

The background is a solid light purple color, decorated with several large, detailed purple roses and dahlias. Some petals are scattered around the flowers, creating a soft, romantic aesthetic. The text is centered and layered over this floral pattern.

OUR

DRAYTON HILLS SERIES

SECRET

#BOOK 1

MOMENTS

JANISHA BOSWELL

OUR SECRET MOMENTS

DRAYTON HILLS

BOOK 1

JANISHA BOSWELL

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Cover design by Layla Brown.

*For those who always have something to say.
And for those who listen.*

The art of conversation lies in listening.

MICHAEL FORBES

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CONTENT WARNINGS

This book contains explicit content. It also deals with grief and the loss of a parent as well as anxious thoughts and situations described on page. If these are sensitive to you in any way, this book might not be the best for you to read.

If you ever feel alone, talk to someone. Anyone. Talk to me. I'm always here to listen and so are friends and/or a professional.

PLAYLIST

Dress –Taylor Swift

Godlight — Noah Khan

You Could Start A Cult — Niall Horan ft. Lizzy McAlpine

False God — Taylor Swift

Nasty — Ariana Grande

Margaret — Lana Del Rey ft. Bleachers

Sweat — ZAYN

Different Kind Of Beautiful (Piano Version) — Alec Benjamin

Moonlight — Ariana Grande

This Town — Niall Horan

Exhale — Sabrina Carpenter

Sweet Nothing — Taylor Swift

Songbird — Fleetwood Mac

Hotel — Montell Fish

Magic — One Direction

Work Song — Hozier

Hold My Girl — George Ezra

Mine — Taylor Swift

Writer In The Dark — Lorde

DICKTIONARY

For those that want to skip the particularly spicy scenes, or those that want to skip straight to them. Whatever your preference. It's a judge free zone over here...

Chapter 21 (over the phone/solo)

Chapter 24

Chapter 26

Chapter 30

Chapter 35

Chapter 40

ONE

CAT

THE MANIFESTATION CHAMBER

“DO you have to breathe so loud?”

Sometimes, when I get into ridiculous movie-worthy moments, usually at the hands of my best friends and college roommates, I have to close my eyes, take a deep breath and think WWTSD? *What would Taylor Swift do?*

Most answers are something witty and adorable, but that’s just not me. I can’t write a record-breaking song about it and have reporters ask me a million questions about my love life. I can’t re-record my albums because I don’t have any albums that someone would have stolen in the first place.

Nope.

I’m just stuck inside of a closet with a six-foot-something football player with gorgeous brown eyes and wavy brown hair who is actively invading my personal space.

Okay. I see how it looks like my problems aren’t a big deal, but if you went through half the shit I have in the last week, you’d think this was rock bottom.

I’ve spent the whole day feeling sick to my stomach over a grade I’m going to get in the morning, curled up in my bedroom with my emotional support blanket. That was before two of my best friends dragged it off me, exposing me to the cold harsh truths of reality and shoved a mini dress in my face.

I pull the blindfold from around my neck, twisting the silk in my hands as some sort of coping mechanism. The smooth

texture between my palms is the only thing encouraging me to take deep breaths.

Thursday night parties the day before a morning of classes should be illegal. But I've grown accustomed to the college lifestyle and participating is way better than avoiding it.

It's my second year out of four years at Drayton Hills, a prestigious college in Eastern Colorado, and I have yet to be a part of the stupid college ritual that happens at every one of Jason Bassey's parties.

Until tonight.

"Do you have to be so close to me?" I groan, pushing at his chest, since he apparently didn't hear my polite question as to why he was breathing so hard.

The small shove does nothing for the proximity between us and it only makes me stumble backwards. He clasps his hand around my elbow, a knowing look on his face as he steadies me. I need a brighter light in here.

Or a fan.

Or both.

It's getting stuffy and all I can smell is the rich, deep, woody scent of his cologne.

"There isn't much space in here, *Catherine*, in case you haven't noticed." He says my name as if it's hard to pronounce, or as if the word is hard to get out of his mouth.

I'd take him seriously if he wasn't trying to hide his grin like a goof. He's had this unique ability to make everything that comes out of his mouth either sound sarcastic, or just straight up ridiculous.

"We wouldn't be here if it wasn't for you," I say, jabbing a finger into his chest. He catches my finger, his warm hand clasping around mine before dropping it to the space between us. I stare up at him, narrowing my eyes as he continues smiling down at me as if this is the best thing to ever happen to him.

I'm not exactly short by any means. I'm five-six, which I think is a pretty normal height for a nineteen-year-old.

Connor Bailey is just fucking huge.

A chuckle escapes his mouth, the sound deep and throaty as he tilts his head back a little before pinning me with those doe eyes that usually have girls dropping their panties for him. "Oh, don't act like it was all me. Jason's not an idiot. You've been giving me the 'fuck me' eyes *All. Night. Long.*"

He stretches out the last few words, proving to me once again that he is still the annoyingly gorgeous idiot he always is. Still, I stand my ground. "No, I haven't."

"Yes, you have."

"No, I haven't," I say again with finality. He tilts his head to the side curiously, flashing me an innocent look. "And you would know that if you—"

"Oh, Connor," he moans. Innocent my ass. "Give it to me! Just like that! Yeah, baby!"

Despite the music coming from the multiple speakers around the basement of Jason's house, Connor knows exactly how to project his voice as he continues to moan loudly, telling everyone on the other side of the door just how good he is at fucking me, how his dick is filling me so good that I won't be able to walk in the morning.

Everyone on the other side of the door is laughing, turning the music down to listen in on whatever is happening in here.

I pin my arms across my chest as he continues thrusting his hips into the door, pretending he's giving it to me *really* good, his hands cupped around his mouth as he continues groaning.

He is the most ridiculous person I've ever met in my life.

I don't think he realises that no one else can *see* him other than me. Regardless, he's putting on an Oscar-worthy performance. He stops for a split second, turning to me, that signature Bailey grin hanging on his mouth, that stupid dimple on his left cheek.

I cock my head to the side. "Are you done?"

“Not quite yet. I was just getting to the good stuff,” he says.

“There’s more?” I gasp, sarcastically. His eyes light up as he leans against the closed door of the closet. “Here I was, thinking that saying you’ve got a golden dick was the cherry on top. But if you knew me at all, you’d know I’d never say anything like that.”

“Trust me, Cat. Forming words would be the last thing you could do if I had my way with you,” he whispers.

The air between us fizzes, the shots I had before leaving my dorm churning in my stomach with the leftover pizza I ate.

Connor is not an intimidating person.

Not to me anyway. But when he leans down, his breath hot in my face, those whiskey eyes staring directly in mine, you could say he’s a little intimidating.

He’s toying with me, obviously. But with the heat, the words coming out of his mouth and his proximity, my body doesn’t know that and everything — and I mean, *everything* — starts to ache accordingly.

Think with your brain, not your tits.

Think with your brain, not your tits.

“Are you done?” I ask again, needing some sort of response to his blatantly obvious remark and attempt at flirting. My voice is breathy and strangled, unlike my usual poised self. He finally takes a step back, allowing me to breathe, but all I can smell is him.

All I can *feel* is him.

Jason Basse’s parties are famous for two things. One, somebody usually ends up pregnant by the end of the night and two, his magical Manifestation Chamber. It’s as ridiculous as it sounds. There’s an empty utility closet at the end of the hall of Jason’s parents house, where he notoriously throws parties every week for the students at Drayton.

Trust me when I say that this closet is *not* special. It’s barely two feet wide, but when you’re stuck in here between a

six-foot-three football player and some shelves, I might as well be trying to fit through the small doors at Brandy Melville.

In short, Jason's Manifestation Chamber was originally a fragment of his own imagination that nobody believed for a while. He has the strongest intuition in the entire school. According to his friends, he's also had a perfect Gaydar since he was in middle school, so everyone started to believe him when he said he knows that two people will fall in love by the end of the semester, or by the end of the school year.

He gets two of his minions to blindfold said participants and shove them into his chamber. You'd think he'd try to decorate it with dream catchers, incense and crystals, but it's just as sterile as the cafeteria floors on a Friday night.

The crazy thing is, it has worked.

Every. Single. Time.

The couples that come out of here are rocky for the first few weeks, but then they bounce back and most of them are still thriving to this day. My best friend, Nora, believes it's some sort of voodoo shit that Jason is pulling, but I can't see what reasons he would have to do that, or if that is even possible.

I always thought it was interesting how he had such an eye for those things, how he managed to see two people that were destined to find each other and put them in the right place at the right time. It's beyond me how he manages to do it, but it's an art I appreciate, no matter how cynical I am about love.

Now, stuck in here with Connor Bailey, I can dub it as completely insane because there is no way in this universe that I could ever fall for him. The only energy between Connor and I is purely platonic, sickly sweet annoyance.

I might have had a crush on him growing up, but that was *years* ago and the crush has yet to reemerge. Since then, he has constantly been testing that friend boundary, making me want to shove the word friend right up his—

“Oh, come on, don’t act like you haven’t been dreaming about this since we were kids,” he drawls, glancing down at me again.

“By *this*, you mean being stuck in a closet with you while you pretend that we’re having sex?” I ask and he nods, clarifying his stupidity. “That sounds so wrong, for *so* many reasons.”

“Okay, then,” he draws out, looking around the tiny room and then back to me. “What else are we supposed to do? They clearly put us in here for a reason.”

“It’s a stupid party ritual that doesn’t mean anything. We were both at the party for different reasons and we ended up here. It was a pure coincidence,” I retort. His eyes narrow, the usual brightness in them dimming as he pins me with a defiant stare, the heat between our bodies crackling like cinder rocks.

His lips curl up into a mischievous smile, the slight glint in his eyes lighting an uncomfortable fire in my lower stomach. He leans down, tugging a curl that has fallen in front of my face, trying his hardest to get under my skin.

I take in a sharp breath.

It’s just the Manifestation Chamber.

“Are you telling me that you don’t believe in fate, Catherine Fables?”

“I stopped believing in fate a long time ago,” I mutter. I stopped believing in anything remotely romantic five years ago to be exact. Still, it was only just over a year ago that I ended a relationship with my high-school sweetheart, realising I was better off emotionally on my own. I was an awful girlfriend and Evan didn’t deserve that. Everyone said that three months after the breakup is when things get better, and they were right. I’m still in my healing era and I’m loving it. “Besides, it’s not fate if someone clearly had a hand in it.”

“You sure know a lot for someone who doesn’t believe in it,” he sings.

“And you sure know how to make very believable moans,” I concede. His face turns puzzled, his cheeks turning the cutest

shade of pink. “Unless, that’s what you think pleasuring a woman sounds like. Then I apologise to you and whatever poor soul you’ve dated.”

“I– That’s not– Obviously, I was–” His hands are flailing as he takes a deep breath, desperately trying to regain control of the conversation.

“Exactly,” I say, cutting off his rambling. I turn back to the locked door, hearing the faint whispers coming from the other side. “Can you just do something to get us out of here?”

“What do you think all the moaning was for?” I pin him with a look. *The* look. “Okay, fine. What do you suggest?”

“I don’t know,” I groan. He shreds whatever distance was between us as he steps closer to me, causing my back to slam against the door. I peer up at him, his chest invading my face as he takes in a few deep breaths. My voice sounds unsure as I say, “If something doesn’t happen, they’re going to forget about us and then we’ll be stuck in here. It only locks from the outside.”

“Are you claustrophobic, Catherine?” His voice feels like lava, running through every vessel in my body, right to where it should not be pulsing. For him of all people.

“No,” I breathe. His eyes squint as if he’s trying to figure me out and his hand drops onto the door above me, caging me into the already tight space. His head drops to the side of my face where my heart beats rapidly. I somehow muster up the strength to add, “I just don’t want to be stuck here with you.”

“Why? Scared you’ll give in?”

“Give in to what?”

The door flies open, and I almost fall right on my ass. The sudden change in temperature knocks the wind out of me, but Connor’s hand reaches out, slipping around my waist as he hoists me back up.

I fall into his chest, my hands pressing onto his broad shoulders as he holds me close to him for a second before I take a shaky step back. Still, he does nothing to put any space

between us and instead leans down, pushing my hair over my shoulder as if it's his fucking job.

“Careful, sweetheart, if you trip over yourself again, I'd think you're trying to do it just for me to catch you,” he murmurs, his mouth hot against my neck. He pulls away from me, shoving his hands into his pockets as he nods at me and whichever one of my friends behind me. “Have a good night, ladies.”

And then he's gone.

“Have a good night,” I mutter angrily, smoothing out my dress as I turn around to face a wide-eyed and slightly flushed Elle. Out of the three of us, Eleanor can handle her drinks the worst. I bet she's only had a few shots and she's already swaying slightly as her face glows. “Thanks for saving me.”

She beams, hooking her arm into mine as we walk up the stairs of the basement, instantly being greeted by sweaty bodies and loud music blaring in our around us. “Seemed like you needed saving. Jason was having too much fun with it, but when the moaning stopped, something didn't feel right.”

You could say that again.

That's not exactly how I would describe whatever just happened in there.

Connor makes me feel uneasy, like he's able to look right through me. We've known each other our whole lives since he's Nora's twin, but since we started high school, I've tried my best to keep my distance, knowing what boys his age are like. But this campus is only so big, and I have to see him more often than I'd like.

“Do you wanna go stand by the pool? I need some fresh air,” I say to her, looking down at her as she snuggles her face into my arm, her brown curly hair tickling my arms.

“Maybe we should just go home,” Elle says through a yawn. “Nor's got that afterparty with the rest of the theatre class and I'm beat already. I need a warm bath and to watch New Girl episodes until my eyes can't stay open anymore.”

I laugh at her very accurate reading of what we both need. Elle likes to party the least. She loves a good night in as much as Nora and I do. But I've grown up with attending fancy events with my dad in the public eye as the mayor, so I'm used to staying up longer than necessary.

After today's closet fiasco, and the fear of tomorrow being the worst day of my life, I'm ready to distract myself and pretend it doesn't exist until the morning.

"That sounds perfect, Elle-Belle." She looks up at me, her nose scrunching at the nickname as we grab our jackets from the other closet.

Once we've shrugged on our coats, ready to step into the early September breeze, the chill I can feel run down my spine isn't from the slightly cold air. It's the same sort of chill I got when Connor's breath was on my neck, when his hand slid around my waist as if it belonged there.

He's not even here and I can still feel him everywhere.

He's started to unravel me already and I hate it.

TWO

CONNOR

FOOTBALL BUTT

“SOUNDED like you had a good time last night, Bailey.”

I turn to my teammate, roommate and best friend as he grins at me, his face a red, sweaty mess. Nothing new coming from him.

If he means what happened last night at the party that was followed by a long cold shower and hours contemplating my existence while I watched Family Guy... Yeah, I guess I had a good time.

