tub while the water warmed her through.

It wasn't until the water started to cool that Carmilla opened her eyes and took in a deep breath. Laura was right, she really did feel better. She pulled the plug from the drain and stood up and turned on the shower. She rinsed off the bubbles still covering her body and pulled her hair from its bun to wash it, the warm water re steaming up the room.

She slowly made her way back into her bedroom, towel wrapped around her as she combed her fingers through wet curls. Grabbing a pair of sweats and a loose t-shirt she got dressed before noticing the medicine sitting on her dresser along with a glass of water. This girl was too much.

Slowly she made her way back out to where Laura was most likely waiting for her. Walking in she noticed Laura standing at the record player. Like last time, she looked like she had no clue what she was doing as she looked it over carefully, almost afraid to touch it. Joeys head popped up from its place on his bed in the corner as a floor board creaked under Carmilla’s feet.

Laura jumped slightly and turned around to face Carmilla, “I promise I wasn't snooping.” She turned back to the record player, gesturing to it with her hands, “I was just trying to get this to play something.”

Carmilla smiled and looked around the room. The curtains were open, casting a warm light into the apartment. The tissues that had littered the coffee table, couch and floor had been cleaned up. The coffee and tea mugs strewn around the apartment had been taken to the sink and something on the stove smelled delicious.

She walked over to where Laura was still fidgeting with the record player and stepped up close behind her. “All you have to do…” She reached around Laura, the front of her body gently pressing into Laura’s back as she reached her arm under Laura’s. Laura froze, taking in a breath and holding it.

“Is move this…” Carmilla gently moved the arm to let the needle hover above the record already spinning on the turntable. She lowered it slowly until it caught and the speakers began to crackle and pop with the rotation. “..to here.”

A second later and music started to fill the apartment, Billie Holiday’s I’m a Fool To Want You. It wasn't what Laura was expecting to hear. She wasn't sure what she had been expecting, but like
usual, Carmilla continued to surprise her.

“This…” Laura let out a giggle, “Is not what I pictured you rocking out to.”

Carmilla felt Laura’s laugh reverberate through her body as her chest was still pressed gently to her back. They stood there at the record player, neither one acting as if they had any intention of moving.

This was that line. The line she had decided to create Sunday when she almost gave her heart completely to this girl. And maybe it was the cold, or the medicine, or the way Laura’s laugh echoed through her entirely, but Carmilla decided that even if there was a line she was determined not to cross, that didn't mean she couldn't get as close to it as possible without tumbling over it.

“And what did you expect?” Carmilla chuckled, taking a small step backwards. Her hand fell on Laura’s hip and urged her to turn around.

Laura turned to face her and shrugged with a small smile, “I don’t know. Something more punk rock, angry yelling and mosh pit inducing. Or maybe even something less angry but something you’d jump around and dance to?”

Carmilla chuckled and glanced down to the floor, “You don’t think you can dance to this?”

Laura shook her head with a smirk.

“Alright then, I’ll prove you wrong.” Carmilla quickly stepped forward and wrapped a hand around Laura’s waist, landing on her low back. A gentle pull brought Laura closer to her as her other hand found Laura’s and took hold of it, lifting it up into the space next to their bodies.

Laura looked shocked as her body followed blindly to whatever gentle push or pull Carmilla gave it and soon they were making small steps around the empty space in the apartment.

“Waltzing?” Laura asked, her eyes watching their feet in an effort not to step on Carmilla’s toes.

“And what’s wrong with waltzing?” Carmilla rasped. Her throat still scratchy from being sick but the air of seduction returned completely.

“What is this, 1698?” Laura chuckled before looking up. Once her eyes met Carmilla’s her joking smile slowly fell as she got lost in the intensity of the dark eyes looking back at her. She swallowed audibly as Carmilla continued to lead them slowly and effortlessly.

“Why Miss Hollis,” Carmilla raised an eyebrow, a smirk twisting up her lips, “Waltzing, in 1698? It may as well have been sex.”

A few more steps and they were moving slower. Carmilla could feel Laura’s breathing grow heavier as they watched each other closely. Their chest pressed together gently, face to face with just a breath between them. This was the moment she realized she was dangerously close to falling over that line. Carmilla stepped back, dropping her hand from Laura’s waist and spun her under her other arm, eliciting another giggle from Laura. When she brought her back, Laura instinctively intertwined their fingers and took hold of Carmilla’s shoulder with her other hand, pulling her back in close.

The dancing had stopped. They stood there silently, the record player white noise in the background as thoughts and feelings flooded their minds. Laura took in a breath, maybe this was the moment she had been hoping for all week. Her chance to make a move.

Carmilla’s eyes flicked down to Laura’s lips as her tongue brushed along the bottom one, wetting it nervously. Laura’s heart was pounding as soon as she decided this was it. The moment she was
going to ask Carmilla out for real.

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A loud whistling filled the background noise as they stood there motionless, hands clasped together, bodies pressed flush against one another.

Carmilla took a deep breath and stepped back, dropping her hands from their hold on Laura and wiping her palms on her thighs.

Laura laughed nervously, "That'll be the tea" she whispered. Still trying to find her way out of the trance Carmilla's eyes had her in.

"Tea?" Carmilla asked quietly.

They were speaking the words, technically having a conversation, but neither one of them were really processing anything other than how it felt to be so close to the other.

Joey barked at the obnoxious whistling coming from the stove and Laura cleared her throat before turning and walking to the kitchen.

"Honey and lemon." She said breathlessly, trying to compose herself. "And soup."

Laura busied herself grabbing a clean bowl and filling it with soup before filling two mugs with tea and setting in on the counter.

"This looks, I mean— thank you." Carmilla slowly walked to the counter, pressing her pals gently against its edge.

Carmilla couldn't remember a time someone had offered so selflessly to take care of her. She had always been on her own. Even when it came to Ell. Maybe especially when it came to Ell.

The memory pulled at the cracks in her chest, on the very heart that was trying to give itself to the girl in front of her. Carmilla wanted to believe it would be different, if she allowed herself to love Laura. But love was always the same. It filled you up before it drained you completely and left you a broken mess.

"I should probably take Joey out." Carmilla quickly moved towards the doorway, "he's been stuck in here with me and—"

"Oh I already took him for a walk." Laura cut her off quickly. Maybe she was a little zealous with the whole, helping sick Carmilla thing, but she would probably do the same thing for Laf or Perry so whatever. "And your fridge was made up of mostly expired and molding food so while I was out getting supplies for soup I also got him soooome.." She opened the fridge and pulled out a familiar to-go box and opened it up to reveal steamed broccoli.

Joey was immediately on his feet and in the kitchen, face pushed in the container of broccoli as soon as Laura set it on the floor.

Carmilla smiled and shook her head at her goof of a dog before stepping back to the counter and lowering herself into a stool. She watched as Laura patted joey's back and laughed at his enthusiasm over the steamed vegetable.

"You're an angel."
The words were out before she could think them through and the amount of sincerity and care surprised even her. She meant them. Completely. Laura had turned out to be an angel lighting up her world of darkness, and she probably didn't even know it. Not crossing that line and keeping her heart hidden away was proving to be more difficult than she thought.

Laura laughed, “Thats just the drugs talking.”

Carmilla decided talking probably wasn't something she should be doing right now if those kinds of things were just going to slip out. Instead she decided to fill her mouth with the soup Laura had set in front of her.

“This is— alright, I don’t want you to get used to me giving you compliments but seriously, this is amazing.” Carmilla took another big spoonful of soup and ate it quickly.

“Told you.” Laura smiled smugly before taking a sip of her tea.

“No for real. Who knew you could make something that wasn't made completely of sugar.” Carmilla smirked before taking another spoonful.

“Ha ha, very funny.” Laura scrunched up her nose at Carmilla, “Its my dads recipe. He makes it for me anytime I get sick.”

“Huh.” Carmilla twirled her spoon through the broth and vegetables in her bowl, “My dad used to do that same thing. Only instead of soup it was toast and bananas.” She chuckled at the memory. She hadn't thought about that in years, and she hadn't shared it with anyone ever. Once again Laura somehow made it so easy to open up. To talk about things she normally never would.

Laura hadn't forgotten about the last time Carmilla had mentioned her father. The photo album in the abandoned house had brought on a conversation that left her with a similar feeling. A wistful and slightly sad energy settled around them as Carmilla went quiet and instead of talking, focused on her soup.

—

“How many episodes of this show are there?” Carmilla groaned and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Technically.. more than you want to know.” Laura laughed and shifted in her spot. Her back was up against the headboard of Carmilla’s bed, her legs out in front of her, ankles crossed and lap top sitting on her thighs, “But you aren’t even paying attention so I don’t know why you’re complaining.”

Carmilla snorted as she sat up and reached for her mug on the bed side table. Laura was right, she wasn't paying attention at all. Joey was curled up at her side and she had grabbed a book from off the floor as soon as Laura had hit play on the laptop.

“That may be true, but with this headache I don’t think reading is going to be an option anymore.” Carmilla set her cup back down and reached over to pet Joey.

Laura frowned at Carmilla and hit pause on her show. “Alright, come here.” She shut the lap top and set it aside, she nudged Joey and the dog moved down to the foot of the bed with a huff.

“I’m sorry, what now?” Carmilla raised an eyebrow and looked at her skeptically.

Laura rolled her eyes and shifted slightly, patting her thigh. “Don’t make it weird, just trust me.”
Carmilla didn't make a move, she just kept her eyes on Laura, trying to figure her out.

Laura widened her eyes and shook her head. “Just lay down. I wasn't wrong about the soup, was I?”

Carmilla narrowed her eyes and thought about it for a second before letting out a sigh and slowly shifting so her back was facing Laura. She slowly lowered herself down onto her back, letting her head drop slowly into Laura’s lap.

“Now what?” Carmilla asked, her eyes looking up at Laura’s face above her.

“You really aren't a patient person, are you?” Laura shook her head as she placed her hands on either side of Carmilla’s head.

“Nope.” The ‘p’ popping loudly as she smirked up at Laura.

Laura bit her bottom lip, trying to hide her smile. Of course even when she’s sick Carmilla was still obnoxious. Laura pressed the tips of her fingers against her temples gently and started to rotate them in a circle.

Carmilla immediately hummed at the relaxing sensation and her eyes fluttered closed. Her smirk melted away as her face relaxed completely, followed by the rest of her body. *Laura was right about the soup, and this.. for sure.*

Laura smiled seeing Carmilla relax. She let her fingers glide back into the girl’s dark hair as she scratched at her scalp lightly, fingers trailing through still damp curls.

“Is this another one of those secret magical cures of yours?” Carmilla whispered, more breathy than she had intended. She would have been embarrassed but it felt too good, she couldn't bring herself to care.

Laura chuckled quietly, looking down at the girl in her lap. “Maybe.” She whispered back. Carmilla's hair was soft and felt like silk as she brushed her fingers tenderly through it. “My mom.. She used to do this to help me fall asleep.”

Carmilla sighed and her eyes fluttered open slowly. She didn't look up at Laura, but instead kept her eyes on the ceiling above her. “Sounds like you’ve got the perfect family. Don’t you, cutie?”

She didn't mean for it to come out bitter— but like a lot of what she was saying that day, her ability to filter wasn’t at its best. She wasn't angry at Laura for having what seemed to be a great family. She was more sad that her chance to have something similar had been taken away from her too soon. Only a handful of memories of her father remained, and her mother… had become callous and cold. Carmilla couldn’t remember a time when her mother had shown compassion like what Laura had given her that day.

Glancing up at Laura, Carmilla knew right away what she said had hurt her. Her harsh words weren't meant to hurt Laura. They were words said from frustration and pain she had internalized for most of her life that had somehow managed to come out and hurt the one person she actually felt cared about her.

“Hey, hey, Laura.” Carmilla scrambled to sit up as Laura shrank back against the headboard, “I didn't mean to— shit, I’m sorry.” She ran a hand through her hair and scooted in front of Laura, taking hold of her hands.

Laura looked down at their hands and shook her head, “No its fine.”
“I…” Carmilla sighed, “…didn’t mean to be a bitch about it.”

Laura chuckled and gave Carmilla’s hands a squeeze, “Really. I’m fine, its fine.” She took a deep breath and looked up at her with a sad smile, “Its just me and dad. Now.”

“Oh.”

*Oh shit.* Carmilla just stayed silent after that. She had already screwed up worse than she thought, she didn't want to make it worse.

Laura saw it in Carmilla’s eyes, she wanted to say something but didn't know what. Laura was used to that look. She was also used to the ‘I’m sorry’s’ she received that ultimately meant nothing. It was a nice gesture, but useless. She was grateful Carmilla at least had the sense not to say that, even if she didn't know what else to say.

Carmilla searched Laura’s eyes and although she could tell she was sad, there was some happiness still there, most likely in memories. “You want to tell me about her?”

“What?” Laura’s expression changed to shock. No one had ever followed up the news of it just being her and dad with that before.

“Just if you want.” Carmilla shrugged and moved to lay back down in Laura’s lap. Maybe it would be easier if there wasn't anyone looking at her, or maybe it would make it easier to say no. “I mean, as long as you keep doing that head rub thing.”

Laura’s eyebrows pushed together as she watched Carmilla get comfortable again. Lowering her head into Laura’s lap, eyes closed, folding her arms loosely over her chest and crossing her ankles. When Laura didn't move, Carmilla opened her eyes and looked up at the girl above her. She reached behind her and took hold of Laura’s hands and brought them to her head before crossing her arms again and closing her eyes with a satisfied smile.

Laura chuckled and shook her head but her fingers started scratching at Carmilla’s scalp again. “She did make really good cookies.”

“Ahhh, the mystery of the sugar dependency is solved.” Carmilla joked playfully, opening one eye to look up at Laura.

Laura laughed and took hold of Carmilla’s hair and dropped it messily over her face, “You’re the worst.”

Carmilla rolled over laughing and brushed the hair from her face. “Yeah well, its all part of my charm.”

“Yeah, charming isn’t what I would call you right now.” Laura gave her a smirk and tossed a pillow down towards her.

Carmilla dodged the pillow best she could before burying her face in the blankets, “I’m a mess.” She sat up and shifted to sit next to Laura against the head board of her bed. It had been nice having Laura around, even if she was sick.

Laura smiled at her before tucking a few loose strands of hair behind her ear. That’s when she noticed the clock next to the bed. “Oh gosh, it’s late, I should let you sleep.” She slid to the edge of the bed and reached down to grab her shoes.
Carmilla reached over and took hold of her arm, giving it a gentle tug back towards her, “Stay?”

Her air of confidence had left her. She wasn’t smirking, being flirty or suggestive. She was just honestly asking Laura to stay. Being vulnerable and opening herself up to the possibility that she might say no.

Laura look at her for a moment, surprised but the vulnerability and smallness of her voice. She nodded slowly before shifting her legs back onto the bed and scooting up towards the headboard.

Carmilla nodded before pulling the covers down and sliding her legs underneath, Laura following quickly. They sank down into the bed, both letting out a heavy sigh as the mattress and covers hugged them. Carmilla reached out and turned off the lamp next to the bed before settling on her back, arms at her sides.

Laura turned on her side, facing Carmilla. The dark haired girl’s eyes were already closed and her breathing not yet slow enough to signal her being asleep. Laura watched her chest rise with each inhale but noticed her lips pulled tight and eyebrows furrowed. Without thinking Laura reached out and brushed her fingertips along the bare skin of her arm.

Carmilla’s eyes stayed closed but the tight lipped expression shifted to a small smile and she let out a quiet sigh. Laura continued to brush her fingertips down her arm until she reached Carmilla’s wrist, then she brought her hand up again slowly.

Carmilla slowly rotated her arm, stopping when her palm was facing upwards and Laura’s gentle tracing continued. Fingers trailed back down her forearm, across her wrist and into her palm. Laura slowly traced her finger up Carmilla’s pinky, then ring finger, until she had traced her entire hand, before letting her fingers drag lightly back up her arm slowly.

Carmilla felt herself relaxing with every trace of Laura’s fingers across her skin. Her breathing slowing steadily. The demons normally waking to haunt her dreams were nowhere to be seen. All she felt was warmth from Laura’s body laying next to her own, and Laura’s fingers, mapping a trail along her arm.

Laura closed her own eyes and kept tracing Carmilla’s arm, her movements growing slower as she began to grow tired and draw closer to sleep. Her fingers swept down Carmilla’s arm once more, her fingers spreading from the center of her palm to etch along each of her fingers. Laura slowly brought her fingers back towards the center of her hand, dragging slowly through the space between each finger. She paused for a second then extended her fingers again, matching her fingertips with Carmilla’s. Their palms pressed together and both let out a sleepy sigh before their fingers fell to interlock in a gentle grip as they both fell asleep.

——

For the first time since Sunday, Carmilla woke up without feeling like she was dying. She took a deep breath, relieved when it didn’t reduce her to chest rattling coughs. Remembering the reason she was probably feeling better she rolled over in her bed but instead of finding Laura, she was met by the wet nose of a German Shepard clearly ready to be taken outside.

Carmilla let out a sleepy sigh and sat up slowly, rubbing her eyes with her palms. “Alright Joey, lets go.”

Joey jumped off the bed and was already through the doorway before Carmilla had her feet out of bed and pressed against the floor. She leaned forward on her knees for a moment, trying to wake herself up a bit more. When she opened her eyes she noticed the plate and note set on her bedside
“Bananas and toast.” Carmilla chuckled and picked up the note set next to the plate of toast covered in slices of bananas.

_Had an early class but I hope you feel better!
In case the toast doesn't work, there's soup in the fridge._
Call me later?
_-Laura_

Carmilla smiled and set the note down before taking a big bite out of the toast. _Yeah, not crossing that line and keeping hold of her heart was going to be difficult._
right after carm finds her toast and bananas... the lines are blurring and Carmilla cant decide if she should cross them or not. Laura doesn't know what to do either.

Hey guys! Sorry for the wait! I ended up on another trip and got distracted with family and snowboarding. BUT-- merry christmas!

Laura swiveled on the stool and smiled as she reread her texts from that morning.

*Carmilla: you burnt the toast
Laura: what? not even a thank you?
Carmilla: you left before I could give you a proper one
Laura: and what's your idea of a proper thank you?
Carmilla: wouldn't you like to know?
Laura: maybe :)

"L! Let's go, what are you even doing?" Laf jingled their keys as they stood in the apartment doorway.

"Right. Sorry." Laura shoved her phone in her pocket and grabbed her beanie off the counter while she slid off the stool. "Remind me again why we are making thanksgiving dinner 3 weeks early?"

Laura walked out of the apartment and pulled her beanie on and zipped up her jacket. Perry was sending them on an outing to get cranberry sauce and ingredients for stuffing.

"Because Perry likes to do a trial run before the real thing." They locked the door and shoved their hands in their pockets, "All I know is it means more pie, so I don't complain."

"I guess you're right." Laura shrugged as they stepped outside.

Ever since the rain storm the previous weekend, the weather had shifted drastically. The air was cold and biting with plenty of wind filling the days. Near freezing temperatures at night, leaving the ground frosted as morning crept up slowly each day. It was only a matter of time before snow actually fell, which almost would have been more bearable.

Walking into the grocery store Laf grabbed a kart and began pushing through the isles with Laura following behind.
"Perry just texted." Laura sped up but kept her eyes on her phone.

"I knew the short list wasn't going to survive." Laf chuckled, "what else does she need?"

"Uhh.."Laura scrolled through the multiple texts as more came through, "everything." She laughed and walked around to the front of the kart and hopped on to get a ride.

Laf lifted their arm and pointed in the direction across the grocery store, "To the vegetables!" They yelled loudly before grabbing hold of the handle of the kart and racing through the isle with Laura still standing on the frame.

Laf slowed down once they were surrounded by produce and Laura hopped off, and started reading through the new list Perry had sent. She was in the middle of explaining how you can tell if a pumpkin is ripe when her phone chimed again.

"Honestly. How many lists is she going to send us?" Laf asked as they tried to juggle an onion, tomato and some kind of squash.

Laura flipped open her phone and smiled. It wasn't Perry.

_Carmilla: it doesn't taste the same_

Laura's head shot up as she scanned the grocery store. Carmilla had to be there somewhere but she didn't see her. She looked back down at her phone as Laf put a few items in their kart.

"Ah, not Perry then?" They asked with a smug smile.

Laura just shook her head and finished her reply.

_Laura: what doesn't taste the same?_

_Carmilla: the soup_

_Carmilla: it tastes different_

_Laura: different good? Different bad?_

_Carmilla: just different. Not like it did when you made it. I think I heated it wrong._

_Laura: it's soup, silly :) I'm sure it tastes the same._

"Are we really going to be making an entire Thanksgiving dinner twice?" Laura asked, watching as their kart got increasingly more full.

"Every year." Laf nodded, "You can invite Danny if you want. Or Carmilla?"

"Oh, I don't know." Laura shrugged and checked her phone. No more texts from Carmilla.

"Things not going like you hoped?" Laf asked, turning down a new isle.

"No. Well, I don't know." Laura sighed.

"What is it frosh?"

"I just, I really like Carmilla." Laura started.
"I'm aware." Laf held up two bags of marshmallows, trying to decide which to throw in the kart. 

Laura grabbed the bigger bag and dropped it in with the rest of their groceries, "but I get the feeling she doesn't have many friends. And I mean, she's had plenty of chances to do something to show she wants to be more than friends but hasn't." She paused, chewing on her lip for a moment, "so I've kind of accepted nothing is going to happen and I'm just trying to be ok with just being her friend. Even though it might possibly kill me."

"Wow. That's some serious self control." Laf started pushing the kart slowly.

"I guess." Laura grumbled and followed Laf to the checkout line. Another buzz from her phone made her check it immediately.

*Carmilla: It still tasted different.*

*Laura: I'll be there in 30*

Laura shoved her phone in her pocket and quickly took the packed up grocery bags and slung them over her arms.

“In a hurry frosh?” Laf asked, grabbing the last of the bags and following Laura out into the cold air.

“Just don't want to keep Perry waiting.” Laura shrugged, picking up her pace.

“Uh huh.” Laf nodded, trying to keep up.

—

“You got all this?” Laura asked as she dropped the bags on the counter.

“Yeah. Say hi to your ‘friend’.” Laf shook their head and shoved Laura back towards the door.

“Yeah, yeah..” Laura felt herself start to blush as she stumbled her way out the door.

——

“I’m starving.” Carmilla pulled open the door wide before turning and walking away, leaving it open, “What took you so long?”

Laura chuckled as she walked in and shut the door behind her, “Oh please.” She rolled her eyes and set her bike helmet on the counter and dropped her backpack on the ground, “It only took me 20 minutes to get here.”

“Why’s your face look like that?” Carmilla sat down at the counter and pushed a bowl of leftover soup in Laura’s direction.

“Its cold outside.” Laura narrowed her eyes in a mock glare as she grabbed the soup and walked over to the microwave. She shut the door and caught sight of her reflection. Her cheeks were pink from the cold wind as she rode her bike over from her apartment and her hair disheveled from her helmet. The microwave beeped loudly, Laura quickly tried to tame her hair before taking the soup out and putting it back in front of Carmilla.

“mmm.” Carmilla hummed happily as she slurped a spoonful of soup into her mouth, “See it didn't taste like this when I warmed it up.”
“I’m sure.” Laura rolled her eyes and looked around the apartment, “Where’s Joey?”

“Oh I see how it is.” Carmilla didn’t look up from her soup, “You really just came over for my dog.”

“Well, yeah.” Laura teased as she sat down on the stool next to Carmilla.

Carmilla finally turned to look at her and narrowed her eyes, “He’s with Pete. I felt bad keeping him cooped up in here while I was sick.”

“But you don’t feel bad about begging me to come over and take care of you?” Laura raised an eyebrow. She brought her elbow onto the counter and rested her head against her palm.

“Psht.” Carmilla sputtered, her cheeks feeling warm, “I’m not.. you didn't need to, the soup just didn’t…”

“Uh huh.” Laura chuckled and spun on the stool before standing up and walking over to the couch, “So since I came all this way to warm up soup in the microwave…” She trailed off as she pulled Carmilla’s laptop from the coffee table, “I get to pick what we watch.”

Carmilla smiled into her bowl of soup. The soup had tasted fine before, she just didn't feel like being alone, and with Joey gone, the apartment felt even more empty. Laura had this ability to make anywhere feel like home just by being there. The simplicity in how she treated Carmilla’s apartment like her own gave Carmilla a sense of belonging she hadn't ever completely felt, even in her own apartment. It was like it was always missing Laura’s presence.

“Fine.” Carmilla stood up, walked her bowl over to the sink, and pulled two mugs from the cupboard, “But I get to veto if its one of those awful shows you love so much.”

Carmilla filled the cups with the hot chocolate she had made before Laura had even gotten there and made her way over to the couch. She set the cups down and grabbed a blanket, covering herself as she got comfortable next to Laura. It didn't take long before Laura had picked out a movie and was slowly scooting closer to Carmilla as the opening credits started.

Carmilla watched her out of the corner of her eye as Laura tried to decide just how close she was allowed to get. She tried to hide her smile as she lifted up the edge of the blanket and got a questioning look from Laura.

“You getting in or what?” Carmilla raised an eyebrow and lifted the blanket higher, offering up the space next to herself.

Laura smiled and immediately scooted closer, filling the space that had been between them, and covering herself with the blanket they were now sharing. Carmilla smiled, her gaze cast down towards Laura, watching her smile and getting sucked into story unfolding on the computer screen. She adjusted the blanket slightly so it covered them both better and sank down into the cushions, Laura shifting slightly at the same time, their sides pressing together and Laura's head coming to rest on Carmilla's shoulder gently.

If it meant more days like this, Carmilla wouldn't mind being sick a while longer.

The movie was near its end, and although Carmilla hadn't really been paying attention to it at all, she could tell Laura had stopped watching and the fact that her bottom lip was trapped between her teeth was a clear indication she was thinking pretty hard about something.

“You’re thinking louder than this movie, cupcake.” Carmilla nudged her under the blanket gently, “Whats on your mind?”
Laura’s eyebrows came together slightly. Apparently she wasn't as good at hiding her feelings like she thought. It was also pretty surprising for Carmilla to come right out and ask her that. In all the months they had known each other, she had never come right out and asked Laura what was on her mind quite so bluntly. Usually she just let her think till her thinking was happening out loud.

“Do you want to come to thanksgiving?” Laura blurted out when Carmilla poked her in the side a second time trying to get her attention.

_Thanksgiving? Wasn't that something you did with family and loved ones?_

The panic Carmilla was feeling must have been pretty obvious because before she could answer, Laura started talking again.

“Not real thanksgiving, so its not special or anything.”

“Oh.” Carmilla answered, slightly hurt and a little bit confused. Did Laura only want her there since it wasn't the real thing?

“No, I mean, its just that Perry likes to make a pre-thanksgiving to practice or something, I’m actually not really sure. I just know we are having pretend thanksgiving on Monday and I know you've been sick and stuck at home and thought you might like a home cooked meal and the chance to get outside. Its just going to be some friends and Perry is cooking so it should be good. And theres no pressure because its pretend thanksgiving and I just thought it would be fun if you came and—“

“Cupcake.” Carmilla chuckled, cutting off Laura’s quickening rant. “You’ll be there?”

Laura pressed her lips together tightly, trying to control the size of her smile as she nodded in response.

“Then fake thanksgiving sounds great.” Carmilla smiled at her before looking back to the computer screen.

Laura watched her for a second before looking back to the movie. Neither one of them were paying attention though, as Carmilla’s arm tightened around behind Laura’s back, pulling her closer to her as they both fit tightly on a single cushion of the couch, snuggled under the heavy blanket.

Laura ended up staying for 2 more movies before finally going home. She had already put off her homework and assignments for the paper long enough, she really needed to use the weekend to catch up. As much as she was enjoying ignoring the world with Carmilla.

Being Carmilla’s friend was turning out to be easier than Laura thought. Aside from all the times she wished she could reach out and hold her hand, or lean in and press their lips together, or the moments they were snuggled together in Carmilla’s bed, Carmilla’s face pressed into her side as she quietly slept (obviously due to the cold medicine and delirium brought on by being sick for so long. Because under normal circumstances Carmilla wouldn't do that. Probably.). Other than that, friendship was working out fine.

At first Carmilla was careful about reaching that line she had decided to draw without actually crossing it. But any time she felt herself about to do something she knew she couldn't come back from, Laura was the one put up that line again. At first it was slightly confusing— how quickly Laura skirted away from physical closeness or brushed off flirtation of any kind, but after a while it made things easier for Carmilla. She let herself test the waters a little more— dragging Laura into her bedroom because the couch was no longer comfortable. Falling asleep with her arm over Laura’s stomach and head resting on her shoulder. Being a little more affectionate than usual, most likely
brought on by the cold medicine and being physically and mentally exhausted from being sick. Either way, it seemed like Laura was suddenly fine with not crossing lines either, which in turn almost made it a game. Carmilla could push right up against that line, watch Laura get flustered but try desperately to keep her composure. It was entertaining, if not a little mean.

——

“Alright L, you need to calm down.” Laf dropped their hands on Laura’s shoulders, “Usually its Perry freaking out and you’re giving her a run for her money.”

Laura let out a long breath, trying to calm down. “I know, I know.”

“Besides, aren’t the nerves supposed to be reserved for real thanksgiving?” Laf dropped their arms and walked to the fridge for a bottle of water, “This is basically just a regular Monday night with just a lot of food.”

“Good point.” Laura glanced through the kitchen. Perry had basically finished preparing food and just a few things were still cooking, but without needing much supervision.

“Besides, haven’t you basically spent every free minute with Carmilla lately?” Laf took a sip of water before replacing the cap and tossing Laura the bottle. “It shouldn’t be that bad. Especially now that you’re just being friends or whatever.”

“Well yeah, but I don’t know. Its confusing.” Laura took a sip of water, thinking over how to explain things to Laf. “I don’t know what happened, but as soon as I accepted we were just going to be friends, its like the level of flirting upped by a surprising amount.”

“So you’re not just friends?” Laf asked, trying to follow along.

“No we are. I think.” Laura tossed back the water.

“Let me get this straight.” Laf took another sip, “You thought Carmilla wanted to be friends and were bummed but decided to be okay with it. Now you think Carmilla wants more but you are still trying to just be her friend?”

“Yeah?” Laura groaned and dropped her head back.

"So quit trying to just be her friend if she's going for more." Laf chuckled and moved out of the kitchen as Perry came walking in.

"I don't think it's that simple." Perry added as she opened the oven to check its contents. "Carmilla doesn't let many people in. And if she's chosen to let Laura be a part of her life then that means something. Pushing for something Carmilla isn't open to or ready for could destroy that completely and then Laura wouldn't have Carmilla at all. Not as a friend. And not as more."

"Gee Perr, way to go all serious." Laf frowned watching Laura.

Perry turned to see Laura slumped against the counter, her chin resting in her palm with her elbow on the counter top. She had the mixture of a frown and confusion on her face, her eyes wide as she thought over everything Perry had just said.

"No she's right." Laura finally spoke, though her eyes were still staring off into space. “I’ve never heard Carmilla talk about anyone in her life really. Aside from the revolving door of library buddies earlier this semester.”
“So what if Laura is her friend?” Laf suddenly seemed more invested in the topic than they were before, “What if they are meant to be and Laura not doing anything is messing up that chance? If Carmilla wants more and Laura wants more, but neither of them are willing to go for it, then they are both missing out on what could be the best thing to ever happen to them.”

“Well I don’t know if—” Laura started but was quickly cut off.

“Maybe Laura should just go for it. Because even if Carmilla doesn’t let anyone in, she let Laura in for a reason. And maybe Laura deserves to go after what she wants. Laura deserves to be happy. Carmilla deserves to be happy. Maybe they are meant to be happy together.”

“What if Carmilla isn't ready to be more with Laura?” Perry took a step towards Laf, her face stern, “What if she's scared and nervous to ruin a life long friendship over something she isn't sure will work? Then they wouldn't even be friends! And Carmilla couldn't handle that. She wouldn't know what to do.”

Laura looked between the two red heads staring at one another in the kitchen. “Uhh, are we still talking about me or..?”

“What?” Perry stepped back and opened the oven again, “Of course! Who else would we be talking about?”

Laf swallowed hard. Sure they had started off talking about Laura and Carmilla, but they ended up using the situation to vent about their own dilemma. And from the sound of it, Perry wasn't ready to talk about it for real.

Laura stood up straight and nodded her head, mostly to herself. With what Perry had said it was easy to decide to just keep going the way she had. It was working as far as she could tell, and as much as she had grown to like Carmilla and having her in her life, maybe Carmilla needed her just as much. Taking a chance and ruining that wouldn't be good for either of them. And knowing how Camilla worked, she wasn't really the relationship type anyway. So maybe it was just better to keep being her friend for the sake of her heart, anyway.

Laf jumped at the sound of the doorbell and nearly sprinted to the door, pulling it open wide. “Kirsch?”

“Hey science nerd.” Kirsch grinned wide and stepped into the apartment, not bothering to wait for an invitation in. “Little nerd hottie!” He wrapped his arms around Laura and lifted her in a hug.

“Hey Kirsch.” Laura managed to get out without any air actually still in her lungs, “What brings you by?”

Kirsch chuckled and set Laura down slowly, “Perry invited me!”

“Really?” Laura asked surprised and turned to face Perry. “You invited Kirsch?”

“Well, yes.” Perry nodded, her face turning pink for reasons only she knew, “I saw him in the art building after class and thought— well we have a lot of food and he said he wasn't busy so I thought him and SJ would—“

“Oh no, I didn't bring SJ. I brought D-bear.” Kirsch turned to look back at the door.

“Wilson, how many times do I have to tell you not to call me that?” Danny had been standing in the doorway unnoticed until now. She had followed Kirsch in but only after everyones attention had been on Perry.
“Danny. Hey.” Laura said awkwardly, looking between her and Kirsch for an explanation.

“Well, like Perry said. She invited me after an awesome posing session and I was like sure! But I really wanted to bring SJ, cause you know, she was my girlfriend.” Kirsch shrugged and reached for a roll sitting on the counter. “But then she dumped me. But I already told Perry I’d bring someone so when I ran into D-bear I just figured I’d bring her instead.”

Danny rolled her eyes and stepped further into the apartment, “I hope that’s okay. I didn’t exactly know what was happening.”

“But you still said yes to Kirsch?” Laura asked, genuinely shocked. As far as she knew, the Summers and Zeta’s had a rivalry only matched by Kirsch and Danny. Always competing and at each other’s throats.

“He promised a home cooked meal. Which smells great, by the way.” Danny answered awkwardly, looking around at the food on the counter.

Before anyone could answer there was a knock on the still open door. All eyes turned to see who it was but it was Danny who managed to offer the first greeting.

“You were invited?” The dislike clear in her voice.

“I was.” Carmilla spat back just as disdainful.

“Carm sexy! I didn’t know you were coming.” Kirsch smiled around a mouthful of bread.

“Carm, hey! You found it.” Whatever awkwardness or confusion Laura was feeling a second ago disappeared completely at seeing Carmilla in her doorway.

“I have been here before, cupcake.” Carmilla’s glare managed to soften once she saw a smiling Laura making her way towards her.

Laura stopped in front of Carmilla and glanced up at Danny who was watching her before turning back to the dark haired girl in the door.

“Well this is awkward.” Laf commented looking around the room.

They weren’t wrong. The fact that Kirsch and Danny had shown up together was weird enough. But to have Laura’s ex and Carmilla in the same room for fake thanksgiving... That was a whole new level of ‘yikes’.

Carmilla looked around the room at the array of facial expressions, ending on Danny’s obvious glare.

“Maybe I should go.” Carmilla sighed and spoke quietly as Laura stepped up to her in the doorway.

“Sounds good to me.” Danny spoke up, crossing her arms and glaring down at the dark haired girl that had managed to steal all of Laura’s attention the second she arrived.

“What? No.” Laura turned and shot Danny a look before reaching out and grabbing Carmilla’s wrist to pull her inside. “You just got here.”

Laura pulled Carmilla past Danny and into the living room, all eyes watching them go. It didn’t take
long for things to get back to normal, though. Kirsch and Danny arguing about something while Perry flitted around the kitchen doing last minute preparations for fake thanksgiving. Laf took orders from Perry and set the table while Laura and Carmilla sat together on the couch.

“For fake thanksgiving, Perry sure did go all out.” Carmilla nodded towards the kitchen at the flustered red head that seemed to be stirring 5 things at once.

“Yeah, I think its just an excuse to have Thanksgiving with Laf before she goes home to her parents house every year.” Laura smiled watching the two red heads bicker about which plates they should be using.

Laura was still thinking about what they all had said earlier. Even though she's pretty sure the conversation ended up being more about Laf and Perry in the end, the idea was still the same. Whatever crush she had on Carmilla, there was no sure way of knowing what would happen if she went for it.

“I think its ready to eat.” Perry smiled and turned off the last burner on the stove.

“Do you really think Carmilla doesn't like Laura?” Laf asked, leaning against the counter.

Perry went to stand next to Laf, taking rolls from a pan and putting them on a plate. “I don’t know.”

“Come on, Perr. Look at them.” Laf smiled and nodded towards the pair on the couch.

Perry watched Laura and Carmilla on the couch talking. Laura rambling about who knows what while she absentmindedly picked through the bag of gummy bears between them. Perry was about to go over there and tell them they were going to ruin their appetites when she noticed it.

Laura would pick through, grabbing a red, orange or yellow bear. Then Carmilla would grab a white or green one. Every time.

“Oh.” Perry looked over at Laf.

“What?” Laf asked, glancing back to the couch, “Please tell me you aren't going to yell at them for snacking before dinner.”

“Of course not.” Perry rolled her eyes and hit Laf’s arm.

Laf gave her a look and Perry smiled and turned back to the stove.

“Fine. I may have thought about it, but…” Perry sighed, “Even if I do think Carmilla likes Laura. Its not for us to make something happen.”

“Even if you think they would work?” Laf leaned against the counter, reaching for a salad bowl.

Perry looked back to the couch and smiled, “Especially then.”

“What do you mean?” Laf asked, following Perry to the table with the food.

“If something happens, it has to be because they are ready for it.” Perry looked back just in time to see Carmilla take another white gummy bear and toss it in her mouth. “Now come on, lets get everyone up to the table.”
Laf sighed but went to gather everyone to eat. Perry was right. As much as they wanted to meddle to make something happen, they knew they shouldn’t.

——

“I’m glad you were able to attend.” Perry smiled as Carmilla set her plate next to the sink.

“I didn’t really have a choice.” Carmilla turned around to lean her back against the counter, looking back into the living room where everyone had gathered, “Laura made sure I was coming a dozen times yesterday.”

“mmhmm.” Perry hummed as she started scrubbing dishes. “I saw it.”

“Saw what?” Carmilla looked to the red head next to her, crossing her arms over her chest.

“The gummy bears.” Perry smiled but didn't look away from her chore of doing dishes. “Even if Laura doesn’t see it yet. I saw it.”

Carmilla’s eyes narrowed at Perry before she quickly looked over at the brunette laughing in the other room.

“I wont say anything.” Perry whispered and leaned towards Carmilla.

Carmilla took a deep breath and gave Perry a thankful look, “Thanks.”

“Just..” Perry set her perfectly washed dish on the counter and turned to face Carmilla, letting out a slow breath.

“I know.” Carmilla rolled her eyes, sensing the lecture about to happen. “She’s your best friend, be careful, don’t hurt her.. did I miss anything?”

“Yes.” Perry stood up as tall as she could manage. She reached out and gently gripped Carmilla’s arm, pulling her attention. “Be careful for you too. I love Laura, but she doesn’t always have it figured out either.”

Carmilla was taken back by the comment. Besides Will and Mattie, she couldn't think of anyone that cared enough to tell her to be careful for her own sake. And coming from Perry, it felt sincere, and not a backhanded way of telling her to stay away from Laura.

“Carm! Come play!”

Laura’s voice pulled her from her thoughts and she turned to quickly look at the girl sitting on the floor setting up a game. Turning back to Perry she offered her a small smile.

“You don’t have to worry. I don’t plan on doing anything.” Carmilla pushed herself away from the counter and started walking to the other room.

“Carmilla?”

“Yeah?”

Perry considered what to say for a moment. Her earlier conversation with Laf came to mind. Her
telling them that they shouldn’t meddle. She wished she could encourage Carmilla, make sure she knew she deserved to try to be happy, but she wasn’t sure how. How do you meddle without meddling?

“Red is Laura’s favorite gummy bear color, too.”

Carmilla smiled and let out a breathy chuckle, “I know.”

—

“You can’t do that, you can’t do that! That’s cheating.” Carmilla reached for the game piece and moved it back a few spaces.

“What? I am not cheating! I’m just really good at this game.” Laura grabbed the piece and moved it back to where it was.

“I don’t know why you can’t just admit to the fact that you’re cheating.” Carmilla shook her head and leaned back against the couch.

“I’m not cheating.” Laura laughed and turned away from Carmilla.

Kirsch had already rolled the dice and was playing his turn, moving his piece around the board. Danny rolled her eyes as he gained more points than she had and grabbed the dice for her turn.

Carmilla bit her lip and watched Laura turn to look at the game board, a wide smile on her face. “You’re lucky you’re cute.”

Laura looked back at her shyly. She could feel her cheeks warming and it wasn’t until Danny cleared her throat, a little too loudly do be natural, that she remembered they weren’t the only two actually playing the game on the floor.

“Can it, redzilla.” Carmilla glared across the game.

“It’s your turn, Morticia.” Danny glared back and shifted slightly closer to Laura.

“Ooookay.” Laura looked between the two then pleadingly at Perry.

“Who wants dessert?” Perry was quickly on her feet and shuffling to the kitchen.

“Yes!” Kirsch threw his fist into the air excitedly. “Did you make brownies? I love your brownies!”

Everyone started to get up from off the floor, abandoning the game that no one really knew the rules for, and started making their way to the kitchen where Perry was cutting out slices of pie.

Danny glared at Carmilla the whole way, which the dark haired girl didn’t miss.

“I think I’m going to go.” Carmilla pulled Laura back, letting everyone else go ahead of them.

“What? Why?” Laura asked quietly. She looked over her shoulder and saw Danny watching them as she slowly walked into the kitchen. “Is it because of Danny? Cause I didn’t even know she was coming.”
“No.” Carmilla shook her head, “I just, should go get Joey before it gets too late.”

Looking behind Laura, Carmilla saw Perry watching them closely. Things were getting too complicated. This was supposed to be simple. Tutor Laura and that was it. She had drawn the line and was determined not to cross it. So why did it feel like everyone and everything was pulling her closer and closer to tumbling over it? What made it even more confusing was the mixed signals from Laura. The past week she seemed to be putting on the brakes more than Carmilla. Ignoring the flirty comments and actions. But then inviting her to fake thanksgiving and never leaving her side the entire time. Then again, maybe this is what friendship was? Carmilla didn't have too much practice in that area so maybe what she thought was mixed signals of Laura liking back her was actually just signals that she was good with being friends.

“Aren’t you okay?”

“What?” Carmilla asked, slightly stunned.

“It’s just, I don’t know.” Laura shrugged. “We’re friends, right?”

There it was. The kiss of death. The lingering thought that there was a possibility of more being shot down with a single statement. Even if Carmilla had already decided against it, it didn't mean the idea of it being a possibility wasn't something she hadn't thought about.

Carmilla swallowed heavily. “Friends?”

“Yeah. And friends talk to each other.” Laura stepped forward, lessening the space between them. “So if you're not ok, or if something is bothering you, you can talk to me.”

Carmilla nodded and grabbed for her jacket, shoving her hands in her sleeves before checking her pockets nervously. “I’ll just see you tomorrow, ok?”

“Sure. Ok.” Laura nodded and stepped back so Carmilla could open the door. She had spent enough time around Carmilla to know when something was bothering her, but she also knew it wasn't usually a good idea to push.

The entire day had been a series of unexpected events. From Danny showing up to Carmilla actually making an effort with her friends. Perry was even being weirder than normal and Laf kept giving her looks throughout the night. Then there were the butterflies.

Anytime Carmilla leaned in close to whisper in her ear as they sat at the table, or the playful banter sitting on the floor. All the times Laura had caught her looking at her with an expression she couldn’t read. Then there was the reaction when she stood there at the door. Friends. Its what they were, wasn’t it? Laura was kicking herself for how much she was over thinking all of this.

Stuff like this was supposed to be easy. You felt it and you knew. But with Carmilla, it was a tornado of confusion and feelings that were sometimes overwhelming. And the idea that Carmilla was only playing games with her, flirting and teasing because thats just what she did and not because she actually liked her, terrified Laura.

The more she got to know Carmilla the more she liked her. The image of leather and a closed off heart disappeared and she saw more of the real Carmilla. She was sweet, and kind and so smart. She felt so much yet pretended she cared about nothing. Seeing the world from her eyes was almost magical. And there were moments she knew it wasn't just a game. Carmilla cared for her. In what
"Miss Karnstein." Maxfield stepped through the door into the darkroom. "I know I'm lenient with attendance as long as you complete your projects but honestly. A whole week without you threatening to murder another one of my students because you don't like to share chemicals? I was beginning to worry."

Carmilla chuckled pushed herself off the counter. "Yeah sorry, I was a little under the weather."

Maxfield crossed her arms and stepped up to the chemical bins Carmilla was standing next to, "How about you show me what you've been working on?"

"Sure." Carmilla moved to pull pictures from the mixture bins, clipping them to the line hanging across the room allowing them to dry.

Maxfield followed the line of photos as Carmilla hung them up. She moved slowly, examining each one carefully. She didn't lean in or attempt to touch, she simply looked. Once she made it to the last one she stopped and turned to Carmilla.

"Something changed." Maxfield stated matter of factly.

Carmilla's eyebrows came together slightly and she turned her head to look at the photos she had just hung before turning back to her professor with an unsure expression.

"Do you know what changed?" Maxfield asked like she knew what was different but wasn't sure Carmilla knew for herself.

"I.. I'm not sure I know what you mean." Carmilla was being honest. She had no clue what Maxfield was talking about. Her subjects? The lighting? The style?

"Once these are dry, come find me." Was all her professor said before leaving her alone in the dark room.

Carmilla couldn't help but feel nervous about it all. Maxfield showed no signs one way or the other as far as if she was happy or upset. She hadn't given a clue as to what she meant either, leaving Carmilla in the dark. In more ways that one.

With a sigh she turned back to her photos, searching for the answer Maxfield was after. Something was different. But what?

She examined the photos as she pulled them from the line. Photos from the greenhouse- roses, lilies, vines, broken windows.. Carmilla had been impressed with herself when she first saw the negatives, and again when the photos started to take shape in the chemicals. The lines were sharp, the focus set, lighting ideal. They were great pictures. Even the ones with Laura in them- maybe especially those ones- even though capturing people in photographs had never been Carmilla’s thing.

Laura's hair catching the light, honey colored sunshine glowing around her. Her tanned skin looked smooth and soft as she reached out for stems or leaned in to smell the flowers around them. Her smile wide as she watched a bird flit through the open space, having found his way through a broken window.

Carmilla paused on the last one and smiled. She reached out but instead of taking it off the line, she brushed her fingertips over it slowly. It was the last photo she took before they had ran to escape the way, was what Laura wasn't sure of.
rain. Or enjoy the rain. Depending on who you were asking.

Laura was sitting cross legged on the old concrete fountain. Her hands stretched out behind her, supporting her weight while her head was tilted back, positioned just right for the last bit of sunshine to hit her face. Basking in the sun, soaking in the last bit of warmth before the skies turned grey and opened up to shower rain down on them.

She was smiling.

Carmilla gently took hold of the photo and pulled it off the line. She remembered taking this picture. She also remembered wishing she knew what Laura was thinking at this very moment.

Adding it to the pile she made her way out of the dark room and into the classroom where Maxfield was waiting. Carmilla handed her the stack of photos and Maxfield added them to the photos already laid out on the table. She had pulled photos from Carmilla’s folder and placed them on the table. It was like looking at a timeline of the last few months.

“Tell me about this one.” Maxfield pointed to a picture at the beginning of the row. It was one Carmilla had taken at the beginning of the semester.

“Its.. at a park?” Carmilla answered hesitantly.

Maxfield sighed and shook her head, “Tell me something I cant see for myself.”

Carmilla looked back down at it. It was at her park. She had gone out there after yet another fight with her mother. She had been furious and it showed in the photo. The focus wasn't as sharp, it was even unclear as to what exactly she had been trying to take a photo of. Nothing pulled your attention, it was just a picture.

“How about this one?” Her professor moved down the line to another photo. The house with the porch light lit. “The difference between the first photo and this one is already easy to see.”

She was right. It didn't matter that the subject matter was completely different. One was shot in daylight, the other night time. There was something else that was different about them.

The difference was Laura, Carmilla thought to herself. That night was the first time Laura had completely taken over her thoughts and had made a regular appearance since.

“Then this one.” Maxfield pointed to another photo of the park. “Its the same place as the first, but this photo, unlike the first, makes me want to go there.”

It was a photo from the night Carmilla had taken Laura there. After the party, while Laura was drunk. Even then when she was doing everything to fight it, her feelings for Laura were already changing the way she saw things. The sunrise had never been quite as beautiful as it was that morning.

They moved down the line— The junk yard, concrete covered in broken glass. The abandoned house, chandelier reflected in mirror covered walls. The greenhouse, rainbows of light bending to illuminate flower and vine covered walls.

“So what changed?” Maxfield sat down on the edge of the table and looked at Carmilla expectantly.

“I did.” Carmilla breathed out quietly.

Maxfield smiled but stayed quiet, hoping the silence would urge her to continue.
“I don’t know how to explain it.” Carmilla sighed frustratedly.

“You stopped hiding behind your photographs.” Maxfield nodded towards the pictures covering the table, “You began to let yourself be a part of them.”

It seemed too simple, but she was right. Carmilla had started out using photography as a way to escape her reality. Hiding behind whatever she saw through her view finder. Trying to create a world outside of her own. Trying to create feelings other than what she was really feeling. Gradually though, she began to let herself be a part of what it was she saw in front of her. Learning to express herself through her pictures, instead of hiding behind them.

“You know, Carmilla. Great photographs aren't created, they are captured.” Maxfield stood up and took a few steps. She reached out, her fingers pressing against the corner of a photo as she slid it across the hard surface, placing it in front of Carmilla before walking away.

Carmilla’s eyes dropped to the photograph sitting in front of her. Of course it was Laura. Head thrown back, mid laugh and pure joy. Carmilla ran a hand through her hair as she let her eyes scan across the table. Her professor was right. Of all the photos sitting in front of her, it wasn't the ones with the perfect lighting or thought out angles that pulled your attention. It was the ones that were taken in a matter of seconds. The moments that left Carmilla’s fingers itching until she pressed the shutter release in an attempt to capture what she felt in that moment. The photographs that were moments where she felt something. Something she didn't want to forget.

Suddenly the line she had created to protect herself seemed so stupid. Protect herself from what? From Laura? From the beautiful girl that made her smile and see the world differently? The girl that had managed to piece back together her splintered heart and made her feel something other than sadness? The line she had created to protect herself now seemed like was only keeping her from being happy.

——

“Oh good, you’re here!” Perry ran down the sidewalk towards the library.

Carmilla turned around and chuckled at the mess of red curls bouncing as Perry ran to catch up with her. “Every Tuesday and Thursday.”

“Even though its not required?” Perry asked, slightly out of breath as she stepped up next to Carmilla.

“What?” Carmilla stopped walking and turned to Perry. She hadn't told anyone she was still tutoring Laura simply because she wanted to and not because it was needed for her grade.

“Laura told me.” Perry looked at her slightly confused. “She was worried when you left so fast yesterday that something was wrong. Then she told me her teacher said it was up to her to keep doing the tutoring and she was worried you'd be mad.”

“Wait.” Carmilla closed her eyes and tilted her head, “Shields gave Laura the option to stop tutoring?”

“Oh. Oh no.” Perry started to fidget with her hands, “She didn’t tell you?”

Carmilla looked at Perry, “No.” What did that mean? “But don't worry about it.” She started walking down the sidewalk again, Perry still following after her.

Perry was rambling, talking even faster than Laura but Carmilla had mostly tuned her out. It hadn't
even occurred to her that when Shields gave her the option to stop working with Laura, he would offer her the same thing. That could only mean one thing right? Laura wanted to spend time with her. Enough so that she kept up the tutoring she didn't need in order to do so.

“…going to say anything.”

Carmilla turned and saw Perry looking at her like she was waiting for a response. Right. She had been talking to her on their walk to the library.

“I um, thanks?” Carmilla spoke slowly. She hadn't heard a single word Perry had said.

“Honestly, its like talking to myself sometimes.” Perry shook her head and rolled her eyes, “I'll see you in class tomorrow.” With that Perry walked off mumbling to herself, leaving Carmilla alone on the library steps.

—

“Hey!” Laura smiled as she ran up to the library, “Am I late?”

“Nope.” Carmilla responded with a smile.

“So, what are we doing out here? Its freezing.” Laura went to pull open the heavy library doors but stopped as Carmilla stepped in front of her and arched an eyebrow.

“I think we should skip studying today.”

Laura gave her a curious look “For any reason in particular?”

“Well.” Carmilla started, taking a step down the stairs, “First, I don’t think you need tutoring anymore anyway.” She looked over her shoulder and smiled at Laura’s sheepish look. She didn't know Carmilla knew about the offer to end tutoring, and obviously felt a little bad about it. “And second, I have somewhere to be. And I’m bringing you with me.”

“Is this another one of those times where you aren't going to tell me anything and I just have to go along with it?” Laura smiled and made her way down the stairs after Carmilla, gripping her backpack straps tightly.

“Exactly.” Carmilla smiled and reached her arm behind her, offering her hand to Laura.

Laura’s hand gripped hers tightly and Carmilla led her to the parking lot where her car was waiting. She opened the door for Laura and shut it gently once she was inside the car. The drive to Laura’s was quick, pulling up to the sidewalk in front of the apartment building Carmilla put the car in park but kept it running.

“I’ll be back an hour.” She gave Laura a crooked smile, “Dress warm.”

“Thats it? I don’t know what that means.” Laura unbuckled her seatbelt and climbed out of the car, leaning down to keep her attention on Carmilla.

“Just dress warm.” She put the car in drive and gestured with her hand for Laura to get going. As soon as the passenger door was shut she pulled away, leaving Laura on the sidewalk more confused than usual.

For whatever reason, things suddenly felt different. Carmilla didn't care if it was finally seeing her photos and knowing what had changed them or Perry’s accidental slip that Laura had chosen to keep
spending time with her because she wanted to and not because she had to. But that line she drew was fading quickly.

Maybe things could be different this time. With Laura. The idea of it wasn't as scary as it had once been and for the first time in a long time it felt like Carmilla was actually letting go of the hurt and the fear of her past and actually willing to let herself move forward.

An hour later Carmilla was pulling up to the apartment building, Joey in the front seat with his head out the window. Laura laughed and scratched his ears before opening the door and pushing him into the back seat. She did as she was told and dressed warm, even thought she wasn't sure why.

“Ready?” Carmilla asked with a smirk.

“I guess.” Laura shrugged, still having no clue what they were doing. She had to admit though, this was one of her favorite things about Carmilla. She knew Carmilla cared about her, but it didn't stop her from letting Laura do things. Explore, adventure, go out of her comfort zone. She was the first person to actually encourage it.

They pulled up to campus and Laura looked out the window before turning to Carmilla. “Ok I get that I usually am confused when we go places but.. school?”

Carmilla just chuckled and climbed out of the car. She whistled for Joey and the dog scrambled from the back seat to follow Carmilla. She pulled her bag from the back seat before securing a beanie on her head and making her way onto campus without waiting for Laura.

Laura laughed to herself in the front seat then quickly climbed out of the car and zipped up her coat as she jogged after Carmilla and the german shepherd.

“The Lustig?” Laura looked over at Carmilla who was pulling her camera from its bag. “Isn’t this building condemned?”

“Yes.” Carmilla lifted her camera and snapped a photo.

The building was falling apart. After a fire had destroyed it, it had been left untouched and closed off. The University hadn't bothered to do anything with it since it would have cost the same amount to fix it as it would to level it. Leaving it there, a crumbled mess, ended up being the easiest way to approach it.

“It burned down in 1904 and has been empty ever since.” Carmilla lowered her camera and gave Laura a mischievous grin. “Until now.”

She slung her bag over her shoulder and started walking around to the side of the building. All the doors and windows had been boarded up surprisingly well. It was clear the university didn't want anyone getting inside, most likely for liability reasons. But Carmilla seemed determined to get in.

Laura looked around hesitantly before following Carmilla around the corner of the building. Campus was mostly empty and since it was so late in the year, the sun was already starting to set.

“I don’t think we are going to be able to get in.” Laura stepped over the make shift fence that wrapped around the building.

As soon as she said it, Carmilla pulled away a loose board that had been covering a doorway on the
side of the building. Joey ran through it as Carmilla slid the board to the side and let it lean against the charred brick.

“You were saying?” Carmilla raised an eyebrow and smiled at Laura.

Laura just rolled her eyes and made her way through the doorway. The building was pretty badly burned, most of its interior gutted. The frame was still standing, 4 walls, the windows from the second story still in tact and still visible unlike the ground floor. They had walked in a side door near what would have been the front of the building. There were still a few rows of seats along both walls that faced the stage on the far end of the building. There was a isle between them about halfway into the building before they stopped abruptly, the rest of the rows clearly a casualty to the fire that had claimed most of the building. The stage was still standing, but from the looks of it, one good gust of wind and it would crumble like everything else inside.

Debris and whatever was left of the interior of the building had been swept to one side, leaving the center of the building bare and empty. The concrete floor cold and covered in black marks left from the fire. Half the roof had caved in, leaving it only partially covered from the harsh weather, the other half exposing the darkening sky above them.

“What’s with you and creepy buildings?” Laura asked, slowly looking around.

Carmilla shrugged and walked past Laura to the center of the room. She set her bag down and walked to the pile of disagreed wood and theater seats. She grabbed a few large pieces of wood and brought them back to the center of the building and stacked them carefully on top of each other.

Laura continued to wander around the empty building while Carmilla made a few more trips to the pile of debris then back to the new pile she was making. Laura hugged her arms around herself as a cold gust of wind made its way through the large open space. The sun was nearly down and with it went whatever warmth the day had held.

Laura kicked at a pile of papers on the ground near the stage and watched as Joey chased after a crumpled up poster being blown by the wind.

“Hey, bring me some of that?” Carmilla called from her neatly stacked pile of wood.

“Some of what?” Laura turned around with a slight jump.

“Paper.” Carmilla walked to her bag and pulled out a tripod and set it up while Laura gathered up a stack of old scripts and playbills.

Laura handed the papers to Carmilla and watched as she ripped them up, crumpled them into balls and placed them in the pile of wood on the cold concrete floor. When Carmilla pulled the lighter from her pocket it became clear what she had been doing.

“Isn’t it kind of ironic that you’re building a fire in the middle of a building that was destroyed by fire?” Laura asked, eyes wide. She was all for adventure, but this didn't seem like the greatest idea.

Carmilla chuckled and moved the lighter to let the flame catch in more than one place. “Consider it therapy. Forcing the building to face its fear of the very thing that destroyed it.”

“Oh yeah?” Laura scoffed, “Is that how you face your fears?”
“Maybe.” Carmilla watched as a small flame took hold of the paper and started to spread to the dry wood stacked together.

Laura shook her head but walked over and held her hands out over the flame, hoping the heat would warm her fingers. “So why were you so against the ferris wheel?”

“Okay, fair point.” Carmilla smiled and stood up, watching the flame take over the pile of wood. “So maybe i’m doing to this building what you did to me. Not giving it a choice.”

Laura turned to look at Carmilla with apologetic eyes. She really did feel awful about that night, even if she had to admit she really enjoyed it at the same time.

Carmilla chuckled and stepped closer to Laura, sharing the same heat from he fire. “Good choice by the way.”

“What?” Laura asked watching the flames dance in front of them.

Carmilla turned, her eyes locked on Laura’s. The flame growing slowly as darkness fell like a blanket around them. Carmilla’s lips twitched into a smile then relaxed as her tongue moved to wet her bottom lip, her eyes moving to study Laura’s lips as she spoke.

“Who could refrain, That had a heart to love, and in that heart, Courage to make love known?” Carmilla’s voice was barely above a whisper. The crackling of wood mixing with her breathing.

Laura swallowed heavily at the words and the softness of Carmilla’s voice as she spoke them. The energy around them was electric. The crispness of the air, light flickering from the small fire, casting long, dancing shadows over charred and empty walls. The sounds of wind blowing through leaves and brave animals not yet hiding from the ever approaching winter. Stars starting to appear through the open ceiling above them.

The way Carmilla was looking at her.

Laura could hear her heart beat and prayed Carmilla couldn’t. It was loud and it was fast and fluttered like the butterflies in her stomach were trying to fly away with it.

“Macbeth.” Carmilla whispered, not taking her eyes from Laura’s lips.

“What?” Laura breathed out, not sure she heard her right.

“Shakespeare.” Carmilla smiled, her eyes moving back to look into Laura’s.

Laura nodded her head but still wasn't sure what Carmilla was talking about. Carmilla lifted an old script from the pile Laura had given her to help start the fire and smiled.

“Oh.” Laura breathed out nervously, “Right. Macbeth.”

Carmilla watched Laura for a moment, the longer her eyes lingered the more flustered she seemed to get. With a smirk she turned and walked back to her tripod, taking her camera off her neck and attaching it carefully.

Laura watched as Carmilla took the camera and tripod and walked it a ways away from the fire. She tilted the camera up to look through the open roof and started adjusting things on her camera.
“What are you doing?” Laura asked, stepping up behind Carmilla to watch her.

“Well…” Carmilla’s tongue poked out of the corner of her mouth as she was bent over the camera, looking through the view finder. “I am going to take pictures of the stars, but first I have to make some adjustments.”

“What kind of adjustments?” Laura asked, looking from the camera to the sky then back to Carmilla.

“You really want to know?” Carmilla asked, turning her attention to the brunette standing behind her, “Cause I brought you snacks to keep you busy while I did the boring stuff.”

Laura smiled and took a step forward, stopping next to the camera, “How about I keep you company for the boring stuff, then we can share the snacks?”

Carmilla narrowed her eyes at Laura, considering it for a moment. Why had she been so afraid to open her heart to this girl? It seemed silly now to think about it. Laura had been wrong. They weren’t just friends. At least Carmilla didn’t want them to be just friends.

Laura nodded towards the camera and gave Carmilla an expectant look before rocking on the balls of her feet.

Carmilla shook her head and turned back to the camera, “So because at night the camera catches light differently, you have to change the settings a bit.” Carmilla turned her head to see if Laura was even paying attention and was pleasantly surprised to find that she was. “You slow down the shutter speed—“

Laura’s face twisted to confusion and Carmilla chuckled.

“ok, shutter speed, adjusting how long the light is able to get it.” Laura nodded in understanding and Carmilla continued. “Then turn the aperture down- which change how much light gets in.”

She continued to explain what she was doing while Laura listened intently. Once they had the camera set up, Carmilla stood up and pressed the shutter release. Laura watched her closely as they both waited silently. 30 seconds passed and they heard the quiet click of the camera.

“Thats it?” Laura asked, clearly unimpressed.

“Thats it.” Carmilla nodded and rotated the camera slightly before pressing the shutter release again.

“Its a little anticlimactic.” Laura teased as she rubbed her hands together for warmth.

“I told you it was the boring part.” Carmilla turned and walked back towards the fire and picked up her bag. She pulled out a thermos and package of cookies.

Laura’s eyes immediately lit up and she practically bounced over to Carmilla and took the cookies from her hands. They sat down on the row of theater seats closest to the fire and shared the package of cookies and thermos of hot chocolate. Carmilla would periodically walk over to press the shutter release to take another picture before returning to sit by Laura and the fire.

