

## the sound of your heart

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# the sound of your heart

by [librah](#)

## Summary

The only things Normani is absolutely a hundred percent sure that Lauren likes are the following: food, music, being right, pretentious books, kissing, and pretentious books about kissing.

So far Camila is not on that list.

(Normani's fairly certain.)

## Notes

so i finally stopped complaining on tumblr about my lack of fic writing and actually started doing something about it. the fic is written from normani's pov because i thought i've always kind of wanted to write a camren fic from someone else's pov. title from "the sound" by the 1975.

sidenote: it might not be the best time to post this considering lauren just killed them yet AGAIN but-

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

## **you say i'm such a cliché**

well, i know when you're around  
'cause i know the sound,  
i know the sound of your heart.

the sound – the 1975

Dating, Normani knows, is something Lauren Jauregui doesn't do.

So when she spies her friend presumably tongue-deep in some random person's mouth, she doesn't even bat an eye, just continues to drink and hope they don't get kicked out for indecency.

It was a very typical Saturday night for the both of them: Lauren getting shoved against a wall, or being led to the bathroom, or doing something inherently sexual, and Normani just glad to be here.

She looks back to check if her friend isn't doing something potentially concerning, but instead sees her walking over the bar where Normani's at, stumbling a few times while she's at it.

"What happened to your, uh, buddy?" Normani asks after helping her up the stool.

Lauren looks up from where she was messing with a paper napkin. "She left." Her brow furrows as if she was trying to recall. "Said she..." Lauren trails off.

"Said she what?" Normani asks.

All Lauren does is give an indifferent shrug. "Dunno. She never finished."

Normani isn't surprised when Lauren looks like she couldn't really care less. She looks her over. Although adequately drunk, hair mussed, lipstick smudged, she still looks fantastically, absurdly beautiful, and is easily considered the hottest person in the entire club. (Like, besides herself, naturally.) Lauren knows it too, Normani figured out a long time ago, loves using it to her advantage, enjoys it, really. Lauren Jauregui can have practically anyone she wants.

And, like, Normani isn't really jealous, though. She has a loving girlfriend, mind you.

"Why aren't you drinking?" Lauren asks, now attempting to make a paper plane out of her napkin.

Normani gives an amused smile. "I'm supposed to be looking out for your ass, remember?" She says like she doesn't tell her that a thousand times already.

Sometimes Lauren's drunk and Normani's relatively sober, other times it's the other way around. More times than not Lauren is the one intoxicated, though, and neither of them are drunk at the same time unless a third and much more responsible body was involved, usually in the form of Ally, Normani's girlfriend and their other roommate.

Lauren nods. "Right." She examines her handiwork on her finished plane. (Now that Normani's really looking at it, it could possibly be a boat too.) "You know, that girl was really pretty." Then with wide eyes Lauren leans over, looking like she's ready to share an earth-shattering secret.

Normani isn't sure what Lauren's doing for a second, but leans the rest of the way in so her best friend doesn't fall and damage her ass. Fingers cupped to the side of her mouth as to not let anything unwanted reach anyone else's ears, she whispers, "Like, I think she's even prettier than me by like, a whole lot. Like, *beautiful*." Then she adds: "And her ass is *so nice*."

"Wow, really?" Normani says with an amused tilt in her voice, wonders how clearly Lauren actually saw her face in the darkness while she was too busy with her hands up the other girl's top.

Lauren nods. "So nice." Then she frowns almost comically. "Oh, no. I miss her, Manibear," she says despairingly.

Normani can't help but laugh at that. Lauren says things like that all the time; she's doubtful the girl even remembers her name. "What was her name?"

It takes her a while to respond. Then, "Camila, I think." Lauren's hands move idly to unfold her airplane/boat. "Or was it Camilla? Cameron? Camden? I don't know." She tries to smoothen out her creased napkin. "Maybe it's time for me to pass out, Mani."

Normani hums in agreement at that.

They manage to make it home in one piece, walking up to their door with Lauren's arm slung over Normani's shoulder supporting her, a typical Saturday night completed. *Correction*, Normani checks her phone, Sunday morning.

Normani fishes for her keys in her purse, earning an annoyed grumble from Lauren, whose eyes are closed like she was trying to catch some sleep. "Oh, shut up," Normani says, "you're lucky I'm such a good friend." Lauren just grumbles again and Normani takes it as a sign of defeat.

The door creaks as it opens and the pair finds Ally sitting on the couch watching TV. She stands when she sees them enter, stretches and yawns. "Hey, did y'all have fun?" She asks, giving Normani a peck on the lips.

"You didn't have to wait for us, babe," Normani says, twisting her lips into a slight moue out of worry.

"I know, but I needed to work on a few pages of my book anyways," Ally says. "Plus, I didn't wanna sleep without you."

Normani visibly softens before Lauren says, "I was gonna throw up from being drunk, but I think I'll just throw up because of you two."

"Oh yeah, like you *aren't* always getting all handsy with some rando at the club." Normani shoots back.

Lauren moves and takes her arm off of Normani to toss her heels in a random direction and starts to slowly shuffle into the bathroom in her inebriated state. "I'd protest but it's a true statement, so." Normani hears the bathroom door shut.

In Normani's opinion, Lauren's completely insufferable when she's hungover without getting laid the night before. Actually, it's also completely insufferable when Lauren and her partner are inconsiderably loud, so Normani kind of loses either way she looks at it.

But this time her insufferableness was caused via incessant whining with Normani admonishing, "Then don't drink as much, you idiot."

She still holds Lauren's hair back regardless.

It's the Monday after when Dinah breaks the news that they're all gonna be next-door neighbors.

"What?" Ally exclaims. "Really?"

"Yes, really!" Dinah's voice is heard throughout the speaker on the phone. "Me and my roomie are gonna be living right across from y'all!"

"When?" Normani asks, barely able to contain her excitement.

Dinah was her, Ally, and Lauren's best friend throughout high school and even when Dinah had to move halfway across the country to California away from the other three. Now with

Dinah coming back, everything's gonna feel right again, their old friend group together like almost nothing's changed.

"This Wednesday," Dinah says, "I wanted it to be a surprise but I just couldn't hold it in anymore, you guys! We'll be together again!"

Lauren's smile matches the one on her two friend's faces. "Who's your roomie?"

"Her name's Mila and you'll love her," she replies. "She's actually started goin' to school here so she's been livin' with her aunt in town until I'm comin' down. Anyways, I know she'll fit right in with us."

They spend the rest of the time talking and catching up, eventually becoming a very vocal competition on who can share the most embarrassing stories of each other with Dinah, excitement showing in the girls' smiles, laughing through the phone speaker, almost impatiently waiting for the real thing.

*"Guess who needs help moving in?"* Is the first thing Dinah sing-songs when she sees them all for the first time in months.

"Dinah!" Ally, Normani, and Lauren shout all at once. They run up, Normani reaching the girl first (she has her athleticism to thank for that) as she tackles her into a hug, the other two soon following.

Then it becomes a big mess of: "We missed you!" "I love you!" and "You still owe me thirty bucks!"

Lauren eventually shushes them all with a hiss of: "You guys, shut the fuck up," noticing the blinds of a few windows opening up to come take a peek at all the commotion outside.

Then it seems like Dinah notices the girl standing near the door of their car, looking extremely uncomfortable and out of place, picking at the sleeves of her sweater, at the same time the other girls do.

"Oh," Dinah says, like she just remembered the girl's presence. "This is Camila, my roommate." She grabs her by the wrist to get her to come closer to everyone else. "Camila, this is Ally, Normani, and Lauren."

"Hi, Camila." Normani gives her a friendly smile, understanding how incredibly awkward she must feel. She overlooks the flush in Camila's cheeks when her eyes fix on Lauren, just dismisses it for a mix of shyness and an oddly chilly breeze; she doesn't glance over at Lauren either, the recognizing glint in Lauren's green eyes going unnoticed.

In a short span of twenty minutes, Normani's already learned that Camila is a clumsy person. She can attest to that by the way the girl carries her poorly taped up boxes, politely brushing aside any help from Ally or Normani, almost tripping twice (once from her unlaced boot and the other by the sidewalk curb she "didn't know existed there").

She was kind of a mess, really, but whatever, Normani doesn't judge.

"Hey, Mila, you mind helping Lauren with the couch?" Dinah calls to Camila when she comes back from inside their apartment, chin gesturing to Lauren because her hands were too busy helping Ally carry a humongous box that was just about bigger than the smaller girl.

"Yeah, Camila, you mind helping me?" Lauren says, hands already on said couch.

Normani hears a hint of a teasing tone in her voice, ignores it because it's Lauren and she flirts with basically everyone. She looks down at her phone to check the time, misses the way Camila blinks, back straightening at the sound of Lauren's voice.

Normani looks up to see Lauren and Camila lift the couch with an efforted grunt, Lauren walking backwards and Camila walking forward, thinks nothing of the way Camila's eyes are glued to the armrest and nowhere else, until—

"Walz, make sure to watch for the—"

"*Oof*."

"God dammit."

Camila trips over the forgotten sidewalk once again, the couch making a blunt sound after hitting the concrete, echoing throughout the parking lot.

"Oh, god, I'm so sorry." The apology comes out of Camila's mouth in a rushed manner. She runs a hand through her hair. "Uh, I really need to remember that that's there." She forces a nervous laugh to come its way out of her chest. Lauren snickers and Normani decides it was because of the joke Camila had cracked, so she doesn't glare at her.

"It's alright." Normani steps in to take Camila's spot. "I gotcha."

Camila gives another laugh. "Yeah, thanks." She walks slowly back to the U-haul, an embarrassed blush painting her cheeks. "I think I'm just gonna stick to carrying, like, lamps and small-to-medium sized boxes that weigh less than I do."

Dinah rolls her eyes in a fond way and Lauren exhales in amusement. "Just don't break anything else, Mila. I got my eye on you," Dinah warns more than says.

"Yeah, just as it probably should be," Camila replies back, voice muffled from her location inside the U-haul, presumably looking for more lamps.

Because of countless years of friendship, Normani knows exactly when the gears of Lauren's mind are turning, thoughts ranging from innocent to, well, the opposite of that. Moving the couch into Dinah's living area, Normani knows it's one of those times.

"What is it?" Normani asks. Lauren meets her eyes, and they also have a weird ability to read each other's thoughts because one side of Lauren's mouth curves upwards and Normani knows it means she's tell her later. She rolls her eyes but still waits.

After moving all the boxes inside Dinah and Camila's apartment, Ally proposes they take a break and invites them into their place.

Ally's in the kitchen baking cookies as Dinah's looking at all their pictures on the walls of the living area with Camila following her around, giving Normani the slight impression of a lost puppy.

"Aww," Dinah says, pointing at the picture with Normani and Ally in matching Mickey Mouse hats kissing outside a castle in Disney World. "I forgot how super cute y'all are." Then she laughs. "So I'm guessing Lauren and her single self took this picture."

Lauren snorts. "You know it."

"You still stuck on that whole 'dating people is lame' thing or whatever?" Dinah asks airily and turns to look at her, her smile easy on her face.

Lauren matches Dinah's smile but directs it at Camila instead. "Of course."

Camila quickly turns away to pick up a picture frame on the coffee table. She puts it back down as soon as she realizes it's a picture of Lauren.

Normani notices that.

*"Can one of y'all give me a hand, please?"* Ally's voice is heard through the partition separating the kitchen.

Normani's about call back to offer her assistance, but Dinah gets to it first. "Ooh, I'll help!" (By help, Normani knows it's just her attempting to eat leftover cookie dough.)

She walks to the kitchen and Camila stands for a little bit, probably deciding whether or not to follow her or endure minutes of potentially awkward silence. She opts to follow Dinah, of course.

Normani glances at Lauren, expecting her to explain whatever it is she's been wanting to say and Lauren wastes no time, leaning over to say in a hushed tone: *"That's Camila."*

Normani's brow scrunches in confusion for a second and then: "Wait, as in like, *'your latest drunken makeout'* Camila?"

Lauren nods, sees the humor in all of this. "Precisely."

"Oh my gosh."



"I know."

"*Oh my gosh.*"

"*I know.*"

Normani giggles, sees the humor in it too, and says, "So *that's* the Camila who you've drunkenly admitted was prettier than you by, like, a whole lot," she quotes her friend's words from that night, "the one that's, 'like, beautiful'."

Lauren isn't even fazed. "Hey, but her ass *is* nice, isn't it?"

Normani can't do anything but agree because, like, it's *true*.

"So that's why she's been acting so weird," she says. "I thought she was just really, really shy."

Dinah walks out of the kitchen with Camila in tow as Normani and Lauren are still giggling.

Dinah raises an eyebrow. "You guys look like you've just been talking mad shit about someone."

Normani's still giggling but Lauren's managed to calm down a little. "Oh, it's nothing."

She tuts. "Wow, I haven't seen y'all in an entire year and y'all are already keeping secrets from me." Dinah's eyes are still narrowed at them because she isn't sure if it really was nothing or if she just missed out on some big juicy info on anyone. Still, she lets it slide.

Ally announces that the cookies are ready and three out of the four girls literally jump out of their seats to fight their way to the stove top, Dinah almost knocking over Ally and Ally yelling at her to watch it.

"Damage my girlfriend and I damage your face, Hansen," Normani warns. Dinah just sticks her tongue out.

After each grabbing a few cookies in hand, the girls make their way into the small dining area.

Ally and Dinah get into a conversation in which Camila chimes in from time to time, the first time Normani's heard her speak since they stepped inside their apartment.

Normani examines the way Camila's long dark hair flows more than falls past her shoulders in loose waves, hands reaching up and occasionally fixing it, flipping it to one side and the other— a habit that Lauren does, too—crooked glasses resting on the bridge of her nose, wearing a white sweater with the image of the sun kissing the moon on it, a faded stain that Normani can assume is orange juice blooms in a small spot near the collar—Camila shifts and a curl of brown hair covers it up—and like, Lauren really wasn't exaggerating because Camila really *can* fill in those dark blue jeans she's currently wearing, even while one of her boots still isn't being bothered to be tied.

She oddly pulls that look off, Normani thinks, just the right amount of a good fashion sense crossed with a slightly scatterbrained personality. It's kind of cute, she admits.

Normani looks over to Lauren and sees that she was probably doing the same thing, upwards tilt on her mouth like she's sharing an inside joke with herself—which, she probably is.

Camila's hands are actively moving around as she's telling a story, pulling her bottom lip between her teeth when she finishes telling a particularly funny bit about her little sister.

Lauren glances to Normani at that, a quirk in her eyebrow.

Normani gives her a look like, *Are you seriously having these thoughts right now?*

Lauren shrugs, a quirk in her eyebrows like *Well what can you do?* folding her hands to rest her chin on them, elbows on the table, either listening intently at Camila's story or just staring at her lips (or possibly both).

God, sometimes her best friend is just so unbelievable.

It's a Saturday afternoon. Normani has just finished the gymnastics class she helps in coaching, the range of six-to-ten year-olds being especially bratty today. (And one particular seven year-old she had almost gotten in a fight with over which foot was her *left* foot, and ugh, god.)

"It was *not* a good day today," she calls out to anyone in general after tossing her sports bag onto the floor beside couch.

"Alcohol?" Lauren inquires from her spot on the other side of the couch, because her logic is just to get drunk to solve your problems. (And, well, sometimes Normani thinks it's pretty empirical logic.)

Right now is one of those times. "Hell yeah, girl."

"Did I hear alcohol?" Dinah's head pops out of the kitchen along with Ally's. "I'm in."

Normani's inclined to remind Dinah that she literally has her own apartment to reside in, but instead she says, "Yeah, why don't we all go? It can be y'all's welcome party." Then she sees the hopeful look on Dinah's face and adds, "That I'm not paying for, by the way—just inviting."

"Yeah, fine." Dinah huffs and exits their door. "I'll get Mila."

At the end of the night, Ally ends up overpowering all of her karaoke partners by ten-fold, even Dinah, who made an attempt to channel her inner Beyoncé and be the loudest one there, ultimately failing when Ally went into opera mode—which Normani didn't even know was a thing you could do in karaoke, but whatever.

Lauren makes an affronted gasp when Ally dedicates a rather giggly rendition of *Love on Top* to Normani instead of her, but eventually gets over it once a tall and fairly good-looking guy buys her a drink, soon forgetting trivial things like personal space, and whispering in each other's ears something Normani's sure she doesn't want to know about.

Camila's only a couple drinks in, just laughing and smiling at anything funny to laugh and smile about, and she sings a few duets with Dinah, but declines her challenge to see who can down the most drinks without, well, *dying*, so Normani can tell that Camila is *thankfully* unlike her counterpart in this department, too.

(And she hasn't made out with anyone this time, so.)

Dinah, loud and boisterous when sober, becomes increasingly *everything* with each and every shot she takes and Normani has to restrain her from dancing atop her chair at one point, Ally laughing so hard she looks like she might puke.

So, a typical Saturday night but new and improved.

Normani isn't sure if she should be worried or excited to see what future Saturday nights behold.

It takes Camila a while to warm up to her new neighbors, Normani notices, but she starts laughing along with them brighter and louder a little more frequently each and every day, and she thinks it's progress.

Before long, it's like Camila's almost part of the friend group. Almost.

Like, if it wasn't for the way she avoided any type of communication or contact with Lauren. Like, at all. For Christ sake, she still can't even *look* in her direction without doing a complete one-eighty.

But it's not all her fault; Normani knows it's a good part of Lauren's fault too. It's Lauren's fault because of how she basically enables the entire thing, obviously aware of the situation and making it a little worse with every deliberate smirk, every lingering glance, hell, every *good morning* she greets Camila with, the poor girl always looking like she isn't sure who Lauren's directing them at.

It almost makes Normani feel sorry for her. If, like, the entire thing wasn't kind of funny.

But she's a good person, though, she promises, so she eventually asks Lauren to tone it down a notch. To paraphrase, she tells her best friend to stop being that big of an asshole and to

take it back a bit.

("I know you're just joking around with her, but jeez, Lauren, let the poor girl live her life peacefully. It legit looks like she wants to dig a hole and lie in it forever every time she sees you.")

"Fine, I'll apologize to her."

"Good.")

"Mila."

"DJ, I don't understand how this is really any of your business," Camila half groans, face warm and pink.

"Mila, it's my job as your best friend and roommate to be involved in your sex life, is it not?" Dinah says matter-of-factly, looking to the other girls for support.

"Nuh-uh, girl, I'm not getting into this discussion," Ally says, flipping the channels on the TV remote. Normani agrees.

"But do we really have to do this *right now*?" Camila takes off her glasses to wipe them, probably an excuse to avoid any eye contact.

"Karla Camila, I am genuinely concerned for your well-being. You can actually like, explode or something if you aren't, like, *you know-ing* enough," she says like she's a doctor listing symptoms to a patient.

"Or are you just really determined to embarrass me?" Camila puts her head in her hands.

Normani's never met anyone who can be so easily embarrassed, but then again, she wouldn't exactly be enthusiastic of anyone talking about her sex life to a bunch of people she's only known for a few weeks either.

"You know y'all can talk about this like, in y'all's own room, right?" She says, but Dinah ignores her with a scoff.

"What're we talking about?" Lauren comes out of the hallway, wringing her wet hair with a towel.

"Did you know Camila's only had, like, two boyfriends in her life?"

"Dinah!"

"What? I'm just proving a point that you need to go out more!"

Normani thinks Lauren looks like she just struck gold. "Only two boyfriends? Looking like that? I don't believe it."

Camila looks like she wouldn't be opposed to full on sprinting an entire marathon just to get out of this conversation.

Dinah continues. "C'mon, Chanco, Austin was an asshole for breaking up with you over a damn text—you gotta realize that."

"I do realize that." She's playing with her glasses now, folding and unfolding. "I just—" She promptly cuts herself off with a long groan, putting her face in her hands.

Lauren speaks up. "Well you could've, you know."

All eyes are on her now. "Could have what?" Dinah asks.

Now, Normani loves Lauren. Normani loves the way Lauren's so socially aware and educated and eloquent, she loves how Lauren uses all three of those qualities at once sometimes, putting a hateful person in their place, or just educating someone after they've made an ignorant statement. Lauren has an ability to tear people down with her words, and same with building them up, too. She loves how Lauren's so vocal and passionate about things in general, loves it when Lauren opens her mouth to say something.

But right at this moment, seeing the way Lauren's eyes are glinting, the statement bubbling up from her throat on the tip of her tongue, waiting until she opens her mouth again, Normani thinks it'd be best for her to keep her it shut.

