

right where you left me

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right where you left me

by [loftop](#)

Summary

Bellas are for life, they really are.

Time goes on, but Chloe stays twenty-three and Beca Mitchell sits with her all throughout, because she always has her love come a bit out of pace. (They are destined to have a forever of their kind.)

Notes

i give up trying to stop myself, i'm basing this off 'right where you left me' - bonus track on evermore and letting myself run free with all the other references. also, my apologies in advance for any scientifically inaccurate things.

all that belongs to universal and pitch perfect belongs to them.

the 1

she's still twenty-three inside her fantasy;

how it was supposed to be.

It's about old friends, everything, *all of it*.

She is only young once, and it is such a good thing that the Bellas have taken up so much of it. Chloe loves the music and the people with all of her young, beating, acapella heart.

It's such a big world, so much to do, so many people to love, so many songs to sing. However, Chloe is happy enough just singing on the top of her lungs with Beca pressed into her side, a huge loopy grin on her face, and the acapella nerds that surround her are so loud she can't even hear her own voice.

She remembers spotting Beca at the fair and her first thought being '*wow, she's short*'.

She remembers crossing paths with her again a night home from the library, introducing herself, and Beca replying with '*dude, how do you even remember me?*'.

She remembers not moving on and shoving aside Beca's shower curtain over the clean voice singing Titanium.

Suddenly, it is the initiation party of the beginning of her senior year and she isn't quite sure she is ready for everything it means, but when this new alt-girl with racoon eyeliner is buzzed enough to not push her away when Chloe wraps her arm around her waist, it is good *enough*.

Oh, Chloe is terrified of this year going past in a blink of an eye, and she can already feel herself sinking into Beca Mitchell's I'm-too-cool-for-this-but-I'm-actually-just-a-huge-dork smile but she has a feeling everything will end well.

Good endings for good people.

Right?

(Which sounds like something the boy with floppy brown hair chasing Beca around would say, with is unfortunate for something coming out of Chloe's mouth, but she really does believe in happy endings.)

Beca threw her head back and laughed. Chloe stares at her and wonders who she put that red checkered skirt on for, tonight.

(No, no. Girls can do things just to feel pretty. But Chloe just can't but *wonder*.)

Some nostalgic pop song that is incredibly loud booms through the speakers that are who-knows-where, and Chloe joins the small crowd of people around her bursting into song. Screaming out lyrics in a jumbled mess of words, she sees even Aubrey letting her tightly wound ponytail down and Stacie groping her boobs in a way that was completely inappropriate for the song, then Fat Amy yelling something about crocodiles and jumping into the pool, splashing water all over a very disgruntled looking Lilly. Cynthia Rose is looking very suspicious, fiddling with the punch and Jessica and Ashley are doing some ridiculous circle dance around Bumper, who is screaming and flailing, trying to escape.

Chloe closes her eyes and keeps humming to the song, making sure she wouldn't ever forget this crazy and tiring happiness of Barden.

"Chloe!"

Her eyes open and Beca is swaying tipsily in front of her, holding her hands out. Instinctively, Chloe grabs onto them and pulls them closer together.

Beca grins stupid big and Chloe has to wonder for a moment if this was the same person that called acapella lame just a week ago. "Chloe!" She shouts again.

"I can hear you, Beca, you don't need to shout!"

Beca frowns, "Oh." And Chloe wants to smooth the crease between her brows. So she does, encouraged by whatever it was that she put in her jiggle juice. Beca doesn't even flinch, just keeps talking. "I think you were right!"

Chloe laughs. "Oh, I always am."

Beca rolls her eyes. "I think we *are* really going to become fast friends."

Jesse stumbles in between them, and Chloe wants to dump her jiggle juice all over his stupid floppy hair, for a second. But Beca just laughs, and the sound twists itself around Chloe's already alcohol-covered insides and stays there. Beca looks like she's having fun, and Chloe begrudgingly decides it's fine for now, as long as she keeps laughing that way, with her eyes creased into crescent moons under the pressure of happiness.

She still feels a need to have Beca's attention, though, even if she isn't really sure where it comes from. So, on her way to Aubrey who is starting to look tired and grumpy, eyeing the messy college boy porch like she is a frat boy away from vacuuming the whole thing, Chloe walks around and presses herself into Beca's back.

She barely feels Beca stiffen, and when Beca sees it's her, she relaxes completely, even leaning a little into it. Chloe smiles smugly, although she doesn't really know where that came from, either.

"For the record, I'm very glad we became fast friends," Chloe says, leaning forward, into Beca's ear. She ignores the spike that pokes her chin as soon as Beca turns her head away

from Jesse.

Their noses brushing, Chloe isn't sure if the pink on Beca's face is from liquor or herself, but she revels in it, either way.

"That's..." Beca licks her lips, and Chloe's look never wavers. "That's good, Beale." She clears her throat and finds the composure to quirk and eyebrow. "I'm a goddamn pleasure to be around, I'll have you know."

Chloe smirks. "Oh, I'm sure of it."

And then she steps back, chuckling to herself as she turns around and sees Aubrey stacking solo cups into a neat pile in a corner just outside the sliding doors. Now she's gotta go take care of that mess.

The months pass dizzyingly quick; Chloe blinks and they are in an empty pool with Beca rolling out a slightly awkward verse of rap that echoes all around the place, and it is almost the greatest thing she has ever heard (Beca's shower rendition of Titanium being the best, Chloe isn't sure she can ever shake of those echoes from her head).

Beca sings to the boy with the boyish grin and Chloe backs her up. They'll always back her up. Beca is laughing as she sings the chorus, spinning around and around at all the people singing right along, and Chloe watches her experience her first taste of glory with an equally wide smile.

Chloe blinks and she's sitting on the chipping floorboards of Beca's dorm with all the Bellas. She blinks again, more forcefully, when Stacie sends an overly exaggerated wink towards Kimmy Jin in an effort to clear that particular disturbing sight from her mind.

Even though Aubrey has her arms crossed in a steely posture standing by the foot of the bed, Chloe can see that even she worries about Beca.

"Do y'all think Beca's gonna get herself aca-bitches in prison?"

Aubrey gasps a bit too dramatically for such a comment, but Chloe wouldn't expect any less from her. "Cynthia-Rose! Don't say that!"

Cynthia-Rose shrugs over the faint sound of Jessica and Ashley humming a surprisingly good Jailhouse Rock. "Just sayin'."

Fat Amy swats Stacie's arm with force just as she is beginning to bite her lips and wiggling her eyebrows at a glaring Kimmy Jin. "I bet our pale little deejay will do well in prison," she chimes in.

"Hell yeah she would," Stacie says, finally joining in on the conversation.

Aubrey rolls her eyes in a way that is so freakishly similar to Beca's that Chloe had to stifle a snort in the back of her hand. "Okay, guys, we're here to--"

But before she could ever finish, the door opens and a very frazzled looking Beca Mitchell steps in. Looking tired, frustrated and without any prison bitches. But Chloe is sure she will always live and die for the moment Beca looks up and sees them there, suddenly with the prettiest smile, saying, "You guys waited up for me?"

Chloe pushes off the couch. She isn't sure why she cares so much. "Of course we waited up for you."

Beca is just *so interesting* to her for some reason. Like Chloe knew her from somewhere, but she isn't sure where. She keeps grappling around her head every time she sees Beca's eyes crinkling up again in happiness and it is a confusion she wants over and over again.

"They've been here for hours, Beca," Kimmy Jin says with a glare that could almost match Aubrey's and Beca's. "This dorm is always a madhouse."

She walks out the door while Beca makes a face.

And Chloe stays after everyone's gone, because Beca looks like she doesn't want to be alone. Beca doesn't say anything. She just lets Chloe stay. She pulls out two beers and nachos from under her bed and salsa from behind a stack of books and lets Chloe keep her own headphones around her neck as they talk.

Beca doesn't cower away the entire night and Chloe never lets her leave her sight. She lets Chloe listen to all the tracks she has on her laptop, and Chloe swears she is flying.

Chloe blinks and she's in a hospital bed, and Beca is grumpy and spikey all over again, acting like she doesn't care, but comes to visit Chloe with various playlists and a whiteboard. She watches Beca scratch the back of her neck and apologise to all the Bellas, and Aubrey handing over control. Chloe stands up for Beca. And she can feel the thrill all the way into her bones when she favours Beca over everyone.

She knows Beca is plotting something with her mixes grumbling something about Jesse and Chloe just watches from afar. They sing in the empty pool again, but without any big audiences, without the reins in Aubrey's hands. Beca blends two love songs together with flicks of her wrist marking the beat and she looks only at Chloe. There is something hauntingly familiar about all this, and there is a spot Chloe's brain keeps skipping, and she doesn't know why. She writes it down to the feeling of belonging.

That night, Chloe calls her once they are all in bed and they just talk. She can't quite recall all the details of the call, even though during it, she swears she would never forget any seconds of the entire thing. They call and laugh into their pillows until Chloe's phone burns almost as much as her heart.

Chloe blinks and the lights are shining down on her, Beca in front of her doing some dance move Chloe had spent hours behind her practising, Stacie is spinning on one leg to the right, and Fat Amy is making lewd expressions in the center.

Hands are waving and punching the air in the audience, cheering and screaming for all their strict rehearsals under Aubrey's harsh training, and it's all worth it.

Beca's music pulses through the room, and Chloe's hair flies around her as she spins and steps into formation, flying with abandon and she feels young and free and everything else that she's been chasing for the past year. She meets Beca's eyes as Beca's voice carries through so, so much, as she throws her fist up into the air and the crowd erupts in a roar.

Jessica and Ashely are laying beats in the back and it intertwines with Fat Amy's rap, just all the times they did it in the empty auditoriums as the sky outside got dark. Beca watches her puppy-like boy that is smiling back at her in the audience, but Chloe doesn't feel uncomfortable.

Backstage, all the velvet curtains block out light and fades the applause that is still never-ending. Fat Amy is already shouting something about vodka, celebration and Bumper's face, but no one is freaked out because all of them are still jumping and whisper-yelling '*oh my god's*'. No one is paying attention to anyone, but they are so alive and present.

Chloe slings an arm around Beca's shoulders, and Beca doesn't even stiffen anymore, she just leans in and looks back up at her with the biggest grin.

"Dude!"

The high-pitched squeaky voice in which Beca says it makes Chloe giggle and press their foreheads together.

And then Beca kisses her, still with the biggest grin, their teeth clinking together a little bit. She pulls back and doesn't look unsure at all, just *happy*. The world keeps spinning.

The Bellas keep whisper-screaming unintelligible things at each other, Aubrey's got her hair down, and Beca's face just turned bright red, but she is still smiling.

So Chloe kisses her again while they are still mostly blocked by Stacie's impossibly long legs, and their teeth don't clink this time.

Chloe blinks and she's still at Barden.

They don't talk about the kiss. But she feels Beca opening herself up, offering herself up to Chloe more than before. It's in the way Beca only gives her a half-hearted glare when Chloe ruffles her hair playfully now and in the way she is already laying in Chloe's bed instead her own when she's having a bad day.

And honestly, Chloe is alright with that. She'll stay far enough away if that's what Beca needs. It makes her stomach flip, actually, even only when Beca sits down with her at the

counter and drinks her overly sweet coffee in silence.

So yeah, it's enough.

It doesn't ruin Chloe too much, it really doesn't. In a way, she supposes she is a little (very) similar the Treble chasing Beca around, romanticising every little bullshit thing and easily amused so often. (Jesse. His name is Jesse. She's got to remember that.) And they both have the tragic tendency to keep coming back to grumpy little deejays.

It is immediately after their third national title, sitting in Chloe's bed while Beca folds paper airplanes with Chinese takeout menus and Chloe has her Russian Lit textbook laid on her crossed legs that spring really hits that year.

"Let's go take a walk."

Chloe sits up in an incredibly quick movement that makes Beca laugh, throwing the textbook straight to the floor. "Hell yeah."

Beca starts idly shoving aside the pile of airplanes further and scooting over to the side of the bed. "Where do you wanna go?"

Chloe shrugs, grabbing a jacket from the pile of clothes by the bed. "Don't care. We'll end up wherever we end up." She smiles to herself as Beca does as well. The crewneck's sleeves flop around Beca's fingers and she looks maddeningly cute.

Chloe peels a clementine as they stroll past graffitied benches and Beca makes a face as they walk by a couple making out way too intensely on one of them. Chloe stuffs a piece of fruit into Beca's mouth to cheer her up, earning herself a surprised little grunt and a swat on the arm.

"Dude!" Beca splutters, a cheek sticking out like a hamster, and it just makes Chloe giggle harder. She chews it with a lot of force and squints at Chloe in a way that is surely meant to be menacing, but Chloe really can't help it but laugh more when Beca just looks more and more like an angry hamster. "Rude."

"It's an excellent orange, excuse you."

"Clementine."

Chloe rolls her eyes. "Oh my god, you're so annoying."

Beca rolls her eyes harder, as if it's a competition. Still, she uncrosses her arms and tugs on Chloe's sleeve, opening her mouth. "Gimme another one."

"Say please."

"No."

"Then you won't get one."

“I’ll tell everyone you found Diego from Ice Age crazy hot.”

Chloe makes a face. “He was a very handsome tiger. I’m not ashamed.”

“So do I get another slice?” Beca asks, batting her eyes and almost walking into a lamppost.

Chloe snorts. “No. Say please.”

Beca grunts, crossing her arms again and choosing to watch where’s she’s walking now. The image of a grumpy Beca stopping anyway in the middle of walking to pick a dandelion from the side of the road makes Chloe want to take her face in her hands and yell at her for being so cute.

Instead, she rolls her eyes again and stuffs another two slices of clementine into Beca’s mouth.

Muffled by her full mouth, Beca manages to push out a “*thanks, you weirdo who find tigers handsome*”.

They come back to Chloe’s room with pockets full of random leaves and grass and a few flowers, Beca happily humming. Chloe doesn’t bother with her Russian Lit anymore, and uses its unreasonably heavy pages to press all the things they’ve collected.

“You know that we’re not really supposed to press them in between pages of a book we use often.”

Chloe shrugs. “Meh. It’s Russian Lit. *It is* a book we don’t use often.”

“It’s your textbook, dude!” Beca says with a bit of a scolding tone, suddenly making Chloe have an Aubrey-styled déjà vu. “Of course you use it! You’ve already failed twice, are you gonna use it to press flowers instead of actually reading it?”

Beca raises an eyebrow, all high-school sweat-pants and Chloe’s own crewneck, standing in Chloe’s room like it was her own. Chloe really couldn’t think of anything better, and she solemnly says, “Yes, I am going to use it to press flowers instead of reading it.”

Beca just sighs and flops down on her bed again.

After a few moments of silence, Beca speaks again. “You wanna go sneak a round of Mario Kart on Stacie’s Xbox?”

Chloe is already at the door in a second, throwing her jacket back on the pile beside her bed. “Hell yeah.”

Chloe blinks and Beca is going further and further away. She asks Jesse about it at the party, but Jesse looks like he genuinely thought Beca was with her.

Legacy is a vibrating mass of excitement and happiness, but even that could not quite bring Chloe back from the sinking in her stomach from having everything about the Bellas cancelled.

She spends the party weaving through crowds looking for a silhouette of smaller-than-average brown hair instead of singing and dancing and trying to bum a cigarette off the loner guys by the fences. (She usually only does that to share it with Beca later, anyway.)

Chloe finds Beca eventually. (She always does.) (Eventually.)

She plops down on the bit of grass beside her, blocked from the flying solo cups and screams by two trees. “Hey, Becs. Where were you?”

Beca’s eyes widen and snaps up from the solo cup she’s brooding into, like she wasn’t expecting Chloe to find her at all.

“Um,” she pauses, scratching her nose, “just...hanging with Jesse. And I made a stop back at the library and kinda lost track of time.”

Chloe frowns but doesn’t push.

They sit in silence for awhile, something that happens more and more often since this year had begun. It isn’t uncomfortable or awkward, not particularly. But it does bother Chloe. It’s...unusual.

“You know that Jesse’s got it bad for you, right?”

Beca, for the second in an extremely short stretch of time, looks like a deer caught in the headlight. After just barely avoiding choking on the sip of whatever was in her cup, Beca blinks rapidly before hesitantly shaking her head.

Chloe sighs, a tiny bit frustrated. This oblivious little motherfucker. “What do you think of him?”

Beca hesitates again. “I...” she pulls out a fistful of grass absentmindedly, “I don’t know.”

“Okay.”

This is supposed to hurt, Chloe is sure. But with all the romantic comedies stored in her head and desperate love stories, she just, still, revels in all the twisted beauty of young love and how dumbly it grows on both sides. It thrills her endlessly just to sit on humid grass next to Beca, not touching but almost. Even the way Beca rubs her thumb over the grasshopper on her forearm knocks Chloe the fuck out.

Compared to the boring meet-cute, Chloe thinks she’d much rather watch a rollercoaster of pining, unreasonable kindness, and a good ending.

She’s more interested in exciting and charming destruction, and maybe that’s where she is going about it all wrong.

So when Beca stops pulling on the poor grass blades and twists her head carefully to look Chloe in the eyes and asks, “Do you think I should give Jesse a chance?” Chloe doesn’t tell her not to.

There is kind of uncertain hope in the way Beca asks it, indirect and fearful. Her eyes are rough with whatever it is that pulls Chloe in, that she doesn’t really understand.

She thinks back to what she was talking about on the phone with Aubrey just yesterday evening. “*Chloe, I can see your toner for Mitchell through the line.*” “*...No you don’t.*”

“*Why even, Chloe?*”

“*I don’t know, Bree. I just want to give her a happy ending.*”

Chloe smooths Beca’s skirt with the palm of her hand, blazing hot even in the fall chill. “He genuinely looks like a cool guy.”

Beca nods. “If you think so.” She smooths over her skirt, in the place that Chloe had just touched moments ago. “I think I trust your judgement more than I do mine.”

Chloe blinks and Beca is dating Jesse. And now she is around even less, gone to work on God-knows-what and then somewhere with Jesse.

Chloe runs into Tom outside the north building and doesn’t bother to stay polite. She flirts and Tom plays along like he always does.

Chloe blinks and they are yelling at each other on yellow grass, a lake behind them and all the Bellas piled onto one chair, witnessing their parents fight. From the corner of her eye, she sees Cynthia Rose smirking with Stacie, and Fat Amy awkwardly patting Emily on the back, who is the only one that looks terrified.

They are in the middle of nowhere, trees surrounding their clearing in the forest and Aubrey stands with hands on her hips. They are in the middle of nowhere, nothing is familiar, their phones do not really work, and Chloe is terrified of change.

Chloe knows the ridiculousness of their fight, it scrapes at her guts, but it makes the hurt that’s resonating in her voice as she asks Beca why *she didn’t tell her* all the louder.

As Beca starts walking away, she wonders if Beca is ever going to find something important enough to not walk away from. She wonders if Beca is lashing out like a child still, or this is just an accumulation of all her frustrations.

But Chloe feels better soon enough, as she listens to Beca shouting down “*I love you—I love all of you; I love being a Bella!*”.

(Even if the only times Beca says those things are when she's stuck in a net, hanging from treetops.)

Chloe looks at Beca while she sings the cup song with all the Bellas again, and she sees Beca smiling back, so warmly.

When they all brush their pants as the fire flickers away, Chloe stands and puts a hand on Beca's back. The girls filter away, Aubrey giving her a look and then walking the other way.

A few crickets chirp in the distance, and although the nearest lamppost is hidden by a few leaves, Chloe stays seated, just trying to see if Beca will say something first.

"I'm sorry," Beca says.

Chloe bites the inside of her cheek. "It's okay now."

"I just-" Beca shakes her head, "I'm really am sorry. I don't know how to be tired without being angry. I don't know how to be angry without throwing a tantrum like a child."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Beca kicks at a pebble by their feet. "I...I don't know." She licks her lips and Chloe can physically feel the thoughts ricocheting in Beca's head. "I think...I think I just wanted to see if I can survive without telling you something first."

Chloe is genuinely surprised at that. "What?"

"I, uh," Beca pauses again, "You know I used to run away from home all the time when I was a kid? When my parents were throwing dirty words at each other and the whole kitchen was reeking of anger and I played in the backyard instead." Chloe doesn't know where she is going with this. "I climbed over the bushes and the picket fence and hid behind the neighbor's trees. Sometimes it was an old man living further away. And I'd stay there, sitting, forever. It was only, like, ten minutes, but it felt like forever to me."

A bird chirps nearby. Chloe shakes her head; she doesn't know what for.

Beca continues, not looking at her, at the ground instead. "And then I went back. They never notice I was gone. But I *was*, you know? I had run away. And I run away just to swear in my ten-year old head that I was in control of something that wasn't burning my house to the ground."

"So you wanted to leave me?"

It's Beca who shakes her head this time. "I dunno. I think...I wanted to know what it felt like to not have you before I really didn't."

"That's stupid."

"I know."

“And cheesy.”

Chloe smiles smugly, hidden by the shadows when Beca releases a strained laugh beside her. The forest beyond is blurry, like a dream. She finally reaches for Beca’s hand, gripping onto it hard because suddenly, it feels like a reality that is slipping away, her brain grappling for something to ground itself.

“Chloe.”

“Yes?”

“I’m scared as fuck to leave too, you know? This really is the one time I’ve ever felt like belonging. The only one.”

“Beca.”

“Yeah?”

“We’re family. Don’t run away.”

“Okay.”

Chloe doesn’t think she’d mind, waiting on Beca forever.

The building is nice, a lot of polished wood and stone countertops, rocking chairs and loveseats in the corners.

Beca hands her driver’s licence to the man at the front desk. He must be new, because he doesn’t greet her with a soft smile and enthusiastic hellos as the usual lady does. Instead, he takes in her information with wide eyes, his head snapping back up.

“Beca Mitchell?”

Beca laughs a little, scratching her neck. “That’s me.”

“Oh god,” The guy inhales so hard Beca is afraid he might pass out for a second. “I’m a huge fan, oh my god, I’ve listened to your music everyday growing up-”

“Oh,” Beca waves her hand, “Stop it. You’re just reminding me how old I am.”

The man is flustered for a moment, eyes even wider, if that was even possible.

Beca chuckles, although genuinely worried about all the emotional rollercoasters she is making him go through right now. “Relax, I’m kidding. I’m here to see Chloe Beale? She should be in her room or in the common area right about now.”

“Yes! Yes, of course, right this way, Miss.”

Beca waves her hand at him again, nodding a thank you. “Beca is alright. Miss makes me feel way older than my sixty something years, you know.”

He nods so quick, in a way that kind of reminds Beca of younger Emily. “Yeah, yes, of course!”

Beca sits down on the rocking chair beside Chloe. She doesn’t say anything yet, just taking in Chloe’s face and her faraway look. She sighs to herself, angling her body towards Chloe gently. (She has a bad back, she can’t risk cracking it halfway to not even talking to Chloe yet.)

“Chloe?”

Chloe mumbles something, hands gripping onto the handle of the chair in a phantom world. Beca sighs again. She’s been sighing way too much lately.

“It’s okay, I’ll wait for a bit,” she says, smoothing down the wrinkles of her dress that reaches her ankles. “I don’t know why I ever wanted to know what it felt like to not have you before I really didn’t. I was always an idiot though, that’s nothing new.”

She sits in silence for a little, gazing out the window at the garden that surrounds the residential care facility, sprouting little flower buds at this time of year.

“When the doctor said you’d be always reliving younger memories, I didn’t know it’d be this intense, dude,” Beca tries to joke, “I haven’t even gotten the chance to annoy you about being all old and dementia-y, and you’re already back in your twenty-somethings.”

Chloe is not looking at her still, flowery blouse cascading down her arms. Beca hears the doctor’s voice in her ears, a resounding pound of *Alzheimer’s*, *old age*, *fatigue*, and whatever else scientific bullshit terms that will never justify Chloe suddenly starting to lose all the bits that make her Chloe.

“God this sucks, I was not prepared for you forgetting things. For you not remembering things.” Beca says again. “God, this...” her voice breaks a little, “this really sucks, Beale.”

ivy

Chapter Summary

"i'd live and die on moments that we stole, on begged on borrowed time."

beca goes over chloe's situation in the present, and gives chloe a description of what their past really looked like. chloe closes her eyes and remembers, in her own way, worlds in copenhagen and moving in with beca in new york.

Chapter Notes

i accidentally set my bathroom on fire while trying to find inspiration. luckily enough, i did find inspiration, so here we are.

if our love died young, i can't bear witness.

"You know, memories are funny things, Miss Mitchell."

Beca closes her eyes, thinking back to what the doctor told her a few weeks before.

"Science still can't explain everything that happens with the brain and old age. I am a doctor, but I can only explain so much about these things. Dementia does a lot of things."

Beca shakes her head, nothing—*nothing*—will ever succeed to explain seeing Chloe, the one unchanging thing throughout her life, fade away into little bits of consciousness and faraway thoughts.

"No matter how many studies, experiments and machines we make, Miss Mitchell, none of it can ever quite explain humans. What makes us human isn't science, it's everything that defies it. Miss Beale's condition can be related to old age and dementia, but we can never be sure what she is going through."

Beca lets go of the wooden handle she is gripping onto like a lifeline as Chloe shifts again, her eyes darting back and forth in the room, a small frown gracing her face. Beca clenches her jaw tightly. She's seen this a couple of times, and it is enough to know the few seconds to wait as Chloe comes back to her.

Which still tears her apart a little at the seams every time she witnesses it, because she is sure Chloe's memories are worlds at least a bit nicer than the one they are in now. Nostalgia is always a dirty liar. Paired with dementia, well, maybe they're indestructible.

Sixty-eight years into this earthliness, leaving a noticeable mark in the music industry, and riding waves of success, Beca still cannot fix what slowly dying feels like.

"What does she remember, then, doctor?"

"The past that's longer ago, that's what happens most times, Miss Mitchell."

"College?"

"That's very possible. Her twenty-somethings, maybe even thirties and forties. If I am clear, Miss Beale interacts with these hallucinations, and sometimes it might be clearer what she is remembering."

"Will she...remember me?"

"She's known you for a long time, Miss Mitchell, I think she will, for now. She might forget things often, so her mind fills in the gaps with a delusion that makes sense to her."

Beca wonders what makes sense to Chloe.