They had been there a couple hours, Carmilla would feed more wood to the fire when it needed it but both girls were content to sit in the abandoned building, covered in the blanket Carmilla had stashed in her bag and Joey curled up at their feet.
“So how do you pick what to take pictures of?” Laura spoke through a yawn as she curled up on the seat and leaned her head against the top of the back rest.

Carmilla looked at Laura thoughtfully for a second before standing up and walking to her camera. She hit the shutter release and slowly made her way back, hands shoved in her pockets. She stood next to the fire, opposite of Laura and watched the flames dance slowly.

“I take pictures of things that make me feel something.”

Laura’s face scrunched up and she turned her head to look at Carmilla, “Is that why most your photos are of things that are broken?”

Carmilla took in a deep breath. “I guess so. Sometimes the things most broken are the most beautiful.”

Laura watched Carmilla closely. Her eyes were focused on the flames between them but something about her expression was different that night.

Suddenly Carmilla’s eyes moved from the fire to Laura’s. There was a vulnerability in them, but also an intensity Laura hadn’t seen before. “I’d like to—“ Her voice cut off and she cleared her throat nervously, “Could I maybe take your picture? Sometime?”

Laura slowly sat up, “You want to take my picture?” She laughed nervously as she tried to read Carmilla’s face, “Why? What do I make you feel?”

Carmilla pulled her hands from her pockets and rubbed her palms against her thighs. She was stepping dangerously close to that line that was already starting to blur. Taking a deep breath she let it out slowly as she looked at Laura, unable to keep herself from smiling.

The delayed response was making Laura nervous as she watched Carmilla through the light of the fire that was slowly dimming. The wood pile was growing smaller as mostly charred pieces glowed softly atop the concrete floor. The light remaining was just enough for Laura to see Carmilla turn and walk back to her camera.

Carmilla slowly unhooked her camera from the tripod and quickly started adjusting the settings as she turned back around. The fire was dying and if she wasn’t fast the light would be gone and her chance would be missed.

“What do you make me feel?” Carmilla said quietly as she slowly started making her way back towards the dying fire. “Your laugh is like the sunrise. You already know it’s beautiful, without having to experience it. But the moment you do. The moment the sun starts to rise and you see the array of colors and feel that warmth you realize… that even though it happens every morning, it’s your favorite thing and you can’t wait to wake up the next day and experience it over and over again for the rest of your life.”

*click*

"Thats.. what you make me feel." Carmilla lowered her camera and looked at Laura nervously.

Laura sat there stunned. That was not what she was expecting to hear at all. “I thought.. um..” Laura licked her lips, her eyes unable to look away from Carmilla’s, “I thought you wanted to take pictures
of the stars?”

“I do."

*click*
Black & White

Chapter Summary

after the night in the lustig... whats lauras response??

Chapter Notes

apparently all it takes for me to be able to write another chapter quickly is a bunch of really awesome notes. So because you guys made me feel so cool with your nice comments, heres another chapter :)

Perry glanced over at Carmilla and frowned. She had been silent for the entire class so far and even her movements as she drew were noticeably harsher than usual.

"Everything ok, Carmilla?" Perry asked, gripping her pencil nervously.

"Fine." Carmilla replied flatly, pressing another hard line across her page.

"Alright." Perry responded hesitantly, turning back to her sketch pad with a frown.

Their model for the day hadn't shown up so their professor had told them to draw whatever they wanted that day. So far Perry had a few lines and swirls. She was realizing art was not one of her talents.

Carmilla’s eyes focused on the page in front of her, her pencil leaving a thick line across it. She started mumbling to herself as she used the edge to draw in the shading along the edges. Stepping back she let out a sigh as she set her pencil down and let her eyes scan the page.

What had started out as a lazy doodle had morphed into something else entirely. The longer she sat there, the more she thought about the night before. What she felt, somehow making itself seen on the page in front of her.

The left of the page held the shape of a door. The pencil marks smooth and light creating the large frame. The door was shut but bleeding through the cracks of the door was the image of light. Fighting to pierce through the barrier, the glow pressing against the frame and splintering through the cracks, like its purpose was to break free and shed light on the rest of the drawing.

The right side of the page was the image of a woman. Dark hair, loose curls, dark eyes. She was surrounded by darkness. Dim shadows of varying shades of grey, swirling around her haphazardly. The shades of grey darkening and sharpening near the edges. Shadows turning into piercing darkness, seeming to be consuming the woman, trying to pull her into the blackness surrounding her. Sharp spires reaching for her, holding her back as her arm reached out for the door, desperate to let the light in.
Perry stood from her place behind her sketch pad and stepped over behind Carmilla, taking in her drawing.

“Carmilla, thats—”

“I think I messed up.” Carmilla cut her off, ripping the page from her sketch book and crumpling it in her hands.

Perry watched with a concerned look as Carmilla threw the crumpled page into the trash can behind them and dropped down on her stool.

“On.. on the drawing?” Perry asked hesitantly.

“No.” Carmilla sighed. “With Laura.”

“Oh sweetie.” Perry frowned, “What happened?”

Carmilla brought her pencil up to the blank page and started drawing again. “I fell in love with the stars. Then wanted the stars to admire me back.”

——

“Ugh.” Laura groaned as she walked into the apartment, “I think I messed up.” She dropped her bag on the floor and walked to the couch, dropping of the arm to land face first in the cushion.

“Uhh, care to elaborate?” Laf asked from the table, homework spread out in front of them.

“With Carmilla.” Laura mumbled into the cushion before pushing herself up. She pulled off her coat and threw it over by her bag and leaned back into the couch, letting her head drop back against the back rest.

Laf shut their textbook and clasped their hands together on top of it, giving their attention to Laura completely.

“She wont respond to my texts and she didn't show up for tutoring today.” Laura lifted her head and looked over at Laf.

“I thought things were fine at fake thanksgiving?”

“They were!” Laura leaned forward, throwing her arms out in frustration.

“So.. what happened?” Laf leaned their chin into their hand lazily.

—

*click*

"Thats.. what you make me feel." Carmilla lowered her camera and looked at Laura nervously. Laura sat there stunned. That was not what she was expecting to hear at all. “I thought.. um..” Laura licked her lips, her eyes unable to look away from Carmilla’s, “I thought you wanted to take pictures of the stars?”
“I do.”
*click

The silence was overwhelming as Carmilla stood there nervously. She lowered her camera and watched as a breath escaped Laura's lips. The air swirling in front of her in a cloud as the warmth provided by the fire died with its flames.

The popping and cracking from the last piece of wood still large enough to burn echoed in her ears. It felt like years had passed and Laura was still silent.

"Carm." Laura finally breathed out, moving to stand up. She went to step forward but stopped, realizing the dying embers blocked the path she hoped to take.

Carmilla swallowed hard and tried to read the girls face. The fading embers barely casting a glow on her thoughtful features. Laura's expression sent a cold shiver through Carmilla. She had seen that look before. That was the look Ell had when Carmilla had told her she loved her.

Ell hadn't said it back.

Carmilla fought the stinging sensation behind her eyes at the memory. The first time her heart broke.. now the cracks were splintering once more after months of them finally starting to mend.

Laura's expression shifted as her eyes moved upwards to the open sky. The caved in ceiling allowing the lightest dusting of snowflakes to start to cover the ground around them. Tiny flakes taking purchase in Carmilla's dark curls, her eyes looking up at the falling snow.

Her eyelids fluttered as flakes clung to lashes and turned to liquid on warm cheeks. It looked like ashes, scattering across cold concrete. The embers from the dying fire, like the hope she had been holding to so tightly. Drifting away in the cold breeze. The universe had always been cruel, when it came to her heart.

"We better go." Carmilla broke the silence, quickly moving to her bag and pulling out a bottle of water.
The remaining fire hissed as water enveloped the last of its glow, a puff of smoke swirling upwards in a fight against the ever thickening snow.

"Carm, wait." Laura stepped towards her, her silence had lasted too long. Too stuck in her own mind to say anything. And now it was too late.

Carmilla shook her head, "It's ok." Her eyes lifted to look into Laura's. A pleading expression, begging her not to say anything more. Sure that whatever words she spoke would only break her heart into more pieces. If it was even possible.

Laura swallowed back the words on the tip of her tongue. She could see the glassy shine in Carmilla's eyes and her whole body froze, afraid to do anything to cause a tear to fall. She hadn't meant for this to happen, for Carmilla to be hurt.

Carmilla brought her fingers to her lips and blew out a loud whistle before shoving her hand in her coat pocket and pulling out her keys. Joey came running towards them, unaware of the uncomfortable tension building.
“Why don’t you and Joey head to the car while I finish packing up.” Carmilla tossed the keys to Laura and turned back towards her tripod.
"Carmilla." Laura stepped forward slowly. She didn’t want to leave her there alone but didn’t know what to say.

"Really." Carmilla called over her shoulder, busying her hands with folding the tripod, "you can start the car and warm up."

Laura stood there a moment longer. Carmilla had finished folding the tripod but hadn’t turned back around. Laura took that as a sign that she didn’t want to see her and turned, patting her thigh and calling to Joey before walking towards the doorway they had entered through.

Carmilla let out a sigh as footsteps got quieter then disappeared all together. She turned and walked back to her bag slowly, packing her tripod and slinging it over her shoulder.

This is why she drew the line.

She kicked at the pile of embers that had once been the fire. Lingering sparks danced across the concrete at her feet before being smothered by snowflakes. Wrapping her arms around herself, she slowly made her way to the open doorway. She stepped through and pulled the large piece of wood back into place to cover the opening.

She made her way across campus and stopped once her car was in view. The car was running, the headlights shining, light glistening off the falling snow. Laura sat in the passenger seat, her head bowed and a frown on her face.

This is why she drew the line.

Even now, feeling broken herself, Carmilla wanted nothing more than to make Laura feel better. Had she not crossed that line, this wouldn't be happening. Laura wouldn't be upset, and Carmilla wouldn't feel like her heart was breaking.

—

“Then she drove me home, and it was awful and silent and awkward the whole time.” Laura sighed and looked up at Laf.

“Geez.” Laf chuckled humorlessly, “You really messed up.”

Laura rolled her eyes and sank further into the couch, “Gee, thanks.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Laf asked, getting up from the table and walking over to the couch.

“I didn’t—” Laura sighed, “I don’t know. I wanted to but.. I got scared.”

“Well.” Laf sighed and dropped down into the couch. "If you care, don't give up."

----

“Good afternoon, Hollis!” Adam greeted as Laura walked into the newspaper room.

"Hey." She mumbled less than enthusiastic to be there. Carmilla had been avoiding her for a week now and it was consuming her mind more than she thought it would. She tried texting more times than she wanted to admit and even though the last three times she had gone to the library for tutoring and Carmilla hadn’t shown up, she would probably still keep going. Just in case.
"Know what today is?" Adam asked, walking around his editors desk and leaning his hip against Laura's.

"Uh, Friday?" Laura asked as she shuffled some papers on her desk.

Adam just smiled and raised his eyebrows.

"Oh crap." Laura's covered her face with her hands. "I totally forgot, Adam. I'm so so sorry!"

Adam clapped his hand on Laura's shoulder "Don't worry Hollis, I already did the hard part." He stood up and walked back to his desk, going to look something up on his computer.

"Seriously?" Laura sighed in relief, "thank you, thank you."

"Thank me by turning in another kick ass article." Adam said scrolling on his computer, "Professor Maxfield." He pulled out a piece of paper and started to scribble on it. "I already emailed her and she's expecting you at 4."

He handed the paper to Laura and walked away. Laura looked down at the paper-

Maxfield
Photography
Visual arts, B211

--

Laura stood in front of the door and double checked the piece of paper in her hand. B211. With a sigh she pulled the door open and stepped in slowly, looking around the mostly empty room.

No one looked up from their work and no one looked familiar. Laura wasn't sure if she was happy or sad about that. Sure it was a possibility that Carmilla could be there, but honestly, what were the chances that would actually happen?

Laura walked over to the desk in the corner of the room and cleared her throat, "Professor Maxfield?"

The woman behind the desk looked up with a smile as she gave Laura a thoughtful look. "Laura Hollis?"

"Yes. That's me." Laura smiled and held her hand out. "It's great to meet you."

"Have we not met?" Maxfield took hold of Laura's in a firm hand shake.

"I don't believe so." Laura shrugged and pulled her backpack around in front of her, "I really appreciate you taking the time to meet with me. I promise not to keep you too long."

"It's no problem." She smiled and gestured to an empty chair next to her desk.

"Well I'm not sure what my editor included in the email when he set this up but you were nominated by your students to be highlighted in the schools paper. Your students really love you." Laura smiled, opening her notebook and taking a seat.
Laura quickly fell into journalist mode and ignored the rest of the students in the room as she started the interview. Maxfield was personable and gave really great answers to her questions and made it easy to get interested in whatever she was talking about. Laura quickly understood why her students liked her so much.

“Just one more question if that’s okay?” Laura asked, looking down at her notebook.

“Shoot.” Maxfield leaned back into her chair.

“What’s your favorite thing about…”

The door to the classroom opened wide and Carmilla walked in, eyes on the camera in her hands. Laura’s eyes shifted to the door automatically at the movement.

“Carmilla?”

“I’m sorry?” Maxfield asked, turning to look behind her.

Carmilla looked up at the sound of her name. She would know that voice anywhere. She stopped walking as soon as she saw Laura, their eyes meeting briefly before Laura turned back to Maxfield.

“Teaching! What’s your favorite thing about teaching?” Laura corrected herself quickly. Her cheeks felt warm, her eyes dropping to stare at her notebook in her lap. It only took a second before she couldn’t help but glance back up at Carmilla. She hadn’t seen her since the night in the Lustig and she was more beautiful than she remembered.

Her eyes looked hesitant and sad… conflicted. Her feet moving her in the opposite direction of Laura, but her eyes staying locked on the other girl. Laura watched her slowly walk towards a door on the other side of the room, then her head dropped low as she disappeared through the doorway.

“I thought I recognized you.” Maxfield leaned forward, placing herself in Laura’s line of sight.

“Laura?”

“Yes?” Laura finally looked back to the professor, “Right. Sorry.” She cleared her throat, flustered and completely lost, trying to figure out what she was supposed to be doing.

Maxfield smiled knowingly and turned her chair, pulling herself up to her desk, “Why don’t you shoot me an email if you have any more questions. I better get back to my busy day though.”

“Of course.” Laura awkwardly shifted in the chair, reaching for her bag and putting her things away, “Thanks again.”

Maxfield nodded and turned her attention to a stack of papers on her desk.

Laura stood up and headed for the door, her bag slung over one shoulder. She stopped with her hand on the handle and glanced towards the door Carmilla had gone through. She had been trying to talk to her for a week, maybe this was her chance to actually get her to talk back.

“Carm?” Laura whispered once she was in the dark room. The room was completely black except for a dim red light in the corner and Laura couldn’t see a thing. She heard a sigh from the other side of the room and knew immediately it was Carmilla. “I know you’re in here. Why is it so dark?”
“That’s kind of the point of a dark room, cupcake.”

Laura could practically hear her rolling her eyes. “Right.” *Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea.*

“Look.”

Laura heard footsteps coming towards her slowly.

“Your eyes will adjust in a minute, just..” Carmilla took hold of Laura’s arm and started to guide her further into the room. “Don’t knock into anything.”

There was a silence that settled around them again. The only sounds in the room were of Carmilla mixing chemicals and shuffling things along the counter.

"You've been ignoring me." Laura finally spoke up. It was easier to say than she thought. Maybe being in complete darkness would actually work in her favor.

"Great observation, Veronica Mars."

Carmilla’s voice sounded more guarded than biting and Laura could tell it wasn't meant as an insult, but more a way for Carmilla to distance herself from whatever feelings she was holding onto.

Laura’s eyes were finally adjusting to the dark room and she watched Carmilla's figure take shape. She was standing next to Laura, her focus on a couple of bins in front of her filled with liquid. Her movement were graceful and careful as she gently placed photo paper in the mixture and let it be enveloped by the liquid.

Patiently Carmilla let the paper sink low into the bin before carefully ensuring every part was covered. She rocked the bin, letting the liquid swirl around the paper before she took it out and placed it in a separate bin, repeating the process.

Laura had seen Carmilla focused before, but not like this. While taking her photos there was almost a romantic expression to her face. This was completely different. She was so serious and careful, it was almost surprising.

“What are you doing?” Laura asked, craning her neck to watch Carmilla as she continued her process of developing her photos.

Carmilla turned and looked at her for a second before looking back to the task in front of her.

“I mean, I’m highlighting Professor Maxfield and I didn't get to ask any questions about photography, specifically, so maybe you could fill in the blanks.” Laura watched Carmilla nervously, “For my article?”

“For your article?” Carmilla smiled slightly without turning around, “Sure. But then we will have to start at the beginning.” She clipped her current photo to the line along with the rest she had already developed and were hanging to dry.

Laura smiled and mentally patted herself on the back. It wasn't exactly the conversation she wanted to have with Carmilla, but at least they were talking. And if she was being honest, the conversation she really wanted to have, she still wasn't sure what to say.
Carmilla gestured to the door and waited for Laura to lead her out. Laura squinted as she walked back into the brightly lit classroom and looked around. Besides Maxfield sitting at her desk, the classroom was now empty. Carmilla walked by her and over to a large empty wall and pulled down a white backdrop that covered the wall from ceiling to floor. She grabbed a stool that had been sitting off to the side and set it in front of the backdrop before walking over to the desk and grabbing her camera.

“First.” Carmilla walked over and set a tripod downing and adjusted her camera to it, “we take the picture.”

Laura looked at her with a confused expression on till Carmilla nodded her head towards the stool with at expectant look. “You want to take a picture of me?”

“That right, Sundance.” Carmilla turned back to her camera, leaning down to look through the view finder and adjusting the focus.

Laura slowly walked over, leaving her things on a desk, and slowly sat down on the stool. It felt like high school year book pictures and she immediately felt awkward about the whole thing. Flashbacks of bad hair days and really bad wardrobe choices made her frown as she watch Carmilla make adjustments on the camera.

*click*

“What is that?” Carmilla asked, standing up tall and raising an eyebrow.

“What?” Laura asked, her eyebrows coming together in question.

“That face.” Carmilla was trying not to laugh, “You look like you're in pain.”

Laura sighed, her body deflating of tension she hadn't even realized was there. She was never good at pictures. She was always awkward, didn't know where to look or what to do with her hands and this situation was no exception.

Carmilla finally let herself laugh at the defeated expression on Laura’s face over a photo and stepped away from the camera to grab another stool. “Relax.” Carmilla chuckled as she dragged the stool back to sit next to the camera.

“I thought I was.” Laura pouted.

“Alright, no picture for a minute.” Carmilla sat down on the stool and tilted her head slightly as she looked the smaller girl over.

“Are my clothes ok?” Laura looked down at herself, feeling uneasy at the thoughtful gaze coming from the other girl, “Like, are the colors weird for the picture?” She adjusted the hem of her shirt and twisted her toes on the bars between the stool legs.

“You're perfect.” Carmilla replied easily.

Laura looked up and felt her cheeks start to burn at the same time as something in her chest started to flutter. The overwhelming feelings she had felt the night in the Lustig started to come back and just as before, she wasn't sure what to say.
Laura’s smile dropped as she noticed the sound of the camera taking a photo and she looked at Carmilla quickly. Carmilla shrugged in response but didn't look away. Laura fidgeted with her hands in her lap as she sat on the stool in the center of the backdrop, bright lights pointed at her and Carmilla watching her carefully. Her expression was one Laura wasn’t used to and she wasn’t sure what to make of it.

“So. Do you have any hobbies?” Carmilla ask flatly.

Laura rolled her eyes and slouched on the stool, “Seriously?”

“What?” Carmilla shook her head, “I’m just trying to get you to relax and stop making that face.”

Laura glared at Carmilla half heartedly and scrunched up her face. She sat up straight and stretched her neck, tilting her head to the right, then left as she shook out her arms and blew out a deep breath. She relaxed her shoulders and gave Carmilla the most genuine smile she could muster.

“Practicing for your byline photo?” Carmilla raised an eyebrow, clearly unimpressed.

Laura let out a laugh, her shoulders leaning forward as she brought a hand up to cover part of her face. Her smile was genuine though and for the first time since seeing Carmilla, she was actually relaxed.

“You should see my yearbook photos from high school.” Laura laughed, “then you’d really make fun of me.”

“Oh yeah?” Carmilla smirked, “Not as cool in high school as you are now?” She teased.

“Hey!” Laura acted hurt but was clearly still smiling, “No one is actually cool in high school.”

“I was.” Carmilla said smugly, earning another laugh from Laura.

“I bet.” Laura shook her head with a smile. “I can see it now. Brooding Carmilla in the back of the classroom, too apathetic to pay attention to anything but whatever pretentious novel her nose was stuck in.”

Carmilla raised an eyebrow at the teasing, “I’ll have you know I paid attention.”

“Oh really?” Laura asked, unconvincing.

“Yes, really.” Carmilla smirked, “I paid great attention to the girl's volleyball team, cheerleaders, and even a few of the quiet nerdy girls.” She finished her comment by wiggling her eyebrows and
sending Laura a wink.

“Oh my god.” Laura rolled her eyes, “Full of yourself much?”

Carmilla chuckled and shook her head, dropping her gaze to the floor. This felt easy, falling back into the regular pattern with Laura. It almost felt as though the hurt she had been feeling for over a week was already melting away just by being around her.

“All right.” Carmilla lifted her head again, her eyes narrowing slightly, “What was high school Laura like?”

Laura’s eyes moved upwards, like she was trying to pick a memory to share, “Shy.”

“Really?” Carmilla asked surprised, “Miss, I can talk to anyone for hours, was shy in high school?”

“Yeah…” Laura scrunched up her face and chuckled, “That’s a more recent thing.”

Carmilla sat there quietly, waiting for Laura to continue.

“I was one of those quiet nerdy girls you were talking about.” She laughed to herself at the memory, “I got really excited over homework and probably spent more time socializing with teachers than I did with other students.”

Carmilla smiled, trying to picture Laura in high school.

“I actually graduated Valedictorian.” Laura posture grew taller and a proud expression covered her face.

*click*

“Is that right?” Carmilla asked, watching her closely.

“Yeah.” Laura blew out a heavy breath, “I almost threw up during my graduation speech I was so nervous.”

“And look at you now. Couldn’t pay you to stop talking.” Carmilla teased, until the memory of a silent Laura standing on the other side of a dying fire flashed in her mind, “Usually.”

Laura’s eyes lifted to Carmilla’s, a clear apologetic expression on her face. She still didn’t know what to say about that night and it made it all that much worse.

Carmilla took a deep breath, trying not to dwell on the memory she had been trying to forget all week. “How about your family? What’s your dad like?”

Laura instantly smiled, her eyes lighting up and her whole demeanor changing. Her smile grew wide, her eyes looking directly at Carmilla, “He’s my dad.” She shrugged one shoulder like it was the simplest thing in the world to understand.

*click*

It seemed like once Carmilla got Laura talking she forgot all about the camera and she completely relaxed. Carmilla watched her as different topics brought out different facial expression and levels of
excited hand gestures. She would wait for a moment that made her smile or frown or feel with what Laura was saying before snapping a picture. It was hard to stay upset, the more she learned about Laura, the more she shared while they sat there across from each other in the empty classroom. It wasn't the typical setting for getting to know someone, but it still felt intimate, private.

That is until the scraping of chair legs on the floor caused them both to look to the desk in the corner where Professor Maxfield had been sitting.

“Its 5:00” Maxfield stated without looking at the pair of girls. She shut her laptop and picked it up, holding it at her side as she walked around the desk.

“Sorry, I didn't realize.” Carmilla stood up from her stool and went to unhook her camera from the tripod, ready to pack up her things as it was clear Maxfield was getting ready to leave.

“Stay.” Maxfield smiled. “Just clean up when you go. Like usual.” She nodded at Carmilla before turning to Laura, “It was nice to see you again, Laura.”

Laura looked completely confused at the comment but Carmilla knew right away that Maxfield had recognized her from her photos. As soon as Maxfield was out the door Carmilla turned around to face Laura, “Maybe we should move on to the next part of the process.”

Laura hopped off the stool and stepped towards the camera, “Oh no, not yet.” She took hold of Carmilla’s arm and pushed her towards the backdrop and the stool that was set up in front of the camera. “I haven't actually taken any photos. I’m more of a hands on learner so I better at least take a few.”

Carmilla gave her a challenging look, one that Laura returned with a sly smile before walking back towards the camera and sitting on the stool that Carmilla had been on previously. She looked at the camera, her hand governing over it for a second before she dropped her finger towards the shutter release.

“Is this the right—“

*click*

She turned back to Carmilla with a wide smile, clearly proud of herself for finding the right button.

Carmilla just rolled her eyes and turned back to the stool, “Fine. But lets make this quick.” Carmilla was clearly more used to being behind the camera than in front of it.

Carmilla stood next to the stool and crossed her arms over her chest. “Go ahead.”

Laura frowned, “You aren't going to sit?”

“That doesn't have to be good enough for vogue, just take the damn picture.”

Laura glared at her slightly, “I had to sit there, so you do too.” she pointed to the stool and raised her eyebrows.

Carmilla kept her eyes locked on Laura and stilled her face defiantly.

“What, know you wont look ‘cool’?” Laura teased, trying to get Carmilla to play along.
“Fine.” Carmilla raised an eyebrow and dropped her arms to her sides, “It doesn't take much to look better than your expression of pain.” she teased back with a smirk.

Laura rolled her eyes but then found herself staring as Carmilla moved to sit on the stool.

Carmilla looked down at herself as she casually unzipped the leather vest she was wearing, her black sheer t-shirt underneath slightly hugging her frame. She placed the heel of her boot on one of the cross bars between the legs of the stool and stepped up, slowly lowering herself backwards onto the stool. Her hands gripped the seat on the front, fingers curling around the edge as she shifted her weight, lifting her body and moving herself further back. Her eyes lifted to look at Laura, her face relaxed and lips slightly parted as she lowered herself effortlessly back onto the stool. Her knees bent, her feet resting on the cross bar, her shoulders relaxed but with tall posture. She licked her lips, eyes on Laura as she settled into the seat.

The white backdrop was a stark contrast to the all black outfit and dark loose curls framing her face and falling over her shoulders. She blinked slowly, her eyes focused on Laura’s like she was seeing every part of her.

“Well?” She asked, raising an eyebrow slightly.

Laura clamped her mouth shut and cleared her throat, her hands fumbling slightly with the camera before hitting the right button.

*click*

As soon as the picture took, Laura looked back up at Carmilla. “Not bad.” She squeaked out, clearing her throat again, she repeated herself, “Not bad.” She shrugged and tried to hide how much something so simple had affected her.

She took a few more pictures, learning quickly there was more to it than just pressing a button. Even in the simple set up where it seemed like thats all Carmilla had been doing. After a few minutes Carmilla hopped off the stool and went to unhook the camera.

“Now, we develop.” Carmilla took the camera and headed to a separate room and opened the door. Laura followed and looked inside skeptically at what seemed to be a dark closet.

“The thing with film, is that if you expose it to light, it’ll ruin your work.” Carmilla stepped inside the small dark room and waited for Laura to join her. “So you learn to do things in the dark.”

She went through the process of pulling the film from the camera and moving it to a separate container. Carmilla explained what she was doing as she did it, since Laura couldn't see. She would sometimes start the process then find Laura’s hands, hand the item she was using off to her, and explain to her how to finish the task.

The process was more complex than Laura was expecting. There was temperature, exact timing, light restrictions, exact measurements, she had no idea it was so involved. Carmilla worked mostly silently, besides the small instructions or explanations of what she was doing. It was clear she had plenty of practice as her hands moved effortlessly and she had no problem with the precise tasks it took during the process.

They had moved from the small closet back to the dark room and Carmilla handed her the container
their film was in. Laura carefully opened it and pulled out the film, following Carmilla’s instructions. As the film un rolled Laura smiled at seeing the pictures on the negatives.

“Now we hang it…” Carmilla gently took the long strip of film from Laura and clipped it to the line next to a row of photos she had hanging to dry. “and wait for it to dry before making pictures from it.”

Laura smiled and stepped closer to try and see the pictures on the film better.

“Shouldn’t you be writing this down?” Carmilla asked, moving to inspect her already developed pictures, “You know, since its for your article and all.”

“Riiight.” Laura spoke slowly trying to come up with a believable response. She didn't need any of that for her article, she just wanted an excuse to talk to Carmilla. “I’m sure I’ll remember the important parts.” She shrugged and started walking around the room, looking at the photos Carmilla had left to dry.

She immediately recognized them from the other night, the photos of the stars. They were incredible. She couldn't believe how clear the sky looked and how easy it was to see the stars. So easy she could even pick out constellations in the dimly lit room.

“Carm, these are amazing.” She slowly moved around the room, stopping to look at each new picture.

That night Carmilla had repeatedly walked back and forth from their spot on the theater chairs to the camera, slowly rotating the tripod to get new angles of the sky. Laura hadn't thought much of it but now she saw the reason. With each rotation of the tripod, not only did she get a different view of the sky, but the shadows and light from the fire effected the view in a new way.

Some shots were completely made up of open sky. Stars and moonlight being the entire picture. Others had parts of the crumbling building in view. Exposed brick, charred and black, chunks of what was once strong structure missing, stained glass windows illuminated by fire and moonlight. Different shapes of shadows and brick walls, falling rafters and beams.

Laura continued to make her way around the room, following the line of photographs hanging in front of her eyes. Each photo completely different from the last, even though only the tiniest of things had changed in it capture.

Carmilla went back to the film they had hung and started to work quickly at developing a few of the photos taken. She worked silently and quickly, adding to the line with each newly developed photo.

Laura laughed as she saw the first photo Carmilla had developed from their quick photoshoot, “I do look like I'm in pain.”

Carmilla smiled but continued to work with the chemicals and photo paper. She hung another on the line and started to work on the next.

Laura waited patiently for each new photo then smiled or scrunched her face as she looked at them. She wasn't used to seeing herself in so many pictures, but she had to admit they were good. Not in an ‘I look so good’ sort of way, but in the way where Carmilla had somehow been able to capture a feeling or a memory with each shot.
She smiled at the photo Carmilla had captured when she asked about her father. She felt her heart ache when she saw the sorrowful smile on her face and sadness in her eyes when a story of her mother had come up in conversation. She felt surprised at her expression from a photo Carmilla had captured as she offered her a genuine compliment. Somehow it had been so easy to open up to Carmilla about so many things. To be honest about the way she felt about them, and express it entirely. Why was it so hard for her to express her feeling for Carmilla, then?

Carmilla had only chosen a handful to develop fully, the entire roll would have taken much longer. But she picked her favorites of Laura, and a couple of herself so Laura could see her own work. She leaned back against the counter after hanging the last photo and watched Laura as she examined it.

Laura smiled at a photograph near the end of the line. It was one she had taken of Carmilla. By luck she had taken a photo right as Carmilla broke into laughter at one of Laura’s corny jokes.

“Can I keep this?” Laura asked, pointing to the photo and looking at Carmilla.

Carmilla nodded slowly, glancing to the photo Laura was talking about, “Sure. Take whatever you want.”

“Thanks.” Laura smiled to herself as she unclipped the photo and lowered it in her hands.

Carmilla watched as Laura took only that single photo and held it gently in her hand. Her eyes moved from the photo in her hands up to her face and she saw the slight smile still on her lips. “Just that one?”

“Yep.” Laura shrugged, still looking at the photo. “Just a reminder that underneath all that snark is a beautiful smile.”

Carmilla wasn't sure what to say or how to respond. “Get everything for your article then?” Carmilla asked quietly, watching Laura's face in the dim light of the darkroom.

Laura nodded slowly, “I think so.”

Carmilla waited a moment, watching the other girl, before moving from her position against the counter to start cleaning up. Laura offered to help but was shooed away casually with the wave of a hand. Once Carmilla had cleaned up everything in the dark room and collected her photos, they made it out in to the classroom and put things away from their quick photoshoot.

Laura followed Carmilla out of the classroom, her hands gripping the straps of her backpack tightly, “I’m glad I ran into you.”

Carmilla watched her feet as she nodded, “Me too.”

“I guess I’ll see you..” Laura cut herself off trying to think of the right thing to say. After going a week without seeing Carmilla, she didn't want to say anything to make that happened again. Especially not after a particularly great afternoon with her.

“I'll see you around, cupcake.” Carmilla finally looked up at Laura and offered her a small smile before turning on her heel and starting to walk away from her down the empty hallway.
Laura had stopped texting Carmilla, deciding to give her some space in an effort to keep whatever good vibes were between them Friday in the photo room going. So she sat there in the library, like she had the last 3 times she was supposed to meet with Carmilla, and she waited.

She had taped the photo of Carmilla up on the mirror in her room, next to a photo of her dad and one of Perry and Laf. Every time she looked at her reflection over the weekend she caught herself stealing a glance at the photo and smiling.

She really was beautiful. Everything about her.

Laura drummed her fingers on the table impatiently, trying not to look at the clock. She didn't want to believe that after their day developing photos that Carmilla would still be avoiding her. Thinking back to the night she had stood in front of Carmilla speechless though, she probably wouldn't blame her. What Carmilla had said was beautiful. And honest. And as much as it had made Laura’s stomach do flips and her heart race, she still couldn't place the reason she hadn't been able to say anything back. The reason she had been so scared.

A quiet thud caused Laura’s fixed stare on her Psychology book to finally break and her head snapped up, a smile spreading wide on her face. “You’re here.”

“Every Tuesday and Thursday.” Carmilla drawled as she lowered herself lazily into a chair opposite Laura.

Laura’s smile stayed wide on her face as she looked back down at the reason for the thud. A ziplock bag of red gummy bears sat on the table between them. She looked up at Carmilla, reaching for the bag.

“Peace offering.” Carmilla shrugged, trying to hide her smile as she opened up her textbook. “So, what are we studying today?”
Laura was a little less than excited when it turned out Carmilla had shown up to study, and that was all she was going to do. Any effort to branch the conversation further than what was in the book in front of them and Carmilla steered it right back to Psychology. By the time they were done studying, she felt like they had never been friends to begin with. Whatever had happened between them that obviously had gone un-talked about, had completely closed Carmilla off again.

Thursday went the same way. Carmilla came ready to dive right in to the exciting world of Psychology and the suggestion that contrary to the need-desire-fulfilment cycle of animal instincts, human motivations sometimes obey a “getting begets wanting” rule: the more you get a reward such as self-esteem, love, drugs, or money, the more you want it.

Laura understood the opposite. The more Carmilla pulled away and gave her less of herself, the more desperate she was to have more. Someone should do a study on that.

“I read your article.”

Laura looked up from the notes on the table in front of her slowly, “Really?”

“Mmhmm.” Carmilla hummed, turning the page in her textbook.

Laura had been slouching in her seat, completely exhausted with studying and entirely frustrated in Carmilla’s lack of willingness to act like anything more than her tutor. This volunteered information, and topic that had nothing to do with Psychology was completely welcomed.

She sat up and fidgeted wither pencil, dragging the eraser along the top of the table. “What did you think?”

Carmilla pursed her lips together thoughtfully, “I think… that there was nothing in it about the film developing process.” She finally lifted her eyes to look at Laura, the corners of her lip twisting into a small smile.

Laura couldn’t hold her smile at the teasing. She didn’t even care that Carmilla was basically calling
her out for her lie about her article just to spend some time with her. She was just so happy to have
back the Carmilla she knew.

“Yeah.” Laura laughed, “It didn't really… flow?”

Carmilla laughed and shut her textbook, “Yeah I don’t buy that for a second.”

Laura laughed again and ducked her head slightly. When she looked up she was surprised to see
Carmilla packing up her things. “You’re leaving?” Her growing happy attitude halting, as the little
progress she felt they were making felt like it was coming to a sudden stop.

“Uh, yeah.” Carmilla kept her eyes on her bag as she put her things inside and closed it, “I think
we’ve done enough for today. Don’t you?”

“Sure. Yeah.” Laura fumbled with her things slightly as she tried to pack up quickly so she could
leave with Carmilla. She slung her bag over her shoulder and hugged her book to her chest as she
took a few large steps to fall in line next to Carmilla as they headed for the library doors. “You uh,
going to be sticking around for thanksgiving?”

Carmilla looked over at Laura, studying her face for a second before pushing open the door and
following her out into the cold air. It had dusted snow a few more times since their night in the
Lustig, but not enough to stick to the ground. The air was just cold and biting, prickling inside their
lungs with every breath.

Carmilla knew she had been holding back, and she knew Laura had noticed. The nervousness on
Laura’s face at such a simple question made that fact clear. It was hurting her as much as it appeared
to be hurting Laura. But since that night she had redrawn that line, deciding distance was the best
thing for them both. Keeping her heart out of it was the only way for them to work.

“Yeah.” Carmilla knew she had to give a little more or Laura was bound to give up on her, and that
was the last thing she wanted. She just needed some time to figure out what to do now. “I have
dinner with, uh, family.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize you had family here.” Laura tried to control her desire to ask a million questions
at this small gesture of opening up.

“I have a brother at Silas, and my sister is coming to town for the day.” Carmilla slowed her pace as
they approached the student parking lot, “And mother, of course.”

Laura nodded, trying to decide if it was better to call this conversation a success and just say
goodbye or try to keep inching that door open more.

“Are you? Sticking around, I mean?” Carmilla asked as they reached her car. She unlocked the door
but kept it closed, turning to lean her back on the cold frame.

“Yeah!” Laura smiled before calming her excitement of Carmilla actually continuing the
conversation even though she had an easy out, “I mean, me and Laf are just sticking around here.
Perry goes home cause her family is only an hour away. She always brings us back stuffing that her
mom makes and man, if you think Perry makes good food you haven’t had her mothers stuffing.”

Carmilla smiled as Laura continued to rant about Perry and pie and something called a Party Pie
Pizza Pile that Laf was determined to finish this year.
“Sorry.” Laura tucked some hair behind her ear, “I was rambling, wasn't I?”

Carmilla chuckled and turned and opened her door. She paused for a second before turning to look at Laura over her shoulder, “How about a ride?”

Laura smiled and rocked onto the balls of her feet, “That would be great.” She quickly made her way around the car and climbed into the passenger seat as Carmilla started the engine.

Things were suddenly feeling normal again. Like they had before the night of the first snow fall. But an uneasiness settled in Laura’s chest and she knew that’s not what she wanted. She had to figure out what was making it so hard for her to talk to Carmilla and admit her feelings.

——

Perry, Lafontaine and Laura all sat around the table silently. Laura had basically word vomited everything that had happened in the last month between her and Carmilla and she was waiting for advice. An opinion. Anything. But the pair of red heads just continued to stare at her.

“Nothing?” Laura deflated, “You really have nothing to say?”

Perry tried to smile but it came off awkward and forced. Laf noticed and brought their hand up, their fingers rubbing gently on their chin.

“She knows something.” Laf leaned towards Perry slowly. They knew Perry was awful under pressure and the right amount would make her spill whatever it is she knew.

Perry’s eyes widened and her posture went stiff, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t know anything. Brownie?” She stood up quickly and shuffled over to the plate sitting on the counter, shoving an entire brownie in her mouth.

“You’re right!” Laura sat up taller, “She does know something!”

Perry shook her head quickly, red curls bouncing frantically as she tried to chew the brownie in her mouth.

“Come on, Perr.” Laf urged, “This is Laura.” They gestured to Laura across the table and the brunette gave her very best puppy dog eyes.

They usually worked fairly quickly on her father and they had even worked once or twice on Carmilla, but Perry was holding strong.

“I can’t.” She mumbled, brownie crumbs threatening to tumble out of her mouth. She chewed a few more times then swallowed, “I can’t get in the middle.”

Laura sighed and leaned her cheek in her hand, her elbow resting on the table. She knew it was no use. Perry was like a vault when it really mattered. She had found that out her first year when she was the FloorDon and refused to repeat anything that was told her in confidence. Laura would be mad if she didn't think it was such a great quality about her.

“Ok fine.” Laura huffed, “If you aren't going to say anything then at least help me figure out what my problem is.” She sat up and knocked her knuckles on the hard table, “Why can’t I just tell
Perry and Laf shared a look before Perry picked up the brownies and walked back to the table. “What do you think it is dear?” She slid the plate forward into the center of the table.

“I don’t know.” Laura grabbed a brownie and took a bite, slouching in her chair. “I mean…” Her eyebrows furrowed as she really stopped to think about the entire situation.

Why had it been so hard? Her head knew she liked Carmilla. Ever since the the other night, her brain had been screaming at her to just say something. Say anything! And if the butterflies and breathlessness every time she saw her was an indication, then her body knew she liked her, too.

“You did mention that Carmilla didn't have many people in her life.” Laf offered, not very confidently, “maybe you’re worried if it doesn't work out she wont have anyone?”

Perry nodded in agreement at the idea. It wasn't totally out of the question. Carmilla did keep her inner circle rather small and without Laura it would be less of a circle and more of a short line.

“Oh my God. That was it.” Laura considered it for a minute then scoffed, “I’m sure she’d find a new study buddy in no time, though.”

Oh my God. That was it. It was meant to be a joke, but that’s what the problem was. Every time Laura wanted to say something or get closer to Carmilla all she could think about was the parade of women from the beginning of the semester. How easily it was for Carmilla to move from one to the next without seeming to care. She didn't want that to be her. She didn't want to be like one of those girls. She didn't want a quick hook up in the library once or twice.

She wanted Carmilla. She wanted lazy Sundays on the couch watching Netflix and drinking hot chocolate. Date nights of ordering Chinese (with extra steamed broccoli for Joey) and looking at the stars. Trips to find new places for Carmilla to take photos, hearing stories about her childhood, sharing stolen kisses and gentle touches. Sunrises in the park and sunsets in her arms. She wanted more than what she had seen Carmilla offer anyone. And she wasn't sure Carmilla wanted the same thing.

“Laura?” Perry tapped her arm gently. She had watched her go from smiling, to a look of realization, to looking completely distraught. “You ok, sweetie?”

“Oh yeah.” Laura stammered out. “I just, I have a.. test? I have a test.” She stood up and looked around the room blankly, “I should go study.”

She didn't study. She wasn't lying about the test, Shields was offering another midterm the next week to help level out some of the lower grades and to make the final less of a hit when it came to end of semester grades. She should have been studying, but this was Laura. She was overthinking, instead.

Your laugh is like the sunrise.

Carmilla was good with words. She had to give her that. Without even trying, it’s like she spouted poetry. But Laura wasn't sure what she meant sometimes.

Carmilla was charming, and sweet, and very good at getting what she wanted. She could be the most kind and sincere person Laura had ever met. Then there were times when you just knew she was purring a well practiced, and frequently successful pick up line. Then there were times where her
words fell somewhere in between and she wasn't sure if it was Carmilla being guarded but sincere, or just really good at making women weak in the knees.

...even though it happens every morning, it's your favorite thing and you can't wait to wake up the next day and experience it over and over again for the rest of your life.

That was it. That was the line that rendered Laura speechless and sent her heart in overdrive. Because that— That, was a promise of a future. Those were the words of someone who had thought of a future that was further away that one night of a good time. But they were also words so beautiful it caught her off guard and made her want to leap into the unknown and plant her feet where she was all at once.

——

Carmilla brought the cup to her lips and looked over the rim lazily. She took a sip of the hot drink and felt it as it moved down into her body. Ignoring the large eyes staring at her she turned and faced the sink, using the arch of her foot to rub up and down on her other leg. A gentle bump into the back of her thigh caused her to let out a sigh and look down towards her feet.

“Its too cold.” She rasped, the first words spoken since she had woken that morning.

There was a quiet wine and a slight shuffling of paws as Joey inched his way closer to her, now leaning his entire body against her leg as his tongue hung lazily out of his mouth. He tilted his head and watched her closely as she stared back at him.

“But its Saturday.” Her whining was almost as pathetic as Joeys as she set her cup down on the counter and bent slightly to scratch the top of his head.

He stood up, tail wagging and padded over to the door. He gestured with his nose at the handle and sat down, turning to watch Carmilla expectantly.

Who was she kidding? That dog owned her more than she owned him.

“Fine.” She rolled her eyes at immediate wag of a tail and walked down the hall, disappearing into there room.

When she came walking back out, dressed and ready to face the cold weather, Joey was already standing at the door, leash in his mouth. She clipped it to his collar and grabbed her phone from the counter and shoved it in her pocket before she swung the door open and followed the german shepherd out.

Carmilla was surprised how quickly things had gotten so cold. Usually it wasn't until December that they would see snow and even though it wasn't snowing enough to actually stuck to the ground yet, it was still annoyingly cold.

Once they got to the park not too far from her apartment, Carmilla let Joey off his leash to run around. She had brought her camera and snapped a few pictures of him chasing birds and digging holes. He really was her favorite.

Her phone started to buzz in her pocket so she lowered her camera and fished it out. She saw who was calling and answered immediately with a smirk.
“Willy boy.”

“Hey. You busy?” Will asked quickly.

“Not really, why? You miss me?” She asked, her eyes watching Joey as he explored further away.

“No.” Will scoffed, “But… I thought maybe we could get coffee before the headache that is thanksgiving this week. You know, actually enjoy family before we have to endure dinner.”

Carmilla chuckled, “Yeah, I could be up for that.”

“Great!” Will was genuinely excited, “Meet me in 20 at the shop just off campus!”

“Wait, you meant right now?” Carmilla asked quickly, but it wasn't quick enough. Will had already hung up. "Of course right now." Carmilla mumbled to herself as she slid her phone into her back pocket. She blew out a loud whistle and turned to start walking towards campus.

Joey caught up quickly and fell in line next to her, matching her pace. She wasn't sure why she bothered with a leash most of the time with how good he was.

She showed up the coffee shop a little late. It would have taken less time had she gone home first and then driven over, but the sun was actually shining and she wanted to let Joey run around a little longer.

Carmilla stopped at the door and pulled joey's leash from her pocket. She was about to tie him up outside while she checked inside for Will when someone walked out through the door. Joey immediately squeezed himself between their legs and the door and ran inside, leaving Carmilla outside in the cold alone.

Carmilla let out a frustrated groan as she rushed inside after the German shepherd, looking quickly around the coffee shop to find him. She spotted Will across the shop then quickly noticed the girl sitting across the booth with him. She could only see the back of her head but it was the familiar color of honey brown hair and Joey was quickly making his way to her.

"Joey?” Laura turned in the booth as the dogs head landed in her lap happily.

"Laura?” Carmilla walked quickly towards the booth, not sure what to make of the scene in front of her.

"Carm?” Laura turned further around, eyes widening at the sight of Carmilla approaching her quickly.

Will had been sitting silently as he watched the dog, then Carmilla come running through the door. He hadn't expected the dog to go to Laura instead of him but the flustered expression that both girls were sharing made it clear this wasn't their first meeting.

He cleared his throat and raised his hand slowly from the table, "Will."

Both girls turned to look at him, Laura more amused as his joke than Carmilla was. The dark haired girl snapped her fingers and Joey quickly moved to sit at her feet, head down, obviously aware she wasn't happy with him.
"What are you doing here?" Laura finally asked.

"Coffee." Was all Carmilla said, her eyes shifting between Laura and her brother. She's sure she hadn't given Will enough information to orchestrate this little meeting but she didn't know the two even knew each other.

"Have a seat then, Kitty." Will smiled and scooted over to make room for her.

"Wait. Kitty?" Laura asked as Carmilla looked around the coffee shop, "You guys know each other?"

Carmilla sighed and pointed towards Wills feet. Joey immediate shuffled under the table and laid down out of sight.

"I need coffee if this is really happening." Carmilla mumbled before turning and walking to the counter.

Will chuckled and took a sip of his coffee, "Carmilla's my sister."

Laura's jaw dropped, her head quickly turning to look between the two siblings. How she hadn't seen it before was a shock. Same dark hair, intense eyes and a charm you wanted to hate but couldn't.

"Wills the brother you have at Silas?" Laura asked as Carmilla sat down across from her in the booth.

"The one and only." Carmilla wrapped her arm around his shoulders and trapped him in a head lock, messing up his hair with her free hand. "How do you know each other?"

Will shoved Carmilla, setting himself free and lifted his hand to tame his hair.

"Kirsch."

"Kirsch."

Will and Laura answered in unison with a chuckle.

Laura smiled at Will then glanced over at Carmilla. Dark eyes were watching her over a hot cup of coffee, their intensity almost overwhelming. She wanted to look away but found it impossible.

"Well I should probably go." Laura bit her bottom lip and fidgeted with her own cup of hot chocolate, "I didn't mean to interrupt your siblings date."

Carmilla set her cup down gently and leaned forward slightly, "You should stay." She finally looked away from Laura, glancing quickly to Will.

Will got the message from the look his sister was giving him and shifted in his seat, "Yeah, stay."

"You sure?" Laura asked with a shy smile.

"Positive, cupcake." Carmilla answered with a smile.
"Will, I swear to all that's holy if you don't stop talking..." Carmilla pinched the bridge of her nose, closing her eyes.

Will and Laura continued to laugh at the clear embarrassment on Carmilla's face.

"Amused?" Carmilla glared at Will before turning back to Laura, "You should hear the story of when Will peed his pants in the middle of—"

Will shot his hand out, covering Carmilla’s mouth so she couldn't finish what she was saying, his face turning completely red. Carmilla smacked his hand away and gave him a smug glare. Laura covered her own mouth with her hand, trying to control her laughter. What had started out slightly awkward actually ended up being a pretty great morning. They had shared a couple cookies and gone through their fair share of coffee and hot chocolate.

"Alright." Carmilla pressed her hands on the edge of the table and leaned back to look at the dog at her feet. He let out a quiet whine and shifted, slightly antsy from laying under the table so long "This has been fun and all but I should get going."

Will checked his watch and nodded, "Yeah, me too."

"Give me a minute?" Carmilla stood up and walked to the other side of the coffee shop towards the bathroom, leaving the other two at the table with Joey at their feet.

"Thanks for letting me crash." Laura smiled at Will, her hands gripping her empty cup.

"Anytime." Will leaned back, throwing his arm on the back of the bench. "I think you actually made it better."

Laura laughed and ducked her head a little, looking into her empty cup.

"No seriously." Will looked in the direction Carmilla had gone, "It's been a while since I've seen her this... Carmilla."

"You mean she hasn't always been broody and mysterious?" Laura joked, leaning her forearms on the table.

Will let out a laugh, "No that's always been Carmilla. But, I don't know." He paused to think it over, "She's fun again."

"Again?" Laura knew she was probably digging into things she should be hearing from Carmilla, but she couldn't help it. Digging for information was second nature to her.

"Yeah." Will nodded and let out a sigh, "After Ell, she just sort of shut down."

"Ell?" Laura tried to ask casually.

"Her ex. She hasn't mentioned her?" Will answered slowly, finally catching on to the fact that maybe Carmilla hadn't said anything to Laura.

"Uh, not exactly." Laura scrunched up her face and shrugged a shoulder.
“Ready?” Carmilla called from near the door, the two still in the booth turning quickly to look at her with slightly guilty expressions.

Joey climbed out from under the table and followed them out into the cold air. It had started to snow while they drank their coffee and flurries of snow flakes swirled around them in the slight breeze.

“I can.. walk you home?” Carmilla stood close to Laura and zipped up her jacket, avoiding eye contact. Instead, watching flakes of snow settle on the ground, some sticking while others melted quickly.

Laura smiled and wrapped her scarf around her neck, “That would be—“

“I’ll take her, Kitty.” Will stepped over, pulling on his coat and zipping it up, “We are headed the same way so its no problem.”

Carmilla let out a heavy breath, clenching her jaw at how oblivious her brother was. “Right. Ok.” She responded through clenched teeth.

Laura giggled and hid her smile behind her scarf before squatting down and running her fingers through Joey’s fur. “Later, Joey.” she rubbed her nose against the top of his head before standing up and fidgeting with her fingers briefly. “Later, Carm.” She quickly wrapped her arms around the other girl before she had a chance to over think it and hugged her tightly.

Carmilla stumbled slightly as arms wrapped tightly around her neck, the puff on top of Laura’s beanie hitting her in the face as their bodies pressed together. It took her a second but once she realized what was happening, she lifted her arms and wrapped them just as tightly around Laura’s waist.

Carmilla felt her body relax as she sighed into the hug, the warmth she felt having nothing to do with body heat and everything to do with the buzzing in her chest. The way Laura’s hands gripped against her body tightly, like she had no intention of letting go— she had to feel it too. Maybe hope wasn’t lost completely.

——

Laura’s pencil tapped furiously against the corner of the desk. She ran a hand through her hair and looked around the room. The pair of eyes staring angrily at her stilled her hand and she offered an apologetic smile. She scribbled out another answer and flipped the page over.

“How’d we do Miss Hollis?” Shields asked, taking her test.

“Good, actually.” Laura smiled and gripped her backpack strap, “At least I think so.” She chuckled quietly.
“I’m sure you did great.” Shields chuckled and placed the stack of papers in his bag, “You’ve been doing well since studying with Carmilla.”

“Yeah, she’s been great.” Laura agreed and followed him out of the room.

Shields chuckled to himself and shook his head, “She must like you to keep tutoring you.”

“What do you mean?” Laura asked, looking up at him as they walked.

“She just doesn’t usually get along well with others. I was surprised when she volunteered to keep it up after her grade was already covered.”

“Volunteered?” Laura stopped walking abruptly.

Shields noticed her sudden halt and turned around a questioning look on his face.

“She doesn’t have to for her grade anymore?”

Shields shook his head, “No, not for a while now.”

Laura let out a sharp breath, her mind reeling. All this time.. all this time, Carmilla had been—

“Uh, thanks Professor!” Laura started speed walking towards the door, “Have a great day!” She called over her shoulder as she pushed the heavy door open and disappeared outside.

Laura walked quickly through campus, hoping she wasn't too late to catch Carmilla and Perry as they left their class. They usually stopped at the coffee kart but with the snow, Laura wasn't sure they would be there today.

Carmilla saw her first and immediately felt herself smiling, “Hey, creampuff. How’d your test go?”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Laura blurted out loudly.

"Tell you what?" Carmilla asked, more amused than anything else.

“Everything ok, Laura?” Perry asked adjusting her earmuffs.

“No. Yes.” Laura shook her head, trying to get herself back on track. However unplanned that track was at the moment, “Why are you still tutoring me?”

Carmilla looked at Perry then back at Laura and shrugged, “For my grade?”

“I know thats not true.” Laura countered, “Why didn't you tell me?”

Perry took in a large breath and looked between the two girls worriedly, “I’m just going to…” She pointed off to the side of where they were and started to slowly walk away, trying to give the other girls some space.

“So?” Laura completely ignored Perry’s awkward exit, her attention still on the stunned girl standing in front of her.

Carmilla sighed and shifted her weight on her feet, “I didn't think it mattered.”
“Really?”

“Yeah, really.” Carmilla lifted her hands at her sides, “Why does it matter? You’re doing better in class, right?”

“Well, yeah.” Laura answered in a mumble. “But.. Why would you keep helping me if you didn’t have to?”

Carmilla’s expression shifted immediately from confusion to something that looked more like anger. “Are you really doing this?”

“Doing what?” Laura asked, her eyebrows furrowing, “I just asked a question.”

“A question you already know the answer to.” Carmilla replied quickly. She watched Laura’s face closely, searching for something. A reason for why she was doing this, if she really didn't figure it out, if she was being cruel. The look in her eyes made it clear she hadn't put the pieces together, or just hadn't taken the time to even consider the reason.

Laura stayed silent, trying to come up with the answer Carmilla was accusing her of already having.

*Your laugh is like the sunrise.*

Carmilla saw the moment Laura finally understood. The crease in her forehead relaxed, her eyes softened and her lips parted ever so slightly with the small exhale of breath. It puffed out slowly between them in a cloud.

“You know why I—“ Carmilla’s quiet words died off early. Her mouth feeling dry and her throat tight. She couldn't do this again. Not when things were starting to feel normal. Good.

Laura swallowed audibly, a sinking in her chest growing deeper. There were so many things she could have said, *should have said*, but once again she found herself stuck without the words. That same fear of knowing what Carmilla was saying. *Knowing* what she wanted. *But for how long?*

How long would her laughter replace the sunrise? How many mornings would Carmilla wake in anticipation before she realized she preferred the sunset and left Laura alone in a clouded morning where the sun couldn't be seen behind the dark sky?

“Don't do this, Laura.” Her name echoed with sadness, eyes sparkling, but not from hope.

Laura stayed silent, lost in glossy eyes and the sound of Carmilla’s voice.

Carmilla took in a deep breath, the cold air stinging her lungs. She had already handed her heart over once, what would it hurt to do it again? It seemed impossible for the broken pieces to shatter any smaller, anyway.

“Anytime that something gets serious with me, I run away. I like to think that I’m this big, fearless person but the truth is; I’m afraid to take a risk.” She paused, clenching her hands in an effort to stop their trembling. “But I did. I took a risk and I opened up and you said nothing. You stood there and looked at me like you’re looking at me now and I don’t know what that means. But I’m done.”

Laura stood there stunned. The riddles and layers of sarcasm and flirting were gone and Carmilla
was being clear and honest. Her own admittance to running away when things got serious should have helped ease Laura’s worry. If Carmilla knew that was something she did and was being honest about it, maybe that was her way of saying she was trying to do more than that? But instead of easing her apprehension, it only added to it. Carmilla knew she ran because she had done it so many times, how could she not now? Its what she did. Its who she was. How could Laura expect her to change just for her?

“Let me know if you ever decide you have something to say.” Carmilla rolled her eyes and walked past Laura quickly.

It felt like a weight had fallen from Carmilla’s chest only to be replaced by an aching from within. She had tried, she had opened up and let herself feel and as much as it hurt, it had changed her. She had been so closed off for so long, she forgot what it was like to let someone in. And even though the ache from within came from the deafening silence after bearing her soul, at least she had leapt. At least she had taken a risk instead of running away.

Laura turned and watched her walk away. The moment could have been magical. Falling snow, glistening flakes as they collected on the ground and bare branches, but once again she had let her fear control her voice. The thing was, she did have something to say. She just wasn't sure how to say it.

Carmilla wasn't the only one afraid to take a risk. But she had been the only one willing to face that fear and take it anyway.

——

“Carm, let me start by saying I’m sorry.” Laura paused to bite her lip for a moment, thinking of her next words. “I didn't mean to hurt you, I was just scared. Of getting hurt myself.”

Silence and attentive eyes urged her to continue.

“And that was selfish and unfair because you were being honest with me, so I should have been honest with you.”

“Great.” Laf said unenthusiastically. “Now that you’ve practiced at least a hundred times on me, maybe you should actually go find her and say it.”

Laura sighed, “You don’t think it sounds lame?”

“I think at this point, she would probably be grateful to have you say anything at all.” Laf got up and started walking away, “Lame or not.”

Laura pulled a pillow into her lap and sank back against the couch cushions. Laf was right. She had waited long enough. It was time to girl the hell up and just talk to Carmilla. She pulled her phone out of her pocket and scrolled through her contacts till she found it. Her finger hovering over the call button. A deep breath and her finger pressed down slowly.

With every ring Laura felt herself grow more nervous. But she finally knew the words she had been struggling to form and she had to let them out. Even if it was too late, Carmilla deserved that much.

“Hey, Carm.” She let out a sigh, “I just.. wanted to talk.”
She couldn't believe it had come down to this but she knew Carmilla deserved more than to be told over the phone.

“I know you have dinner with your family but I was hoping maybe I could see you. I just, wanted to talk. I already said that. Sorry. I guess, just, if you have a minute or you know, more than a minute you could let me know and I could meet you somewhere, or come by your place or whatever you want. And I know there's no reason for you to listen to me but I hope you will because—“

*beep* To rerecord your message, press 1. If you are happy with your current message, press 2.

The sound of Carmilla’s machine cut off her nervous rant and she deflated as she pulled the phone down and pressed another button.

*beep*

“Hey Carm, it's Laura.” She let out a sigh, the ache of everything that had gone wrong returning to her chest. “I know I messed up but I'd like to explain. If you'll let me.”

She hung up and dropped the phone on the cushion next to her and buried her face in the pillow in her lap. All she could do now was wait and hope Carmilla would give her one more chance.

—

Carmilla was standing in front of the house in the exact spot she had been in for the past 10 minutes. Her hands were shoved in her coat pockets and her scarf wrapped tightly around her neck. She had opted to walk instead of drive, hoping to postpone whatever nightmare Thanksgiving dinner with her mother was going to turn out to be. The long walk had numbed her toes and her ears were prickling but the crunch of the snow beneath her boots had actually been calming.

She knew Mattie was already there and had received the expected text of “where are you?” from Will, but she was still holding out as long as she thought she could without getting in trouble. Since the last family dinner things with her mom had been tense. Not to mention that whenever she saw her on campus she made a mad dash in the opposite direction. There was no telling what was going to happen once she walked into that house.

She walked up the few steps and onto the front porch, wiping her boots on the mat out of habit before ringing the doorbell and waiting. She heard the chime sound inside the house and took one more calming breath as she waited for the door to open. Since her mother had become the Dean and moved into the mansion on campus designated for her, Carmilla hadn't ever invited herself in. Even though every time she was there she was told to just walk in, it was her mother's house after all, she never could. She still always felt like a visitor.

She heard muffling on the other side of the large oak door and was preparing to make her greeting when she felt her phone buzz in her pocket. She pulled it out, letting out a sharp breath when she saw Laura's name flashing on the screen. She wished she had stood in the falling snow just a minute longer.

The door opened and arms wrapped around her tightly. Mattie ushered her in the house quickly and Carmilla had no choice but to hit the ignore button and slide her phone back in her pocket. Mattie had already started talking about her latest travels by the time Carmilla hung up her coat and scarf in the entryway. It wasn't until they were walking into the dining room that she felt another buzz in her pocket and knew it was a voicemail from Laura.
Luckily Lilita was paying attention to William when they sat down at the table so she didn't have the chance to comment on her tardiness. She seemed to be in a rather good mood and was being mostly pleasant as they started dinner. It wasn't until dessert that things started to become not so pleasant.

“How are classes going for you, Carmilla?” Mattie asked with a smile as her fork lifted another bite of pie.

“Good.” Carmilla nodded, lifting her glass to her mouth to take a drink as she swallowed her own bite of dessert.

“Do say more than that, dear. Don’t be rude.” Lilita leaned back in her chair, swirling the liquid inside her glass slightly.

Carmilla bit the inside of her cheek. She had planned to elaborate but knew talking with food in her mouth was something her mother wouldn't approve of. Apparently the list of things her mother didn't approve of was basically anything she did.

Her anger dissolved as she looked back to Mattie and saw that she was genuinely interested in what she had to say and how her classes were going. Choosing to ignore her mother, she continued. “I've actually been improving with my photography and my professor thinks I have a good chance at being accepted for the exhibition this year.”

“What’s that?” Will asked from across the table.

“Every semester a few students get the chance to show their work at a local gallery.” Carmilla smiled, feeling excited at the possibility of her work actually getting chosen. “It’s a pretty well known event and collectors and other gallery owners show up. Its a chance to get your work out there. In the past students have actually sold their work or been hired for projects. Its an amazing opportunity.”

“I hope you have a backup plan.” Lilita said flatly before taking a sip of wine.

“What that supposed to mean?” Carmilla spat back before she could think better of it.

Lilita shrugged carelessly, “The chances of your work being chosen are slim. I just don’t want you to end up with no future because you got stuck on this silly idea of becoming a photographer.”

Mattie and Will both turned to look at Carmilla nervously, unsure of what was going to happen next. You could tell neither of the agreed with what their mother was saying but were equally unsure of what to do about it.

“I think its wonderful that you’ve worked so hard to grow your skill—“ Mattie started, trying to lessen the tension and offer Carmilla support. But she was quickly cut off by an amused laugh.