Naturally, Lauren keeps talking, ignoring the furtive warning *What did I tell you about taking it down a notch?* shake of Normani's head.

Camila must be noticing the same thing Normani has because she fixes on her with wide eyes, mentally bracing herself for Lauren's next inevitable words.

"Like, I probably would have slept with you, I mean." *Oh my gosh.* "Like, if I correctly recall that night we made out in that club." *Oh my gosh.*

Camila looks at Lauren in utter disbelief. Normani does too.

She really needs to get that girl a filter.

"*What?!*" Is what comes out of Ally and Dinah, like they both heard that the Earth was in the middle of an alien invasion.

"Oh my god."

Now Normani's the one putting her face in her hands.

"Whoa, whoa, what? Which night? When? *Huh?*" Ally's TV shows are completely forgotten now.

"YOU MADE OUT WITH LAUREN?" Dinah shouts, surprise and disbelief plain on her face.

A hiss comes out of Camila: "Oh, just announce it to the entire apartment complex, why don't you?"

"What the fu—" Dinah stands up from the couch now. "Details," she demands, looking back and forth from poor Camila's still-in-shock face and Lauren's faux-confused one, like she isn't sure what she said that was so wrong.

Normani's eyes peek out from her hands, eyebrows raised, looks at both girls like she's asking, *Well, which one of y'all are gonna explain?* and Camila then looks at Lauren, realizing that she herself should be the one to explain because of the possibility of what comes out of Lauren's mouth is only going to make her look super embarrassing. (Like, even more so.)

So, Camila takes a deep breath and just goes for it, not really given much of a choice. "So, Dinah, remember the first week I made it back to Texas when I told you that Austin dumped me over a text?"

"Yeah, and you somehow convinced me not to kick his white ass. I remember."

"And, like, you told me to go out and do stuff and to not think about it?"

"Yeah?"

"So, I took your advice, and long story short, that's how I ended up, uh..." Camila clears her throat. "How I ended up... yeah." She finishes lamely.

"How she ended up pinning me against a wall of the club," Lauren supplies. Camila and Normani wince while she wonders at Lauren's lack of shame.

"Well..." Ally drawls after a few too many beats of silence. "At least you *did* end up not thinking about that Austin guy that night."

Dinah whistles. "Chanco, I didn't know you were actually gonna take my advice." Her face lights up, shock forgotten, into an amused grin. "I thought you were just gonna board yourself up in your old room with your Minion pajamas and cry yourself to sleep with ice cream leaking out of your mouth or something. I even had the perfect mental image." She walks over to give Camila a pat on the back. "But like, coincidentally making out with one of my best friends and our future neighbor? Much better."

Then she stops, squinting a little, looks Lauren up and down and then does the same to Camila. "But no funny business better happen between you two. I'ma be watching a little closer from now on."

Camila turns crimson. Lauren snorts.

"So," Ally stands up and declares. "That was wild. Who wants some brownies?"

“I apologized to her, by the way,” Lauren says the next day.

Normani raises an eyebrow. “Really? You did?”

“Yeah, I did. We're good now.”

“Good,” she says. Normani knows Lauren never means to make situations get weirder than it should, she just doesn't believe in constantly having to keep things to herself. Granted, she probably should have kept that one to herself, but.

Lauren tries and that's why Normani loves her.

And if making Camila flustered was some sort of running joke (which it kinda was to Dinah, at least), it soon runs dry. Soon, she can stand to be in the same room with Lauren, says good morning back when Lauren greets her, and Dinah even stops making allusions about what happened that night because Camila seems to have gotten over the entire ordeal; instead of stammering and blushing, she just rolls her eyes now.

Normani considers it a good thing; she didn't know how long she was gonna last at the daily sight of Camila's pink cheeks and wide eyes.

Normani has a checklist for this sort of thing.

Her and Lauren are at one of Lauren's friend's cousin's roommate's boyfriend's party that she somehow got dragged to because Lauren whined that Normani still owed her for that one time she lost the TV remote and Lauren found it for her behind the couch. According to Lauren, Normani jumped up and down and gathered her in a hug saying, “*Thank you so much! Oh my god, I, like, owe you my life now.*” (Normani claims she remembers nothing of that, but in the end she still begrudgingly accompanies her.)

It goes like this: a thinly veiled excuse to say hello, a purposely crooked smile, fingers running through her hair, lingering eye contact, excessive flirting, and then *bam*—Normani will be yelling at them to get a room.

But like, Normani doesn't judge because it's not her business, even though it really can get annoying sometimes.

(But Normani's such a good friend that she overlooks the fact with grace.)

So Lauren doesn't date. That is already an established fact.

But what she does occasionally have is Lucy.

Lucy's pretty cool, Normani thinks, and her and Lauren have a lot of similarities. They both dress alike, have similar music tastes, and they're passionate about a lot of the same social matters.

And, well, they have another common interest, too; like each other. Out of everyone Normani's seen hook up with Lauren, she's pretty sure Lucy's the one she's seen her with the most with—either in or out her bedroom.

And she definitely favors her over any of the boys Lauren's hooked up with, she thinks, remembering Luis, and Keaton, and, *god*, don't even get her started on Brad.

Like, she doesn't even mind that she saw Lucy with only a blanket wrapped around her naked self drinking a glass of orange juice in the kitchen one fateful morning. (Okay, sort of.)

And she's even been to a number of their game nights. Which is like, practically a sacred bi-monthly ceremony full of bets and temporarily ruined relationships. But she had brought over some nice-looking wine with a name that Normani couldn't pronounce and they beat Lauren and Ally's team by five points that night, so Lucy and her alcoholic beverages were deemed welcome, like, any point in time for the rest of their lives.

“And, you're sure you don't *actually* like her or anything?” Normani had asked her once after game night as they're picking up the game cards that were haphazardly thrown onto the floor by one of Lauren's *sore loser tantrums*, as Normani likes to call them.

Lauren just laughs it off, waving her hand dismissively and saying, “Nah, Lucy's pretty and funny and stuff, but we've established that whatever we're doing is just a thing.” She shrugs, kneels down and reaches under the coffee table for an *add four* card that they've been missing for almost three minutes now.

She grabs the card and hands it to Normani to complete the stack. “I'd tell you if I ever actually liked someone, Mani,” she says with a tilt in her mouth, noticing the curious raise in her friend's brow.

“Mhmm,” she hums. “You better. I'd like to be the first person informed when the impossible happens, the earth opens up in a fiery pit of smoke, and entire civilizations collapse,” she adds dramatically.

Lauren rolls her eyes. “On second thought, I think I'll just confide in Ally and make her swear not to tell you.” Normani feigns offense. “And then Lucy and I will just have loud sex all night to make you suffer.” She winks.



Normani's face scrunches up in disgust at that. "Ew." She puts the box of *UNO* cards down. "You know what, you can just clean all this up for yourself then, since this is all your loser mess anyways." And she walks out of the living area with her head shaking and Lauren's laugh ringing behind her.

"Dinah, move the fuck out of the way!" Lauren shouts as she dodges a potentially tooth-shattering encounter with Dinah's Wii remote.

"Shit, Lauren, blame this tiny ass apartment y'all got!" She shouts back, knees bent and bouncing from side to side like she was actually playing a professional tennis match at Wimbledon, or something.

"Watch the language, you dumbasses!" Normani says, returning Dinah's serve with her hot pink Wii remote.

Lauren steps on Dinah's foot and she yelps, completely missing the return to stop and glare. "Are you fucking—"

"You know y'all wouldn't be losing so badly if y'all just worked together," Ally says when she and Normani score another point.

"Whatever, doubles suck anyways," Dinah says indignantly.

"*You* suck anyways," Lauren half-mutters.

"That's it." Dinah pauses the game on her serve, ignoring Lauren and Normani's groan. "I refuse to work with the likes of *her*." She points an accusatory finger at Lauren. "Mila," she says, and Camila's head snaps up from her spot on the couch.

"Huh?" She hums around a mouthful of popcorn.

"You're gonna go avenge me in this game." She takes the popcorn bowl from Camila and puts it on her own lap.

"Okay," she says, uncomplaining. "I've only played this like, a total of three times in my entire life though, just so you guys know." She stands up and wipes her hands on her jeans.

A good thing: Lauren doesn't accidentally step on Camila's foot and Camila doesn't accidentally step on hers.

A not-so good thing: They still lose.

(Dinah shakes her head chidingly. "I'm disappointed but not surprised.")

Lauren sighs something dramatic. "Mani, do I really have to do the grocery shopping all by myself? My lonesome? Unaccompanied? Solo?"

Normani exhales in somewhat-acknowledgment. "Yeah, it's your turn this week."

Lauren looks up at Ally in a pleading manner.

"Sorry, Lo, but no." She cuddles into Normani's side. "Oh, but remember to get me some yogurt, though."

Lauren gives one big groan and splays herself out onto the couch. "But I *hate* grocery shopping by myself."

"Then go call up Lucy or something," Normani says, absentmindedly running her fingers through Ally's hair.

"Who's Lucy?" Dinah pipes in from the kitchen. "Oh, and by the way, y'all ran out of yogurt."

Normani doesn't even know how and when she got here. "Oh my god, get out, Dinah."

"What?" Dinah says. "It wasn't even me who ate the last of the yogurt, it was Mila!"

Camila's voice is heard from inside the kitchen. "Dinah's lying to you guys, she definitely ate it." She comes out of the kitchen and into the living room along with her unwelcomed friend.

"Okay, we shared it."

"*Out!*"

"Okay, we'll leave, but just answer the question," Dinah says. "Who's Lucy?"

"Lauren's girlfriend who isn't actually her girlfriend," Normani says.

That makes Lauren sit up straight. "She's not my girlfriend!"

Normani would drop the conversation at this point, but she's still a little annoyed at Lauren's refusal to do the damn groceries, so she says in an incredulous manner: "I never said she was."

Dinah says, "Wait, what? I thought you weren't into dating."

Normani shifts to see Camila checking her phone, one hand tapping something on her jeans. Normani doesn't think or frankly care enough to think about it.

“I’m *not* into dating,” Lauren says, crossing her arms. “We’re just, like, a *thing*.”

“A thing?”

“A thing.”

Dinah raises an inquiring eyebrow. “So like, friends with benefits.”

Lauren’s nose wrinkles. “It sounds trashy and cliché when you put it like that.”

“But it *is* like that, isn’t it?”

“Well,” Lauren tilts her head, defeated, “essentially, yeah.”

“You got a *boo*,” Dinah sing-songs.

“*She’s not my boo*.”

“Oh, my gosh, are y’all gonna get the groceries or what?” Ally shouts, muffled by Normani’s shoulder.

“What? Me too?” Dinah protests.

“Yeah, because you ate all my dang yogurt!”

Dinah sighs the same sigh Lauren had made earlier. “Fine. C’mon, Mila, we have to help get this loser some groceries.”

Then upon the look on Camila’s face, she says, “Girl, don’t give me that look. It was a combined effort.”

The door closes behind the three as Ally lets out a breath and Normani says, “Oh, thank the Lord, I thought they’d never leave.”

Then: “Who gave Dinah a key?”

“Dinah, that’s not a real word.”

“What? That’s some bull. Says who?”

“Other fellow English speakers that aren’t you.”

“I don’t believe you.”

It was game night again. The *Scrabble* board is laid out on the carpet, the six girls (including Lucy) were sprawled out on the living room floor. (It was Lauren’s night to pick the game. Obviously.)

Dinah made the fatal mistake (well, fatal for Normani anyways, because she's been sitting through this argument for three minutes now) of putting down some word that Lauren's hell-bent on insisting doesn't exist (it doesn't, by the way) and Mani isn't sure if Dinah seriously thinks it's an existing word or if this is a new way to mess with Lauren, but it's taking *forever*.

Dinah looks to Ally, like she'll back her up on this.

"Hey, don't look at me," Ally says. "I'm only a kindergarten teacher."

"But don't you write books, too?"

"Yeah, ones about bedtime and brushing your teeth. I barely even type more than eight letters for each word."

Dinah scoffs. "You know what, Lauren?" She throws an *S* piece at the girl and it lands on her hair before falling beside her. "I don't need any more of your damn negativity in my life." She turns. "Hey, Lucy." She takes her cup and holds it out. "Pour me some more, please? Love you."

"Dinah, it's still your turn," Lauren reminds her.

Dinah swishes her newly filled cup. "I already went."

"Yeah, but it wasn't a real word."

Dinah groans exasperatedly. "Jesus, Lauren, just take it or leave it."

"What if I wanna leave it?"

Normani wonders how long this can go on until her head explodes. Hopefully not long. She looks down at her pieces. She can make the word *fish*, she thinks, choosing that to be her next game plan if Dinah and Lauren will ever get the hell over this argument.

They don't get over it as soon as Normani would wish for it, but soon Dinah drops out of the game altogether, saying, "Okay I'm quitting and switching over to a new game I like to call: *Being Super Cute and Annoying*." She refills her glass. "And also getting *tipsyyyy*," she sings.

"I'm with you there, sister." Lucy, who had dropped out two rounds ago, high-fives Dinah.

Lauren ends up winning (not really much of a shocker there) and Dinah does end up fulfilling her promise (that no one really asked her to keep).

After the night finishes, Lucy decides to "sleep" over with Lauren, Normani and Ally decide to tuck in, and Camila is left with dragging a reasonably tipsy Dinah safely to their apartment.

(“Gee, thanks, you guys.”)

“Sorry, Mila.”)

If she ever—*when*—she becomes rich, Normani swears her first action as a billionaire would be to buy and demolish this entire apartment complex and hire people to construct a bigger and better one with thicker walls. And quite possibly with hot tubs. But more importantly the thicker walls part.

Normani rubs her fingers against her temples, eyes closed, and gives out a tired sigh.

Ally sips on her coffee. “I told you to start sleeping with ear buds on or something,” she admonishes, contentedly munching on her toast.

“I wouldn't need to if Lauren would stop having sex so loudly,” she grumbles.

Ally just hums in amusement, like *yeah, good luck with that*.

Normani thinks Ally's just lucky she's a heavy sleeper.

Lauren pads into the kitchen in only her old *Paramore* shirt two sizes too large that she uses to sleep in. “Is that bacon I smell?”

Normani harrumphs. “Yeah, but it's only for people who *don't* have loud sex at two in the morning.”

“That's fair.”

It's late September, nearly October, and the weather has chilled relatively quickly for a place like Dallas. Ally's little elementary school fall carnival feels like a true fall carnival instead of what it was last year, when the temperature that day was somewhere in the high eighties and kids were running and sweating their face paint off under the sun, Normani thinks as she stuffs her hands in the pockets of her jacket, the wind blowing her curly hair in various directions until she fixes it.

“Um, Camila, that looks absolutely nothing like a dog,” Lauren whispers to Camila, never taking her eyes off the brown blob the girl had painted on that poor six year-old's cheek even as he runs off to go try some other game booths. “Don't you volunteer at an animal shelter?”

Camila gives an indignant huff. "It does too. I think I would know what a dog looks like, considering, *as you said*, I volunteer at an animal shelter."

Normani walks up to them, stopping momentarily to glance down at the same little boy's face. "Alright, which one of y'all drew that turd on that kid's face?" She points her thumb back at him from where he's in line for one of the other booths and cocks her hip. "May I remind you guys that y'all are the ones that decided to volunteer with me at this place, or...?" She raises an eyebrow. "I *do not* want to get in trouble with the principal, aka my girlfriend's boss because of you two."

Lauren laughs and sips on her soda while Camila sighs. "It was supposed to be a dog," she mumbles ashamedly.

"Mila, aren't you *studying* to be a vet? Don't you volunteer at an animal shelter?"

"That's what *I* was saying," Lauren says.

"But I'm just saying..." Normani says, "if a bunch of angry parents start showing up and demanding why their child's face looks like *that*, best know I'm outta here and you two *artists* will have to deal with it."

"What? Why me?" Lauren asks.

Normani rolls her eyes. "Cause you two fools specifically asked to run the face painting booth, so I just gave it to both of you because I figured, '*Hey, they both say they know what they're doing, so they can just share.*'" She crosses her arms.

"That makes sense."

Normani turns to join Ally back in their own game booth, hearing Lauren's half-teasing "*It's okay, Camz, not everyone appreciates the arts,*" behind her.

"What's the point of going to this Halloween party if I can't even dress like the devil?" Lauren whines, bottom lip jutting out as far as it can go.

"Lauren, it's a *church* Halloween party." Normani would hit her if she wasn't too busy zipping up her fairy costume. "For Ally and I's *church.*"

"I say let Lauren go," Dinah chimes in from where she's helping Ally put her princess tiara on. "It'll look *hot.*"

"We're trying to help raise money for a charity, Dinah," Ally scolds, blindly reaching behind her to try and slap her arm.

"But she looks *hot*, though," Dinah counters. "Right, Mila, doesn't Laurenza over here look smokin'?"

“Uh, yep,” Camila agrees, too high pitched and cut off too soon. She brings her hand to push up her glasses, which Normani can infer is just a rather poor ruse to hide the blush in her cheeks, considering even *she* can see through it.

“Lauren, either you're going with us or you're not.” Ew. Normani sounds like her mom.

“Fine. I'll go see if my cow costume still fits.” Lauren trudges back into her room. “But I am *not* gonna let that devil outfit go to waste, so you can bet your ass we're going to a real party soon.”

Sure enough, Lauren keeps her promise.

All five of them are dancing in a terribly stuffy living room turned dancefloor at Lauren's friend's house (the type of *friend* that Normani usually tends to stay away from, but), and all the glitter fused makeup is wearing off her face so she probably doesn't look like the most *divine* fairy at the moment.

Okay, so.

Normani thinks Camila's a mess.

Lauren thinks Camila's a hot mess. Emphasis on the hot.

At least, that's what Lauren admits to her, breath ghosting warm over Normani's ear, making her turn to face the girl, giggling a “Even when you're trashed you still have a *beautiful* way with words, don't you, Laur?”

For someone who trips on her own two feet a good half of the time, Camila isn't that bad a dancer. Just clean up her technique a little and *really*, it'd be pretty hot.

“*Manibearrrr.*”

Normani turns and suddenly finds a pair of very friendly, vodka and a hint of soda-tasting lips on her own.

She pulls back and wipes Lauren's red lipstick off her. “Lo, really? You're messin' up my makeup.” Then she thinks briefly at how silly that all those *M* words there were in that sentence.

Okay, Normani's a few drinks in.

But it's fine because Camila had more or less volunteered to be the designated driver for tonight. (Meaning they all played *rock, paper, scissors* and she lost.)

“*Get off my woman,*” Ally shouts over the music in one of her weird Western cowboy accents that she only makes either when she's inebriated or when she's reading a book to one of her kids. She grabs Normani by the ruffles of her costume and kisses her square on the mouth for good measure.

Lauren pouts, crosses her arms. “But there aren't any hot people here that wanna make out with me,” she whines plaintively.

“Dinah would take offense to that,” Normani says.

As if on cue, Dinah, dressed as an angel with the halo on her head not-purposely-but-still-somehow-fittingly crooked, staggers up to them, putting an arm around Lauren. Camila, in a sexy nurse outfit that Dinah had dared her to wear, shows up on the other side of Dinah.

“What would Dinah do now?” Dinah says, a little slurred.

Instead of answering, however, Lauren leans over and kisses her. The second-long flash of surprise dies out in Dinah's eyes as she shrugs and complies.

Normani looks over to see Camila gaping at them like they were a spectacle to be seen. They kinda were, she guesses: A drunk devil making out with an equally drunk angel with the drunk angel's sober nurse beside them and like, seriously, Camila might be the one needing medical attention with her jaw dropped so low it could possibly be unhinged.

Like a snake, Normani thinks. She so should have been a snake for halloween. At least it didn't require that much makeup and glitter.

Normani then laughs, thinks about how the *nurse* might need to *nurse* herself. She takes a picture of the sight, still giggling, the flash of her phone camera startling Lauren into pulling away.

“Whoa there, Ralph,” Dinah says when they do. “Did I somehow do something to make you instantly fall in love with me? Is it the skirt? It's probably the skirt. Yo ass was always a sucker for a cute girl in a skirt.”

Camila's still got that look on her face so Dinah turns to her and says, “This is Lauren's way of being friendly once you *really* get to know her. She's like a dog, but like, instead of humping she makes out with people.” But then she winks. “*Well*, and maybe a little humping, too.”