Beca wonders if Chloe is still the Chloe that always flat out refused to leave her side. If Chloe is still the Chloe that decided right way from the first day that they were definitively going to be friends.

Beca wonders if all of her youth that she's overturned and used away will still reek of Chloe if Chloe isn't really Chloe anymore.

A kind looking nurse that Beca recognizes steps next to them, looking no more than thirty, asking with a bright smile if they need anything.

Beca looks up with a tired smile, shaking her head. "No it's fine, thank you, Marjorie."

The nurse frowns, but even her frown is friendly. Her blonde hair curls around her face and bounces when she walks. "Come on, Miss Mitchell, I told you to call me Jorie! Marjorie sounds like an old lady name." Her eyebrows rising to her hairline at the realisation at what she said, she quickly continues, waving her hand, "Not that I think old ladies are uncool," she gestures haphazardly around her, "I mean, I'm working here and I love my job—it's great—"

Beca grins and pats her on the arm. "It's fine. But only if you just call me Beca instead of Miss Mitchell."

Marjorie seems to have reeled back from her nerves, and she crouches by their two rocking chairs. "Alright, Beca. So how is Chloe doing today?"

Just as Beca is about to answer, a soft voice speaks up behind her.

"I'm doing fine, thanks. It's fun watching the two of you awkward dorks try to hold a conversation."

Beca snaps her head around, wincing because she's sure something cracked. "Chloe!" She grins, feeling like bouncing in her chair, but instead just smiles wider. "Hi!"

Chloe smiles gently, eyes sweeping Beca, taking her in a greed that Beca hadn't been witness to in years. "Hey, Beca. Sorry for zoning out there."

"Oh," Beca waves her hand, "I'm just glad you're back."

Marjorie, out of the corner of Beca's eye, just looks at the two of them with a knowing gaze. Unsurprisingly, she stands up and dusts her blue pants, hands then clasped behind her back.

"Well, if you two don't need anything, I'll let you catch up. If you need anything, I won't be far."

Beca smiles at the nurse that she's come to be comfortably familiar with in these few weeks. "Thanks, Jorie."

Chloe murmurs a thanks behind her as well, and the girl skips on to her next chore, still energetic. In a split moment, the back of her figure makes Beca think of Chloe, younger and cheerful, blunt and unapologetic unfolding everywhere.

A few quiet breaths fill the space between Beca and Chloe, hands resting on laps and chairs slightly swaying. The ivy on the windows behind twist with the early spring falling into the garden.

"You came back."

Beca shrugs, as if it's nothing, and it really is. "I said I'd come as often as I can to visit. I'm a woman of my word."

Chloe shakes her head. "I just never thought that we'd be here one day. You know, old and wrinkled and kinda confused most times on my part."

"Well," Beca chuckles dryly, "here we are."

"Here we are." Chloe twists her fingers. "You know, I don't know why I was like what when you arrived. It hasn't gotten that bad...yet. I think."

Beca just looks at her sympathetically.

She still never knows the right things to say. She still wonders how Chloe puts up with her, most times.

“I...” Beca swallows, “I’ll be here. It’s fine. You’re here now.”

“I usually remember a lot in dreams, lately, actually.”

Beca nods.

“I usually...um, wake up and know there’s something wrong with what I remember. Most times,” Chloe continues, her brows furrowing again. “Like...our first nationals. I know you ran offstage and kissed Jesse there.”

Beca nods again, a sad smile on her face. No matter the circumstances, talking about her college days with people who had been there with her always bring her back to a place of comfort. “That I did. He still brings it up constantly.”

Chloe laughs lightly. “You know, Beca...” Beca raises her eyebrows, tilting her head for Chloe to continue. “From whichever version of me remembered...you kissed me instead. Right there backstage, after the nationals.”

Beca is genuinely surprised, her mouth opening for a second, and she just laughs. Lightly, amusedly. There is a sad twinkle in her eyes as she replies, “Wouldn’t have that been nice, huh?”

“It would have been.”

Beca nods, still with that smile. “It really would have been.”

The old man strumming on the guitar in the distance keeps on strumming, fixing his tuning and then picking at the callouses on his fingers. Beca picks at a scar on her forearm. The last few visits never started out with a silence, only with careless chatter almost right away. There was no bitter reconciliation or fumbling for topics. But now, they fall into quiet for a few moments, just contemplating each other. It isn’t awkward or strained, Beca is sure they are well over those feelings.

From the very first one, a week after Chloe had called her as she ate stir fry with Jesse at their kitchen counter, telling her that she checked herself into a residential home, Beca swore up and down she would visit at least every week.

It’s what she needs to do. There isn’t a question.

And she does. She is sitting here after Marjorie has left and listening to Chloe say there is version of them that had once gotten a cheesy movie moment, the fourth time she comes into this building with polished floors.

Chloe's fingers skip to an unknown rhythm on the armrest and she still regards Beca with a smile. "So," she breaks the brief quiet, "how's Stephen?"

"Stephen finished his masters and just moved in with his girlfriend," Beca replies right away and a grin on her face as she talks about her son. "I have no idea how she settled for Stephen, but well, there we go."

"Rude, Beca," Chloe scolds, her seriousness not quite reaching her eyes, "I personally think Stephen is great. Has his mother's pretty eyes." Chloe adds a little wink and Beca laughs, wondering how the hell she can still manage to pull that off.

And then things are okay again, light and comfortable. Beca reaches over their chairs and takes Chloe's hand as she gossips about whatever thing she heard from her old manager about whatever new show that's all the tits these days. Beca plays with Chloe's fingers absentmindedly, almost afraid to let go like Chloe is going to disappear for no reason.

In a way, she is, so Beca just doesn't quite let go yet.

She comes back to visit the day after that again. This time, before she leaves, she gives Chloe a folded piece of paper.

"What's this, Beca?"

Beca smiles and scratches the back of her neck. "Well, you said what you, um, sunk into-no-um, hallucinated?" She shakes her head, "Anyway, whatever you remembered that day, you said it was about, like, the first half of college. So I wrote down some things. You can go over them if you..." Beca looks down again, wringing her fingers, and in a smaller voice, "ever feel like you're forgetting."

The truth is that Beca holed up in her office back in the house for three days, just looking stuff up about Alzheimer's and dementia and whatever else she could find. Hell, she even watched two science-fiction movies about memory loss and hallucinations before deciding they were completely useless (and after she saw a guy she distinctly remembers spilling wine down her shirt when she was thirty-three at some sort of event playing the leading role). She read somewhere that reading helps. She isn't sure if it's believable.

She still decides to write it. She has to.

The letter is dry and dead in between her fingers, a few splatters of ink seeping through to the other side. It's more of a short list of bullet points than a letter. Beca was never good at writing essays, only short lines of emotion. She guesses that's why she turned out decent at song writing.

"Wow," Chloe says, smiling, "that's...sweet. Thank you."

Beca kicks her foot on the ground, wincing to herself at this behavior that isn't at all fitting for a woman her age. She hasn't been this way for ages.

"The person I've become only now is the best version of me. I've only *now* gotten better, I'm just that stupid. This is the least I can do."

Chloe's mouth twists with words unsaid. "I can't say anything about what I am now. The best of me is long ago, when I was still young and staying a senior for the sake of everything I was afraid to say."

"And the best of us are years away from each other."

"Promise me you'll remember to keep on visiting like you do now, Beca," Chloe suddenly implores, "You...you have to."

"Of course I will," Beca answers right away, "it's the least I can do."

Beca supposes Chloe just doesn't give that much of a shit anymore whether she sounds desperate or lonely. Beca is sure they are somewhat past giving a shit about most things. The ivy leaves just out the window curl against the wall of this little residential home in Atlanta, almost swallowing it whole.

There is a distinct taunting of the universe that brings her right back to where it started, in this city in a perpetual heat bubble that she despised with all her dark eyeliner back when. Really, she never liked its sweltering hot summer middays, the unbelievably cheerful attitudes and the dirty city sidewalks. But Beca still comes back, almost every year, because there is something in the air that weighs heavy and settles the flurry in her chest.

There is a pull down in her bones that reminds her of the best years of her life and cramped college houses. There is a pull down into the crooks of her bones that brings her back to Chloe.

Which is unfortunate.

But it's been that way for a long time coming.

They talk about meaningless gossip and how Chloe feels about orange cats, specifically for the rest of the afternoon. It's when the sun starts to set over the ivy that twists over the windows by their side that Beca finally pulls herself away from the rocking chair.

Back in her expensive car, Beca rests her forehead against her hands curled around the steering wheel. She curses under her breath, just staying there for a few moments. There is a different particular fear that comes with grieving for the living.

She drives home in silence as she thinks about how this is about the time Chloe takes a nap before dinner. She wonders if Chloe will dream of another better version of them that will exist for a short period of time as she almost runs a red light. She thinks of the paper she gave Chloe with trembling hands.

Chlo,

I was a self-focused eighteen-year-old that could only see her own troubles and I got buried under them. I finished a tube of eyeliner every two months; I hope you remembered that, and how you used to run to the drug store across campus to buy me another.

I worked at the radio station, under Luke, that British guy with terrifyingly chiselled abs. I spent months stacking CDs and you listened to me complain about it over soggy fries at least five times a week.

You found me at the activities fair because my dad forced me to join something, to participate in life and not just watch it go by. You took a liking to a hopeless cause despite Aubrey's evident distaste and tried your darndest to make me better. I called acapella lame, then you barged into my shower and all but forced me into a duet, I hope you remember how we sang and how it echoed around the stalls. You barged in out of nowhere, like a godsent force of stupid, cheery and unapologetic happiness. I couldn't see past your blinding happiness. So much so I thought that was all you were made of; happiness.

It wasn't.

Everyone is made of the similar little problems, I couldn't see that then, through my own issues.

I took your yellow cup and tapped a beat on it at auditions, Aubrey glaring at me and you, grinning. From the first moment, I was a lucky receiver of your favoritism. The other girls sang *Since You Been Gone*. Then, you kidnapped me with a sack over my head and winked when you gave me the blood of the Bellas before us and told me we were going to be fast friends. We were, even if I never admitted it. I didn't see you for the rest of the night I spent laughing with Jesse, but you weren't far from mind.

We never knew whether to cheer on three or after three. Stacie's hands never left her boobs the first two months and Cynthia Rose checked Stacie out every spare second. Me, I didn't even have to bother to look at where I was going as long as you had your arm around me.

I am terrible at making friends. All the friends I've somehow gotten are people who stuck around even when I was a bitch and annoyed their way straight past my headphones and eyeshadow. My default to people is an immediate dislike, I've tried really hard to change that since. You helped a lot. You gave me a shit ton of chances until I finally was good to you. I hope you know that once you make your way in, you're stuck with me. Like the ivy growing out your windows now, I don't think I'll ever let go.

Our first performance was catastrophic, in a frat house where you told us afterwards you had nodes. It was dramatic and Aubrey hung on to your hand like a lifeline.

You couldn't sing your solo with nodes and you stuck up to Aubrey for me to get it. A flash of belief in my black-and-white world, and suddenly you claimed all my happiness. You saw something in me that only Jesse, you and Fat Amy saw. I'd live and die for these moments; you have to know. I'm slow and thick with emotions, because I truly don't believe there is anyone in this world good enough for your shine of unblemished happiness.

But I was also scared that there was.

Bumper threw a burrito on Amy on our way to regionals, and we sang *Party in the USA* for half an hour. I join, just enough to be thrilled, just not enough to back out if I wanted to.

I fucked regionals up. You don't debunk my nonchalance or my indifference, you let me be and wait for me to come back. The path from the Bellas to the auditorium doors was very long, dragging a chair and long enough for me to keep looking back. I don't think you knew, so I'm telling you now. I had found something important enough to not want to walk away from, long ago. Even with a sack over my head then, I knew.

I tried apologizing to Jesse afterwards, he wouldn't take it. He asked me, '*you push away anyone who could care about you, why is that?*' I'm telling you something he never knew; I don't know if I could handle more damage, I don't know if you could still love the damage you'd find in me.

You were different, you worked out at the gym and planned all the choreographies and refused to be pushed. You always had a soft spot for damaged goods, from veterinary books to teaching.

I kiss Jesse after *Don't You Forget About Me*, in front crazy crowds and acapella groups. We were just kids then, relatively clean and untouched, I wish we knew that. You looked at me weird, I didn't know why then, and told me you were happy for me. We partied all night, you hooked up with Tom again.

We keep winning these ICCA titles afterwards. You stayed for another three years, and I wonder if you knew that I was going to leave after that first year as well. We both didn't. We both stayed.

I think back to small (stop it, I know you're making a short joke in your head) and closed-off me, eighteen years old and how she thought keeping people safe from the world meant keeping them away from it. I think back to being eighteen, stubborn and confident, believing love is more important than anything. We know that isn't true now, it isn't the universally simple solution.

I hope you still remember.

Yours,

Beca.

Chloe closes her eyes for a moment, head heavy with Beca's hesitant smiles. She grapples with what is real and what isn't. She opens them again when she feels a pull on her arm, suddenly grounded, but something is missing.

"We gotta go back before the other girls think something's up," Beca says as she pulls Chloe on through the branches beneath their feet and the leaves above their heads. Chloe nods.

As Chloe holds the flap of the tent open for Beca who crouches, stepping in just behind her, she immediately hears Stacie loudly greeting them.

"So!" She drops her sleeping bag with a huge grin, "What did you two get up to all alone out there in the woods?"

"In the dark, too," Cynthia Rose adds.

"Where no one can see," Fat Amy says too, already spread out on the furthest side.

Emily is already buzzing with a smile much less dirty than Stacie's. Flo chimes in from her stretches, "And no one can hear!" She then murmurs something about being used to locked up and no one ever hearing the screams, and exchanges a knowing look with Lilly.

Beca just mutters a small 'oh my god' and covers her face with an arm as she kicks Stacie in the shin.

Wincing but not letting the absolutely invading grin go from her face, Stacie turns to Chloe. "Did our married captains have hot, angry make-up sex in the leaves?"

"Is that why Beca is extremely red and hiding in her sleeping bag right now?" Emily asks.

Already buried in her bag, Beca shoots up again. "*No!*"

Chloe just laughs, heading to her bags as well. "No guys, we just talked. After our little shouting match--"

"-yeah, girl fight!" Cynthia Rose says.

"-before Beca was caught in a bear trap, you know?" She doesn't forget, however, to send a wink Stacie's way before taking out her sleeping bag too.

She lays it right next to Beca before anyone else takes the spot, although it doesn't look like they were going to. There is an empty space in the middle, Fat Amy and Flo already taking the far back and Cynthia already stealing a spot next to Stacie closer to the door. Lily is, from what it looks like, meditating in the spot right next to the entrance, blinking open an eye just to say something about the fastest escape route.

It warms Chloe's chest, knowing the spot next to Beca is saved for her automatically.

“I’ll keep annoying you two tomorrow,” Stacie says, yawning, “But Aubrey’s kickass activities were really fucking kicking my ass.” As an afterthought, she adds, “But wake me up if Chloe starts groping you in the middle of the night, Mitchell.”

Beca rolls her eyes and flips her off. “Go to sleep, Conrad.”

“Aye aye, captain.”

The hard ground under her back keeps Chloe awake, eyes flitting over Beca’s upside-down forehead. Her eyes won’t close even if Jessica and Ashley’s whispers have already lulled the rest of the girls to sleep.

How can Beca not see her when all the other girls have worked it out months ago?

She shifts again, but she doesn’t want to turn around and *not* stare at Beca’s upside down face.

As if the person in question hears her thoughts as clearly as she thinks them, Beca shifts too and rubs her eyes. She squints at Chloe. “Chlo?”

“I can’t sleep,” Chloe whispers back.

Beca grumbles something under her breath and her eyes bore right into Chloe’s (as much as she can in the dark, squinting sleepily). Her hand then fumbles the zipper of her sleeping bag and reaches out to touch Chloe’s, resting next to her cheek.

Chloe moves her own so that their fingers are closer, but she still doesn’t see the butterflies that bombard her stomach coming when Beca groggily grips her hand instead.

“Sleep, dude,” she mumbles, eyes already closing again, but not before giving Chloe a stern look. “I am absolutely not surviving Aubrey tomorrow if you are half asleep.”

Her fingers are cold in Chloe’s warm ones, and Chloe smiles at Beca’s thumb drawing shapes in the palm of her hand.

“Goodnight, Beca.”

“Mm,” Beca scrunches her nose, eyes drooping, “’night, Chlo.”

As soon as they get back to somewhere close to campus, they watch, sitting on the doorsteps as Fat Amy scurries to the opposite side of the lake, mumbling something about a canoe. Sure enough, in just a few moments, she appears again, a paddle in hand and clothes still unchanged from the trip, shouting very Australian things.

Bumper covers his face, then turns around, pretending he didn’t see anything.

Beca squints at them from the distance, head resting on Chloe's shoulder. "Why doesn't she just walk around the lake? There's like, a shortcut right there."

Chloe shrugs. "Fat Amy doesn't do anything small."

"Do you think Legacy's doing okay there?"

Chloe glances towards Emily, on the phone talking animatedly with her mother, assuring her that *yes, she's wearing her shower shoes*. "She's fine. We'll assure Mrs. Junk afterwards that we're taking care of her."

Beca shakes her head. "I feel like we adopted a child."

Somewhere behind the door held ajar just behind them, Stacie calls out, "You adopted all of us, aca-parents!"

Beca just shakes her head again as Chloe chuckles, looking down at her frown. She pushes her cup in front of Beca's face. "Here, drink something instead of worrying about your kids."

"Not my kids," Beca grumbles as she takes a sip nonetheless.

Chloe understands the notion of family all too well, raised by good parents in a peaceful suburb. Her parents were busy, never home, but they were good people, and Chloe still did all the things she should have done, from white nights for midterms to sneaking liquor down to the basement with her neighbor. All the sunny days she had spent in her bedroom in front of an ancient CD player spent trying to figure out how to be human without anyone there guiding her take form these years in bursts of energy she is afraid most people can't put up with. She is mostly confident and simple in her decisions, but there are moments she feels like just as much of a trainwreck as Beca.

She wonders if she will ever know when to stop giving, when to stop caring. She's carrying everything she's ever loved on her shoulders, and she isn't sure if she has somewhere to put it down. She isn't sure if they are all the things that make her *Chloe* or just weights stopping her from flourishing.

Beca chokes on Chloe's drink when she lifts her head and sees Fat Amy looking like she's eating Bumper's face on the other side, rolling in the front lawn.

"Alright," Chloe shoots up, "time to go now."

Hurriedly, Beca stuffs the cup back into Chloe's hands as she drags Emily up from the steps and slams a hand over her eyes. Chloe takes the time to laugh because Beca's on her tip-toes and hanging onto Emily's shoulder just to have the tips of her hand barely keep her eyes from seeing the absolute ruining of whoever's front lawn that is.

Emily doesn't even ask questions, just follows when Beca pulls her along into the house, still assuring her mom that *yes, she packed enough underwear*.

Chloe has found a home she built for herself with these misfits she calls her family, and she isn't sure she can ever put that down somewhere.

Chloe blinks and Beca is practically bouncing on her bed, telling her how she's figured out a time (ridiculously early in the morning) where no one was using the studio at Residual Heat and her boss let her bring Emily to try recording.

"Tomorrow morning," Beca *vibrates*, "-well, more like, middle of the night, but whatever- I can bring Emily along and make her sing her dumb little song and we can, like, legitimately try to make a demo!"

Chloe laughs at the way Beca is grinning so wide she could count her teeth, and shoots out of her chair, sweeping her into a hug. Beca just squeals, not even trying to hide her excitement and wraps her legs around Chloe's waist and lets Chloe spin her around, laughing.

She pulls back a little, breathing heavily and keeping her arms around Beca's waist. "So, tomorrow morning?"

"Tomorrow morning!"

Graduation is just around the corner, and Chloe has been living and sleeping in a pit of panic, but it's suddenly nothing at all when Beca is this excited for everything that comes next.

"I'm so proud of you, Beca."

Beca just keeps grinning so hard. "I know. This is so great. I'm so nervous."

"You'll be great," Chloe replies, eyes sparkling. "I love you, you know?"

Beca rubs her hands on Chloe shoulders in still uncontrollable excitement and Chloe thinks that grin might just never go away. She's okay with that. "Love you too, nerd. I'll feed and provide for you when I get all big and famous."

Chloe scowls playfully and drops Beca on the bed, earning herself an undignified yell of surprise.

"You jerk!"

Chloe is still laughing from that look on Beca's face, barely squeezing out an '*well, you'll still feed me, right?*' when Beca all but pounces forward, grabbing her arm and pulling her onto the bed as well.

They lay entangled with Beca's head back in the crook of Chloe's arm, just right of her shoulder after a thorough wrestling match where Chloe definitely came out on top, breathing in synch.

Beca turns the tiniest bit and looks up at Chloe. "You've helped me so much; do you know that?"

Chloe raises an eyebrow.

"Deadass, dude," Beca says, "you're a godsent."

Chloe has the sudden urge to go out and buy flowers to fuss over and hold while anxiously waiting for Beca to come back tomorrow. She has the sudden urge to give them to Beca who will surely flush a good pink and don't know what to say, and Chloe *wants* to cross that line they have ignored for the past year.

She doesn't think she actually will.

But she hopes that if she isn't someone that can give Beca flowers at twenty-two, she will at least be someone that Beca could talk to when she's thirty-two.

Instead, she sets an alarm after Beca leaves her room late at night for an ungodly hour and wakes up twenty minutes before both Beca and Emily and makes them both coffees. She scrambles some eggs for good measure and takes out the cream cheese and the bagels Flo got at the grocery store and threatened everyone who would dare eat them.

She looks up from her own coffee when she hears Beca step into the kitchen. Her hair is only somewhat presentable and her shirt hangs off her shoulder in a way that makes Chloe momentarily almost drop her mug.

Beca looks around the kitchen island and rubs her eyes, walking closer. "You didn't have to, dude."

Chloe shrugs and the lie slips out easily. "I couldn't really sleep so I thought, why not? It's a big day for you two."

"Dude."

"Breakfast is the most important meal of the day, Mitchell. Don't argue."

Beca just smiles and shakes her head.

"I don't know what I did in my past life to deserve you, Chlo."

When, a few days later, Fat Amy and Lily come bounding into the living room with green gowns flopping in their arms, Chloe is nestled with her back to the arm of the couch, legs comfortably resting on Beca's lap.

"Grad gown runway time, pitches!" Fat Amy yells across the room, waving her arms and making at least three of the gowns fall into a heap on the floor.

Beca huffs and stills her fingers, which were tracing patterns on Chloe's knee. Chloe remembers distinctly thinking Beca tracing her name, and it made her stomach flutter as she kept her eyes glued to her laptop screen. "Is that really necessary, Amy?"

Stacie pops out of seemingly nowhere from upstairs, a huge grin on her face that Chloe wishes she could reciprocate. "Of course it is!" She does a dangerous flip over the banister. "Alright, which one is mine?"

"Don't think there's any differences, Stacie," Beca grumbles, still not getting up, "They're all cheap scratchy green cloth."

Stacie, already holding up various gowns to her body and inspecting them with a diligent frown, shoots her a playful glare. "There is surely one that makes your boobs look better."

"*Surely*," Beca drawls, rolling her eyes.

Chloe laughs, shaking her head and tugs on Beca's forearm. Beca turns her head from where it was resting on the back of the couch, watching Stacie with a lazy and fond smile to meet her eyes. Chloe gives her a pointed look and quietly says, "Come on, Beca."

As they drag themselves up from the couch to round up all the other girls, climbing up the stairs lined with all the random stuff Flo and Amy had hung up over the months, Beca slows to a stop just as the banister gets replaced with a wall.

"Chloe."

Chloe, still keeping her hold on Beca's hand, turns around and leans against the wall to look at her. "What's up?"

Beca looks down instead of into her eyes and kicks her foot on the stairs, hesitating. Chloe shakes off the lingering feeling that this will last forever, because it is already ending. She watches Beca fix her gaze determinedly on the centerfold of a magazine pinned to the wall behind them. It depicts a decidedly not PG-13 picture of a Calvin Klein model behind her.

"I, uh, was thinking the other day."

"Wow, really?"

Beca gives her glare that just makes her feel more at home. "I'm trying to say something here."

The girl in front of Chloe is still the girl she found the activities fair, and Chloe still nurses this uncontrollable urge to take care of her that comes from nowhere. A few muffled voices make their way to them from downstairs, and Chloe is terrified she wouldn't be able to block out the storm of nostalgia that has been threatening to knock her out since coming back from Aubrey's retreat. Graduation has never felt more real when her whole family is graduating, and Beca too, and Chloe has no more ties that give her a steady reason to give to herself to not let go.

"Well," Beca sighs, "the first thing is that I...I don't think I'm with Jesse anymore."

Chloe blinks. "Oh?" Beca's hands find the hem of her tank top and plays with it, giving Chloe a few seconds to gather her wits. She can't say she's surprised, but that elation daring to wash over her is overpowered by being afraid Beca is sad. "Are you okay?"

Beca nods, and Chloe lets herself be elated. "Yeah. Yeah, I think it was a long time coming. We'll talk about it later, if you want to, okay? Later," she pauses, and Chloe can see the word *graduation* just on the sidelines of their conversation, but Beca not letting it in, just waving a hand, "later, after...all this."

"Okay," Chloe replies, "Whatever you want."

An ecstatic shriek that sounds just like Stacie pierces their space, and Chloe smiles a little to herself, thinking she had surely found that one gown that has a neckline that goes lower. This is the house she's spent all her seasons in, and the countdown hanging in their kitchen doesn't even have that many days left to cross off.

"And the next thing?" she asks Beca instead.

"The next thing", Beca repeats, "I think I'm moving to New York."

Before Chloe can squeal and yank her into a hug, Beca rushes out, "and I was wondering if you wanted to...be roommates."

Beca has the same nervous smile she had in the very beginning, and there is nothing much Chloe can answer, apart from a soft and assuring "*of course.*"

Emily ushers them out in the morning, the early summer sun spilling over their roof onto all the Bellas cramped together on the stairs with Beca grumbling non-stop and Chloe right by her side. She leans closer to Beca who is just standing there with a scowl on her face, but Chloe sees the way Beca keeps glancing behind, mentally tallying the girls there. And Chloe knows how it feels like; how desperately hopeless it is to try to pull back all the years to no avail.