“Skill?” Lilita scoffed, her hard features tightening as she offered an arrogant smile, “Its nothing more than a trivial hobby and it would do her good to realize that before its too late.”

Carmilla clenched her jaw and narrowed her eyes. It was no secret her mother didn't agree with her choice to pursue this as part of her studies, it shouldn't have been a shock that she wouldn't agree with it as a career choice either.
“Is that so, mother?” Her question ended with a sharpness that could only be described as disdain. Her siblings shrank in their seats as she pushed her chair back from the table. “And what would you have me do instead? Become a lawyer, like Mattie? Or maybe go into business, or become a doctor?”

Lilita rolled her eyes, ignoring her daughters words like it was a child's tantrum that she had lost patience for. “I’m simply trying to save you from your own foolishness. There’s no need to get dramatic.”

“Dramatic?” Carmilla stood up, pressing her palms on the table in front of her. She was willing herself to stay calm, knowing any sort of outburst would cause her mother to dismiss her completely. “About the fact that my own mother wants me to fail at my dream?”

“One day you’ll understand.” She tilted her head slightly, an apathetic expression on her face.

“Do you think I’m ever going to understand, why you refuse to show even the slightest bit of interest in the things that make me happy?” Carmilla’s voice wavered slightly, years of feeling like she wasn’t good enough rising to the surface.

“I think you’re a practical girl and you’ll see that everything I do I do for the best.” She set her glass down calmly and lifted her empty eyes to look at her daughter, “You, my glittering girl, are a diamond.”

It was a compliment but somehow felt like an insult. A shackle, trapping her in an unreachable expectation of a life she desperately wanted to escape from.

“You’ll see that there are things far more important than happiness.” She sighed, seemingly out of boredom, “That’s just the way of the world.”

“The way of the world?” Carmilla scoffed, standing up and shaking her head. “That’s it, isn’t it? You care more about how the world sees you than your own children’s happiness?”

Lilita shifted slightly in her chair but said nothing. Will and Mattie continued to sit silently as Carmilla brought up a hand to rub her temple. She wasn’t sure if she was more angry or hurt and even less sure of what to do now.

“Kitty..” Will whispered, glancing quickly at his mother then back to Carmilla.

Carmilla shook her head and let out a sharp breath, “Don’t bother.” She turned and quickly left the dining room, heading straight for the door. She didn’t bother to stop for her coat or scarf before she stormed out of the house and slammed the door behind her.

It took about a block before she regretted not grabbing her coat. It was still snowing, like it had been all day and with the sun no longer in the sky the night air was biting. Snow gathered in her hair, her clothes dampening with the wet flakes and her body shivering in an attempt to create heat. The exposed skin of her arms and face quickly paled at the frigidity as she walked quickly away from her mothers house.

She was tired. So tired. And so cold. More than from what her body felt from the winter air, and all she wanted was to rest. Her arms wrapped around herself tightly as her body trembled more with every step. Her head hung low as tears threatened to escape. It had all been too much and not even the sound of snow crunching under her feet could calm her.
Laf walked in the living room and dropped on the couch next to Laura. They shoved her shoulder then stole the pillow that was hiding her face. “Still nothing?”

“Not yet.” Laura sighed, “But its thanksgiving and she was having dinner with her family so she’s probably busy.”

“She’ll call.” Laf reassured her with a sympathetic smile. “In the mean time..” Their smile grew wide, their eyes full of excitement. “The pizza is on its way and you are about to witness history as I, your fearless friend, finally finish the Party Pie Pizza Pile.”

Laura couldn’t help but laugh at their excitement, “Isn’t it just pizza?”

“Just pizza?!?” Lafontaine brought a hand to the chest, feigning offense, “The Party Pie Pizza Pile is not just pizza. It’s a masterpiece.”

There was a knock on the door and Laf’s eyes widened in excitement as they leapt off the couch.

“You get the door!” They ran towards their room frantically, “I’ll get my pizza pants!”

Laura let out a laugh and got up from the couch and walked over to the door smiling to herself. Opening the door wide she stood there for a second, her smile falling in surprise.

“You’re not the usual pizza boy.” Laura tried to joke with the same words Carmilla had used when she had shown up at her house on halloween.

When Carmilla didn’t respond, Laura actually took in her appearance. Her boots were wet with snow, her shirt damp and sticking to her body in a few places. She didn't have a coat or anything at all to shield her from the harsh weather and cold temperature outside. Her arms were crossed tightly over her body as her shoulders shook with erratic shudders. Her eyes were cast towards the ground and dark curls dusted with snow flakes blocked most of her face.

“Oh my gosh, Carm.” Laura immediately stepped out into the hallway, her hands landing on cold skin. She rubbed her palms gently up and down Carmilla’s arms while here eyes watched her carefully, “You’re freezing, what were you doing?”

Carmilla’s teeth chattered quietly as she let out a shaky breath.

Laura reached up and tucked dark hair behind Carmilla’s ear before cupping her cheek with one hand and lifting her face. Carmilla’s eyes were glossy, her nose red and her chin trembled from chattering teeth. She looked completely and utterly exhausted.

“Oh, Carm..” Laura breathed out, surging forward and wrapping her arms around her tightly.

Carmilla’s arms were trapped between their bodies but she wasn’t sure she would be able to move them well enough to hold onto Laura anyway. She wasn’t even sure why she had come here instead of home. That is, until she felt warm hands rubbing gently on her back and “it’s ok.” being whispered into her hair. She let out a heavy breath, closed her eyes and let her chin rest on Laura’s shoulder, her body relaxing into the embrace.
“Come on, lets get you warmed up.” Laura said softly before stepping back and pulling Carmilla into the apartment.

Carmilla stood in the entry way, hands clasped in front of her chest, still shaking from the cold as Laura quickly moved into the kitchen. She filled a kettle with water and placed it on the stove before coming back and taking hold of Carmilla’s hand.

“How about some warm clothes?” Laura asked, starting to lead Carmilla back to her bedroom. Carmilla just nodded and followed along, gripping Laura’s warm hand tightly.

Laura’s door closed quietly as Laf came walking out of their room, wide grin on their face. They strut towards the kitchen, thumbs pulling on the waistband of their pants, stretching them out away from their body.

“Alright, I’ve got my stretchy pants on, I’m ready to take down this piz..za…” Their words trailed off as they realized they were standing alone in the kitchen. “Laura?”

They looked around curiously but the apartment seemed silent.

“Thats weird.” They glanced along the countertop and frowned, “What happened to my pizza pile?”

A knock on the door pulled their attention and they walked slowly towards it. They opened it up with a confused look other face as the pizza boy stood there awkwardly with pizza in hand.

—

Laura led Carmilla to her bed and had her sit down while she went to her dresser to find some clothes. She grabbed a pair of sweats and a long sleeve shirt and took them back to Carmilla, standing in front of her and holding them out. Carmilla looked at them for a second before reaching out still trembling hands and taking them, holding them in her lap.

“They are only going to work if you actually put them on.” Laura offered a small smile, still unsure of what happened or what she should do.

Carmilla’s lips twisted up for a second before she let out a breath, still shaky from her shivering.

“Can I help?” Laura asked hesitantly, reaching back down for the clothes she had just handed Carmilla.

Carmilla closed her eyes and sighed before nodding her head. She didn't have the energy to be embarrassed or care that Laura was seeing her so broken anymore.

Laura gently took the clothes from Carmilla and set them on the bed next to her. Carmilla slowly gripped the sleeve of her shirt and started to pull her arm through it, her arms still stiff from the cold. Laura reached down and took hold of the bottom hem of her shirt and gently lifted it, Carmilla raising her arms to make it easy to pull over her head.

Once the shirt was gone, dark hair fell messily over Carmilla shoulders and she lifted a hand to run her fingers through curls, pushing them from her face. Laura grabbed the new shirt and held it out, ready for Carmilla to put her arms through. She pulled it over Carmilla’s head, tugging on the hem until her torso was covered. Carmilla balled her hands up in the ends of the sleeves, covering her cold skin as much as possible.
Laura watched her sit there a moment before she reached out and gently pulled her hair out from under the shirt collar, gathering it and twisting it slightly before letting it settle behind her shoulders. Carmilla looked up at her and offered her a small smile, but it didn't quite reach her eyes.

“Pants?” Laura asked, only slightly awkwardly as she held up the sweats in her hand.

Carmilla nodded again and stood up slowly, reaching down to undo her pants. Numb fingers made it hard for her to grasp the button and she soon found gentle hands gripping hers and lowering them out of the way. She looked up slowly and met Laura’s eyes and felt a warmth spread through her at the concern they held.

Laura simply smiled before undoing the button herself and gripping the fabric of her pants to help Carmilla push them down her legs.

There was nothing awkward or uncomfortable about it at all. It was simply one person helping another because they cared. No hidden agenda or intent to hold it against them in the future. It was an easiness that made it simple for Carmilla to climb onto Laura’s bed and curl up as soon as she had gotten the sweats on.

Once Carmilla was curled in a ball on her bed, Laura pulled the comforter up and over her body, tucking it around her tightly before leaving the bedroom. She came back a minute later, both hands gripping steaming mugs.

“I wasn’t sure what you would want so I have tea or hot chocolate.” Laura set them on the bedside table before sitting down on the edge of the bed by Carmilla, “I figure they are both warm so you could really go either way depending on what you want. I mean I know I like hot chocolate, I’m practically made of the stuff but you may prefer tea. Unless you want me to make some coffee, then I can totally go make some it just might take a minute.” Laura glanced down and although Carmilla’s eyes were closed, she was actually smiling.

“Creampuff?” She was quiet but her voice was no longer wavering.

“Yeah?” Laura asked, matching her volume to Carmilla’s and leaning down towards her slightly.

“Thank you.” Carmilla opened her eyes and looked up at Laura, lifting the comforter to hide the bottom half of her face.

“Sure.” Laura shrugged with a smile. She watched Carmilla close her eyes again, clutching onto the blankets as her body slowly started to warm up. “Hey Carm?”

“hmm?” Carmilla hummed, not moving.

“I need to tell you something.” Laura licked her lips, feeling nervous but knowing she still had to give Carmilla an explanation for everything that had happened before. “Well, I need to explain.”

Carmilla opened her eyes slowly, letting out a deep breath before she moved the blanket down, uncovering her face. “Can you tell me tomorrow?"

Laura really wanted Carmilla to know how she felt and why she hadn't said anything when she had opened up to her. But the look in Carmilla’s eyes made it clear she wasn't in the space to process anything. Laura realized in her haste to warm Carmilla up, she hadn't even asked what happened.
Laura nodded slowly as she bit her lip trying to decide if she should ask or just let it go for now. It was obvious Carmilla wasn't in the mood to talk, but she wanted to make sure she was alright.

“Carm?” Laura asked, scooting closer to her on the bed.

Carmilla lifted her eyebrows, a silent invitation for Laura to continue.

“Are you ok?” Her voice nearly cracked as the idea that maybe Carmilla wasn't ok flashed in her mind. She had been horrible at expressing it, but Laura really did care about Carmilla a great deal and it made her sad to think she wasn't alright.

Carmilla must have noticed the concern in Laura’s voice, or the worry in her eyes because she smiled warmly and nodded her head. “Of course, cupcake.”

Laura nodded slowly and stood up, sliding her palms against her thighs before turning and walking toward the door. She heard the shuffling of blankets and turned around to find Carmilla sitting up watching her.

Carmilla’s eyes shifted nervously around the room before landing on Laura. For the first time all night she looked slightly bashful as she spoke. “Could you stay?”

She was cold and hurt and feeling unloved and the one person she had wanted to see was Laura. Even if things were unsettled, she didn’t care. Whatever happened tomorrow, was going to happen tomorrow. But for tonight she was ok with letting it all go and just asking Laura to be there with her. Even if it would mean nothing in the morning.

“Of course.” Laura answered quickly as she walked back towards the bed. She kicked off her shoes and climbed in under the covers.

Carmilla was back on her side, slightly curled, still trying to soak up any heat offered from the heavy comforter. Laura slid in behind her, hesitant to touch but getting close enough that Carmilla could tell she was there. Laura swallowed heavily as she lifted her hand and slowly lowered it to Carmilla’s shoulder. She felt her cool skin through the shirt and started to rub up and down her arm, hoping some friction would help warm her up.

A second later Carmilla’s hand was reaching around and taking hold of Laura’s. She pulled her arm over her side, tugging Laura’s body closer to her own. Carmilla felt Laura press herself against her back and sighed contentedly at the warmth and simple contact. She held Laura’s arm against her body, relaxing in the gentle embrace.

In that moment she felt warmer than she had all night. She slowly fell asleep to the rhythm of Laura’s heart beating against her back and her arms wrapped around her tightly.

——

Laura laid silently in bed watching Carmilla sleep. It wasn't a surprise she woke up first, especially with how exhausted Carmilla had seemed the night before. What was a surprise was how peaceful she looked while she slept. Laura smiled and reached out, brushing a stray curl out of Carmilla’s face and tucked it it behind her ear.

A smile spread on Carmilla’s lips before her eyes opened sleepily. She blinked slowly, taking in a
deep breath, “Hey.” Her voice scratchy and low.

“Hey.” Laura echoed quietly, taking her hand back and resting it on her pillow.

Carmilla licked her lips and cleared her throat, trying to wake herself up a bit more. She rolled on her side to mirror Laura’s position and tapped her pointer finger on the back of Laura’s hand. “Thanks. For last night.”

Laura just nodded but didn't say anything, hoping her silence would urge Carmilla to explain what had actually happened.

Carmilla saw the curiosity in Laura’s eyes and felt bad for just showing up and not explaining, even though she wasn't sure she really wanted to. “I didn't know where else.” She paused, letting out a breath, “I didn't want to be alone.”

“Its ok.” Laura spoke softly, “Do you want to talk about it?”

Carmilla shook her head slowly, her eyes watching her finger as it changed from tapping the back of Laura’s hand to drawing slow circles on it. She really didn't want to talk about what had happened that led her to Laura’s bed the night before. It didn't seem to matter anymore. What mattered is that she was here. Here because Laura had ushered her in and warmed her cold heart with her gentle hands wrapped tightly around her.

She blinked slowly, looking up through her eyelashes to Laura’s face, not missing the quickening rise and fall of her chest as she took quiet breaths. Laura’s eyes watched Carmilla’s finger trace patterns on her hand, goosebumps traveling up her arm as a heaviness settled around them.

“I need to tell you.” Laura whispered, her throat feeling tight, her thoughts fuzzy.

“Tell me what?” Carmilla asked smoothly. She knew what she was doing and that there was a possibility Laura would stop her. But the way she felt the night before as she fell asleep in Laura’s arms, gave her the last remaining piece of hope she needed to ignore the chance of yet another let down.

Carmilla was no stranger to women. She was beautiful and charming and had gotten very good at getting what she wanted. She knew how to read facial expressions, body language and faint movements to gauge her chances or her effect on who she was pursuing. In this moment, it wasn't hard to tell that Laura had at least a little interest in her. Even if it was just physical.

“Why I didn't say anything when you said—“ She stopped and swallowed, her mouth feeling dry, “When you told me…”

Carmilla didn't want to talk. If this was her chance, she wasn't going to miss it. She shifted her body slightly, leaning towards Laura, her eyes moving from watching soft brown eyes to wet lips that were slightly parted.

Laura’s whole body was buzzing. This isn't how she expected this conversation to go. She thought she was going to have to beg Carmilla to listen to her and give her another chance. She never thought she would see her leaning in slowly, surely about to kiss her, without even getting an explanation from her.

Maybe this was easier. Maybe she didn't have to explain what had stopped her from saying anything
when Carmilla had shown her her heart. Maybe she could just kiss her and have it be a new
beginning. No misunderstandings, no hurt feelings.

Then she remembered the way Carmilla’s eyes had welled up with tears in the dying light of the fire.
And the brokenness of her voice when she had called Laura out for knowing exactly why she had
continued to tutor her and she knew she had to say something.

She felt her eyes closing without permission as Carmilla inched closer but willed her voice to work.
She finally had the words, she would say them out loud. She had to.

Carmilla watched Laura’s eyes flutter shut and she couldn't help but smile at the nonverbal
permission that action had granted her. It was a silent agreement that Carmilla was going to kiss her
and her heart thumped at the idea that it was finally going to happen. She let her own eyes close as
the space between them seemed to shrink into nothing, the mattress creaking underneath them.

“I was scared.” Laura breathed out, eyes still closed but eyebrows pressing together tightly.

The words she hadn't been able to say had tumbled out just before their lips had touched. A second
later and her honesty would have been swallowed by hungry lips and a racing heart.

Carmilla stilled, knowing she could ignore it. She could ignore the confession and do what she had
been aching to do for months. But the tone of Laura’s voice made her stomach churn and she knew
the words that would follow next were important.

Carmilla opened her eyes and scanned the other girls face. She was so close she could have mapped
her freckles like the stars or counted the lashes of her gently closed eyes.

“Of me?” Carmilla whispered, watching Laura’s face closely.

The slight twitch of her eyebrows and lips that pressed together like they were afraid to let words
escape told her the answer. Laura was afraid of her.

“Why?” Carmilla shifted back slightly, uneasy about getting an answer to her question.

Laura kept her eyes closed but felt the mattress shift and she knew Carmilla had moved further away
from her. She wished for second that she hadn't said anything. That instead, she had been able to
taste Carmilla’s lips and feel the softness of her skin. But she had promised herself she would tell her.
That she would be honest and hopefully mend the pieces of Carmilla’s heart she had broken by
remaining silent.

“I was afraid it didn't mean the same to you as it did to me.” Laura voice was small, like she felt
embarrassed to admit her fears. “That I was just another girl to you. A challenge.”

Laura finally opened her eyes when she felt a thumb delicately brush along her cheek and was
surprised to find so much worry in Carmilla’s eyes.

“Is that really what you thought I was doing?” Her eyes searching Laura's face, her thumb still
brushing against warm skin, “Using my romantic wiles to take advantage of you?”

Laura hid her face in the pillow and let out a quiet sigh before turning back to look at Carmilla, “I
mean, I did have a front row seat to the beginning of the semesters cavalcade of study buddies.”
“Mmm.” Carmilla hummed in recognition. Laura wasn't wrong about that. But somewhere along the way, what she wanted changed. “Laura.” she whispered slowly, leaning towards her again.

The inflection of her voice was different than Laura had ever heard her name spoken before. A chill raced up her spine, goosebumps growing on her skin at the reverence Carmilla had spoken with when saying her name.

“You are not just another girl.” Carmilla whispered as she moved closer.

Laura let her eyes flutter shut, her heart grasping onto the words Carmilla had just spoken. She was surprised when warm breath hit her cheek, followed by soft lips. A chaste kiss lingered before Carmilla pulled back and ran her thumb where her lips had just been. Laura opened her eyes and looked at Carmilla. Confusion and worry mixed on her face until Carmilla smiled and spoke again.

“And I’m going to prove that to you.”

——

When Carmilla told her she was going to prove it to her, she didn't know she meant right then. She wasn't complaining, mostly. Sure she wouldn't have minded if Carmilla had started proving that with a kiss, or maybe even staying in bed a little longer. But all it took was a few seconds for Carmilla to stretch, climb out of bed and grab her boots before she was gone with a bashful, yet excited promise to return for her soon.

_Bashful._ Now there's a word Laura had never associated with Carmilla before. That alone was proof something about this was different. And now sitting in her apartment, waiting for Carmilla to come back, she was questioning her decision to even make this a thing.

She didn't know Carmilla as anything other than what she had seen so far. Sarcastic, witty, surprisingly thoughtful, kind and honestly, she had no idea what Carmilla meant when she promised to prove Laura was more than just some girl to hookup with. And now she couldn't decide if she was nervous or excited to find out.

Probably both. Which weren't foreign feelings for Laura when it came to Carmilla.

Carmilla promised to be back just after noon and told Laura to dress for the weather. By now Laura was used to getting very little information when it came to their outings and what they would be doing. But Carmilla had called this a date. _An actual date._ And Laura was losing her shit.

"L, it's just Carmilla." Laf peeled the sweater off their head that had landed on them after Laura had hurled it across the room.

"I know!" Laura held up another shirt then threw it on the ever growing pile on the floor after Laf shook their head in disapproval. "But it's different this time."

"How so?" Laf questioned as they got up and walked to the closet, moving Laura out of the way.

"Because for once we are actually on the same page. Of the same book." Laura smiled, "We talked and instead of being completely confused I actually know what's going on. We are going on a date. Like, an actual date."

Laf nodded as they slowly went through the clothes still hanging in the closet.

"And I know that might seem silly to you but it's like for the first time I know I'm allowed to hold her
hand or sit a little bit closer or just let myself feel the butterflies in my stomach instead of trying to
smother them." Laura fell back on her mattress, arms stretching out at her sides. "I'm nervous." Her
voice was quieter now, the nerves clear in her tone.

"Why?" Lafontaine turned around and held out a sweater in their hand, "You already know she likes
you."

Laura sat up slowly and reached out for the sweater. "What if I ruin it?"

Laf shrugged, the sound of knocking on the door ending the conversation immediately. Laura threw
her sweater on quickly before scrambling to the door, stopping just in front of it to take a deep
breath.

The warm smile Carmilla gave her as soon as the door was open calmed any nerves she had
immediately.

"Hey." Carmilla greeted, reaching a hand out to gently tame some hair that had gone wayward from
Laura's rushed dressing.

"Hey." Laura blushed, lifting her own hands to brush through her hair.

"Hey." Laf said in a dreamy voice mockingly, leaning against the wall in the hallway.

Carmilla rolled her eyes and fought the urge to flip them off. "Ready, cupcake?"

"As ready as I can be." Laura smiled, grabbing her coat and stepping out the door to follow Carmilla
out to her car.

Carmilla gripped the steering wheel with one hand, the other resting on the gear shift. As usual, she
let Laura control the music, their conversation staying simple, stealing glances and hiding small
smiles behind bitten lips and glances out the window.

Laura watched Carmilla stretch her fingers out wide before gripping tightly to the gear shift for the
third time and wondered if that was her way of fighting the urge to hold her hand. She smiled and
turned down the volume of the music.

"So are you going to tell me where we are going?"

They hadn't been driving long and out of habit Laura hadn't even bothered to ask what the plan was.
Carmilla was surprisingly all about surprises when they hung out, and so far, the same went for
dates.

"We're here." Carmilla smiled mischievously as she pulled off the road and into a parking lot.

Laura looked at where they were stopping and raised an eyebrow. "The thrift shop?"

"Mnhm." Carmilla hummed, shutting off the car and turning to Laura, "We just have to pick
something up."

“Just get your ass through the fence, Hollis." Carmilla was holding the clipped fence apart wide
enough for Laura to climb through.

Laura looked at her worriedly, "I know we did this once already but I was drunk and had very poor
judgement that night."
Carmilla chuckled and let go of the fence, metal rattling together, the snow caught on its links puffing into the air before falling to the ground. She reached out her hand and waited for Laura to take hold of it, pulling her towards her.

"Trust me." She smiled and slid her hand to the small of Laura's back and pushed her towards the fence.

Laura sighed, still unsure, but once Carmilla pulled the fence open again, she climbed through, her boots crunching down into untouched snow. Carmilla followed her through, their thrift store purchases slung over her shoulder. Taking hold of Laura’s hand she led her through the small path familiar to only her. They ducked under bare tree branches and walked between bushes covered heavily with snow, their shoes crunching footprints in the blanket of white underneath them.

Carmilla led them out into a clearing, things finally looking familiar to Laura as soon as she saw the wood fence near the pond and the large tree on the opposite side. The picnic table sat atop the small hill not far from the tree, a layer of snow covering the old wood. They walked towards the large tree, their hands holding each other tightly as their feet left a path behind them in the snow. The branches were big enough that the tree had protected the ground near its trunk from the snow, a small area of ground left uncovered. Carmilla led Laura to a large log underneath the tree and sat down on it, using it as a bench.

“Alright, cutie.” Carmilla pulled the ice skates that were hanging by their laces off her shoulder and handed Laura her pair, “Lace up.”

With an excited giggle Laura removed her boots and started lacing up her skates while Carmilla did the same. They took a few wobbly steps over to the pond before stopping short of it.

“You sure this is going to hold us?” Laura asked, tapping the toe of her skate on the glassy ice.

Carmilla examined the pond and shrugged. She really wasn't sure. She had walked on the pond after it had turned to ice in the past, but she hadn't been out this winter to try. She was actually feeling pretty lucky that it was even frozen over at all. She hadn't really been out to check before planning this date.

“I'm sure it'll be fine.” She tried to seem confident as she stepped out onto the ice slowly. Her other foot followed, a smile forming on her face when the ice held up her weight.

Carmilla let herself glide further onto the frozen pond, getting further from the edge she went to turn around to face Laura but her skate caught and instead of gliding, she was falling. She landed hard on her ass with a loud ‘oof’.

Laura giggled and stepped out onto the ice gracefully, pushing her skate against the ice and gliding over to Carmilla smoothly. “You ok?” she asked, trying not to laugh at the look of pain on Carmilla’s face.

“My plan of being smooth and awesome at this to impress you is completely backfiring.” Carmilla said flatly as she rubbed her backside with her hand.

Laura laughed and skated in a circle around Carmilla, “I don’t know.” She slowed her speed, stopping in front of her and extending her hand. “It's kind of adorable.”

Carmilla sighed and took Laura’s hand, letting her help her back to her feet. Laura gripped Carmilla’s arms, helping to steady her once she was up. Giggling as Carmilla struggled to stand without wobbling.
“Adorable, huh?” Carmilla asked, finally standing up straight and brushing ice from her pants.

“mmhmm.” Laura hummed, pressing her lips together. She bit her bottom lip and raised an eyebrow, “Think you can keep up?”

“Psst.” Carmilla scoffed, “Easy.”

“Oh really?” Laura chuckled, sliding her hands down Carmilla’s arms and skating backwards slowly.

Carmilla held tightly to Laura’s hands, wobbling a little before regaining her balance and letting Laura pull her forward. After a few pushes of her own, her balance was better and she was able to keep up as Laura continued to skate backwards, their hands clasped between them.

“Wanna race?” Laura smiled wide before dropping Carmilla’s hands, spinning in a full circle and taking off quickly.

Carmilla tried to keep up, but without much luck. They skated around for a while, Laura skating circles around Carmilla and always stopping to help her up when she fell, which was more often than she wanted to admit. After a while Carmilla settled for standing near the center of the pond and watching Laura skate.

Snow started to fall lightly, flakes collecting in Carmilla’s hair as her eyes followed Laura intently. Once Laura noticed the snow in the sky, she tilted her head back slightly to watch it fall slowly. She stretched her arms out to her sides, smile on her face as her skates skimmed along the ice. A few more easy pushes and she was sliding to a stop in front of Carmilla.

“Having fun, cupcake?” Carmilla smiled warmly, opening her arms to catch Laura as she skated into her.

Laura’s body bumped into Carmilla’s causing her to stop. A quiet giggle escaped her lips as they grasped onto one another, offering each other as much balance as they could.

“This is amazing, Carm.” Laura breathed out, her breath turning to a cloud of fog as it escaped her lips.

Carmilla smiled and pulled Laura towards her, skates scraping on ice until their bodies pressed together. She wrapped her arms around Laura’s waist, Laura’s arms moving to wrap around her neck.

“So are you.” Carmilla replied, watching Laura closely. The golden flecks in Laura’s eyes shining brighter than the glittering of flakes falling gently around them.

Laura felt her heart thumping in her chest. She couldn't believe after everything, this is where they were. Standing in each others arms on a frozen lake while it snowed around them. This was one of those moments that seemed so perfect, she didn't want to forget.

Deciding not to let the moment pass her by, Laura leaned forward slowly, her eyes locked on Carmilla’s lips. The last thing she saw before she closed her eyes was Carmilla’s lips twisting up in to a smile as she inched closer.

Carmilla closed her eyes, her grip around Laura’s waist tightening as she leaned down to meet Laura’s lips with her own. But the ice had other ideas.

As Laura tried to push herself up higher, her skates slipped on the ice, her feet sliding backwards as
she lost her balance. Her arms were still wrapped around Carmilla’s neck and her balance was worse than Laura’s, offering her no help to stay upright. It only took a second before skates were sliding out from underneath them on the slick ice, bodies falling quickly and roughly on the frozen pond in a mess of limbs and snow. Carmilla landed on her back, Laura on top of her, arms still wrapped around each other tightly.

“You are heavier than you look.” Carmilla groaned, the cold ice and harsh landing already causing her body to ache.

Laura couldn’t help the loud laughter that ripped through her throat, her body shaking as she tried to contain it. Carmilla tried to act upset but the sound of Laura’s laughter was infectious and she found herself relaxing on the ice and laughing with her.

Carmilla felt Laura’s body weight shift on top of her as they continued to laugh. She lifted her head off the ice to look at Laura and her breath was stolen as Laura’s lips pressed into hers.

Carmilla’s whole body tensed at the surprise and for a second she forgot to kiss Laura back. Then her hand that had been supporting her on the ice lifted and tangled in tousled hair covered in snow flakes, her eyes fluttered shut and she kissed Laura back gently. The kiss was soft, and patient in a way that Carmilla had forgotten was even possible. A desire to be close, but a calmness like an assurance of time. Time for passionate, hungry mouths to meet in the future— but for now, the chance to revel in the way Laura’s lips felt against her own, the satisfied hum that reverberated between them, the relaxing of a body on top of hers, and the world around them fading completely.

Laura had been surprised at her own courage but quickly realized breathing in Carmilla was better than breathing air. She could feel Carmilla’s cold nose pressing against her cheek, her lips so warm in comparison. A hand tangled in her hair and once again she was left breathless as how gentle Carmilla’s touch was.

The kiss was tender, sweet and unforgettable. Laura pulled back slowly, her eyes opening as she pulled in a much needed breath. She smiled when she saw that Carmilla’s eyes were still closed and a goofy grin was forming on her face. Then dark eyes were looking into hers and she felt her cheeks warm despite the cold air around them. Carmilla pulled her bottom lip between her teeth and Laura let out a quiet giggle, hiding her face in Carmilla’s shoulder.

“I guess we should get up now.” Laura rolled off of Carmilla and sat up.

Carmilla chuckled and pushed herself up to sit on the ice next to Laura, bumping into her playfully. “I mean, my ass is already frozen at this point so I’m good to stay here as long as you want.”

Laura laughed and shoved Carmilla’s shoulder, causing her to slide on the ice slightly. She stood up and offered Carmilla her hands, helping her to her feet before pulling her on the ice back towards the big tree and makeshift bench. They made their way back through the snow, following the footprints they had left during their journey in. Carmilla tossed their skates in the trunk before climbing in and starting the car.

Laura rubbed her hands together quickly in an effort to warm them up, the car heater not warm yet. Her eyes fell to Carmilla’s hand that was once again resting on the gear shift between them. Her fingers stretched out wide before gripping onto the shifter tightly.

Laura shifted in her seat, her hand reached out and took hold of Carmilla’s, pulling it from the gear shift between them. Carmilla looked down quickly and watched Laura rotate her hand before interlocking their fingers and letting their hands settle in her lap. She gave Laura’s hand a gentle squeeze as she looked back to the road as she drove them back home.
“I had a really great time, Carm.” Laura pressed her back against her door and fidgeted with her fingers.

Carmilla gave her a crooked smile, “Me too, cupcake.”

She stepped forward, her hand landing on Laura’s waist, pulling her towards her. A hand moved up to cup Laura’s cheek, her thumb brushing against soft skin before she leaned in to kiss her.

Since that kiss on the ice, Carmilla had thought of nothing else. If she had to say goodbye, she was going to say it with her lips but without words.

Laura kissed her back eagerly, her arms moving to wrap around her neck as Carmilla pressed herself against Laura. She pushed her back a step, pressing Laura’s back against the door behind her.

“Is that you, Laura?”

The door swung open quickly, causing Laura and Carmilla to loose their balance and their lips to separate. Carmilla let out a huff and brought her hand up to wipe at her mouth, Laura giggling at the frustration on her face.

“Oh, sorry!” Perry’s eyes widened, her hands clasping together nervously, “I didn’t mean to— I just heard— welcome home?”

“Its ok, Perry.” Laura chuckled, “Carm was just dropping me off.”

Laura turned and gave Carmilla a look, her scowl dropping and being replaced with an eye roll.

“Oh! Lafontaine told me you were going out. Did you have a good time?” Perry smiled and looked between the two girls.

Carmilla stepped towards her, taking hold of both her shoulders and pushing her backwards gently, causing her to take a step back into the apartment.

“We’re still having a good time.” Carmilla grabbed the door handle and stepped back out into the hallway with Laura, shutting the door. “Now, where were we?”

Laura giggled and shook her head as hands came up to cup her face and soft lips pressed against hers.
The transition from being tutored by Carmilla to dating Carmilla was surprisingly easy. Not a whole lot changed, actually. They still met for tutoring, although they now shared a couch instead of sitting across from one another. In the time between their classes with shields they would spend every second they could together before Carmilla would go into the auditorium and Laura would make a mad dash to her next class.

They still shared gummy bears. White and green for Carmilla, the rest for Laura. At the coffee kart after art, Carmilla always got an extra hot chocolate for when Laura would show up to talk to her and Perry before her next class. Joey was happy about seeing Laura around more often, even if he was a bit sore about losing his place on the couch next to Carmilla. But the steamed broccoli she usually had with her made it easier to accept.

Granted, it had only been a week since their first date. But it had been a pretty great week.

“Come on, Carm.” Laura whined, lifting up a chemical bottle and looking at the label with narrowed eyes. “It’s Friday. Haven’t you had enough of school?”

Carmilla chuckled, turning around slowly to face Laura. Noticing the bottle in her hand, she moved over quickly and plucked it from her hands carefully, setting it on the counter behind her. Her eyes stayed on Laura as she stepped into her space, smirking slightly.

“What?” Laura asked, leaning back slightly and smiling. The way Carmilla looked at her was different now and Laura hadn’t figured out how to look back at her without blushing.

“You not enjoying our alone time?” Carmilla smirked, leaning in to pepper kisses along Laura’s jawline.

Laura giggled and turned her head, meeting Carmilla’s lips with her own. She felt Carmilla smile into the kiss before she felt hips press against hers, pinning her against the counter behind her.

“Woah there lady killer.” Laura giggled, leaning away from the kiss and sucking in a breath, “We are still in the middle of a classroom.”

Carmilla raised an eyebrow and glanced around before nudging Laura’s nose with her own and whispering, “Cupcake, we are alone in the darkroom.”

“Exactly.” Laura smiled, placing her hands on Carmilla’s hips and pushing her back slowly, “So, developing now, smooching later.”

Carmilla sighed and turned back towards her work, “You’re no fun.”

Laura rolled her eyes and turned back to the counter, fidgeting with bottles and equipment, “The sooner you’re done here, the sooner we can go have some fun.”
Carmilla pulled a photo from its chemical bath, rinsed it off and lifted it to clip it on the drying line. As she attached it to the line, Laura fumbled with some tools on the counter, a loud clattering pulling Carmilla’s attention.

“I guess I should just be happy you haven't broken anything yet. Or worse.” She walked over towards Laura, organizing the items Laura had dropped on the counter and placing them out of her reach.

Laura scoffed, and offered Carmilla a mock pout, “It’s just the darkroom. What kind of trouble could I possibly get into?”

Carmilla smiled wickedly, slowly moving closer to Laura. She danced her fingers up the brunettes arm, her eyes locked on her lips, “Oh I have all kinds of ideas about that.”

Laura bit her lip and an effort to hide her growing smile, “You are unbelievable.”

Carmilla leaned in to kiss her but Laura slid sideways, causing Carmilla to stumble into the counter. She snapped her head towards Laura with a questioning look that turned to a glare when she saw Laura’s pleased smirk.

“Develop now.” Laura blew Carmilla a kiss and sauntered towards the door, “Smooching later.”

Carmilla heard Laura giggle as she left the darkroom and couldn't help but chuckle to herself. That girl was constantly surprising her, and the more time she spent with her having her walls down, made her question why she had built them so high to begin with.

"Ah, Carmilla." Maxfield greeted as she walked out of the dark room. "Laura was just telling me you've been showing her your process." She paused, giving Carmilla a stern look, "After classroom hours."

"Riiight." Carmilla said slowly, knowing full well she had been breaking the rules.

Laura offered her an apologetic look from behind professor Maxfield and mouthed the word 'sorry' before making her way out of the classroom.

"You're lucky I like you." Maxfield chuckled and sat down on a table, folding her arms over her chest.

"I know, I know." She went to pack her things in her bag that had been sitting on another table in the room.

"Really, Carmilla." Maxfield made sure to wait until Carmilla looked up at her, "we could both get in trouble if your mother knew you are able to get in here on your own."

The mention of her mother made her tense. Maxfield had been more that generous to look the other way when Carmilla used the photo room without faculty around.

"It won't happen again." She sighed, throwing her bag over her shoulder and turning towards the door.

"We aren't finished." Maxfield stood up and walked to catch up to Carmilla near the door. "I've been waiting for your self portrait for a while now."

"You know I'm better behind the camera." Carmilla spun around frustrated. She had been putting this off the entire semester and wished it wasn't even a final requirement.
"That may be true." Maxfield's tone was no longer that of a friend but completely that of a teacher. "But it's required. For everyone."

Carmilla sighed and sat down on the edge of one of the classroom tables. She knew she wasn't going to get out of it. She just really didn't want to do it. She wasn't even sure how.

"Look, Carmilla." Maxfield sat down on a table across from her and crossed one leg over the other, resting her hands in her lap. "You have talent. Real talent."

Carmilla looked up at her, knowing coming from her, those words had weight.

"But if I being honest, I've been a little disappointed with the work you've been turning in when I know you have better photos you're keeping in your folder."

Carmilla broke eye contact, looking anywhere but at her professor. It was true. She had been holding onto some of her better work, partly because she was nervous to let anyone see it and partly because she wanted to keep it to herself.

“What you've been turning in is good work. They are beautiful pictures. But I want more from you. I don't want to just see a beautiful photo, I want to feel it.” Maxfield held a hand out in front of her expectantly.

Carmilla knew she wanted her portfolio and sighed as she moved to pull it out other bag and hand it over.

Maxfield opened it up and flipped through the pages. Carmilla swallowed heavily when she stopped near the back, where the photos of Laura began. She had kept them separate on purpose. Laura hadn't given her permission to take them, and beyond that.. they were more revealing of her feelings than any of her other work. Sharing that with the public seemed terrifying. Sharing that with Laura, seemed terrifying.

“I keep hoping these will end up in my stack of assignments to grade.” Maxfield flipped slowly through them. “This is the kind of work that will get you noticed. These are the photos that could earn you a spot in the end of year exhibition.”

Carmilla watched the pages turn carefully. Each photo reminding her of a moment. A feeling. Some good, some not. “They’re personal.”

“Thats what make them so good.” Maxfield shut the book and handed it back. She glanced towards the door, the thought of Laura finally entering her mind. The unknowing muse to Carmilla’s art. “She doesn't know, does she?”

“Know what?” Carmilla asked quickly, her eyes widening in worry.

“How you feel about her.” Maxfield put it simply. As if it was the most obvious answer to her question.

Carmilla took in a breath, ready to respond. Her mouth opened but nothing came out. Words had left her completely, being replaced by both panic and a calmness she couldn't explain. How did she feel about her? Was it love? It couldn't be. Not yet. Infatuation? Intrigue? Whatever she felt, she felt a lot of it and it was clear through her work that something was there. Of course Maxfield would find the reason she had kept those works to herself.

Maxfield must have picked up on the internal struggle happening with Carmilla and stood up slowly, “It's interesting that those photos show me more about you, than the subject of your picture. Don’t
Carmilla stood up and followed her professors lead as they walked towards the door. She stayed silent, thinking about Maxfield’s words.

Maxfield’s hand paused on the door handle as she turned back to Carmilla, “The greatest risk we can take is to let others see us for who we truly are.” She pulled the door open wide, “But that can also mean the greatest reward. Remember that when you're working on your self portrait. And when you decide on the photos you submit for the exhibition application.”

Carmilla looked out into the hallway and saw Laura was still waiting for her, leaning against the wall, popping gummy bears into her mouth. She offered a nod of understanding to Professor Maxfield before stepping out of the classroom and walking over to Laura with a smile.

Laura looked up and immediately sifted through the bag for a white gummy bear. Carmilla paused in front of her and opened her mouth, letting Laura gently place it on her tongue.

She smiled as she chewed it and winked at the smaller girl. “Shall we?”

Laura smiled back at her warmly as she reached out and took hold of Carmilla’s hand, “We shall.”

“Come on—” kiss “I promised—” kiss “I’d watch—” kiss “A movie with them tonight.” Laura was losing her ability to resist rather fast at this point but knew Laf and Perry wouldn't be happy if she bailed on them for Carmilla again.

“But isn't this more fun?” Carmilla smirked before leaning in to capture Laura’s lips once again.

“Yes.” Laura mumbled against Carmilla’s lips before pulling back slightly.

“Then skip it.” Carmilla was no idiot. At this point there was more talking than kissing happening and since she could tell Laura had no intention of being quiet, she gave up on her lips and started moving down her neck.

Laura shifted in the passenger seat of Carmilla’s car, but closer to the dark haired girl rather than further away. She let out a shaky breath, closing her eyes and tilting her head slightly, giving Carmilla more space to work with as her lips moved slowly down heated skin.

“I cant.” Laura breathed out, “I promised.” Another heavy breath, “But you should watch with us.” Her next large breath came from nerves instead of the feeling of lips against her shoulder, “Then maybe you could, I don’t know, stay?”

Carmilla’s lips halted abruptly just above Laura’s collar bone, everything around her pausing. Laura was holding her breath waiting for a response and Carmilla wasn't sure she was breathing either.

That was something that hadn't happened yet. The staying. And things that can happen, during the staying. Since their first date, their nights always ended with a good night kiss before they went their separate ways. And although they had technically slept with each other (actually slept) in the past, it had a whole new meaning and world of possibilities now. Possibilities of which both had definitely thought about, but hadn't spoken of or done anything to make it a reality so far.

“Stay?” Carmilla asked uncertainly.

Warm breath hit Laura’s skin as the question was uttered, sending goosebumps in waves over her
whole body. “Yeah, I mean if you want to.” Her voice was quiet, matching Carmilla’s slight nervousness.

Carmilla finally pulled back to look Laura in the eyes and to watch the shy smile spread on her face. She narrowed her eyes and pressed her lips together in consideration, “What movie?”

Laura’s smile widened immediately as an excited squeal filled the car. “Not sure, it’s Laf’s choice tonight.” She moved forward placing a quick peck on Carmilla’s lips before pulling her things into her lap and getting ready to get out of the car.

Carmilla rolled her eyes and shifted back into her own seat with a sigh. “No promises I wont make fun of it the whole time.”

Laura nodded happily, “As long as it quietly, I’m ok with that.”

Carmilla chuckled as she reached in the back seat for her bag before climbing out of the car and following Laura inside. She was usually pretty good at avoiding group bonding time but figured if she wanted to be a part of Laura’s world, that meant being around her friends too. The chances of that going well were better if they were all silently watching a movie instead of something were she had to actually listen to them talk.

—

“Are we seriously going to watch this whole thing?” Carmilla whispered harshly towards Laura.

“Shh! Yes.” Laura didn’t take her eyes off the screen.

Carmilla sighed and slouched further into the couch, adjusting the pillow behind her head, “But seriously, why this one?”

Laura finally turned to Carmilla and smiled at the clear put on her face, “Because its Perry’s favorite.”

Perry overheard and turned to the pair with a wide smile, “The mice and birds clean! Isn't that just wonderful?” And just like that she was back to watching Cinderella scrub floors.

“I thought it was Laf’s pick tonight?” Carmilla wrapped her arm around Laura and pulled her tightly against her.

Laura nodded and leaned up, placing a quick kiss on Carmilla’s cheek before whispering, “It is.”

Carmilla thought about it for a second before letting out a smug laugh, “whipped.”

Laf turned quickly from their place on the other end of the couch and glared at Carmilla at the comment. They scoffed and looked the pair cuddling up and down then smirked, “I could say the same thing about you, Carm,” they finished it off with a mocking tone as they said the nickname clearly only Laura was allowed to use.

Laura started to giggle and Carmilla’s smug grin dropped off her face immediately. She reached behind her and grabbed the pillow she had been using and threw it at Laf, pelting them in the face with it.

Laf was about to retaliate when Perry turned to them and brought a finger to her lips to shush them. “Enough! This is my favorite part!”
Laf settled back in their spot while glaring at Carmilla, crossing their arms over the pillow that had just attacked their face. Carmilla gave them a teasing grin and was one step away from sticking her tongue out at them when she felt Laura shift and rest her head on her shoulder. So instead of acting like a 4-year-old, she gave Laura’s shoulder a gentle squeeze and kissed the top of her head before turning her attention back to the movie.

As soon as the movie was ended, Carmilla lifted her arms above her head in a stretch as Laf and Perry started picking up pillows and bowls of popcorn. Laura settled herself against Carmilla further, draping her arm over her stomach and pressing her face against Carmilla’s neck.

“Did you like it?” Laura asked quietly, relaxing into Carmilla’s body.

“It was Cinderella.” Carmilla replied flatly, wrapping her arms around Laura tightly.

Laura chuckled quietly before leaning back slightly to be able to see the other girl’s face, “I saw how serious you got at that one part. You were invested.”

Carmilla scoffed and shook her head. A knowing look from Laura made her roll her eyes, “He’s just this fat little mouse that stacked his food too high and the stupid cat wouldn’t just leave him alone.”

Laura laughed watching Carmilla look so frustrated over the whole thing, “Of course Gus Gus would be your favorite character.”

She leaned back into Carmilla but felt herself grow slightly nervous when she realized Laf and Perry were no longer around, the earlier invitation of ‘stay’ still on her mind.

“So…” She dragged out the word in pure awkward Laura fashion, absentmindedly picking at the fabric of Carmilla’s shirt.

Carmilla smirked, picking up on the shift in the mood around them. “So.” Her voice silky and low. She let her fingertips drag up Laura’s arm to her shoulder before bringing her arm back from around her shoulder and getting up off the couch.

Laura took in a deep breath. This was it. This is why she had invited Carmilla to stay. And now that it was getting later in the night she was nervous and excited and—

“You’re leaving?” Laura sat up tall on the couch, her face scrunching in confusion.

“mmhm” Carmilla hummed, pulling her boot on from by the door. She grabbed her jacket off the back of a chair and slid in on as she made her way back towards Laura. “As much as I would love to listen to you snore all night—I should get home and let Joey out. He’s been cooped up most of the day.”

Laura’s face shifted from confusion to a pout, “I do not snore.”

Carmilla chuckled lowly and leaned down, placing her hands on either side of Laura’s head on the backrest and lowering herself slowly towards her. “You do.” She pressed a gently kiss to her lips, pulling away only when Laura let out a content sigh. “And its adorable.” She gently tapped her nose into Laura’s before standing up and zipping her jacket up and walking back to the doorway.

Laura pouted at the sudden change of plans but couldn’t really argue with Carmilla’s reason. And the way she was acting didn’t make it seem like she didn’t want to stay.. just that it wouldn’t work this time. Which made her feel a bit better.
“But how about you join me and Joey tomorrow for an outing?” Carmilla fixed her beanie on her head and pulled her keys from her pocket, before looking up at Laura for an answer.

“It’s a date.” Laura smiled wide. That was her answer any time Carmilla asked her to do anything. She still couldn’t quite wrap her mind around the fact that she wasn’t just spending time with Carmilla for the heck of it, but that they were going on real actual dates. Dates were things two people that liked each other did. That meant Carmilla liked her. And the idea of that was just, fantastic.

"See you at noon, cutie." Carmilla winked before letting herself out.

——

Carmilla shifted in her bed, stretching her arms and legs out before relaxing into the warm mattress once again. She heard the clanking of pans on the kitchen and slowly opened her eyes, trying to listen for move movement.

The quiet utterance of 'shit' made its way to her and she chuckled sleepily before slowly swinging her legs over the edge of the mattress. Bare feet made their way slowly down the small hallway to the kitchen, her hand running through messy hair as she let out a yawn.

"William."

"Shit!" Will jumped, a skillet clattering on the floor. "Don't do that!" He glared at Carmilla before picking up the pan and setting it on the stove.

Carmilla smiled and climbed onto a stool, leaning her forearms on the island counter. "It's my apartment. I'll do what I want."

Will rolled his eyes as he made his way to the fridge, "Not if you want me to make you breakfast."

Carmilla chuckled as she crossed her arms and lowered herself to rest her chin on them. "Your washing machine still smell like feet?"

"I seriously don't know what Theo is doing to make it so bad." Will cracked a few eggs in the pan before going to grab a spatula. He scrambled the eggs a bit, keeping his back to Carmilla as he spoke again, "Haven't seen you since thanksgiving."

"Been busy." Carmilla watched him poke at the eggs.

"I'm sorry—"

"Let me stop you right there." Carmilla cut him off quickly, sitting up on the stool. "You didn't do anything. Mother was just—" she stopped and clenched her jaw, letting out a breath, "I let her get to me. So it's on me."

Will turned down the burner and turned around, "You know me and Mattie don't agree with her, right?"

Carmilla nodded, her eyes dropping to look at her hands as she pressed them flat on the countertop.

"Really, Kitty." Will grabbed a couple plates and spit up the eggs on them before taking them and
sitting next to Carmilla. "She just can't stand the fact that she's never been as talented at something as you are with photography."

Carmilla wasn't sure how to respond so instead she took a bite of eggs, prolonging the silence between them.

Will chewed his own bite before setting his fork down, "And the fact that it makes you happy pisses her off even more. I swear the woman feeds off of fear and unhappiness."

Carmilla chuckled as she took another bite. "Thanks Will." She nudged his shoulder and when he turned with a pleased grin on his face she twisted her lips into a frown, "for knowing our mom sucks. Not the eggs. Cause these are awful."

Will let out a laugh and pointed to his plate, “Why do you think I stopped eating them?”

“Please don’t ever make me breakfast again.” Carmilla laughed and pushed the plate away from her. She stood up and walked to the fridge and grabbed the milk. Along with a couple of bowls and a box of froot loops. She poured herself a bowl before handing it off to Will and sitting down.

They ate froot loops together silently before Will went to go check on his laundry. When he came back, Carmilla was sitting on the floor playing with Joey. Will walked to the couch with his arm full of clothes and dropped them in a pile on the cushions. He watched Carmilla pull on the end of a small rope, the other end held tightly in Joeys mouth.

Will smiled and picked up a shirt to fold, “You’re better with him that most people.”

“He’s smarter than most people.” Carmilla replied, not looking away from her game of tug-of-war.

Will chuckled at the smart ass reply but continued to watch her. “How about Laura?”

The rope slipped through Carmilla’s hands and Joey sat up triumphantly with it in his mouth.

“What about Laura?” Carmilla asked slowly, reaching out at the rope again.

Joey scooted back out of Carmilla’s reach as if he was teasing her, the rope dangling from his mouth. Carmilla glared at him before shifting on the floor so her back was against the couch.

Will shrugged, “You seem to like her more than most people.”

“She’s better than most people.” Carmilla smirked and threw a pair of sweats at him.

“Ha. Ha.” Will glared and threw the pants back at her, “Fine. Deflect. See if I care.”

Carmilla pushed herself up off the floor and shoved some clothes to make room to sit on the couch, “There’s nothing to deflect. We are hanging out.”

“Hanging out?” Will asked skeptically.

“Ok, fine. More than hanging out.” Carmilla shrugged before throwing her arm up on the back of the couch.

Will nodded slowly, picking up another shirt to fold.
“Spit it out, Will.” Carmilla rolled her eye’s. She knew Will well enough to know when he wanted to say something but was trying not to.

Will sighed but kept folding, “I just haven’t seen you, ‘more than hang out’ since… you know.”

“Ell?” Carmilla raised an eyebrow, “You can say her name.”

“Yeah, since Ell.” Will threw the shirt he'd folded 5 times back into the pile on the couch and dropped down on top of his laundry. “Who I may have mentioned to Laura on accident.”

Carmilla watched him fidget with his hands as he avoided making eye contact with her. This conversation wasn't about her spending time with Laura, really. It was about him telling Laura about the only other girl she had let near her heart. The same girl that had shattered it without a second thought.

“And?” She asked calmly.

Will looked up sheepishly, “And.. you’re not mad?”

Carmilla shrugged, "I mean she would probably hear about her sooner or later."

Will looked genuinely surprised and even slightly relieved. He gave Carmilla a thoughtful look, "you really like her, don't you?"

The fact that Carmilla imagined Laura would be around long enough to hear about her past at some point was huge. Most of the time the girls she spent time with weren't around long enough to even find out her last name.

Carmilla scrunched up her face like she hated the idea of it but couldn't really argue with it, either. She did really like Laura, as scary as it was.

Will smiled and shoved his sisters shoulder, "That's not a bad thing, Kitty." He chuckled at her while standing up and resuming folding his laundry.

Carmilla just rolled her eyes and got up off the couch and headed towards her room to get ready for the day. Just before she was out of the living room she heard Will call her name and she turned around to a serious expression on his face.

"However it turns out.." He let out a breath and offered a small smile, "just don't disappear again. I've missed this you."

Carmilla smiled sadly, knowing full well she had fallen apart and pulled away after things will Ell had ended. Until now she hadn't thought about how her breaking had hurt more than just herself. And the fact of the matter was, she had no clue how things with Laura would turn out. She hoped they would be different, but there was never a guarantee.

She nodded before disappearing down the hallway. She knew she couldn't promise anything to Will, as much as she wanted to.
They had been driving for about 25 minutes when Carmilla pulled into a quiet neighborhood. The houses looked like identical cookie cutter homes, picket fences, colorful doors, children playing in snow, building snow men and creating snow angels. It was straight out of a 1950's movie.

Joey seemed to grow excited in the back seat as if he knew exactly where they were headed. Laura had been talking about her work with the school paper and a couple of her other classes- the ever looming fear of finals as the end of semester approached.

Carmilla kept her eyes on the road as she made her way through familiar streets. Memories of playing in those same front yards crossing her mind between current worries.


It still blew her mind that was even on the list. It's not like she was picturing moving into one of these picture perfect houses and growing old with her. Just hoping she would have to time to figure out if that's even something she wanted for her future.

"Not that I'm complaining." Laura grabbed Carmilla's hand off the gear shift and interlocked their hands as she looked out the window, "but usually you're taking me to creepy abandoned places. Not cute little neighborhoods."

Carmilla grinned and glanced over at her quickly, "I grew up here."

Laura turned to look at her with a smile, "You did?"

"Yep." Carmilla nodded, taking another turn onto a dead end street. "Till I was 15."

Carmilla drove to the end of the street before parking next to the curb and killing the engine. She turned around and gave Joey a scratch behind his ear before grabbing her bag and camera and setting them in her lap.

“You look disappointed.” Carmilla smirked at Laura who seemed bored as she looked out the window.

“What? No!” Laura turned to face her, “Just… usually we go somewhere cool or exciting.”

Carmilla chuckled and glanced back at Joey who was eagerly waiting to be let out of the car. They shared a look, almost like they could read each others thoughts before Carmilla turned back to Laura and leaned in towards her. She waited until there was barely any space between them before stopping and whispering, “Patience.”

She pulled back quickly and got out of the car, leaving Laura with her eyes closed and a pout on her lips in the front seat. Carmilla walked around the car and let Joey out while opening the door for Laura.

“Should we really be doing this?” Laura asked as Carmilla led her along the side of one of the houses. It was a questions she asked often even though she knew she was always excited for whatever adventure Carmilla had planned.

“Don’t worry.” Carmilla opened a gate that led to the back of the house. “The owner is an old guy. Crazy. Talks a lot about evil fish gods but he's harmless. He wont even know we are here.”
The house was at the end of the neighborhood, sitting on the edge of a small forest. The backyard slowly turned into a mess of trees and bushes the further back they went. The snow on the ground became thinner as the trees around them grew taller. A heavy umbrella of tree branches sheltering the forest floor. The smell of pine filled the crisp air around them as they weave their way through the foliage.

Joey led the way, running between trees and disappearing into bushes. Frightening birds to flight, digging up plants and chewing broken branches. The sun shone through space between branches and trees, glistening on the snow captured on branches and forest floor. The sounds of the forest becoming louder than the sounds of the city as they continued to trek back through the trees.

Carmilla stopped, letting go of Laura’s hand and silently brought her camera up to look through the view finder.

*click*

Laura followed her line of sight and smiled when she saw why Carmilla had brought her here. A tree house.

It was obvious it was old and probably hadn't been used in years, but it looked well built. It was only about 5 feet off the ground, tethered and secured between two rather large trees. Ply wood and tree branches made up its base. A sturdy floor built around branches of the two trees that had intertwined as if to use each other for support. Random bits of wood and metal had been secured together to create walls, leaving space for a window on one side, and a door on its neighboring wall. A small deck wrapped around the entire tree house, made of warped wood for floors and tree branches as the railing lining the platform. Wood slats made up the roof, icicles lining its edges, dripping to the dirt floor below.

“This is amazing.” Laura’s smile grew wide as she took in the sight. It was the tree house of every child’s dreams. Hidden away in the trees, rickety wooden ladder leading up to the deck, a long rope swing hanging next to the deck for a quick exit. Even a tire swing, hanging from a high branch off to the side of the house.

*click*

Carmilla chuckled and lowered her camera, her own smile growing.

Laura jogged over to the tree house and took a lap around it, looking at it with wide eyes. “Can we go in?” She stopped with her hand on the old ladder, shaking it slightly as if to test its durability.

“I don’t know.” Carmilla walked towards her, kicking at fallen branches, “Do you know the password?”

Laura rolled her eyes but couldn't help but smile at the teasing tone in Carmilla’s voice. “Please?”

Carmilla smiled at Laura warmly. She loved how excited Laura got over even the simplest of things. “Just don’t hurt yourself.”

Laura squealed excitedly before turning and quickly climbing the ladder. When one of the steps creaked with distress she decided to slow her pace and make sure the whole thing wouldn't collapse with her in it.
Carmilla watched from the ground as Laura climbed the ladder and lifted herself up on to the old wooden deck. Standing up slowly she brushed off the dirt and snow that had gathered on her knees and started to take cautious steps along the warped deck towards the door.

Laura stopped, hand on the small door frame, as she peered inside. “Woah.” She breathed out, her eyes scanning the interior of the tree house.

It was bigger inside than she expected. Although she had to duck to walk through the doorway, the inside was tall enough for her to stand. There were old posters, street signs and other random items lining the walls. An old wooden chair sat in the corner, a couple of pretty flat bean bag chairs on the ground next to it. There was a pile of old newspapers and magazines next to one of the walls, pages of them ripped out and covering the wood like wallpaper. Pages were faded, lacking color, or completely void of their pictures due to age and weather no doubt.

Laura heard the wood floor creak and turned around to find Carmilla ducking through the doorway. Once inside she looked around with a small smile before lifting her camera and snapping another picture.

“Did you build this?” Laura asked, picking up one of the random items on a shelf that had been nailed to one of the walls. Action figures, small toy cars, and a stack of playing cards also had a home on the shelf.

Carmilla nodded kicking her foot against one of the bean bag chairs, “Yeah. With Will.”

She used her foot to stack the two bean bags on top of each other before dropping down on them, a cloud of dust filling the air around her. She used her hand to wave the dust away from her face, letting out a few coughs before settling into the chairs and looking around. It was her talk with Will that morning that had reminded her of this place. She hadn't been there since they moved and had completely forgotten about it until then.

Growing up they didn't always get along, but everything was different here. They had countless conversations in this tree house, just like the one they had that morning. Its where they had become actual friends. Even if sometimes they still fought like siblings.

She smiled as her eyes scanned her old posters, bands she used to love that she would never admit to listening to now. Random junk or signs they thought were so cool at the time, nailed to the walls. She laughed to herself when she remembered the time they had tried to sleep there one night but ultimately failed because Will was sure he had heard Big Foot running out in the trees.

“What's this?” Laura bent down, her hand reaching towards two 5 dollar bills tacked to the wall. *Carmilla VS Will* was carved out in the wood beneath the money, with lines drawn under the names as though they were score cards ready to be marked with tally’s.

Carmilla let out a low laugh, leaning forward on her chair and brushing her fingers over her name scarred in the wood. “It was a bet.”

Laura could see the look of nostalgia in Carmilla’s eyes and moved to sit down on the bean bag with her. She leaned her side against Carmilla’s and wrapped an arm over her shoulder as they tried to fit
them both on the small, nearly flat seat.

Carmilla rested her arm over Laura’s lap as they fit together in her childhood tree house. “Our last summer here. We had a bet to see who could kiss the most girls. Whoever won, got the money.” She chuckled and looked up at Laura with a smile, “Only rules were it had to be in the tree house and the girl had to initiate it.”

Laura’s eyebrows pushed together as she looked back to the markings on the wall and the money tacked above it. “But the moneys still there.” She looked back down at Carmilla, “And theres aren’t any tally’s under your names.”

Carmilla let out a laugh and looked back at the wall, “Yeah. 14 year old me wasn't as smooth as I am now.” She turned back to Laura and squeezed her leg, “No one won. So we left the money here.”

Laura’s lips grew slowly into a smile as she watched Carmilla get lost in memories. This was a new side of her she hadn't seen before. She didn't talk much about her past, ever. And when she did, it was vague and had a sense of regret attached. This was nothing like that. They were happy memories in a place she must have loved.

Laura reached out towards the money, taking the tack out of the wall and folding the money in her hand. When Carmilla gave her a questioning look her smile turned mischievous as she leaned down, her free hand sliding into dark curls and their lips meeting briefly. She pulled back with a satisfied grin, then used the tack to scratch out a tally mark under Carmilla’s name before holding out the folded money in front of her.

“Looks like you won.” Laura bit her bottom lip, waiting for a response.

“Smooth, Hollis.” Carmilla chuckled, ignoring the money in Laura’s hand and leaning up to kiss her again.

___

*click*

“Ugh.” Carmilla groaned and slouched in her seat. “This is stupid.” She mumbled and ran a hand through her hair.

*click*

The flash went off quickly, light filling the room.

“For the love of—” Carmilla blinked quickly, specks of light floating through her vision. She stood up and walked over to the camera, shutting off the self timer and letting out a sigh.

She turned around to face her living room, hands finding their place on her hips. Joey lifted his head from his bed in the corner of the room, his ears twitching as he watched her carefully.

“Self portrait.” Carmilla groaned, as if the dog had been asking for some kind of explanation of the last 20 minutes.

Trying to decide how to go about this had left Carmilla completely frustrated, and every time the camera snapped a photo she could feel herself scowling at the lens. Not exactly far from an accurate
representation for herself. But not the image she wanted attached to her submission for the exhibition.

She had gone from sitting on a stool in front of the book shelf. To the couch. To standing near the record player. To sitting on the floor. Everything felt awkward, forced, and not her. At this point she was ready to just take a selfie with her phone and call it good.

Joey whined and laid back down on his bed, eyes still watching Carmilla closely as she made her way back to the camera and took it off the tripod. She held it gently in her hands as her eyes scanned the room, hoping for some kind of inspiration. She walked over to the record player and turned it on. The wheel spinning slowly, the lines on the record swirling in circles. She pulled out the arm and slowly lowered the needle in place, a quiet melody filling the apartment.

The quiet music instantly helped her mood lighten. She focused on the rhythm and sounds of the brass instruments as she slowly started walking around the room. She stopped in front of her bookshelf, her eyes scanning the spines of the dozens of books fillings the shelves.

*Self Portrait. What did that even mean? How was she supposed to capture who she was in one photograph? Especially when she wasn't completely sure she knew who that was. Carmilla knew that was reaching pretty deep for the assignment. Any photograph of herself would probably cut it—and although the thought of a selfie had been looking pretty good a minute ago, she knew that wasn’t how she did things. Her photos meant something. So this one would, too.*

The book case was filled with stories of people from different times. Different worlds. Different lives. Each one she had read and fallen in love with in some way. Whether it was the way they spoke, their ability to command a room, how they broke the rules to create the life they wanted… all parts of characters in stories that weren't really about her, but had become a part of her anyway.