“Yeah, I heard what was going on in that closet,” Sam chimes in, wiping the sweat from his forehead as he slows down our jog to a brisk walk as we trek down from our hike around Estes Park, one of our many morning rituals.

We get up at the literal ass-crack of dawn most mornings to train in the gym, or go for a run, or a hike. Regardless of what happened the night before, hungover or not, we always get up.

I’m never hungover because I don’t drink during the season – a choice Coach Mackenzie encouraged, but most of the boys don’t follow. Including Wes and Sam as they huff and puff, dragging their lazy asses behind me as I power on in front of them.

“And Catherine Fables?” Sam says, not sure if the breathiness in his voice is because he doesn’t work out as much as he should, or if it’s because he’s talking about the most perfect woman I have ever laid my eyes on. I’m assuming the latter. I get out of breath just by *thinking* about

her. “She’s fucking gorgeous,” he adds, finally catching up with me and walking beside me.

Of course, I know that. I’m not an idiot.

What I don’t get is how Jason managed to pull that together. His stupid Manifestation Chamber has been something people look forward to at every one of his parties. I’ve never been one of those people. Usually, some girl would try to hook up with me, I’d say no and I’d spend time with my friends. That closet of his is the last thing on my mind when I’m at his parties, but I knew that it was about time I’d get thrown in there. I just didn’t know it would be with *her*.

The memories of last night burn through my vision, causing me to stop still in my tracks. Just thinking about her makes my stomach do a weird flip thing. I’ve spent years trying my best to stay out of her way, knowing that if I was ever that close to her, I wasn’t sure what I would do.

I had her right where I wanted, those big brown eyes staring up at me, her smartass comments that she reserves just for me, the way she felt beneath my hand when I stopped her from falling.... And I still didn’t make a move. I can pretend to be confident and flirt, but when it gets down to it, I always back out unless I know they feel the exact same way. The same way I’d never lead a girl on if I wasn’t feeling it.

I shake my head at the thoughts of her and when I look down, Wes is on the floor, in a squatting position, grunting and groaning like he’s been doing it for hours.

How long have I been spaced out for?

“What are you doing?” I ask, frustrated. He looks up at me, shaking his head as he stands before slowly sinking back down.

“While you got too in your head, stopping in the middle of our walk, I’ve got to maintain my football butt somehow. Sam has one. You would too if you could quit daydreaming about her for like two minutes,” Wes explains between pants. Somebody needs to tell him that having a good ass does not

improve his performance because it's not going to be me. I've tried talking some sense into this idiot five times.

Five.

Fucking.

Times.

"I'm not daydreaming about her. I was—"

"Could've done a better job at those moans if you wanted it to be believable, though," Wes says, cutting me off as he continues squatting. I squint my eyes at him, the harsh brightness from the golden sunrise obstructing my view.

"That's exactly what she said to me," I mutter.

"She's smart too," Sam adds, grinning like a loon. He's got one of those perfect, olive-skinned baby faces that make girls at Drayton Hills absolutely crazy. I don't get the allure. Especially because every word that comes out of his mouth is stupider than the last. He nudges Wes with his foot as he falls over, laughing before standing back up into a normal walking position. "What do you say, Connie Boy? If you two don't fall in love by the end of the year, can I shoot my shot?"

I bark out a disbelieving laugh. "We are *not* going to fall in love."

"So, I can shoot my shot...?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because she's—" I sigh. Really? What reason do I have to defend it? Cat can date who she wants. I don't care. I *shouldn't* care. Still, I hear myself say, "She's unavailable."

"Oh, because she's only available for you, right?" Wes says, bumping his shoulder into mine. I grumble in response, tearing open a breakfast bar from my pocket.

"I get it," he says easily, trying to sound serious, but it's rare anything remotely serious exits this guy's mouth. "You spend ten minutes in a closet together and now you're exclusive. Girls love it when a guy's clingy."

“We’re not– She’s not–” How did I manage to get myself in this situation again? The teasing had stopped for a few months and of course we ended up at the same party last night, making my fantasies press replay in my mind all over again. “Just drop it, okay?”

“Okay, *dad*,” Wes mumbles.

As one of the only responsible people on the football team, I’ve happily acquired the role as the dad. I’m not usually such a grump. I love to hang out and do any stupid ritual that the boys come up with for a fun night, but I also know where to draw the line.

I just didn’t expect that title to be extended to my dorm life back on campus too. I share one of the best dorms in Drayton, located on the South, right next to the football pitch and the training facilities.

It’s a perfect walking distance to where I need to be as well as to the one class I actually take which is in modern literature studies. Our building’s vending machine is stocked at the end of the hall, the cafeteria is a five minute walk away and I get the best view from my window. I keep most of the guys out of trouble, being the designated driver, but sometimes they get themselves into shit even I can’t help them with.

What’s not perfect are my two roommates. I’ve known Wes my whole life. His family has lived across the street from my parents’ house before my sister and I were born. While Nora and I were born in October, Wes was born the next summer and we spent every summer after that growing up together running under sprinklers, walking back from school with our hands and faces sticky and spending nights in the treehouse that our dads built. He’s a pain in my ass every day, but he’s also my best friend and the best lineman for the Titans.

Archer Elliot is a lot more bearable. Slightly terrifying, but bearable. I didn’t know about Archer’s existence until the day we moved in. He’s completely covered in tats and he’s huge. Since he moved in, he’s been quiet and slightly distant. I can’t complain, though. He cleans up after himself and he never

brings girls over, unlike Wes. If we ever need anything, he's there, but he doesn't always like to make his presence known.

Which is why it's pretty easy to ignore him as I work my way around the kitchen. He's sitting on the couch in the small lounging area reading a newspaper. What college student sits and reads a newspaper on a Friday morning?

The kitchen in our dorm – if you can even call it that – is fucking tiny. It barely holds the basic appliances as well as a sandwich maker that my parents got me for Christmas and a blender. The noise usually disrupts everybody out of their bed and ends up with me sending an email to our dorm adviser. The main thing is, it's able to handle my often chaotic baking.

Wes emerges from the bathroom after our run, a towel wrapped around his waist, still humming along to some theatre soundtrack. I pull the cookies out of the oven, resting them on top of the stove.

I frown at them, looking at the brunt mess I made. At least the smoke alarm hasn't gone off yet. *Little progress is still progress*, I remind myself, shrugging off my red mittens and throwing them next to the cooling wrack.

My sister got them for me as a gift for winning last year's football season and they always come in handy. They've got little white hearts on them and when she threw them at me she said, "If you can't bake, you can at least look cute doing it."

"Jesus, fuck. What is that smell?" Wes asks, scrunching his nose up.

"Connor is cooking," Archer says, his voice low and gruff from the couch.

"That explains it," Wes says, nodding.

"Connor is right here, you imbeciles," I say.

"Connor is also referring to himself in third person," Archer grumbles.

"And I'm baking, not cooking. There's a difference," I say, ignoring him.

“Right, one of them you’re actually slightly better at and the other...” He peers over at the tray of cookies. “...Not so much.”

How in the hell did I fuck up cookies so badly? I needed something to bring with me to my parents house for dinner later and I was sure I could pull them off.

I scrape one off the tray, throwing a chunk into my mouth. It takes like charcoal, but I smile through it, holding the tray out to Wes as he studies them suspiciously. I can’t show him any weakness. I might not be the best baker, but if this was a competition, I’d definitely win a participation award.

I’ve always loved making things from scratch, just to see what I could come up with. It started with mud pies in the backyard of my parents house, to a lemon cake I tried to make my mom for Mother’s Day. Both were as terrible as each other, but it’s the thought that counts.

“I mean, what *are* they supposed to be?” he asks, his voice full of child-like wonder as he prods at one. You’d expect it to be gooey, that the cookie would almost fold in on itself at the pressure, but it doesn’t move. I pick up a piece and shove it into his mouth as he stumbles a little, gripping onto his towel.

I swallow the edible death eventually as Wes grimaces around a mouthful. “Just eat it, you idiot.”

“I could,” he muffles, “Weally youse some miwlk wif phat.”

His chest is heaving as if chewing it is a workout. I can’t help but smile as I move into the fridge to pull out a carton of milk and pick up a glass from the cabinet. I turn back around, milk in hand as Wes smiles that mischievous grin at me.

He retrieves the cup happily, pulling it to his lips as I watch him. “Good?” I ask, needing some sort of reaction from him. The slight tremor in his body isn’t a good sign.

“The best,” he says, sighing as he sets down the now empty glass.

“He spat it out when you turned around,” Archer murmurs. I watch the betrayal flash across Wes’s face and it’s the exact

same expression I have on my face. My best friend of almost twenty years...

“I swear to God, Archer, you want to be a Moody Margaret all day until I do *one* thing and then you snake me out,” Wes says, turning to him, one hand tightened around his towel, the other in the air, his mom’s German mannerisms shining through as he waves his hand at him.

“Maybe try being less obvious about it next time,” Archer suggests, still not looking up from his newspaper.

“There’s not going to be a next time,” I say, peeling the more agreeable cookies off the tray and into a Tupperware container lined with kitchen roll. My mom will eat them regardless of the state and I’m sure I could convince my dad too. “Because I’m not going to offer any of my goods to either of you ever again.”

Archer scoffs. “Fine by me. I like my bowels exactly how they are.”

“Since we’re being honest,” Wes starts with a shrug. I give him a look, knowing something stupid is about to come out of his mouth but he carries on anyway. “That apple pie you made me for my birthday wasn’t the best thing I ever had. When I went home, even Jarvis didn’t want a bite of it. And that cat eats anything.”

I shut the lid of the Tupperware box with extra force, throwing it into a plastic bag. I don’t even want to look at them anymore. “Do you ever know when to shut up, Wesley?”

“That is *not* my government name and you know it!” he whines, looking just as childish as he sounds.

He pouts, throwing his arms up as he storms in the other direction. Neither of us realise that was the arm holding up his towel until it drops to the floor, flashing us his football butt.

THREE

CAT

“THESE ARE TEARS OF RELIEF! I PROMISE.”

I USED to think there was nothing worse than a hangover.

But there is.

It's that feeling you get where you're not actually hungover because you haven't drank much, but your head is throbbing, your back is aching, your stomach feels like it's been squeezed out by a giant and the makeup you forgot to wash off last night does *not* look cute. Some people can pull off the raccoon look, but black mascara against my dark skin is not as flattering as some would hope.

After spending the entire night staring at my ceiling fan spin rapidly, secretly wishing it would just fall right on me, I rolled out of bed and told myself it was fine. That *I* was fine. I used to think I was an optimist, but maybe I'm just delusional.

I never usually stress over grades.

Okay, so maybe one time I threw up before my third grade spelling bee when it wasn't worth anything, but that's totally unrelated.

Some people say that I'm a perfectionist, or that I care too much about the little things that won't matter in the long run, but I've always been that person. Because if no one is worrying about these 'little things,' someone has to, right? And that someone just happens to be me.

Naturally, everyone in this dorm is a worrier. Growing up with Elle and Nora has shown me just how much we over analyse situations and see the worst possible outcome before

settling on something rational. Usually, Elle is the most chilled out of the two of us and leaves most things up to the universe, or just lets them be.

I physically can't do that.

I worry about the stupid things that could go wrong like an elevator breaking down or an attack happening in my apartment. Or like grades, even though I know I studied my ass off for my final piece on genetic mutation.

The thing about journalism is that when you have a story to tell, you have to tell it in a certain way for people to truly understand you and to feel connected with your story whilst trying to be funny and also sounding like your most authentic self.

I've battled with this for years and it's something I'm still trying to get the hang of. My writing style is something unique to me and I always get that pang in my chest, a voice in my head telling me that I'm not good enough when my teachers mark me down for my style of writing.

Nora Bailey, my best friend, theatre major and my literal lifeline is also a worrier, but she's a much more chaotic one. Nora is a natural born leader and a phenomenal actress, singer, *and* dancer. She's always been a good performer and she sometimes takes method acting to the next level.

When we were kids, she once convinced a mean girl in our class, Emily, that she was Miley Cyrus over the phone offering her backstage access to her tour date in Colorado. The mean girl fell for it, but when she hadn't heard back from 'Miley' in weeks she was heartbroken.

Nora put on the best performance when we went back to school, acting as if she didn't crush that little girl's dreams. I thought it was hilarious after the way she treated the three of us at school. Elle, however, a true Cancer through and through, couldn't take it and started crying when Emily started crying in class. After that, Nora promised never to use her magic of acting for harm again.

Still, even after being accepted into the best performing arts course in the state, she's pacing in the kitchen, script in hand, a highlighter in her mouth as she recites lines back to herself.

The small kitchen and living room areas are a mess. Throw blankets are covering the floor and the couch, perfectly set up from our reading session before we went to the party last night. The sink and counters are clean, apart from the bowls of ice cream. I pull out a water bottle from the fridge, shoving a pill into my mouth to get rid of the nausea and the headache that is festering.

"What did you get up to last night?" she asks, her voice oddly chipper. Well, Nora is always chipper, but considering last night's fiasco, I assumed she'd be more concerned than she is.

"You seriously didn't hear?"

"Hear what?" she asks, still pacing. "Wes made me stand by the pool for an hour while I watched him try to do backflips into the water. I had my phone ready to call nine-one-one the whole time. So, I was pretty busy."

Wes Mackenzie is like the childhood friend you get forced to play with before you realise that you're stuck with him forever. Ever since we were kids, he's been attached to Nora's hip like an emotional support puppy. I can't for the life of me figure how they're still best friends when all they do is argue and annoy each other. Nora being a theatre major and him being a football player makes no sense to me. But it works for them.

They're always caught in ridiculous situations. He once got himself stuck in a washing machine for a TikTok. Nora once asked him for help while Elle and I were busy to help pin up a costume and he accidentally stitched her in.

Regardless of any foolishness they get up to, they're always laughing by the end of it. At least they have fun together because the second her boyfriend Ryan turns up, he's frowning and he's constantly telling Nora to quit being friends with him.

I don't think Wes and Nora could ever stop being friends. The world would have to split in two, forcing them on two different planets for them to stop being the crazy, chaotic ball of sunshine that they are together.

"Right. Well, guess who got shoved into the Manifestation Chamber," I mutter, adding the much-needed fake excitement to my voice.

"Oh my god! You know what that means right?"

I knew that the second the words left my mouth that Nora would be all over it. If I thought Elle and I liked romance, Nora was a walking Taylor Swift song. She's been obsessed with love since she knew what it meant. Which is why she is always starring in productions where she plays a beautiful heroine who has the male leads at her feet.

"Yeah, but it was with, uh, Connor," I say, ripping the bandaid right off.