Lauren laughs a little too loudly, glances at Camila a little too conspicuously, then says, “That reminds me—” She reaches past Dinah to grab Camila by the wrist, lips and eyelashes and smirk all being put into effect. “I haven't exactly been all that friendly with you yet, *Camz*.”



“Really?” Camila lets Lauren drag her closer, not sure if it's the atmosphere around her making her bolder than usual. “I thought you were being *pretty* friendly with me when we were at that club.”

“*Yeah*, but that was when you were a stranger,” Lauren informs. “Now I'm your *friend*, and I think, as a friend, that you should kiss me.” She says it slowly it like it's nothing, which Normani knows is one of Lauren's many talents, knows that it contributes to the whole *super hot, could get literally anyone I want* vibe that Lauren's got going on.

It does work for her, though, Normani does admit. Even when the truth is that Lauren is probably the biggest dork in the entire universe, she does sell it well.

“Come, on, Chancho,” Dinah urges, clapping her hands impatiently, “let's get this show on the road before you put me to sleep with all that staring.”

Normani shoots her a look. *What are you pullin', Jauregui?*

Lauren leans in, Camila's eyes fluttering closed. She kisses her softly, pulling away and looking back at Normani, seeming to say: *See? I'm not trying to pull anything because I'm a good person.*

“Finally,” Dinah says. “I thought you would never getcho lips in there! Now you're officially part of the squad!”

Camila grimaces at wording of her sentence, exclaims: “Dinah!” as she gets dragged to the dancefloor once again.

Lucy shows up late to the party eventually, so Lauren stops all her drunk whining, leaves Normani and Ally to dance in peace, drags Lucy by the arm to what she guesses is one of the bedrooms, and—

Gross.

She also feels sorry for whoever's bedroom that is.

“Don't you dare get any Cheeto stains on my couch, Dinah Jane!” Lauren says as Dinah barges through the door (uninvited, of course), bag of Hot Cheetos in one hand, iPhone in the other, with a laughing Camila invariably trailing behind her.

Dinah sits down besides Lauren after dancing around a little. She takes an earbud out of her ear. “What was that, Laurenza?”

"I said: Don't get any stains on my damn couch, Dinah."

The taller girl pouts. "Don't gotta be rude about it."

"This couch is *literally* my baby."

"Damn, then I don't really wanna know who the father is."

Then Dinah smooths her hand over the red couch cushion below her. "Why does it matter, anyways? My Cheetos and this couch are both *red*. It's like, camouflage, basically, right? Besides, this old thing doesn't even match the rest of the furniture in the room. I don't even know why you have it."

Lauren stops, gives her an affronted look, and Normani, seated on the chair beside them, half listening, half watching the TV, braces herself for one of Lauren's very informative speeches like it's a reflex.

"Dinah, okay, one: camouflage doesn't work like that if the *bugs* can still get to it, two: this is the red couch from Paramore's first album, *All We Know Is Falling*, you know?"

"Oh," Dinah says, nodding although Normani knows she doesn't have the faintest idea what Lauren's on about. "Cool."

She scoffs. "Did you not know seventh grade me at all? They were all who I listened to, remember?"

Camila perks up from the other side of the red couch at that. "Oh, I knew this was what it was!" She says, leaning forward so she can see Lauren past Dinah. "It looks just like it."

Lauren grins at that, leaning forward, too. "Thanks, it literally took me *forever* to find one like it."

"That's so cool."

"*So cool*," Dinah repeats, standing up, crumpling the now empty bag. "Walz, I'ma go eat some leftover pizza back at our place, but you can stay here with Laurenza and talk about furniture for a while, I guess." She opens the door, puts her earbuds back on, turns to blow them a kiss. "Have fun."

Normani's still only half listening in on their conversation (she's too busy trying to figure out who killed the television lady's son), but she hears topic shift from artist to artist; from Paramore to One Direction to The 1975. She hears Lauren's enthusiastic "They're so good live," to Camila's "Really? I've never seen," to Lauren's "Dude, really? In that case, I'm totally taking you to one some day," then: "I've already decided so it's too late for you to refuse."

She eventually tunes out from there, figures out that *oh, the gardener killed the lady's son. Typical.*

“Dibs on being that one black and red dude from *Sonic the Hedgehog*,” Lauren says, grabbing the Wii remote. “What’s his name again?”

“Shadow.”

“Yeah, Shadow.”

“Why?” Dinah asks.

Lauren shrugs, turns on the console. “He looks cool. And he’s like, super fast.”

“Alright, I guess,” she says. “I’m a be Princess Peach, though, ‘cause she cute.”

It was game night and Ally had dug through their limited collection of video games as per Dinah’s request, because *I swear if I have to play another game of bowling or tennis one more damn time, I’m gonna lose it*. So Ally found that weird video game where it’s Mario and Sonic, but like, they compete in the Olympics, too.

(Normani doesn’t really get it, and honestly, she didn’t even know that it existed, much less that they owned it.)

But anyways, it was the Winter Olympics version and Dinah deemed it fitting because it was snowing outside.

So, here they are, playing the 2010 Winter Olympics version of a *Mario and Sonic* video game.

And each of them were only one drink in. What a night.

Scratch that, Dinah just poured herself a second drink after earning a devastating fourth place in figure skating.

(“Yo, this shit is *rigged*, I tell you. You can’t have perfect timing *that* many times in a row.”

“Lucy did.”

“Yeah, Dinah, *I* did.”

“*Shut your face, Lucy.*”)

Bobsledding, though, proves to be the biggest challenge for the girls yet.

Mostly because they actually have to do things as like, a team.

They’re split up into two groups of three: Dinah, Normani, and Ally (nicknamed by Dinah as *Team DNA*, afterwards patting herself on the back on how clever the name was), and Lauren, Lucy, and Camila (which the latter had nicknamed as *Team Better Than Team DNA*).

“Right!” Ally takes charge of the commands for her team and they're doing really well, putting a sizeable distance over *Team Better Than Team DNA's* bobsled. “Left!”

*Team DNA's* opposers however, are doing not as good. Camila keeps leaning along with her remote, and in whatever direction it goes, the top half of her body automatically has to follow. It seems to mess them up for a while; they're *way* behind until Lauren and Lucy start following Camila's movements and they finally somehow start picking up.

They still finish at second place, but Camila whoops, shouts, “Teamwork!” and moves to high five Lauren and Lucy like they won.

At the end of the night, *Team DNA* has six wins in total and *Team Better Than Team DNA* has three. (Three-and-a-half if Lauren insists on counting their tie.)

After they run out of the drinks Lucy had brought, Dinah noisily invites them to crash at her place because they were all reasonably buzzed and the roads were too icy for Lucy to drive (and Lauren, Normani, and Ally complained about how everyone's just gonna eat most of their food if they all crash at their own place).

“Wow,” Normani remarks after stepping into their apartment, “y'all are a mess.”

“What?” Dinah rears back, sounding genuinely offended. “Me and Walz even cleaned up a little today.”

“There's a banana peel on this counter,” Ally says.

Camila hums like she just remembered. “Oh, yeah, I forgot to take out the trash. *But*, we did a spectacular job on cleaning the bathroom, right Dinah?”

“Yep,” Dinah agrees. “It's spotless in there.”

“Yeah, you could even eat off the tiles if you wanted.”

“Mila, that's nasty,” Normani says, taking a seat on the sofa besides Ally.

“No it's not,” Dinah insists, sitting on Normani's lap.

“You haven't even *seen* how clean the bathroom is now so you wouldn't know,” Camila tacks on.

Normani gently-but-also-kind-of-not-gently pushes Dinah off of her lap, spilling her onto the floor with a gasp.

Ally and Camila are the only ones laughing at the sight because Lauren and Lucy are caught up in a little makeout session on the other sofa.

“Ew.” Normani throws a pillow at them, separating the two with an annoyed grunt. “Please control y'all's selves, nasties.”

“Ooh!” Dinah exclaims. “Idea!” She sits up from her current spot on the floor, says, “Let's play Spin the Bottle.”

Normani thinks about it, looking to her girlfriend first and then looking around.

Lauren, of course, seems enthused about the idea of kissing in general, so naturally, she agrees with a shrug. “I'm in.”

“I'm in, too,” Lucy says.

Normani and Ally look look at each other for a moment before they shrug and agree also. “Fine, I guess.”

“Well, because we're in middle school,” Camila says.

“Then it's settled!” Dinah claps and Normani winces a little, thinking about all the potential noise complaints this night has probably gotten them.

They use a half empty water bottle left on the coffee table for the game bottle because everyone was too lazy to get up.

To summarize it, everyone kissed everyone, albeit a little too giggly to really take anything seriously. Lauren was probably the most happy about this, partly because it's Lauren, and partly because she's drunk.

The game is over but she's still giggling into Lucy's neck, nipping and licking it from time to time. Normani snaps her fingers, complains again and even manages to separate them for a little bit.

By now, everyone's probably knocked out, or at least close to being knocked out. Ally and Lucy were in conversation last time Normani had checked; she looks over to see the both of them asleep on one of the couches now. Her and Dinah were talking about some obscure topic she already forgot about, and Dinah drifts in and out of sleep, opening and closing her eyes from time to time. A wave of peace is washed over the room, with nothing except for Beyoncé playing in Dinah's iPhone like a quiet lull, only punctuated by Lauren and Camila's intermittent chuckling from their spot near the floor.

“Okay, but seriously, like the bathroom is so, *so* clean,” she hears Camila whisper. “I worked like, really hard on it.”

“Did you now?” Lauren whispers back.

“Yep.”

“Nice.”

“Yeah.”

Silence follows suit and Normani closes her eyes.

“I got a neat idea,” Camila whispers.

“What?”

“You wanna go eat some food in the bathtub with me to prove how clean it is? I promise, it's like, super clean.” She giggles, then snorts, then giggles again.

“Dude, yeah, let's go.”

“Okay.”

They must have gotten up because Normani hears a faint cracking noise and Lauren saying, “Did you hear that? My knee popped,” followed by more giggling and Lauren's *shh*.

Then footsteps shuffle from the living room to what is presumably the kitchen, stops, followed by refrigerator humming, and muttering too far away from Normani to discern. Then footsteps grow louder until they grow faint again, the bathroom lights flicker, she hears a faint “We don't necessarily have to eat off the tiles, but we could in theory, you know,” and the shutting of the door.

The next morning, Normani finds Lauren and Camila sitting on separate ends of the bathtub, an assortment of chips, pudding cups, and gummy bears are strewn all over the space between them.

She flicks the light on and Lauren and Camila wake up with a hiss.

“Oh, god, turn that fucking shit off!” Lauren yelps.

“Fuck,” Camila simply says, blindly dislodging a chocolately spoon from her elbow.

Normani turns off the lights with an amused smile twisting her face. She shakes her head, follows Lauren's wishes, backs out the room, and almost says, “Have fun on not puking.”

Dinah is back in California for her cousin's wedding.

Meaning, Camila had no one to cling on to for an entire week.

So on the second Dinah-less day, Camila invites herself into Normani's apartment, one of the only few unfortunate habits she had picked up from Dinah.

“What's up?” She announces. It looks like she had just gotten off from work; her hair is up in a bun and there are coffee stains on her white button down.

“Hey, Mila,” Ally greets with a smile. “How're you holding up without your other half?”

“Ugh.” She plops down onto the only unoccupied chair in the living room. “Lonely. The only good part about her being gone is that I don't have to fight her to reach the shower first. She hasn't even texted me since yesterday,” Camila says. “What if she needs me? What if she's like, dying, or something?”

“It can't be that bad,” Lauren says. “No wedding could ever be as bad as the Red Wedding.”

Then met with three blank stares, she says, “You know, *Game of Thrones*? No one? Mani, Ally, I've made you guys watch some episodes with me one time, remember?”

Normani, not remembering because she recalls falling asleep with Ally tucked into her at the time, says, “Oh, I don't think we reached that episode.”

“Yeah, I don't think we did, babe,” Ally agrees.

“You guys all suck and I'm gonna make you all watch this phenomenal show with me.” She looks at Normani and Ally. “Again.”

“Please,” Normani says, “you probably just watch for that one girl's boobs.”

Lauren scoffs, crosses her arms. “While I do *respectfully* appreciate Emilia Clarke's boobs on an aesthetic level, the story line is fantastic and it's genuinely a good show.”

Then all their phones buzz. Camila gets to hers first, says it's Dinah texting the group chat, reads it and laughs.

*wedding update: no one told me the groom's best friend would be hot as hell!!!! ima try and get me some!!!! wish me luck lmao*

“They're asleep.” Normani just barely wakes up to hear Camila's muffled voice through the quiet shouting of a bunch of television dudes in armor. She looks down to see Ally snoring on her chest.

“I'm not surprised,” comes Lauren's voice.

She closes her eyes again, but then Ally snores, wakes up.

“Hmm?” Ally hums, slowly starting to sit up, so Normani does too, sees Camila and Lauren seated together on the red couch, shared blanket and popcorn bowl in the space between them.

“You guys suck,” Lauren says.

Ally hums what sounds faintly like a “*Sorry, Lo, love you,*” wraps her arms around Normani and drags her back down on their shared seat, starts snoring again after a few minutes.

If there was one thing Normani disliked about her beloved homestate, it would have to be the horridness of the weather. Well, that and the fact that ugly camouflage shirts and denim jeans paired with cowboy boots are still considered an acceptable fashion statement in most parts of this state. But, back to the weather.

Seriously, it could be as dry as a desert one morning with not a cloud in sight and completely pour down a storm within the next five hours. It could be ninety degrees out and start freakin' *hailing* the size of golfballs one day with no actual warning that it will. It's kinda like all mother nature does is spin a wheel and randomly decide what the weather is going to be for the next few hours.

She blames it on pollution and the Ozone layer and whatnot.

Thunder booms at the same time they hear knocking faintly similar to the tune of a One Direction song against the door. Normani gets up to answer it, opens the door with a “Hey, Mila, what's up?”

“Um.” Camila shifts, pushes up her glasses. “So, I was minding my own business, you know, in my room, and I heard a sound—which wasn't the thunder, by the way—it was another sound. Like, a spooky sound. Anyways, I think there's a slight chance my apartment could be haunted and like, I don't wanna get possessed or anything so do you like, mind if I take shelter against the supernatural in here?”

Normani exhales a laugh. Camila's grown on her, she really has. “Just come in.”

“You know you can just say you're *scared* of thunderstorms and being all by your lonesome, right?” Lauren teases from her usual seat on the couch.

Camila frowns like she expects someone to take her previous statement seriously. “Lauren *middle name* Jauregui, I absolutely do not joke about the creepy creatures of the dark.”

“Michelle,” Ally supplies.

“Lauren *Michelle* Jauregui, I absolutely do not joke about the creepy creatures of the dark,” Camila repeats, plops down beside her.



Lauren gasps, reaches over to smack Ally's arm. "Allyson Brooke Hernandez, you have no right putting my business *out there* like that just because Camila is a *scaredy cat* in denial."

Now it's Camila's turn to gasp. "Fine. When you become the first one to die in this horror movie, then you'll realize."

"That sounds ominously like a threat, Camz."

"Nope, just a warning."

Later in the evening the power unfortunately *does* cut out, like a horror movie, and Ally and Normani scream, cling onto each other the same time Camila shouts, "I told you guys! This is some supernatural activity," and Lauren quips, "Okay, ghostbuster, calm down," though Normani can sense that she's a little uneasy now, too.

(And if she was looking a little closer: Lauren's knuckles brush against the side of Camila's knee and stay there as if she needs something to touch.)

Normani turns on the flashlight on her phone and walks hand-in-hand with Ally into the kitchen to find some candles. They find quite a few candles in the drawers and a couple of lighters, too. Normani lights one, turns off the flashlight, and pockets her phone. They walk back into the living room where Lauren is giggling stupidly at Camila's ridiculous faces with her phone light illuminating below her chin and up her nose, the hand brushing against the side of Camila's leg is now completely on her knee, and they were sitting just a fraction of an inch closer than when she left them.

Normani hardly notices, though, too busy handling the candles with one hand and holding onto Ally with the other.

"Alright, can one of y'all put this one in the bathroom?" Normani asks after lighting a candle.

Lauren, being the closest, takes it in her hand. "Sure," she says, though she doesn't sound very sure.

She's purposely slow at getting up, too, until Camila stands abruptly, says, "Alright, *scaredy cat*, I'll go with you."

"My hero," Lauren snips dryly, even though Normani can detect the underlying tone of relief in her voice.

They come back a few moments later and Ally proposes they should play a game until the lights come back on.

Since the Wii is out of the question and no one (with the exception of Lauren) wants to play *Scrabble*, they opt for a fairly old *Candy Land* game that Ally brought back from her classroom, pushing the coffee table out of the way and laying it out onto the living room floor.

Though Normani will admit: considering the multitude of candles they have surrounding them, the entire thing looks more like a demon summoning than an innocent game. Like, she can imagine a candy cane demon stepping out of the game board, or something.

Wow, Camila must be rubbing off on her.

Ally wins for the second time in a row, whooping out a victory, says, “Y'all wanna play again?”

Camila groans instead, says, “How do you always manage to draw the best cards? Not fair.”

Ally winks. “A winner never reveals her secrets.”

Lauren huffs. “Cheater.”

A few hours pass but the power still hasn't come on so Normani says they can just chill in the living room for a while. Ally disappears into their bedroom and comes back with a blanket, a book, and her reading light; Lauren finds her deck of cards and starts to play solitaire on the carpet with her back against the red couch; Camila dozed off earlier, and is still dozing off on the couch above Lauren's head.

The lights come back on eventually, and Normani checks the time and sees that it's well past midnight, and after blowing out all the candles, she steps back into the living room to find her girlfriend awake and yawning.

“Should we just leave 'em there?” Normani whispers, gesturing to both Lauren and Camila fast asleep. Lauren is still sitting on her carpet below Camila, head leaning back so it looks like it just barely touches Camila's nose; Camila is lying face down, her limbs spread out on the couch, legs uncovered by her blanket, and one arm hanging dangerously close to grasping Lauren's boob.

Ally breathes out a quiet laugh at the sight. “Isn't it funny how awkwardly they met? I mean, Camila wouldn't even look Lauren in the eyes the first few weeks they met. Now, months later they've gotten along surprisingly well. It's kinda weird if you think about it.”

But Normani doesn't really think too much about it. “Yeah, weird.”

Those Dinah-less days go on like that for the remainder of the week. When not at work or at college, Camila's always spending her time in their apartment. Even just to study, Normani would walk in the living room to find her on the red sofa, book in her hands and highlighter placed between her lips, glasses nearly sliding off her nose, occasionally asking people to quiz her on things like pet medication, and sometimes with her feet resting on Lauren's lap if she's there.

There's always another girl present at the apartment with her at all times so she doesn't get all that bored, either. When Ally's teaching, Normani and Lauren are there; when Normani's coaching, Lauren is there; when Lauren's out doing god knows what, Ally and Normani are both probably there.

No one minds, of course, because Camila is just about the farthest away from boring that a human being could ever be. Even in the group chat, she has an Emoji of the Day bit.

(Today's was the wrench emoji, by the way:

*imagine a world we would live in if we didn't have one of these bad boys!!!!*

Dinah had typed back: *walz do u even kno what that thing is called*

Within ten seconds Camila then replied: *no but i understand its necessary role to this society gosh china :/)*

Dinah arrives back in Texas so they all go out for pizza once they pick her up from the airport, piling into Ally's car: Normani driving, Ally in the passenger's seat, and Lauren and Dinah seated in the back with Camila getting the short end of the stick, having to squeeze in the middle seat between them.

The drive from the airport to the pizza place goes smoothly, and they spend the entire car ride listening to Dinah's new wedding stories.

“Pero, get this, though,” Dinah continues with her story. “Then after all that *ish* went down, my aunt goes, 'Well, at least you got enough cake!' Oh, gosh, can you believe her?”

“Oh, my God, did she actually say that?” Ally laughs. “Oh, I love your aunt.”

“That reminds me, everyone was askin' how you and Mani are doing,” Dinah says. “They wanna know when *y'all's* wedding is gonna happen.”

“*Aww*,” Lauren and Camila coo.

Ally blushes beside her, looks down, and Normani feels her heart swell before she rolls her eyes fondly and says, “What happened with the groom's best friend, though? Spill it girl, did you get you some?”

“Well I was *about to*, until I found out about his *girlfriend* back home.” Dinah scoffs, flips her hair accordingly. “Like, who does he think I am? I'm too cute for that boy's ass.”