Books on psychology, anatomy, philosophy, art, and photography filled the spaces next to novels and poetry books. All things she had been fascinated by. The way the mind worked, the way the body worked, the way the universe worked and the way people created their own worlds. All parts of herself that constantly drove her curiosity and often darkened her view of the people and world around her.

People were capable of so much. She was capable of so much. The ability to change the world. The ability to change one persons life, just as huge a gift. Just by showing love, kindness, and understanding. Yet people were selfish, callous, unloving and cruel.

Things she found herself to be too often, as well.

Stepping away from the bookshelf, her eyes landed on her reflection in the mirror on the wall. Her eyes were dark as they stared back at her. Her jaw was clenched, pale skin and sharp features. She always felt odd, looking at her own reflection. What she saw was never the same as what she imagined. The way she looked didn't always reflect the way she felt.

It was interesting to look at herself and still wonder who she was.

*click*

The camera sharing the mirror with her seemed to work. Sometimes she felt more connected to it than the rest of the world. Always seeing. Never being seen. *Maybe looked at.* But not seen. Not really.
Carmilla rolled her eyes at herself for how dramatic this had all become. It was a self portrait. Just take the picture and move on. She walked back over to the tripod and attached it once again and set the timer. She made her way back to the couch and sat down, facing the camera and let out a sigh.

*click*

She had the rest of her roll of film, if she just kept looking at the camera then at least one would turn out good enough to use. Carmilla squared her shoulders and fixed her posture, her eyes focused on the lens of the camera.

*click*

She dropped her eyes to the floor and ran a hand through her hair, feeling silly about wanting more that just a picture of herself. Wanting to actually see something of herself in it. Something more than just how she looked.

*click*

Her eyes flicked back up to the camera, but she couldn't seem to make herself smile.

*click*

Parted lips and focused eyes.

*click*

Glance towards the mirror.

*click*

It all just felt superficial. Self portrait with none of herself shining through.

*click*

She let out a sigh, ready to cut the photo shoot short, not wanting to endure more empty photographs just to use up the film when Joeys head lifted quickly. Carmilla turned to look at the dog, curious at his sudden alertness.

*click*

When he didn't move and nothing happened, she looked back to the camera, ready to pose one last time. She leaned her arms down to rest on her thighs, hair falling in front of her shoulders as she let herself relax waiting for the timer to signal another picture to be taken.

*click*

Joey was suddenly on his feet but standing still near his bed, eyes locked on the door. Carmilla sat up, glancing over towards him before turning her gaze to the door just as it swung open quickly.

“Carm! Guess what?!” Laura burst through the door, an excited expression on her face.

Carmilla smiled at the surprise appearance of the brunette in her doorway.
Laura’s smiled stayed wide but her eyes fell to the camera then back to Carmilla who was staring at her from her spot on the couch. “What are you doing?”

“Oh.” Carmilla stood up and rushed to the camera, shutting off the timer. “Homework.”

“Homework? You?” Laura put a hand on her hip and looked at Carmilla skeptically.

“Yes, homework.” Carmilla glared playfully, stepping around the camera and wrapping her arms around Laura’s waist, “But you arrived in a hurry to tell me something I believe.”

Laura smiled and lifted her arms, wrapping them around Carmilla’s neck, “I did.”

“Do tell.” Carmilla raised and eyebrow, her eyes watching Laura’s lips closely.

Laura smiled, knowing exactly where Carmilla was putting her attention but ultimately couldn't contain her excitement to do anything but tell her the news, “I got an invitation to the Deans Formal Dinner!”

Carmilla’s smile dropped and her stare lifted from pink lips to brown eyes. She watched Laura carefully for a second before dropping her arms and stepping back out of her arms and going back to her camera.

“That’s great, cupcake.” Carmilla fiddled with her camera, not really doing anything but keeping her focus on the dials.

Laura’s excitement dropped a bit when she saw Carmilla’s reaction and didn’t understand her lack of enthusiasm. This was a major deal. Getting an invitation to the Deans dinner was something you could put on your resume.

*Other qualifications or skills:*

*Being bad-ass enough to get invited to the Deans house for dinner.*

Really though. It was reserved for students thought highly of by professors and the administration. It was an incredible opportunity to rub shoulders and create connections with people that could drastically help in shaping her future. She was excited. And not sure why Carmilla wasn’t.

“Uh, thanks?” Laura unzipped her coat, watching Carmilla as she continued to avoid looking at her. “Alright, why aren't you more excited?”

Carmilla sighed and looked up with a bored expression, offering Laura nothing more than a shrug.

“Are you… jealous you didn't get invited?” Laura asked hesitantly. That was honestly the only reason she could think of that would make Carmilla less than thrilled about this.

“Hardly.” Carmilla looked amused at the idea as she let out a laugh. “And I was invited.”
“You were?” Laura dropped her coat on a stool and stepped towards Carmilla, the camera acting as a barrier between them.

“mmhm.” Carmilla hummed, her attention dropping back to her camera.

“Thats great!” Laura smiled again, “That means we can go together!”

Carmilla scoffed, “Not happening.”

“Why not?” Laura asked, still completely confused at Carmilla’s mood surrounding the subject.

“Really?” Carmilla asked with a humorless chuckle. When she was met with a nod and a blank stare she realized Laura really had no idea. “I just endured one dinner from hell with my mother, why would I want to do that again voluntarily?”

Nothing about this conversation was making sense to Laura. “What are you even talking about? What does your mother have to do with anything?”

“My mother. The dean.” Carmilla narrowed her eyes, watching Laura’s face as she struggled to make the connection. “They are the same person.”

Laura chuckled at the idea, her smile dropping the instant she realized Carmilla was being serious. “No.”

“Yes.” Carmilla nodded.

“No.”

“How long are we going to do this?” Carmilla rolled her eyes and brought her hand up to scratch at the side of her head.

“This explains so much.” Laura was now in the process of connecting all the pieces that were already there but until now, weren’t considered to be part of the same puzzle.

“It does. One of those things being why I will not be joining you for a night of superficial conversations full of ass kissing—“

“Ooookay.” Laura interrupted holding her hands up in surrender, “I get it. You won’t be attending.”

They looked at each other for a moment as they both tried to navigate how to move past this conversation. Laura wishing she could say something to help and Carmilla eternally frustrated for the way things were with her mother.

“Is she really that awful?” Laura asked, breaking the silence.

Wrong thing to say, Hollis.

“I should get back to my homework.” Carmilla clenched her jaw and adjusted some dials on her camera that she had moved while fidgeting.

“I’m sorry, that was stupid.” Laura reached out and put her hands over Carmilla’s, stopping her movements. “I was just excited but it totally makes sense why you wouldn’t be. Especially after
thanksgiving, even though I don’t really know what happened at thanksgiving, but that doesn't really matter right now, I just, wasn't sure what to say so I said that absolute wrong thing and—“

“Cupcake.” Carmilla cut her off quietly, giving her a tired expression. “You should really breathe between monologues.”

“Sorry.” Laura whispered before pressing her lips together tightly.

Carmilla watched her try to stay quiet and couldn’t help but chuckle at the clear struggle she was having. She lifted her hands, Laura’s still resting on top of hers and kissed Laura’s fingers on both hands before lowering them and finishing setting her camera back up.

“Long story short…” Carmilla finished with her camera and set the timer so it as ready to go. “My mother doesn't know me. Or care to know me.” She pressed the button, signaling the timer to start and made her way back to the couch, sitting down on the edge of the cushion. “Which I’m finding out, might be because I don’t even know myself.”

*click*

Laura looked at the camera, her eyes drawn by the sound, before glancing back up at Carmilla. “Thats crazy.” She went to step around the camera when Carmilla held up her hand and pointed to it and shook her head.


“Oh. Right.” Laura turned back to the camera and stepped back behind it, feeling awkward about the forced space between her and Carmilla. “Well, I know you.”

*click*

Carmilla’s expression had softened, her eyes were locked on Laura’s, completely surprised by her statement.

Laura smiled shyly, keeping her place behind the camera. “I know you’re incredibly intelligent. Like, intimidatingly so. You are passionate about so many things and actually pursue those passions. I know you're kind…” Her eyes lifted to the ceiling thoughtfully before she added, “…when you want to be.”

Carmilla couldn't help but chuckle.

*click*

“You pay attention. In a way I’ve never seen anyone else pay attention. You are fascinated by the idea of the universe and find its vastness romantic instead of daunting.”

Carmilla smirked but felt the familiar flutter in her chest at the way Laura was watching her.

*click*

“You’re smart, like, witty smart. And so funny that sometimes I cant believe how much you make me laugh.”

Carmilla’s eyes dropped to the ground, a shy smile on her face.
“You’re gentle.” She smiled sweetly, "In more than just the obvious ways.”

Carmilla looked back up, searching Laura’s face. For what she wasn’t sure, but she could see her self looking at her smile forever.

“You took care of me when I was drunk and trying to avoid my life. You’ve given Perry pep talks and don’t get angry with her when she tries to mother you, even though i know you hate it. You treated Laf with kindness and respect before you even knew them simply because you believe everyone deserves it. You treat Joey like he's family and me like… like….”

It was a feeling. Not a word. The way that Carmilla treated her and she didn't know how to say it so instead of trying to, she smiled.

Carmilla saw the flecks of gold in Laura’s eyes shimmer and she wished the camera was pointed towards her instead. She was beautiful.

Laura’s expression changed as she let her eyes search the features of Carmilla’s face. She felt her cheeks warm from the intensity of dark eyes watching her. Carmilla’s stare was heated with something she hadn’t seen before.

“You’re beautiful.” Laura exhaled without a thought.

Her smirk fell and was replaced with a look of awe. Carmilla had been called that before. Beautiful, pretty, attractive… it had always felt superficial. Like people had only been looking at her.

The way Laura said it, it felt like she actually saw her.

Laura swallowed nervously, a heaviness settling around them as they continued to look at each other, almost as if they were daring the other person to look away first.

“Butterflies can’t see their own wings.” Laura’s voice wavered slightly and she cleared her throat, trying to piece together her thoughts in a way that Carmilla would understand. “They have no idea how beautiful they are. I think you’re like that sometimes. So entranced by the beauty around you, you don’t even recognize your own.”

Carmilla exhaled sharply, the sincerity of the words and the look ok Laura’s face starting a fire in her chest. She smiled as she stood up and walked towards the camera, ignoring the sound of another photo being taken.

Laura stood still, keeping her place behind the tripod, and watched as Carmilla slowly made her way towards her. Carmilla stepped around the tripod, slightly lidded eyes and a soft smile. She licked her lips as she reached a hand out and pulled Laura towards her by the waist. Her other hand lifted to tuck Laura’s hair behind her ear before she moved forward smoothly and connected their lips in a kiss.

This was different than the kisses they had shared before. Until now they had been flirty and playful. Heated or slow. But this one held more need than the others. Like it would be useless to fight against
it— their lips were meant to be together.

Carmilla’s hand slid into silky, honey colored hair, her fingers scratching against Laura’s scalp gently, eliciting a quiet hum of approval from her. Laura's arms held tightly around Carmilla’s shoulders, holding their bodies firmly together as their kiss deepened.

The steadily timed click of the camera set a slow pace as hands started to explore and noises became less innocent. Laura took the initiative and started to walk Carmilla backward towards the couch. Carmilla’s legs hit the arm rest and before she could adjust her balance, Laura was pushing her backwards.

Carmilla landed on her back on the cushions and looked up at Laura a little surprised. She sat up on her forearms while she watched Laura climb over the arm rest and settle herself on top of her before a hand took hold of Carmilla’s shirt and pulled her into another kiss.

*click*

Carmilla pulled back, trying to catch her breath while Laura continued to kiss along pale skin, her hands finding the hem of Carmilla’s shirt and pushing it up slowly. Carmilla sucked in a heavy breath when she felt cold fingers trail upwards on her stomach. Hands that were holding Laura’s waist tightly, trembled as Carmilla moved them to grab Laura’s wrists to stop their movement long her body.

*click*

Laura lifted her head from the space in Carmilla neck where her lips had been working to leave marks, “What? What is it?” Her words were breathy as she searched Carmilla’s face for a reason she had stopped her.

Carmilla was breathing heavily, her body telling her to keep going. Laura’s swollen lips hovering above hers, the feel of her warm body pressed into her. Cool fingers still gently holding to her warm skin and the taste of Laura still on her tongue.

*click*

“I j-just—“ Carmilla stuttered, her eyes locked on the smile growing on Laura’s lips. She should have been embarrassed with how flustered she was just from kissing her, but her thoughts were running a million miles a minute and her heart was running even faster. She swallowed heavily and licked her lips, trying to get her brain to connect to her lips, knowing she had to say something.

*click*

“The camera.” She said quickly, finally breaking her stare and turning her head towards the camera still propped on the tripod, timer still running and capturing photos.

Laura’s smile grew and she let out a giggle, hiding her face in the crook of Carmilla’s neck. Carmilla let out a slow, controlled breath, willing her body to relax and her heart to slow its frantic beating. Laura shifted and Carmilla took it as her opportunity to get out from underneath her.

She scrambled over to the camera and turned off the timer, stopping its quiet pulse of the shutter snapping photos and let out another sigh. She turned around with a nervous smile, her breath catching in her throat at the sight of Laura sitting on the couch. Pink cheeks, mussed hair, bottom lip between her teeth and eyes focused intently on Carmilla.

Laura worried her lip between her teeth, the memory of Carmilla’s skin under her fingertips making
“We good now?”

Carmilla swallowed audibly and opened her mouth to speak. Her chin bobbed as words struggled to form, completely lost in the seductive look on Laura’s face. She closed her mouth and forced her self to nod, Laura’s smile growing, no doubt by the uncharacteristic nervousness written all over her face.

Laura stood up off the couch and walked back over to Carmilla slowly, taking hold of her hand and pulling her back towards the couch. She sat down and pulled on Carmilla’s hand, guiding her to join her in the spot they were just in. As soon as Carmilla had sat down on the cushion she stood up abruptly, shocking both her and Laura equally.

“You ok?” Laura asked carefully. Carmilla was acting strange and she wasn’t sure why. One minute they were making out and about to do more, then the next— its like she was afraid to touch her.

“Yeah.” Carmilla nodded, her face lacking a convincing quality that she was actually ok. “Joey’s just being a pain. I should take him out.”

Laura’s eyebrows furrowed as she glanced over at Joey who was laying quietly on his bed in the corner, curled in a ball and quite possibly asleep. “He seems fine to me?”

Carmilla glanced over and cleared her throat at the clear lack of actuality at her previous excuse. “Right. Still.”

She looked back at a confused Laura and slid her palms along her thighs nervously. This was already awful enough and she could see there was no saving herself so she blew out a whistle and walked to the door as a sleepy Joey slowly followed after her.

“I’ll be back.” She opened the door and walked out, Joey on her heels before she shut the door behind her.

Laura’s face scrunched in complete confusion as she fell back into the couch and looked around the now empty apartment. She hadn’t noticed until now that the music from the record player had stopped and the only sound was the muffled thump as the record continued to spin.

She let out a heavy sigh and dropped her head back against the couch, “What the Hufflepuff just happened?”

Carmilla groaned, her shoulders slumping even more as she stared at the blank sketch book in front of her. “Stop saying it. It doesn't help.”

“I just— I’m having a hard time…” Perry pursed her lips together, “You panicked?”

Carmilla dropped down onto her stool, “Yes. I panicked. I left her there and stood outside in the snow, freezing my ass off like an idiot.”

Perry gave her a sympathetic look, “Oh sweetie.”

Carmilla started mumbling to herself as she lifted her pencil placing it near the page then pulling it back. She did this a couple times, never actually making a mark on the white page, before dropping her arm and sighing. She had been staring at that blank page for 20 minutes now but all she could think of was how dumb she had been when it came to Laura.

Perry scribbled out a few more lines on her paper before turning back to a distraught Carmilla. “Do you know why you panicked?”

“Cause I’m an idiot.” Carmilla grumbled, lifting her hand again before dropping it a second later. “She told me I was the problem.”

Perry was about to interject, positive there was more to it than that, when Carmilla stood up and lifted her arm, finally making a mark on the page in front of her.

“Things have been great. Perfect even. She was kissing me and we were—“

“I really don’t need the little personal details.” Perry frowned and watched Carmilla’s pencil continue to move smoothly in her hand.

“Point is, suddenly all I could think about was what she told me before. About not wanting to be a challenge, just another girl and I freaked out.” Carmilla’s eyes narrowed at her sketch, adding a bit of shading before continuing to mark the page with larger lines. “What if thats what would happen? I didn't want to just sleep with her and have it mean nothing.”

“Well, would it mean nothing?” Perry asked, her eyes moving from Carmilla to her sketch.

“Of course not.” Carmilla stopped moving her hand, turning to look at Perry with a serious expression. Slowly her expression softened as she realized what she just said and what it really meant. “Huh.”

Perry raised her eyebrows, curious what Carmilla’s sudden realization was. It was clear on her face she was less frustrated but still lost in thought.
Carmilla finally took in her sketch and smiled at the sketch she hadn't even realized she was creating. “It would have meant something.”

The rest of the class had already started packing up their things and most of the room was empty by the time Carmilla had slung her bag over her shoulder and was standing by the door waiting for Perry.

“Hurry up red, I have hot chocolate to get.” Carmilla nodded towards the hallway before she walked out of the classroom, clearly done with waiting.

Perry hurriedly finished packing her supplies up and was about to follow when she noticed Carmilla had left her sketch. She ripped it from the book and folded it small enough to fit in her bag and rushed after Carmilla.

They made their way outside and as usual, got in line at the coffee kart. Carmilla’s silence went unnoticed as Perry held a conversation with herself easily, about what Carmilla wasn't sure. She smiled when she was handed two cups at the same that Laura showed up.

“Hey, creampuff.” Carmilla smiled and handed over the cup of hot chocolate.

“Oh my gosh, thank you!” Laura took the cup and and lifted it to her lips, taking a sip. “I don’t know what my problem is today, I just cant stay awake.”

“Busy day?” Perry asked, rubbing her hands together for warmth.

It hadn't snowed for days but the air outside was still cold as the end of the year approached. Students seemed to be moving lower but with faces that were clearly more stressed. It was the final week of classes before the week of finals and it was clear which students were ready and which ones weren’t. After that it was 2 weeks of Christmas break before the next year, next semester, and next round of stressful classes on the journey of higher learning.

Laura took another sip, humming into the warm liquid, “Mmhm. Trying to keep up with my classes and study for finals, plus things with the paper right now are super crazy and Adam is being a jerk because his girlfriend broke up with him. And, trying to figure out what I’m going to talk about at the dinner this weekend is a nightmare and I keep running out of note cards.” She paused, taking another sip of hot chocolate.

“Note cards?” Carmilla raised an eyebrow.

“Lafontaine has been doing the same thing.” Perry nodded her head, “I don’t understand why you cant just make conversation when you’re there without writing it down first.”

Laura shook her head quickly, “No, its not that simple. These dinners are huge. Its not just university professors that are there, but some major players in the real word. People we could potentially be sending resumes too in a couple years. Make a good impression now, and when you apply for a job later it could be what makes all the difference.”

Carmilla had never considered how much of an opportunity one of her mothers dinners could be to someone like Laura. To anyone really. It had always just been another evening spent enduring whiplash from constant criticism followed by parading her around in front of her colleagues. It was amazing to her how she could be both a disappointment and an achievement at the same time.

After Carmilla’s little freak out on Saturday, Laura had dropped the whole thing and hadn't talked about it again until now. Hearing her talk about it made her realize just how important it was to her. It wasn't just something that made her feel cool to be invited. It was something she had worked hard to
get and could make a huge difference for her future.

“I uh, should get to class.” Carmilla leaned in and gave Laura a quick kiss on the cheek, “I’ll see you tomorrow in the library, ok?”

“Oh.” Laura answered quickly as Carmilla was already turning to walk away. She watched her go before looking over at Perry and shrugging, “She does that a lot lately.”

“She’s just…” Perry tried to give her a reason for the strange behavior but couldn't come up with anything.

“She’s Carmilla.” Laura chuckled and took another sip of her drink. “I’m sure she’ll stop being weird after the dinner. She’s just a little touchy about it.”

“Oh. Ok.” Perry seemed to accept that answer pretty easily and quickly fell in line with Laura as they started their usual walk home together. “So things are going well then? With Carmilla I mean?”

Laura shrugged as they made their way off campus and towards their apartment, “Yeah, I guess so.” She thought about it for a second before stopping and turning to Perry, “Actually, has she said anything?”

“Said anything?” Perry’s voice was higher than usual and her eyebrows shot up in question.

“Yeah. About me.” Laura started walking again, “We just had a, thing, this last weekend.”

“A- a thing?” Perry stuttered. She already knew what Laura was talking about from the conversation she had with Carmilla during their art class and wasn't sure what she was and wasn't allowed to say.

“Yeah. I guess I just thought— you know how Carmilla is. Well, was.” Laura shook her head to herself, “And I know we’ve only been dating a little while and I should be glad she's been so great, but I was worried she was getting tired of being patient because i know she doesn't usually have to be, but then maybe I was the one getting impatient, but I shouldn't have because we’ve only been dating a little while and I’m not even sure I was ready, but I felt like I was, and I just know she’s great and I was worried she was going to get bored of me because, I mean, she’s Carmilla. But then it was her that— and then I was just— but then the hot chocolate, so she must still be interested. Right?”

Perry furrowed her brows and opened her mouth, taking in a breath but wasn't sure how to respond. She wasn't even sure she had followed everything Laura had said. “I um— you should— hmm…”

Laura sighed, her shoulders slumping, “Same.”

Suddenly she was feeling more worried about the whole thing than she had before. How many times had she walked in on Carmilla making out with some random girl in the library? She would be silly to think thats as far as things went when she was in her own apartment with these girls. So why had she been so quick to bolt the other day when things were getting heated? She hadn't asked when it happened, not wanting to make things more awkward, but now she was wishing she had.

“Laura.” Perry pulled open her bag and started shuffling through papers to find what she was looking for, “I know its not exactly an answer but I have something you might like.” She pulled out Carmilla’s sketch that she had grabbed after class and handed it to Laura just as they were walking up to their apartment door.

Laura gave her a questioning look as she unfolded the large paper, looking at the sketch. “You drew me a picture?”
“Oh, I didn’t draw that.” Perry turned the handle and pushed open their door, “Carmilla did.” Perry left Laura standing in the hallway as she stepped inside their apartment.

Laura looked back to the sketch, her eyes following the soft lines along the page. She could tell it was drawn quickly but every line and curve seemed to be placed carefully and purposefully.

It was her.

Carmilla had drawn Laura’s profile. A mess of pencil marks making up her hair, flowing in loose waves down and over her shoulder. Her jaw line was soft, lips slightly parted and corner turned up into a small smile. The curve of her nose drawn carefully, curled eyelashes and softly shaded eyebrows.

It was strange to see her face, created so beautifully with just pencil. Her eyes are what really caught her attention. Carmilla’s ability to use lead to show a certain focus and tenderness was amazing.

Carmilla had drawn in little marks surrounding Laura’s face, tiny stars that filled the background of the page. An entire galaxy and Laura was the center of it.

Laura smiled, eyes still on the sketch as she walked into the apartment and back to her room. She shut her door and dropped her bag down next to it before walking over to her desk and grabbing some tape. She made her way to her mirror with the sketch, attaching it just below the photo of Carmilla she had taped up not too long ago.

Laura chuckled as she went back to grab her bag to start on her homework, “She totally still likes me.”

——

It was the last week of going to the library for tutoring and Laura didn't think she would be as sad as she was about it ending. Especially with the knowledge that she could see Carmilla pretty much anytime she wanted without school work being involved.

Even still, as she made her way through the bookshelves back to their usual spot she felt her smile grow.

"Hey Carm-- and, Elsie?" Laura stopped as soon as she rounded the corner and saw the pair talking.

Carmilla looked over at Laura with a smile, "Hey, cutie."

Elsie looked at Laura, trying to hide a scowl behind a forced smile.

"What's going on?" Laura asked, taking slow steps towards them.

Carmilla was in her usual spot on the couch. Feet up on the table in front of her, arm resting lazily on the back of the couch. Elsie was sitting on the arm of the couch, leaning down slightly towards Carmilla, no doubt using her low cut shirt and coy smile as an attempt to flirt.

Carmilla's eyes never left Laura's as the brunette made her way to the couch, trying her best to ignore the not so subtle glare from the blonde.

"Elsie here was just telling me about the pre final party happening this weekend." As soon as Laura sat down, Carmilla moved her arm from the couch to Laura's shoulder and leaned in towards her, talking quietly in her ear, "what do you say, cupcake? You up for a party?"
Elsie stood up, her glare directed at Laura deepening at the show of affection and Carmilla's clear dismissal of her carefully practiced flirtation.

Laura blushed at the sudden show of affection, her eyes glancing quickly to Elsie. "I have that dinner this weekend, remember?"

"Right." Carmilla pulled back and looked up at Elsie and shrugged, "Looks like we won't be there."

Elsie gave Laura a smug smile before she turned back to Carmilla, switching back to flirtation mode, "well if cupcake is busy, you could always come alone. I would love to keep you company." She trailed her finger slowly from Carmilla's shoulder down her arm.

Carmilla casually pulled her arm away from Elsie and looked back at Laura, "I'm good." She smiled at Laura before turning back to the blonde, "see you around Elsie."

Elsie frowned and stood up, sending another glare Laura's way before turning and storming off in a huff.

Laura really wanted to feel happy at how easily Carmilla had dismissed Elsie, but it was a major reminder of what Laura had seen so many times before her and Carmilla started doing whatever it was they were doing. It was also a huge reminder that Laura wasn't sure if they were exclusive or not. They hadn't really talked about it and it was obvious if Carmilla wanted to be seeing other people, she could be.

"You can go if you want." Laura started pulling things from her bag, trying to avoid eye contact with Carmilla and hoping she wouldn't see how insecure she was feeling.

"I know." Carmilla watched Laura fidget with her bag. She shifted on the couch, pulling a leg up underneath her and turning to face Laura, "You know I'm not interested in Elsie."

Laura looked up, trying to hide her worry, "Pssht. I know."

Carmilla smiled, "Do you?"

Laura frowned, knowing her attempt at masking her insecurity had failed miserably. She rolled her eyes before turning and matching Carmilla's position to face her on the couch. "Why me?"

Carmilla smirked and let her eyes slowly drag over Laura's body then back to her eyes. "God, you're right. What am I doing?" Her tone was playful as she reached forward, running her fingers in Laura's hair and slowly slid them through silky locks. "Naive, provincial girl, entirely too tightly wound. Such a cliche, I should know better." She twirled the end of Laura's hair around her finger gently before letting it drop back down on her shoulder.

"Gee, thanks." Laura rolled her eyes, feeling like Carmilla was just making fun of her.

"And yet..." Carmilla licked her lips and let her eyes slowly trail the length of Laura's body again, "there's something about you."

Laura felt Carmilla's eyes on her, taking a sharp breath when she saw the look on her face. "Seriously, Carmilla."

Her voice sounded much more affected than she had intended and Carmilla chuckled. As much as she enjoyed making Laura flustered, she knew there was a reason she was asking in the first place.

"Why you?" Carmilla asked, her tone no longer teasing or seductive.
Laura nodded, knowing it was probably making her seem insecure to even ask, but she couldn’t help it. The fact of the matter was Carmilla could have anyone, and she was sitting there with Laura, turning down offers from other girls but at the same time running out of the room when Laura had made a move physically.

Carmilla’s eyes didn’t waver as she looked into Laura’s with a soft expression, “Because you’re beautiful.”

Laura deflated slightly, she wasn’t sure what answer she was hoping for, but a comment on her appearance wasn’t exactly what she wanted to hear. “Great. So, you aren’t hanging out with Elsie because you think I’m better looking than her?”

She turned back towards the table and her school work, flipping pages and mentally kicking herself for even asking. She glanced back at Carmilla and saw a smug smile on her face and narrowed her eyes at her.

“I actually wasn’t commenting on your looks at all.” Carmilla replied plainly, wiping the glare off Laura’s face.

“Oh.” Laura looked back down to her book, realizing what Carmilla had meant.

“Is this about the other day?” Carmilla asked. She knew she was opening the door for Laura to ask what had happened when she bolted, but surprising even herself, she wasn’t that worried to be honest with the other girl about it now that she understood what had actually happened. Brown eyes looked up at her, a silent confirmation as Laura searched for her own words, but came up empty.

Carmilla sighed, her eyes dropping to her hands, fingers fidgeting and a heart beat picking up speed. Being vulnerable wasn’t something Carmilla enjoyed, but a situation she found herself in more often than she was used to with Laura.

“There’s been plenty of people who have momentary taken my breath away. Made me want to get lost in a moment, no matter how fleeting it would be. But not you.”

Laura watched Carmilla’s lips twist into a small smile, her eyes still on her hands. She couldn’t understand her expression. The words coming out of her mouth made it seem like she didn’t want those things with Laura, so why was she smiling?

Carmilla looked up, her smile growing more when she saw Laura’s slightly confused expression. Her hand lifted to Laura’s face, her thumb brushing along her cheek gently, “You’re the first person, who instead, reminds me to breathe.”

Laura smiled shyly, biting her bottom lip. The girl wrote poetry without even meaning to. Carmilla smiled and leaned in, pressing a kiss to Laura’s lips then pulling back with a smile.

“I’m in no rush. We’ve got time to work up to breathless.”

It was because she wanted it to mean something. She wanted it to be special. Carmilla wasn’t afraid to be with Laura, she just wanted it to be different. Because for the first time in a long time, it would actually mean something to Carmilla.

——

“This is our last class before finals week, which means next time I see you will be the day you turn in your final portfolios.” Maxfield leaned back against her desk, “For those of you submitting for the exhibition, whatever photos you use in your portfolio will be the ones being presented to the public if
you are selected. So choose wisely.”

Students nodded, sifting through a semester's worth of photographs as they chose which ones to include in their final portfolio. Carmilla sat at her desk, a bored expression on her face as she watched everyone in the room around her.

She had already gone through her photos and chosen which ones she wanted to use for the most part. After hearing from Maxfield that she had been disappointed by some of her work, Carmilla knew if she wanted to make an impression and get chosen for the exhibition she was going to have to lay it all out there. And somehow that seemed simpler now than it had a week ago.

Now she was just waiting for the idiots in the dark room to leave so she wouldn't have to deal with anyone when she developed her most recent roll of film. She wasn't looking forward to it since it was basically an entire roll of her just looking at the camera. But like Maxfield said, it was a requirement.

The tone of her phone receiving a text pulled her attention and she grabbed it from her bag, smiling at the name attached to the notifications.

Mattie: I'm in Saigon today and it's dreadfully boring without you.

Carmilla: you're just saying that because you don't remember anything from that trip.

Mattie: I remember a lot of drinking and a lot of dancing. Any other details seem unimportant.

Carmilla: the only reason you remember that much is because of the pictures.

Mattie: that may be true, but you have to admit we look like we are having the time of our lives in those!

Carmilla chuckled at the memory, looking up from her phone for a moment as a few other students walked out of the darkroom and over to desks.

Mattie: as much as I love this trip down memory lane- I am in class. Did you need anything or can I call you later?

As she waited for a response she opened her photos file on her phone and started scanning through them. She started going slower when she got to the ones from her trip with Mattie. Colorful lights and streamers lit up the background at one of the many parties they had gone to. Dozens of people were dancing and partying behind them. Mattie and Carmilla had their arms around each other's shoulders, Carmilla was smiling at the camera, practically holding Mattie upright with one arm, the other hand in the air holding a glass of champagne while Mattie planted a kiss on her cheek.

She chuckled to herself at the image and attached it to Mattie's contact information before going back to her messages. Still no response from her most recent text and the dark room seemed empty, so she tossed her phone in her bag and took her camera out, heading to the room to start developing.

She was right about the roll of film. One by one she looked at the picture that had been taken. Frown. Glare. Eye roll. It was clear Carmilla hated being in front of the camera. She was losing hope that she would find a decent picture to use at this point.

The one she took of her reflection in the mirror wasn't awful. But she looked sad, which was more surprising than the rest. She knew in that moment she had been questioning herself- why was who she was such a mystery to herself?

She knew who she was. Snarky, sarcastic, closed off. But, that wasn't exactly true anymore, was it?

Another frown. Another sigh. If she had been trying to capture the image of someone who was
completely done with this assignment, she would have plenty to choose from.

Then the images changed. Joey was on his feet in the back, Carmilla turned towards him. Then another somber expression towards the camera.

A smile.

A smile?

In the photo, her posture had lifted, the tired expression gone and replaced with a smile. Not forced or tight. She looked happy. Genuinely happy.

Carmilla saw her eyes were toward her front door and not the camera and realized that must have been when Laura had walked in.

Her own expression was surprising to see. It was a look she had never seen on her own face. Excitement on her face, her body relaxed, her eyes... Were lighter than she could remember ever seeing them.

She scanned down further on the roll of negatives, watching her expression change slightly with each new picture.

I know you

Her eyes were focused on something behind the camera, no doubt on Laura. She could remember the flutter in her chest when Laura had said that. An entire afternoon questioning herself and in a matter of seconds, Laura was sure she knew who she was.

I know you’re kind… when you want to be.

Her eyes were dropped to the ground, a smile on her face, her cheeks slightly flushed.

you are fascinated by the idea of the universe and find its vastness romantic instead of daunting.

Carmilla was smirking. the corner of her lip turned up in a crooked smile, an eyebrow arched, her eyes locked on Laura. Although Laura had no idea, Carmilla was thinking only of her when considering the universe. How she had completely taken over her world.

….sometimes i cant believe how much you make me laugh.

Her smirk had fallen completely, replaced by a shy smile. Her eyes cast towards the ground but their expression soft.

These expressions seemed so foreign to Carmilla. Surprised by her own shyness and how easy Laura had left her flustered and speechless. She had always been so aware of her camera, and it seemed throughout this entire thing she completely forgotten it was there.

She chuckled at herself as she thought about it. An entire day spent stressing over this assignment, and within 2 minutes of having Laura there, her walls had come down and she was actually seeing herself.

You’re gentle. In more than just the obvious ways…. You treat joey like family and me like... like...

This was the moment Laura didn’t know how to say what she was thinking with words, and Carmilla felt the same way. That moment she felt herself being touched more by the look in Laura’s eyes than by the words she had previously spoken. It was was a eternity of feelings that words hadn’t
been created to describe yet. Laura eyes had been shining, gold flecks catching Carmilla’s attention. That was the first time since Laura had started talking that Carmilla had remembered the presence of the camera. Only because she had wished it was pointed at the other girl instead of herself.

Carmilla stared at the negative, barely recognizing the image of herself. Her eyes were soft but searching. Lips parted, a breath escaping them instead of words. The corners of her mouth turned up slightly, the crinkle at the edge of her lips forming with her smile. Her palms were pressed to her thighs, fingers outstretched—the action she felt herself do whenever she had the urge to take a picture but couldn’t. It was as if she was looking into the heavens and seeing new galaxies being formed. Stars created to shine for her, and all she wanted to do was share that vision with the world around her so they too, could know of its beauty.

you’re beautiful

Her smile was gone, a look of wonder replacing it. Laura saw her. Actually saw her. And still thought she was beautiful.

Butterflies can’t see their own wings. They have no idea how beautiful they are. I think you’re like that sometimes. So entranced by the beauty around you, you don’t even recognize your own.

Carmilla paused, looking at the negative carefully. She knew how broken she felt sometimes, but this is the first time she had seen it in herself. Having someone really see her and still think she was enough had made her realize just how broken she had become.

The look in her eyes was hopeful, yet sad. Almost like she wasn’t sure if she could believe the words she was hearing. Like she wasn’t sure if she was enough or could live up to the person Laura was describing. Was she really all those things? Kind, funny, smart, gentle… beautiful? All she knew was in that moment was that Laura made her want to be that person.

Carmilla took the time to develop the picture. Letting it sit in chemicals then rinsing it in cold water and hanging it to dry. She knew as soon as the picture started to leak onto the page in the solution that she had found her self portrait.

A visual representation of how she felt inside. Beautiful features, strong posture and an air of confidence. Then eyes that contradicted everything about her appearance. Hopeful but insecure, searching for something without knowing what it was she was looking for. Slight crease on her forehead, eyebrows pressing together as her mind raced, hearing the words smart, beautiful, caring, and trying to make the connection to herself. When she had heard disappointment, cruel, unlovable so many times—how could they all be true at the same time? Realizing they couldn’t, which ones were the words that really explained who she was?

She was a contradiction. Confident but fragile. Gentle with sharp edges. Thoughtful and thoughtless. Strong but insecure. Beautiful yet broken. A darkness in her eyes, but a light underneath trying desperately to be seen.

She made her way out of the dark room and over to her things. Her final photo to add to her portfolio to turn in the next week. She added it to the collection of prints filling her folder and placed it back in her bag before pulling out her phone. Mattie had responded while she was working so she unlocked her phone, a second later wishing she hadn’t.

Mattie: just checking in before mother’s dinner. I won’t be in attendance due to a work conflict and know she is expecting you to be there. Thought we could schedule a phone call for afterwards?

Carmilla shoved her phone back in her bag. She didn’t want to respond and get in an argument about
how it was her duty as Lilitas daughter to be there and be impressive to make her look good. Carmilla didn't care. And the last thing she wanted was to be used as some prop to make her mother look better.

After stomping her way across campus she climbed in her car and gripped the steering wheel tightly. Her breaths escaping in a cloud in front of her, the cold air prickling at her exposed skin.

She pulled out her phone again, this time ignoring Mattie's text and opening up a new one.

_Carmilla: you free?_

She started her car, turning on the heater and rubbing her hands together for warmth. She checked her phone for a response. Nothing.

Carmilla let out a sigh, shifted the car into drive, and pulled out of her parking space. She only had a few more days left until finals, which wasn't even that important in her mind- she was more stuck on the fact that Laura was going to be leaving for two weeks for Christmas. She had already barely seen her this week with the end of semester craziness and already felt like she missed her.

Her phone chimed just as she was pulling into a space at her apartment. As soon as she pulled it out and saw who had texted her she smiled.

_Laura: hey! A bunch of us are studying at my place. You should come over!_

_Carmilla: do we have to study?_

_Laura: yes. But I'm due for a small break :)_

_Carmilla: I'll be there in 10_

It was a no brainer. Even if Carmilla had to sit silently and watch Laura study all night, just being around her would be better than nothing.

At least that's what she thought until the moment Laura opened her door and Carmilla saw who was actually going to be joining them.

The apartment was full- kirsch and Lafontaine sitting at the kitchen table. Perry and Will on the floor of the living room, Danny and Natalie on the couch, and a spot for Laura next to them.

Carmilla looked around the room as Laura pulled her inside by the wrist.

"We are taking turns helping with different subjects." Laura explained. "Every 30 minutes we rotate and start on a new subject. Worked last semester so we figured we would do it again."

"Interesting." Carmilla glanced over at the couch, Danny was glaring and Natalie was doing a poor job of hiding her flirty grin directed at the dark haired girl. "So how about that study break?"

"Next one is in 15 minutes." Laura smiled before walking away and taking her place on the couch with the other two girls. "You can join us till then?"

"I'll pass." Carmilla shoved her hands in her pockets, feeling like the odd one out. There wasn't an obvious place for her to sit down with everyone else so instead she pointed towards the hall, "I'll just wait in your room."

Laura smiled and nodded before turning back to the books in front of them. They were all very serious about this study session apparently.
Once Carmilla was in Laura's room it occurred to her that they mostly spent their time at her apartment, and she had only ever seen Laura's room a few times and always in an in and out fashion.

It fit Laura. Light colors, large window letting in what sunlight was still visible, pictures on her walls, desk, mirror...

Carmilla caught sight of a picture of herself and walked over to the mirror, remembering the photo Laura had captured and asked to keep. Above it was a photo of Laura and who Carmilla assumed, was her father. Same smile, same bright eyes. He was however, much bigger than the brunette. It was a recent picture but she still looked like a child with his large arm wrapped around her shoulder.

Photos of Laf and Perry and even Danny joined the collection on the mirror. The only thing that wasn't a photograph was a rough drawing of Laura, taped below the photos.

Carmilla pulled it from the mirror, knowing it was her drawing but no idea how Laura had come to have it.

"Perry gave it to me."

Carmilla turned at the voice behind her just in time to watch Laura shut the door to her bedroom and smile while making her way to her, "you can have it back if you want."

"No, it's fine." Carmilla secured it back in its place on the mirror and turned with a flirty smile, "Besides, I drew it from memory. I'm sure I can make another one the next time I miss seeing your face."

Laura smiled as she leaned up to meet Carmilla's smirking lips with her own.

"Next time you miss me?" Laura mumbled against warm lips. The idea of Carmilla missing her when they weren't together making her heart flutter.

"Mmhmm." Carmilla murmured into another soft kiss, her arms wrapping around Laura's waist tightly.

Laura tried to pull back to say something else but Carmilla quickly moved forward, not letting her. She let out a giggle before wrapping her arm loosely around Carmilla's neck and deepening the kiss.

There was a loud knock on the door just as things were heating up, making Carmilla groan and pull back with a glare.

"Laura?" Perry called from the other side of the door.

"I hate them all." Carmilla mumbled, letting her forehead drop to Laura's shoulder as her posture slumped at the interruption.

"No you dont." Laura chuckled and slid her hands around Carmilla's body, pulling her into a hug as she called over her shoulder, "What's up Perry?"

The door creaked open slowly and red hair followed by an apologetic face poked into the room, "Kirsch is doing a food run. Did you two want anything to eat?"

Carmilla chuckled at the innuendo and placed an open mouthed kiss on Laura's neck, feeling a rapid
"Uh, yeah." Laura replied a little more flustered than she wanted to, "we will be right out."

Hands were on Carmilla’s hips, pushing her away from Laura so she stepped back with a chuckle, a smirk on her face.

“Food sounds great.” Carmilla was talking to Perry but her eyes never left Laura’s, a playful glint in them.

The three of them emerged into the other room as everyone was writing down food orders for Kirsch. Pizza, burgers, fries, egg rolls and surprisingly, a salad for Laura. Kirsch ran out to get everything on the list and for the first time that evening, no one was studying. It was mostly small talk on couches and pillows on the floor. Talk of Christmas plans and gift ideas while they waited for Kirsch to return.

“What about you, Laura?” Danny asked, turning on the couch to face her. “Headed home to see papa hollis for Christmas?”

“Uh, yeah.” Laura glanced at Carmilla, who was sitting next to her on the floor before turning back to Danny. “I’m actually really excited. I guess a bunch of my aunts are going to be there too, so it will be a big family Christmas this year.”

Carmilla fidgeted with a loose string from a rip in her jeans, her jaw clenched as Danny brought up different relatives by name. It felt like she was trying to rub their previous relationship just to bug her, and it was working. Of course Laura just kept talking excitedly, and Carmilla couldn’t really be mad at her for any of it, but she still didn’t want to sit there much longer.

The arm that was wrapped around Laura’s waist and resting on the floor behind her moved and Carmilla gave Laura’s hip a gentle squeeze before standing up and walking to the kitchen. She grabbed a glass from the cupboard and filled it with water, trying to tune out the conversation happening in the other room. She knew she shouldn’t let Danny get to her, but she still did.

“Need something a little stronger?”

Suddenly Natalie was stepping close to Carmilla, two beers in her hand. Carmilla took another sip of water before turning to face her, her hip leaning into the counter.

“Beer and studying. Not the best mix if you ask me.” Carmilla’s expression was bored, seeing through Natalie’s attempt at flirting. They had a history— a very, very short one— but history none the less. And it seemed Natalie was holding on a little tighter to that fact than Carmilla was.

“Well, I’m all for having one and skipping the other.” Natalie took a sip, clearly making her choice of alcohol over school work. “You didn’t seem to want to study anyway, so…”

She held out the extra drink between her and Carmilla, wiggling it a little in her hand, waiting for her to take it. Carmilla narrowed her eyes at Natalie while slowly reaching for the drink. She wasn’t studying so what did it matter? She rolled her eyes at the flirty grin than spread on Natalie’s face, but turned so her hack was against the counter and her attention was no longer on the other girl.

Laura glanced over as Laf took over the conversation with Danny and saw Carmilla take the drink from Natalie before turning away from her slightly. Natalie let out a giggle and moved closer to Carmilla, and even though Carmilla didn’t seem interested or even aware of the girls presence next to her anymore, Laura still felt a twinge in her gut at the sight.
Will had been laying the floor, watching the ceiling fan spin slowly while everyone else had been talking. He was probably more burnt out from studying than the rest of them. He had been helping Kirsch with Beowulf for the last 3 weeks, after all. He heard Laura sigh and looked over at the girl, then up at his sister standing in the kitchen.

He rolled across the floor a couple times till his side hit Laura’s knee, then he sat himself up slowly. “Don’t think about it.”

Laura chuckled at his unorthodox approach and gave him a genuine smile, “Think about what?”

“That.” Will nodded his head towards Carmilla. Her back against the counter, taking a sip of her drink, completely ignoring Natalie while she was attempting to hold a conversation with her.

Laura looked over slowly and sighed again, her shoulders slouching. “It’s hard not to.” She looked back at Will and shrugged.

“It just sort of… happens.” He pulled his legs in to sit cross legged like Laura. “She really likes you though.”

“Yeah, I know.” Laura nodded, scooting closer to him so their conversation wouldn’t be overheard by everyone else, “It’s just, that happens a lot.”

Will scoffed, a knowing look on his face. “Oh I know. Try being her brother.”

“Try being her girlfriend.” Laura rolled her eyes.

“Girlfriend?” Will asked quickly, his joking tone replaced with one of pure curiosity.

“No. We aren’t—I didn’t mean to say that.” Laura’s eyes were wide and she shook her head quickly. They hadn’t really talked about what they were and the label had just slipped out.

Will raised an eyebrow and Laura couldn’t believe it took her so long to realize he was related to the dark haired girl. Even their facial expressions sometimes were exactly the same.

“We haven’t really talked about it.” Laura continued trying to explain. “Do you think I should? Talk about the girlfriend thing? With her, I mean.”

Will sucked in a breath and looked back over towards Carmilla. He wanted to give Laura some sort of advice but he honestly didn’t know what to say. There was no telling how Carmilla would react to that conversation. It had been a while since she had gotten close to being in a relationship with someone and he honestly was surprised things were going as well as they were with Laura. There was no telling what would happen if it got more serious before she was really ready for it.

“I guess that’s my answer.” Laura looked back over at Carmilla and Natalie just in time to see Natalie place her hand on Carmilla’s arm and the dark haired girl look down at it with a face of annoyance.

Carmilla glanced up from the hand now on her arm and saw Laura looking at her with a worried expression. She smiled and pushed herself away from the counter, leaving Natalie standing alone in the kitchen, and made her way back to the floor next to Laura.

“Drink?” Carmilla tilted the bottle towards Laura and was surprised when the brunette took the bottle and downed a few large gulps before handing it back. “Whoa, slow down cupcake.”

Suddenly the door was bursting open and Kirsch was standing in the doorway with his arms full of food. Everyone was off the floor and couches and grabbing at burgers and slices of pizza faster than
they had probably moved all day.

Laura hopped up on the counter with her salad in hand, taking small bites of lettuce while pouting and looking at everyone else greasy food. Carmilla stepped up in front of her, placing herself between Laura’s legs that were hanging over the edge of the counter and took a bite of her egg roll, exaggerating with her face and moans how good it tasted.

When Laura gave her a glare Carmilla chuckled and lifted the egg roll up, offering Laura a bite. In a matter of seconds, Laura’s salad was on the counter next to her and she was leaning forward, biting off a chunk of egg roll with a smile.

"Alright everyone." Perry clapped her hands together, "Are we about finished with food?"

"Perr, come on." Laf groaned, taking a bite of two pizza slices stacked together, "I've only had 4 slices."

Kirsch nodded approvingly and lifted his hand in the air for a high five, "That's totally awesome!"

Perry frowned as the pair hit greasy palms together and everyone else chuckled. "If we are going to stay on schedule then we need to get back to the books." When she was met with tired looks and heavy sighs she pouted slightly, "it's my turn for kirsch to help with statistics."

"I still don't think he's really doing any math." Danny scoffed, "All I've heard him talking about is goats and doors."

Kirsch turned to Danny and shrugged, "Even a rudimentary look at probability can give new insights on how to interpret data. Simple thought experiments can give new insights into the different ways misunderstandings of statistics can distort the way we perceive the world." He paused to shove a hand full of fries in his mouth, chewing while he kept talking. "The goat and door thing is the Monty Hall Problem."

Everyone was silent with wide eyes as they listened to Kirsch talk about statistics with his mouth full of French fries.

"Uh, did Kirsch really just use the word rudimentary?" Danny blinked slowly, her eyebrows pushing together completely confused with what had just happened.

"Not only that Xena, but he used it correctly." Carmilla smirked, "maybe you should google the Monty Hall Problem so the giant puppy doesn't have to explain it to you and cut into Ginger 1's turn with him."

"Oh yes, please." Perry nodded, quite seriously, as Danny glared at Carmilla.

"Ooookay, yeah." Laura hopped down off of the counter, "break time is over."

Everyone shoved what they could in their mouthes before going back to their places on the couch, floor or table. Books were being opened and pens at the ready even if energy levels were pretty low at this point.

“Thats my cue.” Carmilla brushed her hands together, ridding them of any food.

“You aren't staying?” Laura asked, crumpling up empty paper bags and heading for the trashcan.
“Nope. I just came for your study break.” Carmilla slipped her coat on and stepped closely towards Laura, tapping her finger against her own cheek and turning her head slightly away from the brunette.

Laura smiled at the gesture and leaned up to give Carmilla a kiss on the cheek before walking her to the door. “See you at the library tomorrow?”

“Wouldn’t miss it.” Carmilla winked before stepping out of the apartment and shutting the door behind her.

It didn't go unnoticed that Laura had seemed jealous at the attention Natalie was giving her earlier. And if she was being honest, Carmilla still had a hard with with the ginger giant, too. Even though she knew she technically didn't have any right to. Her and Laura hadn't labeled what they were, which was great. Except for the part where Carmilla didn't want to share her.

——

Thursday.

One more day of classes until the weekend of cramming for finals. Carmilla was making her way to the library when a familiar face was suddenly in front of her.

“What do you want?” Carmilla walked by without slowing her pace.

“What makes you think I want something?” Mel fell in line next to Carmilla quickly.

“Because we’ve known each other a while now.” Carmilla pulled open the library door and walked through, letting it bump into Mel when she let go of it. “The only reason you acknowledge my existence is when you need something.”

Mel glared at Carmilla from behind as she made it through the door and followed her towards a row of shelves, “Look Carmilla, I dont like you any more than you like me.”

“Then what do you want, sporty spice?”

“An invite.” Mel stopped walking and let out a heavy breath. She hated that it had come to this and it was almost physically painful to actually ask Carmilla for help.

Carmilla turned around and gave her an annoyed look, “An invite to what?”

Mels glare deepened slightly, “The deans dinner.”

Carmilla laughed loudly, “You cant be serious.” She rolled her eyes and turned back around to head to where she was meant to meet Laura like usual.

“I am.” Mel followed after her again, grabbing her shoulder and spinning her around.

Carmilla brushed the hand from her shoulder and stepped back, eyeing Mel up and down, “Why don’t you just use your Summer Society connections? Why come to me?”

Mel clenched her jaw and glanced around to make sure no one was near by, “I cant.”
Carmilla folded her arms over her chest and raised an eyebrow waiting for her to elaborate.

“I don’t want them to know—I—“ Mel let out an angry huff, “I just cant, ok? Can you help me or not?”

Laura had been waiting on the couches for Carmilla like usual when she heard voices not far off and immediately she recognized one as Carms. She let her bag fall from her lap and onto the couch before standing up and making her way to wards the row of books. She turned the corner and saw Carmilla standing at the end of the row talking to someone.

Laura smiled and began to take silent steps forward, trying to make her way up behind Carmilla without her knowing in an attempt to surprise her. She was half way there when Carmilla took a small step forward towards the other girl, leaving barely any space between them, and lowering her voice quiet enough that Laura couldn't hear her.

Laura’s steps stopped immediately and she stood up tall, watching the dark haired girl in front her her for a moment. Her posture seemed stiff and uncomfortable, but her voice was quiet enough Laura couldn't hear what they were talking about. An uneasy feeling in her gut made her turn around and walk silently and quickly back to her place on the couch. She felt silly for acting that way. They could have been talking about anything, slinking back to the couch made her feel like she was spying.

“Cupcake.” Carmilla rounded the corner with a smile and tossed her bag to the ground before dropping onto the couch next to Laura.

“Hey.” Laura kept her eyes on the book in her lap, her voice quiet as she tried to act casual.

Carmilla shifted to look at the other girl, nudging her shoulder gently to get her attention. “Hello? You doing ok, sunshine?”

Laura sighed and shut her book, looking up at Carmilla with a small smile, “Yeah, just stressed. Finals.” she shrugged and leaned back into the couch. It wasn't a complete lie, and hopefully Carmilla would buy it.

“I have the perfect cure for that, you know?” Carmilla smirked and scooted closer to Laura, pressing their sides together.

“Oh do you?” Laura found herself smiling as Carmilla leaned in closer towards her.

“mmhm” Carmilla licked her lips as she leaned forwards, the corners of her mouth lifting in a sweet smile.

Laura let her eyes close, leaning forward to meet Carmilla in a kiss, when she felt something land gently in her lap. She opened her eyes and saw Carmilla smiling, leaning back against the couch, her arm up on the back rest. She looked down and chuckled at the bag on her lap.

“Gummy bears?” Laura shook her head and bit her lip to hide her smile.

“Oh of course.” she answered seriously, “What did you think the cure was?”

“Oh I don’t know.” Laura teased as she opened the bag and picked out a red one. “Can we skip the
studying today?” Laura put another red bear in her mouth and looked up at Carmilla with hopeful eyes. “I’m just feeling a little burnt out.”

Carmilla watched with a smile as Laura picked through the bag for a couple red ones before reaching for her bag on the ground and pulling out a book. She nodded and gestured with her hand for Laura to move closer to her as she opened her book and began to read. Laura slid in against her side, resting her head on Carmilla’s shoulder and brought her feet up onto the couch. She ate a few more gummy bears and smiled when Carmilla started playing with her hair.

Laura watched as Carmilla tried to turn the page of her book with the same hand that was holding it open— her other hand occupied by twirling strands of Laura’s hair and apparently no intention of stopping, not even to turn her page. Laura bit her lip and turned her head up to look at Carmilla, surprised by the focused expression as she struggled quietly.

Laura reached out, grabbing the corner of the page and turned it slowly before grabbing a white gummy bear and holding it up towards Carmilla.

“Thanks sweetheart.” Carmilla winked then bit the bear from between Laura’s fingers, going right back to reading her book.

The comfortable quiet Laura felt made her feel even more silly for being worried about Carmilla just a few moments ago and she tried to just forget about it. Her worries about not knowing exactly what they were. Sitting in the library, Carmilla reading and playing with Laura’s hair and Laura just taking the chance to relax for a minute felt too perfect to let a simple worry get the best of her.

——

After what felt like the longest week of her life, it was finally Friday. Laura had just turned in her final article for the semester and was leaving for the night when she got a text.

Carmilla: Can you be ready at 5?

Laura looked up at the clock in the hallway then back to her phone.

Laura: it's already 6:30 Carm

Carmilla: I meant tomorrow morning

Laura: morning?! But it's Saturday tomorrow!

Carmilla: it'll be worth it ;)

And it totally was.

At first.

Carmilla had picked up a sleepy Laura, cup of hot chocolate ready for her in the cup holder and an extra blanket to wrap around her while they drove. It wasn't a long drive, but Laura still had no idea where they were going when they made their way further from town. But that was fairly normal at this point.

The sun hadn't risen yet when Carmilla pulled off the empty highway and started making her way
down a long dirt road. There were holes and rocks littered across the unpaved path so Carmilla slowed her speed. The sound of tires crunching over snow and rocks made Laura actually start paying attention.

A golden hue started to light the sky as the morning sun started to rise. Snow glistened as light touched the ground, like thousands of tiny mirrors strewn across the ground, catching the rays of light.

Carmilla pulled up next to a small structure. It looked like an old ticket booth. Boarded windows lining the side that was facing them, an old message board above the windows with discarded letters and numbers jumbled in broken messages.

"How do you find these places?" Laura shifted on her seat to look at Carmilla curiously.

Carmilla shut off the car and turned to Laura with a smirk, “I cant reveal all my secrets now, can I?”

Laura just shook her head and waited for Carmilla to get out of the car so she could follow. Carmilla hung her camera around her neck before zipping up her jacket and lacing her fingers with Laura’s.

Carmilla led her up to the small booth, as they got closer Laura noticed the old maps hanging on the wall behind dirty plexiglass.

"Is this the old train station?" She walked over to the dated map and scanned the old patterns of the tracks that were long since shut down.

Carmilla nodded and held her hand out, "Come on. We need to beat the sun."

Laura immediately took hold of Carmilla's hand and followed her around the booth to the old platform. The ticket building stood small and alone, the single platform behind it. Benches sat up against old brick, passengers would wait for their train to take them into the next town and possibly across the country. It was only a small stop on the large and intricate systems of railways.

Rows of tracks stretched out in front of them. The steel bars bare of snow, instead glistening from frozen moisture. Weeds poked up through the thin layer of snow still clinging to the ground in patches, winding along steel tracks and wooden cross beams. Old train cars had been organized, set aside to be moved or replaced but forgotten as soon as the station had been shut down.

Litter scattered on the ground, old newspapers, maps and cans. There was a pile of empty beer bottles near an empty oil drum. Left from the homeless taking shelter in the abandoned cars or teenagers feeling rebellious and adventurous by hanging out in the empty space.

The morning light reflected off the pile of glass, sending spots of light to litter across old train cars.

*click*

Laura walked to the edge of the platform and hugged her coat around her body, letting the morning light warm her face. A light breeze pushed weathered maps and papers across the ground. One map skidding across cold concrete, landing at Laura’s feet. She bent over and picked it up, unfolding it gently to look at the once popular train routes.

*click*
“Where shall we go, Miss Hollis?” Carmilla asked quietly as she approached Laura slowly.

Laura smiled and gave Carmilla a teasing look. Carmilla walked up behind Laura and wrapped her arms around her waist, letting her hands rest gently on the brunettes stomach as she lowered her chin to rest on her shoulder. They glanced at the map then turned slightly to place a kiss on Laura’s cheek.

Warm lips on cold skin sent a shiver through Laura’s body. She smiled as the body pressed to her back began to sway slightly, a large breath causing Carmilla’s chest to press firmly against her back.

Carmilla breathed her in, the smell of shampoo and Laura surrounding her completely. She took the map from her hands and turned back towards the benches, making her way to them to sit down. Her posture was tall, one leg crossed over the other as she held the map open wide.

Laura narrowed her eyes at Carmilla, watching her seem to play a part, pretending to be a different person from a different time. This beautiful woman, put together and seemingly perfect. A complete contradiction to the world around her. Rotting wood on the bench she sat upon. Weathered and chipping bricks, the backdrop to her beauty. It was like she was the last surviving thing in this rundown world. Untouched by time in a place slowly decaying and forsaken.

Maybe Carmilla was rubbing off on her because all she could think was that she wished she could take a picture.

She made her way over the bench, sitting closely to Carmilla looping her arm around Carmilla’s.

“Pick a place.” Carmilla spoke in a formal tone, “Where would you go?”

“Hmmm” Laura pursed her lips together thoughtfully, a finger on her free hand tapping at her chin as she played along. “Here.” She pointed to a spot on the map, not really knowing where it was.

Carmilla nodded slowly, “Good choice.”

“And you, Miss Karnstein?” Laura tried to mimic the formal tone Carmilla had been using. “Where will you go?”

Carmilla bit her lip, worrying it between her teeth gently. “Well isn’t it obvious?” She turned to look at Laura, a small smile on her face.

Laura’s eyebrows furrowed, not sure if she was following the game right. It wasn’t obvious. Had she missed something?

Carmilla started folding the map and set it down gently in her lap. She leaned towards Laura, warm breath hitting her neck before lips brushed the shell of her ear, “I’d go… wherever you are going.”

With that she stood up and casually walked to the edge of the platform, hopping down the few feet to the ground. Laura sat on the bench, a mixture of a smile and blush taking over her face as she watched the other girl. 6 in the morning and she was already a flustered mess.

Carmilla turned around and held up a hand, “Come on, its almost time.”

“Time for what?” Laura pushed herself off the bench and walked over to Carmilla, taking her hand and letting her help her down off the platform.
“You’ll see.” Carmilla started walking along one of the tracks towards a cluster of old train cars. Laura hopped up on one of the steel beams, balancing on it as she followed after the other girl.

A few wobbles into their short walk and Carmilla offered Laura her hand, helping to steady her as she walked along the single rail of the old track. The sounds of the morning filled the air around them. Birds that had stayed to brave the winter chirped noisily, animals scurrying across frozen ground and through patches of weeds.

Carmilla looked up at Laura, she was focusing completely on balancing as they walked slowly. The morning light only warmed her wide smile and made her eyes shine even brighter than usual. Honey hair capturing golden rays of sun as it slowly lifted into the sky.

They reached the end of the track, an old train car sitting in front of them. Wheels rusted, graffiti covering its wooden frame. There were no windows or steps. It was most likely been used to transport things and not people. Carmilla reached up to the large handle attached to the door and pulled. A loud screech echoed through the empty station as the rusted wheel rolled begrudgingly along the door track. A few more pulls and the door was open wide enough for them to climb through. Carmilla slung her camera around under her arm and out of the way before lacing her fingers together in front of her to boost Laura up and inside.

A questioning and nervous look from Laura caused Carmilla to roll her eyes, “Before you ask if we should be doing this—just do it.”

Laura chuckled nervously before gripping Carmilla’s shoulders and putting her foot in her hands, letting her boost her up. She crawled inside, along the harsh and splintered wood until she was out of the doorway and waited for Carmilla to climb up with her. When Carmilla didn’t follow right away, she stood up and walked back into the doorway, a hand hesitantly gripping the heavy door.

*click*

“How are you coming?” Laura asked, looking down at the other girl still on the ground, camera hiding her face.

“Did you even look around?” Carmilla asked, sliding her camera around to her side again before reaching up into the car to pull herself up.

“It’s a dark old train car, what to see?” Laura asked, reaching down to help pull Carmilla up.

Carmilla twisted and sat down, her legs handing over the edge of the doorway as soon as she was high enough. “Take a look.”

Laura turned around and squinted as light hit her directly in the eyes. She blinked a few times before ducking to the left, getting out of the lights pathway. They were inside a train car though, light shouldn’t even be able to get in. Once she finally looked around she realized the light had bled through a tiny hole in the wall opposite the door. In fact, there were dozens of holes randomly placed across it.

The morning sun bled yellows, reds and oranges through the small spaces, casting light through the empty train car. Strands of light, looking like wires crossing the empty space from one wall to the other.

Laura looked down at herself and saw the spotlights covering her body. Light highlighting across her
clothes, her outstretched palms and entire body. The holes in the wall small enough not to light the car completely, but instead, make it seem like stars covering the space of the dark sky. tiny flecks of light piercing the darkness.

*click*

Carmilla pulled on the door, closing it behind her as Laura slowly twirled, watching the light dance across her body as different beams touched her gently. Laura walked to the wall that held the holes and pressed her back against it, looking at the mural on the opposite side. She smiled at the outline of Carmilla, enveloped in the specks of light that seemed to grasp to her pale skin and dark hair.