I drunkenly admitted to her once a few years ago that I used to have a crush on her brother when we were kids, but she never brought it up again. What she doesn't know is that I've been caught by Elle checking him out a few (at least five) times.

He's as good-looking as he is stupid. Which is a fuckton. So that's why I've been politely declining all of Nora's invites to go see him and Wes play. I know for a fact if I saw him in his uniform, his helmet in hand, I would lose all composure and fold like a lawn chair. So, I'm staying as far away from him as possible and it has been working out great so far. Until last night.

"Connor as in Connor Bailey?" she gawks, saying her twin brother's name as if it physically repulses her.

"Unless we know someone else called Connor," I say.

She stops still, dropping her hand with her script in defeat. She looks at me for a second, holding my stare, those bright chocolate eyes staring into mine. For a second, I thought she was getting ready to launch the highlighter at me, but instead she lets out a soft, "Ew."

“I know! I mean, obviously nothing happened. He was just being annoying about the whole thing,” I say, my shoulders relaxing.

“Yeah, he was moaning through the door so people would think you were sucking him off,” Elle says nonchalantly.

I don’t know when she suddenly woke up, but she walks into the living room, her gym bag slung over her shoulder, looking as refreshed and put-together as ever, her curly hair tied into a bun on top of her head. Nora’s face turns pale at Elle’s comment.

“But that is not what happened. *At all*,” I say to Nora, trying my best to reassure her as she eyes me suspiciously. “I swear.”

“Okay...” she says slowly, packing away her script into the tote bag on the couch. “Because if you were doing anything remotely gross in that closet, I’d have to redact myself from both of your lives. You’d get all touchy feely and that would be uncomfortable for *all* of us.” She shivers at the thought, shaking her head. I stand, stunned into silence as I watch her take a deep breath. “Anyway,” she says, her tone suddenly bright as she hitches her bag higher up on her shoulder. “I’ve got to go to rehearsals. Good luck for your grade, Cat. I’m sure you’ll have done great.”

There’s something truly unique about how a Bailey exits a conversation.

The trudge to class is as gruelling as ever. Part of me doesn’t even want to go in there, sitting next to my more than amazing class friends who fly by these assignments with ease, while I’m constantly in fear of not living up to my potential.

My dad enrolled me into Drayton the second the applications opened. It’s where he and my mom met, and it got them both to where they wanted to be.

My mom was a romantic, a hopeless one. And my dad would do anything for her. He did everything to get her to notice him as she actively avoided him and pretended he

didn't exist. Until one day, she couldn't ignore her feelings for him anymore, no matter how hard she tried, and she gave in.

They spent their days at the library, picking out books for each other and were doing 'buddy reads' before it was even a thing. From the stories I've been told by my grandma JoJo, they were inseparable and just being in their presence was what made everyone around them feel young.

When they graduated – my dad with a degree in literature and politics and my mom in literature and journalism – they both worked hard to get a stable career before they ever thought about having kids. They managed to balance their love, career and a child together and I was able to grow up knowing I was a product of their love and got to experience it first hand. As much as the fairy tales intrigued me, I wanted to know the deeper things. About my mom especially.

Since she passed away five years ago, my dad has found it hard to talk about her. Being born to immigrant parents from Jamaica, I wanted to know every single thing about my mom's childhood.

When my dad told me stories about her, he never mentioned what she was like before they fell in love, or what she was like as a child or a teenager. He had always told me that she never wanted to talk about it and that never made sense to me.

My mom was a storyteller, the best one I know. So why wouldn't she want to talk about her past? With my grandma's health deteriorating and my grandad passing before I was born, it feels like I've got nothing left of her. It feels like before she met my dad, before she fell in love, she didn't exist. It's not that her story hasn't been completed – it feels like it never really started.

“Are you stressed?” I turn around to the soft voice that belongs to my favourite class friend, George, as he pulls me out of my daydream. I sigh when he looks at me with complete sympathy, his green eyes softening as he takes me in. “You've got nothing to worry about, Cat. I read your final piece. It was perfect.”

“Thank you and I know I shouldn’t worry, but...” I try to think of an excuse, but I come up empty. There’s nothing major riding on the back of this assignment. I just like knowing where I stand in class. I like knowing that I’ll get a consistent grade. But when I submit a piece on something I had to do a ton of research for with very little prior knowledge, I question my work more than I need to.

“We both worked hard on our pieces. We’ll be fine,” George says, patting me on the shoulder as he nudges open the door to the classroom.

Drayton is what most people call the Hogwarts of Colorado. The deep stone walls are nothing short of beautiful and they make studying in the Grand Library feel like a fever dream. But the only problem is the heating facilities are pretty shitty. Which is why I feel a sharp breeze when I open the door to the classroom, hoping that that’s all it is. Just the wind and not a premonition.

Here goes nothing.

I blink at the paper in front of me again. I can’t tell how long it’s been. Maybe five minutes? Or maybe even an hour. All I know is that my face is covered in tears as I reread the comments and feedback in front of me.

This is surreal.

I’m not living real life right now.

I passed. I didn’t get the best mark in the class like I had hoped, but I got something even better.

Professor Rotford never leaves kind comments on reports. *Ever*. She’s prone to constructive criticism only. She even told us on our first day of classes that we should not expect a pat on the back for writing a sub-par essay and that tears are not allowed in her classroom. I was tough enough to take her criticism and I’ve been using it to improve my writing and it has finally paid off.

*This is a lot better than your last,
but not as good as one of your firsts.*

*Your voice is coming along very well,
Catherine. You should be grateful.*

- A. Rotford.

I mean, she could have said ‘proud’ instead of ‘grateful,’ but a win is a win, right? I wipe my face with the sleeve of my sweater, knowing my makeup and my face in general is ruined. George elbows me, snickering a little as the rest of the class talk amongst themselves about their reports. I know he’s telling me to stop crying, but I can’t help it.

“Catherine.” Professor Rotford’s voice booms across the classroom. I snap my head up, my glassy eyes meeting her steel blue ones. “Do you need a second?”

“Oh, these are tears of relief! I promise,” I say through a snuffle, my voice betraying my words.

She sighs, looking back down at her desk as she murmurs, “The door is open.”

FOUR

CONNOR

“IS SHE FUCKING CRYING?”

TRYING to find my sister is probably the worst thing to do at the end of the week.

It shouldn't be hard. She only takes one class, but for some reason she is never where she says she'll be. We used to share each other's location with each other, but after I thought she was home alone when I went to her dorm, she was having sex with her boyfriend. So that has been ruled out for a while. So now, as it's getting closer until we have to meet our parents for dinner, Wes and I are on the hunt for her.

“Are you still not going to apologise to me, Connie boy?” he asks.

“You know what, I was considering it until you just called me Connie boy,” I say to him, rolling my eyes. He's expecting me to apologise to him because I called him an oaf for wanting to stay inside all day and do nothing instead of helping me find Nora.

“Okay. You're right. It was a low blow. I totally understand. But I still deserve an apology.”

“You were the one who flashed me and Archer. I think *I* deserved an apology,” I say with a shudder. I've seen Wes's ass too many times for it to be a coincidence. That boy just does not like clothes at all.

“Don't act like you didn't enjoy it, Connie boy,” he says, laughing as he wags his eyebrows at me. And for that, I hit him in the back of the head and he stumbles forward a little. I

smirk to myself as he rubs his head. “It just slipped out of me. You’ve got to admit it has a nice ring to it, though.”

“No, it doesn’t have a nice ring to it, asshole,” I retort through gritted teeth as we walk through the Dover building where all of the Humanities classes are held. It’s cold as fuck here and I’m only in jeans and a green Drayton t-shirt.

“You’ve got to stop thinking about my ass, Bailey. I’ve told you time and time again that nothing is going to happen between us,” Wes says sweetly as if he’s talking to a child. The soft sound of sniffles distract me for a second before I shake my head, probably having heard something wrong. Wes continues talking, as always. “I mean, I was considering it that one time, but since then I’ve learned that—”

I hear another sniff. “Stop talking,” I say to him out of the corner of my mouth. There are a lot of turns in this corridor and it’s hard to figure out where the noise is coming from.

“Is this the part in the movie where the guy tells someone to shut up and he kisses them instead? If it is, I’d like to kindly decline.”

“Oh my god. Can you shut up for two seconds, you oaf,” I groan, pushing him with my shoulder as I try to walk closer to the sound.

“Hey, you know how sensitive I am to that word right now,” he whines. Sometimes I feel like shoving my head in a bathtub full of water and then I think I probably shouldn’t. But the urge gets stronger and stronger the more and more I speak with this guy.

We both come to a stop when we walk around the corner, the light brown stone walls caging us in the small corridor and I see her.

It’s hard to miss Catherine Fables. Especially when she’s all I fucking see sometimes. I immediately know that it’s her against the wall, her fingers flying over her phone in her hand as she wipes her face with her jumper.

Wes tries to walk, but I stop him, holding my arm out. “Is she fucking crying?” he asks, his voice quiet. Oh, so now he

wants to be quiet. Great.

“It’s hard to tell,” I say, trying to keep my voice as low as possible. “Lemme go and talk to her. Stay here.”

“Whatever you say, boss,” Wes grumbles.

I smooth my sweaty palms over my jeans as I start to walk towards her. She’s clearly the one going through something, so I don’t exactly know why I feel nervous. She looks up at me as I reach her in five long steps.

“Hey, are you... Are you okay?” I ask, shoving my hands in my pockets. She blinks up at me, her face shining with tears, those beautiful eyes staring right into mine. She runs her hands down her skirt quickly.

“I’m fine,” she says, smiling, wafting her hand in the air.

“Are you, or are you just doing that girl thing where they say they’re fine but they’re really not fine?” I ask, tilting my head to the side. She laughs a little.

“No, I’m actually fine. I just got my grade for my last assignment. I’m just being emotional about it,” she says, giving me a noncommittal shrug as half an answer. When I don’t say anything, still staring at her trying to gauge her reaction, she says, “I was freaking out about it, but I did really well. So, I’m happy.”

“That’s really good, Cat. You should be proud,” I say, playfully nudging her shoulder. Her whole face lights up, her nose scrunching in the most adorable way.

“Thank you. Rotford said I should be *grateful*, not proud. Whatever that means,” she mumbles. She drops her gaze to the ground and it takes all that I am not to lift her chin up to get her to look at me and speak to me. “Anyway. I’m going to get a celebratory packet of chips from the vending machine. Do you want one?”

I gasp, holding my hand to my chest. “Are you suggesting that you’re going to get me a bag of chips out of the kindness of your heart?”

“You know what? Forget it. I was just trying to be nice since you were nice to me, but it seems like you prefer—”

I cut her off with a laugh. “It’s okay. I’ve got to go find Nor anyway. Do you know where she is?”

“If she’s not in the theatre room, maybe check the studio,” Cat says. “She said she had rehearsals this morning, but you never know with her.”

As I expected, Nora wasn’t in either of those places.

Instead, I spotted her in an empty classroom on the other side of campus to the Arts building making out with her boyfriend. Ryan Valla is a nice guy. He always has been and he’s perfect for Nora. They’re both theatre majors and some of the duets they’ve done have actually brought me to tears. Their chemistry on and off stage is palpable, but having to witness my twin sister make out with him is where I draw the line.

“That guy is such a prick,” Wes grumbles. I look down at him as he watches through the door into the classroom, grimacing.

“He’s fine and you know he is. Cut it out,” I say, pushing him out the way.

“Fine? That guy looks like a Ken doll with a stupid British accent,” he says, squaring his eyes at him. I chuckle, knowing that the British part is right. He spent two summers in London and he acts like he was born and raised there.

“Sounds like you’re jealous, dude.”

“I’m not,” he growls. “I just don’t see how *he* can satisfy *her*. Especially if they’re sleeping together. Nora is—”

“Okay, okay. Your work here is done. I’ve found her so you can leave now,” I say, shaking my head at whatever thoughts this guy has about my sister.

He pins his arms against his chest, leaning against the door. “You can’t tell me what to do.”

“Fine. Do you want me to tell Archer?” I watch as his face grows pale. We’ve seen Archer angry one time and it was enough to scare the living daylights out of him. And me too.

I finally push open the door as Wes falls backwards right onto his ass. I laugh as I step over him, watching my sister scramble apart from her boyfriend. His hand was getting way too far up her skirt for my likings and in a goddamn classroom for God sake. I don't know when she started to become the reckless one out of the two of us, but it's not a good look.

She grabs her bag from the table, her brown hair bobbing on her shoulders, as she pushes her eager boyfriend to the side. "What the hell are you doing?" she asks, smoothing out her skirt as she walks towards me. She looks down at Wes who is still on the floor. "Wesley."

"Nora," he says, grinning.

She steps over him, shaking her head. "I told you to meet me an hour ago. We're going to be late."

When Nora and I moved out for college, we made an agreement with our parents that we'd come home at least once every two weeks to visit them. We've always had a strong relationship seeing as we're the only children and we don't have much extended family.

They were only eighteen when they had Nora and I and it always felt like they're the 'cool' aunt and uncle all my friends talk about having. It's always been us in this small little bubble in a huge house in Fort Collins.

High school me would definitely deny it, but I'm one hundred percent sure that I'm a mama's boy. I've gotten used to it now, knowing that I'm always going to need my mom in my corner, but as a kid I would do anything to deny it.

I've always loved my dad and I always will. He's the one I have to thank for getting me into football, but there is nothing that will compare to the kind of bond my mom and I have.

My mom was the one who dropped me off at my first day of middle school and the same person who picked me up earlier after I freaked out during the icebreakers.

My mom was the one who took me out for ice cream after winning my first football game even when my dad tried to keep me on a diet.

My mom was the one who let me and Nora into her bed after she miscarried and made my dad sleep on the floor of the bedroom. Even though we fully didn't understand the significance of what happened, she let us be there for her and joked around with my dad when he made breakfast for us the morning after.

Our family has never been perfect and it never will be. But that's what I like about coming home. I like coming home to the faint smell of pumpkin and spices no matter what time of year it is. I like coming home to the maroon comforter that lays on the back of the couch that never seems to move. I like coming home into my parents arms as they run down the driveway as Nora and I jump out of my truck.

My dad gets to Nora first, trapping her in a hug as if they haven't seen each other for years. It's been two weeks, but still. My mom almost trips over the overgrown grass as she runs towards me, her white summer dress and red apron flowing in the wind as she reaches me.

I used to think mom was a princess because of the movies we used to watch. *"I'm not a princess, sweetie. I'm just your mom,"* she told me once after I went through a phase of calling her Princess Emma for a week straight. *"You're the best mom-princess ever,"* I told her.

"Oh, honey," she says, pulling out of the hug she immediately trapped me in. I smile up at her, her bright green eyes squinting at me in the sun. I reach into the car quickly, returning with the cookies I made. "And a Connor Bailey special? How did I get so lucky?"