"It's going to be fine, Beca."

She sees the flutter of color that bleeds into the tip of Beca's ears. The ivy that stretches along the foot of the home she's loved for the past three years winds along like nothings is wrong.

She hates to let all this go. She looks back at their house and wonders in tune with Beca looking back as well; *Will it miss them as much as they miss it?*

Will this keep being her home when new girls take their place?

Will this keep being her home if she leaves her heart here?

The plastic chairs wobble on the lawn they are placed on, and Chloe stands up on equally wobbly legs as they call her name. The rolled-up paper full with nothing at all tickles her fingertips, and she wishes she could just put on a flight attendant costume and do it all again.

Copenhagen is rainy and filled with fish, and seemingly, nothing else. Chloe is happy for it to be rainy if it means that Beca will be pressed into her side under the same umbrella, an arm around her waist.

Backstage, they watch, huddled together for the last time as flashing lights lick over the shining costumes of DSM. Chloe grabs onto Beca's hand and holds it tight. Beca squeezes back. There is a different kind of thrill enveloping all the buildings when they are occupied by different teams in different costumes, and vying for the same title.

When it's their turn in front, quite literally, the entire world and the lights cast shadows down on the girls Chloe has called family for the past four years, the past she's leaving is only a ghost behind the scenes. The only ghost is the person she is all the other days where she isn't right here, right now.

She hears all her girls giving it their all.

A light shines into her face, and she doesn't know why she keeps letting Beca slip away, she doesn't know what it exactly hurts that dazzles her eyes.

She enters with Aubrey in to the hotel lobby and Aubrey gives her a little look as they prepare themselves to another temporary separation before they can take a break from real life.

"Beca broke up with Jesse," Chloe finally says, just before their goodbyes, "I think."

Aubrey is skeptical as always. "You think?"

"It's what Beca said."

Aubrey just nods, to Chloe's surprise, and pats her on the shoulder when they stop in front of the elevators. Maybe Aubrey sees how she's a hopeless cause clearer than she does.

The door of their hotel room creaks open with a swipe of Chloe's key card and she steps in, the brief kiss she shared with Beca after their first win at the ICCA's all those years ago keep repeating itself in her head. Beca is sitting on the carpeted floor, swiping through her phone at the foot of their bed, and the ache swells up in Chloe's chest right when the exhilaration from winning makes place.

She swears she's not in love with Beca, she swears she just wants the night to end on an equally high note it began with when she kisses Beca again.

It's just that when Beca looked up and saw her, it was the prettiest smile that greeted Chloe, and there is an ache eating her up from her gut. Beca makes an undignified little noise against her lips, and when Chloe pulls back and stares into Beca's wide eyes, she says her name in such an overdue way.

There is a steadiness that only her name in Beca's hands can bring.

"We can forget about this afterwards, Beca," Chloe whispers out of selfishness, still giving herself a safety net to fall back on, "We don't have to talk about it."

Beca brushes a finger delicately over Chloe's collarbone, right where her hands rest. She nods and is the one that leans back in first. Beca touches her and Chloe is a little less torn in between worlds. She still doesn't know what it means to be alive, but she feels a little closer to it when Beca touches her.

If this ruins her for everyone else, Chloe doesn't care, because her lips fit so perfectly in the crook of Beca's neck when she licks right where Beca's heart beats. From saying things at all the wrong times and loving so hard it's practically violence, Chloe has not yet felt so much like a trainwreck until this very moment.

Beca confuses her in every way possible, but all that is nothing compared to the way she whimpers when Chloe's hands wander down her sides.

The taste of Beca lingers on Chloe's tongue the whole way back to Atlanta.

The air smells like rain the morning Lily hauls her suitcases out the front door, the first of all the girls to get on a plane and step into the life that's waiting for them outside the safe walls of youth and Barden. The air smells like rain, almost like they were back in Copenhagen, when things were not quite ending just yet. The air smells like rain, and Chloe can already feel the ground they stand starting to forget about them.

The house is emptying itself of their memories, slowly letting happiness fade into the inside pockets of suitcases and cardboard boxes. Chloe never knew the distance from their rooms upstairs to the front door only took three years. Chloe is terrified she will one day cross one of her friends on the street and not recognize their face, and she wonders where they will all end up in ten years.

She helps all of the girls pack up their lives in Barden into cardboard boxes, without exception.

The first time stepping into the world after Barden is thrilling and completely debilitating.

Chloe follows Beca to New York, and Amy tags along, saying things about business opportunities. Jesse comes to help with moving in, although moving in consists mainly of copious bags of clothes and shoes, a table Amy found God-knows-where and all of Beca's music equipment.

It's Thanksgiving and Jesse is planning on calling Benji and Donald over to their apartment and have a recently-graduated-gathering of take out because they are all too busy and cheap to afford anything more.

Jesse and Beca laugh and joke, and Chloe and Amy share looks with one another, trying to guess if they're dating again or have had an extremely amicable breakup. Jesse doesn't once complain about Beca not moving in with him instead, and Beca never once brings it up.

They keep sharing looks until Beca stumbles on a staircase, a duffel bag on her shoulders. A surprised squeak escapes her and Amy shouts, "Don't break your neck, Shawshank! We're too broke for that shit!"

Jesse laughs and Beca rolls her eyes.

"Aw, it's fine, Beca," Chloe says on instinct, "I'll stitch you up and save you, honey!"

Amy snorts. "Yeah, Mitchell, your aca-wife will save you, don't expect anything more from us."

Beca turns around to flip Amy off in the most childish way. Unfortunately, she forgets there's a whole duffel bag on her shoulder and slips, her knee banging onto a stair in a way that most definitely is painful. The duffel bag knocks Jesse in the ribs and he winces as she tries to grab onto Beca's arm, and it doesn't work as Beca knocks against the banister instead.

A few loud, '*oh shit*'s go around, and despite Amy's earlier remarks, she's the first one kneeled down by Beca's head.

Beca just groans. "You fucking cursed it, Amy."

"Oh my god, Beca, you're bleeding," Jesse says in a voice even louder than Amy, "Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god, Chloe do you actually know how to stitch people up?"

Chloe squeezes Jesse's arm out of the way, "No, Jesus, I was bullshitting, why would you think I actually can—"

"Because you said so?"

“You know it’s bad when Ginger starts swearing,” Amy mutters under her breath.

“—Beca are you okay? Can you hear me? Do you need an ambulance?”

Beca groans again, tentatively lifting her arm to swat away all the hands on her body. “I’ve got a scrape, I’m not dying, Chlo, I’m fine.”

“No you’re not! Look! There’s blood on your clothes!”

“Nothing an ice pack won’t fix—OW!” Beca twists her arm away from Amy who is poking at it with a smug expression on her face. “What the fuck, Amy?”

Amy looks up from where Beca’s arm had caught on a sharp piece of metal protruding off the banister.

“Not that tough now, Mitchell? It’s bleeding a lot, you know.”

Jesse is already taking his phone out when he’s met with Beca’s deadly glare.

“No ambulances, Jesse.”

“But-”

Chloe glares right back at Beca. “You need to get that checked out, Beca.”

Beca glares at them long enough to hurt her own eyes and Jesse ends up carrying her all the way to his car, Chloe holding a wadded-up piece of cloth on her arm and cooing encouraging words into her ear, despite Beca mumbling about how it’s not that bad at all.

And they spend Thanksgiving in the emergency room, Beca non-stop swearing under her breath as the doctor tells her she needs stitches, and Chloe just squeezes her hand tightly and strokes her hair. Amy sends a wink at the nurse and makes him stumble as he sanitizes the instruments, successfully making them all sit in the waiting room instead.

They call their parents, assuring them that they’ve settled in. As well as they could have in a hospital waiting room, anyway.

Jesse leaves for a few minutes to get them all coffee, and Chloe and Amy play a very short game of never have I ever under the fluorescent lights where Chloe gives up after ten minutes. (Who the hell could have ever hidden a koala in the janitors closet for two months before it escaped and stole a student’s left shoe?)

(Amy, apparently.)

Jesse comes back with a latte with two sugars for Chloe, a terrifyingly colorful Starbucks drink for Amy, and a double-double kept in his hands, saved for Beca. He really always was a good guy.

Beca walks out wearing an expression that's even broodier, if that is even possible, snatching up her coffee and downing it in one go. Chloe stands behind her with a hand on the small of her back as Beca scratches her neck with her good arm and awkwardly apologises for ruining Thanksgiving.

"Thanks for the coffee, Jess," she says as they walk past the reception again, "I'm sorry for being a bitch sometimes."

Jesse just answers with a grin and ruffles her hair despite the immediate glare he gets. "It's what makes you charming, Mitchell."

"Yeah, Shawshank, it's where all your talent lives." Chloe snorts, Amy keeps talking. "You know, a person who giggles at everything like Chloe wouldn't ever do the broody musical genius thing as well."

That earns her a light punch from Chloe.

"Oh relax," Amy whispers too loudly, "I'm just saying that to make Beca feel better."

That earns her a light punch from Beca this time, although it is immediately interrupted by a loud cursing from Beca's part, since she had delivered it with her stitched-up arm. Both Jesse and Chloe scold her all the way to the car, telling her to be more careful and to take care of her body.

Jesse gets in the driver's seat and Amy calls shotgun, and neither Beca nor Chloe complain. Which isn't entirely true, since Beca does still complain, saying Chloe and Jesse sound just like her dad.

"You should probably call him, actually, Beca," Chloe says as she puts Beca's seatbelt on for her, not seeing Beca's pink face in the dim light. "Tell him you've moved safely and all." She chuckles to herself, "Which isn't exactly true, actually, we did end up at the hospital."

"Oh shit," Beca fumbles for her phone, "I forgot about that."

Jesse puts on a top-forties radio on and Amy sings along to it annoyingly loud as Beca assures her dad again and again that she's perfectly okay. Finally, she huffs a '*fine*', and puts him on speakerphone.

"He wants to know you guys will take care of me," she grumbles, "even though I'm a full-grown woman that can take care of herself."

Chloe grins widely and she is sure both Jesse and Amy do as well as they talk over each other, shouting out assurances.

"Beca's going to be great with us, Mr. Mitchell!"

"Yeah, I know enough self-defence to fight off alligators, Shawshank's never gotta worry with me here!"

"We promise we're going to take care of her!"

Beca turns off the speakerphone and puts the phone back against her ear as Amy doesn't stop there and goes on into another full-blown tale of her fighting off various wild animals in Australia.

No, dad, don't worry, that's just Amy being Amy.

Chloe smiles to herself and feels alive as Jesse rolls the windows down.

What? No! Dad, there's no crocodiles anywhere close in New York!

The air sweeps her hair into her face and Chloe swats it away, absentmindedly playing with Beca's fingers on the faux-leather seats. She feels unreal, things never went this good for her.

No, Dad, what the heck? You don't need to come over to check for amphibian hazards around the apartment, I promise!

Chloe struggles to hold down to reality, it's dizzying sometimes. An unnerving feeling that none of this is real pops into her mind when she closes her eyes in Jesse's car, but she pushes it away even as her head spins.

And Chloe holds onto the feeling everything is moving towards a good ending.

illicit affairs

Chapter Summary

"and you know damn well, for you i would ruin myself."

the uso tour, beca always picking at the scar on her forearm, and travelling from new york to spain to italy and to france. chloe gets serenaded, and they are bad at love with questionable relationship values.

Chapter Notes

i have kissed people i definitely should not have, am hungover, and regretting half of my choices. my hand also started bleeding out of nowhere.

right when I felt the moment stop, glass shattered on the white cloth;

everybody moved on, I stayed there.

That very first step back into their stupid, cramped, little apartment, Amy claims the one real bed with a resolute flourish of her arms and Beca doesn't even have the energy to argue. She just leans back on Chloe who is standing behind her, carrying their bags and mumbles, "Guess we're sharing a not-really-a-bed-bed, Beale."

And that night, as Chloe finally settled down all their boxes and duffel bags with Beca in a bad arm and Fat Amy pretending to be asleep somewhere in the bathtub, she wonders if they will ever find anywhere else that will feel so much like home than this room that is basically the apartment equivalent of Beca's height. Chloe dusts off the banner at the top of her duffel bag, and hangs it just beside the windows over Amy's self-proclaimed bed. *2014 ICCA champions*, it read, and she just stares at it for a few seconds.

It is a sore and steady reminder that she is and will be able to become someone.

She walks across the empty room (it takes two steps, literally) to sit down on the pull-out. She looks beside her, at the hair splayed in every way on the pillow, belonging to a girl she's broken down enough over the years to snore comfortably beside her on the small bed they will share.

The emptiness of the small room they call an apartment unsettles Chloe more than she would like to admit. Without the vulgar banter and flying insults that decorates it during the day, it's just unfamiliarly hollow and cold. Chloe misses the familiarity of the Barden house and the distant talking she always hears when she falls asleep.

Chloe wiggles her fingers, wanting to feel her world, just to make sure it is still there. She moves both hands and reaches for Beca.

As her palm skims over the loose shirt on Beca's shoulders, Beca scrunches her nose and shifts. "Chloe."

Chloe hums in response.

Beca always has a supple care beneath her hardened glare, and Chloe can physically see Beca reading her worries. And then, scarily like a replay of their tent at the Lodge of Fallen Leaves, Beca turns over, gently grasping her hands. Chloe feels a slight squeeze, and the comforting scowl on Beca's face.

"C'mon. Go to sleep, Chlo."

Chloe settles down and takes a deep breath. The hollow still rings inside her chest with an ache, but she closes her eyes. It isn't much, but it's *Beca*. And Fat Amy, and their ICCA banner and the bunch of clutter they've dragged along.

Chloe has thought about how stupid and cowardly her choices thousands of times since agreeing to come to New York with Beca. She's mulled them over on the plane ride, in her bed staring at the ceiling and as she watched the girls she loves more than music itself throw their graduation caps into the air.

She's told herself following Beca is just a way of postponing the inevitable someday, that they might get tired of each other and move away, find jobs, find a family. She's gone over the possibilities of herself planting both feet on the ground and falling in love with someone new, exciting and clean.

But she still goes wherever Beca goes, because she can't think of anything else kinder to her years and better to live with. It isn't hopeless romance and it isn't cowardice (she hopes, she tells herself over and over), because Chloe knows how hard it is to *ever* even to be able to find something so entirely whole and good to love.

Since she was five and could never remember her parents sharing a kiss, since she was seventeen and watching her older brother call home apologizing for not being able to come back for Christmas because the job he doesn't even like requires him to stay on post, Chloe has known the preciousness of love. She's got lots of love to give, and she's never held back on handing it out.

Life itself is pointless, hopeless, wandering, but when she stands beside Beca, it feels like something with solid weight; something worth remembering.

Beca shifts on the bed again and scoots on over closer to her, not initiating, but close enough to let their arms press together and Chloe knows Beca is letting herself be hugged. So Chloe hugs her and feels Beca smile into her side.

It isn't much, but Chloe knows it's Beca way of phrasing love.

Chloe blinks and she is surrounded by strange people, strange city sidewalks, and a strange way home from the metro. In this enormous city that towers over Chloe, she is no one at all. She wonders what the price she has to pay to grow up; maybe it's only a battle of who can let go of things the fastest.

There is ominous edge that jabs and yips at her ankles as she walks briskly around a trash bag in the middle of the road, an edge that had never caught up to her before, when she was still protected within the walls of school and friends. Dozens of people pass her by, and she is no one at all, and no one would notice if she had gone missing, or will but only as a sub-article on a newspaper as they skim over the usual little dramatics that are so far away from the reader's own conscience.

She misses the stability of small towns, the security of attachment and home. But she also yearns for the possibilities that she is just close enough to graze in New York, all the success and goals just close enough to work for. Chloe sighs and pulls her keys out of her pocket, balancing a clock she grabbed in a Goodwill on her way home in the crook of her elbow.

At this age, she aches for constancy but is still unwilling to resign to mediocrity in this world that offers so much.

Chloe blinks away the sleep in her eyes and foggily makes out the ceiling of a room that isn't her's. From all the places she's lived in throughout her life, she doesn't think this one will ever start bringing a sense that is close to comfort.

At this age, she aches for constancy, but that is hard when everything is running so late, and the pain of old age pressed against her sore back.

Slowly, Chloe pushes herself up into a sitting position, leaning against the headboard. In the dark, she fumbles for the string that turns on the bedside lamp and reaches for the piece of notebook paper folded into quarters under her pillow. Beca keeps her promises, and she gave

Chloe this one two days ago, in a floral dress Chloe would've never imagined Beca could one day wear.

Stacie came to visit her the day after, still in such astoundingly good shape for someone their age, Chloe is almost jealous. But before she could let the envy even register, she was hit by Stacie plopping down beside her on the other side of the coffee table in leather high heels and a V-neck that Chloe cannot even fathom how she managed to pull off. Chloe wanted to shake her head at how some things just never change. Like Stacie still caring enormously under all that, still asking her about her life with the utmost sincerity, and Chloe still having the impulse to say *'I'll probably always have a thing for that idiot'* when asked, before swallowing it down into something that sounds more mature.

And when Stacie asked about Beca being in the same city as her, finally, for the first time since they were young and just venturing out to New York, Chloe just shook her head. There were no words that could describe things like that.

We're still not quite dead yet, Beale. As long as we're not gone and buried, there's still time for anything.

There was always something, Stacie. Beca is always something.

So?

It's too late. Our whole lives have gone by.

Chloe forcibly tries to stop the feeling of slipping away and clutches the piece of paper in her hands, trying to stop the trembling in them that happens so much more often these few days.

She's just so tired.

Chlo,

Jesse and I dated throughout college, and I treated it like I thought I should have, you know?

I didn't believe someone could genuinely love me, I thought it was just that kind of half-hearted relationship in school that we would grow out of. But three years later, his romance wasn't quite drained up yet, and I made up some other kind of theory that maybe he was only with me because he got something out of it. Reputation, maybe, just to look good, two nerdy acapella leaders together like it was meant to be. Do you see where I'm getting at, Chloe?

You've mentioned to me you've been thinking and messing up the things of graduation and New York. So I've decided to be weird and sappy and write you more things; you know I'm a bit selfish, I just want to not lose you.

From the moment when I was ten and crying into my white desk while my dad yelled at my mom in the next to be a better wife, and her clawing at the locked windows two floors up, I was just a messed-up kid trying to teach myself how to live. From the moment you told me about your absent parents and quiet childhood, I knew that you did too.

I've always been alone, but so have you.

Do you see where I'm getting at now?

Jesse and I didn't break up until three months after we moved to New York, Chloe, I wish you remembered that. But then again, I guess there are worse things you can mix up. I was a disaster most of college, I won't lie. I grew out of things too slow and I was the biggest asshole I knew. All love ever did was hurt me, and I so desperately wanted to hurt it back. It was just like another song about broken couples, except that it's never so poetic when it crashes into your own life.

I'm talking about the Worlds, Chlo. Jesse flew in from Atlanta to cheer us on with a USA flag draped so dorkily around his shoulders and I just couldn't take anymore goodness. You walked into our hotel room after I've been sitting there awhile wondering where all the time went off to. You came and stood there looking like you were about to kiss me. And I let you (or maybe you let me). No one was ever able to knock the wind out of me like that afterwards, not quite like you did.

You are older and prettier and wiser, and I've always seen you in a golden light, *that's* something you didn't know. I notice everything you do, you know? I've analysed all the people you've once loved; they are all like you, good and solid and bursting into song. I've tried everything you've once mentioned liking; learning the guitar and baking and almost burning the kitchen down. I didn't understand feelings when I first crashed into those that were for you. It's just plain unfortunate we were always time zones away in our heads.

We laid on the bed in such painful silence after you fucked me straight into the mattress; *I'm so sorry you were dragged into my mess*, that's what I wanted to say, *people like you don't deserve people like me*. Typical college-me things to say, aren't they? Our time zones finally aligned in all the wrongs ways. But you spoke up first, finding my hand under the sheets in the aftermath of ruining a lot of things.

It's just you and me in the wreckage of the world, isn't it, you told the ceiling and I listened.

Do you see what I'm trying to say?

It wasn't right, the things we did in the name of whatever we always had. But we were something so great, don't you think so? I've known a long time coming that you would haunt all my what-ifs.

Do you see what I mean, now, Chlo?

What I'm trying to say is that I do still love you. Through every mess you've pulled me through and every catastrophe I've roped you into. I'm trying to tell you to please don't forget that just yet.

Yours,

Beca.

Chloe blinks and she is worrying about Beca as she picks at the sleeve of her worn out sweater, sitting cross-legged on their couch as she watches her grab her bag and throw her blazer on.

“Do you have your keys?”

Beca huffs as the button on her sleeve gets caught in another button on her pocket. “Yes, got them right here.”

Chloe regards her, still worriedly. “Do you have your lunch?”

“Yes, in my bag,” Beca says with a brief grin, “thanks again for making it.”

“Your phone?”

“Yes.”

“Earphones for keeping that grumpy mysterious vibe going on the subway?”

Beca glares and her but chuckles. “Yeah, they’re here. I’ll be fine, Chlo.”

“Mhm.”

Chloe stands and follows Beca to the front door, feeling more nervous than Beca is on her first day at the studio. “Amy and I will beat up whoever dares to be mean to you.”

Beca laughs, slipping her shoes on. “I don’t doubt it.” Before opening the door, though, Chloe sees her dig her fingernails into her palm and taking a shallow breath.

She rests a hand on her shoulder and smoothens out the inexistent creases on the sleeve of Beca’s blazer and allows herself a moment of weakness in this stressful morning and tucks an errand strand of hair behind Beca’s ear. “You’ll be great.”

“Yeah,” Beca breathes out quietly and takes Chloe’s hand away from her arm, giving it a small squeeze. Chloe knows it’s Beca thanking her.

But she doesn’t expect it at all when Beca shifts her shoulder with her bag and leans in to press her lips to Chloe’s cheek in a final ‘good luck’.

“Alright. I’ll see you tonight, Beale.”

“Yeah,” she mutters, “I’ll see you tonight.”

Chloe stands bare feet and watches the closed door with a soft smile. The kiss that Beca willingly pressed onto her cheek burns in her skin and settles the unnerving flipping in her insides a little. What can she even think more?

She’s worried Beca won’t do well, worried her boss is rude, worried she’ll make new friends that are so much cooler and worried she’ll broodily eat her lunch all alone all at once.

She’s worried she wouldn’t ever find a job or any more direction for the months coming up and she’s worried that if she does, it would lead to another fork in the road.

Chloe blinks and she’s on their old couch from the Bellas house Fat Amy somehow got the ways to get delivered to their apartment.

She’s found a part-time job as a waitress in a big enough café with kind Italian bosses and a few classes at the University only a bus and metro ride away.

Sometimes, just sometimes, she still gets that dizzying suffocation that makes her want to stay in bed all day and rewatch Grey’s Anatomy for the thirteenth time. And she tries so hard to will it away, because they are all in this shitty post-grad life together, and everyone is tired, and no one really has time to pull someone else back at the seams.

On those days, Chloe gets home and doesn’t make dinner, just sending Beca a quick text telling her to get something to eat at the quick-stop fast food shop two blocks down. She doesn’t change out of her loose slacks and button-up shirt and just lays on her bed, staring at the ceiling thinking over all the same things she used to think at graduation.

Chloe mulls over about how stupid and cowardly her choices about agreeing to come to New York with Beca. She thinks maybe following Beca is just a way of postponing the inevitable someday, that they might get tired of each other and move away, find jobs, find a family. She goes over the possibilities of herself planting both feet on the ground and falling in love with someone new, exciting and clean.

But Chloe hears keys jingling at the front door and a muffled ‘*fuck*’ accompanied by the sure sound of keys falling to the ground and she supposed there are far worse ways to cope. She knows about the cigarettes Beca sneak in sometimes on the stairs leading up to the apartment’s front doors before coming in and Amy always trying to break up with Bumper when her Fat Amy Winehouse show isn’t going so well. Chloe just indulges herself in being good to Beca without reason and keeps on loving everyone she comes across with a burning passion, without regret.

There is a certain satisfaction that comes with destruction, of watching everything falling down around themselves, and Chloe knows it’s the same satisfaction that filled her lungs on that night faraway, in the hotel room in Denmark, after she held Beca’s hand as the girl

trembled in a post-sex haze. It's the same satisfaction that she grasped onto when she dragged Aubrey back to her feet every time she crumbled to the floor as she lost control on something she shouldn't have wanted to control anyway, and the same one she yelled out at Beca right before she stepped into a bear trap.

There are a million ways to bleed, and Beca is by far her favourite.

Beca huffs as she kicks away her shoes and pads across the floor, flopping down promptly on the carpeted floor by Amy's big bed. Holding out an arm, she wiggles the white plastic bag hanging from it.

"Here, I got dinner."

Chloe pushes herself up from the bed and smiles at Beca (she didn't even have to try hard). "Great. I'll go change," she says as she drags herself from the bed with much more effort than it took to smile. "You can start without me if you want, I know you didn't eat lunch."

But when she comes back out after much longer (because she took around five minutes to gather enough determination to undo all the ten million buttons on her shirt) around the clothes rack, Beca is still just sitting there, hands folded neatly in her lap, good and waiting, scrolling aimlessly through her phone. The plastic forks and spoons laying nicely on their napkins, and all the take-out containers laid on their respective covers on the carpet.

Beca just grins tiredly, tossing her phone back onto the bed without watching where it landed and replies, "I wanted to wait for you."

So they eat on, sitting cross-legged on the floor at the foot of their bed when they have a perfectly functional table five steps away and complain endlessly about their respective days.

Chloe grumbles, "Helping out with washing the dishes at the job is making my hands crack in places as the fall in New York gets gradually colder and colder."

"That ass-crack of a rapper will not stop talking about butts in his most recent demo," is what Beca replies with.

Chloe continues, "And wanting to get both a degree in English and photography is so much easier said than done."

"And my boss tells me to just put up with it, but how can I even when my name is going to be on that damn song?" Beca says, scowling. "Also, what's up with the lady that lives below us that asks me about my day in excruciating detail every time we see other?"

Chloe sighs deeply, rolling a bunch of noodles onto her fork. "Life here is so much more boring than we thought. Why can't something cute and movie-like happen in a place where half of movies take place in anyway?"