*click*

“Ok, this is cool.” Laura lifted her arm, blocking light from entering the space, changing the constellations that formed on the opposite wall. Each movement she made changing the picture of light forming in front of her.

Carmilla chuckled and crossed the empty space to stand next to Laura. She reached out in the dark and found her hand, interlocking their fingers and giving her a gentle tug. “Sit with me.”

They lowered to the ground, sides pressed together and legs stretch out in front of them. Carmilla took her hand back and lifted her camera, snapping a photo of the wall littered with specks of light.

“Just watch it for a minute.” Carmilla whispered.

Something about the atmosphere felt different. It was morning but felt like night time. Watching the stars in front of them but the light was really the sun. It felt like they were in the middle of the galaxy when really they sat snuggled together on the harsh wood of an abandoned train car.

Laura watched Carmilla closely, small specks of light illuminating her face enough to see her expression change. Her eyes were focused on the wall, but the twist of the corner of her lips was a familiar one. It was the same look she always had before taking a photo. To see it without the camera hiding it was breathtaking. It was the feeling of knowing what Carmilla saw was beautiful, even if you couldn't see it yourself.

Laura relaxed against Carmilla, letting her head rest on her shoulder as she looked in the same direction that the dark haired girl had been focused on. She saw the light hitting the wall, no pattern or order to it. It was just light. The slight rise and fall of Carmilla’s shoulder as she breathed deeply was calming, matched with the sounds of the birds waking with the sun and the steady sound of breathing as they sat there silently.

*click*

Pretty soon Laura started to see what Carmilla was so wrapped up in watching. As the sun rose, the light danced through the whole in different angles. Yellows turning to orange and reds fading away completely. Specks of dirt and dust dancing through spears of light as the light itself seemed to dance with it. Angles and shapes, constellations and images, continuously warming into something new with the steady rise of the sun.

“I don’t know how you do this.” Laura whispered, watching spots appear and disappear on the wall as Carmilla turned her head to look down at her.
Her movements made new constellations. Like a goddess creating the heavens. She was beauty in every sense of the word. She witnessed it, and she created it.

“Do what?” Carmilla asked softly, forgetting the stars created by the sun as her eyes fell to the stars in Laura’s eyes.

“Take something completely destroyed and make it—“ She sat up, turning slightly to face Carmilla. “We are sitting inside an old train car with holes in it. And its amazing.”

Carmilla chuckled and shrugged her shoulders.

“You can take anything that anyone else would deem as broken or meaningless and you make it seem…”
She lifted her hand and rotated it slowly, watching pinpricks of light cover her skin as it stole the light from the mural opposite them, “..magic.”

*click*

“Was that of me?” Laura asked in surprise upon hearing the shutter of the camera.

“Maybe.” Carmilla lowered the camera to her lap. “Would that be ok?”

Laura considered it for a second before shrugging a shoulder, “I guess. Aren’t there better things to take pictures of though?”

Carmilla chuckled and shook her head, “I actually was hoping to use some pictures that you’re in for my final portfolio?” She glanced up at Laura slightly nervous, “I just wanted to check with you before I turned them in.”

“Oh course!” Laura beamed before clearing her throat and trying to act more casual, “I mean, sure. If you want to.” She flipped her hair over her shoulder mockingly and smiled when Carmilla raised an unimpressed eyebrow at her.

Laura tried to think back to the pictures that Carmilla had taken of her. Apart from the time in the classroom in front of the large blank backdrop, she was having a hard time remembering being in any pictures Carmilla took. She had been there while Carmilla took pictures plenty of times, but always wandering around off to the side while Carmilla did her thing. She was never really the focus, so it didn't seem like she had to even think twice about saying yes. Maybe she had accidentally gotten into the shot and was just a figure in the background or something. Either way, she figured it wouldn't be that big a deal, and actually might be cool to get to be a part of something Carmilla loved so much.

Laura shifted back into the space close to Carmilla, letting her wrap her arms around her as they leaned back against the wall of the train car. They silently watched the light shift throughout the dark space slowly as the sun continued to rise. Laura felt warm in Carmilla’s arms despite the crisp morning air and couldn’t help but imagine what it would be like to spend every morning with her. On an adventure, or simply sleeping in while the sun crept through bedroom windows. She wondered if that was something Carmilla would want to.

Then a tightness filled her chest at the idea that maybe she already does have that, with someone else. Or that she could have that with someone else. The last few days played back in her mind, it was like the universe had been trying to remind her what Carmilla was really like. Girls constantly flirting
with her, smiling at her or talking in secret. It wasn't really Carmilla’s fault that happened, but still, it brought up the conversation they hadn't had yet.

*What were they?*

“Hey, Carm?” Laura asked, relaxing back against Carmilla’s chest.

“Hmm?” Carmilla kissed the top of Laura’s head and watched the fragments of light shift slowly. Although he sun was still rising, the light breaking through the holes had somehow grown more dim. The air around them felt cooler and Carmilla wondered if the sky that had been clear earlier was now being taken over by clouds.

“Are we…” Laura started with unsure words. How do you ask this question without making it a big deal? “What are we?”

Carmilla’s body stilled at the words. She knew what this conversation was about, and wasn't sure she was ready for it. Sure just a few days earlier she had realized very clearly she didn't want to share Laura with anyone else. But thinking it and saying the words were two very different things.

“What do you mean?” She feigned ignorance to what Laura was trying to say. Hoping the obvious uncertainty already in Laura’s voice would win out and stop the conversation from happening.

“I mean, we spend a lot of time together.” She shifted against Carmilla, turning slightly to look up at her face in the dim light. “And I just, wasn’t sure if we were… or if we were just…”

Carmilla tried to swallow the lump in her throat that seemed to be getting thicker by the second, “We are just, you know, whatever.”

“You know, whatever?” Laura asked in disbelief. she sat up and turned to face Carmilla completely. Here she was imagining waking up in the morning with her and Carmilla’s response to what they were was ‘whatever’?

Carmilla sighed knowing out of everything she could have said, she said the exact wrong thing. “Look, things are good right?”

Laura looked almost hurt by the parent dismissal, “Yeah I guess, but—“

“So lets just leave it at that.” Carmilla brought a knee up and let her arm rest over it lazily, “Lets not complicate things with trying to label this.”

Laura was now most definitely hurt. Complicate things? This? Now more than before her chest tightened with a near assuredly that Carmilla wasn't as in this as she was. Which, under the circumstances was surprising. Considering Carmilla was the one to pursue this in the first place. And now it was like she was taking ten steps backwards.

Carmilla clenched her jaw knowing the words she was saying wasn't what she was thinking. Did she want to be with Laura? Yes. Did she want to be with anyone else? No. But she felt like saying it out loud would be giving away the final piece of her heart that still belonged to herself. It was stupid, selfish and self destructive. But she was stubborn and couldn't give up that last piece of herself that still felt like hers.

Even though she knew, Laura already had the entirety of her heart.
Laura scanned Carmilla’s face in the low light of the train car, it seemed the stars that had been lighting the space had gone away the same time the warmth she had felt in Carmilla’s arms had gone cold.

“I’m cold.” Laura spoke quietly, her voice steady, “Can we go?”

She didn't wait for an answer before standing up and walking over to the large door. She gripped the long handle and pushed the heavy door open. The wheel on the door whined loudly as Laura struggled to push it open. The more it fought back, the more frustrated she became. With one final push, the door creaked open just enough for her to fit through. She hopped down back into the ground and started walking back to the platform.

Carmilla dropped her head back hard against the wood wall behind her. The heavy ‘thud’ made her clench her jaw tighter. She was angry with herself for not just telling Laura she wasn't ready— and angry with Laura for bringing it up in the first place.

She was already treating it like a relationship. She wasn't seeing anyone else. She was spending her time with Laura, she thought Laura knew how much she liked her. Why did they have to call it anything? Why couldn't the actions be enough without the words?

Carmilla pushed herself up and walked over to the door. She was right about the clouds. The morning was now dark, dark clouds covering the sun and a fog covering the ground. What had started out as light and romantic was now eerie and uncomfortable.

Laura’s arms were crossed tightly over her chest, partly for warmth and partly because she wanted to curl into a ball and hide but knew she couldn’t. She dragged heavy steps through gravel and over iron rails as she made her way through the train yard and back to the abandoned platform. Fog swirled slowly around her, covering the ground and matching her mood.

*click.*

Carmilla hopped down out of the train car and hurried to catch up to Laura. They got to the platform at the same time, Carmilla offered her hand to help Laura up but was ignored. Laura pushed herself up, with a little bit of a struggle, and kept walking back towards the car.

Laura glanced over to the bench they had sat on earlier that morning and sighed.

*I'd go wherever you are going.*

How could Carmilla say something like that, then treat what they were doing so casually? It made no sense.

The drive back was mostly silent. It was a melancholy feeling that hung around them instead of anger or frustration. Laura watched out the window, blanket curled around her once again and her forehead pressed against the cold glass.

Carmilla drove slowly, dreading the moment Laura would climb out of the car. This is not at all how she wanted things to be between them. There had to be a way to fix it without having to do or say something she didn't mean or wasn't ready for.

She sighed heavily, trying to pull Laura’s attention, glancing over quickly to check her gaze. When
Laura didn't move or even acknowledge Carmilla, she slumped in her seat further, gripping the steering wheel tightly.

“Look, Laura..” Carmilla started, already feeling dejected. “I didn't mean to...” She signed again, words not forming the way she needed them to.

Laura sighed, matching Carmilla’s slumped posture and turned her head with a sad smile, “No its fine.” She shook her head to herself, “I shouldn't have said anything. Things were fine. I don’t know why I was…”

It seemed they were both at a loss for words. The sadness and desire in their eyes was at least portraying a mutual desire to not let this ruin what they had.

“Lets just, go back to whatever we were before.” Laura turned back to the window and sighed, her breath fogging the glass. She lifted a finger and slowly drew a pattern on the window. “And you can just do, whatever you want.”

Carmilla’s face hardened slightly at the words. Laura had said them under her breath, but Carmilla had caught them. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“No. Of course not.” Laura sat stiffly in her seat, regretting her comment. It was a moment of jealously and worry. She didn’t want to lose Carmilla before they had the chance to really see what they could be together, and that’s exactly what she was doing. Pushing her away because she really just wanted her closer.

Laura rolled her eyes to herself. Stupid Psychology. Explain that one.

“No, really?” Carmilla asked, trying to keep her voice calm. Her driving had sped up as her emotions had gone from sad to frustrated and they were quickly nearing Laura’s apartment. “Have I done something wrong?”

“No. Of course not.” Laura sat stiffly in her seat, regretting her comment. It was a moment of jealously and worry. She didn’t want to lose Carmilla before they had the chance to really see what they could be together, and that’s exactly what she was doing. Pushing her away because she really just wanted her closer.

Laura balled up her hands in a fist, her face bunching up as she started to get frustrated. With herself as much as she was with Carmilla. “You just— gah! I don’t understand how you can be with me without being with me. Its like you’re here, but because you won’t say it, its an easy out.”

Carmilla’s jaw clenched. Laura was right. She was holding back. But no matter how much she knew that, she was too stubborn to admit it, and stayed silent.

“Just forget it.” Laura dropped her hands in her lap, “I’ll just see you later. Or maybe I won’t. Because I’ll be at the Deans and you’ll be, I don’t know. Doing whatever you want. I’m sure Elsie would be thrilled if you went to her party.”

It was a low blow and Laura knew it as soon as it left her mouth. She regretted it but was making a point and couldn’t take it back now. If there was anything her and Carmilla had in common, it was their stubbornness.

Carmilla scoffed and looked away from Laura. “Yeah, I’m sure she would be.”

Laura knew her comment was low, but Carmilla’s reply seemed spiteful. She stared at the dark haired girl for a second. Her eyes were trained in front of her, jaw set and breathing timed calmly.
Even angry she was beautiful. Laura knew if she said anything else it would only dig the hole they were standing in deeper and that was the last thing she wanted. So she climbed out of the car, shut the door gently, and walked slowly back to her apartment.

——

“Can you believe that?!” Carmilla ripped the comforter off of her bed and started stripping the mattress of its sheets. “What are we? WHAT ARE WE?!”

Carmilla threw the sheets onto the pile of clothes she had already gather in the corner of the room and dropped down onto the bare mattress. Joey was sitting in the door way, complete attention on Carmilla as she threw things around the room.

“How can she not know what we are?” Carmilla mumbled as she picked up the pile of laundry and made her way down the hall to the washing machine. “Has she not been paying attention? Like, at all?”

She shoved her clothes and sheets in the washing machine and messed with the dials abruptly, water starting to fill the machine as she dumped in some soap. When she turned around, Joey was once again sitting in the doorway watching her.

“What?” She glared at him and put her hands on her hips.

Joey tilted his head to the side and let out a whine and quiet bark.

“Fine, yeah, I could have just told her I wasn’t interested in anyone else. But she makes me so, so…” She ran a hand through her hair and groaned in frustration.

Twenty minutes later she was washing the dishes in her sink with more force than she probably needed. “We are just, you know, whatever?” She sighed and picked up another plate, “Who says that?”

Glancing over at Joey who was laying on the floor at her feet she rolled her eyes, “I say that. Thats who.”

Joey whined and she glared down at him again.

“I know i’m an idiot. You don’t have to rub it in.”

Another twenty minutes and she was shoving her clothes in the dryer. “I’m sure Elsie would be thrilled if i went to her party.” She slammed the dryer door shut and hit the start button before leaning back against the machine, “What did she even mean by that? She knows I couldn't care less about Elsie.”

She stood there a moment while her clothes tumbled in the dryer, replaying the whole morning in her head over again for what felt like the hundredth time. She looked down at Joey sitting in the doorway.

“What? No judgmental comment this time?” When Joey just tilted his head to the side before walking away, Carmilla rolled her eyes at herself and walked back to her bedroom, “Great. I’m arguing with a dog now. And when did I turn into Perry?”

——

Laura smoothed out the imaginary wrinkles in her dress nervously. She licked her lips as her eyes
darted around the room quickly. There were a lot of professors she recognized, either from being in their classes or having contact with them for the paper. The fact that she was only good at remembering names and random facts was helping calm her nerves, but everything else about this situation was doing the complete opposite.

“Have you tried this dip?” Laf stepped up next to her with a plate of food in their hands. “I don’t know if its guacamole or something else but its the most delicious thing I’ve ever eaten.” They dipped a chip through the large glob of dip on their plate and shoved it in their mouth happily.

Laura chuckled and relaxed a bit, grateful to have at least one friend with her. She had spent most of the afternoon thinking about how things had gone with Carmilla, she had completely forgot to study her conversation flash cards and when the time came to get ready for the Deans dinner she was a complete stress case. Thanks to Laf she was able to get ready and actually make it to the Deans house without spontaneously combusting from nervousness.

“I’m really glad you’re here.” Laura smiled at Laf as they wiped dip from the corner of their mouth. “I don’t think I could do this without you.”

“Oh please.” Laf licked their lips, getting any remaining dip off their face, “You’re Laura Hollis. You rock at this stuff.”

“Still.” Laura shrugged with a smile. “Although, could we maybe avoid getting in arguments with professors about the long term strategic plan for the illuminati tonight?”

Laf looked disappointed and lowered their plate of food, “But this is the perfect chance to raise awareness.” A pleading look from Laura made them roll their eyes and sigh, “Fine. But if someone else brings it up, I’m offering my opinion.”

Laura laughed and gave Laf’s shoulder a pat, “That seems fair.”

——

“I really need to stop making fun of Perry. Stress cleaning really is a thing.” Carmilla smoothed out her comforter, having just finished putting new sheets on her bed while waiting for the dryer to finish.

She had washed her dishes, hung up her clothes, was in the process of drying the ones she had just washed, made her bed, she even threw out a few molding items from her fridge.

She clapped her hands together, happy with her progress (and ability to distract herself all day) before dropping back onto her bed and taking a deep breath. Joey jumped up on the bed next to her and curled into her side. Without much thought, Carmilla started to run her fingers through soft fur while watching the ceiling fan spin slowly above her.

She glanced over at the clock and right away her mind went to Laura. She would probably be just getting to her mothers house right now. An evening full of fake pleasantries and kissing ass. Carmilla rolled her eyes at the thought.

Her phone chimed from the bedside table and she should have been embarrassed by how quickly she scrambled to get it. The hope that it was Laura disappeared as soon as the phone was in her hand.

Unknown Number: I’ll watch for you at the party in case you change your mind
Unknown Number: ;)

Elsie. Carmilla rolled her eyes and tossed her phone to the other side of the mattress. The dryer
sounded from the other room and she got up slowly to gather her clean clothes. She came back with them gathered in her arms and dropped them on her bed.

The pile was larger than she wanted it to be and whatever avoidance energy she had earlier that a day was clearly all used up and there was no way she was going to put all these clothes away. She was staring at the pile when her phone chimed again.

Unknown Number: I promise you'll have a great time

Carmilla held the phone in her hand and let out a sigh. She looked up at Joey and furrowed her brows, “What?”

They shared a look before Joey lowered his head back down to the bed and let out a huff. Carmilla tapped the phone against her palm impatiently, trying to make a decision, before scrolling through her contacts and hitting the call button.

She held the phone between her ear and shoulder while she looked through the clothes hanging in her closet. At the sound of the line being picked up, Carmilla gripped the phone in her hand again.

“Pete. I need you to come pick up Joey.” She pulled a couple things from the closet and threw them on her bed. “I’m going to a party and don’t want to leave him here in case I’m out late.”

——

Laura stood with a few other people near a bookcase against the wall, champagne glass in hand. She was trying not to drink too much, knowing that alcohol definitely wouldn’t help her leave a good impression on the people at this dinner. Lasting impression, maybe. But probably not a good one.

The string quartet was set up on the other side of the room, playing softly while everyone in attendance mingled quietly. So far Laura had managed to talk to a few of her professors and peers without throwing up or making a fool of herself, so things were going well. She had seen the Dean making rounds through the room, stopping to talk to groups of people for a moment before moving on to the next group.

Somehow she had managed to avoid being a part of those groups so far.

The Dean seemed to be a great host. She was polite and intelligent and from what Laura had seen, got along with most people. However, Laura could admit something about her seemed detached and cold. It made her wonder if that’s how she was with her children. If that’s how she was with Carmilla.

The thought of Carmilla made her stomach flutter and she brought her glass to her lips, hoping the bubbles of the champagne would get rid of the uneasy feelings surrounding her. She was still frustrated with Carmilla for what had happened earlier, but also frustrated with herself for not handling it better.

Maybe it was the stress of finals, this dinner, and Christmas all rolled on top of her feelings for Carmilla that had made everything such a mess. Whatever it was, she was hoping it wouldn’t be too late to fix it.

“Laura, Laura, Laura.” Laf was whispering quickly, their eyes wide and they strode over at a rather quick pace. “She’s coming over here.”

“Who’s coming— oh shit.” Laura’s eyes widened when she saw the Dean headed straight for her. She quickly turned her attention to the others she was standing with and tried her best to pretend like
she had been listening to their conversation the whole time.

“Good evening.” The Dean greeted, inviting herself into the group talking.

She was met with smiles and polite greetings, small talk and who knows what else. Laura was too focused on the fact that her tongue felt numb to really pay attention. That is until ice blue eyes were locked on her and an expectant expression covered the dean's face.

“Uh, sorry, what?” Laura asked, only slightly mortified at how awful this was going. She wasn't sure what made her more nervous. The fact that this was the Dean, or her girlfriend's mother.

Scratch that. Not her girlfriend. Her… whatever.

“I asked for your name, dear.” The Dean repeated slowly, a hint of arrogance in her tone.

“Hollis. Laura Hollis.” She managed to get out confidently. Her eyes moved to look at Laf and she immediately regretted it. They were watching her closely, eyes wide, mouth slightly agape, as if they were waiting for her to screw this up. It made her mouth go dry and her heart beat start to fund loudly in her head.

“Well, Lana Hollis.” Lilita pressed her hands together firmly, an unimpressed look on her face as she looked down her nose to Laura, “What is it you are studying?”

Laura swallowed hard. It felt as though no matter what she said from her on out was going to be the wrong thing. Not only had she gotten her name wrong just seconds after being told what it was (probably on purpose), the look on her face told Laura everything she needed to know. She already didn't like her.

“Its Laura. And she’s studying Journalism.”

A familiar low voice answered for her, with a confidence and surety that even the Dean had reacted to. Laura turned to where the voice came from and felt like the air had been pulled from her lungs at the sight. Carmilla stepped up next to her, a smirk on her face as she reached out and plucked a glass of champagne from a tray being carried past her by a server.

Laura’s mouth dropped open as she took in Carmilla’s appearance. Leather pants, black corset, smooth pale skin, dark loose curls falling perfectly over her shoulder, red lips and dark eyes.

Carmilla took a smooth sip as she pressed her palm against Laura’s low back and let her fingers drag slowly across the fabric of her dress. Her eyes moved to look Laura up and down seductively before they focused back on the Dean.

“Hello, mother.”
Deafening Silence

Chapter Summary

The deans dinner...

Chapter Notes

Sorry it took me so long to post this one... Thanks for all the notes and stuff. It seriously makes me want to keep writing and do a good job when I know you guys are enjoying reading it :) so thanks for keeping me motivated!

For the first time since her mother had become the Dean, Carmilla let herself into the mansion. Closing the heavy oak door behind her she was immediately hit with the sound of music. It was just like her mother to have live music playing. *For ambiance darling.* She could practically hear her mother and see the obnoxious hand gesture she would make at the comment.

And for once, Carmilla was actually grateful for her mothers over the top, showy tendencies.

The soft and calming sounds of violin and cello filled the empty spaces of the house, like background music in a cinematic love scene. The music wasn't the main focus, but still, it guides your emotions. Had there been no music, or a different arrangement, this movie scene could be playing out differently.

Horror. Young girl enters old home rumored to be haunted to attend a party to save her love. But will she be able to save her in time? or will she too, face a grim fate?

Action. Heroic woman fights against her own blood to save the girl she loves. but will she be strong enough to stand up to the enemy that is also her family?

Fantasy. The brave hero faces her fears, hoping to prove her love as she faces the monster she’s lived her life afraid of.

All scenarios were much too dramatic to be realistic, though. She was simply attending a dinner being held by the dean because the girl she was sort of dating had asked her to. With the unfortunate coincidence that the dean happened to also be her mother.

And, saving her from a monster? Carmilla realized standing in the foyer of the home that, this was a situation she could have avoided had she only been honest with Laura in the first place. It was her who had been the monster. A hard exterior, hurting those around her in an effort to protect herself. But then again, love makes monsters of us all.

She let her coat fall from bare shoulders and placed it on the rack near the door. There was the sound of dishes clanking and muffled voices carrying through corridors of the large mansion as Carmilla made her way towards the dining room. It was to the left of the main entrance, a smaller dining area, the same one they had used for thanksgiving.
Carmilla made her way through the empty room, her hand brushing along the velvet cloth on the chairs pushed in under the long dining table. She walked to the opposite wall from where she had entered and stood in front of the door, taking a breath.

Clattering of dishes and glasses, food being put on plates and pulled from ovens. Carmilla pushed the door open and strode into the kitchen carefully. It was her ritual. It had started when she was young — Dinner parties for her mothers friends, colleagues, bosses, whatever it was. Lilita always wanted to make a good impression and paid good money for the best food and drinks she could get.

As a little girl, Carmilla would sneak into the kitchen and hide under a counter. She was good at going unnoticed and would steal cookies, pieces of chocolate and any other treat she could find while hiding from her mother. When she got older it changed from hiding under the counter and stealing food, to making friends with the staff. She avoided her mother, knowing she would never enter the kitchen, while the serving staff snuck her wine or champagne and the best pieces of cake.

She took slow steps through the kitchen, the staff ignoring her and moving about as if she wasn't there. She grabbed a handful of chocolate chips from a bowl on the counter and tossed one in her mouth. As she made her way to the door on the other side of the room, the one that led into the formal dining room, she knew it was different this time. No more hiding away in the kitchen.

“Stealing chocolate again, are we?”

Carmilla smiled, her hand on the door, and turned around. “Well if it isn't my favorite chef.”

“Carmilla.” JP offered a mock bow and smiled happily at her. “Do my eyes deceive me or were you about to actually join the party?”

“You saved me just in time.” Carmilla tossed a chocolate chip in her mouth and walked over to the counter we has working at, leaning her hip against it.

“You know…” JP continued to stir whatever it was that waist the bowl in his hands, “You’ve been stealing my chocolate for years and never once have I seen you actually eager to attend one of your mothers parties.”

“Maybe I’m in the mood for some thrilling conversation.” Carmilla tossed another chocolate chip in her mouth, glancing around the kitchen.

JP looked at her, unconvinced, but nodded anyway. “You know we have better chocolate than that.”

“Do me a favor?” Carmilla grabbed a few more from the bowl, “If I get stuck in there, send me some.” She threw a chip up in the air, catching it in her mouth, then winking at JP before pushing herself away from the counter and walking to the door.

She walked through the door slowly, knowing by entering late and from the room where the servers came, she would most likely go unnoticed. She wasn't here to make a grand entrance or create waves. It wasn't about her or showing up for her mother. She was there for Laura. If it was possible for her to slip in, find the other girl, talk to her and leave without her mother even knowing she was there— thats exactly what she wanted to do.

The formal dining room was much larger than the empty one she had walked through earlier. Her mother had removed the dining table, converting it almost into what resembled a small ballroom. Tall ceiling, wood floors, chandelier and a large entryway that led to the library. The two room combined offered the perfect space for people to move about comfortably and uncrowded while Lilita could show off her collection of antiques and books.
Leave it to her mother to take a dinner meant to highlight students and use it to make herself look better.

Carmilla placed the last chocolate chip on her tongue as she looked around the room. Students, Professors, CEO’s… Then there she was. Her back was to Carmilla but she knew it was Laura the second she saw her.

Honey brown hair, loose curls instead of its usual straightness. A maroon dress, neckline cut wide and barely hanging on her shoulders. The front dipping just below the collar bones and curving in a wide round shape across her chest. Sheer material that dipped in a V on her back, the curve of shoulder blades and path of her spine visible through the thin fabric, the point of the V ending at her low back. The fabric on her torso clung tightly, showing her thin figure and delicate curves, the dress loosening at her waist, relaxing and falling loosely, ending just above the knee.

Carmilla let her eyes trail the length of Laura’s body, her palms pressing into her thighs, an attempt to ignore the regret of not having her camera with her. She smiled at the nervous hand motions and shifting of her body weight as Laura stood with a small group of other people. She didn’t recognize any of them, besides the red head standing next to Laura with a plate of food in their hands. Carmilla chuckled as Laf lifted a chip with dip to their mouth only to have the dip drop and tumble down the front of their shirt.

Her smile faded when she saw her mother making her way towards Laura and the group of students standing together near a book case. Carmilla stilled her shoulders and fixed her posture, taking a deep breath, she started making her way across the room.

Carmilla cringed as she heard her mother speak to Laura. Her voice was cold and slick, the same tone she used when she was displeased with Carmilla. It sent ice through her veins and she could feel herself getting angry before she had even joined the conversation.

“Well, Lana Hollis.” Lilita pressed her hands together firmly, an unimpressed look on her face as she looked down her nose to Laura, “What is it you are studying?”

“So much for slipping in unnoticed.

Carmilla stepped up next to Laura and reached out for a glass of champagne as a server walked by with a full tray. She took a slow sip from her glass while her free hand reached out, a warm palm pressing gently on Laura’s low back, her fingers softly sliding across sheer fabric, fingertips lingering before dropping back to her side. Her eyes trailed Laura’s body over the edge of her glass before moving back to the stern woman in front of her.

“So much for slipping in unnoticed.

“Hello, mother.”

Lilita shifted uncomfortably, her lips tightening and her eyebrow slightly arching. It was the first time Laura had seen her even slightly lose her composure, even if she corrected it immediately.

“Carmilla.” Her voice was frigid and controlled. “Do tell, how do you know Laura?”

Carmilla took another slow sip of her drink, knowing the only way to beat her mother at her own game was to stay calm herself. So thats exactly what she was going to do.

“Well, Laura is the reason for my passing grade in psychology.”
Lilita look taken back by the statement and her eyes quickly fell back to Laura, "Is that true?"

Laura had been staring at Carmilla until this point. Not just for the way she had flawlessly appeared out of nowhere, but her demeanor was that of someone there with purpose. Whatever uncomfortable energy she had when talking about her mother had disappeared, replaced by something else entirely. “Well, yes, technically. But that’s not exactly—"

"Don’t be modest." Carmilla smiled, cutting her off and pulling her mother’s attention. “She has me meeting her twice a week to study."

“Really?” The Dean looked from Carmilla to Laura, a new expression on her face. Almost as if she was torn between being surprised and impressed.

Laura nodded hesitantly, “Yes. But it’s really not—"

The Deans attention had already shifted back to her daughter as she ignored what Laura was trying to say "Had I known all it took was a pretty face, it could have saved us years of bad grades.” Her tone was teasing, in a malicious way. Almost like she was challenging Carmilla, trying to prove her superiority.

Laura wasn’t sure how to take the comment but before she could even think of a response, Carmilla was already speaking.

“Oh I assure you, she’s more than just a pretty face.” Carmilla’s voice was calm and matter of fact. Not letting the obvious backhanded statement get to her. This was all a game to Lilita, and the only way to win was to play the same way she did. Unaffected and calm.

"Is that so?" The Dean rolled her eyes, her weight shifting and body language making it clear she was reaching the end of her patience with Carmilla’s attitude. It seemed her daughter’s ability to keep her cool was something new, and not at all something she was used to dealing with.

Laura looked between the two women, their eyes locked on each other intently. It was a staring contest no one would be brave enough to interrupt. She swallowed hard, not sure what to do in this situation. The rest of the people that had been standing there had already slunked away to other parts of the room at the very obvious yet controlled confrontation. That is, everyone except Laf.

Laf still had a plate of food in their hands that seemed to lift higher and closer to their mouth the more intense things got. Slow bites and wide eyes, as if they were watching their favorite dramatic television show. They couldn’t look away, and for good reason. This whole thing was unpredictable.

Carmilla glanced over at Laura, the first time since stepping up next to her moments before, and her face softened as she looked over Laura’s features. Her eyes looked determined, not angry, as she looked at her. Laura realized the initial touch, the soft hand on her low back was Carmilla’s subtle way of letting her know she was there for her. Even if they were on shaky ground.

Carmilla turned back to her mother and gave her a satisfied grin. Almost like she was excited to rub in the fact that she knew more about Laura than the dean did. "Laura is at Silas on an academic scholarship after graduating with honors and as her school’s valedictorian."

The Deans unimpressed and slightly frustrated expression softened slightly as her attention fell back to the smaller girl who was staring at Carmilla, now slack jawed. Lilita’s face wasn’t as angry, more shocked, as if she felt she should have known that.

Carmilla quickly continued before anyone else could speak. “She’s pursuing a double major. Journalism and Communications. She’s already been accepted for an internship at the states most
popular newspaper office next semester and currently writes for the school paper here."

The Deans lips pressed together tightly and her posture became more rigid as Carmilla continued.

“Among other great pieces, she has a column I'm sure you've read. The weekly highlight of your esteemed professors.” Carmilla’s tone was almost smug, but not to the point where it was sarcastic. She just sounded proud.

"That's your column?" The Dean asked raising an eyebrow.

Laura was pretty sure she looked just as stunned as the Dean did. She had to mentally tell herself to close her mouth as her jaw had dropped at Carmilla's list of her accomplishments.

"Um, yeah, I write. I- I write." Laura nodded, fumbling over words. She wasn't sure what was making her act that way- being intimidated by the Dean or the incredible way Carmilla was so simply sticking up for her. She didn't even know Carmilla knew all that about her. Sure she probably mentioned it over the course of them spending time together, but she was sure she was mostly talking to herself and that Carmilla wasn't even listening most of the time.

"That's been a great addition to the paper. I must admit I'm impressed." Lilita's voice actually seemed genuine as she looked down at Laura. Even if Laura's inability to string together a coherent sentence at the moment was giving her her doubts. "I am curious though, how do you decide who to highlight every week?"

Carmilla's lips twisted up into a half smile before she brought her glass up for another drink. She turned to look at Laura, letting her answer for herself this time, as the Dean had shifted from arrogant to actually interested.

"Oh, well.." Laura licked her lips, hoping the words in her head would actually come out of her mouth in a way that sounded like English. "It's an open poll for the students. They submit teachers names and at the end of the week we tally them and see who was nominated the most."

Words. Actual words. Great job Hollis.

Carmilla smiled before turning back to her mother casually, "Students usually nominate teachers that are, you know, making a difference and actually furthering their education in a way thats uplifting and positive."

The Dean smiled like it was thanks to her that there were teachers among them considered to be such an influence on the students at Silas.

"I've read every single one of Laura's articles and don't recall seeing you being highlighted. Curious." Carmilla paused, taking a sip of champagne as her mothers smile dropped and her eyes narrowed angrily at her. "I'm sure you'll be nominated though. Eventually."

The Deans face hardened immediately and Laura watched as her and Carmilla stared at each other. Laf’s jaw dropped and their eyes widened even further, if it was even possible. It was a blatant insult and Carmilla’s voice had been completely smooth and calm as she said it. It seemed being on the receiving end of her mothers game for so long had taught her how to play well enough to keep up.

The Dean turned to Laura and pressed her lips together in a tight smile, her expression shifting to hide her annoyance of Carmilla. "It seems I didn't give you enough credit Miss Hollis.” She clasped her hands in front of her, falling back into the formal air she had entered the room with. "It's clear the reason you were chosen to join us tonight. I'm proud to have students like you here at Silas."
She turned to Carmilla, her features hardening immediately, “You, however. Won't you join me a moment? In private.” Without waiting for a response she turned and walked away stiffly.

Carmilla chuckled quietly and rolled her eyes, taking another sip of champagne. Laura noticed the slight tremble of Carmilla's hand as she finished what was left in the glass and handed it to her. It donned on her that Carmilla had just gone toe to toe with the same woman that had left her a trembling and silent mess on Thanksgiving, without showing an ounce of nervousness or intimidation until just then.

Laura slowly took the glass from her, a stunned expression still on her face. She couldn't decide if what had just happened was real or not. Carmilla saying all that to her mother and the dean actually saying something nice to and about Laura in the end.

Carmilla's shoulders relaxed slightly as she looked Laura up and down once more, "Well don't you look..." She finished her sentence by licking lips as she looked up at Laura through long eyelashes.

Laura swallowed heavily at the look in Carmilla's eyes, "I'm not the one in a corset. Which, wow."

"That. Was awesome!" Laf stepped forward and shoved Carmilla's shoulder excitedly. "I can't believe you said all that! You make L sound like a bad ass!"

Carmilla sighed frustratedly and turned to look at Lafontaine, "Don't you have somewhere to be?"

Laf looked between the two girls and realized they were probably interrupting something. "Right. My bad." They shoved another chip in their mouth as they turned and walked away awkwardly.

"By the way-“ Carmilla called after Laf, waiting for them to turn around, “That dip thats down the front of your shirt? Snail eggs."

Laf's mouth opened immediately, their tongue sticking out of their mouth and half chewed food dropped onto their plate. “Not cool.” They frowned before taking off towards a server with a tray of drinks to rinse out their mouth.

Carmilla turned back to Laura with a smirk, “You look surprised, cupcake. I do listen to you sometimes."

Laura's eyebrows came together worriedly and she leaned in close to whisper, "You didn't have to say all that. You can't just lie—"

"What part of that was a lie?” Carmilla whispered back, raising an eyebrow.

Laura pulled back, her face confused as she tried to replay the conversation. Technically everything Carmilla said was true. She does meet her twice a week to study. It was a requirement to raise Carmilla's grade. Just because the Dean probably took it differently, wasn't really her fault.

"Carmilla." Lilita called her impatiently, giving her a stern look.

"Duty calls." Carmilla's voice was sarcastic but the heavy breath she took gave away her nervousness. She gave Laura a small smile before taking a step backwards towards her mother.

"Breathtaking, by the way."

"What?" Laura asked, not sure what Carmilla was talking about.

"You look breathtaking." Her smile was small but sincere as she looked at Laura before turning and joining her mother in a private corner.
The night seemed to turn into a game of cat and mouse. The only problem was, Laura wasn't sure which part she was playing. She would think she was about to catch Carmilla, then would find herself in a trap the dark haired girl had set for her instead.

Since their first interaction that night, they had remained almost a room apart. Sharing glances across the room, subtle looks and private smiles. Carmilla moved about the room like it was what she was made to do. Drawing eyes and captivating whoever she spoke to. Laura watched her, just as entranced as everyone else keeping her company.

Carmilla was speaking quietly with a few professor, polite smiles and carefully chosen topics, when Laura caught her eye. A sly smile and casual nod invited the brunette to join them. Slowly Laura made her way across the room, not recognizing the people Carmilla was talking to made her a little apprehensive to join them. All eyes turned to Laura as she stepped up next to Carmilla with a slightly nervous smile. Carmilla turned to her with an expression that calmed her immediately.

"Professors, you know Laura right?" Carmilla asked, gesturing to the girl next to her. She had a way of stating it like they would be stupid not to know her without it sounding rude. She went on to introduce the professors to Laura. One from the Philosophy department, another from the Business Department and one over Environmental Studies.

"We were just discussing the long term effects economical advances have on the environment and how if the way we approach business development doesn't change we will be facing major struggles environmentally in the near future." Professor Olson (environmental studies) turned to Laura casually for a response.

"Seriously?" Laura chuckled humorlessly, glancing at Carmilla, internally glaring at her for bringing her into a conversation she would have absolutely nothing intelligent to add to.

"Yes, seriously." Carmilla smiled and looked back to the professors, "Laura actually shared an idea with me the other day that would probably be beneficial from both business and environmental standpoints."

"I did?" Laura asked slightly confused. When Carmilla gave her a pointed look she turned back to the professors with the best smile she could muster, "I mean, yes. I did." She looked back to Carmilla, hoping for some sort of guidance as to what she was talking about.

"The bike thing." Carmilla gave her an encouraging nod before turning to look at the server that had just appeared at her side.

"Oh that!" Laura chuckled, remembering a rant she had gone on a few weeks before, "That was just a silly idea."

Carmilla thanked the server as she took the small dish from the tray, "Tell them anyway." She gave a courteous nod to the professors and picked out a small piece of chocolate from the dish, "If you'll excuse me." She placed the chocolate on her tongue before turning and leaving them there with their attention now on Laura.

Laura looked back to the professors, all giving her expectant looks. Before she had the chance to over think it, she started talking, "I was just telling Carmilla about an idea I had to start a non profit organization that would accepted used or broken bikes and hire people to fix them by sharing parts between bikes. But instead of being paid monetarily, they could earn a bike of their own." She paused briefly and was shocked to find the professors listening like they were actually intrigued. "It
could provide a mode of transportation for people that can't afford cars or bus passes while cutting down on pollution caused by public transportation."

"That's actually quite an interesting idea." Professor Olson nodded thoughtfully. “I could see it being especially useful in towns like our own. Where students are a large majority of the population.”

Laura was stunned that these professors had actually considered her random idea something worth discussing. It was also surprising how easily she fell into conversation with them after that point. A few minutes later and she was walking away feeling more confident than she had all night. She caught sight of Carmilla across the room and quickly made her way to her.

Once again, thinking she had caught Carmilla— she actually ended up being the mouse again, falling right into the trap Carmilla had set for her.

Just like the time before, Carmilla introduced Laura to the people she was talking to, and some how brought up a topic that Laura could talk about with them. And just like before, a server appeared at her side with another plate of chocolate and Carmilla excused herself from the group and walked away with a coy sway in her hips.

After the third time this happened, Laura was trying to decide if she was more impressed with Carmilla’s ability to somehow start a conversation Laura could actually contribute to no matter who it was with, the fact Carmilla had actually heard and remembered enough stuff Laura had talked about in the past to make that possible, or how easily she set it up then disappeared, always with some new piece of dessert that Laura was sure wasn't being offered to everyone else (Laf had basically raved over every food available to them by now).

Laura was grabbing a new glass of champagne after yet another successful chat with a new group of professors, feeling pretty good about herself and how the night was going, when she saw Carmilla and Lafontaine standing together on the far side of the room. They were standing with one other person, an older man with facial hair and a bowtie. He must have been another professor that Laura hadn't met yet, but it was interesting to watch them interact. Laura wondered what Carmilla and Lafontaine could be having a conversation about. They barely talked when they were hanging out socially, and she couldn't imagine their classes overlapping at all to make for easy course work conversation.

Then it happened. A server landed at Carmilla’s side with a smile, offering her yet another small plate of chocolate pieces. Carmilla took it with a quiet thank you before excusing herself and leaving Lafontaine and the older man to continue their conversation without her.

“Miss Hollis.”

Laura nearly choked on her drink when she heard the Deans voice directly behind her. Doing her best to gain her composure she turned around quickly and saw the Dean approaching her with another woman.

“Yes. Hello. Again.” God, this woman made her lose her cool.

The dean turned to the other woman, “This is the student I was telling you about.”

The woman held other hand to Laura, “Its nice to meet you Laura. I’m Samantha Beck.”

“Samantha Beck?” Laura took her hand with wide eyes, “As in, Editor of The Herald in New York, Samantha Beck?”
Samantha chuckled, “Yes, that would be me.”

“Oh my gosh! It’s so amazing to meet you!” Laura shook her hand enthusiastically, “I mean, I heard you might be here tonight but it’s amazing that you are and even more amazing that I’m actually meeting you and shaking your hand and I should probably stop that now.” She let go of Samantha’s hand and took a deep breath, trying to calm down.

Samantha just smiled at her and gestured to Lilita, “Dean Morgan was just telling me you’ve been accepted for an internship position at The Post for this next semester.”

Laura just nodded, knowing if she opened her mouth she might end up in a never ending rant again.

“That’s a great opportunity, especially given the fact that you’ll only be a junior.” Samantha turned to the Dean with a smile, “They usually only offer those positions to students about to graduate. She must really be talented.”

The Dean smiled at Laura proudly and it took everything in her not to roll her eyes. Just earlier that evening she was pretending not to remember her name and now she was showing her off. Sure it was working in Laura’s favor too, but still. Stupid.

“Well, it was a pleasure to meet you Laura.” Samantha held out her hand again and laughed when Laura took it, shook twice and immediately let go with a wide smile. “I’ll keep my eye out for you. I hope to see your name come across my desk after your graduation.”

“Of course. That would be— I mean, it would be amazing to work with you.” Laura was beyond excited and just trying not to ramble. She offered an awkward wave when Samantha turned to walk away but stiffened slightly when she noticed the Dean had chosen to stay, and her eyes were locked on Laura thoughtfully. “This has been… a really great dinner. Everything was amazing.”

“It seems there are a lot of amazing things happening tonight, no?” Lilita looked amused and on the verge of annoyed. Like she hadn’t decided if she actually liked Laura yet or just liked that she was able to use her to show off her schools achievements.

Laura looked around nervously, wishing she had some magical server to pop up at her side with chocolate and make a quick exit easy like Carmilla had gotten all night long. She would even settle for Laf throwing dip on her at this point just to get the Dean to stop looking at her with her cold and contemplative eyes.

“Laura.”

At least she was getting her name right now.

“It seems I misjudged you earlier, and I apologize.” Lilita held out her hand with her palm in the air, her eyes still on Laura, and immediately a glass was being placed in her hand seemingly out of nowhere. “You are quite impressive and its clear from the amount of times I’ve heard your name tonight among my professors and guests that you are someone to keep an eye on. You are going places.”

“Wow. That’s—thank you.” Laura was blown away by the candidness of the conversation happening, but couldn’t help but feel there was something else attached to it that wasn’t entirely praise.
Lilita took a sip of her drink and nodded tightly, “I would hate to see that go to waste because of poor choices in who you associate with.”

"I'm sorry?" Laura hoped this wasn't about to go where she thought it was. "I don't think I understand."

"I can appreciate your willingness to help my daughter. Heaven knows, it probably wasn't an easy task." Her expression was annoyed as she spoke about Carmilla. "I just hope you're as smart as you seem and aren't playing into her games and wasting time that could be better spent improving your future opportunities."

Laura was completely stunned. Besides the initial hand on her lower back, her and Carmilla had seemed nothing more than acquaintances the whole night. That was actually thanks to Carmilla. Every time Laura tried to spend time with her, Carmilla had somehow found a way to leave without Laura being able to follow.

Suddenly she wondered if that was on purpose and possibly because of something the Dean had said to her when she first pulled Carmilla aside when she first showed up.

“Carmilla is actually extremely intelligent and so, so talented—“ Laura started, hoping to be able to stand up for Carmilla like she had for her earlier but was quickly cut off.

“Darling please.” Lilita waved her free hand dismissively, “I know where this is going but you should quit before she ruins you.”

Laura’s eyebrows pushed together. Theres no way she was saying what Laura thought she was. Right?

“She’s a diamond. And stone cannot love flesh.” Lilita’s eyes bore into Laura’s. Her smile was tight, her features cold.

Laura understood immediately why Carmilla had shown up at her door on thanksgiving. The woman standing in front of her was uncaring and something about the way she looked at you made it feel like the blood in your veins was freezing. How she had gone from praising her 2 seconds ago, to now subtly telling Laura to keep her distance from Carmilla was astounding. What was strange was that Laura felt that the Dean was telling her that she wasn't good enough for Carmilla— even if the things she said about her daughter were less than loving.

Carmilla was the diamond. The stone. Laura was flesh. *Stone cannot love flesh.*

Laura nodded slowly, not sure how to respond. It was a strange crossover of Dean and her non-girlfriends mother and she wasn't sure what to do or how to navigate the situation. She glanced away from the woman in front of her and caught sight of Carmilla. She was leaning against a book case, small dish in her hand, placing what looked like chocolate chips in her mouth one at a time. It was the first time all night that Laura had seen her by herself and she wished more than anything that she could be standing with her.

“Aww, darling.” Lilita rested her hand on Laura’s shoulder. It was a sign of comfort, of reassurance. But it was empty. “Take my advice. Take a step back before you become just another one of her many short lived distractions.”
Laura looked back to the Dean with a straight face. The worst part about it all is that everything the dean was saying, was things Laura had thought herself. Was Laura just another girl on the long list that have fallen for Carmilla already?

Was it fair to think the Dean cold an callous when Laura had been worried of the very things she was using to try and push Laura from her daughter?

"Thank you, again." Laura's voice was quiet and her smile polite, "It's been a lovely evening."

Lilita must have accepted that as an agreement between them, offering Laura a tight nod before turning and walking away. The sound of heels clicking against hard wood as she crossed the room gracefully.

Laura glanced back over to Carmilla, still leaning against the book case, eating one chocolate chip at a time. Although she had made conversation with practically every person there that night effortlessly, it was clear she preferred whatever solitude she had at the moment.

Laura hadn't actually had the chance to talk to Carmilla all night. Honestly, she was still trying to get over the initial shock of her showing up in the first place. She had been completely against the idea of attending this event from the beginning, then after the way things went earlier that morning Laura was stunned that not only had Carmilla shown up- but she had gone to bat for Laura against her mother and helped Laura shine in front of all these influential people.

Laura saw Carmilla's posture stiffen. She set the dish in her hands down and brushed her hands together as Lilita approached her. It was interesting to see the way Carmilla held herself in different situations.

Around Laura she seemed relaxed, her smile was genuine and was actually something that happened often. Her eyes were softer and movements more gentle. That night Laura had noticed when Carmilla was talking with professors and other guests, her posture was strong and confident. Her features tighter, not cold but careful. Just like her words. The way she spoke was different. Practiced. Deliberate.

Then with her mom the confidence struggled to remain. Her whole body seemed tense, as if she was bracing herself for a physical blow when really she needed a shield from the verbal lashings and mind games that seemed to happen instead. Her shoulders curved forward slightly, the way you would expect prey to curl in on itself when faced with a predator they knew they couldn't outrun. But her eyes remained determined and her jaw set. What she lacked in physical confidence against her mother, she gained in the fierceness of her eyes and the careful words and controlled breathing.

"I can't believe this night." Laf stepped up next to Laura with a glass in each hand. They handed one to Laura before taking a drink from their own. "I don't know what you did but you're like famous tonight."

"What are you talking about?" Laura asked, finally looking away from Carmilla and the Dean.

"If I had a quarter for every time I heard someone mention you tonight, i'd have, well, a bunch of quarters."

Laura chuckled and shook her head, "You're exaggerating."

"No. Really." Laf nodded, "I would have been upset about it if Carmilla hadn't saved me too a
minute ago."

"What do you mean?" Laura was now paying better attention, curious if they were talking about the scene she had caught earlier.

"I was talking with one of the head scientists of Polar Industries and I was tanking. Like, talking about fish with feet, tanking. It was bad." Their face looked mortified at the memory as they were telling Laura about it, "Then like some conversation super hero, Carmilla showed up and asked me about my theory of being able to turn plant material into what could become a usable fuel source, which was something I was talking about with Perry between classes once. And sure, Carmilla was sitting there but she was waiting for you so I figured she wasn't even aware we existed. Cause you know how she is. Broody and antisocial and--"

"Laf." Laura interrupted, "you're getting a little off track."

"Oh. Right." They took another drink and wiped their lips before continuing. "So she asked me about the experiment, which the Polar Industries guy seemed interested in. Then she just left. But less like a super hero into the night, and more like someone who just got handed a plate of something that looked delicious before she walked away."

"Yeah, she's been doing that to me all night too." Laura looked down into the liquid of her glass. She would have understood if Carmilla helping her was an apology of some kind for how things had gone that morning- but helping Laf would have been purely because she wanted to. 

"Once I realized how easily Carmilla had turned things around for me just by changing the topic of conversation I realized what a waste of time those cards were." Laf shrugged and finished their drink, "Screw cue cards, I need to get myself a Carmilla."

Laura chuckled, her eyes scanning the room where she had last seen Carmilla, but the spot was empty. Her eyes widened, worried after having to deal with her mother again that maybe she had left. 

"Glad she could help stop the fish feet talk." Laura responded without much thought. She was more focused on finding the dark haired girl.

—

Carmilla took the plate that had just been brought to her and excused herself from the conversation with the mad scientists. How she ended up there in the first place was a mystery. But she wasn't going to watch the red head talk them self into a grave with 'fish with feet' longer than she had to. 

She changed the subject to something less mortifying for the ginger but she knew the truth; JP was the real hero tonight. How he managed to send someone over with a new treat for her at just the right time all night was amazing. And every time it was a small taste of something new and delicious. Becoming friends with him was quickly becoming her best decision ever.

He must have run out of creative things to send her because this time I was a small dish of chocolate chips. Carmilla made her way over to an empty space against a book shelf and relaxed against it. She had forgotten how exhausting playing nice and actually trying to make a good impression was, but she wasn't about to ruin this night after what her mother had said to her earlier.
"Carmilla." Lilita called her impatiently, giving her a stern look.

Carmilla looked at Laura, wishing she could stay, but the tone of her mothers voice made it clear now was not the time to ignore her. Her fingertips still burned from the memory of thin fabric covering Laura’s back. The way Laura’s eyes lit up when she realized who was stepping up to her side had given Carmilla hope that she hadn't ruined everything. That if she could just be honest with Laura, everything would be ok. They would be ok.

Standing there, she felt herself take a calming breath for the first time since Laura had gotten out of her car that morning.

Just as quickly, her lungs emptied and she felt a tightness in her chest and knew she couldn't fight it any longer. She was in love with Laura Hollis. And she had to tell her.

"You look breathtaking." Her smile was small but sincere as she looked at Laura before turning and joining her mother in a private corner. She knew right away it wasn't good, just by the slow tap of Lilita’s fingers on her upper arm as they sat stiffly crossed over her chest. "What is it mother?"

"Don't play games with me, Carmilla." Lilita’s voice was quiet but biting. She was smiling, in case anyone was paying attention to them, but the look in her eyes let Carmilla know she was serious.

"I don't know what you're talking about. You wanted me here, and here I am." Carmilla was less confident than she was a minute ago when talking about Laura. Apparently she was fine with helping someone else shine in front of her mother but felt it was useless to try to make herself seem worth being proud of.

"I don’t appreciate you trying to make me look like a fool at my own function." Lilita watched Carmilla roll her eyes, only making her more angry. "Make no mistake, if you continue to behave this way I have no issue making things for your little... pet, difficult."

Carmilla met her mothers eyes quickly, "I don't think thats necessary." She tried to shift her demeanor from worried to careless, "honestly, she's just some persistent girl that won't let me get away with ditching her at the library. I couldn't care less."

Lilita raised an eyebrow, challenging Carmilla's claims. "You know a lot for her to be just 'some persistent girl'."

Carmilla stayed quiet, a simple shrug to try and sell the lie. She knew there had to be a way to please her mother and keep Laura out of her cross hairs at the same time. “So what do you want? I’ll play nice, make you look good, whatever.” She acted annoyed, hoping it would come off as her usual effort to get her mother to leave her alone instead of trying to keep Laura out of it.

Lilita smiled, satisfied with Carmilla’s willingness to behave. “Remember. She’ll be fine so long as you play your part tonight. Go against me... all bets are off.” Her smile fell to a serious expression and her eyes narrowed at Carmilla.

Carmilla clenched her jaw, knowing her mother saw around her attempt to make it seem like she didn’t care about Laura and would have no problem making things difficult for her if she didn’t play by her rules. “You’ve made yourself clear."

“I should hope so.” Lilita turned and walked away without another word.
Carmilla took a deep breath and ran a hand through her hair. She glanced over at Laura, laughing and talking with a few other students and felt an ache in her chest. The whole reason she came tonight was to make things right with Laura, and now she wasn't sure that was possible with her mother watching her every move. Maybe there was another way to start making things right without her mother even knowing it was happening.

Just like before, her mother pulled her from her thoughts of Laura as she approached purposefully. Carmilla quickly set aside the dish of chocolate chips and brushed her hands together nervously. She had spent the entire night trying to soak up the seconds she was able to steal with Laura while also trying to keep her distance. It had been torture to walk away from her every time she was standing close, but she knew it was part of keeping her mother pleased. Her purpose had changed from making things right with Laura to making sure her mother stayed happy that night.

She felt her shoulders tense as her mother stepped up in front of her. Carmilla's eyes sharpened, determined to keep up with her mother in the never ending game of superiority Lilita loved playing so much.

"Shouldn't you be socializing darling?"

It was posed as a question but Carmilla was smart enough to know it wasn't. It was a command.

"I've talked to every one of your guests by now. They all think I'm the brilliant and doting daughter of our great institutions fearless leader." Her voice was dripping with sarcasm and she knew instantly she had struck a nerve.

Lilita’s lips twisted into an unapproving frown, "The night is not yet over, Carmilla. Until you walk out that door, you know what I expect of you."

Carmilla sighed, "Yes, I know."

"Good." Lilita looked at the server that had just appeared at their sides and frowned.

Carmilla took the plate and gave the server a look as if to tell them to hurry away.

Lilita looked back to Carmilla, "Is that chocolate cake? Honesty, how you always manage to find things not even being served at these functions astounds me."

Lilita rolled her eyes and walked away as Carmilla gripped the plate tightly, once again sending a silent thank you to JP for having perfect timing. She set the plate down on the nearest surface and started walking across the room, opposite of where her mother had gone. The sounds in the room felt like they were getting louder by the second. Clanking of dishes and glasses. Pouring of liquid, vibrating strings from the instruments in the corners. Clicking of heels on the hard wood floor, chatter from guests about money, grades, jobs, futures. It was all too much and Carmilla needed to get away from it.

Luckily her path to the door that led out to the back porch had been clear and she was quickly pressing her hand against cool glass of the door. She glanced back into the room quickly and paused with her hand on the door knob. Laura was standing with Laf but looking almost frantically around the
A smile spread on Laura’s lips and Carmilla felt her own turning up to match. An entire night spent in the same room as her without being able to touch her, or kiss her, had seemed impossible. But as soon as she saw her smile, Carmilla knew if that’s all she was able to have for the rest of her life, it would be enough to mend her fractured heart.

Laura’s eyes never left Carmilla’s as she started making her way to her, her smile growing with every step. Carmilla felt a loss of air and the same feeling from the earlier that night filled her chest. *Breathless and in love.*

Carmilla pressed her back against the cool glass of the door that led outside and watched Laura continue to approach her as the thought played over and over in her mind. She loved her. And she had to tell her.

She had to tell her how she felt even if it made her throat burn and swallowing impossible. Even if her hands were shaking, even though she’s mastered holding them still to get the perfect photo. She had to tell her she loved her, even if the last time she let herself love was the same moment she broke. She had to tell her she loved her, even if it terrified her to even hope the shattered pieces of her heart could be mended—

“Hey.” Laura’s smile had turned shy, as she stood in front of Carmilla, alone for the first time all night.

“Hey.” Carmilla smiled back, her eyes staying locked on Laura’s. “Come with me?”

Laura smiled at the vulnerability in Carmilla’s voice. It seemed circumstance had made them skip over the part where the last time they spoke they were angry at each other. And although it was probably something they needed to talk about, Laura was glad it hadn’t seemed to ruin the intense feelings that lingered between them.

After receiving a smile and nod from Laura, Carmilla pushed the cool door open and led the brunette out onto the back porch. The door shut quietly behind them and Laura was surprised at how warm she felt in the open air.

The deck was large, wrapping around the entire back side of the house. Wooden railing lining the edge, it was lined with heating lamps hanging from the overhang above them. A few steps opposite the door into the house led down into the back yard. A cover of white snow covering grass, untouched and perfect.

Carmilla led Laura down along the house, out of sight form the door hoping for some privacy. The only sounds escaping the house was the soft melody being played by the string instruments. Gently Carmilla took Laura’s hand and held it in her own, lifting it up and twirling Laura underneath them before letting her other hand land firmly on her lower back. Laura immediately fell into place, resting her free hand on Carmilla’s shoulder and stepping in towards her closely.

Bodies pressed together innocently, they swayed in the dim light outside, with shy smiles and hesitant breaths. They had yet to talk, and it was as if they were both afraid to speak and shatter the silent happiness they were sharing with one another.

Carmilla let the hand that was holding Laura’s drop to wrap around her waist, pulling her closer and
holding her tightly. Laura’s arms wrapped around Carmilla’s neck as their swaying slowed but didn’t stop.

“Look.” Carmilla licked her lips as she broke the silence. Her heart was pounding and she was searching for the words to explain the things she felt. “I know i’m not so good with the feelings thing but.. I’m sorry, for what I said earlier.”

“No, its ok.” Laura cut her off, looking down to the nonexistent space between them and shaking her head gently, “I really shouldn’t have said anything. Its ok if you’re not ready to—“

“Laura.” Her name tasted sweet in her mouth and caught Laura’s attention like she was hoping, “Let me finish.” Carmilla smiled warmly at Laura and watched as a pink hue spread over her cheeks. “I shouldn’t have said what I did earlier. Thats not what I want. You aren’t just whatever.”

Laura sighed, almost like she was relieved. She let herself smile but was caught off guard by the softness of Carmilla’s eyes. It was like she was fighting a battle with herself, trying to make a decision. As soon as she spoke again, Laura understood why. She was fighting the mask she had put on for so long and was trying to be the real Carmilla.

“That may have been how I did things in the past but—“ Carmilla paused, taking a deep breath and trying to swallow the lump in her throat. She wanted to tell Laura she loved her but the words just wouldn’t come out. So instead of saying the words I love you, she tried to find a way to explain it without them.

“Everything is just different now. I can't look at a sunrise without thinking about your laugh. And the stars. God, I used to love the stars.” She chuckled softly, a sentimental smile playing on her lips, “The constellations and the order within the chaos. But now I look at them and I just…” She brought a hand up slowly, letting the tips of her fingers graze along Laura’s collar bone, tracing along delicate freckles and leaving goosebumps in their wake. “…I just think how much more I love way your freckles lay on your skin. Your own constellations that make me want to get lost trying to map them with my lips.”

Laura’s mouth hung slightly agape, her eyes watching Carmilla’s as they scanned her skin thoughtfully. Following the line of her collar bones, the curve of her neck, and lingering on her lips. Laura licked her lips unconsciously, feeling the intensity of Carmilla’s stare as it lingered on them.

Dark eyes lifted slowly to meet Laura’s, a gentleness and seriousness mixed within them. “I only want this with you.” Carmilla breathed it out in barely a whisper, their lips merely inches apart.

"Wow." Laura exhaled sharply, caught off guard and not sure what to say. It's what she wanted to hear, but now that she had, she wasn't sure what came next. "That's.. I mean.."

Carmilla smiled at Laura's clear speechlessness and closed the gap between them, pressing a gentle kiss to her lips to silence her further. She tasted like chocolate and made Laura’s head spin more than the champagne she had been drinking.

When Carmilla pulled back slowly, Laura kept her eyes closed and a breathy chuckle escaped her lips. Her eyes widened at the sound of it, realizing how flustered she must seem. Her eyes scanned Carmilla's face and saw nothing but adoration in the way she was looking at her and immediately her heart started to beat faster. "I'm really glad you decided to come tonight."

Carmilla offered a crooked smile and pulled Laura's body tighter against her own. She took the opportunity to place a few quick kisses to Laura's neck, feeling her breathing start to quicken
Laura's heart thumped heavily in her chest, her mind swimming. Trying to think of words while remembering to breathe. "And I know it wasn't just for me but—"

"Don't be an idiot." Carmilla pulled back quickly, looking Laura in the eyes, "of course I came for you."

And she had. She would do anything for her if she only asked.

"Leave with me." Carmilla spoke quickly. The feeling in her heart quickly consuming her entire body, wanting to be closer to Laura in every way possible. “Stay with me tonight. Wake up with me tomorrow."

Laura felt her own pull towards the other girl, wanting the same thing she was asking for. But it was more than just an invitation to spend the night. It was an invitation to wake up together. An invitation to spend the early hours of morning wrapped in each other, long after heart beats calmed down and sweat had dried. To stay, after heavy breathing turned into tired sighs and frantic hands turned into gentle fingertips.

The weight of Carmilla’s words hit her chest, stealing her breath. She nodded quickly mirroring the smile that spread on Carmilla’s face. “I just— I need to tell Laf. And my coat. I need my coat.”

Carmilla nodded, “I’ll wait for you at the door.” She smiled into a kiss, not believing how lucky she was when she heard Laura giggle against her lips. “Take your time.”

Laura knew she meant it by the look in her eyes. Like she had said before, she wasn't in a rush. It felt right, and she would take her time to keep it that way. She bit her lip at the sudden excitement she felt at the idea of being with Carmilla. This night hadn't gone anything like she thought— everything about it was so much better.

Their hands held tightly to one another as they made their way back to the door, reluctantly letting go of one another as they entered the large room with guests still behaving as if they had never left. Carmilla watched Laura speed walk across the room to Lafontaine before she slipped back through the door to the kitchen.

“Have enough of the party already?” JP asked with a smile.

“You could say that.” Carmilla smirked in his direction but kept walking, calling over her shoulder as she walked out the other door. “Thanks for the chocolate by the way.”

She found Laura’s coat and put her own on while she waited at the door. When Laura came rushing around the corner with an excited smile on her face she couldn't help but chuckle. She helped Laura get her coat on and carefully zipped it up. She paused briefly, watching Laura’s eyes shine as she waited to follow her out the door.

She thought back to the self portrait she had chosen. The look in her own eyes as she looked up at Laura and wondered if they were lighter now like they were then. Carmilla had always loved the stars. But everything was different now. Now she preferred the freckles on Laura’s skin and the sparkle in her eyes.

For the stars in Laura’s eyes, brightened the darkness in her own.
It didn't take long before they were stumbling into Carmilla’s apartment. Messy kisses and frantic hands. Shoes were kicked off, jackets dropped on the ground as they made their way back towards the bedroom.