"You'll be lucky if you don't die," Nora shouts back, walking up the path back into the house, chasing after my dad and probably pestering him with questions about New York. Dad goes there a lot for business and it's her dream to go one day. My dad has been planning a big trip for her twenty-first

birthday, but she doesn't know it yet. I do *not* want to be in the same room as her when she finds out.

My mom wraps her arm around my shoulder, her blonde hair tickling me. "How are you, my sunshine?"

"I'm good. Just a little tired," I say, swaying with her as we walk into the house. When she shuts the door, she studies me curiously, her arms now pinned across her chest. "What?"

"You went out last night, didn't you?"

"Yes...?"

"But you didn't drink?" she asks, continuing her walk into the kitchen. I follow behind her, not sure what she's getting at exactly. I don't say anything and she takes my silence for an answer. "Connor."

"Mom, you know I don't drink during the season," I say with a sigh, taking a seat at the island.

"I know, I know. I just feel like you need to loosen up a little, you know?"

"I can have fun without drinking."

She sighs wistfully, looking out the window into the bright backyard and then back to me. "I just don't want you to miss out on things, that's all. You know I just want you to have fun. And part of that is because your dad and I had to grow up pretty quickly. I just don't want you to feel like you need to be one-hundred percent responsible *all* the time, Connie."

I'm not an uptight person. It's never really been my style. Or, well, I thought it wasn't. That was until I started college, realised parties and fraternities weren't just for movies and they were actually very real.

Moving out and into a space where everybody wants to be out all the time and drinking was the main priority, was daunting. So I stayed away from it. I know people on my team can manage football and a social life easily, but for me, eliminating the social aspect that leads to drama and things that I can't risk being apart of, has improved my performance immensely. I want it to stay that way.

“I’m fine, mom. You don’t have to worry about me. Trust me, I’m getting the full college experience,” I say as convincingly as I can. She nibbles on her bottom lip before her shoulders sag, signifying defeat. She presses a kiss to my forehead before walking past me and out of the kitchen.

I don’t get another second to breathe before Nora walks in, her hair somehow a mess from the car to the house as she inspects the box of cookies on the counter. Mom took a bite of one already and seemed to enjoy them. Well, she didn’t spit them out, but she also didn’t compliment them either.

“What are these supposed to be?” Nora asks, shaking the box of steel cookies.

“Cookies, obviously. Do you want one?”

Her face scrunches up. “Your baking looks like death inside a Tupperware container.”

One thing about Nora? She knows exactly where your weak spots are and how to poke them. “Mom ate one,” I say, desperately trying to justify the fact that they look inedible.

Nora laughs. “That’s because she doesn’t want to hurt your feelings,” she says sweetly, giving me that older sister – by eleven minutes – glare. “Watch,” she says, moving towards the white kitchen wall that connects with the living room. “Dad, do you want a cookie?”

“Ooh, yes,” my dad replies, his voice clear with excitement. I give Nora a sarcastic smile. She’s such a know-it-all sometimes and it pisses me off.

“Connor made them,” she shouts back, a smug smile on her face.

“You know what? On second thought, I’m good,” my dad replies and my heart sinks. Am I really *that* bad at baking? “I don’t want to fill up too much before dinner.”

My sister holds her chin high, doing her famous exit which she’s practised over a million times growing up.

I look back down at my apparently undesirable cookies and shove one into my mouth. They can’t be that bad.

They somehow taste even worse than they did this morning. Still, I force myself to eat it because nobody else will.

I love coming home to my perfectly imperfect family.

FIVE

CAT

FREE-FALLING AND FOOTBALLERS

AFTER MY MINI-MELTDOWN when I found out my grade, I was feeling on top of the world the whole weekend. I treated myself to a day full of reality TV and a huge pizza to share with the girls, followed by a morning sitting in the corner of my favourite cafe with a hardback classic book in my hands.

For once I don't want that feeling to go away. I don't want to constantly think about what's next. I just want to take every new assignment with more passion than the last. Anything can become a story, it just takes the right amount of love, patience and effort to make it a good one.

Elle and Nora both work part-time at the bookstore a few blocks away from campus. It's a dainty indie store packed away into an alley full of vintage shops. Some people know it as a hidden gem, but since we started coming here years ago, it's been our favourite space and now both of them have jobs there, it's even better.

BoBo's only has three aisles and multiple comfortable chairs that lay in various places of the room. Its entire vibe is Autumn and dark earth tones. No matter what time of year it is, it just *feels* like a warm, safe hug and a cup of a pumpkin flavoured drink.

I slip through the wooden door, instantly soothed by the warmth and the smell of books. I run my hand over the box of one-dollar books by the door, loving the fact that most of these have been donated.

I'm not exactly sure what I came here for, but I needed something to do before class and luckily Elle is on the morning shift since she has no classes until the late afternoon. She left before I woke up and in comparison to Nora's chaos, she's a lot calmer.

My eyes meet hers over the counter and my face immediately breaks into a smile. Elle is one of those people who know what's wrong without you having to say something. She's also one of those people that would never make a scene in a restaurant, but has this quiet, harsh authority to her tone that can make any server quake in their boots.

"You're in a good mood," Elle points out, leaning on the counter in her green shirt with a tiny *BoBo's* logo on the pocket. "Still on an academic high?"

"Always," I say, scanning the bookmarks on display.

She laughs a little. "You're one of the weirdest people I know. I'm convinced you get hot and bothered over grades and books more than you do over men."

"Why bother with porn when books exist?" I say, shrugging. I was exposed to 'smutty' books and Wattpad way too young. It's not my fault I'm wired this way. Okay... maybe it is. "Nothing gets me going more than ink on paper."

"You and me both," she mumbles, shaking her head. "What are you looking for? Some new Emily Henry copies came in yesterday."

My heart expands at the name of my favourite author. Reading Emily Henry books with the girls is probably what solidified our bond in our first year of college. Not to be dramatic, but *Beach Read* changed our lives.

We've always been huge book lovers and when we picked up her book for the first time, we've not been the same since. She conveys words, thoughts, feelings and emotions in a way that is so incredibly true to the soul and the mind that you can't help but get transfixed within her writing.

We have a dedicated section just for her books in our bookshelf and whenever we go book shopping, we

immediately draw out her books, leaving notes slipped inside the pages so readers know exactly what they're getting into.

"I'd love another copy, but I don't think my book buying ban would like that," I sigh, hitching my tote further up my shoulder. I've got to draw the line for my obsession somewhere.

"I respect that," she says solemnly as if this is a meeting of Book Buyers Anonymous. "I've got to start putting books out, so I'll see you later?"

"I'll see you," I reply, still feeling the warmth and satisfaction of a good day ahead right down to my fingertips.

If you have ever wondered how many times a person could fall asleep in Annie Rotford's class without her knowing, the answer is zero. Yet, George manages to get a few seconds in before she slams a book closed and pushes something over on purpose. She's never openly discussed the common pattern of people falling asleep in her class, but it's obvious that her voice puts people to sleep.

"George," I whisper, nudging him with my shoulder. His head lolls forward before his eyes shoot open, his blonde hair falling in his face. "You need to stay awake. What the hell have you been doing?"

It's not unusual for him to fall asleep in class. Holding his head up has become my part-time job and I don't mind it, but he's been extra tired today. He wipes the drool from the corner of his mouth. I would find it gross if he didn't have the looks and the attitude of a golden retriever.

"Jacks was watching some videos the other day," he mumbles out of the side of his mouth, pretending to take notes even though I know what he's writing doesn't make any sense. "And he wanted to try something new. So, he bought this toy from—"

I hold up my hand. "Forget I asked," I say, shivering. "You and Jacks are cute, but you're also a little sickening. It should be illegal for two people to love each other that much."

His cheeks flush. “I know, sometimes I think—”

“Are you and your friend finished talking, Catherine, or am I boring you?” Rotford’s voice brings us both back to the conversation as the rest of class snickers. Not everyone in our class is as nice as George, which is why I’m grateful to have him as my one friend in this class rather than have twenty bad ones. We both nod in unison. “Good. I think this would interest the both of you.”

I straighten my posture, instantly intrigued. When Rotford starts a rant like that, you know it’s bound to be good. Everyone in the class quietens as she switches the powerpoint on the main board, the title changing from our last assignment feedback to a picture of... A football field?

What the hell?

“As you know, Drayton runs a series of campus-wide magazines to keep with tradition and keep students engaged in what is going on in and outside of the state. We try to keep up with every aspect of the curriculum, every course and even every fraternity and sorority, as ridiculous as it sounds,” she begins.

She changes the slide to a picture of an old newspaper from Drayton. It’s black and white so it must be old. “After a staff briefing with the head of the sports department, it has come to my attention that the Titans Daily, the newspaper designated for the football team, has been abandoned for five years. Nobody has picked it up again and nobody has even purchased any of the old copies. Now, I know that running the school newspapers is not a part of your course or what you signed up for when applying for this at Drayton, *but* it does give many opportunities in the outside world if you are able to start somewhere small. As a favour to Coach Mackenzie, I offered to ask you all if anyone would be up for taking over the newspaper. We’re looking for someone who will give it a modern spin, reintroduce the players and what Coach Mackenzie says, ‘Make football great again.’”

Everyone in the class bursts out into laughter at Mrs Rotford using such casual language.

After the laughter dies down, the whole room goes quiet. Nobody raises their hands, nobody suggests taking it over and nobody even *dares* to look at her. Most of us don't even like sports, so it's understandable. I can tolerate a good game when I'm in the mood for it, but writing about it and the players is a whole other thing. I've never really considered sports journalism and the module we had on it had been quick enough to forget about.

Rotford sighs. "I thought this would be the case," she mutters. She looks up, her piercing blue eyes scanning the room before her eyes land on me. I feel the sweat pick up on my neck. It feels like she's looking straight through into my soul. "That's why I chose someone in advance anyway."

No.

No.

No.

She couldn't possibly be talking about me. I know I've started to up my game this year, but this is where I draw the line. I want her approval more than anything. I want to succeed in this class above all, but this?

This would be absolute torture.

"Catherine Fables," she announces and my blood runs cold. Everyone's head turns to me and I swallow the lump in my throat. George elbows me in the rib as I blink at her. "Congratulations. The assistant coach will take you down to meet Mackenzie now. This will be a great learning experience for you. Enjoy."

My mouth practically hangs open.

I stay put in my seat, trying to wrap my head around it as George packs away my stuff for me since I'm apparently incapable. I'm shoved out of the door before I can even process what's happening.

A young blonde woman with green eyes greets me at the door, a clipboard in hand as she rests her hand on my shoulder. "I'm guessing it wasn't voluntary, huh?" I shake my head. "You'll be fine. I looked through some of the things you've

written. Rotford gave them to me over the weekend. You're really good. I'm sure you'll fit right in."

"Thanks," I mumble, somehow telling my feet to continue walking.

"I'm Olivia, by the way," she says, smiling up at me. I'm thinking about introducing myself, but she already knows who I am. I want to ask how long she's been working at Drayton given how young she is, but I think better of myself and try to mentally prepare myself on the walk over to the other side of campus.

Football is not my thing. At all. I watched a few of Connor and Wes's games growing up by default, but I've never been completely interested. It seems fun and a little violent. Nothing that necessarily checks my boxes for entertainment. So, I try to shake off all the nerves and paint on my best *I'm totally fine and normal* face as Olivia pushes open the door to the Coach's office.

Coach Mackenzie looks exactly as he did as the first time I met him when Wes, Nora, Elle, Connor, and I had a playdate. He's freakishly tall, a dirty brunette, an unkept beard, and a beer belly. His blue eyes light up when he sees me.

It's been years since I've seen him.

After my dad became mayor, he started to distance himself from the people that made him who he is and the friends that picked us both back up after my mom died. It was too awkward to visit him on my own, but I still make sure to send him a Christmas card every year when my dad forgets.

"Catherine!" He beams, leaning back in his chair. I smile back at him. "I'm so glad you're willing to take this opportunity. No one has run Titans Daily in over five years. I've seen your work in the school paper, your dad must be very proud of you. *I'm proud of you.*"

The feeling in my chest warms at his words. No matter how much distance my dad seemed to put between us, he's acting as if it didn't exist. "Thank you and he is."

He nods happily. “So, if you’re on the team does that mean you’ll be attending games?”

I shrug. “Some of them, I’m assuming, but not all. I’ve still got a ton of school work to do and I’m not sure exactly what it is that I’m doing here.”

“Well. If you do, I’d love for you to bring your dad too. It’s been a while since we’ve had a celebrity on campus,” he says, shaking his head at the thought. I don’t know why he places so much trust in my dad after the way he treated him.

“I’m not sure being mayor grants him celebrity status, but I’ll ask,” I say.

“It seems like you’re more interested in her dad than you are in her, Coach,” Olivia says, leaning against the doorframe. I smile at her, grateful she can redirect the conversation. I’m still a little starstruck about my new role, but a little excited to get started. I’m going to need all the help I can get.

He laughs. “Sorry. Anyway, the boys have just finished practice and they’re having a mothers meeting in the locker room. I’ll introduce you to them now. They’re going to be a bit hyper. They’re all like little puppies.”

I have no idea what I’ve gotten myself into.

SIX

CONNOR

HE KNELT TO THE GROUND AND PULLED
OUT A RING AND SAID

“MARRY ME JULIET, you’ll never have to be alone! I love you and that’s all I really know!”

We all sing in unison, watching the video back and laughing at our ridiculousness. We finished practice nearly an hour ago before Sam suggested we make a TikTok in the changing rooms. I thought it was stupid at first, but I’m trying to take my mom’s advice.

Naturally, the current trend going around is a video to ‘Love Story’ by Taylor Swift where somebody has to pretend to propose to someone before they say yes and we all jump around in a circle with the lights off and flashlights on.

Obviously, I got picked to be the person on one knee while Wes wrapped a towel around his head and pretended to be the lovely bride-to-be.

“Let’s do it one more time, folks,” Wes says, wiping the sweat off his forehead. We’re all a shirtless, sweaty mess and someone believes he’s the director. He points to Oliver who is by the lights. “Oli, my man, you have one job. *Literally*. Do it right.”

Oliver nods and I snicker as Wes calls action. He keeps the light on as Sam starts recording Wes’s dramatic entrance around the benches, flicking his ‘hair’ around his shoulder. When he reaches me, I kneel to the ground, open my pretend ring box as the music continues playing through the phone speaker and when the bridge hits, Oliver turns off the lights, I

stand and all the flashlights turn on and we're jumping in a circle.

Two seconds into the song, the lights turn on, ending the fun in an instant.