"Like what?"

"I dunno, like someone bringing me flowers in the snow or a flash-mob or something."

Beca laughs, “That’s so cheesy, it sounds like something Jesse would say. Flowers are useless anyway. They die like, two days later.”

Chloe also glares at her playfully. “Don’t compare me to Jesse. I’m so much prettier.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Beca says, indulging her, “Totally.”

So Chloe knows that they are chasing after completely different futures, but as Beca keeps grinning and almost choking to death on her own noodles, she also knows she wouldn’t really mind following Beca wherever she goes. She’s stubborn in a way she rarely is; she just *has* to walk by her side for at least another few years in the road. Chloe thinks, maybe, just maybe, like this, walking side by side for a year, two years, three years, it would just eventually turn into the rest of her life.

Chloe blinks and she is laying on the couch on a blissful Wednesday off of work with only one class she finished two hours ago. She wants to go out and have fun, but this couch is just too comfortable.

Beca stumbles through the door in the evening, and Chloe jumps in the kitchen at the noise, letting go of her spatula that falls just narrowly into her pan.

“Jesus Christ, Chlo,” she hears Beca calling out from the door, along with a giant amount of rustling, “Did you know the temperatures were dropping outta nowhere today? I was about to freeze to death on the sidewalk.”

Chloe calls out some mumbled answer and quickly closes off the stove, cursing a bit to herself for using the wrong pan for salmon and the residue is probably going to be a bitch to scrub off without damaging the metal—but hey, she made dinner.

When she turns around though, she is met with the most brutally warm sight of Beca scowling, pink in the face and ears from the cold and a handful of flowers wrapped in brown paper, trying desperately to stuff her keys back into her pocket.

Chloe lets her mouth hang slightly open and squeal.

“Jesus,” Beca murmurs as she jumps at the sudden noise.

“Flowers, Beca?! I thought you said they were useless and cheesy!”

Beca just stuffs them into Chloe’s hands and shrugs, giving her a little grin. “Yeah, well, they are useless, but I’ll buy them.” She clears her throat. “For you.”

The pink carnations and white baby’s-breaths topple slightly in Chloe’s hand as she uses the other to pull Beca into a hug and plant a kiss on her forehead.

Chloe fully forgives her own hidden stubbornness of overdue love, in that moment.

Chloe knows, quietly, when someone is special, even the end of the fucking world is just right on the way back from work.

And so what if Chloe is just always afraid to know the definitive answer when the feelings are just swimming around in the stuffy apartment air? So what if she's just a little scared all the time, even when they're only clearly stated words away from love, if she's reluctant to let go of all the good things that are perfectly good without anything more?

Chloe blinks and she is suddenly resorting to writing scribbles of undecipherable words as a way to pass the time. Between feeling so tired she can't even lift herself off the incredibly tiny bed to rushing between waitressing and getting her degree, she sits in the bathtub with coffee mixed with a can of Red Bull after midnight and writes obsessively on the back of draft sheet of paper when she can't stop thinking.

On the first day of November, Beca gives her another kiss on the cheek even when she is in a horribly sour mood after another bad day at the studio, and Chloe stays awake and writes instead. Beca is the one person she doesn't want to brush off with perfunctory comments even when she is at her lowest.

i am sure you and be both can hear my chest bursting open

as you told me i am your favourite person

in a city that doesn't know us

in a place where i am not allowed

to ache for girls like you.

On the first fall of snow, Beca tells her under a blanket fort Amy built from the night before, Mean Girls playing in the back, that 'The Perks of Being a Wallflower' is her favourite book that she coincidentally also dislikes with a passion because she reads it every Christmas. She tells Chloe that the way her boss yells at her reminds her of her mother sometimes.

Chloe writes as her hand cramps, furiously, crazed, on the back of a takeout menu.

you define love the way you lived it

take your time, i say

you cup my face like a soaring soul

and suddenly, everything isn't so bad

On their rare night out in strappy heels and cheap dresses, Chloe leans on the bar and watches the clear drink in her glass swirl dangerously close to the edges. The sight of Beca dancing,

pressed into the front of a stupidly tall blonde, makes Chloe's fingers itch. But Beca sways back as the latest Taylor Swift song about a girl named Dorothea plays at some college student's request, swaying all the way to Chloe, she is satisfied. Beca always wanders back to her, and *she* is the one with her arm around Beca's waist as they squeeze into the cab Amy called, and *she* is the one pressing a kiss on the top of Beca's head as Beca giggles into the hot air of the car, stripped of sense by alcohol, "*how else would I get your attention?*".

The lyrics of the song they left in the background were sad and slow, and Chloe thinks that it was so close, but so far that the sadness in the words would never have anything to do with them.

She wakes up with a hangover, a pill Beca leaves for her on the nightstand, and a notebook page from long ago covered in sloppy letters.

paint my skin in fresh pomegranate,

they stain just the same.

your fingers are cold and my hands are warm,

please, don't find someone new.

When December comes, Chloe could afford to pay her part of the rent without worrying, and it is a sparkling happiness that comes with it. She observes the side of Beca's face as the girl turns half-way around to not let Chloe see her wrapping whatever she wants to give to Chloe on Christmas, and Chloe doesn't mind sitting here and watching forever. She wants to watch Beca and she wants Beca to see her too. Sometimes, even when her whole world is falling down into catastrophe, she still wants Beca to see, just to have the moment together.

Beca gives her an almost fully black watch, dainty and elegant, the black hands ticking calmly in a repetitive beat. "We'll always be in tune and in time, even when you get all professional with your photography degree, travelling around in the future, you see?" Beca tells her with a big smile. Fat Amy gives them both blankets with her own face printed on them and almost sets fire to their tiny Christmas tree.

Chloe listens to the ticking of her watch and watches her stub of a pencil scratch over a page of her notebook.

you laugh and my chest tumbles apart

this is the only kind of heaven i can tolerate

let's stand too close

and let the ground swallow us whole

The show on the television has bright fireworks and crowds of people, and the few friends in their apartment are surrounding the screen with champagne in their hands. Jesse jumps on their couch as Stacie dances alone by the floor lamp. Chloe doesn't miss the lingering gaze Jesse lays on the back of Beca's head when he finishes half a bottle alone.

Chloe cries silently in the corner of the kitchen after her parents give her a New Year's call that turns into a lecture about her pointless lifestyle when Beca finds her. Beca cries with her, her face pressing into the fabric of Chloe's shirt, when her mother forgets to even call. They go back out into the living room at eleven, laughing again, and Chloe feels something settling in her chest.

The house that overflows with Chloe and Beca's stories overflows now with cheers as the countdown starts. The expectance for excitement starts to feel scarily like love, and Chloe wants to forgive both herself and Beca for the sore affection they always share. The avoidance from anticipation turning into addiction when it is entertained, morphing into different looks on either of them.

Chloe doesn't know how to sort out this morbid tenderness that ties them together.

Chloe kisses Beca deeply, *briefly*, as the ball drops and turns the champagne that stains both their lips bitter. When she pulls back, Beca is also stained pink, a heavy look in her eyes.

i can feel your laugh down to the crooks of my neck

we do not get to keep those we meet this young

we can't chase things we'll never keep

only you see my darkness like it's your own

A mad scribble covers a page of Chloe's notebook the first day of the new year.

Chloe's nerves burn and sizzle, reaching to the direction of Beca laying sound asleep in their shared bed, unable to comprehend how such a small being wrapped in dark clothes could make her feel so much.

She is frustrated by Beca keeping up her broody thing even when they are in their mid-twenties; she is *enamoured* by the frown crease between Beca's brows, and she is bursting with words she wants Beca to understand down to her bones.

Chloe lets her pen filled with less ink than good tear across the lines of her paper. How can she go to sleep when she finished two Monsters in the afternoon? How can she go to sleep when she can still write about Beca?

i wonder if you see people and think the same things i do

that they are not you, that they are not you

in case you ever want to look back

i still carry the words that were meant for you

The morbid closeness they share slithers to Chloe's head and messes with her heart. Chloe believes that her and Beca both know better (but maybe they don't). Because Chloe does offer her love up to anyone who crosses her path, but seeing someone trip over or cry alone in a bathroom stall still makes her want to hide away and not come back. There is something so terrifying about intimacy. There is also something so *alluring* about intimacy.

Chloe doesn't deal well with vulnerability. She does well with teasing winks and light brushes on the arm—she's even fine with loud sobbing and elevator breakdowns, but it feels like a crime when she is close enough to touch the stripped apart, naked *being* of another.

There is something fundamentally captivating about Beca's thick scowls and impenetrable sarcasm. But when Chloe does feel something teetering and wobbling over to unease in Beca's way of acting, she can't help but try to stop her self from crumbling too.

And when Beca keeps coming home with moody comments and flopping onto the bed right away, something else bubbles up under Chloe's frustration and spews out in Beca's direction.

When they start arguing, it's harder to stop sometimes, when Chloe feels entirely too much for everything that is Beca.

"Are we?" Chloe all but shouts into their living room filled with clutter, "*Are we?* Beca? Are we just friends?"

About to shout something back, Chloe sees her words slamming into Beca's stony front and create a dent, making the girl's arms drop back to her sides, suddenly not knowing where to put them. "*What?* What do you mean?"

"Don't fucking 'what' me, you should know very well what I'm talking about," Chloe snaps. She would smile over how unsure and flustered Beca has suddenly retreated to, but her frustration squeezes all that down when Beca just manages to shrug, not even looking at her.

"For Christ's sake," Chloe murmurs.

Beca shakes her head. Then frowns to herself, and nods. Then shakes her head again.

Chloe almosts bursts at the words piling up at the bottom of her throat, all aiming towards Beca's once endearing but now plain annoying tendance of obliviousness.

"Are we *just friends* if I make lunch for you to take to work?" Chloe barks. "Are we *just friends* if I'm the only one you let hug you whenever? Are we *just friends* if it's your breath that's on my neck at night?" Chloe sighs violently into the space between them. "I can't believe you're actually so full of yourself and your own problems that you can't see anything else. *How much fucking longer do we drag this on before you admit it's too far?*"

"*What?*" Beca spits back, visibly hurt by the last few words, her eyes going wide and red-rimmed. Chloe can't help but have what she says in this bout of anger only aim to hurt, and she regrets that right away. "Chloe."

Chloe flails an arm to her side, gesturing at nothing in particular. “Is your unfulfilling job really the only thing you can acknowledge right now? Really, Beca? Do you not notice Amy doing the laundry every Saturday because we’re both busy with work? Do you not know that it’s the two guys downstairs that shovel the front door every time it snows? Do you not see how much *I care about you*?”

“Chloe-” Beca huffs in anger, “Chloe, you can’t say that, you know that things are tough but I-”

“*NO!*” Chloe yells, stepping even closer, and that makes Beca’s face go blank again. “Things are tough for everyone, Beca, not just you! I call my parents every Thursday night but they never have more than ten minutes to spare me to talk to me, and I can’t find any job I actually want to apply to because I don’t want to leave the rent on just you and Amy but I also just can’t bring myself to resign to a mediocre job that I probably won’t like-” she pushes her hair back roughly, “The lady that lives on the second floor asks us so many questions because her own children haven’t visited her in three years, and Amy is away all the time ‘cause she actually has the courage to do something she actually loves but staying out all the time is the only way it’ll make enough money to get by with!”

Chloe lets her arm fall back to her side and her wrist stings from where it hits her hipbone.

Without warning, as she catches sight of Beca’s guilty red eyes, she feels tears streaming down her own cheeks. And even though it’s definitely not the best thing to do, she closes the distance between them with quick steps and falls onto Beca, wrapping her arms around her familiar waist.

Her voice is muffled from where her face buries itself in Beca’s shoulder. “Sorry,” she rasps, “I...I’ll stop yelling.

Beca’s arms come up without hesitation to clasp onto the cloth of the sweater on Chloe’s back and she feels Beca shaking in her arms the very same way. “I’m sorry, Chloe. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, *I’m sorry*.”

Chloe shakes her head. “No, I...I just- I can’t control my own feelings right now, my head isn’t working. Just-” she muffles a cut-up breath into the fabric that smells like Beca’s shampoo. “-just stay here.”

Beca stifles a sob in Chloe’s hair as well.

“*Please*,” Chloe adds to the tail of her feeble sentence.

She shakes to the same pace Beca cries into her sweater, and she knows this will take time, undoing Beca from her bones, and she’s not it will ever even happen.

Beca takes a long shuddering breath, and whispers again, “I’m so sorry, Chloe, I love you.”

“I know,” Chloe whispers back into her shoulder.

Chloe sprawls out on their carpet, her back leaning on the foot of their bed while Amy sings loudly in behind the kitchen counter, clanging pans and cups around, trying to make scrambled eggs for everyone. Beca lays with her head on Chloe's shoulder, playing with the edge of her sweater and Amy doesn't even bat an eye. She just keeps singing into the sizzling oil, an Adele song that she's definitely gotten the lyrics wrong.

There is a childlike innocence that unfurls around Chloe's chest as Beca traces the patterns on the hem of her sweatshirt; the endearing crinkle of Beca's tired smile hitting Chloe square in the heart.

"I really like this sweater," Beca says quietly over Amy switching to 'Set Fire to The Rain'.

"You can have it."

Beca blinks slowly and smiles wider. Her face nuzzles closer to Chloe's neck, still largely discombobulated by the early morning fatigue. "It looks good on you. Every time you wear it, I feel like hugging you."

Chloe can see Beca phrasing love differently, and there is a persistent tug in her that hopes she was the one who taught this grumpy ball of eyeliner how to love.

Chloe doesn't think she knows how much it means to her, watching Beca calling her pretty in a language she knows Beca can't speak.

"Do you know everything I do is for you?" Chloe asks in a whisper into Beca's ear one night on a whim of adrenaline. Amy snores in the bed on the other side of their clothes rack, and Beca shivers into her front. "And stop picking at your scar," she adds, knowing Beca has developed a terrible habit of picking at her forearm ever since they went to get the stitches off a year and a half ago.

She nods.

"Do you know what we are?" Beca mumbles back, even though Chloe thinks they both knew, even when they've never said it out loud.

Instead, she smiles into Beca's damp hair, smelling like clean soap. "A lover and a built-in best friend," she whispers, "it sounds pretty great, doesn't it?"

Chloe blinks and stands blankly in front of the standing mirror in the corner of the apartment, seemingly back right there where it started. The yellow cloth tied around her neck in a way that ensures she can't quite breathe comfortably, the flight attending uniform buttoned around her body the exact way it did when she was nineteen.

Reunions are supposed to be happy things, right?

The elegance seems awkward and clumsy now, and Chloe tries desperately to comb her hair into a way that would look more like a responsible adult.

Chloe blinks, and the yellow clothes tied around the wrists of a team that used to be her's flash bright in the dim lights of the aquarium, and Chloe feels old. The feeling the same cloth around Chloe's wrist still brings her back to the night she was recruited by a scowling Alice, alongside a young and scared Aubrey. It takes her back to the afternoon she caught sight of Beca's intriguing frown across the activities fair. It means all the songs she's sang and all the practices she believed were going to last forever.

Chloe blinks, reminding herself that no matter how long the Bellas have been her home, it does not belong to her. Sometimes, on a stage in sparkling costumes, singing Cheap Thrills with Beca's voice ringing in daring clarity, she forgets that it will not always stay the same way, either.

Back in the hotel room they shared without question at night, they lay, hot skin pressed together. Chloe's limbs feel like lead and her scalp still hurts from the tight ponytail. She holds Beca's hand tight underneath the covers, and hopes they will always be good people, always have bright tomorrows.

"Stop thinking," she grumbles, "I can hear your brain turning from here."

Beca huffs into her pillow. "Sorry. I'm just worried."

"About what? Us?"

"A little bit. That, and everything else."

Chloe squeezes her hand. "Don't. We're not people without sure futures. When have we ever not been together?" She passes her thumb in the soft palm of Beca's hand. "Everything is gonna be fine."

And then to Italy, Chloe isn't so sure as words form in her mouth with enticing and refreshing men named after cities in Illinois. The night she sees Khaled eyeing Beca from across the room, she sneaks away from everyone for awhile with Aubrey, sitting at a bar they don't know with their heads low.

"It's ending," Chloe says into her hands, her head spinning slightly.

Aubrey nods.

"It's ending," Chloe repeats.

"Yeah. It is."

And there is a dull pull in her chest that stems from love that remains unnamed still, but Chicago has brown hair and a deep voice, a next-door neighbor type demeanor and a refreshing newness. Chloe leaves an eye out for Beca, entranced on the couch of the salon by her laptop and new loops she is working on. The music courses through Beca, and Chloe knows that the music pulsing through Beca was something she saw first too. Music is Beca's first love.

Turtle-boy understands computer programs and headphones in ways Chloe does not, and Chicago is steady and new in a way that Beca isn't. Chloe doesn't enjoy Chicago's blatant winks, and she still holds Beca's hand under the covers at night.

Greece is sunny and polished. Chloe hugs Beca a bit tighter when she sees Theo and Khaled talking in hushed voices in the distance. One more night, and it is Beca that pulls her up and smuggles drinks into their room. Chloe pops open bottle cap after bottle cap, clinking glasses with Beca with a smile that she thinks might just make Beca want to stay.

But the music that feeds Beca's blood sucks Chloe in, and she loves it so much she loses herself as well.

The heaviness of which Beca's head lays on her shoulder terrifies her. Chloe doesn't want to ever move again, and it almost makes her crumbles completely. Beca holds her hand this time, and traces patterns in her palm. Chloe knows, Beca feels it too. There is a distinct path the soft pads of her finger follows, tracing a word over and over, and Chloe knows that it means goodbye. Everyone grows older around her, yet she stays there, on that bed as Beca leaps to her feet, yelling about a song.

With an empty bottle in her hand, she stands on top of the crumpled sheets of the hotel bed and serenades Chloe with the song that brought them their first taste of glory. With her head resting uncomfortably on the headboard, Chloe looks up at Beca swaying at the foot of the bed, the only thing that isn't fuzzy.

Love's strange, so real in the dark, think of the tender things that we were working on.

Chloe mumbles out a backing bass dizzily, and Beca's grin and never-ending laughs rushes straight to her head.

Slow change may pull us apart, when the light gets into your heart, baby.

Chloe knows that they've got it all wrong, and she tries to reach out to touch Beca's voice. There is still something forbidden that swirls around their room, and Chloe still feels incriminated when she stares too long at Beca.

Don't you forget about me. Don't you forget about me. Don't you forget about me.

The black watch on Chloe's wrist hasn't been dialed to the right time zone after their hectic travels, still stuck at New York time, living in their shared apartment. It doesn't register all the illicit affairs that transpire in a silence that Chloe doesn't ever want to forget.

Don't you forget about me. Will you recognize me? Don't you forget about me.

This time, at least, Chloe assures all the pounding in her head, she is the only one for whom Beca sings that song. She pulls Beca in when she falls onto her knees and kisses her messily. Chloe doesn't know why Beca is crying; she barely notices it.

Beca cries, and Chloe thinks it's fitting as she gently cups her face. A basket case and a criminal. They were always each other's assured presence.

Beca clears her throat softly after singing. The small loveseat in Chloe's room is softer than she would have thought, and her back isn't hurting when she stays slumped there. Chloe has a faraway look across from her, a shawl around her shoulders, her face relaxed and eyes droopy, wrinkles adorning her lost smile.

Beca has always wanted to sing that song for Chloe. For no one else but Chloe.

She keeps repeating the last line, but it seems although Chloe isn't having one of her better days.

She sighs and pushes herself up. She slips another folded sheet of piece of paper into Chloe's loose fingers that doesn't quite register the movement, apart from a slight twitch and tightening. It is only after a moment of hesitation that she presses a lingering kiss on Chloe's forehead and gives into the late time and walks out slowly.

Chlo,

We were something so great for awhile back there, don't you think so?

So we both didn't know back then when I first spilled out just how much I cared onto the carpet that we weren't really made to last, because I would go out to LA and you'd stay in New York, eventually getting a professional photography degree and travelling to so many states taking pictures of everything you thought was worth keeping. But oh, it was so fucking great while it lasted.

Because for awhile, everything worked out, right? You took me on dates saying it's dinner to celebrate finally getting rid of that dumb rapper and his stupid demos. I bought you presents with money I saved for two months under the cover of friendship. When it shifted into love that was spoken out loud, and we just went along with it.

I've given a lot of people presents because I don't really know how to speak in words. Shoes, songs, headphones, jewelry; there is a whole bunch. I've only ever given you flowers, and flowers are the one thing that don't last.

That military tour was full of grappling onto our past voices. Theo always chose music over life, just like me, and Chicago always wanted white picket fences, like the girl you once were. I'm terrified that I'm the one that messed you up, that made you find romance in ugly things, like purple eye-bags and undefined love. Stupid of me to give myself to much importance, right?

You're so good to everyone; who would ever have the luck to become someone special to you? You made me believe I was special when you looked at me and smiled at me and talked to me in a way that made me feel like the only person alive.

I held onto you like a fish to breathable water. It went on for so much longer than it should have. I think these things are so much more complicated than simple labels of 'toxic' or 'true love'. But who am I say? I didn't know how to love until you taught me with lingering notes and patient company. When I couldn't wash away the remaining stains of my father, it was you that told me it was okay. No matter how far I ran, I still have his eyes and his tendency for bad emotions. No matter how much you gave, you still had your parent's absent affections and penchant for care.

We lived in our apartment with loud increments from Amy. We lived like we were the only things that ever mattered.

You know I am painfully dull and cold; I don't know how to care without hurting and I don't know how to love without being loved back. I used to force myself to be alive and passionate without any success. But then you come smacking into my hopeless and unchangeable nature, waving at everything, talking to everyone, and you made my sarcastic ass your whole world. You didn't care; you just smiled it off and roved the world with me without any desire. You were satisfied with only that—with only me.

Seeing all the other bands onstage in front of crowds that were not formed by nerdy students was like a slap to the face. I used to believe riding a wave of talent and passion was enough, before I saw the girl from Evermoist following Khaled everywhere to win his favour.

I used to think I was so tough, so full of it all. Until I peeked through to the rest of the world and I was only a kid trying to sing while no one listened. Until *you* came along and I was only a thin craving for stability and kindness, unable to give you all the things I wanted to.

Then, I had to work and strive for other things that might make me better, you know?

Yours,

Beca

'tis the damn season

Chapter Summary

"but if it's okay with you, it's okay with me [...] you could call me babe for the weekend."

beca leaves for LA because nothing is ever completely right or completely wrong, and chloe is putting herself back together, finding an identity that doesn't rely on beca.

Chapter Notes

i'm sorry i don't update often, i was high for a week, i feel like this chapter isn't as good and that the ache i want to write always aches less when it's put into my own words. but i hope you like it.

*at the restaurant, when i was still the one you want,
cross-legged in the dim light, everything was just right.*

Chloe is so in love with all things unbearable.

She is so completely entranced by the way Beca shoves her entire heart out onto music and sound boards until there is none left. Beca's flittering belief in a key signature and octave changes possesses Chloe to the point of insanity. It is almost as sacred and untouchable as religion, and although Chicago excites her, it flickers out when Beca sings a lingering note into their now shared hotel room.

There is something selfish that claws at her chest when Beca sings the song she once sang for Jesse to only her. There is something in her hands that wants to reach out and claim every legato and every turn of Beca's lips to herself.

And later into the night, when the alcohol still swims around her heavy head but doesn't make her have stupid thoughts anymore, Chloe lies down, pulling Beca with her onto the bed.

She traces the hard outlines of her earrings with her finger, feeling Beca holding her breath.

“You know...” Beca says into the faint light of the room, her hand playing with the edge of Chloe’s sweater again, “I’m performing a song that Khaled recommended tomorrow.”

“Yeah.”

Beca finally breathes, cautiously and so, so, softly says, “Then why do I still feel like my old self? Why do I still feel like a damn basket case that has nothing?”

Chloe smooths the pad of her fingers down Beca’s ear and traces it down the curve of her neck. Their breathing mingles, the light smell of alcohol intertwining between their words. “I don’t know, Beca,” Chloe answers. “I think you’re *everything*.”

Beca turns gently in Chloe’s bed to face her. Her lashes flutter and Chloe lets her eyes go over every faint freckle that dots her face.

“Why don’t we ever talk about these things when we’re sober?” Chloe asks in an equally small voice.

“I don’t know.”

And then, in the quietest voice Chloe has ever heard, Beca breathes, “I’m scared. And I still have so much to do.”

“I know.”

Chloe brushes a piece of hair that was falling onto Beca’s eye away with the lightest touch. “I love you; you know?”

“I know.”

Beca’s hand brushes Chloe’s arm and drops down to her wrist as Chloe’s eyes never leave her tired, guilty smile. Gently, she scratches at the band of the watch she gave her what seems like ages ago. “What time is it?”

Chloe looks down at her wrist although she already knew the answer. The hands of her watch tick at the wrong speed, aligning at the wrong places, reminding her again that she forgets too often, that she didn’t tune them when they left for this place.

“The wrong time,” she replies with a sad little laugh.

Chloe blinks. Chloe blinks hard, blinking her tears away and watches with an aching in her chest as Beca stands in golden light, far up on a stage.

Unrecognisable, yet so familiar.

It is as close to forever she can get, Chloe believes, when Beca moves everyone in the audience with a clear voice. She wants so much for her, for the both of them—so much more than this. She doesn't realise the lingering looks Chicago places on her, only the way Beca's smile glows and trembles and the way she sings. (Chloe's two favourite things on the same stage.) As Beca replaces the voices that backed her up for so many years with a music looper, Chloe wishes she could find a way to fall softer.

But there are limits to love.

And there is only so far that Beca can walk with her.

Chloe climbs up the staircase to the stage clinging to Aubrey's arm, warm and steady like always. Their backing is still good and solid after all this time, even without much practice. Her girls are still good and solid after all these years, even without a sure future to spend together.

There were so many things she still wanted to say, so many things she still wanted to do. But Chloe chooses to believe they're making the right choice. She is still the first one hugging Beca when it's over, and she is still the one whispering into Beca's ear, and it satisfies her for now.

Khaled offers Beca an opportunity in LA, just like Chloe thought he would. It endlessly thrills and terrifies her, how someone else sees all the brightness that threatens to overspill that only Chloe saw so clearly.