“Wait, wait. Carm, wait.” Laura pulled back panting, feeling like she hadn't breathed since they stepped through the doorway. “I just need to breathe.. for a second.” She licked her lips, tasting chocolate and smiling when she noticed Carmilla’s heaving chest.

The tempo hadn't been rushed, just needy up to this point. Enough time had been spent without being together, it seemed stupid to waste another second that way. The apartment was dark, except for the light coming through the window from the full moon. It cast a soft glow about the room, highlighting Carmilla’s pale skin.

Carmilla smiled and took a deep breath, stepping towards Laura as she exhaled slowly. She lifted her hands and cupped Laura’s cheeks gently, leaning in and pressing their lips together slowly. She pulled back far enough to look into Laura's eyes as her fingers moved to trace across collarbones and settle on her shoulders.

Laura took in a shaky breath as Carmilla's fingertips slid underneath fabric clinging to her and slowly moved it to expose delicate shoulders. Her hands moved slowly down Laura's sides, barely brushing against her breasts before dragging over ribs, sending a shiver through her body. Carmilla was setting a new pace, the air around them filling with electricity with every carefully placed touch.

As her hands continued to slide further down Laura's body, excruciatingly slow, Carmilla placed slow open mouthed kisses along her now bare shoulders, across her chest and along her neck. Laura had been standing still, trying to catch her breath as she mentally followed the tingling sensation that prickled beneath the skin wherever Carmilla touched. She wasn't sure what turned her on more- the needy way things had started, heated and consuming. Or the slow and deliberate pace Carmilla was now keeping.

She brought her hands up to hold gently to dark curls as Carmilla continued to place her lips on exposed skin. Laura was sure every inch of her shoulders and neck had now been touched by warm lips. She felt a needy pull low in her stomach when she felt Carmilla’s fingers slide around to her low back, and continue down to grip firmly on her ass.

A quiet gasp was cut short by Carmilla meeting her lips again, hungry but slow. Carmilla pulled on Laura’s body, pressing their hips together then walking her backwards to the bed as they kissed. Her hands gripped Laura tightly, a soft moan escaping as their hips pressed into each other again.

Slowly Carmilla’s hands moved down further, gathering fabric carefully until fingertips were brushing against the back of Laura’s thighs. As the dress now fell over Carmilla’s hands, she dragged them up the back of Laura’s legs, over her ass until her fingertips were pressing firmly on Laura’s lower back, fabric bunched and and gliding smoothly against the back of Carmilla’s hands.

A heat filled Laura’s body, tingling traveling from Carmilla’s fingertips and through her body straight to her core. The gentle grasp she had on Carmilla while they kissed wasn't enough. Her hands were on Carmilla’s hips quickly, fingers tucking under the waste band of leather pants, traveling from her sides to her stomach. The breath Carmilla pulled in as Laura’s fingers moved closer to her center, a clear sign she wasn't the only one feeling the electricity surrounding them.

A moment later clothes were dropping on the floor, hands returning to their quick and nearly frantic pace from before. It seemed the more skin that was touched, the more it begged to be touched. Carmilla lifted Laura’s dress up and over her head, loose curls falling over her shoulder and framing
her face.

Carmilla tossed it aside before rushing forward, pressing her body firmly against Laura’s, hands gripping her tightly around the waist while Laura’s hands made quick work of undoing the clasps that held the corset around Carmilla’s torso. Laura paused as it dropped to the floor, stopping their kiss to take in the sight of Carmilla standing in front of her.

The look in her eyes was vulnerable and warm, the slight barrier that she kept up to guard herself was gone. It was beautiful, “You’re so beautiful.” Laura’s thought broke through her lips in a whisper. Her eyes trailing Carmilla body.

Carmilla smiled, a smirk returning to her lips as she saw the look on Laura’s face, “See something you like?”

Laura’s eyes snapped back up to Carmilla’s, her face turning crimson, a heat in her cheeks that matched the heat already spread through her body. “You are unbelievable.”

Carmilla laughed playfully as she stepped forward and pressed both hands on Laura’s hips. Laura’s stepped back, her legs hitting the bed before she fell backwards onto the mattress, a few wayward feathers from the down comforter puffing into the air. Carmilla following quickly, climbing up along Laura’s body until she was hovering above her, legs straddling her waist, and hands on either side of Laura’s head, holding her above Laura’s body.

“A little warning would have been nice.” Laura smiled, her hands reaching up to wrap around the body lingering above her in an attempt to pull her down and on top of her.

Carmilla chuckled lowly as she moved a hand to Laura’s hair, plucking a feather from it and twisting it between her fingers to show Laura. The brunettes giggle switched to a shuddering breath when the feather started to trail lightly against her skin. Goosebumps chased the feather down Laura’s neck and across her shoulder before they trailed down slowly along her chest.

Carmilla traced the feather slowly across Laura’s collar bones, watching closely as Laura’s chest began to rise and fall more rapidly. Slight trembles as the feather drew lines on soft skin, following the curve of her breasts, circling the expanse of her stomach and following the bend of hip bones.

Underwear still sat low on her hips, the only clothing both girls still had on otherwise bare bodies. Laura’s eyes fluttered shut, her head pressing back against the pillow as she captured her bottom lip between her teeth. Carmilla was drawing circles across thin fabric, dropping the feather low between Laura’s legs.

The barely there sensation pulled a whimper from Laura when Carmilla let her fingers drag gently along the cloth with the feather. Carmilla moved her hand up Laura’s body again, lowering herself onto her once her hand had left— their hips, stomachs, chests, pressing together. Carmilla’s eyes mesmerized by Laura’s tiny movements and the seconds she would hold her breath before her lips twitched into a smile as she let it out slowly.

Laura’s eyes opened wide, pupils blown as she looked into the dark eyes studying her, memorizing every freckle, every curve. The unhurried pace of Carmilla’s movements had only added to the rapid pace of her heart beat and the pull deep in her stomach. Hands that had been gripping Carmilla’s sides, slid along soft skin, running over the swell of breasts and up to tangle in dark hair as she pulled Carmilla down on top of her completely.

Lips connected in a messy, needy kiss. Laura no longer able to remain patient. Carmilla hips rocked into Laura’s, a moan mixed between them, neither one sure who had started it and who was finishing
Laura rolled over, rolling Carmilla onto her back and straddling her hips. Pulling back to sit up, Laura dragged hesitant fingertips along Carmilla’s body as she took in the sight of her between her legs. Her hands found Carmilla’s and lifted them above her head, pinning them against the pillow as she leaned down to kiss her again.

The sensation of high voltage in her lips sent a chill through Laura’s body, an addicting feeling that she knew she would never quite quench.

“Laura…”

The whispered sigh filled Laura’s ear as she moved her lips slowly down Carmilla’s body, covering Carmilla with wet lips just as she had done for Laura second before. She left a lingering kiss just above Carmilla’s navel, before looking up to Carmilla’s face. “Is this ok?”

Carmilla nodded quickly, out of breath and hands shaky. Her fingers threaded in her own hair as she pushed it from her face and fragile lungs tried to keep up with the heavy breaths she was taking. The feeling in her body was consuming, tingling and heat in a way she had never felt before.

A surge of electricity shot through Carmilla’s body, pooling between her legs. Carmilla gasped at the same time Laura let out a moan at the taste of wet heat on her tongue. The silent shudders and involuntary twitching of Carmilla’s body urged Laura on as she explored the girl laying underneath her. Laura trailed her hands up along Carmilla’s body slowly while her mouth made quick work between her legs.

Gasps and moans filled the room, each cry sounding more and more like a plea for release. Carmilla’s hands dropped to grip Laura’s as they kneaded her breasts. A gravely moan echoing through the room as legs twitched and Carmilla’s hands gripped Laura’s tightly. Her lungs held tightly to the breath trapped in her chest as her back arched off the bed and her muscles spasmed.

When her breath finally released and her body dropped back down to the bed exhausted, she kept her eyes closed, spots dancing on the back of eyelids and a dizziness filling her head. She flinched at the gentle lips placing kisses near her core then sighed as they made their way up heated skin.

Laura licked her lips, the lingering taste of Carmilla on her tongue, mixed with the salt from beads of sweat spread out over exposed skin. She took her time making her way back up Carmilla’s body, timing her movements with the rise and fall of Carmilla’s chest. Her lips met her hip bone, then dragged gently over heaving stomach muscles, a tongue pulled slowly over an erect nipple before twirling gently around the other. A kiss at the base of her neck, just below her ear then meeting her lips just as she pulled in a heavy breath.

“You ok?” Laura mumbled against Carmilla’s mouth, her body lowering slowly to rest on top of Carmilla’s.

“That.. was...” Carmilla breathed out a heavy breath, bringing a shaky hand to tangle in Laura’s hair as she kissed her back.

Laura smiled against warm lips, their messy needy kisses now slow as Carmilla still struggled to catch her breath. Laura pulled back, smiling when she saw the look on Carmilla’s face. “Really?” She chuckled quietly, feeling nervous and shy for the first time that night. The softness in her voice causing Carmilla to finally open her eyes.

"Really." Carmilla smiled warmly, a reassuring look in her eyes as she changed their positions. Moving Laura to lay on her back while Carmilla settled over her.
The soft glow of the moon and the look in Laura’s eyes once again stole Carmilla’s breath and she wanted nothing more than to say the words she had been struggling to say all night.

I love you.

She wanted to tell her, but the butterflies in her stomach swarmed her throat and the words got caught their wings.

Not able to say it with words, she found a different way to get it out. The words etched in Laura’s skin with swollen lips. Fingertips spelling them out with shapes along the curves of Laura’s body. Silently spoken by the careful movements of a warm tongue and the matching rhythm of heart beats as heaving chests pressed together.

Carmilla laid with Laura, her body buzzing with every sound she made beneath her. She had memorized Laura’s body with her lips, getting lost in areas she was exploring for the first time. Taking her time to map the constellations laid out across her skin and committing to memory every spot that drew out a new sound of pleasure.

Carmilla’s felt her body move with Laura’s, a rhythm set by heart beats and rapid breathing. Her hand moved expertly between Laura’s legs, her pace quickening as the sounds escaping Laura’s lips became more needy and she could feel Laura inching closer to her own release.

Laura’s head pressed further into the pillow as the pressure built, becoming too much. New galaxies formed on the inside of her eyelids as she came undone. A gasp mixed with a whimper escaping swollen lips as Carmilla’s fingers curled inside of her and her legs trembled. Her back arched off the bed and her hands gripped tightly to Carmilla’s body, sure that if she let go she would float off into oblivion. The only sound louder than the pounding of her heart beat was Carmilla's voice, calling her beautiful like it was her name.

—

Laura’s hand traced lines along Carmilla’s arm as her ear pressed against her chest. She had listened as a frantic heart beat slowed, her own heart calming with the steady rhythm against her ear. She was curled against Carmilla’s body, under the thin cover of a warm sheet and wrapped in Carmilla’s arms. The promise to wake together in the morning grew closer, as they had spent most of the night wrapped up in each other and she could feel herself drifting closer to sleep.

Carmilla’s fingertips drew shapes along Laura’s back, as her cheek rested against her head. Everything about this moment felt perfect as she listened to Laura’s breathing slow and the movement of her hand brushing along her arm still. She smiled to herself before turning and placing a gentle kiss on Laura’s forehead, earning a sleepy sigh from the girl in her arm.

Carmilla hadn’t told her she loved her, but the flutter in her chest and the way their bodies fit together gave her the feeling that she would have time to gain the courage. She hadn’t felt this way before, everything about it was different. From the way her body felt under Laura’s fingertips, to the way her heart ached every time she saw her.

She had never known such an ache to be a good thing.

She watched through the window as snow began to fall, glistening in moonlight as it floated to the ground. The sound of Laura breathing breaking the peaceful silence around them. Warm breath swept across her chest and she found herself drifting to sleep as slowly as the snow outside her window.
The comforting ache in her chest cemented the feeling that once again her heart had broke, and this time it was by her own doing. That night she ripped apart the armor she had made to mend the pieces from the last time her heart had shattered. But she hadn’t really mended it at all.

She just closed it off and locked it away. Like keeping the tiny shattered pieces in a shoe box under the bed. Knowing they were there. Knowing she hadn’t fixed it yet and not knowing if it was even possible.

Then Laura walked in and gave her the courage to uncover the box, remove the lid, and lay out every piece of her heart she had gathered and hid away. And every time Laura brushed her thumb across the back of her hand, or twirled a strand of hair between her fingers, told her she was beautiful and didn’t let her pull away, she was encouraging Carmilla to find the pieces that matched up and piece them back together.

She lay there feeling like her heart was finally whole again, but the scars from fractures splayed across her heart, still there. But Laura saw the marks and called them beautiful and touched them with her fingertips, her lips and her heart and suddenly Carmilla’s scars didn’t feel like wounds. They felt like badges- earned from battles fought, and struggles faced, against herself and others, until she found Laura.

Loving Laura had ended the war and somehow made broken beautiful again.

——

*click*

Carmilla took silent steps around the bed, holding the camera up in front of her. She had woken up having felt more rested than she had in weeks. The warm body in bed next to her probably having something to do with it. She had always preferred to sleep alone, but waking up next to Laura made her want to never wake up alone again.

It was still snowing outside but the heavy comforter covering them both kept them warm. Carmilla rolled to her side and let her fingers ghost across the curve of Laura’s spine. She was spread out on her stomach, brunette hair splayed across the pillow that both her arms were hidden beneath. Her legs were laid out across the bed, with the comforter dipping low on her back.

They had fallen asleep, naked bodies pressed together, in the early hours in the morning. As they slept they moved to find their own space of comfort. Carmilla could remember waking up to a leg thrown over her body or a hand intertwined with hers, as if Laura was trying to maintain some closeness even if it was only a slight touch while they slept.

As Carmilla’s hand reached Laura’s low back, she felt the familiar tingle in her fingers at the desire to capture a moment. She climbed out of bed as gracefully as she could, trying not to wake the sleeping girl next to her. Clothes were a mess covering her floor. The pile of laundry she had washed the night before but never got around to folding had been pushed off the bed hastily while trying to make room for… other things.

Bare feet padded on the floor as she found a pair of underwear and slipped them on. The search for the rest of her clothes stopped when she heard Laura take a sleepy breath and shift slightly on the bed.

Instead of grabbing more clothes, Carmilla grabbed her camera.

*click*
The light coming from the window wasn't the typical morning sun, a thin layer of snow falling from heavy clouds blocking the light of the sun that had already risen fairly high in the sky. The room was still light and warm, the air thick with the memory of the events from the night before.

Carmilla smiled as her eyes focused on Laura’s body. Faint marks scattered across soft skin, the memory of moans and gasps replayed through Carmilla’s mind with every new star that had been left by Carmilla’s mouth the night before.

*click*

The covers pooled at Laura’s waist, her back exposed and slightly curved as she lay asleep on her stomach. Her face turned to the side and resting peacefully on the pillow bunched in her arms. Laura’s features were relaxed but somehow warm as Carmilla let her eyes linger. On eyelashes, on pink cheeks, slightly chapped lips and the slight curve of a smile.

*click*

She’s sure she’s never seen a more beautiful sunrise.

*click*

Carmilla lowered the camera with a smile, walking to the dresser and setting it down, the lens pointed towards the bed. She adjusted the focus before starting the cameras timer.

With quiet steps she made her way back to the bed, kneeling on the mattress and lifting the sheet up and over her shoulders. As she crawled towards Laura, the sheet slowly slid down smooth skin, catching just under shoulder blades.

*click*

Carmilla heard the shutter and smiled, knowing the camera had captured her back as she moved towards Laura. Hovering above her, she slowly lowered herself down, her bare chest pressing against Laura's back. She placed a gentle kiss on Laura's spine, letting her lips follow its trail upwards.

*click*

Laura shifted slightly and hummed sleepily, a smile spreading on her face as she pulled in a large breath. Carmilla moved some stray hair from Laura’s neck, lowered herself into the space behind her and kissed her gently below the ear.

*click*

“mmm, morning.” Laura’s stretched her legs, arching her back slightly as the rest of her body followed in the stretch.

“Morning sunshine.” Carmilla rasped in Laura’s ear before taking hold of her earlobe between teeth and pulling gently.

Laura’s smile grew at the surprising playfulness and she couldn't help but giggle as a cool nose nuzzled against her neck.

“Don’t move.” Carmilla whispered as she slowly climbed over Laura and got out of the bed.

This was the moment Laura decided to open her eyes for the first time and was surprised to find
Carmilla walking towards the bathroom with nothing but underwear on. When Carmilla stopped the doorway and turned to look over her shoulder with a smirk, Laura felt the familiar flutter in her stomach and bit her lip to contain her smile.

*click*

“When I come back you can tell me if you'd rather have pancakes or waffles.” Carmilla smiled as she stepped into the bathroom and shut the door behind her. She chuckled softly to herself at the look on Laura’s face but stopped when her eyes caught her reflection.

Somehow she looked different. She was smiling without having to think about it, her hair was a mess but she couldn't even bring herself to care. Carmilla’s eyes were pulled to the dark marks left on pale skin. Littered across her chest, near her hip and low on her neck. She brought her fingers up to touch bruised skin, a tinging in her fingers as they smoothed over the space where Laura's lips had been.

She sighed happily as she turned on the sink and splashed cool water on her face.

Laura rolled over, pulling the sheet up to cover her body as she sat up and looked around the room. She chuckled at the mess she hadn't noticed until now. Clothes were scattered across the floor, the comforter pushed down towards the foot of the bed.

*click*

Laura’s eyes snapped to the camera pointed towards her and she narrowed her eyes, keeping her attention on it to see if thats where she had heard the noise come from. She was so focused on the camera, when Carmilla's phone started to buzz and vibrate across the bed side table, it made her jump in surprise. She rolled her eyes at herself while she leaned over, reaching for the phone. She figured it was an alarm going off and pulled the phone from the table and looked down at the screen. By the time she realized it was someone calling and not an alarm, it was too late to not pay attention.

‘Mattie’ was written across the top of the screen as it lit up with a picture of Carmilla and another girl.

Laura’s first instinct was to smile. Carmilla looked so happy, a wide smile, a shine in her eyes that Laura recognized as the one that had been showing up more often lately when they were together. But the sight of another woman with her arm around her shoulder and her lips pressed to Carmilla’s cheek made her heart sink and stomach drop.

Their arms were around each other and even through a photo Laura could feel the sense of familiarity between them. The photo wasn’t that old, she could tell that much, and even though Laura had never seen the other woman before, she could feel herself getting jealous.

Everything Carmilla’s mother had said to her the night before came rushing back into her mind.

“I know where this is going but you should quit before she ruins you… She’s a diamond. And stone cannot love flesh.... Take a step back before you become just another one of her many short lived distractions.”

Laura tried to ignore the tightness in her chest and the worry that was creeping into her mind. When the ringing stopped and the picture faded from the screen she let out a heavy sigh.

*click*
Carmilla’s phone lit up again with a single vibration. Laura couldn't help but look down at the screen, immediately regretting it.

**Mattie: Kitty cat, don’t tell me you forgot about our date last night. I was looking forward to it all day….**

The rest of the message was cut off, the only way to read it would have been to unlock the phone and open up the message thread. Already Laura knew she had already done too much. The simple thought to stop an alarm had lead to something that twisted her gut and fogged her thoughts completely.

She knew she didn't know the whole story, or who the woman calling Carmilla and texting her about dates was. But it was too late. The tiny seed of doubt that was lingering unnoticed had suddenly taken root and was over growing the closeness and trust Laura had built with Carmilla. It's vines had twisted around her heart without her knowing and now they were tightening, clenching it with unbearable force.

*click*

Laura scrambled to the edge of the bed, clutching the sheet to her chest as she scanned the floor for her dress. When she couldn't find it she grabbed the nearest tshirt and pair of sweat pants she could find and pulled them on quickly.

The shirt had just fallen over her torso when she heard the bathroom door open behind her.

"Aw, clothes." Carmilla pouted playfully as she climbed back onto the bed, sliding under the sheet and pulling it just high enough to cover her chest.

"I um, I need to go." Laura stammered without turning around.

"What about pancakes?" Carmilla asked in a teasing tone.

"I just- I don't think..." Laura pulled in a deep breath, realizing no matter what she said, it wasn't going to be easy and she might be ruining everything. "I think we may have rushed into this and I just... I think maybe you weren't ready and—"

"Don't do this Laura."

Laura finally turned her head, surprised by Carmilla's tone. It was steely and quiet. She had never heard her sound so serious before.

"Do what?" Laura spoke quietly, not even convincing herself that she wasn't panicking. "I was just expecting too much from you and it wasn't fair and I realize that now. And it's ok, it's ok if you weren't ready or got caught up in a moment and…"

"Stop." Carmilla dropped her eyes to her lap, her shoulders slumping forward as the single word cracked quietly as she spoke it.
"...and the pressure of your mother and school or whatever just got to your head and you didn't mean what you said. It's ok. Really. I should have been more patient—"

"Stop!" Carmilla's gaze snapped up quickly. Her heart clenched when she saw Laura jump in surprise by her voice, but she couldn't take it back. Everything about this was wrong. She clenched her jaw and forced herself to be honest. She wouldn't let this happen without saying the truth and putting it all out there. She had come too far to stop laying her heart out on the line now. "Don't you dare make this my fault."

*click*

Laura shrank slightly, averting her gaze again. Her heart was pounding, a painful thump that made her ache for the frantic flutter she had felt only the night before. Her gut twisted and her mind felt foggy but the panic kept rising, the vines clenching harder. "You got a phone call. While you were in the bathroom."

"And?" Her response was quick. She couldn't let herself think of the sound of hurt in Laura's voice or the hesitance in her eyes. It would ruin her reserve and she knew she would give in and do anything to make her smile again.

"And I thought it was an alarm so, so I picked up your phone. But it wasn't an alarm."

Carmilla reached for her phone, lighting up the screen and seeing the alert list.

2 missed calls: Mattie
1 new message: Mattie

Carmilla knew it didn't matter who it was. Sister. Ex. Hell, it could have been her gynecologist for all Laura knew. And immediately she had decided no matter who it was, an explanation wasn't worth waiting for. Who Carmilla used to be, she would always be.

Carmilla wasn't sure if she was more angry or hurt and at this point she didn't even want to explain herself. Explain that Laura was worried over nothing. If all it took was one phone call to scare her away, then it wasn't really about Carmilla at all and there was nothing she could do, anyway.

"Were you just waiting for something to give you an excuse to bail?" Carmilla asked, trying to keep her voice from sounding too harsh.

"What? No!" Laura twisted on the mattress to face her. In her mind, she was giving Carmilla the easy out. It was Carmilla who wasn't ready for something serious. It made no sense for Carmilla to blame her for leaving.

"It's obvious this isn't something you're used to doing and it wasn't fair for me to force you into it."

"This isn't something I'm used to doing?" Carmilla scoffed, "What? Sleeping with someone or having it be more than just sex?"

Laura let out a sigh of frustration, "That's not what I'm saying—"

*click*
"No. I get it." Carmilla gripped the sheet tightly to herself. "But I don't believe for a second this is about me."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Laura's voice was defensive and her eyes narrowed slightly. "It's not a secret you have plenty of experience with sleeping around."

No, no, no. This was going all wrong. The words were out before she could stop them and she hated herself for it.

Carmilla's jaw clenched, but less out of anger and more because it felt like her heart was being ripped from her chest.

"Carm, I— I didn't mean that." Laura shook her head, panic written all over her face.

"No." Carmilla shook her head slowly. Her expression was blank and it gave Laura an uneasy feeling. "You're right."

*click*

"Carm, I just.." Laura ran a hand through her hair, "What am I supposed to think when I've walked in on who knows how many make out sessions and girls are constantly falling all over you?"

Laura was right to some extent. That was who Carmilla used to be. But she hadn't been that person in a while.

"That's not who I— My past is part of who I am Laura. You can't expect all of that to just evaporate because I love you."

Her throat clenched and she felt sick. She had finally said the words but everything about it felt wrong. They weren't supposed to be said out of anger, they weren't supposed to taste bitter falling from her lips. They were supposed to taste sweet, and sound like the song her heart had been singing since she realized how she felt. It was supposed to be soft and special and different.

But just like that her heart was no longer hers. She had ripped it from her own chest and thrust it into hands that were clenched and hurt. The quick rhythm her heart had been keeping beat to, slowed to a near stop. It felt like her heart was giving up. Broken one too many times to continue to keep beating.

*click*

Laura's mouth dropped open, the frustration disappearing from her face as she heard the pain etched in words that should have been full of happiness. It's what she wanted to hear, at least she thought so. So why did it hurt so much when Carmilla said it?

The silence that followed was deafening. Their eyes were locked on one another. Both wishing to go back in time to take back words that would never be forgotten.

Carmilla sighed defeatedly, looking down to her lap. "You keep asking me to jump and ok, maybe it takes me a minute, but every time— every time I fucking leap, thinking you're going to catch me." She paused, taking in a shaky breath and looking up at Laura, desperation in her eyes. "But at the very last second you pull your arms back and I crash to the ground."

Laura swallowed hard, feeling her eyes start to well up with tears.
Carmilla's voice broke as she continued, "So either stop asking me to jump or meet me half way."

Laura was speechless. Carmilla was right. It was her own apprehension that had started this. She hadn't even waited for an explanation before jumping to conclusions and practically bolting. She had always seen Carmilla as the guarded one, but as she sat there and saw the desperation in the dark haired girl's face and a tear make its way down her cheek she realized—it wasn't Carmilla that had been holding back. It was her.

It had been Carmilla that had stepped up every time Laura wanted more. Carmilla had given her practically everything she asked for. She had faced demons and made changes just to make Laura happy. And what had Laura done?

She had panicked at the first sign of trouble. Stepped back the second she got nervous, instead of facing her fears like Carmilla had done for her.

Carmilla sprinted to the edge and leapt without even looking where she would be landing. And Laura wouldn't even step up to the edge.

“I think you should go.”

*click*

“Carm, I...” Laura breathed out, feeling her own tears start to fall.

Carmilla looked up at her, an emptiness in her eyes that silenced Laura completely. There was nothing else she could say. So she let silence take over and fill the space that surrounded them.

*click*

But it wasn't silent. At least not to Carmilla.

She sat in her bed, clinging to the sheet and feeling more exposed than she ever had in her life. It wasn't because of her state of undress, but because she had opened herself up and given everything she had to Laura and it just hung there. Words and feelings and tears, floating through thick air made up of regret and fear and heartache.

She could hear the sound of the sheets rubbing on her skin, the slow dripping of water from the bathroom faucet, and the hum of the heater trying to counter the chill from outside. She heard the sound of steps moving further and further from her down the hall, the turning of the door knob and the click of the lock as the door opened and closed painfully slow.

*click*

Her knees drew towards her chest and her hands covered her face as she tried to stop the tears building in her eyes. Every deep breath hurt worse than the last and every silent sound echoed loudly in her head.

*click*

Her eyes moved slowly to the camera on the dresser, another blow to her already aching chest. She slowly lowered herself on her side, unable to care about the heartache being captured on film.
She heard the click of the camera, the shudder in her breathing and the faint echo of a sorrowful heartbeat.

She heard the silence that filled the room around her, impossible yet consuming as she laid there curled in on herself.

She heard everything, felt everything. Everything she had tried to protect herself from had come crashing down on her more violent than she could have ever imagined.

The only sound she couldn't hear was the sound of her heart breaking.

But God, could she feel it.
the end before the beginning

Chapter Summary

after the silence...

Chapter Notes

sorry this one took so long. thanks again for all the notes! it seriously it the greatest and keeps me writing, so thank you!

Carmilla stayed in the same spot in her bed, sheet pulled to her chest and body curled in tightly. She watched the light change as it came in through the window as the sun reached its place high in the sky. Then she watched as it dropped lower and lower, trading places with the moon.

Snow continued to fall all day. Light flurries then heavy drifts. Sparkling flakes then vengeful heaps as it played games with people brave enough to venture outside.

She listened for a long time. Footsteps and closing doors from other places in the building. Muffled conversations traveling through thin walls.

She wondered if her neighbors had been able to hear her and Laura the night before.

The thought made her curl up tighter, clutching at her knees.

Her camera had run out of film and the dull timed clicks had stopped not long after Laura had left. She never heard the footsteps returning, the sweet sound of Laura's laugh or anything that would wake her from this nightmare.

The sun had completely gone, leaving Carmilla surrounded by darkness. She felt numb. The world around her had stopped spinning and she was stuck, suspended in time as the events in the morning looped through her memory.

Where had it gone wrong? Where had she gone wrong?

Lights from a car outside filtered through her window, lighting up the empty space. It may have been the first time her eyes had actually focused on the world around her and she saw what state it was in.

Clothes strewn on the floor, comforter pushed off the bed, still lying nearly naked in the center of her bed.

With a heavy sigh she sat herself up and looked around the room. It was stupid, really. Like opening the fridge to see what inside when you already know what's there. Already know what you're looking for can't be found there, anyway.

She climbed out of bed and grabbed a tshirt off the floor before putting it on slowly. Bare feet pressed into the floor and she shifted her weight, feeling uncomfortable in her own space for the first
time in her life.

It felt too quiet. Too empty.

Another deep breath and she was grabbing the sheet on her bed and pulling it up high to cover the bed. She grabbed her comforter and did the same, smoothing out the heavy cloth and placing pillows at the head of the bed.

Her eyes lingered on a few wayward feathers that had landed on the bed in front of her. She could practically hear the sounds Laura had made while she dragged them slowly over warm skin. A heavy swallow in a clenched throat came and she averted her eyes to the pile of clothes on the floor.

She slowly started picking them up, folding them, hanging them, and putting them away. She came to Laura's dress, mixed in with the pile and laid it out on her bed gently before going back to the pile on the floor.

Once her clothes had all been put away she turned back to the dress resting on the edge of her bed. She picked it up, holding it in front of her with outstretched arms. She sat down on the edge of the bed and hugged the dress to her chest, dropping her head and inhaling the scent of body wash and something sweet. It smelled like Laura.

Carmilla grabbed a hanger for the dress and hung it in her closet before making her way to the bathroom. Immediately she turned on the water in the shower, letting it heat up as she stripped of her clothes. Her reflection mocked her. Not the same person she had looked at earlier that day. She avoided lifting her eyes to look at her face, only scanning the marks left behind that were lower on her body.

Her fingers brushed gently over a mark on her hip. The tingle she had felt that morning at the memory of Laura's lips was now a painful burn. She was grateful when the heat from the shower finally fogged the mirror that her reflection was no longer recognizable.

Water scalded her skin as she stepped in, letting it cover her body, praying for it to wash away the numbness that was consuming her. Her forehead rested on cold tile as water fell down her back, burning trails down her skin and reminding her what it meant to feel something.

She didn't move till the water ran cold, then washed her hair and soaped her body as her skin prickled with goosebumps and limbs started to shiver. She climbed out of the shower and toweled off her body, and rubbed at her dripping hair. She turned off the light and made her way back to the bedroom. Not bothering to dress before climbing into cold sheets she curled up and let the silence pull her into an uneasy sleep.

An hour later Carmilla woke with a jolt, blinking quickly trying to adjust to the little light being let in through the window. “Laura. You awake?”

She turned on her back, letting a hand rub her eyes sleepily as she reached her other arm to the space next to her, expecting to find a warm body. Instead the sheets were cold. The nightmare hadn't only ruined her sleep. The nightmare was her new reality.

A quiet sob echoed through the room, breaking the silence that had lingered since Laura had left. The numbness finally lifted and wracked her chest with a pang of sadness. She could no longer hear the sounds echoing through the building, or the slow drip from the faucet. All she could hear was her labored breathing as her lungs burned with every heavy sob that left her chest and was muffled in her pillow.
“I mean, she has to know it’s Monday, right?” Laf was leaning on the counter in the kitchen while Perry stood at the stove.

“Of course she knows it Monday.” Perry gave them an unimpressed look as she poured more batter into the pan. “Why wouldn’t she know it’s Monday?”

Laf sighed and looked towards the hall, “Because since she came in yesterday I’ve only seen her once when she came out to grab the carton of ice cream and a very large spoon, before she disappeared again. She’s been cooped up on her room for over a day now.”

Perry flipped a pancake and turned to Laf, shaking the spatula at them, “Well maybe you should just go check on her to be safe. It is finals week. I’d hate for her to sleep in and miss as important one.”

As if on cue Laura came bouncing down the hall, full of energy and a wide smile on her face. “Good morning!” She greeted happily before grabbing a couple pieces of bread and putting them in the toaster.

“Uh, hey, L.” Laf watched her closely, noticing right away the difference in mood from the last time they saw her. She had stormed into the apartment and ran straight to her room without a word. “You doing ok?”

“Great! Why?” Laura grabbed some orange juice from the fridge and poured herself a glass.

Laf and Perry shared a look before Perry placed a pancake on a plate and handed it to Laf. “Well, sweetie, you’ve been cooped up in your room for while. We were beginning to worry.”

Bread popped from the toaster and Laura grabbed it, quickly buttering it and grabbing her jacket as she made her way towards the door. “Just been studying. Finals week!” She shoved a piece of bread in her mouth and pulled open the door, mumbling a goodbye over her shoulder as she disappeared through the door.

“Well that was…” Perry furrowed her eyebrows and twisted her lips thoughtfully.

“A big fat lie.” Laf shoved half the pancake in their mouth, syrup dripping down their chin. “She’s gonna try to be all fine and dandy and then she’s gonna snap.”

Perry frowned and let out a sigh as her eyes traveled back to the door. Laf was right. Laura was trying to pretend everything was fine, and even thought she hadn't told them what was bothering her, they both could see it was something big. And putting on a fake smile probably wasn't going to last very long.

—

That afternoon, Laura waltzed back into the apartment with just as much bounce as she had left that morning. She had already finished 2 finals and had passed them both. She had a couple papers still due by the end of the week and 2 more finals, then she would be home free. Friday would come and she would be going home to spend Christmas with her dad and family and everything back at Silas would be put on hold.

At least that's what she was telling herself. If she made it through finals and survived the 4 hour bus ride home, then she could keep ignoring the fact that she had just destroyed what may have been the greatest thing to happen to her and hurt one of the people she cared most about in this world.
Ignoring it was harder while she was still there. Walking across campus, every dark haired girl was Carmilla. Every corner she walked around held the possibility of running into her. She wasn't sure if she was hoping to see her or grateful she hadn’t. It felt strange to go about her day without talking to Carmilla, she had become such a constant. She missed her. But knew it was her fault things were the way they were and it wouldn't be as easy as just saying I’m sorry.

—

“Carmilla?”

Carmilla heard her door shut and let out a sigh. She knew ignoring her phone would probably lead to this, she just didn't think it would happen this soon.

She came shuffling down the hall slowly, sweat pants and a t-shirt, wild hair and a scowl.

“Mattie.” She nodded and went straight for the fridge, ignoring the stern look from the woman standing in the doorway.

“You look like you’ve been sleeping for a week.” Mattie frowned and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Only 3 days.” Carmilla shrugged and smelled a take out container that she had pulled from the fridge.

“You cant be serious.” Mattie’s shoulders dropped as she rolled her eyes and strode of to the counter. She set her purse down and pulled out a stool, sitting down and clasping her hands in front of her. “I take it this has something to do with mothers dinner?”

“Not at all, actually.” Carmilla took a bite of cold take out and walked over to stand at the counter opposite of Mattie. “That actually was fine. I had cake, mother was happy, then I left.”

“Then why am I finding you this Wednesday morning, still in sleep wear and eating cold food that smells like you should have thrown it out days ago?” Mattie frowned and eyed the food in Carmilla’s hands suspiciously.

Carmilla avoided Mattie’s eyes and took another bite, realizing it tasted as bad as it smelled. She dropped the container in the trash and leaned down on the counter. “Just taking a break.”

“Don’t you have finals? And an exhibition application?”

Carmilla sighed, “Yeah. So?”

“So what on earth are you doing?” Mattie’s calm and somewhat unimpressed demeanor switched to one of annoyance. She loved her sister, but got frustrated with the way she dealt with things sometimes.

“I’m just, I didn't feel like going today. Back off.” Carmilla stood up, throwing her arms out and rolling her eyes. She didn't want to have to explain what was really going on. She wasn't even sure she could.

Mattie narrowed her eyes at Carmilla, she knew there was something bigger than just not feeling like going happening but knowing her sister, she wouldn't just come out and say it easily. "What did she
"What?" Carmilla looked up quickly, "who?"

Mattie pressed her lips together and rolled her eyes, relaxing her posture, "the girl that has you acting like a silly little fool."

"There's no girl." Carmilla glared across the counter.

"Oh please, Kitty. The last time I saw you act like this was when that little blonde trollop ran away with her tail between her legs the first time mother looked at her." Mattie's expression softened when she saw Carmilla switch back from angry to hurt. "This isn't you. Where's the feisty little flirt I know? The girl that owns every room she walks into and makes sure other people know it? The girl that takes her pick from the line of women lusting to be with her?"

Carmilla managed a chuckle but shook her head, "That's not me anymore. Hasn't been for a while."

"No?" Mattie asked curiously with a knowing smirk, "I don't think it ever really was, Carmilla."

Carmilla looked up at her curiously. That was not the response she was expecting. Mattie had always been up for a game or crazy night out on the town. She had played wing woman more times than Carmilla could remember, so why was she suddenly playing like that wasn't who she had been?

“Don’t look at me like that. I pay attention.” Mattie shifted on her seat slightly, “You got your heart broke and instead of fixing it, you did everything you could to ignore it.”

“What are you talking about?” Carmilla scoffed, playing it off like it was no big deal. She hadn't had her heart broken. Or fallen off the deep end and completely forgot who she really was in order to hide the hurt she was feeling. Not. At. All.

“Ell. You think that girl ruined you, but you ruined yourself, love.” Mattie’s smile was small, caring and almost sad. She had watched her little sister break and forget herself in an effort to forget the girl that had crushed her. “Your heart may hurt but it's still beating. This new girl-- no matter how special she is, you can't lose yourself trying keep her."

Carmilla knew there was a reason she had been avoiding Mattie. Even without knowing what was going on- she knew what was going on. "So what if I don't know who I am?"

"Then it's time you figure that out." Mattie smiled and placed her hand on Carmilla's on top of the counter.

Mattie was right. Moping around her apartment alone wasn't her. Sure, she hurt. But she wasn't dead. Somewhere along the way she had managed to heal her heart- maybe it had something to do with Laura and maybe it was something she had done herself, in order to love Laura the way she wanted to. The way she knew Laura deserved. Either way, she couldn't lose herself again. Whoever that was.

"Thanks, Mattie." Carmilla smiled, genuinely, for the first time in days.

"How about lunch?" Mattie smiled then quickly went back to her normal composed self.

"Sure. But first can we go pick up Joey? I'm starting to miss his condescending looks when he thinks he's smarter than me." Carmilla stood up, walking towards the hallway.
"Fine. But we are taking your car." Mattie stood up and straightened out her clothes, "last time we took mine he slobbered all over my leather."

---

"How did we survive this last year?" Laura whined as she shut her door and slumped back against it.
Laf looked up from their place at the table and shrugged, "A lot of tears and a lot of sugar."

"I don't think I have the energy to cry." Laura pouted as she dropped her bag, pulled her coat off and made her way to the kitchen, "So sugar it is."

She grabbed the packet of cookies and sat down next to Laf, offering them a cookie once she was already chewing one of her own.

"How many do you have left?" Laf asked, shoving a cookie in their mouth whole.

"Not enough." Laura mumbled, cookie crumbs falling from her lips.

Laf chuckled and shook their head as they struggled to chew and swallow their entire cookie.
"Finals. Not cookies."

"Oh." Laura shrank further in her chair, "too many."

They both chuckled and reached for another cookie before Laura started talking again.

"I have one more tomorrow and then one Friday morning before I have to catch the bus to go home."
Laf nodded, trying to decide if they should bring up the elephant in the room. Since Laura had come home the morning after the dinner at the Deans she hadn't so much as mentioned Carmilla, and after everything she had done for them both at the dinner, Laf couldn't help but wonder why that was.
"So do you know what Carmilla is doing for the holidays?" Laf tried to ask casually.

Laura half glared at the cookies sitting between them, "I don't know. Why would I know?"

"Oh I don't know,"Laf rolled their eyes, " maybe because up until the last few days you've been connected at the hip."

"Yeah well, not anymore." The almost permanent smile she had been forcing herself to keep on her face was completely gone now. She had been trying to keep herself focused on school and finals in an effort to ignore what had happened the last time she spoke to Carmilla. She still wasn't sure how to process it or even how she felt about it.

"Whoa, frosh, you ok?" Laf asked, wide eyes as they noticed Laura's chin quivering slightly and her eyes welling up.

"Yeah. Fine. I'm fine." Laura sniffed and wiped at her watery eyes.

"That is not the face of someone that is fine." Laf scooted their chair closer to Laura and wrapped an arm around her shoulder, "What happened, L?"

Laura let out a heavy sigh and took in a shaky breath, trying to keep control of her emotions. "I don't even know, Laf. I messed up."
It only took a second for Laura to finally break and try to explain what had happened between labored breaths, trying to push down sobs.

Carmilla had stepped up and opened up her heart and Laura took one look and froze and she didn't know why. The idea of losing Carmilla to someone else had twisted her gut and squeezed at her heart in a way that was unbearable. She wanted Carmilla, she wasn't ready to claim she loved her—but what she felt for her was big, and maybe that scared her. Whatever it was, she had hesitated giving Carmilla her heart in return and in the process probably ruined any chance she had with her.

"It can't be that bad. She did say she loves you, right? Maybe you can fix it?" Laf gave Laura's shoulder a comforting squeeze.

"You didn't see her face, Laf." Laura took a deep breath, composing herself again. "She hasn't talked to me since I left."

"Have you tried talking to her?"

"Well, no." Laura admitted. She had tried to pretend the whole thing hadn't happened. "Maybe that's where you should start then."

"You're right." Laura sighed, "I'm just not sure what to say."

Laura’s phone started to ring in her bag, slowly she got up and made her way to her bag, searching its pockets for the phone. She smiled when she saw who was calling.

"Hey, daddy."

"Pumpkin!" Laura’s father's voice was cheerful as it came through the phone. "Now tell me real quick, are you in Building A or Building B cause I just can't remember."

"Building B, Dad. But why do you need to know that?" Laura asked in confusion.

"Because they all look the same! You would think they would do something with these things to make them look different. I mean, how many times do you think people walk into the wrong apartment? Probably a lot."

Laura could hear sounds in the background that sounded like her dad was driving which made his question make ever less sense. "Dad, what are you doing?"

"Trying to find a parking spot." He mumbled some other words under his breath as he pulled into a vacant spot and put his truck in park. "Now, Are you going to make me try and find your door on my own or are you going to come out and get me?"

"What? You're here?!" Laura’s eyes went wide and she rushed to the window that looked out to the front of the apartment building. She saw her dad climbing out of his truck with a smile and couldn't help but laugh. She hung up the phone and ran out the door, grabbing her coat as she went out to meet her dad.

Carmilla watched Mattie drive away from the sidewalk outside her apartment. They had picked up
Joey and stopped for lunch on the way back. Snow was still falling, like it had been for 3 days, and
the world was becoming more and more white by the second. Once Mattie was out of sight, Carmilla
 glanced down at Joey and was met with a curious look.

“"You up for a walk?""

The response of a quickly wagging tail and excited hops gave Carmilla her answer. She looked
around, trying to decide where exactly to walk when Joey started going without her. She figured it
wouldn't hurt to let him lead and adjusted the camera strap around her neck before shoving her hands
in her pockets and following after the german shepherd.

They had been walking for a while, Joey would run off to a tree or after a bird then make his way
back to the sidewalk, continuing to lead Carmilla in no particular direction. Carmilla was lost in
thought mostly, going over her conversation with Mattie earlier.

She knew she was right about needing to figure out who she was. It had been so easy to let things
fall apart after Ell. It was easier to pretend like things were fine than to face the hurt she had caused.
It was easier to act like someone who didn’t care about anything or anyone and always keep her
distance, stay unattached and casual rather than open up her heart to get hurt again. That is, it was
easier until Laura came along.

Somehow Laura had caused Carmilla to tear down those walls and forget the mask she had been
using for so long, and the real her was able to show through. It was a choice, to let Laura in. One
Carmilla didn’t regret. Even with the tightness in her chest whenever she thought about her. She was
tired of pretending and Laura had made it easy to stop.

As Carmilla stopped and watched Joey run off into a pile of snow she decided not to waste time in
trying to figure out who she used to be. But instead, decide who she wanted to be.

—

After an hour of following Joey, Carmilla looked around to see where they were at. Having made a
circle around campus they were coming up on familiar apartment buildings and the park she often
took Joey to. She was getting restless, having lifted her camera numerous times just to drop it again
without snapping a photo.

It had been that way since her film had run out on its own as the camera sat on her dresser. She had
replaced the roll of film with a new one, but hadn’t felt the pull to capture a picture. It seemed
nothing could live up to the way she felt when those last photos had snapped. Why take a photo if it
doesn’t make you feel something?

Everything Maxfield had been telling her made sense now. There’s a reason her fingers tingled or
she felt the need to press her palms into her thighs when she felt a pull to take a picture. It wasn't just
something she saw that she wanted to capture- it was a feeling. It was a piece of her own soul
getting put onto film, a glimpse into her head or her heart when she snapped a photo with that strong
of a pull. It seemed stupid to go back to capturing moments because they ‘looked’ good after finding
so many moments to capture because they tore at the cracks of her heart in so many different way.
Stitching pieces together or widening the gap.

Carmilla was ready to go home, frustrated with the lack of inspiration from the world around her
when she heard a familiar laugh and the cold, snow covered world around her instantly seemed
brighter.
Without thinking her camera lifted and her finger was pushing the shutter release.

*click*

The sound of the camera finally capturing a photo was both calming and haunting. The last time she had heard that sound, she was curled in on herself as the woman she loved walked away from her silently.

Now, it was the same woman's laugh, breaking through the silence around her that had stirred an instant reaction and caused her to take her first photo since feeling like her heart had stopped beating. She lowered the camera slowly, surprised by her own reaction to seeing Laura. It seemed that even though her head wanted to still be angry with her, her heart had other ideas.

"Let's go." She spoke quietly to Joey who had stopped at her side. She wasn't ready to talk to Laura yet, with her heart and head disagreeing about how she felt, she knew it would only confuse things further.

Joey on the other hand knew exactly how he felt and took off, running towards Laura. Carmilla was about to call after him but stopped, knowing if she did, Laura would hear her and her plan to avoid her wouldn’t work. But then she realized her dog running right to her would probably ruin that plan anyway. Instead of being an adult and handling the situation maturely— she jumped behind a tree to hide herself.

—

“Dad! What are you doing here?” Laura laughed as she ran out of her building and straight for the man making his way towards her. She practically barreled into him, wrapping her arms tightly around his waist in a hug.

“I came to see my little girl, of course.” Laura’s father leaned over, returning the hug tightly before pulling back and gripping her shoulders to look her over, “You look tired. Have you been getting enough sleep? Eating ok? Because if you need money for groceries all you have to do is ask.” Laura smiled and shook her head, “I’m fine dad. Its just finals week. I promise everyone looks tired. Even the professors.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive. What are you doing here anyway? You know I’m catching a bus home in two days, right?” Laura stepped back, putting her hands on her hips as her father squared his shoulders.

“Did you really think for one second I was going to let my little girl take a bus, in what is going to be the biggest snow storm we’ve seen in 5 years, for 4 hours to get home?” He scoffed and shook his head, “No way. I came to get you so we could drive home together.”

“I guess I should have expected— Joey?” Laura was cut off by the german shepherd running up to her excitedly.

“You know this dog?” Laura’s dad asked with a chuckle as Joey struggled to contain his excitement at seeing the girl.

“Well yeah, but—" Laura leaned down, petting Joeys cool fur while looking around, expecting to
see Carmilla. “I’ve never seen him without Carm.”

She told Joey to sit and he immediately obeyed, impressing Laura’s father as he reached down to pet the dog’s head. Laura pulled her phone from her pocket and scrolled through her contacts till she found Carmilla’s name.

She hesitated a moment, letting her thumb hover over the call button considering her options. She couldn’t just let Joey run around by himself, but was this really the way she wanted to break the silence that had been holding strong between the two girls the last couple days? Then again, maybe that’s why Joey was here— if she was someone that believed in fate, maybe it was a sign.

She pressed the button as she took in a deep breath and lifted the phone to her ear. It rang a few times and she couldn’t decide if the flutter in her chest was because she was hoping Carmilla wouldn’t answer, or that she would.

Carmilla felt her phone vibrate in her pocket and she let her head drop back against the tree. It was stupid to think Laura would ignore Joey, it was even more stupid to think she could really get away with hiding behind a tree. She pulled it out and clenched her jaw as she looked at the screen.

Mentally cursing Joey she answered the phone and held it to her ear. She heard Laura breathing and turned to look around the tree at the girl standing there with Joey and a man.

“Carm?” Laura asked quietly, turning away from her father as if it would somehow offer some privacy. “Are you there?”

Laura had turned to give Carmilla the perfect view of her face. Even though they weren’t exactly close, Carmilla could feel the anxious energy between them. She would be lying if she had said it wasn’t good to hear Laura’s voice. It was obvious she had missed her by the way her camera had immediately lifted at the first sign of her and the way her chest tightened as she fought the urge to forget everything that had happened and confess her love all over again.

Laura glanced over her shoulder at her dad, who was busy playing with Joey, then turned away again, taking a few steps towards Carmilla unknowingly. “Look. I know you’re probably.. I don’t know, furious? Hurt? Angry? And you probably hate me now and I know you don’t want to listen to anything I have to say…”

“What do you want, Laura?” Carmilla’s voice was quiet but solid. Her head and her heart at battle and she wasn’t sure who was winning. All she knew was that the longer she listened to Laura’s voice or looked at her, the faster she was forgetting herself all over again.

“You are there.” Laura sighed, seemingly relieved she wasn’t talking to herself. When Carmilla remained silent, she couldn't help but start to fill the silence with nervous rambling. "How are you these days? because you sound great! All furious and brooding and-- hey, are you excited for finals to be over?"

Carmilla continued to watch Laura from her place hidden halfway behind the tree. She could tell Laura was uncomfortable but trying. And just like Carmilla thought, her heart was winning over her head and she actually felt bad. Her voice softened but she kept it firm. "What do you want?"

"I just- it's Joey. He's here. At my place and I wasn't sure if you knew or if he just got out on his own somehow or something."
"Yeah, he's uh, he's fine. He will make his way home." Carmilla sighed, watching Laura look back towards Joey and the man.

"What? Really?" Laura asked quickly. That was exactly the opposite answer she was expecting. Carmilla took better care of Joey than she did herself. "I can bring him back to your place if you want. Or if you're out I can let him stay at mine until you can come get him?"

"I said he's fine, Laura." Carmilla was getting impatient. She felt stupid for hiding behind the tree and frustrated that Laura just wouldn't drop it. But the fact that Laura was willing to take care of Joey just made her love Laura more.

"It's really no problem. I'm just studying anyway." Laura walked back over to Joey and the man, "well actually my dad just got here and surprisingly has become fast friends with Joey so it's no problem--"
"Fine. Goddammit." Carmilla stepped out from behind the tree, leaving footprints in the snow as she made her way back to the sidewalk. "Look up."

"What?" Laura asked, lifting her head to look towards the street.

"Left."

Laura turned and saw her immediately. Less than a block away, phone up to her ear, her other hand shoved in her pocket. Heavy coat, beanie, straight face and beautiful. The snow was falling lightly, it hadn't stopped in days but that afternoon had been less storm and more light dusting. Flakes were catching in Carmilla's hair, on her clothes, and on pink cheeks. Laura felt herself smiling before quickly stopping herself. She could tell by Carmilla's voice she wasn't happy to see her. Which hurt. But was understandable.

"Hey." Laura whispered into the phone, keeping her eyes locked on Carmilla's despite the distance.

Carmilla sighed, most of her anger and frustration dissipating, "Hey."

Laura took a step towards Carmilla, "You look--"

"Don't, Laura." Carmilla cut her off. Her voice quiet and pleading. She may have stepped out from behind the tree, but the distance was the only thing making her able to keep herself together. She still wasn't ready to do this. Especially still having no clue where Laura's head was at. Or heart, for that matter.

"Sorry." Laura's voice was barely a whisper as she halted her steps. "Have you been here the whole time?"

"Yeah." Carmilla replied sheepishly.

"Why didn't you just say so?"

"I was trying to avoid this." Carmilla shifted her weight, noticing the cold air around her for the first time since she had started her walk.

"Oh." Laura realized Carmilla didn't want to see her. She couldn't really blame her- she still hadn't explained anything from the other morning or even tried to make things right. But honestly, she wasn't sure how to explain or what to do.
"Look, thanks for watching out for Joey. It... It really was nice of you."

It was weird having a conversation with someone over the phone while you could see them at the same time. Carmilla was close enough to read Laura's body language and see the change of expression on her face- but ultimately felt miles away.

"And I don't, hate you." Carmilla sighed, her shoulders dropping. "I don't think I could if I wanted to."

Laura's eyebrows shot up. It wasn't exactly forgiveness or offering her a clean slate-- but it still felt huge. Even if Carmilla's voice had sounded hesitant in admitting it.

A silence fell between them as they watched each other from afar. Neither of them were sure where to go from here. They were stuck in middle ground and much like the rest of their relationship, communication just wasn't happening. Carmilla was still hurt and Laura was still trying to figure out her own issues. Why she had been so quick to jump to conclusions and bail in the first place. She was frustrated with herself for that one, of course she understood why Carmilla was hesitant to talk to her.

"Are you- did you-" Laura cut herself off, she didn't want to hang up but wasn't sure how to keep Carmilla on the phone without feeling stupid. "How are your finals going?"

"I should get going." Carmilla kicked at some snow on the ground, dropping her eyes to look away from Laura.

"Oh. Right. Sorry." Laura turned back around and called Joey to her side. She gave his back a rub before pointing towards Carmilla and ushering him to go back to her. "I um, was going to study for my psychology final. You know, Thursday in the library. Like always, if you want to, you know.."

"Maybe." Carmilla looked down towards her feet as Joey approached her. She knew that was a lie- she most likely wouldn't show up and felt bad for giving Laura false hope. So she took a breath and spoke quickly as she looked up. "Probably not."

Her eyes landed on Laura just in time to see the small smile that had formed from her 'maybe' turn into a frown at her final response. She tried to offer her an apologetic look but wasn't sure it had traveled the distance between them. She had already stayed longer than intended so she quickly lowered her phone and hung up, shoving it quickly in her pocket and turning around to start walking home.

"ok. okay then." Laura was still talking into the phone as she watched Carmilla walk away. "that is how it is. that is just- how it is."

"Everything ok Laura?"

Laura wiped at her eyes with the hand not holding her phone before turning around to face her dad. "Yeah! Just school stuff."

"You sure?" He asked, concerned.

"Mmhmm." Laura nodded with a forced smile, "how about some hot chocolate?"

Carmilla clenched her jaw and kept her eyes forward. She could feel Joey glancing up at her as they
walked together down the sidewalk.

"I'm not talking to you." Carmilla ignored the German Shepherd and picked up her pace.

Joey kept up easily, staying close to Carmilla's side instead of exploring like he had done earlier. Carmilla glanced down at him and glared when he looked up towards her.

"Don't give me that look. You're lucky I didn't just leave your ass." Carmilla shook her head and chuckled reluctantly, "You wouldn't survive on Laura's idea of a healthy diet."

Carmilla reached down and scratched between Joey's ears, he quickly took it as his sign of being forgiven and ran off to chase a bird. Carmilla walked slowly, falling back into the train of thought she was on before running into Laura.

It was clear she still loved her. The mixed feelings that had swarmed her chest at seeing her told her she probably always would. Carmilla was no longer angry, she realized. Just hurt.

The other thing she realized was that Mattie had been wrong. Her advice not to lose herself was useless. Not because she was lost because of Laura, but because it was Laura that had finally helped her find herself again.

She had been so hurt after losing Ell that it seemed smarter to build up walls and wear masks to keep her heart safe. She had gotten so good at playing it safe and distant, she started to forget she was playing a game all together. Until Laura.

Laura was the first girl that had seen past the carefully crafted disguise and not only saw the real her, but helped Carmilla see herself again, too. Laura hadn't forced her to tear her walls down, Carmilla had chosen to.

As she made her way through the falling snow, breath escaping her lips in a cloud and cold air stinging her skin, Carmilla felt her lungs fill with air, then empty as she breathed easy.

It made sense now. Why it had hurt so much when Laura had left. Carmilla had chosen to love her. She had willingly handed over her heart and Laura had no idea what to do with it.

It wasn't Carmilla's fault. It wasn't really Laura's, either. Something was standing in the way, that much was clear. As Carmilla made her way into her apartment building she realized that just because she had fought her demons in order to love Laura, it didn’t guarantee Laura had done the same. If Carmilla really loved her, she could give Laura the time to figure it out for herself.

——

Laura sat at a table in the library with a bag of gummy bears and her psychology book in front of her. It was the last final she had to take and it seemed normal to be in the library studying for it. Apparently every other student still on campus had the same idea though.

When Laura walked in out of the snow, almost every table was already occupied. She made her way back to her usual spot, hoping Carmilla might actually be there, but found someone else napping in their spot.

She wasn't sure what she expected. Carmilla had been pretty clear about her intention not to show up, but there was still a chance. At least Laura hoped there was.
So she had found a table close enough to the door, and a seat facing it, that way if Carmilla happened to show up, she would see her walk in. So far it had been an hour and all Laura had seen was students that had consumed way too much caffeine, had been getting way too little sleep, or were on the verge of tears.

Finals week was a magical time.

"You do that too, huh?"

Laura's eyes shot up from her book just as she put her red gummy bear in her mouth. A familiar smirk made her smile, "Do what?"

Will smiled and pulled out the chair across from Laura, "Eat the red ones first." He pulled a textbook from his bag and opened up a notebook filled with writing, "Carmilla does that too."

Laura scoffed, "What? No she doesn't." She shook her head and offered the bag to Will, "She only eats the green and white."

Will took a few gummy bears and stuck them in his mouth, a puzzled look on his face. "You sure?"

Laura chuckled, amused and slightly sad, "Yeah. She's been stealing them since we first met. I don't think I've ever even seen her eat a red one, now that I think about it."

"Interesting." Will nodded, "I thought red was her favorite." He shrugged and pushed his books around to get situated while looking at the rest of the empty table. "She coming to study with you?"

"Who? Carmilla?" Laura looked back down at her book trying to play it off as casual. "Uh, no. I don't think so."

"Oh." Will looked disappointed, clasping his hands together. "How's she doing, anyway?"

"Why are you asking me?" Laura shrugged and gave Will a curious look. She was actually just about to ask him the same thing. Running into her the day before hadn't really been very revealing as far as how she was and Carmilla probably wouldn't have told Laura anyway.

Will was searching for the right page in his text book as he answered, "She's just been pretty quiet since our mothers dinner. I was surprised she went at all but she's been avoiding everyone since then." He finally looked up at Laura and shrugged, "I just figured if she was going to talk to anyone it would be you."

"Oh." Laura swallowed heavily. She wasn't sure how to reply. Carmilla disappearing was most likely her fault and had very little to do with her mothers dinner. But if Will didn't know that, then Carmilla had most likely been keeping to herself completely and not just avoiding Laura. "Well, I don't know. But it's finals week, so.. She's probably just, you know, doing that."

"Yeah. You're probably right." Will smiled then turned his attention to his books.

Laura sighed and picked at the edges of her book absentmindedly. She had to admit to herself she hadn't really be studying. She had come to the library purely to see if Carmilla would show up. And she hadn't.

She wasn't even sure what she would have done if Carmilla had come. The ball was in Laura's court but she didn't even know what sport they were playing. Carmilla had put it the best way possible.. Carmilla had leapt, and Laura hadn't bothered to meet her halfway.
It wasn't really fair for her to be upset Carmilla hadn't shown up. That would only be one more time Carmilla had come halfway without Laura even knowing which direction she wanted to go.

It was becoming more and more clear that Laura was the one that was confused about her feelings and had been keeping Carmilla at arms length. She had used the excuse that Camilla was the one that needed to change and open up in order for things to work. Only, that had backfired when Carmilla did just that and Laura wasn't ready for it.

So what was holding her back?

--

Carmilla walked into the photo room quietly, trying to avoid the other students finishing up their portfolios and turning them in. She had hoped having it be the last day to turn things in that the dark room would be empty. She had film to develop and didn't really want an audience for the visual of her curled on her bed, heart broken. It was going to be hard enough for her to look at them at all, it would have been torture to let anyone else see that.

As soon as she started to pour the chemicals, the noises from outside the darkroom started to fade away. That was why she loved the process of developing so much - everything else just seemed to disappear as her photos started to appear. Like she was escaping the world outside and getting lost in the one she had captured through her lens, the one she had a say in how it was seen. Taking something seemingly not worth a second glance and making it the most beautiful thing you've ever seen.

As the first of the photos started to develop Carmilla remembered why the camera had even captured her heartbreak in the first place.

The first photo was of Laura, sleeping on her stomach, hair splayed across the pillow a slight smile on her lips. Carmilla had woken and wanted to capture the beauty of the moment. And she had.

It seemed perfect. Everything about the photo was bright. From the morning sun stretching across the room as it snuck in the window in the morning hours. To the way the sheet fell low on Laura's back, exposing smooth skin and gentle curves and lines of her body.

Even though the film had been black and white, the different shades of dark and light that spanned between the two extremes added to the depth and feeling of the scene far better than a photo with color could have captured. Photo after photo showed a new angle, a new focus, on the girl fast asleep in Carmilla's bed. It had been a moment so fleeting it seemed as if she had captured a picture of something she had dreamt.

Even more so as Carmilla saw herself in one of the photos. Hidden beneath the sheet as she crawled up next to Laura's body, her lips pressed against her back gently. Laura's smile had grown, no longer sleeping but eyes still closed gently. Carmilla sighed at seeing her own expression. Anyone would be a fool to not see how in love she was. It was clear in everything about the photo. The focus was still Laura, Carmilla's body slightly blurred as it captured her in a moment of movement. But the look on her face crystal clear, a smile so bright she wondered how it had stayed hidden in the darkness of heartbreak so long. Her eyes cast up towards Laura's face, an expression like she was seeing heaven after living an eternity in hell.

The outline of naked bodies beneath the sheets, gentle touches on soft skin, pursed lips and sleepy smiles. The photos had captured the intimacy of the moment without it seeming sexual or exploitive.

Then everything changed. Shades of grey seemed darker, the morning not seeming so bright, as
Carmilla was no longer in the photos. Laura sat alone in the bed. Sheet clutched over her body, the look on her face no longer one holding a happy memory of the night before, but the expression of someone feeling exposed and more vulnerable than they wanted others to see.

Then she was at the edge of the bed. Panic written on her face. Carmilla felt like she couldn't develop the photos fast enough. Watching the morning that had left her so hurt and confused unfold before her eyes. Pieces still missing in the seconds between photos captured and the deafening silence in seeing it happen without knowing exactly why it was happening.

Then an ache took up the space in Carmilla's chest where confusion had been staying. Laura sat on the edge of the bed fully clothed, Carmilla in the center of it, sheet clutched in a fiat at her chest, pleading eyes that Laura hadn't even turned around to look into.

As the photo sat in the chemical mixture, Carmilla considered leaving the rest of the photos undeveloped. Why relive the moment if she didn't have to? But her hands continued to work, developing some of the most haunting and powerful photos she had ever taken. Ironic that instead of being behind the camera, she was in front of it.

She hung the last of the photos on the line to dry, yet another of herself curled in a ball on her bed. Her expression no longer sad, confused or hurt... By the time the film had ran out, she was numb. Her face expressionless. She had seen the tears that had fallen to wet the sheet and leave tracks on her face before they dried and left nothing but a damp mark on the sheet, still clutched in her hand.