“Yeah, you go, girl,” Camila says, leans in to plant a noisy kiss on her cheek.

They all laugh together, and when Normani looks into the rearview mirror to see Camila's hand edging questioningly near Lauren's, she hardly thinks to stop and do a double take.

Later that evening, after all five of them manage to get themselves into a booth and get their food, Camila gets pizza sauce dribbling onto her chin—which really *isn't* a rare occurrence, but this time Lauren is there to wipe it up with a laugh and a wink, and Normani merely glances at them until Ally asks her to pass the parmesan.

Normani hears the front door slam behind her and Lauren and Camila walking in, obnoxious and laughing way too loudly for her sleepy mind; she's taking a nap (or *was*, anyways). The two are still laughing, but Normani keeps her eyes shut.

Lauren notices Normani on the couch, shushes Camila promptly, albeit the shushing doesn't completely work because the two are still giggling like they're *trying to be considerate, but also not*.

She squints her eyes open, sees Lauren and Camila walk to the dining room table with an alarming amount of ramen noodle packets in their hands.

*(Does she want to know? Does she really want to know the context of this?)*

They dump it all out onto the table and Lauren asks, “Okay, how do you wanna split this up?” In the tone of someone taking part of a drug deal and not... whatever this is.

“Well how many are there?”

A few beats and then: “Aw, man there's an odd number.”

“I'll fight you for it.”

Normani's eyes are shut again, but can hear the smirk in Lauren's low voice when she says: “Oh, really? You'll *fight* me for it?”

She squints her eyes open once more, just barely misses the glance Lauren gives at Camila's lips.

Normani kind of wants to know now. “Why is there a pile of ramen noodles on my table?” She questions abruptly, disgruntled, but now sitting up.

Lauren and Camila jump with a start, taking a step away from each other like they got caught doing something they weren't supposed to.

“Y'all better not have stolen all of that,” she says.

“Don't worry, we didn't,” Lauren says.

“Then... why?”

“There was a sale at the grocery store,” Camila simply states. “And ramen noodles are God's gift to the undeserving humanity.”

Normani gives one soliditary nod. She's too tired to actually be concerned, drug deal or no. She's about to ask if they bought the toothpaste she asked for, but she decides not to. “Right.” She blinks. “I'll be in my room.” With that, she walks away, leaving Lauren, who is now too busy sorting the packets to look up, and a flushed Camila.

Normani's been getting... suspicious.

More specifically, suspicious of Lauren.

Not in the *wow, my roommate and best friend might secretly be a wanted druglord* way, but more like...

Normani's been having a good night's sleep for about a month now and she never thought she'd say this, but.

She's a bit worried.

Even Lucy, who's always hung out with them on occasion gives her an odd look every time Lauren sends her home after game night now. Lauren doesn't notice (or she pretends not to, at least), and gives her a peck on the lips before she shuts the door, immediately yawning and stretching afterwards, mumbling an “I'm tired,” before she shuts herself in her room, avoiding all opportunities to talk to Ally or Normani.

Again, she's a bit worried.

Normani is in fact so worried about her best friend's recent mannerisms that tries to bring it up one morning (key word: tries, but really, *how do you even transition into that type of*

*subject?*). Lauren, though virtually lacking in shame and being a considerably blunt person, is paradoxically a private one when she wants to be. She dislikes people nosing in on her business, and what Normani's learned from experience is to just wait until she tells you, not the other way around. Creeping around the subject until she relents is the best way to handle her, because she gets undeniably angry if you don't.

“So, what's up, Laur?” She asks once Lauren pads into the living room.

She shrugs. “Nothin' much, why?”

“I don't know, just curious.”

“...Okay.” Lauren fixes her a puzzled look, says, “I'm gonna go take a shower now.”

Normani nods.

Good talk.

Normani has a hunch. A hunch that itches the back of her mind, a hunch that wonders if any of this has to do with a certain girl living in the apartment across from them. The one that isn't Dinah.

She decides to follow in on that hunch.

Normani finally pieces it together after about a few more weeks of watching and observing, and okay, she'd like to say that it was from recalling all those *Sherlock Holmes* marathons Lauren used make her watch, or those unsolicited mystery genre book reviews and synopses Lauren used to blabber in her ears at least five times a week about (she had a phase back then), but no, it wasn't until she had woken up at around midnight, stomach growling and shivering from her teeth to her sock-clad feet in the Arctic cold temperatures Ally loves to set in their bedroom that the answer had shown up right in front of her face.

She finds out kind of like this:

Normani gets up slowly from her bed as to not disturb her sleeping girlfriend and shuts the door behind her with a soft click.

Normani can hear the faint sounds of *That's so Raven* murmuring quietly. She looks over with only the TV light to help her, sees one big, blankety lump of dark hair that is definitely a sleeping Lauren. She decides not to wake her, padding quietly over into the kitchen instead.

The fridge greets her with a hum and Normani scans its contents, reaching past a foam container with the words “*don't you dare even think about fucking touching this, Dinah*” written in what is obviously Lauren handwriting, and in smaller, much neater scrawl on the bottom right corner, Ally had written: “*please*” with a heart next to it, she grabs a carton of milk and pours herself a glass of it. She makes herself a sandwich, leans back on the counter and eats in silence.

Normani hears some shuffling in the living room, suspects it's Lauren getting up so she peeks her head out of the partition, almost chokes on her sandwich because *that is not Lauren*.

Well, it is Lauren, because Lauren is *there sleeping on the couch*, but the person who got up from the same couch and is currently up and stretching her arms above her head is not Lauren, but is surprising-yet-unsurprisingly Camila.

She walks to the TV with a sleepy hum, quietly chuckles along with the audible laughing track that plays on the screen, and shuts it off, the living room now filled with darkness.

Normani widens her eyes, silently pops back into the kitchen until she hears the front door open and click shut.

So her hunch was correct.

Huh.

# don't you tell me that you "just don't get it" 'cause i know you do

## Chapter Summary

She says it like an admission, like the chest inside her cracks open upon the right words and now she isn't all too sure of what to do with the heart that comes spilling out beneath her ribs.

And *oh*. Because this is Lauren and she is her best friend and now Normani knows how big, exactly, of a freakin' deal this—she—is to her.

## Chapter Notes

ok so im so sorry for playing myself and thinking that i would update this thing in less than a month but woo here i am now

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Okay, so Normani's well aware that it really isn't any of her business, best friend or no. Like, not truly.

She just can't help it—it's so interesting to watch unfold in front of her.

Everything has become more obvious now that she's decided to open her eyes and pay attention to what goes on around her. She can see and analyze practically everything (like a hotter, more fashionable, female version of Sherlock Holmes, she likes to think), from the worrying of Camila's lip to Lauren's newfound habit of surreptitiously glancing at Camila when she thinks no one's looking every time the two are in the same room.

It's kind of like TV, she thinks; only gayer, not near as white, and nobody dies at the end.

(Like, fingers crossed, at least.)

The intermittent hybrid laugh-screeches are getting increasingly louder from its source in the kitchen and really, all Normani knows is that Ally had asked Lauren and Camila to be in charge of the baking while she made a quick trip to the school to pick up some papers she left; all Normani knows is that they're probably making a hell of a freakin' mess in there by the sound of it.



She should probably check the situation out before Ally comes back and flips.

Normani steps in the kitchen—or more like, steps on some flour spilled *in* the kitchen. She looks down, then looks up to find Lauren and Camila with more flour spilled onto the each other than onto the floor, which is saying something because there's a *fair* amount of flour spilled on the floor. There's white all over Lauren's black shirt, black jeans, and black hair; there's somehow more on Camila's everywhere—her clothes, her arms, face, even on her glasses.

“Guys, what the fuck,” Normani says, crossing her arms. “Seriously? I thought Ally just asked you to mix the ingredients in the bowl.”

“We did,” Lauren says while Camila wipes her flour-stained glasses on her flour-stained shirt (which, Normani's pretty sure kind of cancels the effect of having clean, flour-less glasses, but she doesn't say anything). “Sorry.”

Camila walks over to the counter, steps over a discarded egg carton, and holds out a bowl. “See? Mixed perfectly.”

“Then what about the rest of this shit?” Normani says.

“That,” Camila's voice quiets into a mumble, “was kind of an accident.”

Normani pinches the bridge of her nose. “Y'all better clean this up.”

“We will,” Lauren says, bending down to pick up an abused wooden ladle.

Normani leans against the threshold of the kitchen, arms still crossed, spies a white hand print left on Camila's ass, wonders exactly *whose* hand that belongs to, decides that she's had enough of *Lauren and Camila* for today, promptly leaves the kitchen with an eye roll and a: “And go take a shower when y'all are done.”

*Hopefully not together*, Normani almost adds; instead she says, “And then go to the store and replace all the stuff you've spilled on the floor.”

There's an odd difference in the way Lauren interacts with Camila compared with the way she interacts with the other girls. Normani isn't even sure if it exists, or if she's just reading too much into it.

Call her crazy, or whatever, but there's a distinction between how Lauren talks to someone like, say, Dinah, and how she talks to *Camila*. There's like, an uptick in her mood, kind of.

Or something.

Normani can't quite put her finger on it.

But it sure is something.

This is probably the fourth sheet of paper Dinah's cut into a penis now and yeah, it was hilarious the first time, but after a while, the only person laughing at it now is Lauren. Naturally.

They are all helping Ally make decorations for the Christmas party in her classroom tomorrow; Normani and Ally did the buying and baking (after the *flour incident* nearly a week ago now no one—as in Lauren and Camila—is allowed to even so much *look* at a whisk anymore), Camila promised to drop by before school on the day of the party to help Ally set everything up, and Lauren and Dinah are supposed to be making the decorations. (Key word: *supposed*.)

Ally had tasked the two girls to cut up sheets of paper to make into snowflakes, Christmas trees, ornaments, snowmen and the like. They were busy at work until one of them (Dinah says it's Lauren, Lauren says it's Dinah) cut one into the shape of a—*er*, a dick, which then triggered the laughing and the screeching and the giggles and *really*, it *was* funny the first time around.

“Stop, Dinah, you're wasting all that paper!” Ally exclaims after wiping the tears that were forming in her eyes after that mess.

“Cheechee, you're making the trees sad,” Camila says from where she's seated on the red couch behind Lauren and Dinah on the floor. She rolls onto her stomach, rests her chin where Dinah and Lauren's shoulders touch. “They didn't wanna be remembered like this.”

“How do you know what the trees would have wanted?” Lauren asks teasingly. “Maybe they wanted this fate. If I was a tree I would totally want to be remembered like this,” Lauren deadpans, reaches over to tickle the back of Camila's neck.

“Hey, Walz,” Dinah says when she stops squirming, leaning right against Camila's ear, her voice comically dropping many octaves, “you want one of my D's?” She holds four of her paper dicks out (*god*, Normani hates that word) like she would with cards and Lauren howls with laughter, leaning her head against Camila's appalled-looking face.

“At least take me out to dinner first!” Camila says, horrified.

“This is *not* the spirit of Christmas, girls!” Ally says.

The five girls spend Christmas time with their families, but Lauren invites them to the family beach house back in Miami she said her parents weren't going to use this year.

It makes Normani glad; the winter temperatures in Texas were the lowest they've been in years, and all the continuous days of snow and ice were just frosting on top of the cold, dead winter cake that Normani wanted no taste of, so she's happy to spend New Year's out in the sun.

They climb out of the rental car Lauren had driven from the airport to here, stretch their legs and grab their bags.

The rooming situation is easy: four rooms with Ally and Normani sharing one and the rest getting their own.

The sun is just starting to set after they all get situated in their rooms so Lauren suggests that they all go take a walk on the beach until it gets dark.

Normani walks hand-in-hand near the water with Ally, closing her eyes for just a moment, feels the breeze blow her hair, the sand mold under her feet, and the warm air tingle her skin. Camila, Dinah, and Lauren are in front of them, laughing and shouting and gesticulating wildly. As sappy as it sounds it makes Normani's heart swell and smile for some reason, and she hasn't even had a drink today.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Ally asks beside her, looking up at her face in a way that makes Normani want to smile again.

"I don't know, I just love you and the girls so much."

"Aw, you're so sweet," Ally says, gently squeezes her hand.

Normani looks forward to see Dinah splash water onto Camila, which then escalates into Dinah attempting to splash water on Lauren, which Lauren dodges, resulting in *more* water being splashed onto Camila.

Lauren squeals a: "*Camz!*" when the girl puts her into a bear hug, gets dragged into the sand by the smaller girl for a frankly pathetic display of what only Camila would consider as "wrestling," and when it seems like they're done, Lauren whispers something in her ear, looks up at Dinah and shouts a: "*Charge!*" when the two decide to team up and push the taller girl into the water.

"*Shit,*" Dinah exclaims after she makes a splash, "*this water is cold as hell.*"

They all laugh until Normani sees Dinah barreling towards her and Ally with a screech.

The gigantic count down clock on the wall of the club flashes an obnoxious neon green 11:15 p.m. The color is startling and flashing and Normani's sure that is why her eyes are hurting and her head is pounding out its own bass line to accompany the DJ's music and not the result of all the fruity drinks Ally's been sliding her way.

She doesn't mind all that much, though; it doesn't hinder her from dancing and talking or twerking (the important things), Normani knows, because like, she's too hot to *not* do all that stuff; all it really does is make her turn her back towards the digital clock so she doesn't have to look upon it at the least. Very smart of her.

She just finished filming some kind of intense dance-off between Ally and Dinah to put on Snapchat. (Normani says Ally won. Dinah isn't taking it, calls her out on her favoritism. Normani calls her a sore loser.)

“Who are you kissing at midnight?” Dinah shouts over the thumping in Normani's head. (She just saw a flash of green again, makes the blurry numbers out to be something more or less like 11:50.)

Normani blinks hard, looks at her in puzzlement until she remembers what and why they're even here to celebrate in the first place. It's New Year's Eve. Duh. She knew that.

“Hopefully my girlfriend,” Normani shouts, looks back to see said girlfriend groping a laughing Lauren and her boobs on the other side of the dancefloor. (Lauren's laughing; not her boobs. That'd be weird.)

Dinah nods like this is somehow the first time she's heard about this so-called girlfriend. “I think I'ma find me some hot guy to mack on later.” She stops and giggles then, covers her mouth with her hand. “Lauren and Camila are probably gonna go mack on each other.” Normani's eyes follow Dinah's again to see Lauren laughing, with her hands on Camila's hips.

She snickers into Dinah's shoulder. “Ew, you're right.”

The clock reads 11:59 now; not because Normani looked at it, but because people are finally starting the count down.

All five girls are now gathered together on the dance floor, taking part in the counting. By the time they reach *five* the chanting grows impossibly louder, and by *one*, Normani's already got her lips on Ally's.

Dinah *did* manage to find a hot guy to *mack on*, Normani notices in her peripheral, and Lauren and Camila, well, Normani can't see them—they are probably in the blinding direction of the neon green clock—but honestly, they definitely did kiss. Like, Normani would bet fifty bucks on it if she had fifty bucks willing to bet.

(But like, not a big deal, though, because Lauren then later kisses Dinah, Ally, and Normani at least twice each, so.

Everything is still slightly questionable to Normani. Maybe they just like to kiss each other when they're drunk, too. Maybe Camila is just another Dinah, or Ally, or Normani when

Lauren is drunk. Lauren *is* a good kisser, after all.

Okay, shut up, Mani.)

A moment, Normani thinks, that stands out and apart from all the casual laughing and friendly touching of the trip, one that she can safely sort into the *Lauren and Camila* file she somehow keeps in the '*This is hardly any of your business but it is kinda interesting*' part of her brain, happens during the middle of the night when she's sure everyone is asleep but her.

Normani gets up from the bed, tries not to let it dip and un-dip as much, and shuffles to the window. She opens the curtains slowly, lets the moonlight pool into the room. The palm trees shake in the breeze and the waves roll in and out, already has her head nodding sleepily.

She nearly chokes on nothing when she spies a silhouette from the corner of the window, feels her heart stop and lurch and *dang it, she isn't feeling so sleepy anymore*.

The beating in her chest manages to quiet down after even harder looking and concluding that it's actually *not* some kind of murderer, but merely Lauren, who apparently couldn't sleep either.

She sees the girl sit under a palm tree, draw her knees to her chest, cross her arms over her legs, and lean her head back against the tree, looking up at the stars, what it seems. All of this is practiced movement, Normani realizes; she's probably done this every time she's gone down here.

Normani leans with her elbows against the windowsill and yawns.

Lauren was her first friend in high school, months before Dinah and Ally were even in the picture. It was just the two of them for a while; Lauren just came out of a private school, and Normani was way too shy to have anyone other than a few people to talk to solely in class.

What makes Normani blink in surprise again and snap her out of her thoughts is another dark figure walking up to the same palm tree Lauren was sitting under. For half a second she thinks that maybe she should warn Lauren of the killer creeping towards her, but then nearly breathes a sigh of relief to find that it's just Camila, a not-murderer.

She watches Camila take a seat beside the girl, can only imagine what kind of conversation they would be having, can only imagine if they're talking about a topic that Lauren likes, such as the stars, or one that Camila likes, such as Harry Styles' solo career, or whatever. Or even if their lips are moving at all; maybe they're just sitting there in silence. Maybe they have the same weird mind connection that Normani has with Lauren, too.

Normani yawns again, closes the curtains, arches her back to stretch it, and climbs back into bed with Ally.

One more day passes before they have to leave and face the cold—literally—realities of life, as Lauren would put it.

They spend it with shopping and the beach and more seafood than anyone could dream of. Dinah and Camila are the winners of two-out-of-three Chicken Fight matches against Normani and Ally; Normani tries to teach the girls how to do an Aerial in the sand (which, really was not that good of an idea because Camila almost broke her neck, like, twice); Lauren fools Camila into eating calamari, because, “*It's just chicken, Camz,*” which resulted in a lot of spitting out and a dramatic: “*I trusted you!*” and laughing from the other girls until Camila spat into someone else's (Normani's) napkin; Lauren even kisses Dinah for a little bit (Normani misses the part where Camila's face falls afterwards), until Dinah tells her that even though she loves her, she needs her to stop ruining her chances with the boy she's had her eye on from the other side of the bar.

So, yeah, it was a pretty good vacation.

After they get home, the month of January seems to roll by like other months usually do: fast but still somehow not fast enough. School starts back up again which make Camila and Ally busy. Competition season was approaching soon for Normani, which meant having to come up with new drills and scheduling longer practices. Lauren is just Lauren, which means more drum stick-stocking and complaining (both of which are *not* mutually exclusive of each other, by the way, Normani figures out when she had decided to pop into the music shop Lauren works in one day).

Everything goes back to normal schedule.

“It's *not* a date,” Camila insists.

“Really?” Dinah crosses her arms. “Then what *would* you call it exactly?”

“A friendly guitar lesson between two buds.”

“Buds.”

“Yes, buds.”

“A *bud* that you may or may not have a crush on.”

“Maybe.” Camila scrunches her eyebrows, taps her pink highlighter against her cheek.

“Maybe?”

“Yeah?” She toys with the lid, capping and uncapping until Dinah takes it from her hands. “Hey,” Camila complains, “I need that.”

“It's annoying. Now answer the question,” Dinah says. “Why a *maybe*?”

Camila manages to snatch it back. “I don't know. Feelings are confusing, I guess.”

“But he's *cute*.”

“Well, *yeah*.”

Dinah offers her a puzzled look. “Then what am I on your ass about again?”

“I don't know,” Camila says. “You're the one who bombarded me with all these questions.”

Normani, who's been hearing snippets of the conversation from Dinah's kitchen, walks into the living room and says, “What's going on? Mila's going on a date?”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“He's Mila's coworker and he's really cute and he plays guitar and *he's so into her*.”

“*Dinah*.”

“He *is*.”

“*Oh my god, some asshole's kid decided to go ballistic on the fucking drum kit again today at the shop and my dumbass boss made me get him off of it, like, Jesus fucking Christ it was literally the worst fifteen minutes of my entire life, and like, literally James was right there beside him but nooo he couldn't do it because he was too busy 'restocking the guitar strings', like, god, fuck him,*” Lauren's unmistakable voice rings from the threshold and into the living area.

She sits (well, more like flops dramatically) onto the seat beside Normani and closes her eyes, rubbing at her temples.

“So how was *your* day?” Camila says, eyes trained on her textbook but mouth ticked up nonetheless.