Chloe helps her pack her bags, a silent countdown in her own head. She avoids Chicago and his good boy grins, listening to the crazed beating of her own heart. The shy and held-back smile that Beca presents her with when Chloe hums the continuity of the song that Beca starts lights her on fire in such more lively ways.

"I think I'm going to move to LA," Beca finally says when they succeed to zip the luggage up. "For good."

"It's fine," Chloe says with a brief and strained smile, "Maybe it *is* best we leave it like this, maybe it's just right."

Beca looks at her, as if she really did expect Chloe to protest more.

Chloe shrugs and pulls the Beca's hand away from her forearm where she's picking at again.

"Yeah, Beca, maybe right here is just right," she repeats herself. "Not too much, not too little—just enough to be able to laugh at over drinks in a few years." Chloe takes a deep breath, looking into Beca's eyes. It still makes her stomach jump and summersault, even if she refuses to acknowledge it. "Just enough to still be able to forget in a few years."

Except that Chloe wants to do anything but forget about Beca and her. She would kill for all the moments they've stole in between real life and her fantasies.

She doesn't think she would ever forget about them.

She swears she wouldn't.

She isn't sure why she says those things, but they felt like the right things to say.

Chloe sees Beca squeezing her eyes shut and nodding hard, taking a shuddering breath. Chloe is sure that Beca could have said anything right there, and she would believed it with her whole heart.

But Beca doesn't say anything and Chloe doesn't ask for anything more.

And that will be that.

Beca doesn't really meet her eyes on the plane ride back, but still sits adamantly beside her in the vinyl seats, pretending that taking off and turbulence doesn't bother her in the slightest. It twists Chloe's insides, but she just leaves *Don't You Forget About Me* and *Freedom '90* on repeat in her phone and stares at the side of Beca's face.

Everything is propelled into fast-motion by Chloe's own reluctant hands. Aubrey somehow plans a celebration without them knowing at their apartment in New York, and everyone is on the plane together until the end destination. The chatter and swearing that Chloe falls asleep to with Beca's head on her shoulder is unchanged from the ones that lived within their younger competitions.

Beca's suitcase doesn't even get unpacked when they step into the apartment, everyone swarming about all at once.

It wasn't until Beca stands up wobbly from the couch with an entire wine bottle in her hands as a toast that Chloe is hit with the sudden urge to ask her to stay. Beca scratches the back of her neck, picks at her forearm and turns a light pink, and even songs are irrelevant to the way that Chloe *wants* Beca. Beca stutters through her endearing and heartfelt speech to the Bellas, and there is something raw and primal tearing through Chloe's resolve.

Chloe doesn't even try to push it away, she just tugs Beca back down to still be the first to hug her. Her heart is so much greedier than she thought.

Her hands never leave their destinations on Beca's shoulders, her hair and her waist, as if Chloe is physically incapable of letting go. The buzz of crowded laughter and rosé has heat swimming around the cramped living room, and everyone knows to leave Chloe and Beca alone on the loveseat when they start dancing horribly to Katy Perry.

"When are you leaving?" Chloe says softly into the ear of a Beca that she hopes is just as reluctant to let go as she is.

Beca, sitting across her lap with her legs dangling off the side and her arm behind Chloe's head, rests her forehead on her temple. "Next Tuesday. Eight in the morning."

Chloe nods, gripping Beca's waist tighter.

"I love the Bellas, Chloe," Beca whispers.

"I know. Me too," Chloe breathes.

"I love music, Chloe."

"I know."

"I love you, Chloe."

Chloe closes her eyes. "I know."

Chloe finds the old bits and pieces of herself start assembling again in the most terrible ways, approaching boys in her classes with no other reason than for fun. She talks and smiles and then walks away. She starts holding onto things too tight, and gives up trying to call her parents every Thursday. She brings home churros twice, purple moons stamped under her eyes, and watches with a delight that is rare these days when Beca jumps up and stuffs three into her mouth.

There is nothing that tugs at Chloe's heart more than the sight of Beca with a full mouth and dusty fingers standing in front of the one real window in their apartment. All the light drops in and spills through Beca, and Chloe couldn't see anything else.

She doesn't say anything when Beca takes her high school track shirt and her purple sweatpants. She drinks two shots of espresso with her morning coffee, and stays later at work without real reason. But on Sunday night, she sits and slides a ring pop onto Beca's finger while Amy cooks up some kind of lasagna in the oven for a good meal. Beca giggles (*giggles*) and Chloe is sure that she has everything in the world, sitting on their pull-out bed with unwashed laundry piling up at its feet. The enormity of her feelings disgusts her.

Fat Amy steps up beside her by the window when Beca leaves for a few last-minute errands on Monday morning, and for once, doesn't say much.

"Shortstack is making it, huh?"

Chloe runs a hand through her unwashed hair and gives her a shaky laugh. "Yeah." She shakes her head. "Yeah, she is."

Amy hums, turning to look out the window with her.

"I'm going to miss her."

Amy hums again, then smiles sadly in a silence that is rare in their dynamic. “Yeah. Me too.”

Amy tells her, after she offers her the muffins she never once let them eat in the three years they’ve lived here, that she’s going to spend the night out. Chloe nods, squeezing her arm.

Chloe spills Red Bull onto the carpet and doesn’t bother to clean it up. She finds a supermarket receipt behind the houseplant and a pencil by the sink. She writes.

i don’t belong to you

and you still don’t belong to me

how can this end

before even being defined?

Chloe blinks at the darkening sky outside the windows they still haven’t bought curtains for at the foot of Beca’s bed. She watches Beca wash her face through the crack in the bathroom door, taking out her earrings and brushing her teeth. She watches Beca slip into a shirt that was once her’s and sit down beside her, the same wooden frame pressing into her back.

Automatically, Chloe’s hand reaches up and runs through Beca’s hair, over the top of her ears. Beca’s face is almost transparent in the faint light, and there is something childlike in the way she smiles tiredly without anything but eyebags as decoration.

And Chloe knows they might have just thrown away the chance of late night Drag Race marathons and midnight snacks—and Chloe knows they might never be picture-perfect or sworn by the preacher; but if romance isn’t the exact way that Beca’s eyes go red with her sad smile, then Chloe doesn’t know what it is.

Her hands tremble when she reaches to her own ear to unclasp the metal backing and slip her small diamond stud onto Beca’s right earlobe. Beca is holding her breath, almost *vibrating* in front her, and Chloe keeps trying until she hears the small click of the earring. Beca shakes her head just the slightest bit.

They sit there in silence until Beca finally looks at her with quivering lips and a desperation so heady in her eyes that Chloe couldn’t breathe.

“Don’t let me go without saying goodbye.”

Chloe gently tugs Beca up and guides her slowly down onto their bed, resting her forehead on her’s, breathing in synch. And no matter if Beca would ever only stay within what other

people would label a ‘friend’, Chloe is almost sure she would be the love of her life. There is nothing else that she has ever touched that has made her so thrilled to be alive.

(The best of friends are always the loves of her life. There is a way Beca listens to her that no one else can.)

(There is a sadness in her that only Beca understands.)

Beca is crying, and Chloe thinks that so is she, and this is totally not the way she wanted for things to end (or go on), but the way tear tracks swirl down Beca’s cheekbones as Chloe kisses them away is so unbearably enchanting.

She cries as she lets her hands smooth down Beca’s sides, her thighs, parting her legs to fit herself in between so neatly, then up again. Chloe used to believe that Beca never loving her back was rock bottom, that she couldn’t ever feel worse about herself afterwards. And then she believed that it was leaving Barden, such inevitable and painful goodbyes that she tried to delay for so long. But with Beca mumbling messily as Chloe kisses her, saying “*Chloe, I do love you, I love you, I love you so much*”—Chloe doesn’t know if she would ever feel alive again this, after Beca leaves.

She thinks, as she cradles Beca’s body tightly to her own, fingers flitting through every curve and groove, that love hurts the most when it is returned, when she knows Beca’s hurt bleeds from her own hands.

She doesn’t know who she is without Beca, (she doesn’t really *want* to know, either) but Beca is more flushed and vulnerable than Chloe has ever seen her, and she can’t bring herself to concentrate on anything more than only, simply, solely, *her*. Touching Beca used to be like breathing, but it burns Chloe’s fingertips now that she tries to stop the trembling in her hands. The stupid and dumbass clichés of flashing images hit Chloe like her tears, Beca’s face in every single pretty memory she remembers.

All the seasons stare back at her with pitiful eyes and hollow touches.

Beca shakes her head unsurely after a few seconds, Chloe feeling everything dropping out of her fingers, slipping away into slimy messes on the apartment floor. They were both crying too hard for this to work.

She gives up trying to engrave everything Beca is into the deepest corners of her memory and drops down, sobbing into Beca’s collarbone and just wrapping her arms around the slim body they have been conditioned to recognize anywhere. She hates that it isn’t anything special, and she hates how hard Beca is crying, almost just as hard as she is.

Sleep is blurry and unreal. It is haunting and restless.

The room spins when she wakes up and the comfort that usually follows is replaced with hot, burning regret, beating in tune with Beca’s breathing.

In the yellow cab, Beca holds on to her hand tight and tells her not to follow her to the gates, because it would surely just make it that much harder.

“Chloe.”

Chloe forgets how to breathe, because after all this time the way Beca says her name still tears her apart. The way Beca says her name, and Chloe is still all over the place. The way Beca says her name like she has everything to lose.

“Chloe,” Beca whispers again as the car slows to a stop.

Chloe blinks hard to keep the crying away, because Beca has to remember her properly, *smiling*, not a mess.

“Say you love me again,” Chloe answers.

Beca smiles sadly. “I love you.”

Chloe kisses her gently on the cheek. “I love you too.”

Chloe blinks and Beca rises to fame in a hit song four and a half month later, like a miracle dressed in grumpiness and spikey earrings. It tops the charts out of completely nowhere and Chloe stumbles over the coffee table and knocks her elbow on the kitchen counter when she hears Beca’s voice suddenly pouring from the radio.

Chloe surrenders to bad habits again, drinking coffee and barely eating anything for two days. Sleeping in until two and going to bed at four, trying to force herself into the same time zones as Beca. Twice, she buys cigarettes, trying to taste like Beca after a long month, only to throw up in her cramped bathroom with Amy holding back her hair and her mouth tasting sour for the rest of the day.

But Amy moves out as well soon enough with an enormous trust fund and new plans for her career, and Chloe spirals deeper into whatever it is that she finds to match with the storm on her insides. She finds a comfort in wasting her time away to love things that are gone.

Aubrey storms in when May comes, glaring at the empty twizzlers bags on her pull-out couch and making her a meal that she eats under another stern glower.

“What is this?” Aubrey barks from the fridge.

“Cheese.”

Aubrey spins around. “It’s been expired for a month, Chloe.”

Chloe just waves her hand. “Pining over expired shit is called romance, Aubrey. You wouldn’t understand.”

“For a piece of cheese?”

Chloe just waves her hand dismissively again. Aubrey shakes her head and whips out her phone to make a call. After a few moments of talking, she puts it away and tells Chloe that she's staying for two weeks. Pulling Chloe to her feet, she leads her to the bathroom and speaks to her in rare, gentle words.

Everything is a blur, Chloe doesn't know why, but days blur with nights and food blurs with coffee. She is a ghost of her own life, haunting a home that used to be theirs, haunting memories that they used to share.

It blurs and blurs and blurs until Chloe blinks one annoyingly sunny afternoon and she is sitting in a rocking chair in a warmly lit room, a young woman crouching down in front of her and talking to her in a soft voice. Chloe opens her mouth but nothing comes out, everything rushing by in a great swoop, and Beca's twenty-seven-year-old face still flashing before her eyes.

The woman has a name tag that spells out Marjorie and curly hair, speaking to her in such a familiar voice. She hums a tune that Chloe recognizes from the radio a few days ago, the song that miraculously pushed Beca up the charts. Chloe shakes her head and breathes in and out, scratching at her forearm, humming it back.

Her fingers tap out a beat on her thigh, a shawl she doesn't remember putting on covering her sweatpants. It seems a bit too old even for someone hitting thirty.

She feels a piece of paper being slid slowly into her hands, scratching her palms.

Chlo,

Aubrey always had this theory that love doesn't ever go away. She says that love for one person stays and never fades, and new relationships, new lovers and new obsessions just pile on over it. She believes that falling in another love is finding someone new to be able to love harder than the last.

I'm not sure if I ever believed it. And if it was true, it would be so sad. So pressuring. Because how the fuck would I love someone else harder when I've already known what it was like to love you?

And where do I put all that love down once I'm forty years into life? Where do I get a break from all the past lovers and heartbreaks piling up on my shoulders?

You have no idea how dizzying it was, arriving in LA and just wanting to produce music, and finding myself drowned instead in a crowd of others, wanting all the same.

I had a push from Khaled, of course.

It's crazy and disappointing to see how much good words, networking and money can immediately boost you into the eyes of the public. When Khaled made a bunch of phone calls with his big fingers plated with enormous gold rings, I wasn't even sure I deserved to be so immediately pushed to the spotlight if all I did to get it was to please one person with status.

And LA was so grand and crowded, I didn't know if I could take it. Because in all of my carefully crafted plans and thought-out futures, I wasn't prepared to love. I wasn't prepared for a nerdy group of acapella dorks to be something to get attached to or to suddenly understand the feeling of home in a place that I was sure I didn't belong in.

(But it was a home I wasn't born in. But it was a home that wanted me.)

It was in the loud words of Amy that I learned understanding, and the patient nights with you that I learned how to love.

You kissed Chicago, although I don't think you remember. It wasn't wrong, and I wasn't mad. I believe that you didn't want to hurt us, and I believe that you never once lied to me. I never thought I would start having these thoughts, these moments where I try to put others first. It's almost disgusting; caring so much. You understood what I wanted before I did, I think. But I can never be sure. I don't blame you for that. But I wish you would remember, you dated him for a brief two months before he left for Seattle or Phoenix or something like that. You weren't overly heartbroken. You were kind of bummed and we stayed on the phone for an entire night, although I don't think it was completely about Chicago at all.

I know it wasn't ideal, I know it wasn't how it should have been. I hate that we both knew the right things to say and do, but neither of us did it. All those motivational bullshit about *carpe diem* and shit like that are so much less motivational when I have to use it on myself.

My biggest regret is that your regrets have to do with me.

Places on top charts can be bought, did you know that? You can pay money to get the song onto the chart or to boost it up a couple spots. The higher it is, the more people playing it.

Pictures can be photoshopped. Videos too.

I didn't really know anyone then, it's like being the new kid at school again, and it's only your reputation that precedes you all over again.

And I looked at myself in mirror, a first live show, a face covered in makeup done by someone else, and I could barely recognise myself. She was a stranger, unfamiliar, but made her appearance when I was in front of fans (I had fans, isn't that so crazy?) and she was the one knowing and having all that brilliant glory close enough to touch. Of course, the show had varied reviews and opinions, and I understand. Who was Beca Mitchell, suddenly popping out of nowhere with a hit EP? Who was Beca Mitchell, who put her in the spotlight?

Who was Beca Mitchell? (I would have liked to know as well.)

(The EP was called 85.7, my first radio station all the way back then.)

Guest stars and interviews were not as personal as they seemed, but I couldn't bring myself to dislike them either. I guess everyone likes talking about themselves, even me. I kept threatening to back into being generic, kept wanting to just fuck all that publicity and just do music, but that is simply not allowed.

I get instructions to play up the sarcastic part, they said it would make me different and fun to watch on screen. I was allowed to keep the straight face, to be as moody as I want. They said it adds mystery. They said I have to do what they said, because that was what was good for my career. I have to get people interested to have people listen to my music, don't I?

(Also, the contracts. I have to listen to them because it's literally the contract.)

So when I stood in front the mirror at night, after a day of doing what people want to see, and washed away the makeup, I could barely recognize myself, still. Without the mascara, without the dresses that my team fought with other teams to have monopoly over, without the high heels, I looked like *Beca*, but I didn't feel like her.

I didn't really know which one was real.

It can't be the one that they've modeled to their taste, right?

But if it's this one, standing in front of the mirror without anything, she wasn't really the one that people like, was she?

So, what am I without all that applause?

What am I if not the Beca that the public had sculpted into life in their screens with all the things they choose to like about me?

Here's another thing I don't think I've ever told you: you are the one good thing that still belonged to me even when I wasn't myself.

You'd answer my calls even after weeks without contact and make me see that LA isn't all there is. You'd stay on the phone for hours like a virtual hug and show me that there is much more to the world.

You remind me that what my dreams became shouldn't bury the girl I once was.

When my existence was based on how much strangers liked me without reason, you didn't budge one bit and stayed my friend. I wish I told you that enough times so you would always remember: that you're my best friend. You will be my friend until the very end.

Learning that I have value despite the applause that comes and goes was hard.

I guess what I'm trying to say here is thank you. Thank you for keeping a love for basket cases, thank you for not forgetting about me yet.

Yours,

Beca.

Chloe blinks and blinks and she slowly wakes up again, still in the clothes she was in yesterday, on her couch and her back aching.

Beca is thriving on magazine covers as a sudden hit, winning over the heart of loads and loads of other people. Chloe wanders through the supermarket aisles, feeling haunted by the sparkling eyes of Beca that decorate half of the shelves by the cashiers.

Nothing changes, but Chloe forces herself to get better. No one comes and saves her, so she finally cleans their (now only her's) apartment and gets out to go grocery shopping. Aubrey sends her a text to tell her she's proud and promises to visit again soon.

Chloe could feel Beca up on the shoulders of fans looking down at her happy and a little lonely life. Chloe doesn't entirely dare to look right back, keeping her eyes down on her normal little days. She puts her photography licence to practice, freelancing between a few studios and stock photo distributors. There is an annoying nagging excitement that follows when an employer emails her about maybe having to travel a bit for a few new stock photos.

Chloe has bills in her mail, she's trying to block the small leak on the windowsill, she's forcing herself to cook meals—and she's almost thirty, but still feels twenty-two. It's so scary, how she could count the years on the crease in her forehead by not the way she sings in the shower. It's scary, when she sold her college textbooks to another young girl, that her entire youth was only worth fifty-two bucks.

She is lonely, without the overwhelming crowd of girls figuring out the laundry or random song breaks, but she is content with the days she's managed to build. So she isn't really that lonely, and more romantically put, she's completely free.

Chloe blinks and snow is falling, her first winter without anyone around.

She is aware how terribly intertwined with this fate when Beca calls her at three in the morning out of nowhere. (She is so aware. So painfully aware.)

She pretends the past three weeks of no texts are inexistant and answers without blinking the sleep away from her eyes. Beca cries through the screen, a little drunk. She almost starts

crying herself, because how can she ever stop have a weakness for Beca, how can she get rid of her Achilles heel when she can't even bring herself to dislike it?

And Beca goes on and on about how, weirdly, the only person she truly knows in LA is Jesse. How she really wasn't born for this, how she hates being placed on a platter and dishing out crazy tricks just to impress a bunch of people who don't even really like her. How she misses New York.

And she's hiccupping, and Chloe can physically feel the tremors in her voice echoing through to her own head. How Theo is now telling her to embark on a publicity relationship with Jesse, how she doesn't want to but her team insists. How she has to try everything just to keep a relevancy, to keep people looking at her.

So Chloe blames it on how hopeless and sad Beca sounds, how in need for a friend she is, when she decides the next spot for still life shoots for whatever small magazine is going to be in LA. And Chloe blames how she misses her old friends when she set a date to meet up with Beca again at a coffee shop on Vermont Street.

Chloe blinks and she is bouncing her leg in a coffee shop, never once before so nervous for meeting a friend. Because that's all that Beca should be. A friend.

There are things overturning and boiling up in her stomach as Chloe watches Beca still wear her shyly sharp smile but neater clothes and lighter makeup. The crescents of her eyes when she grins is pulling in not only her this time, but thousands of other people.

They sit down talking and Chloe convinces herself that friends do look at each other like that. Beca stares at her with these big hopeless eyes and Chloe wishes she could turn back time to a time when they weren't so heavy with the weight of living.

"You're a such a huge deal," Chloe says softly, "Don't you see that? Everybody loves you."

Beca bites her lip and looks down at the heart pattern on her latte already fading in with the coffee. "Yeah."

Chloe's look doesn't have to linger at all to know Beca isn't happy, though. Chloe is all too familiar with the thin layers of people's smiles around LA and she is all too familiar with Beca's frown. "Come on, what's wrong, superstar?"

Beca looks back up at her with such desperation. "This is everything I've ever wanted. But... this is...everything I've *never* wanted." She picks at the scar on her forearm, earning a disapproving glare from Chloe, who never fails to try to stop her from doing that even now. "It's just...I want producing. I'm...so much more now. It's all like, *wow*," Beca lightly shakes her head, "I'm like...barely a music producer anymore. I'm..." Chloe watches her fiddle with her cup as she finds her words. "I'm...*entertainment*."

Chloe watches Beca with her soft eyes and she sees Beca with that expression of sadness and exasperation that is there when she spills Starbucks coffee on the sidewalk and when her intern job just before Worlds made her lose all confidence.

“You’re a big-shot entertainer for everyone, Becs.”

“All I do is *entertain* everyone, Chlo.”

Beca lowers her head and sticks her hands in her hair. Chloe watches her take a deep breath. “I’m...not a producer anymore. It’s like...I’m the production and I’m there like a clown in a circus just trying to get people to look over for a little bit.”

Chloe watches Beca crumble over her latte and it completely ruins her. She wishes she could be someone that could still take Beca into her arms, to kiss her on the forehead, to drag her into their noisy dorms and watch bake-offs until they want to throw up.

It still feels like only seconds ago they were having the time of their lives in the sweltering heat of Barden. Chloe feels like she is still stuck there. The floor spins as she listens to Beca continue, words still spilling over like nothing at all when is with Chloe.

“Come home for Christmas this year,” Chloe says, out of nowhere.

Beca barely hesitates, to her absolute surprise. “To Barden?”

“To Georgia. Back to my hometown.”

Beca blinks. “Okay.”

Having Beca on a plane beside her, snoring on her shoulder is far more calming than any bullshit meditation or self-help books Chloe has tried in the past year and a half.

Chloe is reminded of Luna Lu, that one fleeting name attached to a museum piece she scrolled past mindless a couple months ago on Facebook. How she paused and smiled at the two red hearts pressed together in a big and cream-white ribcage, how it was the first thing she saw on the internet that did make her smile in a long time.

“The Anatomy of a Hug.”

How it made her smile. How things that make her smile without reason were getting rarer and rarer, and how desperately she is trying to undo that.

(She smiles without reason when Beca is around.)

(It is terrifying and irrational, and she wants to run away from it.)

She wants to write long, never-ending poems on the backs of the vomit-bags they give her on the plane and tie her heart to Beca's shadow. She wants to name the poem 'friendship', because it is the one thing as stable and selfless as the feelings she yearns to pour onto Beca's hands forever.

The drive back to the suburbs Chloe knows so well flashes by like bits of scenes from a movie. There is rain falling down on the car windows, the windshield wipers doing their rhythmic back-and-forth with the steady beat Chloe taps onto the steering wheel.

The pharmacy she got her friend a morning after pill in. The swings she snuck out to at fifteen and flew so high on it with the girl she liked at the time, so high she swore she would never come back down.

This is a town that holds everything Chloe except for Beca.

And now she's brought Beca here, a ethereal presence beside her, eyes already drooping from the ride here and hair sticking to her cheek.

Chloe is sure they were never meant to sleep apart, ever since a fateful college night when there was a Bella bonding night let by a very blonde and very intimidating Aubrey, herding all of them into the Bella House before the freshmen were even allowed in, pulling out lame party games. After many problems led mainly by the two bottles of champagne Fat Amy brought under her shirt (*Gross*, Beca had said, *I don't want bra-alcohol*, and then managed to finish half a bottle by herself), it turned into a middle school sleepover, and Chloe cheeks had hurt from smiling so much.

Tipsy Beca was loopy and giggly, and fell straight onto the lap of an amused Chloe spread on the loveseat to the far right. Chloe remembers Beca's sweet-smelling breath huffing out little laughs against her neck as Stacie and Flo moved around the floor, bumping into each other as they tried to beat the Just Dance routine while singing whatever song was playing (Chloe really didn't know what it was, it was indistinguishable). It wasn't unlike the feeling right now, the same soft breaths washing over the crook of her neck where Beca laid in bed, curled up under Chloe's arm around her shoulders.

Chloe watches the arm slung over her chest, a rare part without tattoos but adorned with a small, curved, scar. She takes in the girl still asleep so peacefully on her arm that is numb, on her bed. She thinks about all the days they'd been without each other, and thinks about what a stroke of luck it is to be back together.

Beca's head moved, only to press further into Chloe. Their bare bodies under the blankets make Chloe's heart skip a beat. She thinks about the holidays that Beca dislike so much, thinks about how she's spending them with her.

Chloe feels Beca stirring as she props herself higher against the pillows, against the headboard. She watches Beca scrunch her brows together and then purse her lips. Chloe

watches her move her head sleepily, trying to find a comfortable angle after the change of position. Chloe hears her grumble something.

“You’ll have to be clearer than that, Beca,” she replies with a smile that is admittedly too wide for such a foggy morning.

Beca blinks open an eye and gives a glare that is in no way scary. It makes Chloe want to deepen the purple marks that are already shining against Beca’s neck. “Come back here, Beale.”

“I *am* here.”

Beca pouts and Chloe chuckles. She watches Beca blink away the sleep and move in slow movements although her limbs are dreading whatever is meant to come next, after they leave the comfort of the bed. Good thing it wasn’t happening soon.

They are going to sleep in half the day just for old times’ sake.

Beca runs a hand through her hair and shifts lazily closer to Chloe, finally sitting up, only to swing a leg over her’s. Chloe just keeps on smiling and runs her hands slowly up and down the thighs of the girl now straddling her.

“Chlo.”

Chloe smiles. “Beca.”

Beca wraps her arms around Chloe’s neck and brings herself closer again, nuzzling her face back into Chloe’s neck, and it fits so well. Chloe allows her hands to move now, running over Beca’s back, her tattoos, her legs, her neck, and lifting her face to kiss her. But Beca’s face soon returns to the comforting solidity of Chloe’s neck as Chloe hands find their place firmly over her hips as they roll obediently. Chloe feels Beca’s whimper into her ear as an ache that she knows is burning since years.