After a moment of letting her eyes follow the timeline of that morning, she pulled the final roll of film from her pocket. She knew there was only one photo on it and easy even sure what she would do with it, but decided to develop it anyway.

—

“Ah, Carmilla.” Maxfield smiled as she took Carmilla's portfolio from her, “I was beginning to think you had decided to fail my class.”

“Just doing some last minute developing.” Carmilla shrugged as she watched Maxfield open her portfolio and flip through the pages.

“This is not what I expected to get from you.” Maxfield turned the pages slowly, examining each photo with care. “You’re sure these are the photos you want to use for your final and the exhibit application?” She looked up with a questioning look as she closed the portfolio.

“I’m sure.” Carmilla nodded and clutched the strap of her bag that hung across her chest.

“That last photo, your self portrait, is especially powerful.” Maxfield smiled, actually seeming impressed, “I have a feeling a lot of people will be affected by your work.”

Carmilla tried not to overthink the final photos she had chosen for her application, knowing that if she was accepted for the exhibition that there would potentially be hundreds of people looking at her work. It had always been an immensely private thing, to willingly offer her work up to the criticism of others was a little daunting.

“You should get an email over the break about your application.” Maxfield added Carmilla’s portfolio to the pile on the table, “Have a good Christmas.”

Carmilla’s eyes were still locked on her folder, her stomach churning with the idea of everyone seeing her photos but knowing it would be an amazing opportunity at the same time. “Thanks, yeah. You too.” She finally looked up at her professor and forced a smile before turning and walking out
That was it. An entire semesters worth of work came down to 9 photos tucked away in a folder. Carmilla was both glad and terrified at the fact that there was nothing else she could do now but wait.

——

This was stupid. This was the worst idea she has had in a long time but as much as she regretted standing there, she couldn't make her feet move.

“You do it.” Carmilla whispered, staring at the door. “Go ahead. Knock.”

Joey let out a quiet whine and tilted his head curiously as he stared up at Carmilla. She glanced down at him with a straight face and sighed before looking back at the door.

“Well, if you wont knock, I don't want to.”

Suddenly the door was opening and Carmilla’s eyes were going wide with the same speed. Her feet still unable to move as Joeys tail started to wag excitedly.

“Carmilla?” Perry gave her a curious look, “What are you doing here?”

“I uh…” Yeah. Worst idea ever.

Carmilla had in fact gone to the library after turning in her portfolio and saw Laura sitting with Will at a table and lost her nerve. Everything was a mess and the more she tried to figure it out the more confused she got. So instead of staying, Carmilla left before either of them had noticed her. But after finishing her last final the next day, she knew Laura would be leaving for Christmas and she wasn't sure she could let her go without seeing her one last time.

If there was anything Carmilla had learned about distance, was that it made it easier for people to forget about you. More time than she wanted to think about had already passed since her night with Laura and with the other girl not even making an attempt to talk to her about what had happened, Carmilla feared she never would. Which meant the ending of the year could also be the end of any chance they had in making things work.

When she had grabbed the gift off her counter and led Joey out into the snow, Carmilla wasn't even sure she would be in time to catch Laura before she left but figured fate would have its way. The universe would either help her and prove to her once again that she was meant to be broken and alone.

So when Perry opened the door, and made it clear Laura was still there— Carmilla was shocked that it seemed for once the universe might actually be on her side.

“Did you knock? I’m so sorry I didn't hear you! Its been pretty busy here and I was just headed out but I can go get Laura for you if you’d like.” Perry was cheerful as ever and turning around to head back into the apartment to fetch Laura when Carmilla stopped her abruptly.

“No!” Carmilla cleared her throat and lowered her voice slightly, not wanting it to travel into the apartment for anyone else to hear. “You don’t have to do that.”

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“Oh?” Perry turned back around, slightly confused. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah. Fine.” Carmilla shook her head and looked down at Joey. He had laid down and seemed to be over Carmilla’s indecisiveness when I came to Laura lately and looked absolutely
bored to be there.

“I must admit I’m confused as to what you’re doing here, then.” Perry stepped into the doorway, tilting her head and giving Carmilla a curious look.

Now that she was standing there, Carmilla was probably even more confused than Perry. She had wanted to see Laura, that was the whole reason she had walked there. So why did she panic when Perry offered to go get her?

“I just came to drop this off.” Carmilla held her hand out, she was holding a small gift wrapped in christmas wrapping. “For Laura.”

Perry pursed her lips together tightly, “And you wouldn't like to give it to her yourself?”

“Can you just give it to her?” Carmilla sighed and clenched her jaw.

“Of course.” Perry took the gift from Carmilla and looked at it, “But I really can go get her for you. She’s just packing before her dad comes to pick her up to drive home for the break.”

Carmilla glanced past Perry into the apartment and considered it. It was the whole reason she had come but the more she thought about it she more she felt like it was a bad idea.

“Its ok.” Carmilla cleared her throat and patted her thigh, prompting Joey to get up. “We have to go. Can you just tell her… just tell her..”

Tell her that when the sun rises I only think of her. Tell her that I listen for the sound of her voice and the melody of her laugh wherever I go. Tell her when anyone says my name it never sounds as sweet as when it falls from her lips. Tell her the world seems darker without her smile. Tell her that she broke my heart but I still love her with every shattered piece.

“Don't tell her anything. Just give her the gift, ok?”

Perry could see how torn Carmilla was and instead of insisting she give it to her herself she just nodded and offered her a small smile.

Without another word, Carmilla turned around and walked away, her shoulders tensing as she heard the apartment door shut behind her. She let out a sigh as the cold air hit her face when she stepped out of the building and dropped her head back to look at the sky.

Worst idea ever.

All she wanted to do was see Laura but she couldn't. She had to stop being the one to jump and give Laura the time to figure out what she really wanted and let her meet Carmilla half way. That meant giving her space. No matter how hard it was to keep her heart away from the person that felt like home.

"We meet again."

A strong voice startled Carmilla as she stood on the step. Turning around quickly, she immediately recognized Laura's father from the other day as he bent over to pet Joey.

"The dog, I mean." He smiled warmly at Carmilla, "I don't think I've had the pleasure of meeting you, though." He brushed his hands together before offering one to Carmilla.
She took it and gave a firm handshake, "Carmilla."

"I know." He dropped Carmilla's hand then looped his thumbs in his belt loops. "I'm Laura's father, and I've heard quite a bit about you."

"You have?" Carmilla raised an eyebrow skeptically.

"Of course. You've been helping Laura with her psychology class."

"Oh. Right." Carmilla nodded and moved to walk by him. This whole thing was frustrating enough without thinking that Laura only spoke about her as her tutor.

"I've also heard you're very good at taking photographs."

Carmilla stopped and turned to face him again. His smile was familiar, same with the shine in his eyes. It was easy seeing the parts of himself that he had given to Laura. She couldn't help but feel there was more than just physical features that they shared. He was friendly and warm, seemed to talk to people easily and just seemed to give off the feeling that he already considered you a friend, even if you had just met.

“And that you've been very kind to my daughter. Even though I’m sure we both know she can be a handful.”

Carmilla felt her cheeks start to pink and hoped Laura’s father would blame it on the cold air. It seemed Laura had said a lot more about her besides the fact that she had been tutoring her.

“Well, she’s...she's Laura.” Carmilla shrugged as she finally returned a smile.

“That she is.” Laura’s father chuckled, “She’s very fond of you, you know?”

“Oh I don’t, um, I don’t know about—” Carmilla found herself fumbling over her words, her eyes staring at the ground. She couldn't bring herself to say the words she was thinking. I would make them closer to being true, and she desperately didn't want them to be.

“She is. Even if she doesn't trust it yet.” Laura’s father nodded firmly, as if he was indicating that was the end of any argument that may have happened on the subject. “She’s like her mother, that way.”

Carmilla gave him a questioning look at the comment. She hadn't heard much of anything about Laura’s mother so she didn't really understand the comparison.

“She tried to fight her feelings for me, for years.” He smiled wide, giving off a cocky smirk, “But she couldn't resist this forever.” He chuckled again and pulled open the door to the apartment building. "Just don’t give up on her. She just takes a little longer than some to realize things sometimes. Understand?"

“Yes, sir.” Carmilla answered, less confident than the man in front of her. He smiled before disappearing into the apartment building and leaving her on the porch alone.

She couldn't wrap her head around the serious yet brief conversation that had just unfolded. She had just barely met Laura’s father and it seemed he was already rooting for her when it came to winning his daughter's heart. It made her curious what Laura had told him about her, as well as what he knew
that she didn’t. But however brief the conversation was, he was right. She couldn’t give up on Laura. Her heart wouldn’t let her.

As Carmilla started her walk home, she shoved her hands in her coat pockets and hid her face in her coat collar as best she could. Flakes of snow were still falling, just as steady as they had all week. The ground was growing more covered by the second.

Everyone was bracing for the biggest snow storm in years but Carmilla couldn’t help but think it was amazing. Seeing an entire city being enveloped in white, people avoiding going out, the sign of footprints dwindling with the more snow that fell. Sidewalks usually littered with students, now completely bare.

By now most students had left for the holiday or were saying their final goodbyes. People had been warned to avoid traveling after Saturday so as soon as students had finished with finals that Friday morning, they were quickly taking their leave. Going to see family, celebrate the holidays or simply going home for the break.

But this was home for Carmilla. So instead of trying to hurry up and leave, she took solace in the crunch of the untouched snow beneath her feet and emptiness of the world around her. White and perfect. A clean slate. Whatever imperfections the world held was covered by the perfect blanket of snow that continued to grow over the next several days.

——

Laura couldn’t believe how quickly Christmas had come. After packing up her things and grabbing the few gifts that Perry had left out from her and Laf, her dad had helped put her things in his truck and they had started their drive home. They made it just before the weather really picked up and Laura couldn’t be more glad her dad had come to get her instead of taking a bus.

The week after finals seemed to fly by. Laura was surrounded by family, playing games and eating food, telling stories and just enjoying the time off. She tried to keep herself busy, knowing anytime things slowed down she would catch herself thinking of Carmilla.

She had thought to say goodbye before leaving for the break but knew it was exactly that easy. The realization that it had been her, and not Carmilla, that had caused everything to fall apart made her feel awful. Especially when she still didn’t understand exactly what had happened. Until she could explain things to Carmilla, it didn’t seem fair to show up and play with her heart, not knowing what the outcome would be.

So instead, she busied herself with dishes and watching younger cousins and helping with meals. Anything to keep her mind occupied and her heart untouched by regret.

It was short lived though. Christmas eve rolled around and aunts, uncles, and cousins all went back to their own homes, leaving Laura’s more empty than she had seen it in a while. It was just her and her father, him in his reclining chair and her on the couch, tv on and a fire lit in the fire place. They had decorated a christmas tree that sat in the corner, its lights blinking slowly as snow continued to fall outside.

Laura switched from watching the snow fall delicately in the darkening night and the flame in the fireplace dance fiercely, pops and crackles escaping the burning logs. How could two things so opposite, still be so similar when it came to beauty. She could watch both scenes for hours and be captivated. One so gentle, every snowflake unique and special as it drifted peacefully to the ground. The other untamed and exciting. Flames consuming and heating anything it touched.
Laura should have known she would immediately think of Carmilla.

The way Carmilla touched her was always gentle, careful and everything about her surprising and constantly new. And the way she made Laura feel. A consuming heat that filled her chest and scorched her lungs that made it hard to breathe, speak and think when she was around.

Why had it all gone so wrong? Was it too late to make it right?

Laura pulled out her phone and checked the time. Midnight had just passed, which meant it was officially Christmas. She smiled as she typed out a couple texts and sent them off, hoping to be the first to wish her friends a Merry Christmas.

She was about to head up to bed when her phone chimed with a new text. She couldn't help the smile that spread on her face at the reply on her screen.

Maybe it wasn't too late, after all.

——

Carmilla checked her email for what seemed like the millionth time since turning in her application for the exhibition. It was Christmas Eve and even though she probably wouldn't hear from Maxfield until after Christmas, she was refreshing the page every time she walked by her computer.

New Email

Carmilla nearly tripped as she tried to spin around in her kitchen to go back to her computer. She frantically opened up the message, her eyes skimming the screen quickly.

“I did it.” Carmilla exhaled and ran a hand through her hair. “I seriously— I did it.”

Joey lifted his head from his bed in the corner and watched Carmilla stare at her computer screen, both hands on her head as she read and reread the email from Professor Maxfield.

Congratulations!

Your submissions have been selected to be previewed at this year's Photo Exhibition. Your photos along with a few of your fellow students will be featured alongside professional works from respected photographers from around the world.

This event has furthered the careers of many photographers over the years and we hope to continue that tradition.

We are asking that you prepare the photos you've selected in the way you would like them to be presented. There will be many other pieces displayed and we encourage you to make yours unique while still maintaining the integrity of the original photo.

Instructions on what we expect from you are on the page attached to this email.

We look forward to seeing you and your work at the Photo Exhibition December 30th.
“People are actually going to see my work.” Carmilla let out a quiet chuckle, “Wait.” Her smile dropped and she swallowed nervously, “People are going to see my work.”

She ran her hand through her hair again and started to pace the kitchen. She walked over to her phone that was sitting on the coffee table and picked it up, scrolling through the contacts. She opened a new text box addressed to Laura before she realized what she had done.

Staring at the screen for a moment, just seeing Laura’s name seemed to help the anxiety she had been feeling, but instead of sending a message she locked the screen and set it back on the table. Walking towards the window she stopped at the record player and turned it on. The vinyl spun slowly as Carmilla lowered the arm and music started to play softly.

Carmilla stood at the window and watched the snow fall as the quiet melody filled her apartment. The excitement and nervousness she felt over the exhibition was too much to let her sleep, and even though she knew it was nearing midnight, she felt wide awake.

She considered texting Laura anyway, to share her news, she hoped Laura would be excited for her. But it was late. And she hadn’t heard from her since she left with her father. And she wasn’t sure if it would be a welcomed text or not, no matter what time it was.

Carmilla’s phone chimed from the coffee table and both Carmilla and Joey looked over at it surprised. Carmilla glanced at Joey and shrugged. She looked at the clock and saw it was just barely after midnight before making her way to her phone.

1 New Message: Laura

Carmilla couldn’t believe it. She checked the time again before dropping down on the couch and unlocking her phone.

Laura: Merry Christmas, Carm

Carmilla smiled and sank back against the cushions. She read the text again, a million things running through her mind as she tried to decide on a response. She typed out a quick reply—

Carmilla: Merry Christmas cupcake

—before she set her phone down and grabbed a pillow from the couch and pulled it onto her lap. She let her chin rest on the pillow as she played with the fabric bunched up at the corner. She let out a chuckle before laying down on her side and pulling a blanket up and over herself. It was small, but it was still something.

As Carmilla drifted off to sleep, her last thoughts were of Laura, the exhibition, the box tucked away under her bed and how she knew exactly what she was going to do to make her photos special.

"How was your Christmas?!" Perry yelled at the screen as her and Laf squished together so they could both be seen on the monitor.

“Per, you don’t have to yell. We are talking over Skype, not across a canyon.” Laf shook their head but with an adoring smile on their face.
Laura laughed and scooted in towards the old computer on her fathers desk. "Christmas was good! Dad made pancakes and we opened our gifts for each other. It was quiet, but nice. What about you guys?"

"Oh ours was lovely." Perry was whispering now and both Laf and Laura chuckled as she continued, "I spoke to my family then Laf and I made some cookies and watched a Christmas film."

"Perry made the best gingerbread cookies I've ever eaten, L." Laf leaned towards the screen with a wide smile, "they were so good! And I put some aside for you to try when you get back—"

Laura smiled at the idea of cookies, "I can't wait—"

"But I ate them."

Laura let out a laugh and Perry rolled her eyes.

"I can make some more when you get back." Perry gave Laf a disapproving look before turning back to the screen, "when is that going to be, by the way?"

"Well classes start again on the 4th, so probably the 3rd, honestly." Laura shrugged, "Dad wants to go to our towns New Years Eve celebration Saturday night."

"That means you'll miss the zeta party saturday.” Laf frowned and leaned back in the chair they were sharing with Perry.

“Yeah, well, it's not like I'm expecting a New Years kiss or anything so it doesn't really matter where I am at midnight.” Laura leaned back in her own chair and sighed.

Perry’s expression was one of concern as she looked at the screen. She still didn't know the whole story of what had happened between Laura and Carmilla and the way Laura was talking made it seem like she didn't know about the exhibition Friday night, which was tomorrow, or the fact that Carmilla's work was going to be shown. Being stuck in the middle made her feel awful. She cared for both of them but didn't feel like she should meddle. So she did what she did best when in an awkward situation—she changed the subject.

"Shall we open our gifts?" Perry forced a smile, her eyebrows high on her forehead.

The mention of presents seemed to brighten everyone's moods and Laf and Laura both grinned. Laura grabbed the few gifts she had left off the floor and set them on the desk. They had planned on doing roommate Christmas together before Laura left but when her dad showed up, their plans changed. So here they were, a few days after christmas, doing it over Skype.

Laf and Perry held their gifts from Laura in their hands excitedly. It had been torture for Laf when Christmas came and went and there was still wrapped gifts under the tree.

"Who goes first?" Laura asked, her gifts in front of her.

"Same time?" Laf grinned, already pulling on the corner of the wrapping paper.

"Go!" Perry said excitedly, wrapped up in the happy energy between the other two.

Perry and Laf had theirs open first, having only waited to open Laura's together.
Laf nearly fell over with laughter at the mini "mad scientist experiment kit" that was really just the science version of an easy bake oven. The only thing you could create was multi colored jello and pudding it seemed, but they still thought it was awesome.

Perry clapped her hands together at her gift- a new set of baking trays. After a failed attempt at making a vegetarian lasagna, Laura had accidentally destroyed Perry's old pans. Permanently warping them and some how melting the lasagna right into the pan. New ones were needed. Badly.

Laura laughed at the Lois Lane and superman coloring book from Laf and actually gasped at the briefcase with her initials engraved on the side from Perry.

"For your internship." Perry smiled wide as she watched Laura turn the bag over in her hands.

"This is amazing, thank you." Laura smiled as she rubbed her hand over the smooth leather.

"It's from us both." Perry nudged Laf with her shoulder.

"Yeah, you didn't think I'd just give you a $3 coloring book, did you?" Laf smirked and wrapped their arm around Perry's shoulder.

"Well, yeah." Laura laughed, "That's exactly what I thought."

They all laughed then Laura noticed the remaining gift. She hadn't even thought about the fact that there was 3 gifts left over but only Laf and Perry left as far as gift giving went. She picked it up and held it in front of the screen.

"Is this from you both, too?" Laura asked, slightly confused.

Perry’s eyebrows came together and she turned to whisper to Laf, "You said you would tell her."

“I forgot.” Laf looked guilty as they avoided eye contact with everyone, looking away from the computer.

"Tell me what?" Laura's voice was stern, whatever the secret was, she wanted to know it.

"Well. Sweetie." Perry was stalling as she continued to glare at Laf, "Carmilla stopped by the day you left—"

"What?!” Laura's eyes went wide, "Why didn't you tell me? Where was I?!!"

"Well, you were packing—"

"And you didn't come get me?!!" Laura cut Perry off quickly.

“She asked me not to.” Perry defended quickly, but she left that gift for you and Laf was supposed to tell you because I was on my way out at the time and I’m so sorry you didn't know. She asked me not to say anything, just to give you the gift.”

Laura sighed, “Its ok.” And she meant it. Perry had only done what Carmilla asked, so she couldn't really be mad at her. She looked over her shoulder, pretending her father was calling to her before turning back to the computer. “I better go, Dad needs something. But Merry Christmas guys. And
thanks for the gifts, I love them.”

Laf and Perry both nodded. They knew it wasn't really her father calling her to leave but didn't want to force her to stay.

“Merry Christmas, L.” Laf smiled warmly at the screen.

“We will see you next week.” Perry added, trying to keep the mood light.

“Yeah, see ya.” Laura smiled before waving at the screen and ending the call.

She sank back in her chair and looked at the small gift in her hands. It was rectangular but seemed just a little too big to be a book. She ran her fingers over the edges of the paper slowly. It was wrapped perfectly, sharp edges and beautifully tied ribbon around it. She should have known it couldn't have been from Laf. Maybe Perry, but as soon as she knew it was from Carmilla, it was obvious. The same perfectionism and beauty she showed in anything creative had come out in the beautifully wrapped gift in her lap. It was almost too perfect to open it.

So she didn’t. Instead she shut off the computer and walked back to her childhood bedroom, set the gift on her bed, and left it there.

——

“You do know what day it is, right?” Will asked as he hopped up to sit on the counter.

“Friday. Asshole.” Carmilla glared at him from her spot on the floor in her living room.

Will chuckled and lifted his bowl of cereal higher while her took a bite, “But the actual date. Like the date on the calendar. The little number that sits in the corner and tells you how many days there are in the month.”

“If you don’t shut up going to throw you and your dirty clothes out the window.” Carmilla clenched her jaw and went back to the project in front of her.

“Just throw my clothes first so they can soften my landing, ok?” Will smirked and shoved another spoonful of cereal in his mouth, dodging the permanent marker Carmilla chucked at his head.

“Its 11 am.” Carmilla sat up, shifting to kneel on her knees. “I have until 2 to get these to the studio. Thats plenty of time.”

Will drank the milk left in the bowl before setting it on the counter next to him, “Where did you even get that stuff?”

Carmilla glanced over her shoulder at him before looking the shoe box next to her, “I uh, I just had it.”

“You mean you were saving it?” Will smirked again.

Carmilla rolled her eyes and adjusted one of the items around her photo. It was always fun being the cocky, sarcastic one. Not as fun when someone was giving you a taste of your own medicine.

“Yeah. I was saving it. I purposefully kept it and had it all in a box that is now serving a purpose for
my project.” She leaned back on her knees again and looked over her shoulder with a glare. “Happy?”

Will smiled wide and hopped off the counter, “Yep.” He chuckled to himself as he walked down the hall towards the laundry room, happy with himself for how easily he was getting to Carmilla.

Carmilla groaned and shook her head, looking back to the photos spread out across the floor. She would never admit it to Will, but she had waited for the last second to finish getting things ready for the exhibition that night. She had the frames, and the prints, the only thing slowing her down were the ‘extra touches’ they suggested in order to make her work stand out.

She wasn’t about to go crazy with fancy frames or glitter glue. She wanted her photos to be what caught peoples eye, not how crazy she could present them. And after getting a text from Laura just after midnight christmas morning, Carmilla knew she wanted there to be purpose behind what she did.

So christmas morning she had woken up, made her coffee and gone to her bedroom. The box she had tucked away safely under her bed was exactly what she needed to make her photos stand out at the same time as remaining purposeful. So she pulled it out and took off the lid to look at its contents.

It took 5 days before she was ready to actually take anything out of the box. So here she was, day of the exhibition, finally putting everything together and hoping she finished in time to get it to the studio by the deadline.

She was on the last one and found herself examine the photo as she sat on the ground. Black and white, haunting and revealing. This night was going to expose her more than she had ever been before. Not just with the photos, but the way she had chosen to present them. And as terrifying as it was, she had made the choice not to back down. Not to close herself off or build up her walls again. Because as scary as it was, leaving her heart open and exposed to the pains of feeling and letting people see that— it was scarier being numb, and missing out on the chance of love just because there was the possibility of getting hurt.

Her heart was already in pieces. What more damage could be done by letting people see the cracks?

“Throw me that marker?” Carmilla spoke quietly as Will walked back into the room.

“Promise not to throw it at my head again?”

“No.” Carmilla smirked in his direction, chuckling when he rolled his eyes and tossed the marker back to her.

She pressed the tip to the white canvas that outlined the photo, smooth cursive looping across the empty space. She wrote slowly, feeling the words she penned, before setting the marker down and finishing by securing it in the sleek black frame. She slid it across the floor to join the rest of the photos she had already finished preparing and sighed as she looked them over.

“Whoa.” Will was standing behind Carmilla, his arms crossed over his chest. “I know I was joking with you earlier but— this is kind of incredible, Carmilla.”

Carmilla smiled and pressed her hands against her thighs as she sat on her knees. “Thanks, Will.”

Will nodded, still letting his eyes take in everything in front of him, “Is she going to be there?”
Carmilla instantly dropped her head, her eyes landing on her hands as she worried her lip between her teeth and shook her head. “I don’t think so. I didn't tell her.”

“I think you should.” Will put a hand on Carmilla’s shoulder and gave it a comforting squeeze. Carmilla pulled in a heavy breath and fixed her posture, “Enough of this sibling bonding crap. Help me get these in my car?”

Will chuckled as he stepped forward to pick up a couple of the pictures, “I suppose I owe you for letting me do laundry.”

“Damn right you do.” Carmilla smiled as she watched Will take a stack and move towards the door. She took one last look at the photos still in front of her and forced herself to gather them up and take them to the studio before she had the chance to change her mind.

——

Laura had been ignoring the gift, moving it off her bed to sleep, then trying to ignore it the next morning when she woke. She wasn't sure why she felt the need to do that. Maybe it was the feeling that she didn't deserve a gift from Carmilla when she had treated her the way she had. Maybe it was just one more thing reminding her how wonderful Carmilla was and how messed up everything had gotten. The fact that Laura was still struggling to figure out why she had pulled away so quickly was also frustrating.

It was clear she missed Carmilla. Being home over break she had spent more of her time trying to distract herself from thinking about her. But nearly everything reminded Laura of her. She had wanted to call her or even just text her multiple times but except for Christmas, she had always managed not to. She was even blaming that one on lack of sleep, holiday spirit and it being past midnight.

It was finally Friday, which meant the town New Years eve party was the next day, and even though she couldn't figure out why, her dad was super excited for it. Their town was small enough that most everyone got together in the high school gym for food, dancing and games. There was a tiny firework show that happened at midnight, then everyone went right home. Not exactly the crazy parties Laura had gotten used to. Especially after meeting Kirsch.

“Well good afternoon, pumpkin!” Laura's father greeted her as she walked into the kitchen, still in her pajamas, Carmilla’s gift in hand. “I was beginning to think you had been swallowed by your mattress.”

“It is a great mattress.” Laura joked halfheartedly as she sank into a chair at the table.

"You want some lunch?" His attention was back on the newspaper in his hands as he sat opposite Laura at the table. "Or are you in the mood for breakfast?"

Laura leaned her elbow on the table and tripped her chin into her hand. "I'm not that hungry yet.” She looked the dish sitting at the end of the table. Leftover Christmas candy and chocolate from the week before was still full on the plate. With her free hand she reached out, pulling the dish towards her with her fingertips.

She smiled when she saw the small pile of gummy bears sitting with a few other types of candy.
It seemed she was doomed if she thought she could go five minutes without thinking of Carmilla.

She picked up a red one and put it in her mouth before dropping her attention to the gift sitting in front of her. She would have to open it eventually, now seemed as good a time as any. With careful movements she slid her finger under the edge of the paper and unfolded the corner gently. It had been wrapped so carefully, it seemed wrong to just rip it open.

All the corners had been pulled open, just unwrapping one more side would leave the present uncovered, revealing what it was. Laura glanced up at her father who was lazily reading the paper. Convinced he wasn't paying attention, she ate a couple more red gummy bears before pulling back the paper to finally see the gift.

It was a photograph.

Laura just stared at it for a moment, blown away by the gesture entirely. She picked it up off the table and held it closer to her.

The frame was a shiny silver, Laura could see her own reflection in it, it felt cool and smooth under her fingers as she traced the edges with one of her hands. It had an intricate design that sat on the edge furthest from the picture. Laura wasn't an expert on frames but it definitely wasn't one you'd find in the $5 sale bin. Something about it reminded her of the many mirrors and pictures that had covered the walls on the old abandoned house Carmilla had taken her to. It seemed like an antique, treated with extreme care over many years.

The photo it held was what really surprised Laura. It was of her and her father. The day he had shown up at her apartment just before the break. The ground was covered in snow, with flakes falling from the sky around them. Laura had her arms wrapped around her fathers waist tightly, a cheek pressed to his chest and a smile on her face as she hugged him.

Her father was smiling, his arms wrapped around her gently as he stooped low to hug her back. His cheeks were red and his eyes were shining.

Laura remembered how relieved and happy she was to see him in that moment. She couldn't believe Carmilla had actually captured it. Not just what it looked like, but somehow, how it felt.

“You still do that?”

“Huh?” Laura looked up quickly at her father. She had been so focused on the gift that she hadn't noticed him fold the paper and set it aside.

“The gummy bears.” He nodded towards the plate, “As a kid, you used to eat the red ones first because they were your favorite. I only ate white gummy bears for years.”

Laura looked down at the pile of gummy bears. She had stopped eating them, and until now didn't notice it was probably because all the red ones were gone.

Laura’s father grabbed a white gummy bear and squeezed it between his fingers before sticking it in his mouth. “I hate white gummy bears.” He chuckled and made an exaggerated disgusted face.

Laura chuckled and scrunched up her nose, “Then why eat them?”

He smiled and picked up another white one, holding it out between them, “Because you like the red
Laura’s smile fell slowly and her eyes fell to the picture sitting on the table in front of her. It was an incredible gift, but it was more that that. It was a moment that had meant something to Laura, but to any other person, they probably wouldn’t have given it a second thought. Except for Carmilla.

Carmilla had seen it. Laura was realizing this wasn’t the only time Carmilla had seen something no one else had.

*How had Laura not seen it?*

“Can I ask you something?” Laura looked up at her dad as he ate the gummy bear he had been holding.

“Anything.” He reached for his mug and took a sip of his hot chocolate.

Laura looked at him carefully, noticing features she hadn't before. Lines around his eyes that creased more whenever he smiled. His full beard groomed neatly, his smile warm and happiness filling his eyes. He looked older than Laura remembered. Not that he looked *old.* Just older. Slightly tired. But he was still the same dad she had grown up seeing as her hero.

"Would you do things differently?" She hadn't really thought out a way to ask what she wanted in a way that would make sense, "I mean, if you could have see how things would go, pictured how they would end."

Laura's father smiled, the small hint of sadness in his eyes growing slightly, "Is this about your mother?"

"No." Laura shook her head, "Well kind of. But not really."

He chuckled at Laura's stammering and set his cup down. "Is this about a certain girl you've been moping about all Christmas?"

"I have not been moping!" Laura's eyes widened and she sat up taller in her chair.

When her dad laughed loudly she couldn't help but laugh too. She had been miserable. And apparently not very good at hiding it.

"It's just..." She twisted her lips thoughtfully trying to think of the best way to explain. He was her father after all, word choice was very important here. “This girl. She’s... Kind of, rough around the edges."

"Ha!" Her father belted out a laugh, surprising Laura completely. "That girl is softer than a marshmallow."

Laura rolled her eyes, "How would you know? You haven't even met her."

"I have." He gave her a serious look, "and any edges that girl has are about as pointy as you want them to be."

"That doesn't even make sense." Laura grumbled and sank in her chair. She picked at the edge of the table with her finger while she tried to make sense of everything. Carmilla, everything that had happened, herself...
Laura’s father sighed and offered her a small smile, "The thing about the people we fall in love with... Often we let our own fears make up problems to give us an excuse to keep our distance. The way you know it's real is when the fear of not loving them outweighs the fear of falling in love."

Laura looked at the photograph again and thought about all the times Carmilla had pushed past her fears for Laura. Had that been Carmilla choosing Laura over fear? choosing love over the possibility of pain?

"If someone sees the real you, instead of the you their fears create..." He sighed heavily, like he was remembering his own big love. “You can never really know how things are going to end. Love is scary and unpredictable and sometimes it hurts like hell. But you’ll never find out how amazing it could end if you’re too afraid to let it start.”

That was it. That’s what was holding Laura back. The idea of how it would end. It didn’t matter how many times Carmilla had shown she would be there and would choose Laura over and over. The idea that there was even a possibility that Laura would let her inland then lose her, was unbearable.

What you never have, you can never lose.

So why did she feel like she had already lost a part of herself, anyway?

“Can I borrow your truck?” Laura looked up at her dad, only one thought on her mind. She had to see Carmilla. She had to talk to her before it was too late.

“My truck?” Laura’s father scoffed, “Have you looked outside today? There’s a blizzard going on!”

“Dad, please.” Laura pleaded as she stood up from the table, “It’s really important. Please?”

“Laur—”

“Is it either you trust me with your truck or I start walking.” Laura stared at her father confidently, hands on her hips, “And I’m sure I have a better chance at survival in your very capable pickup, than walking with my very short legs in the very high snow.”

Laura’s father shook his head as he stood up from the table and walked out of the kitchen. Laura’s posture slumped, feeling like he had just killed her chances of making it back to campus to see Carmilla. Then he was walking back into the kitchen with his keys in his hand.

“You are just like your mother.” He smiled and handed her the keys. “Stubborn as a mule.”

“Thanks, daddy.” Laura smiled and lunged forward to hug him tightly.

“I expect updates on the drive every hour, drive only as fast as it’s safe, and watch out for idiots on the road.” He hugged her back tightly, his voice stern but a in of pride in it too.

——

“What about this one?” Carmilla smoothed out her dress as she looked at her own reflection. She glanced over to her bed and rolled her eyes when she saw that Joey was sound asleep. “Some help you are.” She mumbled as she walked back to her closet to look through her clothes for the thousandth time.

She had dressed up for dozens of her mother’s dinners, but those had always been her getting presentable just enough to pass while also wearing something that would piss her mother off. This was different. This was for her own career and future, and she didn’t want to mess it up.
Carmilla and Will had dropped off her prints at the studio earlier that day and since then she had been a nervous wreck. Once she handed them over, there was no going back. No adjusting the way anything looked or how it would be seen. It was no longer in her hands and she had never been more terrified.

She had paced every room in her apartment, tried to read but kept reading the same lines over and over again, every record she tried to listen to just wasn't right and she couldn't even get through an entire song. So when it came time to get ready, she was more than ready to get the night over with.

She pulled out the black dress that had been sitting in the back of her closet. It was more reserved than most of her other stuff. Not too low cut, or hem too high, it was elegant and tasteful. Exactly what she needed for that night. She put it on and looked at herself in the mirror, running a hand through loose curls as she let out a sigh.

There was quick knocking on her apartment door and Joeys head perked up. He was off the bed and out of the bedroom before Carmilla had even turned around. She grabbed her shoes and half hopped, half walked to the door, pushing Joey out of the way once she was there so she could open it.

___

Laura tapped her fingers on the wheel impatiently. The last 4 hours of driving had felt like 40. With the snow and other drivers on the road going slower than turtles, she wanted to scream. She had finally pulled into town and was sitting at the stop light just around the corner from Carmilla’s place. The drive had given her plenty of time to not only swear at other cars on the road, but try to figure out what exactly she was going to say once she actually saw Carmilla.

The light turned green and Laura peeled out, snow shooting out from under her tires and she made the final turn and parked next to the curb in front of Carmilla’s building. The sun had gone down and nothing but streetlights and the moon peeking out from behind snow clouds was lighting the area.

Laura could feel her heart pounding in her chest as she turned off the engine and pulled her coat on. She hopped down out of the tall pickup and trudged her way through the snow covering the sidewalk.

She had let her fear make up an ending that she couldn't even be sure would happen. How could you be afraid to lose someone before you even let yourself have them?

She pulled the door open and quickly found herself standing in front of Carmilla’s door. Her heart thumped loudly, rumbling in her chest and pounding in her head. She was taking heavy breaths, like she had just ran the last 4 hours instead of driven. Before she had time to stop herself she lifted her hand and knocked quickly and loudly on Carmilla’s door.

As soon as her hand fell back to her side her heart started to pound even faster. She clenched her hands at her sides then tried to relax them, shaking out her hands and trying to relax her shoulders.

Then the sound of Joey running to the door followed by footsteps muted the sound of her pounding heart and as the door slowly opened everything seemed to go in slow motion.

“Laura? What are you doing here?”

Laura breathed out the breath she had been holding, her lips twitching into a smile, ignoring the tightness of her lungs and the feeling that she couldn't breathe.

“Hey.”
Seeing the Whole Picture

Chapter Summary

How it ends..

Chapter Notes

I know I say this every time, but thank you for all the amazing comments. As someone who up until Carmilla, never shared their work with anyone- it's been amazing getting so many wonderful comments and and such great encouragement. You have no idea how incredible it is to hear the things you love about my story and to know you enjoy reading.
So thank you. For making me excited to write and to share it with you. You are all wonderful.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Laura? What are you doing here?”

Laura let out the breath she had been holding, her lips twitching into a smile, ignoring the tightness of her lungs and the feeling that she couldn't breathe.

“Hey.”

Laura looked at Joey before peering further into the apartment, “Where’s Carmilla?"

"She left already." Will stepped back as Laura rushed into the apartment.

"What do you mean left?" She turned around quickly to face Will, "Left where?"

"She didn't tell you?" Will sighed and shook his head to himself. "God she's so stupid--"

"Will!" Laura interrupted, "Where is she?"

"The exhibition. She was accepted and the show is tonight." Will watched Laura's face shift through a few expressions before he continued. "I told her to tell you but she was afraid you wouldn't come. I was about to head that way myself if you want to come with me?"

"Yes! Of course!" Laura was quickly back in the hall, "let's go!"

"Uh, Laura?" Will called after her, "you might want to, um..." He gestured to her body hesitantly.

Laura looked down and realized before she left home she hadn't even changed out of her pajamas. She had just grabbed her coat and shoes and left in a hurry.

"Right." She lifted a finger to point at Will, "I'll go change and you can-"
"I'll run my laundry home then come get you." Will chuckled.

"Perfect." Laura nodded before turning on her heel and running back out to her dads pickup.

It wasn't exactly going how she imagined it. She thought she was going to burst in with some romantic speech, explain everything, make things right and everything would fall into place. Which may have been a little silly to expect it to play out like a movie. Life was far from a movie—especially when it came to her and Carmilla. But even if it hadn't started like a movie, maybe it could still end like one?

Carmilla was speechless. After walking the entire studio, purposefully avoiding her own prints, she was now standing in front of them with wide eyes and absolutely nothing to say.

They hung together in a straight row across a sleek white wall. Black frames, white mattes and photos in the center. They were all the same size, clean and arranged neatly with the photo meant to pull your attention. The pieces of what Carmilla had been keeping in the box beneath her bed were secured in the bottom corner between the glass of the frame and the matte, offering a subtle yet powerful addition to the image in the frame.

She had really done it. And although the night was only beginning, the reactions had been nothing but positive and encouraging. Before she had even seen her prints on the wall herself, she had been given compliments for her work from quite a few people.

"Wait." Carmilla counted across the wall, only seeing 8 photos. "There's one missing."

Maxfield nodded and gestured for Carmilla to follow her as she walked along the wall, passing Carmilla's photos one at a time. "The studio director thought your final piece deserved its own wall."

They turned the corner and Carmilla's self portrait hung alone, a spotlight shining on it lowly. It's solitude only added to its intended message, making it an even more powerful piece than Carmilla had ever thought it would be.

"She's quite impressed with your work." Maxfield looked at Carmilla who was standing next to her, staring at the photo, "I wouldn't be surprised if she approaches you to show and sell your work after this."

"I don't know what to say." Carmilla shook her head, tearing her gaze from the photograph to look at her professor. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me." Maxfield chuckled, "I'm just glad you decided to show your best work. It's a powerful story you've told tonight. You should be proud of yourself."

"I couldn't have said it better myself." Mattie stepped up next to Carmilla and wrapped an arm around her in a side hug. "This is truly amazing."

Carmilla nodded at professor Maxfield as she was called away by another student. Turning slightly to Mattie, Carmilla smiled, "Thanks for coming with me tonight. I don't think I could have done this alone."

"Oh please, I wouldn't have missed this." Mattie beamed, "My little monster all grown up and making a name for herself."

Carmilla chuckled and lowered her head bashfully before the sound of her name pulled her
"Carmilla!" Perry scurried across the room between people quickly, "I'm so glad I found you!"

"Hey red." Carmilla found herself smiling at the familiar face. Whether she wanted to admit it or not, she considered Perry a friend and was actually glad to see her. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here for you, of course." Perry smiled warmly and looked up at the wall they were standing by, seeing Carmilla's photo. "Oh my. Is that you?" She stepped up to the print, examining it closely.

"Yeah." Carmilla nodded and took a heavy breath, "I think I'm going to need a drink."

—

"Will, this place is huge." Laura looked around the space filled with people and photographs, "what if we never find her?"

"It's Carmilla." Will scoffed, "I'm sure it will be hard to miss her."

Laura gave him a curious look as they hung up their coats and started walking further into the building.

"Have you ever not noticed her when she's around?" Will slowed his steps and looked around, "she has a way of standing out."

"That's true." Laura mumbled as she narrowed her eyes, looking from person to person.

“Laura?”

Both Will and Laura turned to the excited voice calling Laura’s name.

“Perry?” Laura smiled as the red head approached them quickly.

Will looked between the two then cleared his throat and lifted a hand in a small wave, “Will.”

Laura rolled her eyes and turned back to Perry, “I didn’t know you were going to be here.”

“I hope thats okay, I just really wanted to support Carmilla. It’s a big deal that she’s showing her work tonight.” Perry hugged Laura then stepped back nervously.

“Of course, Of course its okay.” Laura nodded with a smile, “Have you seen her? Where is she?”

Just like that she was back to scanning the room, looking for the girl.

“I just left her actually. Someone wanted to talk to her about her work.” Perry turned and pointed towards the area she had come from. The same area that held Carmilla’s photographs. “That’s where her photos are but she walked away.”

Laura turned back to Will, “I’ll start there, you try the other way—“ She turned to Perry, “Are you good to help me find her too? The other side of the room?”

Perry nodded quickly, then they split up. Will pushed his way through people, moving further away from Laura. Perry turned and headed the way she thought Carmilla had walked off to and Laura went straight for the area Perry had pointed at.

Laura started to slow her pace, realizing she might be moving too fast and not giving herself enough time to actually look at the people she was passing. Everyone seemed more interested in the pictures
on the wall than the other people in the room and she went mostly unnoticed. Everyone was dressed
nicely, put together and sophisticated. Laura suddenly felt out of place and underdressed. As she
started to look at the work on the walls she was taken back by how professional it all looked. The
pieces were amazing. Laura hadn’t thought much about it before now, but it was an entire room of
work by people as gifted as Carmilla.

She walked through the pathways of walls created to show the photographs. Thin white walls placed
randomly throughout the large room with hanging lights, shining on each photograph. It was
interesting to see other peoples styles and things they chose to capture. Seeing so many different ones
made Laura eager to see Carmilla’s. She was growing just as excited to see her photographs as she
was to actually see Carmilla.

Her footsteps stalled as she rounded a corner and caught a glimpse of what she thought was herself.
Someone had walked by a photograph and blocked her view— but she could have sworn it was her.

Laura made her way over to the wall and stood back far enough to be able to see its entire length and
the handful of photographs hung along it.

“Oh my gosh.” She whispered as her eyes quickly trailed the wall, not stopping to look at any
photograph long enough to see it clearly. Only quick enough to see they were all of her.

“Mesmerizing. Isn’t it?”

A smooth voice seemingly coming from nowhere caught Laura’s attention and she glanced to the
person who had just stepped up next to her. Mattie. She recognized her from her contact photo on
Carmilla’s phone.

“Yes.” Laura whispered, looking the woman up and down carefully. Seeing her there was
throwing off her initial plan to talk to Carmilla and tell her how she felt. Carmilla hadn’t invited her,
but she had invited Mattie. What did that mean? Who was she to Carmilla?

“Have you seen them all?” Mattie turned to Laura with a slight smile. She had recognized the girl
immediately, having seen all of her sisters photos at this point, and knew exactly who she was.

Laura shook her head slowly, still watching the woman next to her. The way she was acting seemed
as though she knew Laura, and knew something Laura didn’t. She didn’t seem put off by her
presence, more intrigued. This is not the way an ex or current girlfriend would act in this kind of
situation. Especially in front of a wall full of photos that were of a different girl. There was
something else going on here entirely and Laura knew her reaction to Mattie’s call the morning she
was at Carmilla’s was the wrong one. This wasn’t someone she needed to be jealous of. She cared
about Carmilla, it was clear, but not the same way Laura did.

“Go look.” Mattie smiled knowingly, “It’s quite the story.”

Laura’s eyebrows pushed together, thinking over the situation. Nothing about this night was going as
planned and she should have expected that. Nothing with Carmilla ever went how she thought it
would.

When Mattie nodded towards the first photo on the wall, Laura finally turned to look at it instead of
her. She took slow steps, dodging other people who were walking and looking at the work hung on
the wall.

Laura stepped up the first photo in the row and let her eyes study it slowly. It was easy to
recognize where it was taken, only she couldn’t remember when it happened. Either she had been
caught up in her own world, or Carmilla had just been able to take it without her realizing.

It was at the park where Carmilla had taken her a few times. It had to be early morning, the sky was just starting to lighten with warm hues. The large tree that sat next to the pond was full of leaves of different colors. The pond reflected wrinkled images of the branches that hung low as ripples filled the water. Instead of snow on the ground, there was a lush green lawn. Dew hung to blades of grass, sparkling in the early morning light.

It finally clicked when it had been taken when Laura saw herself, standing next to the fence that circled the pond, wearing Carmilla’s leather jacket.

The night Carmilla had taken care of Laura when she was drunk. She had just broken up with Danny, and completely out of character, Carmilla had offered to take her home. They ended up at the park instead, and that was the first time Laura thought there might be more to Carmilla than she originally thought.

The photo was beautiful. The tree multicolored from the changing leaves of fall, the morning sun reflecting off the pond, the wild grass and broken fence. In the corner of the photo, Laura stood at the edge of the pond, leaning on the fence, wearing Carmilla’s jacket. Her hair was pushed over one of her shoulders and hung down, blowing slightly with the morning breeze.

The photo had been taken far enough away that Laura wasn’t the focus of the piece, but immersed in the beauty Carmilla was able to capture from the entire scene.

Laura was about to move to the next one when she noticed something pressed between the frame and the photo. It was a leaf.

It was of mixture of red, orange and green bleeding together. It matched the leaves on the tree in the photo perfectly. The only way Carmilla could have had a leaf to press into the frame that matched the photo exactly, was if she had kept one from the day she had taken the picture.

Laura couldn’t think too much about what that meant or she wouldn’t be able to focus on the next photo. She sidestepped slowly and stopped in front of the next one. Just like the first, sleek black frame, white matte, then photograph.

This one Laura knew exactly when it had been taken. It was the same day as the first, only hours later at the junk yard.

The backdrop was mountains of old rusted cars, scattered across the wide landscape. Shards of glass spread across the ground, left over from Laura smashing plates and cups and anything else Carmilla had given her that afternoon.

The glass was all different colors, reflecting in rainbows and leaving speckles of colored light across the frames of the cars and other piles of junk strewn about. In the distance sat a lone car, on the edge of the hill, looking over the city below.

The entire inside of the car had been ripped from it, leaving it bare except for the back seat. Laura was sitting in the junked car. Her arms were spread across the back of the seat, her head tilted back as the afternoon sun hit her face. Her eyes were closed and her smile was so warm it outshone the afternoon sun.

The city was framed by piles of junk, a contrast of discarded and forgotten objects and a city full of life. The distance between them seemed almost telling of the distance we keep between ourselves and things we view as broken. Laura was the connection between the two.
Someone so full of life and emotion, yet here she was surrounded by brokenness. Comfortable in the remnants of lives passed and things left behind.

She was closer in this photo. Still not the focus, like the first, but no doubt an important part of it.

Laura scanned the photo thoughtfully, thinking back to that day. The conversations she had with Carmilla and how she had finally started to show glimpses of the person she had been trying so hard to hide away.

Then just like the first, Laura noticed something pressed in the corner between the glass and smooth matte.

A few pieces of colored glass. Shards that had come from the glass Laura had smashed the afternoon the photo had been taken. They had to be. Laura wanted to reach out and brush her fingers against the sharp edges but knew she would only feel the smooth glass from the frame covering it.

She quickly moved to the next photo, growing more curious of what the rest of them held. What she was seeing was not what she had expected at all.

The third photo made her chuckle quietly. Not because of the image in front of her, but the memory that immediately filled her mind.

Carmilla's scary story, searching for the key to the mysteriously locked room and standing in a closet, hiding from a squirrel.

It was the abandoned house Carmilla had taken her to.

The photo was beautiful. It was the room with the bookshelves, piano and spiraling staircase. Once again Laura saw herself in the photo and shook her head at herself.

*How had she not noticed Carmilla taking pictures of her?*

The large bookshelves covered in dust lined the room, just like Laura remembered. Mirrors covered the walls not taken by the shelves, almost all of them cracked or shattered to some degree. They all captured the light differently, just like the cobweb covered crystals on the chandelier hanging from the ceiling. The piano sat at the bottom of the spiral staircase case, it looked more decrepit than Laura remembered. Broken keys, covered in dust, wires swirling and dangling from its body.

The house looked haunted from the image Carmilla had captured. It was different, seeing it from Carmilla's eyes. All of the photos had been so far. Laura had been there for each of them. Obviously, since she had been a part of them all. But what she remembered seeing, and what Carmilla had seen, had been so different.

Where Laura saw dirt or junk or absolutely nothing. Carmilla had seen beauty, a story, a memory. And somehow she had captured that in her photos. Even the way Laura was seeing herself in the photographs on the wall was different than how she imagined herself to be in those moments.

In the photo, Laura was ascending the stairs, dark red carpet beneath her feet, her hand clutching the intricately patterned railing. Her gaze was cast towards the top of the stairs, no doubt looking at the stained glass window that was bleeding orange, red and yellow into the room, causing Laura to practically glow.

Once again, she was the only radiant thing in an otherwise dark and eery photograph. The single display of life in a dreary world surrounding her. Somehow her presence brought life into the picture.
Her existence gave the window above her something to shine for, the crystals a reason to capture light, a purpose for the beauty hidden beneath dust and decay.

Laura was more of a focus in this photo than the last. It seemed to be the pattern. Slowly she became more and more important to the picture hanging before her. And just like before, there was something pressed between the glass and the photo.

A key.

The key Laura had found to open the door at the end of the hall. It had opened the room that held the book of photographs that had caused a crack in the wall Carmilla had built, allowing Laura in, if only for a moment. A quiet mention of loss, of love, containing no real details other than the emotion seeing the photographs had stirred up in Carmilla.

Laura exhaled softly, focusing on the key. All these items, carefully placed with a glimpse into how Carmilla had seen the world. They must have held some significance for her to keep them. Carmilla had always seemed like a mystery, holding things close to her chest and being cautious about what she shared and who with.

It seemed those walls were gone and there was nothing she was keeping to herself anymore. From the photographs to the little keepsakes paired with them. It was the most exposed Carmilla had let herself be and Laura couldn't wait to see the rest of the story.

She stepped to the next photo, completely unaware of anyone and anything happening around her at this point. The building could have been on fire and she wouldn't have cared. Her eyes and her heart were trapped on the things she saw in front of her. The world through Carmilla's eyes. Laura wasn't sure if it was because it was a world Carmilla had created, or because she had been able to capture something magical in the world that surrounded them all, that no one else had bothered to notice before.

The fourth photo pulled at something in Laura’s chest as her eyes quickly took in what she was seeing.

Once again, it was her. But she had never seen herself look that way before.

She was standing the greenhouse— the hidden one she had taken Carmilla to. They had been there for sunrise, broken panels of glass, green vines and colorful flowers had surrounded them. They had shared the morning in mostly silence, surrounded by beauty in such an unexpected place.

In the photo it seemed the sun was at war with the clouds. Patches of light broke through shattered windows, chased by the sprinkling of rain drops. Droplets had been captured by leaves and petals of the plants that surrounded Laura as she stood in the center of the green house.

Roses, lilies, vines and flowers of all kinds were intertwined around beams, pushing against panes of glass, growing out of cracks in concrete and holding firm to any surface and part of the building that they could. It was beauty taking a stand. Refusing to die in a structure ridden with destruction. And Laura was at the center of it.

The sun lit her figure, a warm glow cast around her. Honey colored hair and a smile warmer than the sun. Her face was turned upwards, eyes closed and arms outstretched. Her fingertips barely brushed the petals of flowers that seemed to be reaching desperately for the light she exuded, and drops of rain fell gently on her face.

The sunlight sang, warming everything about Laura, as the raindrops led the melody that filled the
space around her. It was a contradiction to what you should have felt. It should have been a destroyed building. Taken over by weeds and littered with shards of glass and dying plants. Instead it was beautiful. Full of life, bright and warm, the rain offering life instead drowning the garden in a mournful gloom.

In the bottom corner of the frame, was a perfectly pressed white lily.

Laura glanced back at the photos she had already looked at and realized something. She had started out as a piece of the background. Off in the corner, or sitting to the side, just one small part of the larger whole. Slowly, she had become a larger part, one photograph at a time, until she realized she was now the central focus.

The photos before, drew your attention to different things. Broken objects, to follow lines like a pathway to reveal a secret place. But this was different. She had become the center. She had become the thing that drew your attention and everything else in the photo was now the background; the pieces that were needed to complete the puzzle, but not the focus of what you were trying to create.

Pausing, Laura looked back to the photo in front of her. She couldn't help but feel that even though she was the focus, there was something else this photo was saying completely. She just couldn't quite grasp what that was.

She hurriedly stepped to the next one, ignoring someone that had stepped up beside her and tried to pull her attention away. She didn't care if it was rude or even who it was, she was lost in the world that was more and more becoming about her, yet, not about her at all. It was hard to explain everything she was feeling while slowly making her way down the line of Carmilla’s photos.

Laura's heart ached at the next one, remembering all that had happened the night it had been taken.

Charred brick and exposed rafters filled the edges of the photo. A bending frame and crumbling walls in the dilapidated building, a visual so strong you could nearly hear the boards creaking under pressure of the slight breeze. Fire light danced brightly, casting shapes and shadows across the cold concrete floor. The ceiling was mostly ripped away to expose the night sky littered with thousands of stars above them.

In the photo, Laura sat at the edge of one of the worn theater seats. The fabric ripped and dull from years of un use. Her posture relaxed but in a way you could see she was paying attention to something. Captivated even.

Her gaze was angled upwards, looking to something above the camera it seemed. The stars in her eyes out shining the Galaxy in the sky above her.

The look on her face was one of wonder, like she was seeing something incredible for the first time. Witnessing magic, maybe. A slight smile on parted lips, light from the fire accentuating the soft angles of her face. A warm cheek, a smooth jaw line, the curve of her neck. Small shadows battling low light, like a dance between her conflicting emotions. Starting in her chest and reaching the surface through her torn expression.

Everything about the photograph was a contradiction. Glowing embers lifting into the sky as the first sign of snow fell lightly to the ground. Fire and ice sharing the air as wonder and worry filled light brown eyes. The darkness of the sky fighting the light from the dying fires flame. Coexisting where it shouldn't be possible. A war amidst a love story.

Laura took in a deep breath as she looked at the photo. She could remember the exact moment this
picture had been taken.

*Your laugh is like the sunrise. You already know it's beautiful, without having to experience it. But the moment you do. The moment the sun starts to rise and you see the array of colors and feel that warmth you realize... that even though it happens every morning, it's your favorite thing and you can't wait to wake up the next day and experience it over and over again for the rest of your life.*

She remembered the click of the camera and the flutter in her chest that followed those words. The words she hadn't forgotten since they were spoken. The words she thought about more than she wanted to admit.

That moment had filled Laura's heart with an overwhelming amount of excitement. The words Carmilla had said were beautiful, and sincere and exactly what Laura would have loved to hear.

But the excitement was matched with fear and worry. She didn't understand it then, the reason for her fear, but it had stopped her from telling Carmilla how she felt.

The first of many times.

Laura's eyes dropped to the corner of the photo, once again something placed delicately in the frame.

A small slip of paper, burnt around the edges and crumpled as thought it had been wadded up then attempted to be smoothed out again. The paper was yellowing from age and probably the effects of getting wet then drying again many times.

Words written, unmistakably by typewriter—

"*Who could refrain, That had a heart to love, and in that heart, Courage to make love known?*"

"Macbeth." Laura whispered to herself. Remembering Carmilla saying that exact line before throwing paper into the fire. "She kept it."

As the words left her lips she realized that was the case for every single keepsake that came along with each photo. Carmilla had saved a piece of the world she had captured on film. And now it seemed, was using it as a way of giving away a piece of her own heart.

With each stone, leaf, key or piece of paper, Carmilla was exposing a piece of herself.

Laura stepped back, and for the first time since starting down the line of Carmilla's photos, she looked at the other people around her. Men, women, students, professors. They all walked around, stopping momentarily to chat or examine a photo on the wall. Eliciting their own feelings, their own interpretation of what they thought the photographer was trying to capture.

Laura watched an older man, he was looking at the photo of Laura in the abandoned house. She could see from his face that it was stirring something inside of him, it had caught his attention and had made him feel *something*. Then she wondered what that something was.

She had been there, experienced the moment the photo had been taken, and felt something in that experience. But seeing it from Carmilla's eyes, seeing it framed and sitting on the wall, she felt something different. She felt what Carmilla had felt.
How was that even possible? For someone to capture a moment and just by sharing that, make someone else feel what she felt?

When Laura saw the man nod at the photo like he understood, then turn and walk away, she looked back to the photo in front of her.

This is the first photo she had stayed stuck in her own feelings. Remembering the way she felt that night, instead of letting the picture show her how Carmilla felt.

She shut her eyes and took a deep breath, then opened them slowly and let herself see it from Carmilla's eyes instead of her own.

The light in the photo fell to Laura. From the stars to the fire, it was like she was pulling it from every direction as a beacon. The focus was clearly her, centered as a pillar, strong and beautiful in the photo with the world literally crumbling around her.

The chaos and destruction didn't even matter though. The warmth that seemed to focus on Laura, the light surrounding her and the glimmer of stars in her eyes made everything else almost fade away. A feeling of comfort, of warmth and beauty emanated from the photo, surprising Laura that she could feel that looking at a photo of herself.

The quote that accompanied the photo rang through her mind-

"Who could refrain, That had a heart to love, and in that heart, Courage to make love known?"

That was it. In that moment, and now in this moment, Carmilla was making her love known.

She had told Laura she was like the sun. The thing the entire world revolves around. And now she was showing her the same thing, one photo at a time.

It finally hit her. This was their story, or more so Carmilla's story. Carmilla was showing everyone the story of how she fell in love with Laura. Starting out as a single piece, lingering in the background, there, but just barely. Then slowly becoming the entire world in which you found yourself captivated by.

—

"Carmilla, this is Evelyn. She's responsible for holding this event every year." Maxfield introduced the woman that had just walked up to them.

Evelyn was an older woman. Tall and thin, white hair that was cut short and styled sharply. She had an air of confidence and an expression that made it seem like she had a secret.

Carmilla liked her instantly.

"It's nice to meet you, Carmilla," Evelyn smiled and held her hand out to shake Carmilla's. "I'm very impressed with your work tonight, as are many other people."

"That's, I mean, thank you." Carmilla shook her hand and stood proudly. The nerves she had started out with that night had completely gone and she was nothing but excited about sharing her work and hearing people's thoughts. "It's great to meet you. And Thank you, for the chance to be here tonight."

"You earned it." Evelyn smiled then glanced at Maxfield. "I have to say I've been amused at the response from your photos. I just tried speaking to a girl looking at them and was completely ignored." She chuckled and looked at the two women, "I honestly don't think she even realized I was
Carmilla chuckled bashfully. Being excited about sharing her work didn’t mean she was any good at accepting praise about it. That had never been something she was very good at.

"Carmilla has been making huge improvements throughout the semester." Maxfield was talking to Evelyn proudly and Carmilla wondered if that’s how normal mothers talked about their children.

Maxfield had always been more encouraging than her own mother, and even though her mother bragged about her— it was never with a sense of pride in Carmilla, it was like she was bragging about herself somehow.

Hearing Maxfield talk about Carmilla and how much she had grown, made it easier to actually believe the praise she was getting.

"Is your mother here?" Evelyn asked curiously.

Carmilla froze, her throat tightening, knowing she had invited her mother against her better judgement and was met with a laugh. And honest to god laugh. The thought that her mother would even consider attending was laughable.

"She's a very busy woman." Maxfield answered politely, reading Carmilla's face easily. She offered her a small smile before quickly changing the subject and leading Evelyn away to meet another student.

Carmilla exhaled slowly and glanced around the room, a smile returning to her face when she saw Will making his way quickly towards her.

"There you are." Will spat out, "Are you trying to hide from everyone?"

Carmilla glanced around amusedly, she was literally standing in the middle of the room. "Yes. I'm hiding in plain sight." She rolled her eyes, and continued talking, her worlds full of obvious sarcasm. "How did you ever find me? I thought my plan was brilliant."

Will shook his head and sighed, not in the mood to argue. He knew it was a waste of time and had to get Carmilla to Laura. "Just come with me. No questions."

"What? Why?" Carmilla started to follow him slowly.

Will groaned and looked over his shoulder, "I said no questions." He had seen the aftermath of things between Laura and Carmilla enough to know that not telling her what was going on was probably smarter. Less chance that she could back out or freak out. He just hoped things would go better than they had in the past.

Now the hard part was going to be keeping Carmilla with him long enough to find Laura.

—

At this point Laura wasn't sure she wanted to see the rest. They had all been beautiful up to this point, but she remembered how things had changed after the night in the Lustig and she was afraid the story was about to change, too. The warmth and love shown in every photograph so far could very well switch to hurt and disappointment after what had happened. But it was too late. She was already stepping to the next one, not able to stop herself.

She was swept away in Carmilla's world shown through images and didn't want to leave it.
The next photo was of a treehouse. Surrounded by trees dusted in snow. Dried leaves and pine needles covered the forest floor. Warped wood, different colors of brown and levels of decay made up the frame of the small house suspended above the ground. Tree branches intertwined through the base and railings of the structure. It almost looked as if the forest had created the tree itself.

Icicles hung from the edges of the tattered roof. Sharp points with glistening ends, droplets of water falling slowly to the frozen ground. Snow held in patches on the roof, untouched except for fallen leaves and melting patches from sunlight piercing through the trees.

Laura stood at the doorway, one hand on the twisting frame, her body frozen in time. The moment captured just before she stepped inside. Face turned to the side, her profile visible as a child like smile lit up her face, her eyes wide with excitement like she was about to enter a completely new world.

It was childhood, wonder, excitement, innocence. All captured in a single second, a single expression, a single breath.

Laura was wrong. The story hadn't shifted from love to hurt. It had only grown more and gone deeper. Nothing about what she felt looking at this photo was held on the surface. It was deep, it was pulling at her heart and making her smile, the same feeling of excitement from that day returning as she looked at the ghost of its memory.

Every photo had been beautiful visually, but this one was different. It was beautiful but for every reason besides the way it looked. Beautiful for the way it made her feel.

Laura smiled wide, her eyes stinging for reason she wasn't sure of, as she chuckled at seeing what was sitting in the corner of the photo.

Two five dollar bills.

This time Laura couldn't control the reflex to reach her hand out and brush her fingertips against the frame. The prize for the bet Laura had helped Carmilla win, years after the rules were set.

Laura dropped her head and shook it gently as she felt her eyes start to well up with tears. She felt so silly. Worried she wasn't special to Carmilla when all along, Carmilla was only looking at her. So many memories captured that Laura hadn't even been aware of. So much love Carmilla was offering Laura that she didn't even see.

Laura lifted her head and wiped at her eyes gently. She had missed so much. Hadn't seen it when it was always right there.

She was nearing the end of the wall as she stepped to the next photo. silently she hoped it wouldn't also be the end of the story. The photo she now saw in front of her gave her hope that it wouldn't be.

The train station.

Laura stood above the camera in this one. The angle catching the glare of the sun as it broke over the very corner of the train car she was standing in. Her hands were clutching the large rusted door as she stood in the empty doorway. The sky above the train car was bleeding orange and red as the sun rose slowly, a hint of clouds that Laura knew had later rolled in with a layer of fog.