“The people I work with are *assholes* and I hate them.”

“Aw, poor baby,” she coos sardonically.

“Shut up. You don't know the horrors I have to deal with on a daily basis.”

“I bet.”

Lauren rolls her eyes. “So, what were we talking about?” she says to the rest of the group, making a point to ignore Camila.

“Mila's going on a *dateeee*,” Dinah sings.

Lauren raises an eyebrow, tugs a corner of her mouth like how any teasing friend would. “Really? Oh shit,” she says, “who?”

Camila bites her lip, looks back down at her book. “Some guy I work with. Shawn.”

“Ooh, *Shawn*. Sounds cute.”

“He *is*,” Dinah chimes in.

Normani studies Lauren's face for any kind of betraying twitch in her features, and when she finds none, Dinah taps her on the knee, leans in and whispers, “Why are you glaring at Lo like that? Did she eat all your leftovers again? Give me five bucks and you can get your revenge.”

Normani shakes her head. She forgets she's not the best at controlling her facial expressions.

She'll work on her poker face later.

“What are you guys gonna be doing on your quote-unquote *date*?” Lauren asks.

Camila twists the highlighter cap and shrugs. She seems more closed off about this subject now that Lauren's the one asking the questions. “He's just gonna go teach me how to play the guitar because I've always wanted to learn. I'm like, pretty sure it's not even an actual date. Dinah just says it is.”

“It could be like, a tutor date,” Dinah says. “That's a thing.”

“I think you mean *study date*,” Camila says. “Study dates are a thing but I don't really think those are supposed to be romantic. Also, I'm not in highschool anymore, so it's definitely not a thing.”

“It could be,” Dinah says. “One minute you're playin' guitar and next minute you're doin' the nasty on his couch.”

“*Dinah!*”

“Well, it's probable,” Lauren says. “It's happened to me on various occasions.”

“*Lauren!*”

She throws her hands up defensively. “What? I'm just joking, Camz. Jeez.” Then she rests her chin on her hand, looks up like she's thinking hard about it. “Sort of.”

Camila covers her ears. “No more talk about doing it on couches.”



Dinah salutes. "Yes, ma'am."

Lauren snickers instead, says, "You got pink highlighter all over your forehead."

Camila groans.

Really, it's not like Normani is even *sure* Lauren and Camila have something going on. Not entirely, at least. Like, what's one little midnight encounter of them curled up on the couch together have anything to do with romance? If she thinks about it, not really anything. Normani does that with Dinah sometimes. She does that with Lauren, too.

And all the flirting? Everyone does that with everyone.

And the staring? Well, she's not really sure about that but it could be because Lauren needs to get her eyes checked, or something. Or maybe she's just staring into space.

So, like, *boom*. Myth debunked, or whatever.

She's probably just making a big deal out of it. Maybe she's just that bored.

She doesn't even know if Lauren *likes* people in that way.

The only things Normani is absolutely a hundred percent sure that Lauren likes are the following: food, music, being right, pretentious books, kissing, and pretentious books about kissing.

So far Camila is not on that list.

(Normani's fairly certain.)

"*I can see him!*" Dinah squeals, peeking out of the door's peephole. "Shit, he sure is damn *fine*. I wouldn't mind if he carried me like he's carrying that guitar."

"Dinah, get away from there," Ally scolds.

Dinah protests and doesn't move. "Damn, he can totally teach *me* how to play too, if he wants."

"This is probably why Mila didn't want you over at y'all's place while he's there," Normani comments.

She nods, unfazed, still keeping her eye against the peephole. "Yeah, probably."

Normani looks over at Lauren preoccupied on her phone, earbuds on, and feet resting on Normani's lap. She wonders if Lauren's listening to the conversation through her music. Probably not; when her earbuds are on, nothing can get through to her.

Dinah's silent for a few moments then she says, "Okay, Mila answered the door... Aw they hugged! That's cute... Now they're walking inside... Gettit, girl!" she practically whoops.

"I'm pretty sure they heard you, you know," Ally says. "That door isn't exactly the thickest."

"Oh, maybe that's why Walz kept glancing up at the door like she knew I was doing something behind it, or whatever."

Ally shakes her head. Normani laughs.

Lauren's toes curl on her lap like maybe she is listening after all.

Lauren's a decent liar with a built-in timer.

As in, she can believably lie for only a while until her facade starts cracking and crumbling and she starts doing weird things. Like, weird things only bad liars do.

Normani knows from experience that it takes her about six hours when Lauren's involved in a prank until she starts her spontaneous nervous laughing, takes the same amount for a surprise party, and give or take a few days for fairly big secret surprises. Just depends on the necessity of the thing, Normani had concluded a long time ago.

(Her record was probably almost an entire month for when Normani planned to create one of those scavenger hunts those super quirky romantic movies would always do for her and Ally's anniversary, in which Lauren had to make up *a lot* of excuses to cover for her, and fortunately kept to herself with hardly a slip-up. Thank god.)

She isn't really sure where Lauren's own feelings would fall under in Normani's well-kept time chart.

The answer, Normani finds, is that it takes approximately a day.

"He taught me how to play a few chords," Camila says when they all go out for lunch the next day.

"Did anything else happen?" Ally asks kindly, leaning forward, eyes not prying but still expectant.

“I mean, we joked around a little bit, I guess. It was far from awkward, which is always a pleasant surprise considering I am the way I am,” Camila answers.

“Did y'all fall in love?” Dinah asks around a mouthful of fries.

Lauren kicks her in the shin.

“Ow! What was that for?”

“Those were my fries.”

“Jesus, sorry, Ralph,” Dinah says, but then she turns to Camila again. “So, before I was so *rudely* interrupted, I just wanna know what you think of him now. Like, do you got a *crush*?”

Normani looks down onto the table, spies Lauren's elbow casually brushing against Camila's when she picks up her burger. Her eyes move upwards to see Camila naturally leaning towards her touch, just barely, like her subconscious hopes to get away with the action.

“No idea,” Camila says, though it sounds more like a mere noise she made at the back of her throat instead of a simple two-worded answer. She clears her throat like she's about to say something before she shrugs instead, grabs her soda and sips on it.

Lauren reaches over to grab a napkin, breaks from Camila's contact.

She's taking her time with wiping her mouth when Normani shoots her a: *What is it?* kind of look.

Something flickers in Lauren's eyes, disappears behind the wall that Normani's only sometimes ever been able to pass through before she shoots her back a: *Nothing, what are you up my ass about this time?*

But she somehow doesn't brush up against Camila for the remainder of the time they have sitting in the small booth and Normani thinks she just might be onto something.

This starts the first hairline fracture in the wall of Lauren's facade, Normani thinks; the could-be beginning of the cracking and crumbling.

“What do you think of Shawn?” Normani asks her one day, not *totally* out of the blue because Shawn *was* Camila and Dinah's previous topic of conversation before they left to go pick up the pizza they had ordered.

Lauren tilts her head, shrugs and says, “Uh, he's cool, I guess? I've seen him around the music shop, but like, I've never actually had a conversation with him. Why exactly are you asking me?”

“I just wanna see if you think he's good for Mila,” Normani lies smoothly. She should totally become a detective someday.

Lauren stares at her dubiously, and Normani raises an eyebrow. “What?”

“Nothing.”

Valentine's Day is looming dangerously around the corner and if Normani was *not* the totally wonderful and amazing girlfriend that she is, she would have been panicking with thoughts of what to get Ally by now.

(She has a pair of earrings, one of those humongous teddy bears stuffed in one of Dinah's closets, reservations to a fancy restaurant, flowers, candy, and like, something else she'd rather not disclose. But anyways.)

Right now they're all taking part in the elementary school Valentine's Day party, much like they did during Christmas, which means Dinah, Lauren, and Camila are in charge of the decorations. (Dinah only got let back into the crew after vehemently apologizing to Ally and promising a grand total of zero phallic-shaped decorations this time).

Ally is busy making a Valentine's card for each of her kids, taking the time to meticulously pen down an individual handwritten note instructed for their parents to read to them if it's too hard to read by themselves.

Normani puts all the paper plates, plastic utensils, and other elementary school party paraphernalia into one tote bag and sets in on top of the counter. She takes a seat on her chair in the living room to where the TV is tuned to some kind of cooking show.

“How's it goin'?” Normani asks. “Ya'll cut up any penises yet?”

“No, but Mila's cut up a butt,” Dinah says, which earns a warning look from Ally, who is bent over a paper in her reading glasses like the teacher she is.

“It's a *heart*!” Camila exclaims. “See?” She holds it up. “Maybe it just looks like a butt to you because you don't have a heart.”

Dinah gasps, puts a hand to her chest. “I do so have a heart! Tell her, Lauren.” She nudges the girl beside her into putting down her phone.

Lauren shakes her head. “Nope, Camz is right; you totally lack a heart.”

Dinah nods, exaggeratedly clenches her jaw. “Fine, if y'all wanna talk that shit to me—” She holds up her scissors, blade pointing to and from Lauren and Camila, “sleep with one eye open.”

“This just proves my point about you not having a heart,” Camila says.

“Well, y'all have done this to yourself,” Dinah says.

“This is her super villain origin story,” Lauren says to Camila and they both laugh.

“God, y'all are so annoying,” Dinah says. “I'm taking a break.” She puts her scissors down, stands up and lies down on the couch. Neither Lauren nor Camila seem to be bothered, though; they just continue to cut up more butt-shaped hearts with jokes and giggles.

They've just finished with making all the decorations when Dinah exclaims: “*Chanco!*” abruptly sitting up in the spot she hasn't moved from since she became *one with the couch*, as she put it, and repeatedly taps Camila on the shoulder in excitement.

“Dinah, god, *what?*” Camila swats the girl's hand away.

“You got a text,” she says, shoves Camila's own phone in her face, “*from Shawn.*”

Camila's eyes widen at that; Normani can practically see the blood drain from her face, which she deems is notable. “Give me that.” Camila tries to snatch her phone back but fails. “What did he want?”

Dinah raises her eyebrows, somehow looks happier that Camila does. “He wants to know if you'll go out with him on Valentine's.” She shoves the phone back to her face again and Camila grabs it this time. “*Look.*”

“*Oh my gosh,*” Camila says. Then: “Dinah, did you just text him back a *yes* without my permission?”

“Yep.” Dinah pops the *p*.

“I am literally going to kill you.”

“Actually, Chanco, you're going to *thank* me,” she says pointedly. “I mean, it's not like you got all these hot dates waiting in line for you on *Valentine's Day*. Like, no offense or nothing.”

Camila crosses her arms defensively. “You don't know that,” she mutters.

“Yes I do. I live with you. Your calendar was literally blank last time I checked.”

Normani tears her eyes away from Twitter to see Lauren somehow suddenly taking an interest in daytime television cooking, leaning her back against the couch, hands folded and her undivided attention on some lady's droning about coconut juice products, or whatever. “Ally, you should make whatever that is,” she says, gestures distractedly to the TV. “It looks tasty.”

Normani looks a few inches over to see Camila looking at the same thing (or person) as she was.

Interesting.

But then Camila's eyes quickly drift back to Dinah, and she shakes her head like she's shaking off a thought before saying: "Well, at least you texted him for me so I didn't have to do it myself, I guess."

Very interesting.

What Normani hears the day after Valentine's, from Dinah and Camila, is that the date goes great. So great in fact, that the two are going to see a movie Wednesday after work.

The burger joint they're eating at is fairly crowded for a Monday, but it was lunch time and all the tables in the place are taken by people on their breaks, so they all squish into a booth made for either for three adults or four children-sized people and not five restless girls. Normani and Ally are seated on one side, and Dinah, Camila, and Lauren on the other, as per usual.

Something *not* as usual, Normani admits to notice, is the gap of space Lauren's left beside Camila. It's minuscule and hardly noticeable, like you have to have been observing and watching and comparing from previous moments where body language is pertinent.

(Body language is always pertinent with these two, she finds.)

"*I told you so, Chanco*," Dinah says, waving a fry in Camila's direction. "I'll take my *thank yous* in forms of cash and/or a second burger."

"All you did was text a confirmation," Camila says. "*I* could have done it if you didn't steal my phone and do it first."

"I'm still willing to accept that second burger."

Camila rolls her eyes, inconspicuously glances at the inch of empty air where Lauren's skin isn't touching hers, a movement that Normani observes and notes faintly.

"I gotta go pee," Lauren says, waits for Dinah to get up so she can go.

The walk to their apartments are seven minutes of a silent Lauren trailing behind the rest of the group. Everyone senses her sour mood, leaves her alone, probably thinking it's derived from a bad day at work, but Normani knows better. Like, if she's right on her whole *Lauren and Camila theory*, or whatever she later decides to call it. Hypothesis maybe? Who knows.

Science was never her thing, anyway.

But being Lauren's best friend *is* her thing, so Normani squeezes Ally's hand before letting go, slowing down, and wordlessly falling into step beside her.

“Whoa, *what* did you guys do?” Lauren asks.

“Camila invited Shawn.” Normani pauses between every word because it's her second time explaining and she knows Lauren's not an idiot. “He's coming over to game night tomorrow.”

“Did she even ask the rest of us?”

“Yeah, she ran it by the game night council and they approved.” By game night council, Normani means her and Ally.

“I thought I was part of the game night council, too.”

*Well, you might have made some biased decisions*, Normani's tempted to say. “Yeah, but you weren't there and me and Ally thought you'd say yes, anyways.” She thinks for a bit then says, “What kind of reason would you have to reject it?”

Lauren scowls. “I don't know, whatever.”

Horrible lie, Normani notes, but she's too good of a friend to call her out.

Shawn's really nice. Like, in the way that it seems almost *too* nice if he wasn't so darn genuine about everything. He even asks if he should take off his boots before entering the living room as to not get the carpet dirty. *No one* does that, and it's such a nice change from Dinah and Camila's dirt-tracking Doc Martens that Normani's mouth almost falls open in pure shock.

He brings homemade mac and cheese when he enters the threshold behind Camila, and Ally gushes about how *nice* the gesture is and how he didn't have to do that before taking it from his hands and setting it down on the dining room table.

“It was no trouble at all,” Shawn says behind a disarmingly white smile.

“*Homemade?*” Dinah mouths in shock behind Shawn's back after practically moaning around her fork.

Normani nods to Dinah in wide eyes because *wow, it really is good mac and cheese*.

“So, how did y'all get to talking?” Ally asks Shawn and Camila politely.

“At work; nothing special about it. One day we just randomly started talking.” Camila responds quickly.

“Actually,” Shawn starts, and Camila throwsn him a look, taps his shoulder with her knuckle. He smiles anyways, then says, “She spilled coffee all over me on her first day.”

“Shawn!” Camila moves to kick him but ends up kneeing the leg of the table.

The girls laugh and Dinah urges him to carry on: “Keep going! What happened next?”

“Yeah, it was a mess,” Shawn continues, “and she was all over the place like, 'Sorry! Sorry, I'm so sorry!'” He laughs and looks at Camila fondly. “She *literally* just got there, too. She didn't even have her apron tied on yet.”

“Shut up,” Camila says. “And it *was* tied, it just came *undone*, for your information.”

“Hey, don't act like it was only bad for you,” Shawn says. “That coffee *burned*.” He laughs, which makes Camila laugh.

“Y'all are too cute,” Ally remarks and Normani and Dinah agree.

Normani looks over to Lauren, sees her eyes glued to her bowl even though she's only eaten a bit of her food. She taps her toe against the girl's ankle, tilts her head in questioning, but then Dinah nudges Lauren to whisper a joke in her ear so the girl forces a laugh and decides not to look at Normani for the rest of the time.

“And for number twelve,” Shawn says, holding out his game card in front of him, “I put down 'cauliflower'.”

“Damn,” Dinah says. “How come I didn't think of that?”

Ally huffs. “Gosh, I know, right? I even had that for lunch yesterday.”

“Who has the most answers filled in?” Normani asks.

“Shawn,” Lauren answers with a moue after counting the filled lines on everyone's cards, and it sounds more begrudging than Normani knows she wants to let on. Lauren always wins—*won*—at *Scattergories*.

“Dang, Shawn, you're really good at this game,” Dinah says.

“Thanks.” Shawn smiles. He smiles a lot. “I play this game with my little sister all the time when I come to visit her.”

“That's really sweet,” Camila says. She's sitting with her legs crossed on the floor beside Shawn with their knees touching and arms in each others' space.



When he puts his arm around her shoulder, Normani swears Lauren's glare is enough to fry holes through Normani's ribcage (and *she* isn't even the one who it's directed at).

Normani isn't saying Lauren's jealous or anything, but like.

Lauren is jealous.

Normani doesn't directly state it, nor does she give her any type of *look* that suggests any of the sort because she knows Lauren will shut her up and make some vehement comment about how they're not in high school anymore so instances like that don't happen because she's not like, a hormonal sixteen year-old, but—

Lauren is jealous.

Lauren is so jealous.

The next day, Normani hears through the grape vine (which is Dinah, essentially) that when Camila walked Shawn to his car, they kissed and he asked if she wanted to be his girlfriend. Her answer became apparent in the morning, when the emoji of the day was the couple holding hands, proceeded by a heart emoji. Then another heart emoji, and another, and another.

The door slams from the living room and Normani hears boots trudging into where she is in the kitchen. Lauren stops when she sees Normani like she was caught up in her own thoughts and ostensibly forces her facial features to relax. (It kind of works but then, really, it doesn't.)

Judging by Lauren's heated mood she must have heard through the very same, very loud grape vine as well, Normani thinks.

Lauren yanks the fridge door open, and Normani says, “Calm down, Hercules. You okay? Did James do something stupid at work again?”

She shuts it after grabbing nothing. “Wasn't there. He was sick today,” she mutters.

If simultaneous sandwich making and brooding was an Olympic sport (or at least a game night event), Lauren would be the clear winner every time.

“Did you hear that Shawn asked Camila to be his girlfriend yesterday?” Normani asks coyly.

“Yeah? Dinah isn't exactly the most quiet. And it's not like the overabundance of heart emojis in the group chat from Camila this morning were arbitrary. This time, at least.”

“Thoughts?”

“Good for them, I guess?” Lauren's too busy scouring the pantry shelves to look at her.  
“Where the fuck is the bread?”

“I'm not sure if we still have any.”

“Fuck.” Lauren makes an exasperated noise in the back of her throat. “Then what's the fucking point of anything then?” She kicks at the wooden cabinets under the sink.

“Here, I forgot Ally put it over here, my bad.” Normani grabs the bread, sets it down by Lauren.

Lauren merely huffs. “Thanks.”

Silence follows and Normani grabs a water bottle from the fridge, leaning nonchalantly on the wall, still examining the movements of Lauren's unnecessary angry butter knife waving.

“You want some peanut-butter on that jelly or are you fine with it all by itself?” Normani mumbles before she sips on her water bottle. (Get it? 'Cause like, Lauren's *jelly*? She thinks it's clever.)

“What?” Lauren asks with a scowl.

“I said: Do we have enough peanut-butter or do I have to add that to the grocery list?”

“Uh, we still have enough, I think—I don't know.”

“Okay, just makin' sure.”

There isn't really much of a difference between Single Camila and Taken Camila. Single Camila makes horrible jokes, spontaneously bursts into song, and trips over everything and nothing. Taken Camila makes horrible jokes, spontaneously bursts into song, and trips over everything and nothing.

Taken Camila also still stares at Lauren a lot. Single Camila used to do that. Normani's pretty sure Taken Camila *shouldn't* do that.

Old habits die hard, she guesses.

The only difference between the two Camilas is that Shawn—all smiles and manners and guitar chords and songs—comes over frequently, either to teach her a new song, pick her up to go to dinner, or drop her off after work.

But that also means that Normani sees him a lot more, which *also* means that Lauren does, too, which is kind of a mess because she never really knows how Lauren's gonna be that day.

She varies from being indifferent, to distant, to grumpy, to everything in between.

So Normani pretends like it's nothing when Lauren has to find excuses to leave their apartment more often. For her best friend's sake.

“Mila told me that Shawn thinks you don't like him,” Dinah says to Lauren, chewing noisily on her Twizzler.

“What?” Lauren's face scrunches up ridiculously when she lies. “Why?”

“Yeah, how could he ever think that?” Normani says with a hint of sarcasm and it earns a glare from Lauren.

She scoffs. “That's dumb. Just because I don't talk to him doesn't mean I don't like him.”

“Mila says that Shawn told her he tried talking to you one time at the music shop and all you did was ignore him.”