She hears the repetition of “*Chloe, Chloe, Chlo*” by her face and Beca’s wetness warm on her skin. Chloe doesn’t think she can quite shake off this moment for the rest of her life. Beca’s quick, short, breaths melt into the softest of sobs into her neck when Chloe curls her fingers inside her.

You’re so good, baby, is what Chloe whispers into Beca’s ear just as she stills and her fingernails dig into Chloe’s shoulders.

They stay there, and Chloe just has her arms resting around Beca’s body, and neither of them move.

“I love you, you know?”

Chloe nods imperceptibly. “I know.” She kisses the top of Beca’s ear. “I love you too.”

A tall tree stands in the corner of the living room, where the carpet meets the stairs. The lights twinkle in multicolor and her mother gives Beca a gift along with Chloe's. Chloe doesn't say anything, but can see Beca blinking away tears.

Chloe has a distinct feeling that the whole house is alive, and the details of her childhood that lives within the walls are present with weird, excruciating detail, carving themselves into her head. She points to the posters on her wall and the track banners from senior year, associating a memory with each of them and Beca listens to them all in silence and quiet smiles. There are whispers and laughter in the walls where her adolescent self used to sneak in alcohol and weed, late night talks in the basement and kisses at the foot of her bed.

Snow sticks to the window pane and Chloe suggests they go out to the front porch, wanting to get away from the suddenly unbearable loud house.

The snow falls heavily outside, on the branches of the old willow tree in front of the cabin and the pines surrounding the back.

Beca always understands things too slow. Aubrey once said, in her freshman year, that all her eyeliner must've blocked off some nervous receptors or something, because emotions can't ever seem to break into that thick skull of her's. Beca might disagree with the thick part, Chloe is sure, but maybe Aubrey was still a little right.

"Do you remember when I punched that guy at regionals and got arrested?"

Chloe snickers. "How could I ever forget?"

Chloe wishes Beca could find some of that reckless impulsivity that was there and ruining things for so long. She could really use it now.

"Do you remember sending me that text, when no one else did?"

"Of course, Beca."

The rippling of her coffee as she shifted almost sloshed over the sides, playful and uncontrollable, almost mocking Beca for understanding everything, always too late.

Chloe was always defending and favouring her stupid, stubborn choices when everyone else had given up on her.

"Do you remember my internship?"

“Geez, you were weird as heck everyday that year, you really did underestimate my spidey senses.”

The weight of loneliness that wrapped around Beca instead of her father’s arms ever since he left might have also been the one clogging at her nervous receptors, Chloe thinks. Chloe knows Beca never understood why Chloe was so good to her.

“Do you remember me kissing Jesse after Nationals?”

Chloe frowned, then laughed. “You jerk. I was the one you kissed. I can remember that anywhere just by how your face shined bright red.”

Beca grinned. “Just testing you. Can’t have you forgetting on of my most charming moments, can I?”

Do you remember?

Do you remember?

Do you remember?

Chloe shakes her head at all of Beca’s questions, not sure why she’s asking them now.

How could she ever forget?

“It’s you,” Beca says.

Chloe blinks. “Huh?”

“Everything, you know, it was all you.”

“Beca.”

As they stand there on the front porch under the light snow, Beca looks up at her, blinking slowly. The weight of all the passing seasons rest on her eyelashes, little flakes of snow clinging and making them sparkle. Beca licks her lips and smiles a little. “Please don’t forget me and all the things we did. Okay?”

Chloe brushes a thin layer of snow from the top of Beca’s head. “I could never. I can never help myself with you, Mitchell, you know that.”

“Feeling any better today?” The cheery nurse asks as she skips by with a few flowers that Beca is sure she is going to give around. What an angel.

She shakes her head. “Not really. I’ve been bringing back random things we did in our college years, and she just nods to each one, but she doesn’t really look like she’s really there.”

“Oh,” the nurse frowns, “that sucks. What kind of stuff did you bring up? Maybe you can try more general events?”

“Maybe,” Beca answers, “they *were* pretty specific. Um, I asked her if she remembers me punching a guy at my freshman regionals.”

She chuckles at the nurse’s surprised but undeniably impressed expression. “I was young and dumb, what can I say. Um, I also asked her about a text she sent me after that...about my internship when I was senior, and the time I first kissed my husband right after our Nationals.” Beca purses her lips. “But she shook her head for that one. I’m not sure why. It was such a huge deal too, we won and everything.”

“Memory and love are funny things, Miss Mitchell,” the nurse replies sadly.

Beca knows all about the nonsense remembering does. She looks down at her lap and she can still hear Chloe’s younger voice, all playful and careless and pushing her towards things she never would have done.

Come with me.

Clear as day, although nothing else is.

“Come with me,” Chloe says, because that’s what Beca remembers. And Chloe leads them to a corner in the basement where the other people at the admittedly not-that-lame party wouldn’t go.

Chloe puts her hands on Beca’s shoulders, an out-of-place solemnity that almost makes Beca laugh if she wasn’t having a near stroke as Chloe inches so close.

“You’re so good, and you don’t even know.”

Beca doesn’t know what to answer in her decently buzzed state and just nods. The scar on Chloe’s forehead shines light green with the neon lights bouncing off the walls.

“Beca,” Chloe says, her name rolling off her tongue in sincerity even though Beca is already swearing to herself that she would never drink again.

“Chloe,” Beca whispers back in a voice she doesn’t even recognise.

Chloe stares so hard at her, staring so hard Beca thinks she is surely able to see the afternoon her mom threatened to jump out the third-floor window when she was ten, four months after

her dad left, her thin, childish, arms and incoherent crying the only things that yanked her back. Staring so hard Beca thinks Chloe is surely repulsed by her habit of lashing out with completely viciousness at her father when she carries his very eyes and his tendency to avoid hard situations. Staring so hard Beca believes Chloe has found every title of every book she's read on Sunday afternoons spent at the public library her mother left her in, because raising a child in a city so far away from family is the hardest thing ever, and Beca *understands*, she really does.

Chloe stares so hard at her, and breaks into a goofy smile, pulling her in and resting her head on Beca's temple.

"You're so great, Beca, and you so fucking dumb because you don't even know," Chloe says with an amusement so clear Beca thinks she might be close to laughing. "You are my absolute favourite person, and it scares me shitless."

She squeezes Beca hard and kisses the side of her head. She squeezes Beca tighter and much longer than it should be appropriate for friends to do, and it fills Beca with a senselessly hot light that makes her fearless of whatever she would have to face after this.

The nurse squeezes Beca's hand and she is back in front of Chloe staring off into the distance, and deep crease in between her brows. The blue mesh seats and distant hum of a heater.

Beca sighs. "Yeah. I know."

Chloe blinks her eyes at the sudden disorientation and looks at herself deeply in the mirror, feeling weird about how all the fears she used to have in college come right back. The world is so big, and as Beca is going back out there with grand plans and grand connections, how much longer would Chloe matter?

January has already dug itself halfway into the new year, and Chloe sits down beside Beca on the bed that has been *theirs* for the past dozen days. There is so much she could map out and see clearly with logic, but there is so much more she can't control with rationality. Her suitcase that is near empty and the boarding passes that are tucked into its front pocket are sore reminders that it is not really their bed, nor their shared home.

"Come on, Beca, LA is waiting for your talent. You gotta pack sometime."

Beca doesn't turn around for lift her head to look her in the eyes like she did so often when they were in college. She just shifts closer and rests her head on Chloe's shoulder, taking a deep breath.

"I don't know how I could ever make it up to you."

Chloe is about to ask what for, but she knows why. She's always known.

All the times she's dropped her blatant favouritism on Beca over everyone else just for the sake of it. All the times she's let her plans be wrecked to stay close for a bit longer, and all the times she's gone into the shower before Beca in their shared Bellas house with sucky hot water tanks to warm the room up at least a few degrees before Beca comes in afterwards.

Chloe shrugs. "Go back to LA and go show the world your music," she raises her eyebrows and manages a smile after a pause. "Then we'll call it even."

Beca finally lifts her head, her eyes are watery and she's biting her lip, without eyeliner or mascara, she looks untouched and helpless. From the corner of her eye, Chloe sees her hand gripping the sheets until the knuckles are white.

There is a corner blocked off by wood shelves from unloading trucks behind a McDonald's on the corner of the street Chloe used to wait for the last bus in her sophomore year of high school. After her grandfather's abrupt death from cancer, she had a weird obsession with service jobs, and worked at that McDonalds for a spring and a summer before quitting and never going back. Work days were long and boring, the oil from the fries burning her fingers and drive-through headsets buzzing in her ears for so long she would hear them in her dreams.

She used to wonder, after a shift and her shirt smelling like fast-food, if she could ever love something longer than it would exist.

"Chlo," Beca's voice is cracked and scratchy, "Chlo. *Chloe*."

Chloe shakes her head, trying to stop her from saying anything more. But Beca doesn't take it, and keeps saying her name like she's trying to reel back all the years that have passed. "You know if you ever told me to stay..." Beca looks so deep into her it's like she's scooping up all over Chloe's college feelings. "I would. In a heartbeat."

Chloe closes her eyes and takes a deep breath.

"How about this?" She opens them again and Beca's eyes never left her face. She swallows down the well wishes, and has a sudden urge to keep this break from the world in her hands. She wants to be selfish.

"I'll wait until you're thirty-five. And I won't leave New York for another year." Chloe feels like she's suffocating but she continues. "But you know that I'll always be here. I won't

forget anything about us.”

Wait for what, she doesn’t know, and neither does Beca. But Chloe knows they both know what it means.

It’s Beca’s turn to squeeze her eyes shut so tightly, and a couple of trails of tears escapes, making a sparkling path down her cheeks. She finds the voice to hoarsely say, “You’re crying, Chlo.”

Chloe licks her lips and taste salt. “Oh. I am.”

Beca shakes her head. “I won’t ask you to wait if you don’t ask me to stay.”

The drive to the airport is nothing but blurry numbness. Chloe is sure this is what dying must feel like, and it never gets easier every time. They are such messy things, and Chloe understands why they are this way. She really does. Beca squeezes her hands and has red-rimmed eyes and Chloe wants to cry again.

Only music has come this close to divinity. Only music.

Beca is on her way to standing up because her back is getting sore when she sees Chloe frown deeply and her wide eyes glancing around only to land on her. There is a stability and clearness in them that weren’t there before, and Beca drops back on the rocking chair in a way that is probably extremely bad for her back. But she can’t care less when she struggles to breathe as she gets to be met with such familiar eyes that are still a most disturbingly clear blue.

“You’re back,” she chokes out.

Chloe rests her hand gently on her’s, but doesn’t say anything just yet. She just keeps staring at Beca with eyes that reach every inch of her, and Beca keeps taking Chloe in, with the lines that curve around those very same eyes now.

“You were somewhere good just now,” Beca says, after remembering how to breathe again. She’s not sure if Chloe can register what she’s saying, and maybe she’s just talking to herself, but she doesn’t mind. “You said something about snow and beds, and I think you were back to that Christmas I spent with you are your family, but you didn’t talk to any of them. You didn’t call out your uncle James on all his girlfriends, or count for hide and seek with little August—” Beca gets hit with an unpleasant feeling, “Oh god, I hope you still remember their names.”

Chloe's eyes just crinkle a bit sadly.

"Oh, Chloe." Beca wants to cry again, but she is sure that she must have dried up all her tears in all the years that have passed in between.

She just keeps talking. She recounts that whole vacation she got away from LA, where people knew her for herself and not her face or her name. How Chloe convinced her to go back to her hometown for the holidays, and got her to love the holidays for the first time in a long time. How Chloe's parents thought they were dating in the beginning, and how Chloe wouldn't stop teasing her about it the whole time. How they took walks in Chloe's old high school and the trees that surrounded it that still has seventeen-year-old Chloe's carving of '*long live orange juice*'. How a few relatives dropped by throughout the time they were there, all welcoming and loud and cheerful. How they played hide and seek with little nieces August and Betty, running through the closets and basement of that good sturdy house.

Beca lowers her voice and tries to wipe the bashful smile off her face that definitely did not suit a person her age as she tells Chloe about the night her parents left for dinner at a café and they didn't sleep a wink. How they ruined the sheets and the walls locked in words that could not ever be repeated.

And then her voice breaks while she talks about the day after, having to finally pack her suitcase and leave for LA again.

"I know what you meant now, Chlo," Beca whispers, "I understand so much more now." She shakes her head. "Only *now*."

Beca squeezes her eyes shut. "It's so dumb. It's so, so, fucking dumb. Every huge thing that was stopping us then looks like *nothing* when you're sitting there getting stuck at twenty-three and twenty-five and twenty-nine." Her voice is wobbly when Chloe shakes her head and opens her mouth, but Beca squeezes her hand, and she doesn't say anything. "You're... you're *trapped*, fucking stuck, to watching me not choose you when I should have."

She passes her hand that isn't holding onto Chloe's through her hair. But it's pinned up and she only makes it a mess, loose tendrils now falling onto her face. "Oh my god."

"Beca."

Beca lifts her head and watches Chloe's face soften even more and her eyes seem like they're drowning her.

"Beca, come on. It's not dumb."

"Chloe."

Chloe shakes her head. "I know I'm losing it. But at least I'm stuck in..." Beca watches her pause and frown, searching for her words, and it carves a fissure into her chest with every wrinkle on Chloe's forehead that becomes deeper with thought. "...in a place you exist in."

"Chlo," Beca protests, "don't say that."

Chloe just squeezes her hand again, tighter. They sit there, just watching each other as an old man in the back picks up a guitar and picks on all the wrong chords.

“I can’t...stay in New York or Barden or old houses for something I want to come back,” Chloe finally whispers, her words a bit jumbled and broken, but she still manages to chuckle. “We’re too old for that.”

“Chloe...”

“I can’t wait for you until you’re thirty-five anymore.”

Beca stares emptily at Chloe’s hair, pinned up as well in a neat bun. The once bright colors now fading, greyish-whitish leaking away from auburn. “You’re stuck,” she says in a hoarsely low voice, “right where I left you.”

“I can’t wait on any more of the promises,” Chloe replies, “But I’ll be right where you left me, waiting for the rest of my life, you know.”

A tendril of hair sticks to Beca’s wet cheek as she just keeps shaking her head, more to herself and anything. Chloe sits there and holds her hand and lets Beca cry silently, rocking back and forth on their chairs.

this is me trying

Chapter Summary

"and maybe I don't quite know what to say, but I'm here in your doorway. i just wanted you to know...that this is me trying."

beca is in a town that loves assholes, and chloe is finding herself an identity that doesn't rely on the things that she loves. love doesn't always follow definitions, and life is hard.

Chapter Notes

jesus fuck writing stuff is so hard

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*they expected me to find somewhere, some perspective,
but I sat and stared right where you left me*

Chloe still sleeps on the pull-out couch in their apartment a few times even though there is a perfectly good bed a few feet away. It is worn down magically nicely and nostalgic in an extremely present way. Her mind runs miles when she lays down on the soft sheet thrown over, the grey fabric smelling like familiar soap.

She closes her eyes and thinks of Beca's recent interview, another new and amusing way of questioning tired celebrities with strict guidelines and ridiculous games.

Alright, Beca, only short words, no full sentences!

Uh, what?

Yes, you got it, exactly like that! First thing that comes to mind!

Beca shifts on the neon plastic in front of a completely white screen and gives a chuckle. The interviewer's voice is distorted and peppy.

Okay, she answers.

Chloe got two pictures texted to her from Montreal five days ago. A very pretty street lined with orange cones, shops with wooden neon signs and an emerald mountain in the back. A another under a clear night sky and a queue of streetlamps continuing until very far off.

How does the world of fame feel like?

Meeting, leaving, symmetrical faces and dinner parties.

Can you be more specific?

You and me, knowing, liking, never close enough to be touching.

Chloe frowns at every online magazine's bold-typed title that doubts Beca's sudden success. She purses her lip at every intruding paparazzi picture of Beca crossing the street or at a bar with someone that is a stranger to Chloe. Only she knows how Beca likes *Gatorade* out of everything to chase her vodka, through and into those photos.

How does success feel like?

Never-ending cities, crowds, long lists of charts.

Can you be more specific?

Late nights, endless work, looming critics.

Can you be even more specific?

Never being where you want to be.

Chloe tosses and turns; she should go to sleep soon. She has a plane booked for tomorrow, taking her to Seattle for some city shoots.

How does excitement and heartbeat feel like?

Singing, headphones, wide highways and loud stages.

Can you be more specific?

Beca pauses and smiles a little.

An old dance routine, bandanas tied so tightly you can't breathe and college radio stations.

Can you be even more specific?

Blue you can't unsee, red that incinerates and the song Titanium.

Chloe still craves energy drinks like Beca used to crave coffee when she is so tired that she couldn't see straight. Chloe still craves the smell of cigarettes, but she means the one she had five years ago.

The interviewer doesn't retort for a split second, but a split second in a ten-minute long YouTube video is like eternity.

What is your favourite color, then?

The sudden, persistent, dynamism drives a loud bark of laughter out of Beca.

Easy. Purple. It's color theory.

Chloe knows a lot, but she doesn't say. She understands Beca's first love being music, she understands how impossible it is to find even one love in one lifetime. She knows that what is loved is mentioned.

Chloe sleeps restlessly.

(Before she took likings to sarcasm and eyeliner, she did also have peaceful sleep.)

"Theo Harper Takes a Stand on Feminism" coats at least two online articles that pop up on Chloe's phone and she raises an eyebrow, but doesn't really think about it anymore.

Beca rings her up on a Saturday afternoon, her words slurring together and her voice cracking every two words.

He's being praised on the fucking internet when all he said was like two words about rape being bad, Beca grunts through the line, seeming unable to stop. As if he didn't start that shit on accident, getting caught on tape while he said those things just trying to piss another douche off because he quit their collaboration.

Chloe hums in understanding, just entertaining Beca's rant, because she's gotten enough of these. It does concern her a little bit, that every single time, Beca is slurring her words, sometimes messy bar voices in the back, sometimes the dead silence of her apartment surrounding the words.

When asked about it, Beca just sighs and replies, *sometimes I want to drink just to forget all the people following me everywhere and shouting at me wherever I go. And then I drink a little too much and I'm, like, aware they're looking, so I drink more to ignore that.*

Theo kind of steps out of the backdrop of a producer and does a couple interviews where he fully embraces the feminist thing he's got going on and using big words.

But it's like he didn't just fucking yell at a woman last week because she refused to give him her phone number, you know? It's as if most of the men I know haven't already harassed an

actress.

It's fucking bullshit, Chlo.

He's, like, my boss so I can't run my mouth, and I hate that.

A couple of days later, someone tweets a video of Beca Mitchell snapping at Theo Harper outside of a restaurant.

Two hours later, a few thousand comments sweep in, saying they've had enough of Beca's rude personality, that it's plain unpleasant. They attribute Beca's sudden rush to stardom to luck and backstage forces, and Chloe knows that Beca is agreeing with them right now.

They range from casual to downright terrifying, and Chloe winces reading them and shuts off her phone.

A day later, old cases of Theo sexual harassing a female co-worker gets dug up and makes it little stroll around the internet.

She's the one who calls Beca this time, and Beca returns the call four hours later.

It's like it's always a life-or-death situation here every single fucking day, Beca says.

And I got unlucky, with that getting caught on camera. Theo told me get another producer.

And this town loves assholes like them, and there's nothing we can do. People are going to forget about it in six months and he'll still get jobs handed to him.

Chloe picks up the phone again and again. And one time, Beca is so drunk out of her head, giggling and yelling into the phone in nonsensical sentences, and it makes Chloe laugh.

I miss you, Chloe. I miss you, I miss you, I miss you! You're my one good thing. I love you.

Chloe grins and shakes her head.

"I love you too. You know," Chloe pauses, her grin softening to a quiet smile, "You're going to marry me someday, if things always went the way I wanted them to. And I'm nothing great, but I'll make enough money for two nice rings and a bigger apartment. We're nearing that age, anyway, right?" She laughs quietly to herself. "We've gotta surrender to the age sometime, right?"

Beca's end is silent for a few seconds, then a clear chuckle comes through and sneaks its way from Chloe's ear to her heart.

"Yeah, Chlo. If everything goes to shit, I've still got you."

Chloe lets the days go by without a fight, just letting them carry her in the direction they want. Most times, Chloe gets by without trouble, enough money to pay bills and enough

enthusiasm to keep on travelling to places and taking pictures of things she finds pretty.

With every new interview about Beca that pops up on the internet, Chloe knows she is finding some more footing in the life without her. She doesn't acknowledge the same song on repeat for two months or the words she slurs when she's drunk, and all the vowels sounding like Beca's name.

Chloe reads an article about a lighthouse online and it goes something like this: "*when you love someone, that person becomes the lighthouse of your universe.*" It goes on and on about how it is the lighthouse that shines over everything that can even be perceived in the dead of the night. How everything that is beautiful is only beautiful when the lighthouse lights it up. How beauty can be recognized, but is only breathtaking with that person.

How they illuminate.

How they make everything more.

And Chloe spends months trying to undo her lighthouse from her blood. She spends months concentrating on separating the individual seconds of her day to make them seem longer and more complete, putting each one into her fist and counting the jagged edges, trying to find good things in their cracks. She ignores the ghosts that live in her closet that disapprove of her willing forgetfulness; she calls everyone she misses but stays happy.

Her pictures are starting to feel beautiful again, and she sees the excitement in songs that talk about things other than love again. In the sweltering heat of Arizona and the unforgiving snow of New York, under the rain in Seattle and by the beach in Vancouver—she really believes that she is better off.

And when Chloe's flight touches down in LA once more after months and months, it is Beca who reaches out first after their long silence. They haven't properly spoken in so long, yet Chloe still thinks of her on her birthday.

And they lounge around everywhere, Beca splitting her life apart again to fit Chloe in it. Slouching in a wooden chair in Beca's recording studio, Chloe revels in the unblemished thrill that comes with it, knowing Beca still comes back to her.

At night, on Beca's living room floor, in between plastic plates full of sushi and soy sauce, she tilts her head and breathes in and out.

"I think..." Chloe blinks and watches Beca's face carefully, "I think that I know how to be with myself now."

Beca laughs, not patronizing, just rather delighted, like she knows exactly what Chloe is talking about. "I'm glad."

Chloe sees a different kind of light as she watches Beca struggle to open her bottle of iced tea, one that is not dependant and overbearing. It lets her breathe beside it, a safeness that

envelopes her.

And they talk about everything, from the new coffee table to theories of alternate universes, but never find a chance to get closer; a chance to hug or kiss or touch each other. For a split moment, Chloe's heart runs away and explodes into Beca's hands, all over her iced tea. But she reels it back instead and keeps laughing at Beca's terrible pun.

A bit later, Beca sits with her back against the headboard of her bed, a bottle of water clutched in her hand and her knees pulled up against her chest. The excitement wearing off, she stares at a spot of sauce on her sweatpants while Chloe taps out a beat against the sheets, spread wide across the covers.

A long time ago, Chloe could see it in her head, clearer than anything else she remembers, they were just like this as well. Sitting in Beca's bed, a bottle of whatever in their hands and talking about the future like they had any idea what it would be like.

And they had their dreams, about music, about love, about travelling, about starting families that would be happy forevermore. Tonight, they still drink the same stuff from bottles from whatever, and when their glasses touch, it's the sound of dreams falling apart.

"Do you think I'm a good person, Chloe?"

Chloe's beat falters and she turns her head to rest her cheek, squished, on the back of her right hand. She hums in sleep confusion, but nods without hesitation.

Beca smiles the tiniest bit, sadly. "You really think so? Even when I'm this successful?"

"Why would I deem you a bad person for being successful? That's dumb."

"I'm in LA, Chlo," Beca laughs, and Chloe starts to notice the dark circles under her eyes and the crease that is beginning to take place permanently between her brows. "No one kind and good and perfect gets famous."

Chloe purses her lips, squinting her eyes and trying to figure out Beca in her haze. She always thought she was good at that; at reading Beca's frown, at understanding her retorts, at decoding her cold words. But Beca rests her head against the headboard, looking down at her with an almost empty look in her eyes, and Chloe doubts she really ever learned to read her properly.

"But you're Beca," Chloe says with finality, "I believe you won't become a huge asshole."

"But even my beginning was wrong. I got pushed over the people trying so hard just because I impressed one person with status. I didn't work for it."

Chloe snorts unattractively into the sheets. "That's bullshit, Beca." She rolls off her stomach and flops onto her back, untangling her hair from under her back and pats Beca's knee with a dazed smile. "You worked your ass off every second for the Bellas and you made awesome

mashups for every competition. If that isn't dedication and talent, then what is? The final sprint to that finish line was just a little different, that's all."

"I've fucked people over too, you know," Beca says quietly. "Most times, I don't even have the option. Either the management I've signed a contract with decides for me, or I'd get fucked over if I don't do something about it first." She tightens her grip on the poor water bottle in her hands. "I hate it. I wish I could do something about it."

Chloe looks up at her and wants to wrap her up and take her back to New York, back when all they had was each other. "Why don't you just come back?" she asks, "you know I'm here. You know Amy is there, you know the Bellas are going to have your back, still."

Beca's face is a mixture between crying and laughing. "Really? Because I know I don't deserve it. I disappear for weeks at a time and I don't even call *you* often, and I'm in weird places most times and can't keep in touch."

"I mean it. If it gets too tiring, we still have our apartment and I have a job." Chloe breaks into a goofy smile, her jet lag messing with her head and she can't help but smile a lot when she's laying here with Beca. "I'll take care of you, babe."

Beca laughs shakily. "Thanks, Beale."

"Of course."

Chloe has heard all about the warpath Beca left behind her as she fought for her place in LA, through the phone calls and skype sessions and texts that swam between them a few months ago, back when they still talked so often. And she isn't blind, she does check up on news and articles, and sometimes they link together and Chloe can figure out how things went down.

She's been there so many times, looking on in the distance as Beca lost her mind trying to toe the line between career and morality. She understands that they are different people. She understands that Beca is just the kind of person that puts so much effort into honesty and righteousness, and she hurts for someone like Beca to be put in these sorts of situations, and she understands that she would never fully understand that.