But in the photo, the morning was magical, and warm, and everything she remembered that moment to be. But the sky was only a sliver of what was contained in the photograph hanging on the wall. The rusted and worn down train car stood angled on the track it had been abandoned on. Laura, once again, the center of the piece. She stood tall, a calm expression on her face as darkness from the car hovered behind her. Only it wasn't all darkness.
Carmilla had captured the lights piercing through the tiny holes in the metal walls. Spears of luminescence shooting every which way in chaos behind Laura’s frame. Her expression of calmness a contrast to the direction and flow of the light randomly shining behind her. Just like the warm colors painting the sky contradicted the darkness swallowing the inside of the train car.

It seemed no matter how chaotic the world, Carmilla was able to catch a calming light and feeling with the image of Laura in the center. No matter how broken things seemed to be around her, Laura was constantly breathing life into the photograph, making it beautiful despite its brokenness.

A carefully folded map sat at the bottom of the photograph. Train lines and old routes covered the old map pressed within the frame, but something else caught Laura’s eye. She stepped up closer and saw the neatly penned cursive scrawled across the paper.

*I’d go… wherever you are going.*

Laura felt her eyes start to well up again at the words that had seemed part of a game before, but now gave her hope that she wasn’t too late. Another realization stole her breath momentarily as she read the words written carefully across the map.

Everything Carmilla had placed within the photographs weren’t just a pieces of the worlds from which she was sharing. It wasn't only pieces of herself. Everything had also been touched by Laura.

From the leaf she had twirled between her fingers by the stem, as she stood with Carmilla at the edge of the pond. The colored glass she had held in her hands before shattering it upon the ground. The key she had gently turned as she unlocked the door, the flower she had passed and barely brushed with her fingertips. To the piece of the old script she had offered Carmilla to feed the fire, the money she had taken from the wall seconds before pressing her lips to Carmilla’s. And now the map she had barely paid attention to until the promise Carmilla had given her, to follow her wherever she planned to go.

Every object was a piece of Carmilla. And every object had been touched by Laura. Just like Carmilla’s heart.

——

Laura moved to the last photo on the wall. Number 8. 8 memories. 8 moments. 8 brand new declarations of love and a view into Carmilla's world that held nothing but beauty and love for Laura.

A sharp intake of breath. A quick step forward. Laura was blown away and mesmerized by the remaining photo.

She wasn’t sure if she wanted to smile or cry. She wasn't even sure what she was feeling. Everything about it was so simple and peaceful yet overwhelming at the same time.

It was much simpler than the earlier photos. This one had no color but held just as much beauty as the ones that had. It was soft shades of black, greys and white that filled the frame. It looked clean, crisp, and nearly perfect.

It was Carmilla's bedroom. Mostly just the view of her bed from an angle that caught just the edge of the window as well.

The white walls popped brightly. Black, smooth surfaced bed side tables framed the head of the mattress on both sides. A deeply colored comforter was hanging over the foot of the bed, half on the floor, crumbled and discarded sometime in the night. Light shone through the window softly with the
first rays of the morning. Shadows from the shape of the widow stretched across the wall lazily.

White sheets that looked soft and light, covered the bed and parts of the bodies nestled between them. You could see the shape of legs, smooth and sleek, outlined in the soft curves of the thin material that lay loosely on top of them.

Two naked figures, not quite intertwined, but even through the sheet you could tell they were pressed as closely together as could be deemed comfortable.

The girl that had been in all the pictures up to this point was on her stomach, relaxed and in the early moments of waking. But this time, there was someone else with her.

A darker haired girl, seemingly captured in a moment of movement, was pressing herself closely to the body beneath her.

The silent exchange captured between the two bodies was intimate and such a personal expression, the only world Laura could think to describe it was stunning.

The use of color being absent from this photograph made it easier to focus on the tiny details of the expressions on faces and subtle positions of bodies and sheets.

The white sheet was falling down the back of the darker haired girl. The muscles of her back flexed as she positioned herself over the other girl. You could tell her movements had been slow and purposeful just by the position of her body. As the sheet slid down porcelain skin, it fell just above lauras waist, exposing Laura's entire back, her arms stretched up and tucked beneath her pillow as her head was turned to the side.

A slight smile lifted the corner of Laura's lips as the other girls fingertips pressed along her shoulder blade while her lips lingered on her spine. The dark haired girls eyes were looking up to Laura's face, full of adoration and love.

It seemed this was the moment all the photos had been leading up to. Laura had slowly become Carmilla's world in her photos, until suddenly they were sharing the world together.

A crinkle at the edge of upturned lips, gently pressed fingertips on bare skin, goosebumps rising near warm lips, creased sheets, and the flow of morning light melting through the window.

Everything about it felt safe, romantic, complete.

It was a strange feeling for Laura to be flooded with memories and feelings from that morning, then feel something else from seeing it in front of her. It was everything from sweet and warm to sad and heart wrenching.

She felt a tear glide down her cheek as she noticed the feathers trapped in the corner of the frame.

The feathers had brushed her skin softly, ghosting across collar bones and tracing ribs. Eliciting sharp breaths and low chuckes as it tickled sensitive skin. A sensation as fleeting as the bliss that she had woken with that morning. Quickly dissolving into doubt and heartache.

"Is this where it ends?" Laura spoke quietly. She hadn't meant to say it out loud but once again a smooth voice broke through the haze she had been in.

"Not quite, darling." Mattie's voice was somber as she gave Laura an expression that almost seemed apologetic.
"Will, seriously. We've almost lapped the entire building." Carmilla slowed her steps, tired of following Will for no apparent reason.

Will turned around and saw Carmilla had stopped and was just looking at him with a bored expression. "Look, I didn't want to say anything cause I don't really know the proper protocol for this--"

"Will." Carmilla's eyebrows lifted, completely over his behavior since he had gotten there. "Spit it out. What are we doing?"

Will sighed dramatically, "Looking for Laura."

Carmilla shifted her weight and licked her lips, her mind reeling. "But she's not even in town."

"She is." Will started walking again, Carmilla quickly following, "I brought her. She showed up at your place looking for you tonight."

"Why the hell didn't you say so?" Carmilla picked up speed, not caring if Will followed or not. Her lazy attitude taken over by the sole purpose of finding Laura in the packed studio.

Carmilla saw Mattie on the far end of the studio. Just barely visible at the edge of the wall that held her self portrait. She was talking to someone and for a second, made eye contact with Carmilla with an expression she couldn't read. All Carmilla knew was that's where she should be headed right then.

Mattie had walked around the corner with a slight nod that urged Laura to follow. She wasn't sure what for, all the photos had been lined up together already, what more was there to see?

Then the photo sitting alone on a wall just big enough to hold it came into view and Laura felt as through the air was being pulled from her lungs.

The spotlight shone on the photograph perfectly to accentuate the shadows and light trapped inside the frame.

The romantic and consuming story of love that had been portrayed shattered immediately after seeing the image. The gentle touches and turned up lips, draped in warm bed sheets was not the end of the story.

This was.

Carmilla had taken three separate shots and developed them on top of one another, combining them into one heartbreaking photo.

The setting stayed the same throughout. Large bed, framed by dark tables and covered in white sheets. A single figure sitting in the center of the bed. But that's where the photos overlapped.

You could see the movement of the woman, the only thing that changed within the photo, surrounded by a world suspended in time and frozen inside the frame.

The first image you noticed was Carmilla sitting up, looking directly at the camera, naked and clutching the white sheet tightly to her chest. Her image was crystal clear. You could see the crease
in her forehead, the tendons flexed in the fist holding thin material, and the shimmer of tears building in her eyes.

She looked lost.

Then it was as if she was moving in the photo. A blurred outline of the same woman covered the space between her upright figure and the mattress below her. Captured in the exact moment she had lowered herself to lay on her side. You couldn't see her face, or make out any details, but the blurred shades of black pulled at your heart and made you feel how hopeless she must have felt. You didn't need to see her face, the hollow blur of movement told you everything you needed to know.

The third image that had been pieced into the photograph was both empty and overwhelming.

Carmilla, curled on her side, clutching at the bed sheet as exposed shoulders curled in and hair splayed against the mattress. Tears were rolling down cheeks, a damp spot on the mattress under her head, but her face looked emotionless. Her eyes a unique mixture of abiding pain and newfound emptiness.

Laura shook her head to herself, sniffling and wiping at her eyes. Words lost as her heart ached at the image in front of her. The thought that she had done that to Carmilla made her feel like she couldn't breathe.

This changed everything.

Everything she had come here to do, everything she had hoped for, everything she thought could happen. How could it? After seeing how she had left Carmilla. How could she ever forgive Laura after that?

“My little sister has always had a flare for the dramatic.” Mattie nodded slowly, but it felt like a statement meant to lessen the blame Laura felt. It was nice. Ineffective. But nice.

“Sister?”

Mattie responded only with a turn of her head and a moment of eye contact.

Laura chuckled humorlessly as a response. Mattie had been her sister all along. This whole mess was for nothing. But it didn't matter now anyway. She still had no idea what to say. A night beginning with her wanting nothing more than to see Carmilla, and now she was actually grateful that she hadn’t. The words she had wanted to say now felt like they weren't enough.

Words, how little they mean when they are said too late.

Laura wasn't paying attention to Mattie well enough to notice the slight nod and silent interaction she was having with Carmilla across the room. Her eyes had dropped from the photo to the corner. An automatic action by now, curious to see what Carmilla had saved and added to the vision she was creating. What more she as giving of herself and to the story.

Only this time there was no gently folded paper or feather captured behind glass. Instead there was careful words written in perfect cursive. Looping smoothly across the bottom corner of the matte framing the photo. No more pieces of herself left to give, only words.

‘My ribs are hollow because my heart belongs to you.’

Mattie turned her head slowly to look at Laura. She knew nothing other than what she had seen from the photos and what little information Carmilla had offered her. Which wasn’t much. But she was
pretty good at reading people, and even if she wasn't it wouldn't have taken a genius to read Laura’s face.

“You miss her.” It wasn't a question. It wasn't an accusation. It was a realization.

Upon seeing her sisters photographs for the first time that night, Mattie had assumed Laura had broken Carmilla’s heart and hadn't cared. When she saw Laura there, her intention wasn't to comfort Laura or help her. Quite the opposite. But after seeing her face, her quivering chin, thick swallows, tears falling from reddening eyes and heartbreak written on her face— Mattie realized Laura was just as hurt as Carmilla had been in that last photo.

Laura breathed out a shaky sigh, trying to hold back her tears.

“Like someone cut a hole in me.”

“Mattie.” Carmilla finally spoke to her when she was close enough that she wouldn't have to raise her voice or draw attention, “Have you seen— Laura.”

Carmilla stopped dead in her tracks as soon as she saw who Mattie had been standing and talking to. Her eyes flew to her sister then back to Laura quickly, trying to read what was going on.

"Carm. Hey." Laura cleared her throat and quickly wiped at her eyes trying to hide the remnants of tears.

"Laura." No other word would form besides the shape of Laura's name. What word would be the right one, better than the melody that formed from her lips when she spoke the name belonging the the girl that owned her heart?

Once again, words were not enough.

Carmilla stepped forward and slightly into Laura's space. Her hand moved forward slowly until her fingertips brushed Laura's. She sighed, relieved that Laura hadn't pulled away.

"What are you doing here?" She whispered, her eyes locked on Laura's misty ones.

"I came to..." Laura trailed off, she couldn't do what she had come her for. Not now. Not after seeing what she had done to Carmilla. "Your work." She stepped back, lifting her hand from Carmilla's and gesturing to the photograph on the wall. "It's incredible."

She was motioning to the photo but her eyes were on the ground, unable to bring herself to look at the heartbeat she had caused.

Carmilla didn't take her eyes off Laura and knew what the photo was doing to her. She took Laura's hand again and tugged her gently around so her back was to the wall, no longer able to see the photograph.

"Laura, it's just—" Carmilla sighed. She knew it wasn't 'just a photo'. She couldn't say that. It had been real. But that wasn't the whole story, even if that's what it looked like. "It doesn't matter."

"How can you say that?" Laura voice cracked as she said it. She tried to turn back around but was stopped by Carmilla's hand pulling her closer. “Of course it matters.”

"Laura why are you here?" Carmilla asked again, only this time her words sounded like she was
pleading. She had seen that Laura was holding back since the morning the in photo behind them. She couldn't force Laura to trust what had been happening between them, and had been trying to be patient. But this cycle of heartbreak and silence was becoming overwhelming.

"Carmilla?" Evelyn was approaching the two girls with someone at her side. "When you have a moment I have someone I'd like you to meet."

"Shit." Carmilla mumbled as she shut her eyes tightly. It seemed all too familiar to be interrupted in such an inconvenient moment with Laura. If it hadn't been Evelyn, Carmilla probably would have told them to shut up or ignored them all together.

"It's ok." Laura whispered, actually grateful for the interruption for once.

Carmilla clenched her jaw and let out a slow breath. She turned but kept her hand wrapped around Laura's. She didn't want her to use the interruption as a chance to leave.

“Hello, again." Carmilla smiled as best she could but winced when she felt Laura gently pull her hand free.

Evelyn smiled and introduced the other woman- she worked for a local magazine and had connections in the world of photography that Carmilla couldn't ignore. No matter how much she wanted to get back to Laura.

Laura stood silently behind them as they spoke for a moment before she felt her eyes start to sting again. She couldn't remember a day that was as much of a roller coaster of emotions as that day had been. She was exhausted and couldn't be there anymore. She knew if she waited, Carmilla wouldn't let her leave. so she took the opportunity and started making her way to the door.

She stopped and turned around, unable to leave without looking back at Carmilla just once. She looked so in her element. She was smiling, small, but genuinely. The woman in that final photo was not the same woman standing across the room.

Somehow in the time between the morning that had been captured and frozen in time and that night, Carmilla had changed.

Carmilla turned her head, still in conversation with the two women, and made eye contact with Laura. It was pleading but somehow understanding and Laura felt lost in her look.

When Carmilla gave Laura a small smile before turning back to her conversation Laura realized something.

It was never Carmilla that was broken. It was the world around her that was. She had been the piece fighting so hard to remind it of its beauty.

Because what was broken really? And who got to decide if thats what she was?

Carmilla was anything but broken.

She was strong, and compassionate, fearless and gentle. She was thoughtful and patient, headstrong and loving. She may have been many things, many separate pieces, but that didn’t mean she was broken.

In all of her photographs the world had been in some state of shattered. From glass pieces to forgotten worlds. Abandoned and deemed no longer of value. No longer beautiful. And Laura had been at the center of it all.
Maybe it was Laura that was the broken one.

Laura rushed outside, struggling to fill her lungs fully as she tried to alleviate the tightness in her chest.

It had always been her. Laura was the one that had been cracked, and Carmilla had always been trying to show her the beauty she saw in her.

From the morning in the junk yard when she allowed Laura to feel angry and let the fire inside of her show. To the night she took photos of the stars. An entire galaxy in the sky above them and Carmilla's eyes nearly never left Laura's. Carmilla wasn't showing Laura the beauty that the broken world around her held for nothing. She was proving to Laura that broken meant nothing when it came to beauty.

Laura took in a shaky breath and wrapped her arms around herself and turned towards the direction of her apartment. It would be a long walk but she was hoping the cold December wind would finally numb the ache she felt in her heart.

——

"I know dad, I'm sorry." Laura sighed and fell back into her bed, "I didn't mean to miss the big New Year's Eve party."

Laura's father chuckled on the other end of the phone, "It's fine, pumpkin. Steve can give me a ride. And you know we only go to see how long it takes for someone to get hit with a firework."

Laura couldn't help but laugh at the image of Mrs. Pepper, a 75 year old lady, running away from stray bottle rockets the year before.

"Besides, with the snow storm picking up I don't want you driving right now anyway."

He hadn't asked what happened the night before, which Laura was more than grateful for. But he was her dad, so he could probably tell by her voice things hadn't gone like she hoped they would.

"Thanks dad." Laura sat up and looked out the window at the snow still falling. Maybe if she was lucky it would never stop and she could just stay locked in her room forever.

"I'll give you a call tomorrow and we can work out how I'm going to get my truck back."

His voice was comforting and Laura couldn't help but think how lucky she was to have a dad like him. Sure he wasn't perfect, but he always ended up making Laura feel better about whatever was going on without having to try too hard.

Laura had just hung up the phone when she heard her door start to creak open.

"You about ready sweetie?" Perry poked her head through the doorway with a smile.

"I know I said I'd go tonight but I really just would rather stay home." Laura sighed and pulled her legs underneath her to sit cross legged on her bed.

"What?! No!" The door swung open quickly to reveal Lafontaine who had been standing behind Perry. "You have to come!"

"She doesn't have to." Perry swatted at their arm as they pushed by her and into Laura's bedroom. Laf looked back at Perry before hopping onto the end of Laura's bed, "Yes. She does."
"And why is that?" Laura raised an eyebrow and gave them a tired look.

"Because it's New Year's Eve." They smacked Laura's knee, "you can't start the year alone in your bedroom thinking about all your regrets of the last year."

"Lafontaine!" Perry’s eyes were wide and her tone showing how surprised she was at lafs lack of tact.

"What? It's true." They shrugged, "You have to start the year off how you want it to go. So you're going to get up, get dressed, and come dance and drink with us."

"Because I want the rest of my year to be full of frat boys and alcohol?" Laura asked sarcastically, not believing their logic for a second.

"No. Smart ass." Laf glared playfully, actually glad for Laura's slight playfulness. It was a start. "Because you want the rest of your year to be full of possibility."

Laura's smirk fell, that was not what she expected from Laf.

"Tonight, anything is possible. It's a fresh start, a new beginning. A chance to let go of whatever held you back last year and hold on to what inspires you to take chances."

Laura glanced at Perry, who looked just as surprised by Lafs words as her.

"You're afraid of change, L." Laf leaned back on their palms, "why do you think I call you frosh still?"

"Cause you're a jerk." Laura rolled her eyes. It was an annoying nickname now that she wasn't actually a freshman.

"It's because you're still the same nervous, guarded girl you were when we met." Their voice wasn't mean or harsh. It actually had a surprising caring tone to it, "Don't be so scared to grow up and take chances. The past doesn't have to be your future."

And there it was. Laf rarely interfered on a deep level, but that was some serious insight.

That was the underlying cause of what had been happening. Laura couldn't let go of things that had happened in the past in order to embrace a new possibility for the future. She thought Carmilla wouldn't truly care for her because of what she had seen her do in the past. She was afraid to let herself love because when she had in the past, it had left her hurt and alone.

And Laf was right. She had to let go of all of that if she expected things to be different in the future.

"What if she doesn't want me anymore?" Laura asked, terrified at letting the words escape her lips. Saying it out loud felt like it made it more of a possibility. "Last night- she seemed fine. She seemed amazing. She doesn't need me."

"Laura." Laf scooted towards her and gave her leg a squeeze, "Whether or not she needs you doesn't matter. What matters is if she wants you." They looked over their shoulder at Perry who was leaning against the doorframe watching them and smiled, "Love is a choice."

10:50 pm

Carmilla was already angry she was there and she hadn't even gotten out of her car. She could see
the lights in the house flashing and the music was loud enough it was interrupting the silence in the
car as she sat there and stared at the house.

When the warmth of the car was nearly gone because of the freezing air outside, she decided it was
time to get out. She sent Will a text letting him know she was there and slowly got out of the car and
got to the back of the car.

She was pulling the first bag of ice from the trunk when Will jogged up to her with a wide smile.
"Hey kitty! You are seriously saving the party."

"I still don't understand why you need ice. You could have just filled the cooler with snow."
Carmilla shoved the bag of ice into his chest and went to grab a second one. "Plus everyone is drunk
and probably wouldn't even notice if the beer was warm."

"Wow." Will chuckled and let Carmilla stack the second bag on the one already in his arms, "Aren't
you a ray of sunshine tonight."

After spending an entire afternoon (she had slept till 1) trying to decide what to do about Laura,
Carmilla decided a distraction would probably be a good thing. The fact that Laura hadn't even tried
to contact her since the night before didn't calm her at all, and she wasn't sure if it was a good or bad
thing.

So when Will had texted, begging her to "BRING ICE", she figured it wouldn't hurt to get out of her
apartment and do something other than think about Laura.

Until she was actually in front of the zeta house. Then it got worse when she followed Will inside.
The freezing air outside vanished the second she walked into the stuffy house. People were already
sweaty from dancing and the astounding number of people packed into the house. No doubt being a
fire hazard.

All the noise and overwhelming sexual tension filling the house made Carmilla want to throw up.
Everyone was so desperate to find someone before the clock counted down to midnight, it would
have been amusing had she not been feeling desperate herself. But not just for anyone. For Laura.

“What was I supposed to do? Just ditch the person who was giving me this enormous chance? To
what?” Carmilla adjusted the bag of ice in her arms awkwardly as she followed Will into the kitchen.

“Uh, you were supposed to follow the girl you’re in love with to tell her—“
“I already told her.” Carmilla shoved the bag into Wills arms then leaned back against the counter.
“Thats the point Will. I can’t make her love me back.”

“Woah.” Kirsch walked into the kitchen and straight for the cooler full of beer. "Thats a serious
word.”

Carmilla rolled her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest. She knew agreeing to help Will with
this stupid new years eve party was a bad idea. She just wanted to keep busy in hopes of keeping her
mind off the night before. It definitely wasn't helping that the first thing Will asked her about was
Laura.

Will chuckled and emptied one of the bags of ice in the cooler, "she already loves you. It's obvious."

"Who? Laura?" Kirsch asked as he popped the top off his beer.
"See?" Will threw his arm out towards kirsch, who had just helped him make his point.

"It doesn't matter." Carmilla rolled her eyes. "She left. She could have stayed and she chose to leave."

"You let her leave." Will countered quickly.

"It's not that simple." Carmilla grabbed her own beer and opened it quickly to take a gulp.

And it wasn’t simple. She could have stopped her, but it wouldn't have done any good. Laura had to be ready in her own time.

——

11:15pm

"Do we really have to stay until midnight?" Laura yelled over the music pumping from the speakers next to them. "I'm all for new beginnings and stuff, but—" she caught a zeta as he stumbled over to her and pushed him back on his feet, "I'm not sure this is exactly what your inspiring speech was referring to."

"Yeah ok, maybe it's a little less encouraging than I was going for." Laf shrugged and took a sip of their drink, "but you aren't really trying that hard."

Laura sighed and leaned back against the wall. They were right. She wasn't trying. A fresh start sounded nice, but the only fresh start she wanted was with Carmilla. So what was the point in trying when she wasn't even--

"Carm?" Laura pushed herself off the wall as she saw Carmilla weaving slowly through the crowd of people.

She tried to follow her with her eyes but she was too short and the crowd was too big and she lost sight of her almost as quickly as she had gained it.

Maybe Laf was onto something with this idea of not letting her past dictate her future. Using the excuse of new ears eve, she had 45 minutes to get her new beginning.

—

11:20 pm

Carmilla pushed her way through a group of people in an attempt to get to the front door. She had delivered the ice and had a beer and now it was time to go. It wasn't until she saw the pair of red heads dancing in the herd of college students that she slowed her pace through the maze of coeds.

Perry saw her and her eyes went wide with a smile to match. Before Carmilla could do anything, Perry was somehow parting the crowd and making her way quickly to her.

“Carmilla!” She gripped at Carmilla’s wrists in an attempt to not let the crowd pull them apart.

“Thats me.” Carmilla mumbled, her arms hanging loosely as Perry swung them between them. Was she drunk?

“Oh my goodness! I’ve been looking for you for days!” She pulled Carmilla into a hug, their bodies stumbling slightly.
“Days?” Carmilla was beyond amused at the behavior of the intoxicated red head in front of her, even if her arms were pinned at her sides in a hug tighter than she liked.

“Well not days.” Perry pulled back, her hands still gripping Carmilla’s arms, “But last night. Then tonight. So.. nights!”

“Why were you looking for me tonight?” Carmilla asked with a chuckle when Perry let out a hiccup.

“For Laura, silly.” Perry giggled and swayed as her hands dropped from Carmilla’s arms.

“Laura? Laura’s here?” Carmilla tried to get Perry’s attention again but she was giggling about something and trying to fix the collar on the boy standing next to them. “Perry, focus. Where’s Laura?”

—

11:40pm

Laura had searched practically the whole house by now trying to find Camilla again. At this point, she was worried she had imagined her making her way across the room. The only other option was that she left before Laura could find her. The fact that there were probably over a hundred people crammed in the house wasn’t helping. It had even been a good 15 or 20 minutes since she had seen Lafontaine or Perry. And the bouncing curls and fire engine red hair was usually fairly easy to spot.

She was rounding the corner from the hallway to the main living room when arms were wrapping around her tightly and lifting her off the ground.

“Nerd hottie!” Kirsch squeezed her tighter before setting her down with a wide smile, “Awesome party, bro!”

“Kirsch.” Laura chuckled, “It’s your party.”

“Oh. Right.” He nodded, his smile never wavering. “Did angry hottie find you?”

“What?” Laura stepped closer, afraid she hadn't heard him right over the sound of bass pumping through the house and practically shaking the walls.

“Yeah. She was on a mission to find you earlier.” Kirsch nodded, eyes wide. “Or maybe it was a mission not to find you. I can’t remember.” He grinned sheepishly, “Sorry, I’ve had a few drinks.”

“You aren’t making sense, kirsch.” Laura shook her head, frustrated with not understanding what he was saying. “Is carmilla here or not?”

“Oh she’s here.” He looked over the crowd in an attempt to point her out, “She brought the ice and wanted to tell you the time. Or give you time. I don’t remember.” He grinned sheepishly, “Sorry, I’ve had a few drinks.”

“Do you see her?” Laura turned to try to look through the crowd with him but was hoping with his height advantage he would be able to help. He was drunk, not blind.

“No bro. I don’t see her.” He shook his head and frowned at the smaller girl.

“Thanks for trying Kirsch.” Laura sighed but kept trying to see her in the crowd. It was nearing midnight and she wasn’t sure what would be worse. Having Carmilla be in the same place as her but the universe sending them a sign, not letting them find each other. Or finding her and not knowing
what to do once she did.

—

11:55pm

“Carm sexy!” Kirsch yelled over the few people between them.

Carmilla spun around and watched as Kirsch tried to navigate his way gracefully through the crowded room. It was much more clumsy and entertaining than he had probably meant for it to be.

“What is it Kirsch?” Carmilla checked the time on her watch. The closer it got to midnight, the more frustrated she was getting. She knew Laura was there. Why was it impossible to find her?

“I was just looking for you!” Kirsch stumbled into her slightly, balancing himself by pressing a hand against the wall behind her. “Lerd hottie—naura—Laura, is looking for you.”

“For fucks sake.” Carmilla rolled her eyes. Of course a plastered Kirsch would be the one to find her. “Do you remember where? Or are you too hammered?”

“I’m not hammered.” Kirsch chuckled, leaning over towards her with a grin. “She’s over there.” He pointed across the room from where he had been talking to Laura then hopped his way into the crowd dancing in the middle of the room.

As midnight approached it seemed like the music was getting louder and the people were getting more enthusiastic. It was literally minutes away and everyone was either counting down the seconds before their midnight love connection, or drinking to forget the fact that their lips probably wouldn’t touch anything but the edge of the bottle that night.

Carmilla stepped up on a couch and looked in the direction Kirsch had pointed. There was no telling how long ago Kirsch had seen Laura or if she was even still in that general direction, but it was worth a shot. She scanned the faces lining the wall and felt the hope of finding Laura slipping away as someone started the 60 second countdown.

Carmilla was about to jump down off the couch when she saw her. Her back was against the wall and her eyes were glued to the rim of a cup in her hand. She didn’t look like she wanted to be there, in fact, she looked like she would rather be anywhere else.

For a second Carmilla worried maybe Kirsch was wrong. Maybe Laura wasn't looking for her and didn't even want to see her. She hadn't tried to call her, so why would she be happy to see her at a party on new years eve?

“Fuck it.”

Carmilla stepped down off the couch and started pushing her way through people. She had 45 seconds to make it across the room to Laura and right now it was feeling impossible. People kept stepping in her way or trying to stop her or get her to dance and all she wanted to do was to stand in front of Laura when the clock hit midnight.

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40!
It was a stupid idea to start counting from 60. Who had decided to start counting anyway? If she knew, Laura would probably throw her drink at them. It was too much of a reminder of how Laura hadn't been able to find Carmilla in time.

She swirled what was left of her drink in her cup and watched it slosh against the edges. Glancing up she caught sight of Laf and Perry starting closely together in the corner of the room smiling at each other.

Laura couldn't help but smile at the tiny and nervous movements they made to get closer with each second that was counted down. Looking out across the room, it seemed everyone was doing the same. Waiting for the clock to strike 12 to kiss whoever they had found to start the new year with.

And there she stood alone.

She felt bad for not feeling more happy for her friends. They deserved to be happy, to be able to have their own new beginnings, even if she wasn't going to get hers. As the numbers started to get smaller, the seconds ticking closer to midnight, Laura couldn't help but feel even more dejected about the whole thing.

Laura closed her eyes and took in a deep breath. The sounds of laughter, music, drinks being poured, people counting down were overwhelming. It was pointless now and all she wanted to do was leave. She opened her eyes and turned towards the door but felt a hand wrap firmly around hers and pull her back and quickly down the hall next to them.
Laura’s back pressed against the wall behind her abruptly, pulling a gasp from her lungs as she tried to figure out who had grabbed her and what was happening. When she finally focused on the figure standing in front of her, her eyes went wide and her jaw dropped.

Carmilla eyes were focused on Laura’s as she stepped in even closer than they were already. “You have ten seconds to tell me to stop before I kiss you.”

The sounds of the party started to disappear as Laura stood there speechless. Her back was against the wall, her arms at her sides. She could barely register the gentle grip Carmilla had on her hips. Her focus was on the look in Carmilla’s eyes and the way she licked her lips. Laura swallowed heavily, as Carmilla stepped even closer. She was being slow, and careful, giving Laura the chance to stop her if she wanted to.

She wouldn’t.

Everything was in slow motion, the crowd counting down loudly and excitedly as midnight inched closer. Laura and Carmilla were alone in the hallway, everyone else gathered together to celebrate once the countdown ended. It wouldn't have mattered anyway, the only thing Laura saw was Carmilla. The only thing she heard was Carmilla’s quickening breathing as she moved closer.

Carmilla watched Laura closely, trying to read her expression as she moved closer. She hadn’t stopped her, she hadn't spoken, she hadn't even moved.

Carmilla lunged forward and pressed her lips against Laura’s. She didn't want to wait until midnight. She didn't want to wait another second. And it seemed neither did Laura.
As soon as Carmilla’s lips pressed against Laura’s, Laura had lifted her hands and wrapped them around Carmilla, pulling her body against her own. Carmilla pressed her hands against the wall on either side of Laura as she pressed her body firmly against her, deepening the kiss. Feeling overwhelmed and relieved all at the same time. Her heart was pounding, her whole body buzzing at finally being this close to Laura again. At the feeling of Laura pulling her as close as possible.

The kiss was passionate and heated. It seemed almost angry. But it wasn't. It was desperate. It was an aching that needed to be filled. It was loneliness. It was love.

Carmilla sighed against Laura’s lips. She tasted like fireworks. Pop rocks on her tongue and fireflies in her stomach. No longer the light flutter of butterflies but the fire of exploding light, igniting every piece and splinter of her heart. It was intense and consuming and full of sparks.

The counting had stopped, the cheering calmed down, midnight kisses had happened and ended along with the last remaining seconds of December. The problem with countdowns is that once you run out of numbers, there's nowhere left to go.

The problem with someone that causes fireworks in your heart, is that once the blaze dies down, you're left with nothing but the smoke.

Carmilla pulled back, her eyes fluttering open as she paused just inches from Laura’s face. Laura’s eyes were still closed, her lips slightly parted and swollen from the kiss, slightly turned upwards with the beginning of a smile.

Carmilla felt her hands shake as she pulled them away from the wall and took a step backwards. Laura hadn’t stopped her when she gave her the chance, but she still hadn't been the one to make the move.

Carmilla took another step back and bumped into someone walking down the hall. She watched Laura open her eyes as they stood against opposite walls while people started to walk between them. The look on Laura’s face was one of confusion when she saw Carmilla with her back pressed against the opposite wall. It switched to panic when she watched Carmilla take off towards the front door of the house.

She was too stunned to follow her immediately, but she tried to catch up, pushing through people and ignoring people saying her name. Carmilla disappeared outside, the door shutting behind her just as Laura reached the main living room. Practically sprinting, she made it to the door and ran outside, not caring as the icy air bit at her skin.

"Don’t you dare do that.” Laura called after her, “Carmilla!”

Carmilla was already at her car but spun around at the desperation in Laura’s voice.

“You can’t just—” Laura stopped herself as she got closer to the car, she wasn't angry, not really. "You can't just do that."

"Why not?” Carmilla yelled back in frustration.

Laura took a deep breath and calmed her voice, trying to put her feelings into words. “You kiss me and it— It cracks me open and…” Laura sighed and crossed her arms over her chest. "And I don't know what to do or what to think because..” Laura sighed and ran a hand through her hair in frustration she could never get the words to come and even if she did, would they even be enough?

The car between them might as well have been a canyon separating them. The feelings were too much and the words just not enough.
Carmilla’s heart was racing. She didn’t care that Laura seemed mad, she had followed her out of the house. She was angry that Carmilla had left. She was finally not stopping herself from feeling because of the fear that came along with it.

“Because what?” Carmilla urged her to continue, stepping around the car and towards Laura.

“Carm.” Laura breathed out, dropping her gaze to the snow on the ground as soon as Carmilla stopped walking towards her. “I cant—“

The door to the house burst open and a group of people came stumbling out laughing and yelling. Laura spun around to look at the noise, the interruption reminding her where they were and that she was outside in the snow without a coat. She turned back towards Carmilla and rubbed at her arms for warmth.

“I cant do this. Not here.” Laura shook her head and tried to avoid looking at Carmilla but couldn’t keep her eyes from looking into the dark ones locked on her.

Carmilla clenched her jaw and looked around quickly before stepping back to her car and opening the passenger side door. “Then we will go somewhere else.”

She thought she had been showing patience, courage even, giving Laura time. But she had been scared. Scared Laura didn’t want her back and the longer she let Laura keep to herself, the longer she got to imagine what it would be like if Laura actually wanted her back. But she was done waiting. She was done being scared. She was done running.

——

Laura was the first one out of the car and in Carmilla’s apartment building. She was even the one to put the key in and walk in, leaving the door open for Carmilla to follow. She had been silent the entire ride there, bouncing her leg in the car and fidgeting with anything she could get her hands on.

Everything she had been bottling up and feeling over the last couple weeks without Carmilla was pushing at the surface and it was only a matter of time before it came exploding out. She knew she had missed Carmilla while she was home for Christmas, but she didn’t realize how much until she kissed her.

Her feelings upon arriving the day before had been so sure— she knew how she felt about Carmilla and she couldn’t wait to tell her. Then she saw her photos and it changed everything. How had she not seen what Carmilla had seen? She had been a part of the story and hadn’t even realized it. Seeing those photos made her feel like it was too late. Like it wasn’t fair to pull Carmilla back in after she had pushed her so forcefully away.

Laura spun around at the sound of Carmilla shutting the door.

“Ok. We are out of the cold, and not surrounded by lackwits—“ Carmilla started but stopped when she saw the look on Laura’s face.

“Carm, it wasn’t you.” Laura sniffled and wiped at wet eyes, “It was me.”

“What was you?” Carmilla asked softly. She set her keys on the counter and took slow steps towards Laura. When the other girl didn’t back away, she brought her hand up and brushed a tear away with her thumb.

“I'm broken Carm.” Laura reached up and took hold of Carmilla’s hand, bringing it down between them but not letting go. “Of everything that caught your eye and lifted your camera... I was the most
destroyed. It was never you that was broken. It was me.”

Carmilla wasn’t sure what she expected Laura to say, but it wasn't that. Of all the things she saw in Laura, broken was never one of them. Carmilla’s eyes dropped to their connected hands as she slowly lifted them until her lips are pressing gently against Laura’s knuckles.

“You have no idea how wrong you are.” Carmilla whispered against Laura’s hand.

Laura sighed, she wanted to smile at how sweet she was being, but she closed her eyes and felt a tear fall down her cheek instead. “Carm, I’m not some perfect—“

“No one is.” Carmilla cut her off quickly but softly. She didn’t want to fight anymore. They had been fighting wars within themselves long enough, fighting each other would do no good. “We all have flaws. We all have cracks.”

Laura looked up at Carmilla. Her voice sounded so sure of what she was saying, it was hard not to believe her.

“But your cracks are filled with kindness.” Carmilla kissed Laura’s knuckle again before lowering their hands. “...and compassion...” She stepped closer and tucked a strand of hair behind Laura’s ear. “...beauty and hope.”

Carmilla moved forward slowly, watching Laura carefully as she did, until her lips pressed gently against Laura’s cheek. “They are filled with light.” She kissed her other cheek then pulled back far enough to look Laura in the eye, “They are filled with love.”

Laura exhaled, her shoulders relaxing, and her lungs feeling like they were working properly for the first time in weeks. The ache in her chest was still there, but no longer strangling her heart.

“I don't know why I wasted so much time trying to pretend like I didn't love you. I guess I just didn't want to feel like this. It hurts.” Laura was fighting back tears as the words left her mouth. It did hurt. It hurt to know that she had wasted so much time letting stupid things get in the way, letting her fears hold her back. Most of all, it hurt knowing how much hurt she had caused Carmilla.

Carmilla brought her hands up to cup Laura’s face, using her thumbs to brush tears from both of her cheeks. “I'm not easy to love.”

“No. That's the thing.” Laura shook her head as she reached up and pulled Carmilla’s hands down by her wrists, “Falling in love with you was the easiest thing I've ever done. That's what made me so scared.”

Carmilla smiled, her eyes studying Laura like she was taking a mental picture, one she didn’t want to ever forget. “Do you realize you just told me you love me? Twice.”

“Uh— I—“ Laura stammered, both from realizing Carmilla was right, and the smile on her face.

*God she was beautiful.*

Laura hadn’t realized she had even said it. She wasn't sure she had even said the words to herself yet. Somehow holding it all inside had become too much and the words came out without her thinking. Maybe that was exactly what she needed. To stop thinking about it and just feel it.

"Is- is that ok?” Laura asked nervously.

Carmilla chuckled and shook her head. She bit her bottom lip and glanced over at her bag that was
sitting next to the door. “Don’t move.”

Carmilla walked over to her bag and picked it up, pulling something from it. The bag hit the floor again and Carmilla made her way back to Laura, holding out the book for her to take. Laura grabbed it, her eyebrows pressing together in confusion as she rotated it in her hand.

She had seen the book dozens of times by now. Probably more. It was the same book Carmilla always had in her bag, or in her car, or in her hand. The pages were worn, notes in the margins, corners of pages turned over. It was Carmilla’s favorite book. She never went anywhere without it.

“I tell you I love you and you give me a book?” Laura asked with a nervous chuckle. Her declaration hadn’t been planned, but this seemed like an odd way for Carmilla to respond.

Carmilla smiled warmly and nodded towards the book. “There’s a bookmark. Find it.”

Laura gave her a curious look before letting out a sigh and wiping at her eyes once more. She was feeling less emotional for some reason, even though she had no idea what exactly she was looking for, it somehow felt like everything was finally going to be okay.

She flipped open the book and started flipping through the pages quickly until they opened to a marked page. Laura could tell by the material, a photo had been keeping Carmilla’s place in the book and she pulled it from between the pages. Turning it over to see the picture on it, she looked up quickly at Carmilla, completely shocked.

“This was the day we met.” She lifted the photo to show Carmilla and was met with a smile, “I know because I ruined that shirt from spilling my drink on it. And you.”

“I know.” Carmilla reached out and grabbed the photo from Laura, chucking as she looked at it.

The photo was from the day they had met. It had actually been taken before they met. Laura was sitting on a table in the quad, talking with Laf. She was leaning back on her hands, head tilted to the sky, sun shining on her face.

Carmilla smiled at the photo, like she was getting lost in its memory. “I can’t tell you I loved you the first moment I saw you. And the first time we spoke, I for sure didn’t love you then.”

Laura laughed at the memory of Carmilla practically yelling at her. She had just thrown her coffee all over her. Then an entire stack of books not too long after that. How they ended up here truly was a mystery.

Carmilla pulled the book from Laura’s hand and set it and the photo on the counter before taking her hand and leading her over to the couch. She sat down, pulling Laura down close to her, keeping their hands together.

Laura watched Carmilla’s face as her dark eyes stayed locked on their hands. Carmilla’s fingers brushed slowly over the back of Laura’s hand and wrist as she started talking again.

“I don’t know if it was the first time you held my hand or kissed me or told me goodnight instead of goodbye.” Carmilla lifted her eyes to look at Laura, the weight of what she was saying clear in them. “But I remember the first moment I looked at you, sitting on that bench, soaking up the sun and I suddenly could feel the world spinning for the first time.”

Laura felt the heaviness in her chest start to float away. Whatever vine of doubt that had wrapped itself around her heart was loosening with every word Carmilla spoke. Her voice was soft, her touch was warm, and the look in her eyes more gentle than she had ever seen it.
“I’ve been dizzy since the first moment I saw you. I had no idea why, Everything else was a blur as
the world continued to move. But you... since that first moment, somehow you always remained in
focus. Like you were suddenly the only thing I could see clearly. The only thing that kept my feet on
the ground no matter how out of control everything else was spinning. Because without even
knowing it, I was falling. Falling so hard that it didn’t matter how fast the world spun because my
world now revolved around you.”

Laura was speechless. Flashes of the photographs from the night before filled her head. The gradual
focus on Laura the further down the wall she had moved. It wasn't showing Laura becoming the
most broken. It was the chaos behind her becoming less important, less scary, while Laura always
remained in focus. Calming the feeling of destruction and despair, pulling light into darkened places
and touching fractured and forgotten objects to remind them they were beautiful too.

"I didn't know it then, but I fell in love with you when you held my hand and made me forget I was
afraid of heights. I fell in love with you every time you smiled, or rolled your eyes or got angry at me
and bunched up your nose. I fell in love with you when you asked if we 'should be doing this' at the
same time as you climbed through the fence." Carmilla and Laura both chuckled, knowing Laura
had asked that question more than once while doing the exact thing she was asking it about.

"I fell in love with you when you touched my body and at the same time touched my heart."
Carmilla's smile looked grateful, her own eyes misting with the words escaping her lips. Like she
was relieved to finally get to say them out loud. The sound of them even more precious than the
thought of them.

The image of Carmilla curled in on herself flashed in Laura's mind- how could that same person be
sitting here and still love her so much?

"I've fallen in love with you over and over again, and since the first time that it happened- I have yet
to fall out of love even once.”

Laura had been silent for what felt like forever. As Carmilla searched her eyes for some kind of
indication that she had heard her, and understood her, she couldn't help but smile.

This incredible woman sitting in front of her had changed her life so tremendously and she hadn't
even realized it. She knew there was more to explain, things Laura probably hadn't realized yet- her
self portrait being one of them.

She hadn't chosen to present the photograph of her curled in on herself to show how 'broken' she
was. Quite the opposite.

Carmilla had always been terrified to show herself completely to another person. Afraid once they
saw the whole picture, she wouldn't be what they wanted, she wouldn't be enough.

The morning Laura had left her alone in her room, Carmilla had exposed herself completely. She had
broken through any wall she had built around her heart and had taken a leap into uncertainty,
knowing there was a chance of getting hurt.

It had been worth it.

She realized she didn't have to be perfect to love with everything she had. The scars on her heart had
made her stronger, not weaker. She was a mixture of patches and stitches, but so was Laura. And
what she thought were jagged slivers, destined to remain torn from her heart forever, were really
pieces waiting to fit the cracks within someone else. Parts of herself that she could offer as a shield to
cover and strengthen the cracks in someone else's heart until they could heal themselves.
She had been hurt but not broken. But if she hadn't let herself be exposed, every part of herself, then the pieces of her heart that Laura needed most wouldn't have been able to reach her.

—

It was minutes after midnight. Snow fell lightly outside as the moon shone through the window, lighting Carmilla's eyes and making everything about her softer. The look in her eyes, the curls in her hair as they framed her face, the pink lingering on her cheeks from the bitter air they had been in only moments before.

Laura didn't know how to describe the feeling in her chest. It was as if Carmilla had awoken galaxies within her, swirling wildly in her rib cage. Dancing constellations existing only because Carmilla loved the stars.

Because Carmilla loved her.

Things weren't all of a sudden perfect. All the problems and the fears hadn't disappeared. But it was okay. Because sitting there, looking into Carmilla’s eyes and seeing the reflection of the galaxy bursting in her chest, Laura knew she loved her more than she was afraid.

“God, Carmilla.” Laura whispered and shook her head gently. All the feelings that had been swarming her chest in butterflies and star dust were settling into the most calming feeling she had ever experienced.

Love wasn't chaos and rapid heart beats. It was feeling found in an unescapable maze. It was slowing heart beats to match the other one tethered to your own. It was soft smiles and even gentler fingertips. It was the security in constellations, fixed forever in the heavens while comets exploded around them.

It was letting Carmilla show her that her scars were beautiful, while Laura did the same for her. It was exposing her heart to the possibility of disappointment, anger, and pain. But trusting it would be touched by compassion, understanding and love.

Laura scooted forward on the couch as close to Carmilla as she could and brought a hand up, fingers sliding into dark curls as she closed the space between them. The kiss didn't feel like fireworks, butterflies of even an explosion of stars. It felt warm and full. Like the cracks were being filled with every ounce of love that Carmilla was freely offering her.

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Carmilla blinked slowly and let out a sleepy sigh as she rolled to her side. Her hand slid across the mattress, a smile spreading on her face when her fingers brushed against warm skin.

“Can’t sleep.” Laura whispered as she watched Carmilla get comfortable on her side.

Carmilla's expression was still sleepy, fighting to keep her eyes open as she pulled in another heavy breath before whispering, “Why not?”

Laura smiled and brushed a dark curl from Carmilla’s face before leaning in and kissing her lips gently.
“What was that for?” Carmilla smiled as soon as Laura pulled away. She lifted her fingers to brush lines against the skin of Laura’s arm as it lay between them.

“No reason.” Laura leaned in and kissed her again quickly before pulling back and giggling quietly.

Carmilla rolled towards Laura, gripping her side and squeezing tightly, causing Laura to squirm underneath her. She continued to tickle her while kissing across her collar bones and up her neck playfully before pulling back and looking down at her. Carmilla was holding herself up with her forearms resting on either side of Laura’s head. The soft light of the moon was streaming in through the window, light up their faces and making the room glow.

Laura tried to untangle the sheet covering them slightly before reaching up and sliding her palms over Carmilla’s waist. She gripped gently and pulled her body down to rest on top of hers, moving one of her arms as Carmilla settled into the space tightly against her side with her head resting on her chest.

Carmilla’s fingertips started to trace shapes across Laura’s bare stomach as she listened to the steady beat of her heart. “You know I never did tell you happy new year.”

Laura chuckled and ran her fingers through Carmilla’s hair before placing a kiss against the top of her head. “Happy New Year, Carm.”

Carmilla smiled against warm skin before shifting upwards to place a kiss just below Laura’s ear. “Happy New year, cupcake.”

They stayed that way for a while, the moon shifting in the sky in the early hours of the morning. Snow that had been falling constantly started to thin, flakes drifting slowly until they stopped all together. Frost crystallized against the glass of the window, the hum of the heater low, the sound of steady breathing breaking the silence in the room. Fingertips brushed warm skin, invisible messages covering the expanse of exposed bodies. Eyelashes fluttered with sleepy eyes and tired sighs, the comfort of being wrapped in each others arms pulling them closer to sleep.

Laura’s eyes were heavy, the movement of her fingers slowed to nearly a stop. She could feel the steady thrum of Carmilla’s heart against her own chest, falling into the same rhythm of her own and she smiled at the idea that they had been destined to find one another. To share broken pieces of one another, fitting together to make them whole again.

“Will you come somewhere with me?” Laura whispered, nearly asleep, feeling Carmilla’s shallow breaths puff across her chest.

“Anywhere.” Carmilla whispered back, her lips brushing against bare skin.

They fell asleep seconds later, their hearts feeling whole and more full of love than they had ever felt before.

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Thankfully, Laura had let Carmilla sleep until noon before cashing in on that promise for her to go anywhere with her. After 4 hours of driving, Carmilla knew there was no way they were going to make it back to Silas that night. Even if it had stopped snowing the roads weren’t the greatest. Especially at night. The only thing Carmilla hadn’t considered was what that would mean.

“You cant just stay in your car all night, Carm.” Laura put her hands on her hips and gave Carmilla a pointed look through the car window. She had already tried to open the door herself but Carmilla had locked it before her hand was even on the handle.
“Cupcake, no.” Carmilla shook her head, her voice loud enough to pass through the glass of the drivers side window. “I love you but I cannot spend the night in your fathers house. Parents do not like me.”

Laura’s stern expression fell quickly and she couldn't help but laugh. Of all the things Carmilla could put her foot down for, the fact that it was staying at her fathers home for one night seemed ridiculous.

“Carm, you have nothing to worry about.” Laura bent over, pressing the tip of her nose against the glass of the window. “He already likes you, I promise.” Her breath covered the widow in a fog, so she stood up and pressed the tip of her pointer finger against the window.

Carmilla watched a heart form underneath Laura’s finger on the window and rolled her eyes. She let out a groan before unlocking the car and pushing open the door. When she saw the pleased expression on Laura’s face she wasn't sure if she should feel even more worried about the situation or not.

The front door opened and Laura’s dad came out with a wide smile, “Pumpkin! You were supposed to call me, not drive here in the snow!”

Laura made her way over to him, gesturing for Carmilla to follow. “I know.” She gave him a tight hug then held out the keys to his truck, “But it stopped snowing and Carmilla followed me the whole drive so we were perfectly safe.”

“Oh, Carmilla.” Laura’s father nodded his head in a greeting, “Nice to see you again.”

“Um, you too.” Carmilla replied hesitantly but with a smile.

Laura looked between Carmilla and her father and chuckled at the awkwardness happening before pushing her father towards the doorway and taking hold of Carmillas hand and tugging her along behind her. “Can things be awkward inside? Its cold.”

Laura’s father laughed then led them inside, immediately going to the kettle on the stove in the kitchen. “How about some hot chocolate?”

Laura had stopped just inside the doorway and was standing closely to Carmilla, helping her pull her coat down her arms, “Sounds perfect.” She called out to her father but kept her eyes on Carmilla as they stood together in the living room.

Carmilla smiled and felt her cheeks start to warm. Laura was something else. One smile from her and Carmilla's edges didn't seem so sharp.

Laura smiled, bunching up her nose before giving Carmilla a gentle kiss. She pulled back and bit her bottom lip while she watched Carmilla slowly open her eyes and a smile return on her face. It was sweet and quick, but it was special. Everything between them felt that way.

Laura led Carmilla into the kitchen where her father was and started pulling mugs from the cupboard and talking with her dad. He was telling Laura how the new years eve party had gone. How the fireworks somehow got lit before they were taken from their box. Which meant every firework that was supposed to go off that night all got lit at the same time and started exploding early in the back of Steve’s truck.

Carmilla watched the two of them talk, Laura laughing when her dad tried to explain what it looked like seeing the entire town dropping to the ground to dodge rogue fireworks and how Steve was crying and screaming at the same time afraid his truck was going to explode.
It was strange to realize that moment felt more like home than any other she had ever had. It was easy for Carmilla to admit to herself that choosing to let herself love Laura was the best decision she had ever made. Even if it took some heartache to get there, every bit of it was worth it. When Laura looked over her shoulder as her dad poured warm liquid into the mugs and smiled at Carmilla, she knew Laura felt the same way.

“Hot chocolate?” Laura set the cup down on the table in front of Carmilla then slid into the seat beside her, sipping from her own cup.

Carmilla took a sip of hot chocolate and set the cup back down then looked over at Laura with a small smile. She had told Laura she loved her in every way she knew how the night before, but in that moment, she wished she could tell her all over again. Her palm rubbed against her thigh as Laura smiled over the edge of her cup, her father still talking to her but her only focus was on Carmilla.

Carmilla wanted to capture this moment forever, but knew she would have to remember it since taking a picture wasn’t an option. Nervous energy made her bring her hand from her thigh and reach for the bowl in the center of the table. She picked out a white gummy bear and was about to put it in her mouth when Laura snatched the bear from between her fingers.

She turned to watched as Laura reached for the bowl and grabbed a red bear and held it out in her palm for Carmilla to take. Carmilla looked at her curiously as she took the red gummy bear from Laura’s hand and held it between her fingers. Laura smiled coyly before she took the white gummy bear she had stolen from Carmilla and stuck it in her mouth.

Carmilla gave Laura a crooked smile, surprised by what had happened. When Laura grabbed another white gummy bear and stuck it in her mouth, Carmilla chuckled, her eyebrows coming together confusedly.

“Why are you eating the white ones?” Carmilla was still holding the red bear between her fingers, confused by what was happening.

Laura just shrugged and smiled even wider as she grabbed another white bear, “Because you like the red ones.”

It was the most simple response in the world, but it was that moment Carmilla knew Laura finally saw it. She saw the whole picture, and still loved her.

Carmilla felt a hand slide into her thigh as Laura turned to look at her dad. She silently watched the two of them talk, laughing and smiling. She would nod in response when they tried to include her in the conversation, but she didn’t mind just being there, being part of the new picture forming with her in it.

Chapter End Notes

The end.
I have no other story ideas currently so that’s it's for a while...
(Unless it want to give me suggestions. Of anything peaks my interest I may give it a go.)
Later!
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Amanda: Please write the epilogue for this omff PLS YAS

okay :)

Chapter Notes

its short.. but hopefully you enjoy it anyway. Also, finishing this fic sucked. Cause it was so fun writing and hearing from you guys. But thanks to actually quite a few people offering the same idea, I started a new one. In case you're interested in reading :)"Carmilla stepped into the elevator and hit the button for the ground floor. She's not exactly sure how it happened, but life was kind of incredible. After the exhibition, she had been offered space at the gallery to show and sell her work on a regular basis, as well as a job with a national magazine who's home office happened to be just a few miles from the gallery. She was a now a field photographer, occasionally traveling for assignments for the magazine as well as making actual money selling her own work.

Plus, she was finishing up her final semester at Silas and had been going practically non stop. It had been a long 3 months getting used to it all but it was finally feeling normal. Good, even.

The elevator slowly shut and her eyes fell to her reflection on the cold silver doors. She couldn't stop the small smile that grew on her lips. Mere months ago and the way she saw herself was completely different. It wouldn't have made her smile. But things were different now.

She had been through hell to get here. Dealing with her own demons, as well as literal monsters trying to hold her back and push her down. Her mother had been furious when she shifted her classes and found a way to graduate early so she could really focus on photography. So much so, that she threatened to cut Carmilla off.

Carmilla realized she had already been living without her mothers help- actually, she had been making it despite her mothers efforts to hinder her dreams. Getting "cut off", so to speak, was probably one of the greatest things to ever happen to her.

Carmilla had simply smiled at the threat and left the deans mansion for what would probably be the last time. Whatever hold Lilita had on her, be it out fear or just years of telling her she wasn't good enough, had vanished.

Carmilla realized she had already been living without her mothers help- actually, she had been making it despite her mothers efforts to hinder her dreams. Getting "cut off", so to speak, was probably one of the greatest things to ever happen to her.

She let out a content sigh, she had never thought things would end up the way they had. But here she was.

"What the--?" Carmilla glanced at the lit up numbers as the elevator slowed to a stop on the 4th floor.
She should have been the only one left in the building. After getting lost in her work in the dark room provided by the magazine, she had lost track of time and when she had finished her work, it was well after everyone else had gone home for the day.

The doors slowly opened, Carmilla's reflection on the heavy doors rippling away as they opened to reveal someone standing in the 4th floor office, files and notebooks clutched against her chest and a tired look on her face.

Carmilla's eyebrows lifted in slight surprise at the sight. The other girl was looking at the floor, clearly exhausted and not paying much attention.

"Going down?" Carmilla asked, her voice low, a slight smirk on her lips. Her hands rested on the railing that wrapped around the elevator as she leaned her back against the wall behind her.

Warm brown eyes lifted immediately at the sound of her voice and Laura felt herself smiling at the all too familiar smirk. She quickly cleared her throat and replaced her smile with a straight face and stepped into the elevator without saying anything.

Laura stopped just barely inside the elevator and turned her back to Carmilla, tightening her grip on the stack of papers in her arms.

It took a week after Carmilla started her job with the magazine before they realized it was in the same building as Laura's newspaper internship. They had found out in almost this exact way. Carmilla had lost track of time, Laura had stayed late, and the unlikely meeting in the elevator after hours had happened.

"Long night?" Carmilla asked, not moving from her place against the back of the elevator.

Laura stared at the office in front of her, the elevator doors apparently offering her one last chance to leave before they shut and trapped the girls together for the slow ride to the ground floor.

"You could say that." Laura swallowed heavily, her fingers gripping tighter to her papers.

The elevators started to shut, the movement startled Laura and caused her to jump slightly. A snicker from behind her made her roll her eyes.

"Something funny?" Laura asked but didn't turn around. She watched the reflection of the dark haired girl appear in the elevator doors closing in front of her.

"What's got you so tense?" Carmilla purred, her voice low and quiet, sending a shiver through Laura's entire body.

"Nothing." Laura tried to answer casually, but the breathy sound to her words betraying her.

"You know..." Carmilla pushed herself off the wall and stepped forward, stopping just behind Laura.

The elevator moved slowly as it descended to the main floor, the movement causing Carmilla to sway slightly, her body moving just enough to barely brush against Laura's back.

"...if you need some help relaxing, I'm sure I could help." Carmilla lifted her hand, her fingers gently moving Laura's hair to one shoulder, exposing the right side of her neck.

"Is that so?" Laura asked, not being able to hold back the small smile now growing on her lips as her shoulders relaxed slightly.
Carmilla smiled when Laura let out a giggle and squirmed slightly at the touch of fingertips along her neck.

"Second floor." Carmilla leaned forward, placing a quick kiss to Laura's exposed skin, "Not bad, cutie."

Laura smiled and turned around to face her, "One of these days I'm going to make it all 4 floors."

Carmilla stepped closer and smiled into a kiss, letting her lips linger against Laura's until she felt the other girl start to smile, "I hope not." She winked and took the stack of work from Laura's arms, "This is one of my favorite games."

"Oh really?" Laura raised an eyebrow and tilted her head slightly, letting Carmilla take half the stack of papers from her arms.

"Mmhm." Carmilla nodded and kissed her again just as the doors opened to the main floor.

Carmilla went to pull back but was stopped by Laura's free hand reaching up to curve around her neck, fingers tangling in dark curls and pulling her back into a much deeper kiss.

The elevator doors hung open a while before closing, the elevator sitting still on the ground floor. Laura stumbled back slightly and felt her back press against cold metal and the papers being held in one hand start to slip. She chuckled and pulled her hand away from Carmilla to catch the papers about to fall at their feet.

Carmilla groaned as Laura ended the kiss in favor of not dropping her work and stepped back with a pout.

"Don't give me that look." Laura chuckled and reached over to press the button for the door to open again, "I was hoping I was the only one running late. It doesn't look good for both of us to be late to our own house warming party."

Carmilla took a deep breath and reached for Laura’s hand, intertwining their fingers and leading her out of the elevator, “I still don’t understand why we have to do this. You've been practically living with me for weeks already.”

Laura shrugged and followed her out of the building, tugging on her hand once they reached the parking lot. “You know Perry, she wouldn't take no for an answer.”

Carmilla stepped closer and swung their interlocked hands gently between them, “You know, we could skip it.” She bit her lip and raised an eyebrow at the girl in front of her, “I have plenty ideas of much better ways to spend our night.”

Laura bit her lip and shook her head gently, her eyes never leaving Carmilla’s, “You know we can't do that.” Even though she really wanted to.

Laura felt her phone vibrate in her pocket and let go of Carmilla's hand, readjusting the papers in her other arm before pulling her phone out and answering it. “Hello?” She suppressed a chuckle and smiled when Carmilla pouted at her.

“Hey Perr— no, sorry, we both got held up at work.” Laura smiled at Carmilla and nodded towards the parking lot, following Carmilla towards her car, “We are headed home right now, I promise we won't be long.”
“You got us… a plant?” Carmilla’s eyebrows pressed together as she took the potted plant from Kirsch.

“Yeah bro!” He smiled proudly, “You know, its like, a house warming gift.”

“I see…” Carmilla nodded slowly, her eyes looking at the small plant.

“Its great Kirsch.” Laura nudged Carmilla with her shoulder before stepping forward and giving Kirsch a hug. She shot Carmilla a look before taking kirsch by the hand and leading him to the living room with everyone else.

Carmilla just rolled her eyes and walked to the kitchen, plant in hand, before trading it for a beer from the fridge. She popped the cap off and took a sip as she turned and leaned hip against the counter.

It was interesting, seeing how different things had become in such a short time. She watched as the people just a few short months ago that had been mostly strangers, now sat in her apartment, the very apartment she and Laura now shared, and acted like family.

Laf and Perry sat closely together on the sofa, hands together, while Laf spoke passionately to Danny about their latest project. Danny nodded along while Perry listened intently. Will was on the floor with Kirsch, tossing a tennis ball back and forth, watching Joey pounce from one boy to the other excitedly. Mattie was standing near the record player, wine glass in hand and thumbing through records on the shelf.

Laura’s laugher pulled Carmilla’s attention and she chuckled quietly when she saw Joey taking up Laura’s entire lap as he stuck his nose down into the edge of the chair looking for the tennis ball Will had tossed her way.

The familiar tingling in her fingers made her put her drink down and walk towards the table. She adjusted the dials on her camera and set it on the counter, peering through the viewfinder and adjusting the focus. With a single press of a button she made her way towards the group of friends, sitting and laughing together in her living room.

Carmilla gently pushed Joey off of Laura’s lap and pulled her up to stand. Laura gave her a curious look but wrapped her arms around Carmilla’s shoulders as she pulled her close by her waist.

“What are you up to?” Laura asked quietly, not missing the grin on Carmilla’s face.

“Nothing at all.” Carmilla winked at her with a small smile.

Will tossed the ball towards Kirsch and Joey lunged for it, knocking him over and straight into Danny’s legs. She had been sitting on the arm of the couch and the hit had knocked her off balance. Her arms flew in the air as she fell on top of Kirsch ungracefully. Everyone erupted in laughter as Danny glared at Kirsch while attempting to get up.

“Dog pile!” Will yelled as he launched himself towards the two already tangled on the floor.

Laf’s eyes widened and they followed Will quickly, pulling Perry with them. Joey hopped around them excitedly, everyone laughing as they all piled on top of each other with Joey hopping around them.

Laura let out a laugh and was about to join the growing pile when Carmilla gripped her waist and pulled her flush against her own body with a smile.
"Ready?" She whispered with a shy smile.

"Ready for what?" Laura chuckled at the uncharacteristic bashfulness Carmilla was showing.

"To create the rest of our story." Carmilla leaned in and pressed her lips against Laura's as best she could with the smile still on her lips.

*click*

Later when Carmilla would develop her roll of film she would see every person in her life with a smile on their face and a light in their eyes. Kirsch, Danny, Will, Perry and Lafontaine piled on the floor in a mess of bodies and giggles. Mattie standing behind them, head thrown back in laughter with her hand outstretched towards the group to guard herself from being pummeled accidentally. Joey doing his best to join in the mess of limbs and Carmilla and Laura, bodies pressed together, smiling into a kiss.

Carmilla had never had a family portrait before.

Now she did.

End Notes

Tumblr: yoitsmeecass (in case you want to say hey)

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