“Oliver!” Wes shouts. “I swear to God—”

We all turn to the door, heaving until our faces drop when we see who's there. It's not Oliver. In fact, Oliver is passed out in Jaxon's arms somehow, doing some weird bridal carry. Coach Mackenzie clears his throat and a lump gets stuck in mine as I take in who is standing at his sides.

Catherine Fables is in the boys locker room.

She looks fucking stunning.

And I look like... this.

I don't get time to process it before all of my attention is on Coach. I'm supposed to be leading this team, but clearly I'm doing a bad job at it if we're spending our time doing TikTok's to Taylor Swift songs.

Coach sighs, running a hand down his face. “I'm not even going to ask whatever was going on just then, but can everybody please put on a shirt.”

Michael Redford's – or Red, as we call him – shoulder bumps into mine playfully as he wiggles his eyebrows at Cat and the assistant coach, Olivia. “You sure, Coach? Seems like we've got company.”

Coach huffs. “I said put on a shirt, Redford. Or are you incapable of doing that like you have been incapable of catching a ball all season?”

Everyone makes a low sound of disapproval followed by a few snickers. Wes hits Red on the back of his head with a towel. “Ooh, he got you there, Red.”

“Mackenzie!” Coach's harsh tone makes me flinch.

“Yes, Coach?”

“Put on a shirt and keep your mouth shut, or your mom and I will not be letting you back home for Christmas and you

can stay here. Got it?”

“Yes, Coach,” he mumbles, turning around to his locker.

A few minutes later, the entire team is decent and quiet, sitting on the benches waiting for them to say something. The whole time, Cat kept her gaze on the floor, not daring to look up at me as everyone rushed around the room, snickering at the fact that there were two women in the locker room. It’s not a big deal, but the guys like to act as if they’ve never seen a woman before. With or without clothes on.

I’m trying my absolute hardest not to smile or even look at her, but it’s really fucking difficult.

She’s standing there in a black tennis skirt and white top, her tote bag around her shoulder, her curly afro long down her shoulders, giving her a preppy, hot look. She rolls her lips in as she finally looks up wearily. When she’s noticed we’ve all actually got shirts on, she relaxes a little.

“Okay, boys, listen up. Catherine Fables is going to be working with you all to improve your interview skills this season, as well as taking over the Titans Daily,” he explains. He turns to Catherine who has been looking around the room aimlessly, looking at everyone but me.

She smiles at Coach before looking at someone at the back of the room, a technique we’ve all been taught when speaking in front of crowds.

“Hi, so, as Coach said, I’m Catherine, but you can just call me Cat. I’m a journalism major and I’m hoping to have my own take on the Titans Daily and help the school get to know you all more before you all become famous football players,” she says easily, a tight smile etched onto her lips as everyone cheers at the end of her statement. She is clearly not doing this by choice. “This isn’t all going to be about football. Not because I don’t find it interesting, but because realistically, no one wants to know every single detail about football. You’re the only team without a newspaper and I want to help change that.”

Coach nods at her, grinning like a proud dad before turning to us with his usual defiant stare. “Catherine is now a part of this team and I expect you to treat her as such. Am I clear?”

“Yes, Coach,” we all reply. Some of the guys talk an octave higher, wagging their eyebrows at her. She doesn’t even seem to notice.

She’s looking right at me. I took my eyes off hers for two seconds and now she’s looking at me? Our gazes lock and hold as Coach continues talking.

“Great. The first induction will be next week so Cat can start putting together profiles. Until then, I want you all on your best behaviour on and off the pitch.”

Olivia opens the door before she and Coach Mackenzie walks out. Just as Cat turns to leave, she looks over her shoulder, her eyes dip to my shoes as I spread out on the bench and then back to my eyes.

And then she fucking smiles.

At. Me.

I must have died and come back to life because by the time I can form coherent thoughts, everyone around me is cheering, whistling like fucking animals about having two hot women on our team. As much as it sucks to say, after having Olivia as the assistant coach for a few weeks, the boys started to back off. I just hope it doesn’t take that long for Cat. I hate the fact that they can even *look* at her.

“Holy fuck, she’s hot,” Redford says. The words coming out of his mouth burn straight through me, making my chest fill with an ache. I don’t know why it does. I have no right to be jealous.

“Scary, too,” Sam says. I pin him with a look and he accidentally drops his boot before picking it back up. “Hot scary,” he corrects. That’s more like it.

“Makes sense. Scary is clearly your type after what your ex looked like,” Red retorts.

“I told you she was going through a phase,” Sam says, exasperated. He bumps his shoulder into mine as he flips off Red. “How long do you think it’ll take until she has her way with one of us?”

I huff, slipping on my Nike sneakers. “Did you not listen to what Coach said? He said we’ve got to be on our best behaviour on and off the pitch, which I’m sure is code for hands off.”

“Who said he has to find out?” Sam says, gaining the approval that he wanted from the rest of the team. I shake my head at him.

“Why don’t you just go for Hailey Dermont, or something, man? Or literally, *anyone* else?” I find myself saying. Hailey has made it a personal mission of hers to sleep with every one of the football players and I am *not* going to participate in that trend. Everyone else on the team love that shit.

“Why would I do that? You’ve seen the way she’s been all over Oliver this year,” Sam replies, nodding to where Oli is mindlessly munching on a protein bar. The poor kid isn’t going to know what hit him when Hailey eventually rocks his world.

I shake my head. “Besides, Cat is my sister’s best friend. She wouldn’t go near you with a ten-foot pole,” I say.

“Oh, but you’re sure she’ll go near you though,” Wes coos as he casually steps across the line that’s drawn on the floor as if it’s a tightrope. The more I watch him, the more I wonder how many times Coach dropped him as a baby.

“What are you talking about?” I ask, scrubbing my hands across my face before resting them on my thighs, my shoes done up so I can finally leave.

“Don’t bullshit me, Connor. I saw that little look that she gave you and I saw the way you lost your shit. Girls only do that when they’re thinking about fucking you.”

All the guys nod and ‘mmm hmm’ in agreement. What kind of stupid rule is this and why did I not know about it until now?

“You– What– You think she–” I stutter, my face feeling red hot with heat.

Wes starts laughing hard, gripping onto his shirt. “See, look at you! You’re blushing already. You’re in deeper than I thought.”

“I’m not deep in anything,” I mutter, clearly not making sense as I grab my backpack and get ready to get the hell out of here. Wes follows behind me.

“But, you want to be deep in her p–” I turn around, squaring my eyes at him as I close the distance between us. He holds his hands up in surrender. “Yeah, yeah. You’re right, you don’t like her at all.”

SEVEN

CAT

STICH AND BITCH

IT'S BEEN four days since my mind will never be the same again.

It's been four days since I walked into the football locker room where almost fifty twenty-something year old men were sweaty and shirtless, singing and dancing to one of my favourite Taylor Swift songs.

It was as ridiculous as it was adorable.

I see those trends online all the time, but seeing it in person is another thing. When they all broke apart, realising that we'd been standing there, they all looked so vulnerable, as if they've had this mask on pretending they're big and strong when really they're just little boys.

I've known what the team is like. I knew that the second I walked in they'd use any chance to try to give me the 'fuck me' eyes and I ignored them. I stared straight ahead, trying not to make eye contact with anyone who was trying way too hard for my attention.

But when I looked down and saw Connor, my chest felt like it was on fire. He wasn't doing what anyone else was doing. He wasn't immediately in flexing mode. He just looked *comfortable*. Like that was his safe space with his friends. Insanely hot, but comfortable.

That was four days ago and I'm still getting flustered just *thinking* about it, despite being in the cold produce aisle in the supermarket.

Every Sunday, the girls and I do a weekly grocery shop as well as a walk. We get all the essentials we need and extra picnic snacks, bring them back to our dorm, pack our picnic and we go out again. Each week, when we can remember, we think of a new activity to do. This week we're going to bring our favourite books as well as practising our crochet. It's our little Sunday ritual and I love it.

Nora's mom says it makes us look like little old people, but I couldn't be happier in the middle of a supermarket while Elle and Nora check and then check the list again before picking up the right fruits.

"What are you looking for, Elle-Belle?" I ask as she stares at the refrigerated fruits, frowning with her arms crossed, basket in hand.

"You know those strawberries that my mom brings over sometimes?" I nod, knowing she is referring to Annie, one of her moms. She has a knack for picking up the best snacks. "I can't find them anywhere."

"Maybe it's because you left your glasses at home, babe," I say, tapping between her eyes and she laughs before sighing heavily. "It's just strawberries. We can get some different ones."

She sighs again. "I know. I just really wanted those ones, but I'm just a mess right now." Nora appears by our side, eating some of the grapes we're going to buy. We both give Elle a look, our eyes softening. We don't have to say anything else before the words start to pour out of her. "I haven't been home in a few weeks because I've got a recital coming up, but I don't want my moms to come. I don't think I'm ready for them to see me dance again."

Even as one of the strongest and bravest people I know, Elle has a lot of difficulty with her confidence. No matter how many times Nora and I try to drill it into her that she's amazing at everything she does — especially dancing — she's finding it hard to believe she is as good as she was before the accident.

"You don't have to tell them if you don't want to," Nora says around a mouthful. She swallows. "If I don't think my

show is going to be good, I tell my parents not to come. They end up showing up anyway, but that's not the point. You don't owe it to them, or anyone to be at your best all the time and if you don't want them to see you at what you think is your lowest, then you don't have to."

Elle nods, chewing on her bottom lip. "Yeah," she says quietly before gaining more strength in her voice. "Yeah, you're right. I'm going to see how rehearsals are this week and make a decision."

"That's our girl," I say, nudging her with my shoulder. "Now, let's get all this back so we can go to the park for sunset."

We somehow end up coming back to campus with four different grocery bags and one of them filled with books we got at the Little Free Library around the corner from the supermarket. We exchanged some of our books for some of theirs and now we've got a whole new set of books to talk about.

Walking through Estes Park in late September as the sun starts to set has to be one of my all time favourite feelings. We've each got a bag in hand, the sun casting a gentle glow on our faces as the purple-pink of the sky starts to set near the mountains.

It's usually quiet around this time of year, so we don't feel bad about taking a spot in a public park where the odd dog walker walks past as we set out our picnic blanket and food.

As soon as I'm about to take a picture of our spread — cheeses, grapes, mini subs, crackers and more cheese — my phone screen is engulfed with a picture of my dad.

My heartbeat immediately picks up, knowing that if he's calling I have to answer immediately. I hate that our relationship has gotten to this — that I have to feel anxious every time he calls.

I excuse myself, walking further away until I get to a bench as I hear Elle and Nora bickering about moving spots so

the lighting is better. I answer the phone and as always, I have to make the first move.

“Hi, dad. I’m glad you called,” I say into the phone, resting it against my ear as I look out to the frosted mountains where I spent most of my summers and winters as a kid. I wonder if my dad remembers the time he, mom, and I went for a hike and were fully convinced we saw James Marsden trekking down.

“Are you?” He just loves to make things difficult.

“Yeah...?” I say, my voice heavy with concern and uncertainty. “What’s up?”

My dad never calls unless there’s been a problem or he suddenly remembers he has a daughter who only lives an hour away from him. Mostly, I don’t mind. But seeing the relationship my friends have with their parents, I’m a little envious that my dad doesn’t call *just because*. He doesn’t call because he’s randomly thinking about me, or if he’s stumbled across one of my baby pictures.

“Checking how the semester is going,” he says simply. I hear him typing in the background. Of course he can’t take a few minutes out of his day to call his daughter with no distractions. Work always comes first.

It’s also coming towards the end of September, so I’ve been in school for over a month now, but he doesn’t know that apparently.

“It’s going okay. My grades are good and I’m alive, so I guess everything is great. How are—”

“Great,” he says, cutting me off. I take a deep breath, trying my best not to get upset or angry. “Well, I wanted to ask who is the person who is emailing me about attending a football game? You know I don’t do that.”

“Oh, it’s just Coach Mackenzie. You remember him, don’t you? He was asking me about it when—”

“Why were you talking to him? You’re not on the football team.”

Deep breaths are doing nothing for me right now.

“Well, if you could let me finish my sentence, maybe you’d understand,” I bite out. There is nothing but silence on the other end. It’s rare that I ever snap at my dad like that. “I’m writing the newspaper and blog for Titans Daily. The opportunity came up in class and no one wanted to go for it. I thought it would look good on my CV.”

I’m bending the truth a little, trying to make it seem like this is a choice. This is supposed to be a power move of some sorts. A new era. A new challenge.

“Well, there’s a reason no one wants to do it. Nobody cares about college football, Catherine.”

“That’s the thing. I’m going to change it up a little,” I say, waiting for a snarky response, but I don’t get one. This is my chance. “I’ve planned out a few things and—”

”I’m sorry, Indira is calling me into a meeting. We’ll talk another time, darling. Love you.”

“I love—” The cell ends and the ache in my chest deepens. “I love you too,” I say to nobody.

I walk back over to the girls, painting on my best face as they lay down on the blanket staring up at the sky. When they see me, Nora leans up on her elbow, frowning at me.

“Why the long face?” She asks. I lift up my phone as an answer. “Papa Fables giving you a hard time?” I nod. “Jeez, what is it with parents today?”

I shrug, taking a seat next to them, pulling my crochet needles and wool from my bag, resting them in my lap. Elle sits up too, crossing her legs.

“He’s just busy,” I say, shrugging again and looking out onto the sunset as if it’s not a big deal. I don’t know why I’m still making excuses for him.

“It’s a Sunday afternoon. What could he possibly be busy with?” Nora asks, sounding more upset than I am. Sometimes I think she feels everybody else’s pain more than her own and

she takes on that extra load. Maybe it's an acting thing. I don't know.

“Pilates?” Elle suggests and the tension in my body immediately starts to smooth out as I laugh at the idea of my dad doing any kind of yoga.

When Nora's initial anger simmers down and she joins in on the laugh, I try to push all the negative feelings aside and just enjoy my time with the girls. As much as my dad can get under my skin, I'd be damned if I let him enjoy the things I love the most — my best friends, sunset, crocheting and books.

Sometimes, I feel like I need nothing more.

EIGHT

CAT/CONNOR

“IT’S CALLED EDGING.”

CAT

I WISHED someone could give me more of a helping hand with this new project. I wish Coach Mackenzie had not just left the room, saying nothing but ‘good luck’ and gave me a double thumbs up. I wish Rotford had given me some sort of direction to where to take this instead of leaving me in the dark.

This is supposed to be a good thing. It’s supposed to show me how my writing could work in the real world and how I would conduct interviews with real celebrities or even with local people. But trying to organise a room full of football players is like trying to teach a puppy to potty train.

Coach managed to line them up in the sports classroom, but it feels fucking tiny with me at a desk, papers and my laptop in front of me and men who are way too tall to be considered students towering over me, pestering me with questions I don’t have the answers to. It’s only half of the team, but it feels like there’s at least fifty of us in here.