"It'll be alright, just wait and see," Chloe says after a moment of silence, "it's okay for now. Just breathe, Beca. We've all messed up and done questionable things, you know."

Beca looks like she's about to cry. "You're the only one who still treats me like I'm brand new."

"Because you are."

Because every time Chloe has the privilege to see her again, she's like a new person all over. Because Chloe is convinced she's still the only one to see Beca as everything as she is, and not only a superstar, or a lover, or a musician, or a businesswoman.

Because Chloe is *so* endlessly enthralled each and every time Beca splits her life apart just to fit her in it again.

And then Beca is crying, clutching at that water bottle like her life depends on it, and Chloe wonders how they cry so easily these days.

“I miss the days when we were in college, Chlo,” Beca chokes out, “I miss them so much. I miss the way I’d wake up with a house full of people who I knew loved me back, and I miss the boring ass lectures, and the window that doesn’t close fully and the cat that always stays on our doorstep. I miss knowing that you were just a knock on a door away, back when everything was just out of reach enough to still be able to dream about. I miss having a place feel like home, and I miss being able to tell you I love you to your face any day, and I *know* that never said it enough.”

Beca’s breath catches in her throat in an ugly sob and her face is splotched in spots of red, and it still makes Chloe lose her train of thought. She looks back with a helpless sniff of her own, her vision blurring as well.

“And I’m always thinking about the people I’ve left along the way all the time, the people I should’ve talked to more, cared about more, the people I wish I had more time with, but I was too caught up in my own problems and emotions to see, and now they’re just weights I carry with me for longer and longer, and it’s *so hard* grieving for the living, Chloe—” Beca sucks in a deep and shuddering breath, her lips trembling, “—and I don’t know how I can carry on this way for any longer, it’s so exhausting, you know? And I keep wondering if I am a monster or if this is what it means to be a person, and I get drunk but it’s not enough, because I wake up and I’m still worse off than I was before—”

Chloe puts a hand on Beca arm and squeezes. “Beca. Beca. Beca, stop.”

Beca stutters to a stop and stares at her with big red eyes, bloodshot and not pretty at all.

“Come on,” Chloe says, pulling her closer and laying them back down, “breathe.”

“I’m not too gone, right?” Beca whispers hoarsely, “I’m not too gone to be good again, am I?”

Chloe squeezes Beca tighter and doesn’t speak, because truthfully, she doesn’t know. She gazes at the ceiling and listens to Beca’s breathing slowly calm down and even out. She hates feeling this helpless and not being to help Beca, or just stand in front and block everything out for her.

They lay there, following each other’s breathing. Chloe wants Beca to stop treating herself like a tragedy, but she loves the way she is the one to pick up her pieces when she cries. She thinks of the selfish things Beca has admitted she’s done to make her own career a bit easier through drunken hazes of conversation. She thinks of the kindest things she’s seen Beca throw her money into to make the world a better place.

She is not sure if there is a deep down, if they are not just everything their actions are.

She doesn’t know how they can be so old, yet still know so little.

It’s spring again, and the days are so slow, but the years pass so fast.

All they have left Chloe are deeper questions about where they are going. She can afford hot water at all times, organic fruit to feel fancier, and all that other pretty crap.

And still, the only things she knows for sure is Beca's hot skin against her's and the trust she's left in Chloe's hands as she plays with the edge of her shirt.

"How 'bout happier subjects," Chloe suddenly says, sitting up in one swoop and Beca jumping a little. "I think I'm gonna apply to be an English teacher somewhere, settle down and stuff. Any fancy resume recommendation ideas you can give me?"

Chloe stabilizes herself with a hand on Beca's arm and almost falls over again with the look Beca is pushing her way. She smiles tentatively and is returned with an even softer smile, and Beca looks so much better than she was moments ago.

"You're Chloe Beale," Beca says, loosening her grip on the water bottle and letting it topple over. "You're a three-time super-senior, you got two degrees at the same time, and you've always seen the good in me somehow."

Dear Chlo,

You have been thinking of things that are a couple years closer to us, these times. They are more accurate than I thought they would be, it's surprising.

You are everything that was still good with me when I was at my worst. I never wanted to be thrust into the spotlight, and for a sheer moment, when Khaled offered me all that, I fell for it. But I always wanted to be a producer, nothing else, nothing more.

Everyone was on my ass all the time; my first hit EP was all I ever had. It is so frustrating when I learn and create new ones that I think are so much better, but no one listens to them. That EP was all that I was known for. And they started saying I was a one-hit wonder, and I mean, even if I was, why was I still relevant enough for every little action to be dramatized into huge statements? I was so young when I sang them, just out of that USO tour and believing that talent and hard work would take me anywhere. I should have known that everything life wraps up and gifts me has been already priced with more to give up in my future days.

Thirty-two was a long way from eighteen, and an even longer way away from now. All I wanted to ask you, every time I picked up the phone, was for you to come to my shows. Music is *love*, and I wanted you to hear that. I knew that I was slowly fading away in songs, and slowly only being known for the articles and eyeliner. I hated that.

But with you it was so simple. With you, *music* is so simple. You understand that the good and the bad all end up in the song.

When the crowd beneath the height of the stage claps and cheers, it's sweltering and deafening. It was like a trembling wave of blessing from the world. No one knew we were together, but they've all seen the way we were together.

Please don't forget me just yet.

Yours,

Beca.

When everything comes crashing down in a spectacular and sudden mess, Chloe is too far away from Beca to catch her when she falls.

The entire internet and tabloid articles explode with a few screenshots that Theo publishes of his and Beca's text thread, and a couple of paparazzi videos of her snapping at people on the street just pushes it further.

When Chloe tries to channel her comfort into texts on her phone just as the insults start on the bottom of twitter feeds, they feel minuscule compared to what Beca was aimed at with. She thinks of how easily scared and easily hurt Beca was when they first met. She thinks of how Beca was so delicately tough, how she cried to Toy Story and how she flipped off Aubrey. She thinks of how undeniably *good* Beca is underneath all that, of her late nights and her shy laugh, how she messes up but apologizes afterwards.

Then, the days pass only with crosses off calendars and for a supposed 'one hit wonder', the whole world turns against Beca. There are insults and careless comments thrown for good measure on the internet, and there are near death-threats and unforgiving paparazzi pictures crawling everywhere for the extremes.

Chloe wants to cry at how someone so immorally important to her could be treated like garbage in other hands.

Chloe blinks hard to fight off the tears that have no place being there at all, and behind her eyelids, scenes flash by in succession. The sunlight of Barden, loud parties, movie midnights. Innocence, out of reach, yellow cups and girls swearing the basement in their house is haunted.

She thinks of how no one has ever been able to evoke the same feelings in her ever again, after Beca. She wonders if that is a blessing or a curse. If that is something to hold on to or if she should try to let go.

But before everything, they are friends. Before everything, friendship lasts and lingers for so long.

Chloe wants to get away from her mobile job in photography and move on to something that wouldn't make her heart beat out of her chest every time LA popped up on the screen as a next destination. She puts her degree to use and aims for a teaching job.

She focuses on herself and is moving on. She was, until she picks up the phone on a morning and is greeted with a voicemail from Beca, voice soft and scared.

She focuses on herself and moving on until Beca needs her again.

She calls Beca back with fumbling fingers when she hears Beca sobbing through the message, scared out of her wits by paparazzi and fans.

"No, no. Don't cry, Beca, don't cry, please, I'm coming right away."

And she books a flight to Los Angeles on a cloudy Tuesday afternoon.

Chloe always saw an unearthly stubbornness in Beca, from the very first glance of that dark-eyed frown across patches of grass, there was an almost otherworldly clash with everything else. She has never seen it clearer than in this moment, Beca standing in front of her in a crumpled long-sleeve that was once white, but used to a cream color, hair messy and eyes tired.

The ends of her hair are still a muddy blonde from a dye that her team obligated for a music video a couple of weeks ago, and the sharper angles of her face with the all at once neat but hopelessly careless clothes have never looked less like Beca. But that obstinacy still seeps out of her clenched fists, her imploring gaze up at Chloe.

"Take me home, Chlo," she slowly whispers, "If you want to."

"I want to. You know I'll always want to."

Beca is somewhere very deep in her world, now surrounded by plastic smiles and knives in backs, all grappling towards the top of fame and success in the city of angles. She isn't the rough but sincere girl Chloe had found walking in the activities fair anymore.

"But you also know I'll still have to leave. I..." Beca bites her lip, so tightly Chloe is afraid she is going to draw blood, "I'm so sorry, Chlo. I *don't know* why I chose this line of work," she struggles, and Chloe reaches out to one of her clenched fists, gently prying it loose and threading her own fingers through, "but at the same time...I just can't fucking let it go. It's all I am now."

Chloe shakes her head. The frustration that is almost hand in hand with every mention of Beca is worthless when Beca is tilting her head down, trying to keep Chloe from seeing her eyes turn red. She curses this train of days taking Beca's once sparkling dreams into the muddy stages and newspapers headlines to dirty.

She winds an arm around Beca's waist. "Let's go home."

Home is the apartment Chloe still keeps in New York; her job able to afford it anyway. She books a flight for the both of them back to New York city without knowing where things would lead them this time, and the entire trip back is a haze. Home is a place they haven't been to in months, but still warm and cramped, the familiarity overwhelming and painful as soon as the door rattles open. An empty mug sits on the small dining table, just where Chloe left it in February, just before leaving for Montreal.

She pulls Beca in through the narrow hallway, stepping over shorts of which the owner remains anonymous.

She hears Beca murmur into her shoulder again, "*how did we end up here?*".

They fall onto bed sheets, Beca squeezing her eyes shut and Chloe's wide open, helplessly taking in the woman by her side. She undresses Beca gently, peeling off the long-sleeve and the black trousers, letting them fall onto the carpet. She discards her own sweater and slacks; she keeps her eye on Beca and her red eyes. She pulls Beca in closer under the covers and whispers into her shoulder, smoothing her hand over her side. In all the mess that they are in now, Chloe is still craving to be someone that is there for Beca, and she blinks in rapid succession, images overlapping in her head and passing like short films.

Painful politeness in well-pressed blouses, as if in another life. Children running and laughing, Beca's mixing equipment, new tattoos and old songs, and falling in love, no one being surprised but for them. Handsome men, pretty women, estranged calls.

In all of them, Chloe is dazed and confused and still overwhelmed by what she feels, reaching out and curling around back into the pits of her chest, in the crevices between her ribs. Some craving *so past sexual* that it is almost innocent.

Innocence, in Beca's lash line, in her own freckles, battling to their death against the slew of speculations and reputations that are knocking on their door.

Beca stays with Chloe for two months. She keeps an almost scary friendly attitude after the first day out of habit, and it pains Chloe down to the core. It makes Chloe sure that she is the only one in the entire world that can see when Beca is trying to deceive, and bits of Beca's frown find themselves in Chloe morning coffee and the creases of her shower curtains. Bits of Beca's damaged pieces surface and make themselves at home in Chloe's bed, and Beca hands them over in a way that definitely isn't supposed to thrill Chloe.

The media speculates about the whereabouts of Beca Mitchell, not really caring about accuracy, just the drama. Chloe pats Beca on the arm and tells her that she wouldn't listen to them, she's just going to believe the story that Beca tells her.

Beca tells her that's not fair, and Chloe replies that she's not here to be the judge of things; that she's only here to be on Beca's side.

(That's what I'm here for, Beca.)

(You did nothing wrong. It's the rest of the world that's wrong.)

But anything that Beca hands to her and not anyone else thrills her endlessly. Without reason.

It's my fucking pride that ruins things, Beca mumbles on the third night as they fall asleep on the couch, Beca half on top of her and nodding off to Mean Girls. Chloe nods and rests an arm around her shoulders.

I can't cry. If I start, I'm scared that I'll never stop, Beca says on the first Tuesday afternoon when Chloe asks her about it. She kisses her on the forehead and orders pizza and beer.

Maybe it's just every artist's dream to be remembered somehow, Beca declares to the bedroom wall after her shower, and Chloe hears it through the closed bathroom door. She pretends she doesn't and sings *The Sign* as if carelessly as she dries herself off until she hears a banging on the bathroom door and Beca yelling desperately for her to stop. She opens it to find Beca glaring, but brighter, lighter, and more similar to the one she remembers.

I never just leave good enough alone, Beca grumbles sleepily into her shoulder after a night spent screaming out Chloe's name. The purple marks sparkle on her neck, and Chloe pulls Beca tighter against her front.

I'm betting on an unreachable success and the rest of my life is the wager, Beca says as they finally talk about it over the only dish Chloe knows how to cook. Beca stuffs more mac and cheese into her mouth and Chloe laughs as Beca splutters.

I'm betting on an unreachable success and the rest of my life is the wager, Beca repeats and repeats, *and I feel like I'm hurting everyone in the process*.

Chloe takes Beca back to Atlanta in the sweltering heat of August, at the start of a brand-new school year. They sit on the concrete steps of the ice-cream shop facing Barden and watch cabs and cars and trucks stop and go, students hauling suitcases and exchanging hugs and crying and laughing. She grips Beca's hand tight as they watch the place that used to be everything that they ever knew not recognise them anymore.

Look, Beca, this is the people we used to be.

Look, Beca, please don't forget about this.

The bus stop where they stumbled out to on dreary nights back from a day in town has new graffiti tags on its glass walls, and the sidewalk where Amy once chipped a bit off with a truck she got from god-knows-where is repaired. Neither of them really talks about the weight that has been sitting on their shoulders since they last saw each other, and they don't sit too close. But Beca reaches out for Chloe's hand as they walk by the empty pool and Chloe squeezes back.

"Can we go to the convenience store down the road again?"

Chloe nods and smiles and tugs Beca into a hug under the shade of a tree. "Yeah. Yeah, of course." But she desperately wants to pull Beca back to their old dorms and old classrooms and the old corner of the unused bathroom on the third floor to go back to what they used to be.

(Spinning, taunting, improvising out a love that they hadn't experienced yet.)

Everything has changed, Chloe thinks, but herself.

She is something that world forgot to bring along as it keeps getting older.

The road to the Seven-Eleven is so familiar, Chloe can still retrace every step she used to take on the Wednesday afternoons before Bellas practice. Beca still buys a white Gatorade and lollipops and Chloe still buys the same ketchup chips and tic-tac's.

"I want to stay in these Barden days if I ever get old and slobbery," Chloe says as they sit on the benches back by the ice-cream shop.

Beca snorts. "I'd have so much fun seeing you slobbery."

Chloe rolls her eyes and steals a gulp of Beca's Gatorade. Beca doesn't give her another smart remark or sarcastic jab, just closes her eyes and leans back into the wood, taking a few breaths. Chloe doesn't know where they are going, but they are still together after all this time so it *must* mean something.

And she thinks that maybe the girls were right when they said that the basement of the Bella house was haunted.

Because they walk by the trees and see the white tile house in the distance, and Chloe swears she hears *Just A Dream* again. And even when Chloe reaches out and holds Beca's hand, intertwining their fingers, she is haunted by the ghosts of how happy they used to be.

"I've been wishing we could start over a lot lately," Beca whispers into the boiling hot air between them. "But I'm not even sure it would finish better."

Hey Chlo,

The days where my entire career blew up in my face were some of the worst in my life. Because what do you do when the one thing that saved you becomes the things that destroys you?

Whatever I touch, crumbles. I didn't want that to happen to you.

You already know that you would let you ruin me if you asked me to. You already know I'm reckless and absolutely insane, and I can't bear the thought of you suffering from it. Anyone else, (and there's already been so many) but not you. Oh god, not you.

There are so many things that kindness and justice can't help but watch burn in flames. And that night, when you watched me with that hopeless look in your eyes, I wasn't sure either that I could say that I've always been a good person.

We hadn't seen each other or had a proper conversation in so long, yet you were still my weak spot; my Achilles' heel. I am sure there are things about you that I have forgotten as well, and that thought disgusts me. What you said on a morning on the first of April in 2012, I cannot come up with, but I know we were in the Bella house together. I am so vehemently furious at the act of forgetting any little thing at all, but I am old as well and I can't even remember lyric to my own songs most days.

But I found the picture of a tattoo I wanted to get on my back when I was thirty-three, a long string of ivy that would go up my back and wrap the tiniest amount around my left shoulder.

I found that idea a night I was hanging out with a strange woman behind the noisiest bar, both of us running away from the crowds and dealing with our own stuff. She had red hair and a soft voice, and you can already see where this is going.

She was smoking when I found her, stumbling in my heels and mascara smudged. She asked if I wanted to hear a story, and I said yes. I had nothing better to do and no one better to talk with.

I killed a stray cat in my car today, she told me, I was crying when I left the house and kept crying when I got to the car, and a fucking Justin Bieber song was paying on the radio and it somehow made me cry harder.

She stuck a joint into my mouth and flicked her lighter, looking me dead in the eyes. I didn't do anything, and she lit it.

I felt worse about that then when I cheated on my husband, she said. Her eyes were bloodshot and she sat a bit too close, and the stank of weed made my head turn. Why do we do the things we do?

We sat there for hours, sometimes talking sometimes not, and she rolled with surprising speed and knew how to fold the filter into a heart. It was sickeningly romantic in the most

terrible way, and it was the first time I felt cared for in a year. I watched the stars spinning in the sky, barely even there. She asked me if I was happy, and for a split second, I could have sworn it was you that whispered to me, voice soft and hair tickling my neck in the gentlest way. Your voice the exact way I remembered it to be when I was only twenty, and I told her that I was.

And I *was*, in that moment.

You know that when we're at rock bottom, everyone that crosses our path looks like light. But I'm trying, I swear I am. I'm trying *so* hard to be good enough.

We forget the memories sometimes, but the memories don't forget us.

I have loved you since I was eighteen, because there are never strict lines that love should be forced to follow in order to count. We never used the term 'girlfriend' or 'couple' or whatever else, but I'd like to think that I've loved you my whole life; that we were and are something. I love you, Chloe, please remember me.

Yours,

Beca.

Beca always refuses to comply, she still refuses to give in, even as her career falls out right underneath her feet, and Chloe swears to her bedroom ceiling as they lay there together again, that it would be her that takes care of Beca once she gets tired and wants to go home.

She watches Beca hold onto her talent given to her by her parents and nights spent hunched over her desk in college to slash back at the people doubting her. And still, she refuses to give in.

The world has not heard from Beca Mitchell in months, and they slowly start cooling down. Like always, the town finds some other relevant star to bash on without proof, without good reason and keep on loving assholes Beca stays with Chloe, back in their tiny apartment in New York, and starts writing music again.

Chloe feels like she's in some kind of twisted paradise, back in the morbid sense of intimacy she's shared with Beca since forever. She watches Beca sit in front of a keyboard and stab at keys, humming under her breath, and she is fulfilled.

"I can't wait for you get out this funk, Beca, and be happy. I can't wait for you to get better."

Beca looks up with a smile. "Really?"

"You're the biggest idiot I know and the only thing that makes sense to me," Chloe replies.

And Chloe thinks she's found something that was missing from her long journey of trying to be better as well. She finds a nice school near the upper west side and wonders why she thought life was so hard before. She tries to mend things with her parents, because this is their first time being parents too, and she gets how hard things get sometimes. She buys donuts on her way home for Beca, and watches her make dinner while dancing in the kitchen. She watches Beca build herself back up and sleeping in until it gets easier. And she doesn't intervene, because she knows she is there to love Beca, and not to save her.

She tells Beca that, that wherever justice and kindness doesn't reach, she will still have her.

It is everything Chloe has ever looked for in the few hopeful dates she's ventured into, but she doesn't point that out, and neither does Beca. But Beca greets at the apartment door every night without fail with a smile or tired eyes, and gives her a hug and helps her with the grocery bags. And before bed, they move around each other, humming the same song, brushing their teeth and washing their face.

Beca loops her arms around Chloe neck at the door of the bathroom and sways with a small grin and a light in her eyes that Chloe has missed so much. Chloe asks her what they would do after all this is over, because honestly, Chloe wants to be the one to kneel on the floor with a shiny ring and pick out her white dress and forget to buy tomatoes at the farmer's market together in twenty years.

She knows she's told Beca that before, but she knows she couldn't give Beca everything they want either. She wants to make her all her's, but she's also afraid that Beca is going to be at that farmer's market, arguing over a wrongly priced watermelon with the seller; she's afraid Beca is going to see a dress she likes and hesitate about buying it.

"What are we going to do, Beca?"

Beca's arms are warm, resting on Chloe's shoulders. "We'll do all the good stuff, okay?" She sways lightly against Chloe again. "We'll make breakfast at noon and trash talk all the reality TV contestants and hold hands. Then I'll move out and you'll leave to find better things to waste your time on, because that's what always happens."

Chloe brushes a hair from Beca's eyes and lets her touch linger for a bit. "Okay. I love you, you know?"

"I know, Chlo."

So Chloe turns the apartment upside down when Beca gets a call from her team, out of nowhere. She looks for the errant scraps of paper on which she's poured her soul and unsaid love onto. The place is a mess after she's stacked most of them into a relatively neat pile on the coffee table.

She hears Beca in the hallway, talking furiously to someone on the other side of the line, and Chloe knows that she's going away soon, that it was inevitable.

Most of the papers are torn and blotched, the edges curling and crumpled into sad pieces of garbage. Chloe swallows harshly, suddenly unable to move properly as she sees the words that were once overflowing with importance seem like useless things thrown up into sentences. Some of them, as she picks each one up and smoothens it out carefully, still punches her in the guts. Others are stupid, nonsensical and nearing hysteria.

Beca tells her that her team has picked themselves up and organised a plan for the future. She says that they want her to marry someone to settle down the press and just focus on pushing out good songs. Beca says that it's good that being with Chloe has given her inspiration for music.

How wonderfully strange is it to be a muse, she seems to be telling Chloe in between the lines.

It's good as long as it's you, Chloe answers in the form of a tight hug.

She's known from the first drunken phone call that she wouldn't be completely sheltered from Beca's fame either. She's been prepared to be stabbed by it somewhere, sometime. She knows that maybe Beca marrying famous film composer, Jesse Swanson as a college-to-adult love story would be exactly the thing the media needs.

Where do you think I can stop? Beca asks, tears in her eyes that she refuses to acknowledge as she packs her suitcase.

When you're with me, Chloe answers. She drives Beca to the airport and cries in her car until she can't breathe.

Chloe climbs the never-ending stairs back to her apartment alone, without Beca, and wraps all her old letters in a big yellow envelope. She throws a coat and a hat to run down to the post office before she regrets it. She prints Beca's address in LA carefully and slides it over the counter, only hesitating the smallest bit.

For your song writing, I hope it helps, she writes, *from Chloe*.

A week later, after two demos that Beca has already sent her with bits of *her* writing in her cracks of the melody, Chloe decides to clean out her apartment and rent it out. She is vacuuming when she finds a folded flyer beneath her bed. When she undoes the creased edges, it is a Bellas flyer, with the faded blue border and a bold 'B' that pricks at her eyes. Her own handwriting stares back at her.

She doesn't even remember writing this one, the letters scrawled with such reckless abandon that they scare her with their ferocity.

You are so deeply intertwined with every concept of love I've ever had. I love you, because you are love.

Chloe doesn't send that one to Beca.

Chapter End Notes

[here is the backtrack to cry to](#)

also, sorry if some things don't make entire sense, like how beca answers phone calls and how they book flights so fast. if you ask, then it's the magic of love <3

coney island

Chapter Summary

"and if this is the long haul, how'd we get here so soon?"

two white weddings, where beca bets on music with the rest of her life. two weddings, and chloe stays by her side because they're beca and chloe, and together they're bloe.

Chapter Notes

who is writing this very mediocre chapter instead of writing her research papers?
i don't know, i refuse to acknowledge it.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

i could feel the mascara run; you told me that you met someone.

glass shattered on the white cloth, everybody moved on.

The news of Beca Mitchell, hit pop star and talented songwriter, being engaged is leaked skillfully through a few undercover accounts on various social medias. They excite the public decently while Beca is sent on a 'vacation' with Jesse in the Galapagos, paparazzi booked in advance to follow them around. The buzz buzzes even louder, and her team picks a sweltering hot day in the middle on July for them to announce it officially.

Beca's Instagram has now a picture of Jesse on the top of its feed, cooking pasta and the caption 'husband material'. The comments blow up and Chloe turns off her phone, placing it on her kitchen counter. She turns her head towards the unsent Bellas flyer, laying crumpled on the coffee table.

Just the one last poem she wrote ages ago. Only three words, she spent countless seasons writing over and over again.

Just for the few seconds Beca spends reading what she's sent her, she would be thinking of Chloe. Just for the few seconds Beca spends reading her crazy scribbles, she belongs to Chloe.

Beca sends back a thin stack of papers in the mail a few days later. Chloe knows that it's easier if she would have just typed the words out in an email or scanned them out, but the scratchy sheets in her hands are the closest thing to holding Beca lately, and she is grateful.

Three sheets of dollar store paper, so thin that they could tear any moment. The handwriting of the three pages of a song's draft is so distinctly Beca's; thin, slanted, and neat. The words, however, makes Chloe's breath stick in her throat. Little parts of the nonsensical thoughts that took over Chloe's life for awhile, that she had sent out to Beca barely a month ago. They are now a song called "*Fast Friends*", with a post-it note on the back, saying "*thank you, Chlo, for co-writing this song*".

Chloe rereads those three pages many times in the following weeks. They crumple and tear at the edges, and she bites her lip guiltily every time it happens. She reads it so much, and thinks about all the things they've never told each other at parties, on stages, and side by side in tents. Chloe reads it so much, and she thinks that she understands that telling love to the fullest could also be a kind of burden.

Beca calls her again on a rainy Monday morning from Los Angeles. They've stayed in touch recently, never really letting go after Beca left last time. Chloe thinks they've wordlessly fallen into another kind of torture, much sweeter, much lighter.

(Maybe it wasn't really torture at all.)

(Chloe isn't really sure how to call it anything else.)

Chloe answers while curling her hair and humming to herself, and Beca's smoothly shy voice fills her like it has never before. Beca asks her what she thought of her song, and Chloe is overwhelmed all at once with words overflowing from her tongue, trying to find the right ones to describe how the song makes her lose sleep at night.