“It was a busy day.”

“You were behind the register and you still didn't talk to him while he was paying for his stuff.”

“There was a long line behind him. Would you rather me talk to him or not get my ass fired?” Lauren reaches into the Twizzler bag. “And I don't really understand why I have to be, like, his best friend, or whatever. He's not *my* boyfriend.”

“Whatever, Ralph. Just manners.” Dinah hangs her Twizzler above her head and cranes her neck up to bite it.

Lauren snorts. “You're one to talk. This isn't even your bag of Twizzlers.”

Somewhere throughout the year (Normani can't really put an approximate date to it; all game nights start blending in after all the wine and board games and shouting), game night somehow becomes less of a bi-monthly event and more like an every-week-to-every-other-week-and-maybe-sometimes-even-two-times-a-week type of thing.

So Camila brings Shawn to all of them.

And Lauren brings Lucy to all of them.

And Lauren makes out with Lucy during all of them.

And the first time it happens in front of Shawn Normani, Ally, and Dinah shout and scold Lauren to be decent, and Ally profusely apologizes to him on Lauren's behalf.

"It's okay," Shawn says, though the tone in his voice suggests that he's at least a little bit astonished.

(Normani's just thankful Shawn didn't react like Brad did when he saw her and Ally kiss. She's really freaking glad Shawn didn't say anything like: "Oh, yeah, no worries. I watch lesbians get it on all the time on my computer screen," and then proceed to laugh like the joke was funny and *not* utterly disgusting.

Safe to say, Brad Simpson and game night were a one time thing.)

They watch a movie later and Normani can see Lauren's in *that* mood again because she's been practically clinging to everyone, except the usual person she would cuddle with when they watched a movie, which may be because that certain person now has a significant other that *isn't* Lauren.

When Shawn puts an arm around Camila, Lauren snuggles into Lucy's neck. When Camila puts a hand on Shawn's chest and rests her forehead on the side of his neck, Lauren kisses Lucy firmly without a word.

It makes Lauren's green eyes even greener with envy, if that were possible.

Lauren kisses Lucy a lot that night, and when everyone goes to bed, Lauren takes her to her room. Normani's sure it puts Lauren's long and glorious streak to an untimely end.

The breakthrough Detective Hamilton (herself) discovers goes like this:

Every time Camila does something, or even mentions something boyfriend-related, Lauren is there, ready and bouncing like a loaded spring, immediately reaching over to either flirt or kiss Dinah, Lucy, or whoever is beside her.

As evidence, it happens to Normani a few times one night over drinks and she's safe to say that the analogy holds.

Camila is the trigger and Lauren is the spring. Or whatever is used to make springs bounce. It's an imperfect analogy, but witty nevertheless, Normani thinks. Lauren would be proud. And "*Camila is the trampoline and Lauren is the ten year old kid with the birthday party*" sounds a tad bit less poetic in her opinion.

"*I'm going on a date*," is the first thing Lauren says right after the waitress leaves and everyone finishes ordering their food.

The entire table turns to look at her—even Shawn—in surprise.

"Sorry, what? Did you say *date*?" Normani asks, and she's not trying to be rude or anything, but she's her best friend and they even have a weird *mind connection thing* and she literally did not expect this. At all. The entire world as Normani knows it kind of collapses.

"Yeah?"

"Like, romance and junk?" Dinah says, face scrunched incredulously.

"Duh? That's what dates are for, I'm sure." Lauren sips on her drink.

"That's great, babe," Ally says, and Normani thinks she's the only one in the table doing a decent job of masking her surprise. She even tries to pinch Normani's thigh under the table.

"Yeah, that's great, Lo," Camila says. Her elbows are on the table and her hands are folded in front of her face, covering the worry of lip when she speaks. "Who's, uh, who is it?"

"Lucy, actually. We're going this Friday."

Camila looks like she's trying not to choke on an ice cube.

"Lucy? Really?" Dinah says.

"Yeah?" Lauren raises an eyebrow. "Are you trying to insinuate anything? Because you could just tell me, you know."

"No, she wasn't. Right, Dinah?" Normani tries to diffuse the situation before Lauren turns it into one. They haven't even gotten their pizza yet. Normani is *not* about to leave without pizza in her belly.

"Yeah, Ralph, it's all cool." Dinah shrugs. "My bad if I offended you, or anything. I'm just happy for you; my baby is growing up." She pinches Lauren's cheeks jokingly. "Maybe now you'll stop kissing me."

The corners of Lauren's mouth pull up and she pushes her on the shoulders. "Not a chance, Dinah Jane. You'd miss me too much."

When everyone is at least two slices in and Normani is debating whether or not to indulge herself in a third one, Ally says, "So, Shawn, Mila tells me that you do gigs sometimes. That's pretty cool."

"Thanks, I actually have one coming up on Friday at the bar on eighth street. I've been meaning to ask you guys if you wanted to come," he says.

"Of course we'll go," Camila says and everyone nods except Lauren, who has a frown on her face.

“Crap, that's the same day as my date,” she says.

“C'mon, Laurenza,” Dinah says, reaching over to put her arm around her, “this is Camila's boyfriend! And he makes music! You and Lucy love music. And you honestly don't even have to make a good impression on her because it's Lucy and she knows you're a mess, anyway. Just take her with us.”

Lauren rolls her eyes and picks at her pepperoni before saying: “Okay, sure. We'll be there.”

The mood picks up again and Normani does end up sharing her third slice with Ally. Everyone even laughs when Dinah says, “But now I'll be the seventh wheel. Damn, I gotta find me a man.”

The bar they're at is familiar. The girls have been here on more than one occasion; they're even friends with the bartender, who goes by the nickname Big Rob. He's sweet: the kind of person that gives newly-turned twenty-one year olds free drinks and glowers at creepy men who hit on uninterested women. Ally even made up a secret handshake with him one night and three birthday drinks later.

The air is still cold outside in late February, and it's much warmer inside so Normani takes off her coat, rubs at her arms. Early 2000s hits play from the speakers in a volume considered what would be a whisper compared to the usual Top 40s club music she knows is a few blocks away. Normani likes Big Rob and she likes this bar's atmosphere.

Ally and Normani walk with their hands entwined behind Dinah and Camila. She spies the stage on the other side of the room, where Shawn is in the middle of setting up his equipment. Camila greets him and he comes down to give her a kiss on the cheek.

“I'm glad you guys made it,” he says, smiles. Normani fleetingly wonders who his dentist is.

“Of course,” Camila says. “And I didn't even force them.”

The door opens and Normani turns around to see Lauren and Lucy walk in. She waves, catches their attention, and they walk over to join the rest of the group.

Onstage Shawn is just as charming as Normal Shawn, and his singing voice a thousand times more melodic than his speaking voice.

Normani sits across the booth from Ally, who is sitting next to Dinah, who is sitting across from Camila. Lauren and Lucy sit at the bar, and judging from the way Lauren's hand is edging on the inside of Lucy's thigh and they keep going off into the bathroom to make out every ten minutes like, *sure*, they have “incredibly small bladders”, Normani knows at least one or both of them are drunk enough.

She takes her eyes off of Shawn performing and sees Lucy stand up with the sound of the barstool scraping across the floor. Normani's sure another round of *'We Gotta Go Pee'* is

starting, but then Lucy makes her way over to their booth, plopping down beside Camila, saying: “I wanna watch. I can see him better from here and Lauren doesn't wanna leave her seat.”

Normani misses the part with the look in Camila's eyes that say: “*I don't really think this is how dates normally work.*”

But Normani does see her nod, her fingers curled around her drink, and the bite in her lip before asking: “Is she okay?”

Lucy blinks. “Yeah, I'm pretty sure. She wouldn't really tell me anything if I asked, anyways.” She shrugs.

Camila's face screams, ‘*Let me go talk to her,*’ so Normani beats her before she can.

“I'll talk to her.” She gets up after Camila and Lucy stand to let her out, walks over and sits beside her friend.

Normani doesn't have anything against Camila; not at all. It's just that—if she's being honest—she isn't really sure about the idea of Camila talking to Lauren right now, not when she's in a state like this. Normani knows her best friend better than anybody and she doesn't want to see Lauren do something she'll regret and get her heart broken. With Camila's boyfriend on the stage and Lauren's date seated at another table, the timing would be as ill-advised as ill-advised comes.

“Hey, girl,” Normani says, taking the seat where Lucy sat. “How ya feelin'?”

Lauren taps to the rhythm of Shawn's song. “Fine. Buzzed, I guess.”

“You know your date's sitting at our table, right?” Normani says, puts a hand on her shoulder.

Lauren's cheeks are pink and warm, her lips red and bitten. She pays no mind to Normani's question for a while, and when she thinks she does, Lauren just looks back at where everyone else is seated. She mumbles a quiet and apprehensive: “Wanna kiss her.”

Normani has a feeling she isn't talking about Lucy. The hand on her shoulder squeezes. “I know you do, girl.”

When Shawn's set is done and everyone finishes giving him a round of applause and other loud noises (most of which came from Dinah: she unsuccessfully tries to get the entire bar to chant his name), Normani finds herself sitting in Ally's passenger seat with a text from Lauren that says: *doing good. stayign over @ lucy's. love yuo mani, b home tomorrwo.*

What really blows Normani's mind about this situation—what really makes her stop and wonder if this really is the girl she's known her entire life and not kind of some fraud—is that Lauren never runs from her problems. Lauren is the type to take things in stride when things

go awry, the type to bite her lip until it bleeds and make fingernail crescents into her palm until her knuckles are white. Running isn't her thing. Like, physically and figuratively.

So when running from her problems is exactly what Lauren's doing and has been doing for quite some time now, well, Normani's stumped.

The screen on her phone flashes the time, reminds Normani that it's been nearly eighteen hours and Lauren still isn't back yet. She opens her messages to check just in case she missed a new text from her, like maybe even a distress call, or something. When the last text from Lauren still reads: *woke up. still at her place. not dead but dont bother calling, i prob won't pick up*, read at two p.m., Normani can't help but worry, even though, like, *yeah*, Lauren's a grown woman, and *yeah*, she can handle herself just fine.

It's just that it would put Normani's mind at ease if Lauren was handling herself in the comfort of their own home and not out somewhere doing *god knows what* in the Dallas Metroplex.

Her phone buzzes, though, and her hand flies to grab it. She brings it up to her face, sighs when it's only Ally texting: *are there any specific scents u want from bath & bodyworks??? if not i'll just go ahead and buy the entire store :)*

Normani sighs. *just buy whatever u want babe*, she texts.

“*Shit.*” Normani hears an unmistakable muffled voice through the door. The doorknob jiggles and the door creaks as it opens. Lauren steps into the threshold in the same clothes she wore yesterday.

“Jesus Christ,” Normani says.

“Nah, just me.” Lauren stumbles into the living room, runs a hand through the mess that is her hair as she tries to trudge into her room without another word to the girl on the couch.

Normani stops her on the way with two hands on Lauren's shoulders. “Hold up.” She knits her brows, examines her closer. Lauren looks down but Normani tilts her chin up. “Are you actually high right now? Are you kidding me? I thought me and Ally told your ass to never take that shit inside this home.”

She's not really worried anymore. Kind of more like pretty fucking pissed, if you asked her.

“Look, I'm sorry, okay? I asked Lucy to drive me home, but then some of her friends came over and—“

“I really don't wanna hear what you have to fucking say for yourself right now,” Normani interrupts, knows she's about to strike many chords with what she says next: “You know, lately you've been acting like one of my ten year olds who think they own the place and can do whatever they feel like doing.”



“I’ve—we’ve all left you alone to go sulk whenever Camila’s boyfriend even so much as breathes in the same room as you, and I get it, okay? I do and I’m sorry.” Lauren flinches at the mention of Shawn. “But do you think going on so-called dates with people you obviously don’t have any romantic interest in will help you in like, any way? Do you think kissing Dinah, or me, or even Ally in front of Camila will help you in any way? ‘Cuz it won’t.”

When Lauren looks up she’s crying, and Normani can’t help but feel a pang in her chest at the sight. Lauren collapses into Normani’s chest, and she can feel her sobs, raw and shaking and wet on her shoulder.

“I don’t know,” Lauren gasps between shuddering breaths. “I don’t know what to do and what I’m doing and I’ve never felt like this, Mani. I don’t know.”

Normani just clutches Lauren tighter, whispers words like: “Shh, it’s okay, it’s okay,” and just lets her soak “I don’t know”s into her shirt when they make it into Lauren’s room.

When Lauren wakes up it’s eight o’clock and Ally is already home after dragging a multitude of candles and hand soaps in her tote bag. She shuffles into the kitchen, rubbing at her eyes and tugging on her Paramore shirt.

“Hey,” Ally says, moves to hug her, “there’s my girl! I bought you a new candle for your room.”

“Thanks, Ally.” Her voice is quiet and gravelly. She moves to take her normal seat in the dining table across from Normani.

*You good?* Normani pushes a plate of Ally’s freshly made cookies towards her.

*I’m better.* Lauren takes one.

“So,” Dinah says, flops onto Lauren’s couch, “Mila’s birthday is coming up tomorrow. Hope y’all got everything ready.”

“How could we forget after you’ve reminded us for five days straight?” Normani says.

Dinah decides to ignore that. “We only got a few days left til’ showtime and I need everything perfect for my best friend.”

“Relax, Dinah,” Ally says. “Mila’s our best friend, too. Of course it’ll be perfect.”

Dinah nods. “Good, good. I’m not really worried about you, girl.” She whips her head to Lauren, who acknowledges her phone instead. “Who I’m really worried about is *this girl* right

here who thinks she can show up to only *two* out of five secret birthday meetings without even a text.”

Lauren looks up from her phone for three entire seconds to shoot her a withering look. “I have a job I go to, you know.” She crosses her arms then adds: “And it's not really much of a birthday meeting when all you do is barge in here unannounced and gather everyone into the living room.”

“Whatever, then, Miss Money, do you got a present?”

Normani notices the imperceptible twitch in her features before: “I do, actually.”

Dinah nods. “Okay, good. Meeting concluded.” She claps twice, stands abruptly before making her exit with a: “Peace.”

When Ally exits the living room and leaves Normani and Lauren by themselves, Lauren sets her phone down on the coffee table and looks up at her. She pulls her bottom lip into her mouth before saying: “Can I ask you something?”

“Yeah, what's wrong?” Normani leans in closer when Lauren hesitates.

“I kind of—I bought The 1975 tickets for Camila's birthday and like, I don't know if I should, like—you know,” Lauren says apprehensively. Her fingers idly play with the sleeve of her sweater.

“Oh.” Normani blinks. “I thought that show here was sold out. When did you get them?”

“Like, in January. I've kind of just been waiting until her birthday to give them to her.” She says it like an admission, like the chest inside her cracks open upon the right words and now she isn't all too sure of what to do with the heart that comes spilling out beneath her ribs.

And *oh*. Because this is Lauren and she is her best friend and now Normani knows how big, exactly, of a freakin' deal this—she—is to her.

Normani thinks carefully before she says it. “You really like her, don't you?”

Lauren's heart is beating, beating in her own hands, and all she knows how to do is clutch it tighter. “I—yeah, I think.”

Normani nods, knows this is as honest and *Lauren* as Lauren can get right now. “Give it to her, of course,” she says. “Just, like—” Normani frowns in search of the right words because this is the first time Lauren's opened up without any type of deleterious assistance to do it for her. “Be careful, okay?” And this is as *Normani* as Normani can get, too.

“Yeah, Mani, I will. Don't worry.”

(Normani still kind of worries.)

*Angsty drunks*, Lauren mockingly named them, are the poor saps rooted in the deep corner of the bar, the ones with their backs hunched forward and their cheek rested on their fist like a surrender, the ones Lauren and Normani used to make a game out of when they were bored. (Kind of like an *I Spy* but with more shots than necessary.)

Lauren's never been an angsty drunk; she's never been much of a plaintive drunk, either. Not even an angry one.

Like, with the exception of a *few* recent instances.

And right now, of course.

Lauren is staring. At no other than Camila.

Which, granted, she's wearing a lopsided glittery tiara *and* a neon pink "Birthday Girl" sash, *and* she's on the arm of one of the best looking guys in the room, so really, like, half of the people in the club are staring at Camila.

But Lauren's eyes are egregious and even though the edges are *hazyblurryfuzzy* around Normani's vision and she's drunk enough to believe that Ally's hair might be sentient and flying in all directions around her, the flickering neon sign spelled out in capital letters as "JEALOUS" on Lauren's forehead is clear-cut like the fake diamond smack dab in the middle of Camila's tiara.

Normani likes to call this: *Typical Saturday Night: Birthday Edition*.

Dinah is utterly wasted, which means she's found some guy with muscles and a shirt about three open buttons more than the average unbuttoned shirt calls for, and she's leaning against him like he's the last upright wall in existence. Then guy number *dos* comes along and it becomes a club sandwich (see what she did there?) that Normani isn't really surprised of, but still somewhat proud of Dinah nevertheless.

Ally whoops a: "Whoo! Shots!" and Normani just realizes she left her side to go to the bar.

She makes her way over, accidentally grasps a total of one boob before quickly apologizing to the owner.

Camila looks like she's maybe two shots in, clutching at Shawn, who is red-faced and sweaty and laughing almost embarrassingly loud at Ally's joke.

And Lauren is staring.

And Lauren keeps staring even after she downs the shot Ally gives her.

And knowing Lauren, she's most certainly thinking about the way Camila's head dips back and her throat exposes when she takes her shot, how Shawn grips her waist tighter, and how much she wants Camila to pay attention to her. In that exact order.

“Lauren,” Normani manages to shout over the music and Ally's laughing. She doesn't mean for it to sound chiding, but it does anyways.

“What?” she snaps, holding a new shot glass in her hand.

Normani doesn't even remember when Lauren got another one, and god forgive her, she's a little bit too drunk to be giving any sort of advice right now, but she blinks hard and says, “You're staring and it looks like you're fixin' to shove a hand down Mila's pants right in front of her boyfriend.”

But Lauren's eyes say: *'Well, no offense, but I would,'* and her mouth says, “She hasn't even looked at me, like, once tonight.”

“Uh, we obviously haven't been watchin' the same girl, then,” Normani says. Lauren looks at her in confusion and she takes the advantage to steal the shot glass right from Lauren's fingers.

“I was gonna drink that, asshole,” Lauren protests.

“*You* were not,” she says firmly. She slides the drink near Ally, who is apparently on a roll with her story-telling, and out of reach for Lauren. “I'm gonna get you some water, or something.”

“Just go back to your girlfriend and leave me alone, please,” Lauren laments, jerking her shoulder away from Normani's hand.

Normani doesn't really know what to say and she's far from thinking clearly, but her throat closes up at the sight of her miserable best friend and, god, all she wanted to do tonight was get *turnt*, but *fuck*, Lauren needs her.

Lauren stands and Normani is quick to catch her with both hands on her elbows.

“Where the fuck is Dinah?” Lauren asks. “Maybe she'll make out with me. That'll show Camila.” The last one was probably meant to be a thought and not a sentence.

“Lauren, c'mon—“ Normani isn't really sure where she wants Lauren to go, but definitely somewhere away from where she could do any further emotional harm to herself. “I know you have feelings for her, but this ain't a good look for you right now.”

Lauren suddenly yanks her arm from Normani's grip. “Yeah, I have *feelings*.” The bite in her tone is too apparent. “I don't even know what those *feelings* are and I don't know what to do with them and there's not much I can even *do* in the first place.”

Normani really doesn't know what to do but hand her some water. “I'm sorry,” she manages. “Drink this.”

“I've never even been *jealous* before, Mani,” Lauren says, and thankfully, she takes a sip of the water. It eases Normani a little bit, even if Lauren scowls afterwards. “It's kind of a shitty feeling.” She attempts to move past Normani to where she assumes either Dinah or Camila is.

Either way, Normani stops Lauren from going any farther. “C'mon, Laur, please. Remember what I told you about how this isn't gonna solve any of your problems.”

She tries to push her away for umpteenth time that night. “Yeah, but I'm drunk and I can do whatever the fuck I want. Since when have I ever needed an excuse to *fuck anyone*?” she spits out.

Compelling argument aside, Normani still doesn't budge. “*Lauren.*”

Lauren is really fucking trashed.

And she's back to staring over Normani's shoulder and right at Camila.

She's about to say something about it again, but Lauren stops, says, “Fuck, I feel like pure shit and I might throw up. I'm gonna go home now, I think.”