I’ve never been in a space with this many men and it’s starting to freak me out. They all talk too much and too loud. They also smell disgusting and they keep giving me the heebie jebies for looking at me for too long.

Worst of all? Connor fucking Bailey won’t keep his eyes off me. Since the party, I’ve felt him everywhere and in every fibre of my body. It’s like he’s attached himself to my mind and my body without meaning to. And I hate that it feels like I

have no control. But I'm supposed to. I'm supposed to have the upper hand.

I take a deep breath, ready to calm them down and get my first person up. I stand, hoping to make myself visible to anybody who will listen.

"Can everybody calm down, please?" I ask as loud as I can without sounding insane. Nobody moves. "Hey!" I try again and nothing.

I'm about to give up and try again in a few minutes before Connor's eyes lock with mine as Wes and another guy talk at both sides of him animatedly. I don't know what's going on in his brain, but he looks at me like he knows what I was trying to do and he nudges Wes and the other dude and they stop talking.

"Can everyone shut the fuck up so we can get on with this and you can all leave and get about your day?" he booms.

The deepness and roughness in his voice causes me to stumble a little and I catch myself on the table as everyone goes hauntingly silent. He is the captain of the team after all, and the bossy side of him is weirdly attractive.

He keeps his eyes on me and half of me is grateful that he has my back like that, but the other half of me is annoyed that they don't listen to me. If I'm going to do this, it needs to be on my terms and under my leadership and control. I won't be able to survive in the real world if I can't get a bunch of twenty-year-old boys to listen to me.

"Thank you," I mouth to him, and he nods, his cheeks turning the tiniest shade of pink before he continues talking to Wes at a manageable volume.

The classroom is big enough so the boys should be able to take a seat at the tables that are scattered around like a detention room, but most of them settle for sitting on top of the tables. There's something so fascinating about boys and their inability to sit on furniture the right way.

I double check the list that Coach made for me. He suggested I get through as many as I could until I couldn't take

it anymore, which seems doable.

I call out the first name. “Michael Redford?”

The boys whoop and cheer as the unlucky guy walks forwards. Unlucky because he’s the same guy who suggested keeping his shirt off when I first went into the locker room and also because he’s ginger with the unlucky last name ‘Redford’ and everybody calls him ‘Red.’

He walks towards me, his cheeks – you guessed it – red. His legs are so long that they go way past my chair underneath the table. I scoot back a little, trying to put some distance between us.

As much as it’s easy to get information about the players from Coach’s files, I’ve learned that the best way to learn things about someone you already know is by asking them basic questions and seeing how they present the answers to you.

Which is why I shouldn’t be surprised by the number of stupid answers that I get when I asked three boys in a row what their height was, and they replied with some variation of “Do you want to know my shoe size too? You know what they say. Big feet means big dick.”

When I’ve gone through four boys, each of them having similar descriptions and hobbies, I’m already falling asleep. It’s not that they aren’t interesting. Some of them say the most outrageous things that confuse me so much that I need to take a step back. Some of the boys are quiet, a little shy and nervous that they’re being questioned like this on a random day.

But when Wes’s name is called, I can’t help but smile up at him. It feels like we’ve not spoken properly in years, but he’s always fun to be around. He’s usually attached to one of the Bailey twins’s hips and often has something inappropriate to say. It’s best when all of us are together and I can watch the way he feeds off everyone’s energy and becomes one huge ball of light.

Connor doesn't think I notice the way his face scrunches up and he rolls his head back when Wes walks up to me. I've purposefully skipped his name off the list, moving to all the people around him instead of him.

I also don't think he's noticed that I've picked up on him trying to skip the queue – if you can even call it that – by attempting to bribe others to make up an excuse and leave early so he can get to me quicker. He's getting antsy and I'm having way too much fun watching him squirm.

“Cathy!” Wes calls, pulling out the chair and immediately man-spreading as he sits. Like his dad, he has dirty blonde hair that is a messy heap on his head and he's one of the lucky people whose eyes change colour depending on the lighting. Now, they look sort of grey. It's fascinating.

“Don't call me that. You make me sound like an old woman,” I say, laughing as I pull up a clean page on the document I've been working on.

He sulks, crossing his arms against his chest. “But you're *my* old lady,” he says.

The laughter rushes out of my chest. He's been calling me that for as long as I can remember. I think it has something to do with the fact that I'd always get chosen to be the grandma when we'd play house as kids. Wes was always the pet on a leash and he always belonged to Nora.

“Keep doing that,” he whispers, turning back to the group of boys as most of the room has cleared now. I end up gasping, trying to catch my breath and process his words at the same time.

“What?”

“When you have the next person come up to you, laugh and smile at them like they're the funniest person you've ever met,” he says quietly, leaning into me. I smile, shaking my head slowly at his mischievousness. “It will drive Connor up the wall. He's already being pushed back and he clearly wants to talk to you.”

“What's his problem? He seems nervous,” I say to Wes.

He shrugs. “Talking to people isn’t his thing, apparently.” I nod, feeling a strange pang in my chest for drawing out this process for him when he probably would have benefitted from going first and getting this over with. Wes takes my silence as dismissal. “Just do it, Cat. Please. I’m begging you.”

I sigh, catching Connor’s eye as he fiddles with the hem of his shirt. “Okay,” I say quietly. Wes’s eyes light up at the challenge. “Okay, fine.”

He whispers a silent ‘yes’ to himself before using every given moment to try to make me laugh as I ask him the basic questions like his age (nineteen), birthday (June 14th), star sign (Gemini), height (six-one, but he looks five-eleven) and hobbies which ranged from kayaking to chess. He answers them all lazily and I keep my face painted in a smile the entire time until he winks at me and moves on.

When Sam Cho takes a seat at the table I smile so hard that my cheeks hurt. It helps that he’s an attractive guy – smooth face, adorable dimples and a smile to match. He’s also one of the boys who gave me *the* eyes in the locker room the other day.

“Hi, Sam. It’s nice to meet you,” I say when he crosses his arms against his chest.

“You too,” he says. I laugh as if he said something funny, tucking my curls behind my ear. His eyebrows crunch as he looks left and right for the joke he must have missed and when I train my gaze over his head where Connor’s eyes are burning holes through the back of Sam’s head. “*Ooh*, Connor? Tell you what would make him mad?”

“I’m open to suggestions,” I say, shrugging. Connor has no right to be this upset over not getting a chance to talk to me and I’m having the time of my life seeing how far he’ll go before he has a tantrum.

Sam’s smile creeps up on his face as he leans into me and I lean forward. I have no idea what I’m doing, or what he’s going to do, but my heart is pounding with anticipation. The desk isn’t that big so he reaches over easily, tucking another strand of hair behind my ear. His face is so close to mine now I

can feel his steady breathing against my neck, the sensation so weirdly foreign to me that my eyes flutter closed for a second.

“I’m not going to do anything, but from his angle it probably looks like I’m saying something filthy,” he murmurs softly. “I’m giving him three seconds before he comes over.”

CONNOR

What the fuck is he doing?

I know the comments he made about her were harmless, but this, right in front of me, is anything but harmless. The room is almost cleared now, and I’ve been standing in here for what feels like hours.

I don’t bother to hide my annoyance as I storm over there, pull Sam out of the chair and sit in his seat. It’s petty and extremely pathetic, but I’ve been watching her laugh with all the guys on the team while I have to wait around to have a five-minute conversation with her. And those five minutes with her would mean the world to me.

“I told you,” Sam mutters, laughing as he walks away.

Cat doesn’t even look at me as I sit down, spreading out my legs, pinning my arms against my chest. She stares down at the papers in front of her, taking notes as if I’m not right here.

When I get more comfortable, my leg stretches out further and my jeans brush against her tights. I watch her actively try to fight it, her teeth sinking into her bottom lip. I brush my leg against hers again, needing some sort of reaction. It might be doing nothing for her, but I know I’ll be thinking about this tiny interaction for weeks.

“Catherine,” I press.

“Connor,” she says lazily before finally meeting my eyes.

It’s impossible for someone to get more and more beautiful every time I see them, right? Like, that *shouldn’t* happen. So, why is it when I look into those dark brown eyes, I can see a golden pool of light swirling within them that I’ve never seen before?

“It’s my turn now, right?” I ask, nodding to her sheets which she’s neatly piled up.

“Actually, no,” she quips, beaming at me. “That’s all I’m going to do today.”

There is no way she’s being serious. “What?” I ground out.

She sighs, tilting her head to the side playfully. “Well, Coach said to go through as many as I can and I’m tired,” she says, clearly faking a yawn as she stacks her sheets on top of her laptop before leaning on her forearms. “Besides, I know most of the answers to the questions I was going to ask you, so it’s not like I really need much from you.”

I tilt my head to the side. “So, you strung me along this whole time just to say you don’t need me?”

“No, Connor,” she says, pulling out her chair as she stands. She presses her palms to the table as leans into me, her strong scent of her cherry and macadamia shampoo invades my senses. I lean into her too, needing to be closer to her, but she moves her head to the side of my face and all I can hear is my heart pounding in my ears. Suddenly nothing else exists other than her proximity and the tight feeling in my chest as she whispers, “It’s called edging.”

Fuck.

My.

Life.

NINE

CONNOR

“I DON’T GET IT. WHY IS HE JEALOUS?”

“WHAT ARE you doing for your birthday, Connie boy?”
Wes asks.

I glare at him across the gym. He’s lunging from one end of the room to the other with weights in each hand, effortlessly trying to have a conversation with me even though he knows I prefer to work out in silence. I’ve tried to put on my noise cancelling headphones more than once and he still makes sure I can hear him. I can’t tell if I just have an old shitty pair of headphones, or if he’s really just that loud.

“It’s in three weeks,” I say, sucking in a breath as I continue my crunches. He walks past me, shaking his head as if this is the worst news he’s heard in his life. “Plus, Nora is probably going to want to plan it. I really don’t care.”

He starts to lunge back in my direction, not breaking a sweat. “You’re turning twenty on the second greatest night of the year and you’re letting your little sister pick what to do?” He sounds so angry and serious, it’s ridiculous.

I groan, throwing my head back and stopping my reps because now I’ve lost count. “Second greatest night of the year?” I repeat, looking at him curiously as he finally collapses on a bench in front of me.

“After my birthday, obviously,” he says easily.

“Right, *obviously*. And Nora is technically older than me by eleven minutes, so I really don’t mind if she picks a theme. I don’t care about my birthday, you know that,” I say with a huff.

As for my birthday being on the greatest night of the year as Wes says, he means that it's on October 31st, Halloween, and in three weeks from now. It's a lucky birthday for someone who enjoys partying.

Every year we always spend spooky season watching old horror films and Halloween episodes of our favourite sit-coms and then we end the month off with a birthday party and Halloween party in one. Growing up, it was the lead up to my birthday that was the most exciting part of the year.

As for parties, I don't care much for them. I never have and I probably never will. Even though I'm dragged to one nearly every weekend and I have a good-ish time. I stick to playing games that are apparently more fun when you're drunk, or I spend most of the time talking Wes out of doing something stupid. Or, he does that stupid thing and I have to bring him home. Coach puts enough trust in me to keep the team in line on and off the pitch, so I'm one of the only people who takes things seriously.

If I'm going to play in the NFL, I have to show good leadership skills and be a good example by taking my health seriously. I know a lot of my teammates can handle both, but I'd rather not take the risk, especially after hearing about the countless injuries that can happen while intoxicated.

Once, I spent the whole night riddled with anxiety, searching for the worst injuries you could get as a football player and how easily they could happen if you're not careful with your body and how easily accidents can happen when you're not fully sober. It scared me so much that I swore off drinking and making sure that me and everyone else around me is safe.

As for my birthday... I've hated it for as long as I can remember. Not because I'm a twin, — I always knew that would be hard — but because of who I am and who Nora is. As proud as I am of my sister for being so fucking talented at everything she touches, I also envy her ability to be able to answer and ask so many questions that often fills the silence of any room we're in.

She never has to worry about running out of things to say and she can come up with anything on the spot. She always has something to talk about, something to show and something for people to be interested in. I, however, am only good at one thing.

Everybody plays football. It's the most popular sport in the US, so it's not extraordinary that I am the QB for my college. I'm a conversation filler, a quick two-minute question and answer. Nobody asks how much time I spend training, or how I got to the level I'm at today. Nobody cares to ask for routines or rituals that I do with the boys. So, it's hard to feel different and appreciated when you shared a womb with somebody so extraordinary.

Nora knows how to work a room that nobody notices I'm in.

So, yeah, it sucks to share a birthday with somebody who manages to make everything about her on the one day that is supposed to celebrate both of us. I can't blame her though. It's what she's good at and it's just not one of my strengths. I'm trying to get better at talking to people, but this whole thing with Cat and the newspaper is making me extra fucking nervous. There's no way I'd be able to make it to the NFL without a few interviews here and there. I need to suck it up and do better.

"Fine," Wes grumbles. "If you want to be a grump about it, I'll drop it. But just so you know, when you get married, I'm throwing you the best bachelor party ever."

"I'm literally shaking with anticipation," I reply, bored.

"Alright, Connie boy," he says, rolling his eyes as he gets to his feet. "Last rep before we hit the showers, or we're going to be late."

One thing I love about having a campus college is that everything is close together. After hitting the gym this morning with Wes, we made it back to our dorm, showered

and were out of the door in less than an hour and we made it to class on time.

Unlike most of the team who chose the easy way out to minor in some sort of sports science, Wes and I decided to minor in Literature. I've always liked studying books in high school and my parents have always been huge readers. I guess having teachers as parents really rubs off on you. Most guys in my classes growing up hated it, but I loved it.

I loved the feeling of feeling so incredibly immersed into a book that you forget that you're reading. When reality seems like the worst possible place to be, there's always some kind of universe to lose yourself in. Studying them now at a degree level is a lot harder than I thought it would be, but that doesn't mean I like it any less. I enjoy the challenge, the way it makes my brain work twice as hard.

Wes, on the other hand, has been staring at the extract from Shakespeare's *Othello* for the last twenty minutes, asking me more and more ridiculous questions. We've been studying this text for months, going over the same key scenes and picking out the authorial methods and the psychological context behind the antagonist's intentions.

"I don't get it. Why is he jealous?" Wes asks, pushing the sheet away from him as he crosses his arms against his chest, his face painted in serious concern. "Like, I get some of his motives, but did he really have to do *all* that just to stay silent in the end?"

"That's the whole point. He's a sadist, or a 'motiveless malignity,'" I say, flicking through the text. Wes's face crumbles in confusion. "He doesn't need a reason to do what he does. It's something deeper, more psychological. He's just manipulative and he gets drunk on power."