She wants Beca to know that she writes like she speaks; gently, quietly, and taking over Chloe with every word. She wants Beca to know that her music is still the kind of unwavering belief it was when she was nineteen; innocent, beautiful, and ringing in Chloe's head years later. But she tells Beca that she's loved it, that she's so, so, talented, and that she has never been prouder.

When Beca asks her to be the maid of honor just for the show, she accepts without the resounding pang of pain that she expects to find.

Beca flies back out again, before Chloe could properly ask her if this much flying across the country could possibly okay for her health. Beca assures her anyway that she is used to it at

this point, even though she does it most times only for different publicity jobs. Still stuck in that whirling spiral stuck on her one top hit, all of Beca's relevancy is kept with magazine drama and relationship statuses, and Chloe can hear how much it bothers her in the way she talks.

They go to a beach together, Beca waking up one morning under Chloe's covers, head resting on her shoulder, and mumbling about it. Chloe smiles, turning them gently over to curl her arm surely around Beca's middle and pressing her cold nose into the back of Beca's neck. She doesn't know where to even begin on describing how the absence of Beca feels like the absence of herself.

(How does she feel everyone else's feelings but her's?)

Beca hums a muffled little noise like they do not have the whole world weighing down in their shoulders, lazily slotting her fingers in between Chloe's, and Chloe is reminded of all the nights where it felt right. Just like right now.

The beach has amazing carousels and arcade games, and Chloe laughs like she is young again. She catches Beca's dumb grin from the corner of her eye, and she feels like she is a young schoolgirl, stomach flipping with the careless attention of a crush. It's invigorating and exciting, and Chloe thinks she could fly. Above the city skyline of Brooklyn and the golden sand of their beach, the whole world sounds like Beca. Chloe watches Beca miss popping a balloon in the arcade stand while a five-year-old girl pops them perfectly, and she thinks she could spend her life like this.

She takes Beca dress shopping like a good bridesmaid a few days later, and she thinks it may be one of the most sacred moments of her life. Amy, Stacie, and Emily fly out and all cram into Beca's car, and for a day, it's like nothing has ever changed. For all of Beca's shy uncertainty after this long, their raucous excitement makes up for, and the conversation doesn't stop the whole ride there. It isn't truly dress shopping even, more of a warehouse-type place where Beca's team had picked out ones they think would work with the whole theme, but they have a good, long, time vetoing out each dress. The bridesmaid's dresses are all floor-length and elegantly white, lacy and flowy. A tailor with a mustache takes all of their measurements and allows them to try on a few that might be fitting.

It's when Chloe argues with Fat Amy on whether or not she should wear a bra that Beca comes out of her own fitting room, the tips of her ears bleeding red.

It is around that time that Chloe has all the air knocked out of her lungs and the past decade falls heavily onto her crumbling chest.

Fat Amy howls in delight and Stacie laughs, rushing over to her with Emily. Beca's eyes bore into Chloe behind Stacie's shoulders, and then she looks away, a smile on her face. Light falls onto her face, adorable as usual. Chloe relearns how to breathe.

"Hey, Chloe!"

Chloe's head whips to her right where Stacie is two inches from her face and snapping very loudly. "What?"

“I’ve been asking what you thought about the dress, but you were too busy making gooey eyes at Beca.”

Chloe rolls her eyes, and makes a face. “So what if I am?”

She is startled by another loud cry from the other side of the room. She turns to see Fat Amy wiping away genuine tears, close to sobbing.

“My Bloe is still as strong as ever.” She wipes her nose with a piece of random hanging fabric behind her, much to the tailor’s dismay. “It’s so touching.” Emily nods with overdramatic tears in her eyes.

(Though it is that dramatic, after all.)

Chloe laughs, catching Beca’s eyes, as she is laughing as well. Someone pushes her playfully from behind, and she stumbles towards Beca. Beca catches her with two cold hands on her forearms, a huge grin on her face. It’s pure and almost childish, and Chloe could just drown herself in the curves of Beca’s eyes when she smiles.

Out of nowhere, Stacie and Emily start a low beat, and hum out a slow song. Beca giggles, and whispers, “Do you know what song this is?”

Chloe shakes her head, too focused on looking down to her smiling face. Beca’s slight quirk of an eyebrow indicates that she, however, knows exactly which song it is.

Amy clears her throat and materialises by the two of them.

“Chloe Beale, do you promise you are Dixie Chicks serious about Beca Mitchell?”

Emily’s clear voice rings out with the song’s chorus, and Chloe bursts in a fit of giggles. *Titanium* fills the dusty warehouse room, and under the fluorescent lights, the tailor looks very uncomfortable. Chloe can only nod, clutching onto Beca’s waist.

“And Beca Mitchell, do you swear that you are, as well, Dixie Chicks serious about Chloe Beale?”

Beca’s face is red and scrunched up. “Yeah,” she wheezes. “This is such a terrible song for a fake-wedding”, she adds.

Fat Amy glares at her. “Do not interrupt my wedding officiating, bride number two. And it isn’t fake, since I am actually a properly certificated as a wedding officiator, according to the five-dollar website I visited when I was twelve. I’m actually the most popular wedding officiator in Tasmania with both feet, I’ll have you know.”

Before Beca can really take in her words, she continues on. “And now, by the power vested in me by an incredibly sketchy website, I declare you aca-wives!”

Chloe is laughing, and Beca as well, while Stacie wolf-whistles. They’re only getting older, it’s ringing around Chloe’s head, and the years change so fast. She leans down and kisses Beca on the corner of her mouth before anyone could truly notice.

“So...” the tailor mumbles awkwardly, wringing his hands, “should I take this as you ladies liked the dresses?”

Chloe thinks someone answers, but she can’t be sure. She feels like this moment could be forever if she tried.

Amy takes a taxi back to her hotel when it starts raining later, and Stacie and Emily walk back to their own places after the rain stops. The streetlights shine right back at them on the sidewalk after it just rained, and the entire city glows the softest yellow. The shops are closed but the signs are bright, and birds chirp quietly somewhere in the trees they’d just walked by.

When the excitement wears off, all that is left is still themselves, every time. Beca has her arms around her, hugging herself tight and is watching every step fall on the pavement. She looks lost and unsure, and she looks so *small and fragile*, and Chloe just wants to wrap her up with herself and never leave.

She steps closer as they walk past the café they caught up in when Chloe asked Beca to come home with her for Christmas, and even that feels so far away. In this freshly rained road, everything is years away, a thin layer of gullibility and hope shielding them from what isn’t the gentle tension vacillating between their bodies. She steps closer, wrapped an arm around Beca’s shoulders and pulling her into herself. Beca is pliant and smells like the fresh air around them, pressing her head deeper into the fabric of Chloe’s shirt. Her hands reach for Chloe’s free hand, and cradles it gently between her fingers, tracing the callouses and lines in her palm.

The action makes Chloe’s breath catch for no apparent reason, and she presses a light kiss on Beca’s forehead.

“It’s such a nice night,” Beca says.

“It is.”

Beca lets out a shaky breath, stopping her light paths on Chloe’s hand and slowly laces their fingers together with the utmost care. “I could write a song about this. I could cry just thinking about it.”

Chloe understands.

Chloe *understands*.

Chloe wants to cry as well; she wants to sit down on that very street, humid pavement and cool night air, and cry with Beca sitting cross-legged, facing her. Chloe wants to cry at the loveliness of it all, at the sight of Beca in a white dress. Chloe wants to cry at Beca practically curling into her side, at her fingers squeezing Chloe’s so tight, and no other sadness in the world would do.

Chloe could also cry just thinking about it.

Chloe would always cry for Beca.

The wedding itself is tasteful if not a little too formal, with a little too many professional cameras. The music starts as Benji takes a deep breath and puts his hands on the white keys of the piano. It is a piano mash-up that all the Bellas participated in, and Benji translated into flowing keys with skill. Chloe's legs are numb, standing at the head of the aisle behind her other girls, a single flower in hand.

Jesse is waiting impatiently at the end of the small path, bowtie neatly on his neck and his good grin stuck diligently on his face. Chloe stares at him as he stares at a faraway line in the horizon until she almost bores a hole in his well-pressed tuxedo.

The words maid of honor rings in Chloe's ears, even as her long lacy dress matches the intricately planned themes of the plastic wedding. Everything is meticulously matched and designed by Beca's team, down to the forks and napkins, and the invite Chloe received by mail wasn't in Beca's writing.

(But the tears Beca cried into Chloe's shoulder the day before bled with the very intimate bits that were *all* Beca.)

Chloe walks down the aisle with yellow acacias clipped in her braids and two scarlet gardenias in her hands. She sweeps her eyes over all the guests gazing in her direction, she sweeps her eyes over the silky drapes over the tables and everything else that *should* be there for love.

When Amy hears her queue and starts the rest of the walk down the aisle, the bouquet in her hands is snow white. She does a pirouette halfway down and almost falls on a guest, singing an impromptu ballad with the music that makes a vein pulse on Aubrey's forehead. Then it's Stacie, walking down with the same bouquet and flower in her hair, Unicycle with her. Then it's Cynthia Rose, and Emily, and everyone else that flew to New York with no hesitance when Beca sent invitations.

Beneath the stain of time, Chloe's painful feelings that have been boiling for the last month (or the last decade) disappear. Beca walks down the aisle with the prettiest dress and the nicest hair. Chloe stands right next to Jessie onstage while Beca is everything she's ever dreamed her to become. She walks very slowly, her arm intercrossed with her father's, and her eyes are searing into Chloe's face. She walks very slowly, looking at Chloe like she's the one at the destination.

Beca smiles suddenly, tears in her eyes that were not there before, a radiance so pure and exciting pouring out from her as she walks down the aisle and towards Chloe. She is filled with such tenderness and nostalgia that it is catastrophically unbearable; Chloe almost combusts with love.

And then Beca gets close enough and stares at Jesse, a soft look in her eyes. Beca exchanges vows with him in the same polite and graceful voice she has on television, the boiling

feelings behind her eyes moments ago absent now. Beneath the stain of time and their similar white dresses, Chloe's feelings disappear.

Beca is someone else, but she is still right there.

Beca's third album does better than her previous one. She never again reaches the success that she had on her very first hit single, and Chloe watches her slowly come to terms with that. Her songs are well-liked, although a bit hard to decode, and Chloe prides herself in knowing that her name is printed neatly on every single one as 'co-writer'. Only she knows the exact sweater Beca talks about in '*Yellow Bandanas*', and only she understands the underlying melody that appear in the bridge of '*White Wedding*'.

Beca settles down in her vinyl chair in front of another faceless interviewer. It is a big interview, with Beca dressed up casually but with utmost elegance. It is the ten-year anniversary for when Beca first got catapulted into the view of the public, and her fans have been screaming about it since September of last year.

Chloe would know with the amount of undercover sleuthing in Twitter and the way she mixes in right with all the other fans on social media.

Neon lights beat down on her meticulously decorated face and Chloe stands behind the camera, not even sure how Beca managed to get her in. She takes in the swarming people and fancy equipment around with wonder.

When Beca's gaze keeps on flickering to behind the cameras during the recording, only Chloe knows that it's only searching for her. That satisfies her.

A lot of people praise you for staying so kind and gentle after everything you've been through in your career, Beca. How do you do that?

Beca picks at her forearm and shrugs good-naturedly.

"Yeah, I've heard that a lot. I'm not absolutely nice and godly to everyone, you guys." Beca pauses, blinking in Chloe's direction and then directing her eyes to the floor by the interviewer's leather shoes.

"I think...that these things that people call kindness or tenderness are just a direct ricochet from all the shitty things that fuck me over, you know?" Beca nods to herself. "It just...gets clearer when life throws more shit at you."

You were originally only vying to become a producer, a kind of behind-the-scenes genius, right? Did you ever plan on this career as a celebrity singer?

"No, no, not at all. But music is the love of my life, so I should have known since the beginning that I would get absolutely sucked into its entirety, really. And I'm so glad it did."

And the songs you write! They have this feeling of warmth and tenderness that I have not ever seen another artist achieve. Care to spill some of your secrets?

“Oh, there isn’t really any,” Beca says, chuckling, “Just talent and my co-writer Chloe.” She lifts her head and sends a cocky wink to the cameras, and looks Chloe dead in the eyes with a beautiful grin. “Shout-out to you, Beale, you’re the fucking tits.”

The interviewer laughs with her.

Chloe marvels at the place Beca holds within a room.

No other top-secret ingredient to inspire up-and-coming new artists?

“Well no, not really anything concrete. You have to get dead drunk before knowing how strong liquor is, and you have to fall in love before knowing how thrilling it feels. Song writing is a little like that; you have to put love in the words before it goes from good to great.”

Wow, deep.

Is there anything you’d like to say to your fans and everyone listening to wrap things up with?

Beca blinks owlishly and grins again, turning to the camera.

“You guys gotta keep being who you are; don’t let that go. Turn the whole world over with what is unapologetically yours and make it ours. You know I’m terrible at emotional bullshit, but I’m glad, like someone special once told me, that we all became such fast friends.”

That part is, from the very next day, edited into screen-caps and videos and quotes that fly around the internet. Chloe still hears the echoes of what Beca believes in, finally put out into the world with her own hands.

My songs are not love songs, but love is there. My songs are telling you they love you, because you are love.

(Beca shivers after she says that. *God, that’s corny. I’m getting old.*)

And Chloe loves them back, because there is nothing better than knowing there are pieces of her love in them too.

Behind the thin curtains of Chloe’s room’s window, Beca sits with her back pressed into a rocking chair. She drove all the way here and only when she sat down did she realise she forgot to bring a letter. She runs a hand over her face and pushed back her hair. The years are unforgiving.

Chloe isn't really there today, and it tears Beca apart, seeing her with that empty look in her eyes. They are blue, but they are a blue that don't mean anything. Occasionally, Chloe says something and Beca answers the best she can without crumbling apart.

Beca stares out the window, absentmindedly scratching her arm. She takes a stray piece of paper and starts writing, because she isn't going to disappoint Chloe. Or let her forget about anything.

Dear Chlo,

Beca scratches her arm.

The seasons are great and so is the coffee. Stars are bright and night and the moon shines just for us. But I've never felt beauty with my own hands until I saw you.

Beca scrunches her nose, evaluating the badass-ness of the sentence, then shrugs.

What else can I say at these times if not for romantic pleasantries that I've never gotten the chances to say? The world is wide, too wide to understand. Nothing compares to you. But everything is about you.

For the most time, Chloe sits on her bed and does nothing. Beca sits with her, pencil scratching on paper. Her writing is getting sloppy and she furrows her brows, trying to keep it in a straight line.

I love music down to its bones. You are the one thing that has come the closest to music than anything else I've known. People work nine-to-fives while I write songs and line up drum beats. I might die of hunger, but romance wouldn't.

And we might not be anything great, and we might not be written down in history, but I've translated every single way you've ever told me that you loved me into four-notes and sheet music. It might not be enough to touch the hearts of thousands on top of charts or play non-stop on the radios, but it was always enough for me to keep believing.

It was times like these that Beca wasn't sure who she was anymore. She had believed her whole life that music was her first love, that music lived and beat in her heart the same way it flowed beneath her fingers. The rhythmic eight counts that taps against her ribcage since she was fourteen has been her friend longer than she could remember. For music, she had dealt her entire life into a gamble for the industry. For music. For her oldest, kindest, friend.

I might not even have a bit of talent, really. Only enough luck to meet you, and then this broody teenager wrote ridiculous amounts of song with nothing at all. You know that I write you into every universe I create, and every time, you are bursting with light.

But when Barden tore it all down with the Bellas—with Chloe—Beca had not been prepared. She had friends that were not lingering full notes or changing octaves. People that cared for her, that stood by her, and people she wanted. Their rhythmic dancing and their flowing laughter made her happy. And she thinks that she made them happy, too. She was splitting things in half and taking the smaller part and texting them when she got home at night.

Please don't forget about me just yet. I love you too.

Beca.

Beca picks at the scar on her arm and thinks that maybe soulmates *are* real and that they are *found*. Not in headphones but maybe in sullen midnight kidnappings and cult-like rituals. And maybe they were her friends.

And maybe, just maybe, love does not look exactly like music, after. Maybe love looks more like bandanas and fluorescent lights and blue eyes. Maybe love resembles music a lot, but it flows better in the form of Chloe.

“Stop picking at that goddamn arm, Beca.”

Beca's eyes shoot open and she stares at Chloe's ridiculously concerned expression.

“That's the first coherent sentence that's made absolute sense in an hour, Chloe.”

Chloe glares at her. “Does definitely not change the fact that the only reason that scar doesn't go away is because you always pick at it.”

Beca could almost cry from relief, seeing Chloe's eyes clear up and hear her scold her.

That night, when it gets late enough that Beca has to leave Chloe's room again, she gets up silently and leaves her short letter on the nightstand. Chloe has been asleep for half an hour already, and she doesn't want to wake her. Walking slowly past the desk at the other side of the room, Beca catches sight of a bright yellow post-it.

Chloe's handwriting isn't as neatly loopy as it once was, and they all slant downwards into a crushed corner, but it is perfectly readable.

“I have forgotten about a lot of things, but I have never forgotten how wonderful you are.”

It almost glows in the dark, floating on the yellow post-it.

Chapter End Notes

almost to the end...

seven

Chapter Summary

the end.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*and it's been so long, but if you ever think you've got it wrong,
i'm right where you left me.*

Beca sits down in her chair and a pair of hands claps in front of her face. She blinks up confusedly at Marjorie, wondering where she's heard this part before.

Marjorie crouches down in front of her chair and pats her knee, a sad look in her eyes and the old man in the background just keeps strumming on his guitar. It frustrates Beca to no end, because she is sure that he's playing all the chords wrong to a familiar song she couldn't quite place in her memory.

"Ms. Mitchell, please, you should stay seated."

Beca wants to cry, she wants to rip her hair out. "Why? Just let me go home," she cries, "it's all gone anyway, there's no point to anything!" She swallows back her frustration. "My whole life has gone by."

Marjorie nods sympathetically. "I know, I know, going home sounds nice. But you're staying here for tonight, alright?"

"No." Beca shakes her head. "I have to go home and bring back another letter for Chloe."

The nurse just shakes her head again, standing up and Beca stands up with her, wobbly, with a hand on her shoulder. She leads them down the hall and Beca throws a glance back

instinctively to the head of red hair still rocking on the rocking chair. At least Chloe is fine for now.

They stop in front of a familiar oak door and Marjorie pushes it open, and Beca finds herself in the well-decorated study of her home where she's written her story down for Chloe for the past four months. She turns around to stare at Marjorie.

"Jori, what is this?"

"Ms. Mitchell," she sighs, then murmuring to herself, "I hate this part every time." She clears her throat and straightens herself. "You're in a home with Ms. Beale, admitted five months ago, for dementia, Alzheimer's and old age. I'm sorry."

Beca only stills for a moment then closes her eyes, sighing as well. "Right." She inhales. "Right, right. I keep forgetting."

"Are you sure?"

"About?"

Marjorie shrugs, gesturing around her. "If you need anything, you know."

Beca sits down on the wood-framed bed, suddenly feeling weak and sad. "How do I know, then?"

"Know what?"

"Everything, Jori. How do I know about my own life that I've lived, and the choices I made? I have a story inside my head, but I don't know if it's true anymore." She sighs. "All the stories I've written for *Chloe*."

Marjorie smiles sadly. "You say this every time I remind you these things. I'll go get Jesse."

Marjorie leaves and a few moments later, a new voice approaches in a quiet conversation with her.

Is she better?

Yeah, she's in the present now.

That's good. That's good. How is she?

Confused, mostly. Like any other time, but, um, I feel like there's something different about this time. I can't put my finger on it.

Marjorie appears at her door again with the old man, his guitar still strapped across his body. Beca stares, finally understanding the song with all the wrong chords that has played in the salon of the home for the past months.

Jesse moves his guitar to the side and steps forward as Marjorie backs away quietly.

Beca rushes forward as fast as her body would allow and clutches to his forearms with a desperation that leaves her breathless.

Jesse smiles, still in that hauntingly boyish way. “What’s up, Becaw?”

Beca trembles, unsteady, Chloe’s face floating stubbornly before her eyes. “Please tell me who I am, Jesse. What am I? Is what I remember right?”

“You’re Beca Mitchell,” he says softly, “You’re a musical genius, you’re the kindest celebrity I know, and you’ve been my best friend since I was eighteen.”

“And Chloe?” Beca whispers her name in with a reverent dread, and it slips of her tongue easier than anything else she’s ever attempted to say. “And Chloe?”

Jesse smiles at her with a soft look. “You do remember some things, right, Becs?”

“Yeah, I do. I think.”

“Well, that’s enough, then. There’s never use to going over past things.”

Beca stares at him with trembling hands. “But I want to know what we are. What we *were*.” She wrings her hands in frustration. “I just want to know our story---I, I just want to *remember* her and all the things we did.”

“Listen, Becs,” he says, walking slowly past her and sitting down, patting the seat in front of him. Beca sits down and he smiles. “Your memories? Most of them are right. A lot of them are wrong.”

“Bullshit, Jess,” Beca bites back, “Are you saying I’ll just never know what really happened? That everything is just gonna be a messed up ton of bullshit that I don’t even really understand?”

“Do you really want to know?” Jesse asks, “Do you not think what you feel is enough?”

Beca frowns.

“In all the versions of the stories you’ve created, that you remember, she is there,” he says. “And every single time you remember something different, the one unchanging thing is Chloe.”

Beca finds her way back into Chloe’s room, and Chloe is still sitting in her rocking chair.

“Chloe,” Beca breathes into the tensing air between them. “Chloe. Hey.”

Night wind leaks through the slightly open window by the bed in the room. It plays with the ends of Chloe's hair, running through and dancing with the white ends.

"Hey, Becs," Chloe says with a smile. The corners of her mouth curls up into wrinkles and the bun in her hair is held together neatly with a pin. Beca has never seen anything so clearly in her life. Like she's eighteen again, she stumbles into Chloe's surroundings and falls right into those eyes that bloom with the smile growing on Chloe's face.

"Still right where you left me, see?" Chloe says, a playful almost unfit for their age.

She grins, unabashedly, contrary to Beca. She chuckles, even, and peers at Beca beneath her lashes, and the feeling is all too familiar.

There are too many things Beca has never voiced when she was eighteen. They've been on the corner of her mouth her entire life, but she still hasn't found the courage to say them out loud.

If Beca hadn't moved to LA, would they have had more time? If she never joined acapella, would she still be able to close her eyes, picture a grin, and write songs all night long? If Chloe had remembered things better, would they then be able to say it out loud?

Jesse was a great husband, better than anything Beca could have wished for. He was patient and hardworking. He was a smiling face in their house and so, so understanding when Beca wanted to adopt kids. He knew her past and cared about her safety and always gave her enough time alone. He also wasn't in love with her, and she wasn't in love with him, so everything was a calm and mutual discussion. There were never intense feelings or shouting matches, because they weren't entirely consumed by the other. He fixed something in Beca that her own parents had broke.

"Trust me," Beca says with the same unsteady comfort she once did as she insulted acapella at their activities fair, "I won't leave this time. I have no where to go to but here."

"I trust you," Chloe answers softly. "I always have. You know that."

Beca stands there, looking at the woman that had taken up a good half of her life. She had forgotten a time where people didn't assume that Chloe and her were an inseparable pair. The night before her wedding, she threw a rare party for everyone at her house. Deep into the night, everyone was hollering about Fat Amy and Bumper, about how they were still physically impossible to pry apart.

Amy had then yelled right back, "Why don't you guys say that to Beca and Chloe! They're just as bad!"

“Damn right!” Bumper had bellowed as well, a beer between his thick and stubby fingers. Jesse was sitting at the other end of the couch, with just as a big, shit-eating grin as everyone else.

“They’ve been aca-wives for decades and no one has said they were a ‘disgusting pair of lovebirds!’”

Beca had grimaced, squeezing herself further into Chloe’s arms in their loveseat. “That is not true. You both have. Multiple times.”

Chloe was just sporting a huge grin, as she always did. Like she was proud to be assumed to be someone Beca belonged to, and that made Beca’s heart soar every single time it happened. Everyone was decently drunk. Every time they all got together was beginning to be one less time they’d all see each other.

She had shaken her head and went off to get more drinks. And some time later, when the loud party had died down and people tired themselves out at the karaoke, Chloe slung her arm around Beca’s shoulders and hung onto her with all her weight. Beca could smell the rum and champagne on Chloe’s breath, and she had missed their college with her entire being.

“Beca...” Chloe had breathed into her ear in hot breaths. “Beca.” She had laughed to herself, almost in a deprecating way. “Beca, Beca, Beca. You’re getting married tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” Beca had replied, knowing that anything else would have hurt less than those words from Chloe’s mouth, said in that manner. “I guess I am.”

Chloe had shaken her head, pressing it into Beca’s shoulder from behind in their dark corner of the kitchen.

Beca sighed. “If I knew better—”

“No, Beca. You’re getting married tomorrow.”

“If I hadn’t left New York for LA—”

“You’re getting married tomorrow.”

“If I was stronger—”

“Stop, Beca,” Chloe had replied, with a dry laugh. “Please, don’t make me say it.”

“Chloe,” Beca had said, her eyes blurring and her throat scratching. “Chloe. Chloe. Chlo.”

Beca had raised her head to look at the ceiling. “If things were right, would we have ended up together, Chlo? Would we be happy?”

Beca had opened her mouth and let her words spill for the first time since she was eighteen, and she wasn’t sure if Chloe would remember it in the morning. Beca had turned around, buried her own face in Chloe’s shirt and felt burning hot tears stain the cotton. She had known that Chloe would be too kind to answer truthfully, that Chloe wouldn’t admit that she

too understood how sometimes things don't workout for no good reason, and that Chloe loves her too.

Standing in front of Chloe, Beca doesn't remember most things, but she knows that there is nowhere else she has to go. Standing in front of Chloe, Beca is eighteen, and twenty-five, and forty-seven, and sixty-eight all at once. She doesn't need to remember or know anything else apart from Chloe. Chloe, Chloe, Chloe, her oldest, dearest friend.

She smiles at her and all at Beca wants to cry. This is already is love at it's fullest.

"Beca, stop worrying. However things are, however things change..." Chloe tilts her head.

"The story will end with us."

Chapter End Notes

i have nothing to say for myself (at least i finished this?)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!