Normani nods, doesn't wait until Lauren changes her mind. “That's the best idea you've had all night.”

“Yeah, just—” Lauren stumbles a bit before reaching into her purse. “Give these to Camz for me?” She pulls out an envelope titled: *To Camz.*

Normani blinks again, then realizes. “Oh, your tickets.”

Lauren is holding them out expectantly for her to grab.

“No way, girl.” Normani shakes her head. “I'm goin' home with you. And I want you to give them to her. You don't have to give them tonight; maybe you could do it tomorrow when you're less of an asshole, but I want *you* to give it. They're yours, anyway. I was just gonna give Mila a giftcard to Starbucks.”

Lauren makes an exhaling noise that sounds a bit like a laugh. “Mani, she works at a coffee shop.”

“Shit, I don't know how I forgot that.” She guesses she has to give Camila her non-Starbucks related gift tomorrow, too. “I even put thirty bucks in it.” Maybe she'll get her a cool shirt from Target instead.

“But,” Lauren says, “yeah, I guess I should be the one giving her those tickets.” She moves to put the envelope back inside her purse. “Ugh, I really feel like shit and I kinda wanna die and I feel even worse for missing out on Camila's party. I'm gonna go use the bathroom and then we can go.” That water Normani gave her must be magic, or something.

When Lauren walks off and Normani finishes informing Ally that they're leaving, Camila finds her, all flushed cheeks and smudged makeup. “Hey, Mani, where's Lauren? I'm gonna go ask her if she wants to dance.”

Normani glances to the restrooms, hesitates before saying: “She's not really feeling that well—must have been something she ate. She's in the restroom, but right after this we're gonna go

on ahead home. I'm sorry, Mila.” The *happy birthday* tries but dies on her tongue upon the falling of Camila's face.

She looks at Normani like they reach some kind of irrevocable understanding (or Normani's reading too much into it; she can never tell). Camila bites her lip and nods, face drawn in worry. “Oh, okay. Well, I'll see you guys tomorrow, then. Tell her to feel better for me.”

“Will do.”

The cab ride from there is silent. Lauren is pressed up against Normani, who has her arms around her. When Normani looks down, Lauren's eyes are open and relatively clearer than they were in the bar.

Lauren is pensive, but she doesn't look as miserable as before, Normani thinks. “You have a shitty way of coping with your feelings, you know.”

“Fuck off,” Lauren mumbles. “This is why I never get in touch with them.”

“Shoulda kept it that way,” Normani jokes, and she smiles when Lauren offers a playful glare even though she knows how badly her best friend feels.

“I could puke on you, you know. I really could.”

It's eleven o'clock when Normani wakes up and minutes past noon when she finally gets herself together.

Camila had knocked on the door at about 12:50 with a small paper bag in her hand and a shy curve of her mouth. “Is Lauren feeling better? I brought her a muffin.”

“And you didn't give me or Ally one? Rude.” Normani puts her hands on her hips, jokingly shakes her head and purses her lips.

Camila juts her bottom lip out. “Sorry, Mani. I'll bring you guys a truck full of muffins next time.”

“Better make it two trucks,” she says. “Sorry we had to leave your party early, by the way. Lauren really wasn't feeling good.”

Camila runs a hand through her hair. “Don't worry about it. You didn't miss much; Dinah almost legit married, like, two guys, though. At the same time.”

Normani takes the paper bag from her hands. “Thank you, Mila. I’ll go on ahead and give this to her.”

Camila smiles, pulls the corner of her top lip between her teeth. “Thanks, Mani. And I was totally a hundred percent serious about the muffin trucks.”

The clock reads one p.m. when Normani finishes washing the dishes left by her and Ally and she quietly pads into Lauren's room with the muffin in one hand and a glass of water in the other.

“Hey, Lo,” Normani whispers, moving Lauren's Aspirin aside and gently placing the things on the table by her bed.

The blinds are shut and the room is dark. The only visible part of Lauren is some of her hair; the rest of her body is covered by her blanket. She makes no sound of acknowledgement besides the rustle of the sheets when her foot moves.

“Mila dropped by earlier with a muffin for you. She wanted to know how you were doing,” Normani says, sitting down on the open space of her bed.

Lauren groans at the mention of Camila. “I was an asshole last night, wasn't I?” Her voice sounds scratchy and wrecked.

“Yeah, you were a huge mess.” Normani isn't known for holding anything back. “Do you remember?”

“I wish I didn't.”

Normani hums understandably, places her hand in what she hopes is in comfort on Lauren's thigh. “Sorry 'bout that, girl.”

It's five in the afternoon when Lauren still doesn't come stumbling into the kitchen like she always does; it's six when Normani hears a thumping noise and the slamming of the bathroom door.

“Lo?” Normani knocks on the bathroom door and is answered by a groan. “Lauren? I'm coming in.”

She finds Lauren kneeling in front of the toilet, green in the face and clutching at her stomach, looking like a very unhealthy combination of sick, tired, sad, and given up on like, literally everything.

Normani whistles, grimaces at the sound when Lauren moves to puke again. She holds her hair back and uses the hair tie on her wrist to put it up and it out of her way.

When she cleans Lauren up and gets her back to bed, Normani takes her temperature. “Damn, you're sick. You have a fever.”

Lauren's petulant whine that soon comes after sounds like an: “*Oh, really? Couldn't tell.*”

“Just try to get some rest, okay?” The muffin on her bedside table from earlier is missing only a chunk (which is kind of like, in the toilet now).

Throughout the rest of the afternoon, Normani and Ally take turns checking on her with food and medicine until they go to bed later in the night because of work in the morning.

Normani wakes up to the alarm clock ringing and its red blinking of 6:00 a.m.

She sits up, rubs at her eyes when she notices the other side of the bed is already empty. Ally must have already awoken before her.

When she isn't in the kitchen, Normani goes to Lauren's room. She finds Ally there, already dressed and stroking Lauren's hair, who has her eyes shut and is either sleeping or trying to.

“She was throwing up all night,” Ally whispers. “I woke up three times to check on her before I went back to sleep, then I woke up at four-thirty again and just decided to stay up.”

“Oh, shoot.” Normani feels bad for letting Ally do that by herself. “I'm sorry, I was just out.”

Ally giggles quietly. “Who's the heavy sleeper now?” But then she sighs, looking down at Lauren. “I don't think I should come in today.”

Normani thinks for a while. “I don't know, don't you have to give out a test today? I can watch her so you don't have to.”

Lauren whines, low and tired and pathetic. Ally pushes the hair on her forehead back to kiss it and Normani sends a text to Dinah and Camila to inform them about Lauren's current state, paying no mind to the time.

To her surprise, Camila texts back immediately: *oh no :( do u guys need anyone to take care of her while u guys are at work?? i'm completely free today and i wouldn't mind at all :)*

Normani blinks at her screen. “Camila texted. She offered to watch over Lauren for us.”

“Really?” Ally asks in puzzlement. “That's great, but I wonder why she's up this early if she isn't doing anything.”



Normani shrugs, sends back: *thank you so much mila. u kno where the key is. but why are u up so early tho?*

The response is immediate again:

*ben 10 reruns duh*

*not the one where he's a teenager but the good one*

Of course. Normani almost wants to ask Lauren what she sees in her.

Her phone buzzes again, but it's not Camila this time; it's Dinah.

*dis woke me up lol. tell lausr sorry nd i hope she dont die but i dont gotta b up 4 another 30 mins so gn*

Normani doesn't even bother to answer that one.

“Well, it's settled, then,” she says.

Somewhere beneath three blankets, Lauren groans.

When Normani and Ally come home, the place is warm and the air that wafts into the threshold smells like food.

“Hey, guys.” Camila greets from the kitchen with her hair up in a bun and an oversized cardigan loose on her shoulders. “I'm making some fajitas. You guys can wait a little bit, right?”

“Yeah, of course, thank you, Mila,” Ally says. “Here, I can help you out a little.”

Normani comes into the living to see Lauren on the couch, book held in both hands and a One Direction blanket covered up to her chest.

“Damn, love your blanket, girl,” Normani remarks. “Where'd you get it? Liam's face looks great on your boob, by the way.”

Lauren rolls her eyes. “It's Camila's.” Her voice sounds better than it did last night, and some of the color has come back to her cheeks.

“Don't make fun of my favorite blanket or you're not getting any of the wonderful food I cooked.” Camila shows up beside Normani to slap her on the arm before she tells Lauren to “scooch over”, to which the other girl happily complies, moving over and lifting up the blanket for her.

Normani tries not to give Lauren a smug look. Tries.

“Aren't you worried you might catch whatever nasty thing Lauren has?” she asks.

“Nah,” Camila says, “my immune system is like, rock solid. Seriously, I haven't gotten sick since like, the ninth grade. And if I do ever mysteriously fall ill, I know Lauren over here will take care of me. Right, Lo?” She pokes her on the chin.

“Well, I never promised *that*,” Lauren says in a tone that hardly convinces Camila, much less Normani.

“But you owe me one now, so you kinda have to. Sorry 'bout it.” Camila plucks the book from her hands, brings the blanket up to her face to try and make her Spiderman-kiss Niall.

Lauren protests and turns her head, of course. She'd much rather be kissing Camila, anyway.

When the table is set and after Dinah comes through the door with a dramatic: “Nurse Chanco, gimme the stats on our patient,” Ally puts the rest of the food she made on the table and takes her usual seat beside Normani.

Ally insists on a prayer before eating, so they join hands, their plates still empty except for the half-eaten brownie Dinah had already swiped before Normani slapped it out of her hand.

“Oh, why don't we go around and take turns to say what we're all thankful for now?” Ally says.

“Uh, isn't that, like, a Thanksgiving thing?” Lauren asks, but immediately shuts it when Normani glares at her. “Or not.”

After Ally says something mushy and sentimental about family and friends and Normani does the same thing—except a little less mushy—Lauren says, “Um, I'm thankful for not dying today. And also for not throwing up all over Camz.”

Camila gives her a smile and a quick sideways glance before saying: “And I'm thankful for Lauren not dying under my watch because it might have been hard to explain to the police. And also that she didn't throw up all over me *or* my One Direction blanket.”

When it gets to Dinah, all she says is: “I'm thankful for these brownies and you people and God, of course. Amen,” and after the chorus of “Amen” echoes back, she then proceeds to plop what is left of her brownie into her mouth.

Camila starts to say something, but it comes out like a muffled “*Mmph*,” considering the entire brownie she shoved down her throat. She chokes a little (Lauren pats her back), swallows and says, “Guys, Lauren got me The 1975 tickets for my birthday.”

Ally says, “Wow, that's so sweet, Lo. I hope y'all have a lot of fun.”

Normani says, "That's cool. Y'all can geek it out together and away from us for one entire night."

Dinah says, "Dang, that is pretty cool, Walz. Good job, Lauser. It almost beats the present I gave her."

Camila grins wide, gives full display of the brownie piece stuck to her teeth.

Lauren catches it but grins back, smile almost as equally brownie-ey.

It's nice when Lauren starts to revert back to her annoying-but-not-as annoying self again. She still invites Lucy to game night, but she doesn't make out with her (and their date thing was apparently a one-time deal, so Normani doesn't have to relive the horrors of *that* again); she doesn't try striking up conversation with Shawn, but she at least doesn't totally shut down and pout for the entirety of his presence.

It's still nice.

But Lauren still stares and so does Camila sometimes, boyfriend or no, and Normani still knows it isn't her business except for what her best friend lets her in on, so.

She doesn't say anything.

The emoji of the day buzzes in Normani's purse when she's in the middle of driving home. She doesn't get to it until reaches her floor, turning on the screen to find a singular broken heart with not even the paragraph-long explanation as to why Camila chose that emoji for the day, usually laden with exclamation points and question marks and maybe an ellipsis here and there.

Which could only mean one thing.

Camila coops herself up in her room for the entire day.

Dinah comes by their apartment only once to ask one of them if they would take her to go on a junk food run with her. "Mila kind of ate all my ice cream halfway through *Stuck in Love*," she explains.

"I'll go with you," Normani offers.

"I will, too," says Ally.

Normani gets up to put her jacket on and hand Ally hers. Lauren stands up from where she's been sitting the entire time, and Normani asks if she wants to come.

Lauren shakes her head, but moves to grab the doorknob. "I think I'm gonna go check on Camz," she mutters without saying anything else. She catches Normani's eye before she gathers her earbuds and her phone and walks to the apartment across from them.

Camila feels better the next day.

Not better as in *"I'm completely over my ex boyfriend because it's been well over twelve hours so I'm ready to go out and mingle,"* but better as in Camila agrees to let the girls take her out to the diner nearby for pie and shitty breakup stories.

"I don't even know," Camila says, moving her straw around her milkshake. "He started going on about getting discovered and record labels and managers and tours and 'life moving forward,' or whatever, and I hardly even knew what was happening until he looked at me all sad and stuff and started apologizing."

"I'm so sorry, babe." Ally reaches across and covers Camila's hand with her own.

"Yeah, Mila," Normani agrees, nodding her head sympathetically. "That sucks. I'm really sorry."

Dinah waves a dismissive hand, puts an arm around Camila's shoulder. "Ah, who needs him, anyway? Not when you got us."

"Thanks, Dinah." Camila tries a smile but it ends up looking like a sad quirk of her mouth. "Thank you, guys. Like, seriously."

"There are other nice boys with hella good jawlines that are out there just waiting for Karla Camila to come along," Dinah says.

A breathy laugh makes it way out from Camila's chest. "I don't really think I want to see or date another nice boy with a hella good jawline, like, ever again, actually."

Lauren chuckles, nudges her with her elbow. "Good choice, Camz."

Normani watches as Camila tries not to smile around her pie.

"No, no." Dinah shakes her head and picks up the box of macaroni and cheese promptly after Normani puts it in the shopping cart.

“What? There's a coupon for these,” Normani says, waving the slim yellow piece of paper in front of Dinah's face. “See, look. Buy one get another one free.”

The other girl wrinkles her nose. “Yeah, but this brand is gross.” Normani scoffs and Dinah continues: “So why would I want *two* of these nasty boxes of nasty macaroni when I can get that one brand of the cool ones shaped like dinosaurs?”

Normani rolls her eyes. “Yeah, but you gotta shop smart, though.” Then she stops, squinting her eyes a little. “Wait a minute. Why should I care?” She plucks the box from Dinah's hands and puts it back on the shelf. “I'm not your roommate and I don't care if you go broke.”

“Okay, that was kinda harsh.”

“Just sayin',” she says while Dinah grabs her preferred brand of macaroni. Like the shapes are really a factor. Sure.

“Alright, girl,” Dinah says tapping a beat on the shopping cart handle when they're out of the aisle and into the next one. “Gossip time.”

Normani hums, starts to search the shelves for her favorite brand of protein bars. “Gossip 'bout what this time?”

Dinah drops her voice. “Lauren and Camila, of course.”

She finds the kind she's looking for, looks back and forth between one flavor and the other. “What about 'em?” she asks nonchalantly.

“Normani,” Dinah says. “Girl, I *know* you know.”

Of course Normani does. It's kind of hard not to considering your best friend has had one too many minor drunken emotional breakdowns about it and you were the only one with a shoulder to cry on available. Unless Ally knows. *Does* Ally know? Is *anyone* really that oblivious at this point?

But anyways, she's getting off track here.

It's not her business. No matter what. No matter how much Normani is inclined to grab her 3-D glasses and put some popcorn in the microwave everytime Lauren and Camila do something laughably, disgustingly rom-com worthy when they think no one's watching. None of her business. At all.

“Not our business.”

Dinah scoffs. “I *know*. But it's *interesting*.”

“Chocolate or vanilla?” Normani asks instead.

“Mani, I know you way better than this and you're not fooling no one,” Dinah says, carelessly taking the vanilla box out of Normani's hand and tossing it in the cart with an exasperated sigh. “And I *know* you're just about as nosy as I am, if not more.”

“There's an apple flavor? I wonder how that tastes. Should I try?”

“*Mani*. I *know* you love gettin' in on drama. That used to be, like, our *thing*, remember?”

Normani exhales, rolls her eyes and relents. “Okay, fine. Got me, or whatever. Of course I know about those idiots.” Apple flavored protein bars probably wouldn't have been her thing, anyway. “How'd you figure them out?”

“Remember all those months ago when I told you I'd be watching a little closer from now on? I did, duh. And I've already kinda known from the start. I know Chanco like the back of my hand. She didn't even have to tell me,” Dinah says, swerving past an eight year-old to reach the hot Cheetos. “She can't hide nothin' from these eyes. I'm like a hawk.”

Normani grabs a bag of tortilla chips around a mother who is in the middle of scolding her child. “Mila really broke Lauren's heart with Shawn, you know. I didn't even know Laur could be all jealous and sad like that.”

Dinah sighs and the child beside them screeches. “I think that was partly my fault, honestly. I was sensing some weird vibes from Mila and, I don't know, she's just a hopeless romantic and I didn't wanna see her get hurt or anything every time Lauren made out with someone new—like, no offense, but you know—so I was really eager setting her up with Shawn.”

The child stops screeching and Dinah adds: “I shouldn't have been involved like that, though. I gots to let Walz be Walz, even if I'm just looking out for her.”

Normani nods and she takes over pushing the cart. “Yeah, I get that. Lauren just *really* wanted Mila to pay attention to her, you know. That's why she kissed like, everyone in front of her.”

“That's a really shitty method of dealing with things,” Dinah says. “What did Lo expect would happen? I mean, it's Mila we're talking about. The most she would do is write bad poetry, or like, indirectly tweet a lyric, or something. Actually, I'm pretty sure she already has.”

“That's what *I* told her,” Normani says, stopping in front of the ice cream. “I told her it was really selfish of her to do that, but I mean, we talked a lot after that, and she's better about it. Dealin' with it like a big girl now.”

“So, flirting her ass off?” Dinah raises an eyebrow.

“Yep. They both are. It's kinda gross to watch, honestly.”

“God, I know,” Dinah agrees, then leans in close. “And sometimes I hear the door opening and shutting at like, around midnight. Do you think...?”

She snorts. “Please, all they do is watch cartoons and cuddle. They've been doing that for like, months already. I bet you they haven't even *seriously* kissed yet, you know, like, zero alcohol involved. Lauren's such a puppy when she catches feelings; it's kinda cute, but it's

also like exploring the deep ocean with those freaky ass fish 'cause you don't really know what the hell could happen or what you could find."

Dinah claps emphatically and Normani rolls her eyes. "Beautiful metaphor, Mani. What would those two even do without us?"

Normani chuckles. "Without us to guide them these fools'll probably do something really idiotic. Like, *Romeo and Juliet* style idiotic."

She hums in agreement and bends down to grab a tub of Rocky Road. "So, when do you think they're gonna kiss? Like, give me a rough estimate."

Normani narrows her eyes. She's already getting goosebumps on her arms from standing near the refrigerators. "Why? God, are we placin' bets now? Like we used to?"

"I don't know." Dinah shrugs innocently, but then she soon breaks out into a mischievous grin. "Maybe."

Normani makes a disbelieving sound at the back of her throat.

"C'mon, Mani," she says. "Remember when we did that with Lauren's first three boyfriends?"

"Yeah, and you were fifty bucks richer than you were at the start of Junior year."

"*But* I treated all of y'all *and* Lauren's new boo to ice cream didn't I? You even got a double scoop, if I recall correctly."

"You can't seriously believe I'm actually going to place *bets* on something like this," Normani says firmly and crosses her arms.

"What? Scared you'll lose and I spend it all on some sweet ass clothes? Like I always did?" Dinah's voice is challenging and mockingly superior, so, like the intrinsic law of the universe:

By the end of the grocery run, Normani comes back with food, tampons, and an agreement.

"Bet," Dinah says, reclining on the red couch. "It's today; some slow ass song in the middle of the crowd. Probably that one song that Mila plays out loud when she thinks she's alone. I have no idea what it's called because I never know what that guy is saying, but," she points the remote at Normani, "it's corny enough to where they both lean in at the same time."

Normani thinks, munches on her apple. "Nah, either after the concert inside her car, *or* in the restroom. Don't care who leans in."

"Nuh-uh," she says, "that's not how the rules go. Gotta pick one, girl."

Normani gets up to throw her apple core away. "Fine, I'll go with my first one. In the car." When she sits back down, she says, "How are we gonna find out which of us is right, anyways?"

Dinah shrugs. "I got ways. And I feel like we'd know if they do."

Normani nods. "Yeah, you're probably right."