"The more you speak, the less I understand," he mumbles, picking up a pen to write what I just quoted from one of the critics of the text. I shake my head at him with a laugh, about to do the same before I look out of the window.

All classrooms on the ground floor in the humanities building form a square around a courtyard that holds a flower

bed and a statue of the first headmaster of Drayton. It's a beautiful and distracting sight during the summer as the sun shines directly onto the grey stone and it reflects through the large windows of the classroom.

It's especially distracting now as I watch Catherine walk from one side of the building and across the window. It's like she's walking in slow motion. Since the day at the party — I'll be honest, it was way before that, but still — I can't help but notice her everywhere I go.

She is a picture of academic perfection. Her hair is tied back into a bun, wild curls falling loose in her face as she clutches her binder to her chest. She has a backpack instead of a tote as she doesn't even look in my direction, only seeing her destination.

She's always had this unwavering sense of confidence even when we were kids, and she would boss us around. She looks so sure of herself until she's caught off guard and her stance slightly falters.

Recently, it's been me who has been making more and more of a fool of myself while she gets to say things like 'It's called edging' while I try and find the right words. For once, I want to regain that control that I had in the closet, or at least some of it.

There's only so much that I can get out of Nora about what Cat thinks of me without arousing suspicion. We've all had our little friend group from when we were kids, but everything feels different now that we're at college. If Cat actually took one look at me without dying to take a jab at me, she would see that I've been at her feet for *years* waiting for the day she'll give some of herself to me.

"Whatever," I say to Wes, remembering that we were just having a conversation. I don't know how long I was staring at her for, but the quirk in his eyebrow makes me believe that it was longer than need be. "I'm going to fill my water at the fountain. Talking some sense into you is making my mouth dry."

“Right. It isn’t because you just saw Cat walk into the building, is it?” he asks.

“It just so happens that she is also going to class in the same building as us,” I say calmly. He doesn’t give up the strange look he’s giving me, so I add, “Don’t read into it.”

He finally drops his gaze from mine, giving me the second to breathe as he continues writing while he murmurs, “Oh, I’m not the one reading into it, Connie.”

TEN

CAT

IT SMELLS LIKE OLD PEOPLE

“YOU JUST CAN’T GET ENOUGH of me, can you?”

I can feel him before I can see him. Well, I also took a glance through his classroom window as I walked past it, trying to keep my head high and not take more than one glance. His behaviour towards me has become weirdly sporadic and I can’t figure out why.

For some reason, it seems like he wants to cross the line we drew up when we were in high school. The added forced proximity with me now on the team for the Titans Daily is not helping our case. Or does it encourage it? Whatever that is.

Connor has been feeling like a fucking magnet. I have no idea what kind of voodoo nonsense spell that closet put on either of us, but his usual *in the shadow’s* vibe has become less and less prominent and I can’t tell if I hate it or if I love it.

I turn to him finally, pulling my water from the fountain as I screw on the cap. I move out of the way slightly, keeping my eyes on the ground, knowing I’d get distracted by his eyes as he goes to fill up his water.

“Well, after the stunt you pulled at the interview, I thought you were avoiding me,” he answers. His voice is layered with a thick emotion I can’t quite place. Annoyance, maybe? There’s something else in there that I can’t put my finger on. Still, it runs through my body like a tidal wave.

“What reason would I have to avoid you?” I ask. I let my eyes settle on his as he closes the cap on his water bottle, twisting it in his hands. I don’t know what kind of

conversation I'm inviting, so I shake my head at the thought. "You know what? Never mind. I've got things to do, and *you* have a class to attend."

I readjust my bag on my shoulder, giving Connor a weak smile as I turn around and start walking in the opposite direction. I hold my head high, ready to get on with my day like I initially planned before I feel a gentle tug on my arm, pulling me back. I stumble slightly, my stomach doing a weird flip as Connor's hand brushes against mine

"Miss me already, Bailey?" I ask.

He shakes his head, not finding my joke funny. Weird. Usually, he'd chuckle low at one of my comments, or stick his tongue in his cheek and try not to laugh at least. I wait for him to get the words out, which he's clearly struggling to do.

"I need your help, Cat," he says quietly. The vulnerability in his voice catches me off guard. So does the gentle whisper in his tone, the way the light dims in his eyes as he drops his gaze to his shoes.

"You need *my* help?" I ask, my voice a little breathy.

"That's what I just said, yes," he says, resting his eyes back on mine, a slight flare in those golden-brown eyes.

"Now is not the time for attitude if you want me to help you," I retort. A smile twitches on his mouth as he sighs.

He runs a nervous hand through his hair. "Look, these interviews have been freaking me out and I'm... I'm worried. I'm scared that I'm not anything other than a football player and that people won't be interested in me beyond that. Everybody else on the team has something else that they're good at, some secret talent, and I don't. I don't have anything to fall back on and I'm going to drag the team down if my answers to your questions are shit."

I watch him take a deep breath, the exhale shaky. That was definitely not what I was expecting him to say. I knew the first interview made him antsy from what Wes told me, but I didn't know just how badly it had affected him.

I've always known Connor has been a little closed off and sensitive. He has this huge papa bear energy with his protectiveness over Nora and his friends. I've also known that being a football player has just been so *him* that I don't think I could separate the two.

"And how exactly can I help you with that?"

"I need help getting better at talking to people about real things, about *feelings*, about memories, about hobbies. I don't know," he explains. I quirk my eyebrow, not fully understanding him as he continues talking, his voice dropping to a whisper. "I just have so many words and thoughts in my brain that I can't seem to get them out. Not in a way that makes sense, at least."

"And you think *I* can help you with that?" I ask.

My friends have always said I'm a good teacher and a good listener. I try to be at all times. Growing up where my mom and my dad were such huge personalities and always had something to say, I learned to listen to them and pick up on cues. I also paid close attention to how to help people in ways that don't come across as condescending, knowing exactly what it's like to be talked down to.

"I think you could do anything you wanted to, Cat," he says simply. My chest immediately expands, my organs somehow feeling too big for my body. I feel the praise all over me like tiny sharp needles pricking my skin. "Plus," he adds, his voice suddenly filled with humour, "You've always had a soft spot for me. You can't deny that."

"That's because you're my best friend's brother and we grew up together," I argue, not sure why the comment gets to me. I have soft spots for a lot of people – the misunderstood villain, the introvert, the rich millionaire with a soft side, or the football player who is terrible at baking.

"Regardless, you're clearly considering it," he says, nodding down at me.

My heart knows the right thing to do before my brain does and words of agreement flow out of my mouth.. "Fine. I'll

help you. Only because I feel bad for you. *Not* because I have a soft spot for you or anything like that.”

“Whatever you say,” Connor relays. He nods down to my folders that I’m holding, his nervous smile twitching. “Do you want me to give you my number?”

“I’m sure that’s the first order of business, yes,” I mumble.

Why do I have to be so awkward? Being alone with him more often than usual has made me unnecessarily antsy. We usually just talk through Nora, or I occasionally text him on social media.

I can do this, right? I can have unsolicited one-on-one time with my best friend’s brother and not make it into a big deal.

“My hands are kinda full, I’ll just give you mine,” I suggest. He pulls out his phone as I tell him my number. I watch the mischievous smirk pull across his face as he creates my contact. “You put my name as something stupid, didn’t you?”

He shakes his head, his cheeks burning pink as he meets my eyes, shoving his phone back into his pocket. “Don’t know what you’re talking about, Catherine,” he says easily, slowly walking backwards.

“What are you doing?”

“Going back to class,” he answers with a shrug.

“Can you walk like a normal human and watch where you’re going?”

“Worried about my safety, sweetheart?”

“No, you’re just going to do something stupid, and I do *not* want to be called into the station as a witness,” I say. He ignores me again, still walking backwards as he somehow manages to dodge the pillars in the hallway. “Goodbye, Connor. Don’t die on your way to class. *Please.*”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” he says triumphantly. “Then I’d never get my one-on-one time with you.”

“You’re ridiculous,” I snort.

“I’m your favourite kind of ridiculous, Cat, we both know that.”

“For someone who says they don’t know how to talk to people, you talk a lot of bullshit,” I shout back at him which only makes him smile harder. His eyes squint, those infuriatingly perfect lips spreading across his face as his cheeks flush.

“Only for you,” he says, pointing at me.

What the hell have I gotten myself into?

It smells like old people.

I don’t know why I’m surprised by the pungent smell of the Gilwell Care home located twenty minutes away from campus. I’ve come here nearly twice a week for the last five years, but I always forget just how sterile the initial smell is.

My grandma JoJo has been thriving here for years. She’s always had ongoing health issues even from before she had my mom, but when she passed away her mental and physical health plummeted. Although my dad wasn’t thrilled about it, he set her up in the best caring facility in Colorado and has been paying for her care ever since.

JoJo has always been special to me. She was always the one to take care of me when my parents needed a night away. She was the one who got me ready for my first day of school when my parents had passed out on the couch from working late. She was the one who cheered me on as loud as she could from her wheelchair at my high school graduation while my dad silently clapped. I know if my mom was there, she would have been just as loud as my grandma JoJo.

There’s been this weird hostility between my grandma and my dad for years. Before, my mom would often ease the tension between them with a joke, or a hand on my dad’s back, signalling him to step down. But now, without her, my dad is prone to making jokes about JoJo and their relationship.

As much as I had wished my parents' love would have won over my grandma completely, that was never the case. My JoJo was always protective of mom in every way, no matter how much she liked my dad. She always put her first and never got too close to my dad even after my mom's passing. There was part of her that thought he would hurt my mom somehow and she didn't want to see that happen. A huge part of me thinks that the only reason my dad is caring for JoJo is because I'm not able to and he's doing it just for me.

I appreciate the sentiment, but I just wish they could get along without them being civil with each other just for me. My mom is a part of me just as much as my dad is and I just wish they could both act like that for once.

When I pass through the chilling hallways of Gilwell, I spot JoJo's nurse. She's a young woman, probably in her late twenties, with the same soft brown eyes as Elle and curly hair.

Arianna has been caring for JoJo for the last six months, but before that she was volunteering and since then they've created a strong bond. I'm glad she has somewhere here with her. If it was up to me, I'd drop out of school completely just to be here every day, but that's unrealistic.

"How is she today?" I ask Ari, nodding down to the community room where she's most likely in a competitive game of chess with one of her friends like she is every week.

Arianna smiles tightly, her eyes twitching. She lets out a heavy sigh as if her next words are hard to get out. "She's been thinking a lot about your mom today. She put that she was feeling nostalgic on the wellness sheet this morning, so don't be surprised if she starts to bring up old memories."

My chest pinches at the thought. I give Arianna a kind smile and thank her before slipping past her and walking through the doors of the community room.

It smells a lot fresher in here. They're not allowed to have any perfumes that are too strong to not upset the other residents, but just being in my grandma's presence brings me a different kind of peace. The community room adds a fresher

take on the home and even has a few large plants taking up a space in each corner of the room.

It's hard to miss my grandma JoJo, despite the loudness of her voice as she argues with her friend Joyce over a playful game of chess. Not only does she have the voice as loud as a football commentator, but she always wears the most ridiculous outfits.

Don't get me wrong, my JoJo can pull off nearly any outfit. But while her other friends stick to boring neutral colours and matching sets, JoJo likes to shop and dress as if she's a teenager in an experimental phase. Like today, she's wearing an oversized pink cardigan with a green shirt underneath and a long black skirt with tiny, embroidered stars.

I have a strong witchy feeling that she can sense me before I even reach her as Joyce sulks, walking past me. I still don't fully understand how my grandma is able to beat every single person she plays at chess. It's one of her many secret talents which she has yet to share with me. Joyce gets the blunt end of it every week though. Poor woman.

"Don't feel bad for her, birdie. She's too slow to keep up," JoJo says before I get to her. I laugh a little at her playful meanness as I take a seat across from her in a chair that feels like a warm hug. I sink down onto the cushions, taking in my JoJo's old but beautiful face. They say that black doesn't crack and it's so true. She sighs heavily, replacing the chess pieces to their starting positions. "How was school?"

I immediately smile at the question. She knows how much I love my classes and she's one of the very few people who care. "It's been going well. If you remember that assignment that I was telling you about. The one on genetic mutation?" She nods happily. I think she was more shocked than I was about what I found out during the research process. "Well, you'll never guess what Rotford said about it."

I thoroughly explained to her the contents of my essay and all the notes my teacher made. As much as constructive criticism hits me straight in the gut sometimes, I'd much rather have some sort of feedback that can help me improve rather

than nothing at all. That combined with the positive comment she left has somehow altered my brain chemistry and I've been on a high since. My only problem now is to figure out when I'll be able to help Connor with his... problem.

"And what about the girls? How are they?" JoJo asks once I've finished my rant. I used to think I annoyed her when I talked a lot about my friends and the things that make me happy. Not only have the nurses encouraged positive distractions, but she genuinely seems interested.

"They're great. It's the start of the semester so they're still getting into the swing of things. You know what me and Nor are like. Parties are happening a lot more frequently now," I say with a shrug.

"Oh, birdie. The things I would do to go to a college party again," JoJo says wistfully. "Most of the parties were full of older people too. You don't want to know the kind of stuff I got up to."

"I can only imagine," I say laughing. I've seen some videos of what parties are like in Jamaica. A *party* is hardly the right word. I thought the parties at the frats on campus were insane, but it's nothing compared to the videos I've seen. They are fucking wild.

"Did you do that ritual you told me about? You called it stupid and ridiculous three times," JoJo says.

"For someone who struggles with her memory, you always remember the weirdest things," I mutter, toying with one of the pawns. My eyes meet her chocolate brown ones as she frowns.

"That's only because you tell me the most insane things, Songbird," she replies easily, a throaty chuckle leaving her. I remember telling her about the Manifestation Chamber during the first week of college. She laughed in my face then too. I also remember telling her it was the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard of and no college horror story I heard in high school could have prepared me for such dipshittery.

“Yes, I did. And before you ask, no, I am not plotting or planning on falling in love with him any time soon,” I say sternly. JoJo is a romantic. Apparently it runs in the Johnsons’ blood. Since my mom passed, my stance on love in the real world has greatly fizzled out. I love to read about it and watch it, but in reality, it could never work. There are too many limiting factors, too many parts of myself that I am convinced are incapable of being loved.

“You said it’s worked before, no?” I nod stiffly and her whole face cracks into a deep grin. “But you don’t think it could work for you.”

“I *know* it won’t work for me. The people that are put in there clearly force a connection and trick themselves into believing that they are the ones for each other. With Connor, it could never work. I’m his sister’s best friend, I know he doesn’t see me for any more than that,” I reply.