"I'm *always* right," she remarks.

Normani stretches her foot to kick Dinah's, gives her her best glare. "Not this time, Hansen. You're gonna owe me."

"Gosh, it's pouring out," Ally says when she walks in, hanging her rain coat and setting her keys down on the table.

"Mmhm," Normani agrees. "Lauren and Mila better have brought some umbrellas while they're waiting in line."

*Rain. Concert. Kissing. Kissing in the car while it's raining. Something Lauren would totally be prone to doing and something Camila would totally let happen to her.* Normani shoots Dinah a smug look like the other girl knows exactly what she's thinking. Dinah gives a halfhearted eye roll and diverts her attention to the TV.

"Have they already left?" Ally asks.

"Yep," Dinah says.

"That's nice. I hope they have fun."

Dinah exhales, mumbles. "Not too much fun, though."

Normani shakes her head slowly, but twists her face into a slight smile.

Ally plops down beside Normani. "Aw, leave them alone. Let them figure out their feelings for each other on their own. It's cute."

Dinah and Normani stare at Ally.

"What do you mean by that?" Normani says.

"Please, babe," Ally says, unbothered. "Don't look so surprised like *I* didn't know what was going on. I've known about Lauren's little crush for a *long* time." She looks at Normani. "Just because *you* have, like, a mind connection with her, or whatever y'all call it, doesn't mean I'm *blind*." She looks at Dinah. "And just because I'm not taking dumb *bets* with anyone doesn't



mean I don't know, either. I can keep things to myself better than both of y'all *combined*," she says honestly, but not harshly.

Dinah shrugs, looks at least a little bit guilty. "Yeah, true that. You're such an *angel*, Allyson," she coos, walks over to wrap her into a hug. Normani joins in.

"Y'all two are too much sometimes," Ally says.

Something definitely changes the next day after the concert. The space between Lauren and Camila shift and alter into something else, something inexplicitly *Lauren and Camila* and also something *Normani's-bet-with-Dinah* related.

They haven't talked to each other much since last night, but when they do, Lauren's mouth is twisted into a smothered smile, which makes Camila bite her lip to keep from giving one back and look away like the screen of her phone is where Lauren's new eyes have relocated.

Normani locks eyes with Dinah whenever it happens and the other girl shakes her head back and shoots her a puzzled look.

Lauren didn't even say anything to Normani when she came back besides a "Yeah, we had a lot of fun," and a "Oh my god, they were so good live," and a "No, nothing *happened*, Mani. I don't even know what you *mean* by that," even though she totally *knows* what Normani means by that, which is like, fine and all because she respects the fact that Lauren isn't ready to disclose anything yet.

But now Normani is back to guessing.

"Walz won't tell me anything," Dinah says. "But something *obviously* happened because Mila's been giving off that *vibe* since she left the concert."

"Lauren won't say anything either," Normani says.

"This is ridiculous." Dinah crosses her arms, sinks into the couch. "How are we supposed to know what happened that night, then?"

"You don't." Ally shows up from out of the kitchen. "Just let them be and call that stupid bet off."

Dinah pouts and whines like a petulant child.

But, what is much more important than a bet is the happiness of her best friend. Her best *friends*, actually.

And they seem fine, with all their new inside jokes and shared french fries from the diner, trailing behind the group on the walk back, their linked arms which turn into laced fingers when they walk up the stairs into their apartments, and Lauren's "We're gonna stay in the living room for a bit to watch a couple episodes of *Broad City*," and "Oh, yeah, I guess you guys can join in too, if you want," like the TV *isn't* Normani's.

They seem *really* fine, in her opinion.

No one says anything even though *everyone* knows.

Everyone knows the reason behind Lauren's new offhand habit of wearing scarves although it's a few months past scarf season, and everyone knows the owner of the shade of lipstick poorly smudged onto Camila's neck like one of them did a half-assed job of wiping it off.

Even Lucy knows. She had an arm slung across Ally's stomach on blue and a leg wedged under Dinah's on green when she whispered in Normani's ear (which was far closer than it usually would have been if they weren't in the middle of playing a game of *Twister*), and said, "Whoa, when did *this* happen?" with a head jerk in Lauren and Camila's direction (who's limbs somehow *always* managed to get tangled together).

Dinah almost said something one time when Camila was minutes later than she usually was when getting off from work and Lauren had offered to drive her home, but Ally kicked her shin under the table when Lauren and Camila walked into the room with sticky cheeks and half-eaten ice cream cones in their hands, so Dinah effectively kept her mouth shut.

"They're like, perfect for each other, though, you know?" Dinah plucks a grape from its bag without any intention of putting it in the cart. "Lauren is the only one who laughs at Mila's jokes. Like, even the terrible ones that make me not wanna be her friend anymore."

Normani rolls her eyes and ignores her as she tries to get Lauren on the phone. "Which kind did you want again?" she says when her friend picks up.

Instead of an answer, she gets rustling and a distant "—Camila, stop—I—I'm—literally going to kill—" And then a disconnection.

Normani groans and Dinah says, "Was Mila with her? They were gaying it up, weren't they?"

(When they get home, Lauren complains about getting the wrong teaflavor and Normani nearly dumps the entire gallon all over her head.)

Normani likes to think she sees everything. Like, with her detective skills and all.

What happens in the morning totally blindsides her, though, to a point where it shouldn't even blindside her because *is this not what she expected?* So, maybe like a sort of-blindside.

It happens right before Normani and Ally get finished with their morning prayers.

The doorknob to their bedroom jiggles as it opens and in comes Camila—in nothing but the same old *Paramore* shirt Normani remembers Lauren wearing last night stopping at her mid thigh.

Normani really hopes she's wearing underwear.

Camila freezes like a deer in the headlights at the same time Normani's back straightens and Ally wonders with a: “Camila? What're you...?”

For three more beats, she's looking back and forth between Normani and Ally while they're looking at her with such confused expressions that their faces might get stuck that way.

“*This isn't the bathroom,*” she manages to croak out.

Normani blinks to make sure she isn't having some weird dream and nope, no she isn't.

*You've practically been living in our apartment for almost a year and you still have trouble finding the bathroom?* Normani wants to say. Instead she rubs at her eyes, says, “We all need to talk. Like, as soon as you get your pants on.”

Camila takes forever to get her pants on, and it apparently takes Lauren twice as long to do the same (probably both on purpose). They exit the bedroom together slowly and take their seats side by side on the red couch.

“So,” Dinah says after the prolonged silence lasts far too long, “did Many and Ally finally catch y'all two boning, or what? 'Cause I'm still not sure why I'm here when I can be like, asleep in my own bed.”

“What?” Lauren says blearily. “What the fuck is going on?”

“Okay,” Normani interrupts before Dinah can get another word in. “We promise y'all aren't in trouble or nothin', we just need to make some things clear.”

“Yeah,” Ally tacks on, “and we just feel like this is the best way to like, get it all out, you know?”

“Yeah, exactly,” Normani agrees.

“I don't really know what I need to say?” Camila says with a questioning lilt, though her face is still as red as it was earlier.

“To be fair,” Ally says, “we *were* gonna wait until y'all decided to tell *us* about it, but...you know, *that* kinda happened, so I guess now is as good a time as any.” She tries an awkward smile, but it fails and she clears her throat. “Sorry.”

Lauren sighs and leans her head back against the couch pillows. “Fine, whatever. What do you guys need to get *cleared up* about?”

“Okay, first of all, I'm sorry, but, Mila, how the *hell* did you not know which room was the bathroom when you're here literally *all the time*?” Normani asks.

“I'm *sorry*,” Camila tries and pushes up her glasses. “I was *really* sleepy.”

“When did this *thing*...” Ally waves her hands around in some kind of vague gesture. “Uh, happen?”

“Um, like, after the concert,” Lauren answers.

“Interesting.” Dinah leans forward and puts her fist under her chin. “When and where was the exact time of your first kiss of that night? And try not to skip out on any details, please.”

Ally hits Dinah on shoulder with a pillow. “You don't have to answer that.” She fixes a warning glare at her.

Dinah curses and rubs at her arm. “God, okay, then. I'll ask another question. Mila, so like, are y'all *girlfriends* now? Spill.”

Camila widens her eyes at that, eyebrows shooting up to her hairline. “Uh, I—I don't... know?” She turns her head slowly to face Lauren as if to ask: *Are we?*

Normani's face is twisted into amusement and whatever expression *Please don't screw this up, Lauren* is. She watches as Lauren's ears turn pink and her brain walk into the land labeled: *Uncharted Territory*.

“Well,” Lauren starts, “we haven't talked about it, so, like...”

Camila's face literally conveys the shattering that is quite possibly happening inside her chest.

Normani physically tries not to wince. Okay, that was not a very good start.

“But,” Lauren continues.

Normani holds her breath. *But's* are good.

“Do you wanna be?” she asks her.

Normani starts to breathe again. Okay, not bad, Lo.

Camila worries at her lip, sounds hesitant when she says: “I don't know, do you want to?”

“Do *you* want to?”

“Well, do *you* want to?”

“Do y—“

Dinah groans and interrupts: “Oh, my god.” She curls up right where she is on the couch. “If this takes longer than five minutes just don't bother waking me up.”

“Seriously,” Camila says to only Lauren, dropping her voice like that would somehow help in a silent room full of three other people with properly functioning ears. “Do you want to? Like, *be* with me?”

“God, Camz,” Lauren whispers. “Of course I wanna be your stupid girlfriend.”

“Hey!” Camila exclaims, tongue poking out past her teeth. “My girlfriend is actually pretty smart, for your information.”

Lauren's grin threatens to split her face in half. “I hate you.”

Camila wrinkles her nose. “Uh, I don't really think you know how this whole *girlfriend* thing works.”

Then they're back to talking and giggling like no one else is in the room, so Normani looks at Ally, then Dinah, and says, “Meeting concluded, then.”

Again, Taken Camila isn't really different from Single Camila.

Only now she stares at the correct person. (Which is definitely good if she wants to keep those eyes, Normani thinks.)

They're a lot more open about everything, too. So, there's *a lot* of PDA, deciding on which bed in who's apartment they'll both sleep on tonight, and *grocery runs* (which is just buying a carton of orange juice and then making out in Lauren's car afterwards, *and then* accidentally leaving the orange juice in the car when they come up). Lauren changes her Facebook status even though she hasn't been on the site in like, months.

They're the same *Lauren and Camila* they always have been, just a bit *more*.

They're back at the good bar; the nice one with Big Rob and the comfortable atmosphere.

This is the only time Lauren and Camila have been separated from each other tonight. Normani and Lauren are the only two in the empty restroom.

Normani dries her hands under the machine when she hears the toilet flush and the sink running.

“Hey, Mani?” Lauren says as she's washing her hands. “Can I tell you something?” Her voice has an unsteady undertone.

Normani hums as she reapplies her lipstick. She looks over at her friend, who has her eyes glued downwards at the running water. Something's on her mind, obviously, and it might be because of the drinks, and it might be because they're best friends and Normani's eyes can automatically detect the twitch of her lip before she says:

“I love her.” The faucet squeaks shut and the sound somehow reverberates off the tiles.

Normani stops for a second, looking down at her lipstick and then up at herself and then over to Lauren.

“Have you told her?” she asks quietly, even though she probably already knows the answer.

Lauren is quiet and the noisy thrumming of the dryer is too loud, so Normani moves closer to her.

“It's just... scary.” Her voice is small and her moving hands precarious.

Normani waits until Lauren lifts her green eyes up to meet hers.

“When I first saw her I just really... I thought she'd be fun to kiss, you know? To like, mess around with.”

Normani nods, unsurprised, knows it was just routine behavior when Lauren met a new attractive person.

“And then, we became friends and I thought she was really cool. That she could be like Dinah or Lucy, or like you or Ally.” Her eyes drag back down to the tiled floor. “That I could like, kiss her just because I can, like what I do with everyone. But then—“ she picks at her chipped nail polish “then at the same time I wanted her to notice me, and I know she did; I know that she noticed me the same way you guys notice me, but—“ she sighs “I wanted the way she looked at me to be different, I guess.”

Normani nods again.

“And then she made me so confused and overwhelmed because I started wanting more than just her staring at me and more than just finding drunken excuses to kiss her.” Normani can see her chest rise as she inhales and exhales. “I started thinking about you and Ally and how

nice something like that would be—more specifically, how nice something like that would be with Camila,” Lauren says. “I still want that. Like, a lot.” She sniffles. “It’s just that me almost a year ago is so much more different than me now, and it’s... kinda terrifying but also sometimes *not really*, and it has my brain in like, whiplash, or something.”

“But you love her?” Normani’s eyes are soft and Lauren’s are somehow softer.

“Yeah, I do,” she says resolutely, heart-wrenchingly honest.

“Then tell her, obviously,” Normani says warmly, “but only when you’re ready. Mila will be waiting for you across the hall when you are.”

That makes Lauren smile soft around the edges. “You think so?”

Normani scoffs. “Please, girl, I know so.”

“Thanks, Mani. I love you.” Lauren looks a tad more relaxed, like there’s less imaginary pressure on her shoulders.

“I love you, too, Laur.”

When the two exit the bathroom and find their booth, Normani spots Camila, with comically puckered lips and contorted facial expression, in the middle of making Dinah and Ally red in the face from laughter. She sees Normani and Lauren, stops making her previous face to wave them back over.

The smile that takes over Lauren’s face is the brightest Normani thinks she’s ever seen.

“Lo?” she asks before Lauren takes another step.

“Yeah?”

“She looked at you differently even back then, too; she’s always looked at you differently.”

“What’s the address of that one fancy place you took Ally at Valentine’s Day?” Lauren asks casually.

Normani gasps. “Aw, you finally wanna go on a fancy schmancy date with her?” she coos.

“Yeah,” is all Lauren says, albeit shyly. Then upon another look at Normani’s raised eyebrows and tilted mouth: “Shut up.”

Suddenly something itches at the back of Normani’s head, and it may be Dinah’s ghost in the room influencing her or it may be because Ally isn’t currently present, but she says, “Okay, can I ask you, like, a totally random question?”

Lauren quirks a brow. “Yeah?”

“So, the night of that concert,” she says, “when did y'all, like, kiss?”

Lauren's head tilts curiously. “Why do you wanna—” But then realization flickers through her eyes, afterwards followed by disbelief. “Really?” she demands, crossing her arms. “Who instigated this bet? You or Dinah?”

“...Dinah.”

“Wow, just like what you guys did with my first three boyfriends from Junior year,” she says incredulously.

Normani doesn't know if she should say “*yeah*” or “*sorry*”.

Lauren sighs, though, pushes her chair back with a scrape and crosses her arms. “But if you *must* know, then I guess I'll tell you,” she starts. “So after the concert, we made it into my car. It was still pouring out and we were talking about—god, I don't even remember—something about the group beside us, I think, and I guess we both moved to turn on the radio and I don't even remember who leaned in first, but, well. Yeah.”

She flushes visibly and Normani doesn't even bother to make fun of how grossly cliché the entire thing sounds. Instead, she grins up at Lauren's confused expression.

“God, you just won, didn't you?”

“Y'all think they really went through the date?” Dinah asks, gnawing on her plastic straw as they make their way up Normani's door.

“I was there when she made the reservations,” Normani answers. “And *you* were there when you fussed over which dress Mila should wear for tonight.”

She hums. “True that.”

But when Ally opens the door and raised voices alongside cartoon sound effects are heard inside the living room, Normani begins to think the opposite.

They find the Lauren and Camila seated on the carpeted floor, game controllers in their hands, room dim except for *Mario Kart* flashing colors across the screen. They're both out of the fancy clothes that had been picked out by Normani and Dinah: Lauren in a shirt and pajama bottoms, and Camila in sweatpants with one of Lauren's sweater loosely hanging off her body.

They haven't even noticed any of the three girls' entrance, being too engaged into the game. (If that wasn't made apparent by Camila's: “You *fucker*, you did *not* just blue shell me on our *date*.”)



Lauren responds back with a snarking: “But I *did*.”)

Normani clears her throat loudly. “Um, what the hell's goin' on?” she asks, slightly confused. “I thought y'all were on a date?”

Neither of them make a move to pause the game.

“Uh, we are,” Camila says, eyes merely flitting in their direction.

“What about the restaurant?” Ally asks. Her eyes roam down to Lauren's hands gripping the controller. She gasps and Normani immediately follows Ally's gaze.

“Whoa, Lauser,” Dinah whistles, “what did you do to your hand?”

Lauren glances down at her carefully bandaged knuckles, but her eyes shoot back up to the TV. “Uh, I just—” She curses as her vehicle slips on a banana peel. “Damn it, Camz.”

“*I'll never slip on a banana peel*’ my ass,” Camila mutters smugly.

“What did you do?” Normani presses somewhat impatiently.

“I—uh, punched a guy in the face,” she says quietly.

“Wait, what?” Ally asks.

“A guy. I punched him. In the face.” She groans, sets her game controller down exasperatedly when Camila wins. “Fuck you,” she says to her.

Camila coughs something like: “*Yeah, you will.*”

“*Guys,*” Normani snaps. “Why did Lauren punch a guy in the face?”

“He was being a big creepy asshole,” Lauren answers simply like it's enough of an explanation. And because it's Lauren in question, it kind of *is*.

“Damn, okay,” Dinah comments. “Go, Lauren.”

“Did y'all at least eat there?” Ally asks worriedly.

“Well, not really,” Camila drawls, “considering it happened *inside* the restaurant.”

“Yeah, we were kind of escorted out,” Lauren adds.

“*But,*” Camila says while Lauren reaches over to play with the sleeves of her sweater, “we *did* stop to get hotdogs.”

Normani takes in the situation and sees Lauren beginning to get that look on her face. The look on her face that means she's probably forgotten about everyone else in the room besides Camila.

So Normani says quietly to Dinah and Ally: “Uh, you guys wanna go over to Dinah's place?”

“Yeah, let's go,” Ally agrees, following Normani and dragging Dinah by the wrist.

As Normani waits for Dinah to unlock her front door, she whips her head around to see the girl with her ear pressed up against the door she just closed.

“*Dinah!*” Normani hisses, but she makes her way back over beside her. “Stop being a creep.”

Dinah shushes her.

“*I love you.*” Lauren's unmistakable voice rings through the thin wood, soft but not at all hesitant.

Dinah literally gapes, hand flying to her open mouth. “Yo, did you *hear* that?”

Normani rolls her eyes and yanks her away, despite the taller girl's complaints.

“By the way,” Normani says, sitting down and throwing her legs on Dinah's lap, “you owe me fifty bucks.”

“What?” Dinah says, her phone screen casting a soft glow over her downturned lips.

“I won the bet,” she explains haughtily. “It *was* in the car. I got her to tell me.”

Dinah looks petulant at first, but then her eyebrows knit a look of defeat. “Damn, fine, then.”

Her eyes trail above Normani's head, and when she turns around she sees Ally looming above her, hands on her hips and reading glasses perched on the bridge of her nose. “*Normani Kordei Hamilton*, what did I say about that bet?”

“Ooh, full name usage means business, Mani,” Dinah whispers mockingly. Normani digs her heel into her thigh.

Upon her girlfriend's disapproving glower, all she manages is a weak: “Sorry, babe.”

Ally clicks her tongue and crosses her arms, but then her gaze lets up and the corner of her mouth tilts. “You better be using that money to take me on a date, Mani Bear.”

Typical Saturday nights go down like this now:

Dinah's laugh is discernable from anyone else's, and booms as a guy approaches her with what is probably a joke. She takes him by the hand and lets him lead her to the dancefloor.

Normani dances happily next to the love of her life, who loops her arms around her neck, stopping the rhythmic flow of the music for only a moment to giggle into each other's skin.

Lauren and Camila are still smushed into the booth, and even though everyone else has exited in favor of the dance floor, they leave hardly any space between them, like the opposites of a magnet.

This is Lauren now: head tilted back and mouth caught in mid-laugh, sitting beside the girl who loves her—the girl who she loves back just as much, and Normani wonders at how far her best friend has grown over the months.

Normani realizes this is the first time Lauren's done that with someone that the sight of it *doesn't* make her want to barf a little.

She takes it as a good sign.

## Chapter End Notes

aaaaaaaah i finally finished it yall im so happy B^) tell me what yall think on my tumblr if u want: bijauregui

## End Notes

woooo s/o to [xnevxrlandx](#) and [theperfectsin](#) for saving my ass and correcting my pathetic abundance of typos. find me screaming on tumblr: [bijauregui](#).

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