“You know I’ve always told you to *know* and not *think*,” she begins. She’s right. It’s one of the first life lessons she ever taught me. “What I haven’t told you, is how wonderful hope could be.”

I groan, throwing my head back. “Why would I hope for something that I don’t want?”

“You’re telling me you don’t want to find love, my songbird?”

“Yes,” I say certainly. “I know hope springs eternal or some bullshit, but the truth of the matter is you can do all the hoping and still not get what you want. You think I don’t wish for things that never come true? Because I do. I do it all the time. I have hope for better grades. I have hope that my dad might finally get his head out of the darkness and see what life could be like outside his work. I hope that my mom could give me some sort of sign, any indicator to show me that she’s still here, but none of it ever happens. It never works. There is literally zero hope in hoping when you’re not certain it’ll come true.”

The words rushed out of me like a tidal wave, leaving me heaving by the end. I don’t know what came over me. I’ve

been thinking about it for the last few days or possibly the last few years. It's been a topic for a journal that I keep in my room and for some reason I can never fully finish the thought. Sometimes it goes on for pages, or I write a sentence and the words can never come.

“That, my love...” JoJo sighs, locking eyes with me as she tells me what she's thinking straight up. “Is the stupidest shit I've heard in my whole life.”

ELEVEN

CAT/CONNOR

ROMANCE IS NOT DEAD

CAT

YOU KNOW that feeling when you first bring a puppy home and they've overcome that awkward stage where they're adjusting to the new environment. It's usually only a few days in where they start to become their hyperactive self, jumping off furniture, biting holes into socks and slippers, practically bouncing off the wall.

That's a pretty accurate description as to how Connor has been acting since he told me he needed my help.

Don't get me wrong, I want to help him. All I've done today is plan ideas and questions to ease him into the interviewing process. But every time I write a new question down, alternating between picking up my phone or getting a snack, I get a new text from him. I'm toying with him, using the day to recoup on ideas before reaching out to him. Still, he's as eager as ever as he continuously texts me as I lounge on the couch in the empty dorm, watching my favourite TV show.

CONNIE

Tomorrow night? I don't have a game.

I'm busy.

CONNIE

Monday?

I'm busy.

CONNIE

Tuesday?

If your next question is Wednesday, don't bother texting me.

I shut off my phone, hiding it in the cushions. Maybe if I don't look at it, I won't have the urge to text him and rile him up. I hit play on the episode of *Desperate Housewives* as I pull up my document on a separate slide. I'm about to start transferring my notes into my physical notebook before I hear repeated buzzing sounds coming from the cushions. This man just won't give up, will he?

He's spam-texting me.

Even better.

I ignore all of his messages and press the call button instead. Leaning my phone against my ear, I look out onto the nearly empty courtyard from my window. It's one of the perks of having a luxury room where the sunsets and sunrises look ten times prettier. I don't get a chance to enjoy the deep blue sky before Connor's voice booms down the phone.

"Catherine Fables, to what do I owe this pleasure?" he drawls. I can just *hear* the smile on his face.

"Can you stop texting me? Or I'm going to block your number. You just got phone privileges, you really don't want them revoked already," I say playfully.

"So, you don't have a three-point strike system in place?" he asks. I greet him with silence, not enabling his stupidity.

“Fine,” he concedes, “I’ll just have to find another way to text you. Why are you avoiding this, Cat?”

“I’m not avoiding it,” I say, closing the tab of my show. That’s been ruled out now. “I really am busy.”

“Yeah, doing what?” he asks. I dip my apple slice into the peanut butter, covering it completely before shoving it into my mouth.

“Busy people things,” I respond around a mouthful.

“Busy people things, huh?” he repeats.

“Mm hm,” I muffle. He sighs loudly.

“Open the door, Catherine. I’ve been standing outside for the last ten minutes.”

My eyebrows knit together in confusion. What the hell...

“Ten minutes?” I repeat. “I called you two minutes ago.”

He groans at me like I’m missing something. “Yeah, and I’ve been standing out here for ten.”

“Why?” I say, exasperated as I stand up from the couch, tightening my blanket around my shoulders. There’s no point trying to hide the mess I’ve made here. I have a chaotic working environment and I’ve come to peace with it. It’s apples and some sort of dip or nothing at all. It’s the only way I can get anything done.

“Why do you think?” he replies.

“You’re that desperate, Connie?” I ask, a little louder this time as I reach the door so he can hear me. I end the call and shove my phone into my back pocket.

“Just open the door and put me out of my misery, woman,” he says on the other side of the door, trying the handle.

I can’t help the laugh that escapes me as I open the door.

Fuck.

Have I mentioned before how fucking tall this man is? Because he’s huge. Or I’m just small. I don’t know. Either way, the wind practically gets knocked out of me as I open the

door wider, letting him walk in. He's wearing black baggy jeans and white t-shirt. The way this man can exude confidence and comfortability at the same time completely baffles me. I'm too caught up in the sheer size of him and his hypnotising smell of fresh wood that I don't notice the box he shoved into my hands.

Before I can question it he looks over my head at my messy set up in the living room. "Busy, right?"

"Super, *super* busy," I say. He peers down at me and then at the box. I look at the white box with a red ribbon poorly crafted on top of it. "What's this?"

His face explodes into a smile. "Open it and find out."

That's not weird or suspicious at all...

I gently remove the ribbon, placing it onto the counter beside us. He watches me carefully, a slightly pensive look on his face. I open the lid of the box and I'm greeted by two very badly decorated cupcakes and an empty wrapper beside them. The frosting is a colour between off-white and a pale pink. I can't really decide. One of them has a dollop of red icing in the middle which I can only hope was supposed to be something else that melted off.

Connor has always been a gift giver. I've never known why. Sometimes he'd show up to parties or events with something random he made. But never anything he bakes. He saves those for special occasions like birthdays or a holiday. They very rarely taste good, but we all get a kick out of making fun of his bad baking skills.

But he made these.

For me.

"Sorry about that," he mumbles, laughing a little as he picks up the wrapper. "I got hungry on the way here since you so kindly locked me out."

"I did not lock you out," I retort, "I didn't even know you were coming."

“Yeah, yeah,” he says, dismissing me with his hand. The sass on this man is insane. “Just try one.”

I do as he asks and take the one without the extra dollop of icing. It smells fresh, but they feel a little warm which I can't decide is a positive thing or not. I gently peel off the wrapper, feeling the heat of Connor's gaze on me. I bring the cupcake to my mouth, silently praying that they're not as bad as they usually are, and I take a bite.

They are... not great.

It's probably the worst thing I've ever tasted in my life. It remains a mystery to me how he can fuck up something so simple so badly. The frosting tastes like it has salt added to it instead of sugar and the inside of the cupcake tastes like it has added bits of... something.

“I added crushed up Oreos in there 'cause I know you like them,” he says sweetly. Jesus Christ. *He added in Oreos because he knows that I like them.* Why does he have to sound and look so adorable? He scratches the back of his neck awkwardly. There is no way I can tell him how bad they are. Not like this. “What do you think?”

“They're so—” I get out through a mouthful, finally swallowing that god-awful icing. “So, so good. I can't get enough.”

“Yeah?”

I nod, painting my face into a smile as best as I can. He steps in closer to me, his eyes a little dim as he searches my face. I'm not good at acting. That's Nora's thing. I just hope I'm putting on the performance of a lifetime right now before his feelings get hurt. I have no idea when I started to care this much about them, but the softness on his face is making me second guess a lot of things right now. A lot more than just his feelings.

For extra conviction, I add, “They're brilliant. The icing really ties it together,” I lie.

“Thank you, Catherine,” he says quietly. I hate the way he says my name like that. I can't tell if he's even saying it *like*

anything, or if that is just the way he sounds and I'm that pathetic. Regardless, it sends a shiver down my spine and his proximity only makes this worse.

He raises his hand to the side of my face slowly, and I stay glued to the spot. Am I supposed to be speaking right now? Telling him he's welcome whilst lying through my teeth? His thumb raises to my cheek, and I can immediately feel just how hot my face is. I never get flustered by guys. Not anymore. Mostly because I haven't been in close contact with one since my ex, but still. This is new.

The soft caress of his thumb against my cheek pulls my body into instant comfort mode and it takes all that I am not to close my eyes. To not show him that I'm already weak by his touch. I keep my eyes locked with his, trying to search for some explanation, but he clearly knows what he's doing. In one swift motion, his thumb glides down my cheek to the side of my mouth where he swipes the frosting I hadn't noticed was there.

He doesn't take his eyes off mine as he places his thumb into his mouth, a low hum coming from the back of his throat as he swallows. "You're right. The icing does tie it together." I open and close my mouth to say something, but nothing comes out. "It tastes much better coming from you, though."

CONNOR

She ate my cupcakes.

Catherine Fables, a real-life walking human ate my fucking cupcakes, and she didn't spit them out. Either she's just a really nice person, or she's madly in love with me. Unfortunately for me, there's no in-between.

I know how bad they taste. I ate one before just in case and added the wrapper for extra effect. I've known it for years but God, I really like this girl. Way more than I should.

I wait in the living room as she collects herself from the very stupid thing I just did. A huge part of me was hoping I'd get to do that, but I would've kissed it off her face. I don't know if I'm making up the chemistry between us in my head,

but there is no way she's not affected by me the same way I'm affected by her.

I sigh as I fall between the cushions on the couch. "So, how is this thing going to work?"

She makes her way over to me, shaking her head as she mumbles something to herself. I tripped her up. I finally did something to throw her off and I'd be lying if I said doing it once didn't make me want to do it again.

"Well, as you can see from my very busy office here, I've been prepping your questions," she says.

I take a look at her *very busy office* and realise it's a lot worse than I thought it would be. Blankets and pillows scatter the floor despite the chair she's sitting in looking like it's made entirely of blankets. A particularly ominous episode of *Desperate Housewives* plays in the background as she has various dips laid out and a bowl of apple slices next to her notebook and computer.

"I have a question," I say sincerely. Her eyes meet mine, full of curiosity and wonder. "Do all journalists watch *Desperate Housewives* while prepping, or is that just a personal choice?"

She gives me a sarcastic fake smile. "A personal choice and a necessity," she replies, and I nod. "Okay, are you ready to start?"

"As I'll ever be," I say, picking up the other cupcake.

It's a nervous tick I don't know how to get rid of. I always need something in my hands. Whether it be a football or a cupcake that is most likely going to make me lose years off my life. I take a bite of the monstrosity, grimacing as I put it back. When my eyes lock with hers she smiles shyly as I catch her staring at me. I can't help but watch as she pushes her hair out of her face, her long curls falling down her shoulder.

She's so fucking pretty.

Have I said that before?

I hope she can't feel how obviously I'm staring at her, but it's a crime not to. Every time I see her, I feel like my whole world is restarting. As much as she can have a quick joke to relay, she's also got that sweet sensitive side which I want to see more often. The side that lets me into her dorm when it's a mess. The side that eats my terrible cupcakes *just because*. The side that spends the whole day writing up questions to help me just because I asked.

Everything about her is beautiful – inside and out.

“First question,” she announces, opening her notebook in front of her. “What do you do for fun?”

“Uh, football and work out,” I answer truthfully. There's nothing that makes me happier than being out on a pitch or reaching a certain goal at the gym. Setting myself weekly targets is what helps keep my head in the game, knowing I'm working towards something.

“Okay,” she draws out, scribbling my shitty answer down. For some reason I feel like I didn't hit the nail on the head with that one. Catherine can try to hide her emotions all she wants, but I read her like she's my favourite book. I've always liked that about her. “How about what makes you happy?”

“Football.” The answer sounds salty on my tongue. Foreign, almost. It *does* make me happy. It *does* make me want to work hard at it and get better, but there's something that's missing from me. A part of me that is supposed to make me stand out in some way that I can't find.

“Connor,” she says gently, her eyes filled with silent sympathy. The way she says my name doesn't sound condescending like the way Coach says it after a bad pass or the way my mom says it when I told her I haven't been out again. She says it like she really cares and understands. Like she really wants to help me.

“I know,” I say, sighing, “I'm trying, Cat.”

“It's okay,” she replies immediately, no sign given that she was about to talk me down or make fun of me. “Should I give

you some model answers? You can ask me the questions instead.”

That sounds a lot less daunting. I nod and she slides over the notebook to me. I pick it up, reading over the questions in front of me that a baby could probably answer. Her handwriting is so fucking neat and tidy — everything is underlined neatly, her purple colour scheme is perfect. Fuck. I don’t think I’ll ever run out of things that I like about her at this rate.

“When did you fall in love with football?” I read it again and shake my head as she snickers. “Wait, no. Sorry.” I clear my throat, my cheeks instantly getting hot. Maybe I should ask to crack a window. I try the question again. “When did you fall in love with... journalism, right?”

“Yeah, you got it,” she replies, still giggling. If I could hear that sound before I go to heaven, I know I would die a happy man because fuck. It does something warm and fuzzy to my chest. Like a warm hug. I settle in the seat, watching as the memory takes over her whole body. “So, as a kid, whenever something bad or strange happened, I’d almost subconsciously give it a headline. It was usually something stupid. But one of the things I remember is this one time I was in the car with my parents, and we were road tripping around the US. We stopped in the middle of nowhere and they were playfully arguing over getting a new car, but my mom didn’t want one because she had that beat up Vauxhall for years. The whole time, my mom was basically arguing with herself while my dad watched her, smiling, knowing he was only playing and doing it just to rile her up. I pulled up the notebook I bought at the gas station and wrote, ‘She was transfixed by their love, but surely it was a fable.’”

I’m suddenly taken aback by her words. I don’t think she’s ever spoken to me that much in one sitting. I love hearing her talk. I love hearing what she talks about. She has this incredible, almost innate ability to be able to make anything sound interesting. It’s a skill I wish I had.

“And *she* was you?” I ask. Her eyes meet mine and she nods, pulling in the side of her cheek. “So, you’ve always been

a cynic?”

“A realist,” she corrects, shifting underneath her blanket. She drops her gaze from mine, settling somewhere in the mess of the dorm. “Their love was too picture-perfect. It was natural to think it was some sort of story unfolding in front of me. Not the fairytale kind with happily ever after, but one I had to learn from.”

I catch the slight glimmer in her eyes as she talks, as well as the tightness of her voice. “Your mind is extraordinary, Cat, you know that?”

I watch as her face softens a little before a ridiculous smile spreads across her face. “I know,” she sighs, throwing her hair over her shoulder in that simple yet sexy way that I like. “God, it’s exhausting being this incredible *every* day.”

“Big ego too,” I mutter.

She rolls her eyes at me, getting back into her serious position. “So, Connie,” she says. Fuck. I love it when she uses my nickname like that. “When did you fall in love with football? And you’ve got to tell me the truth because I know when it was too. I saw it in those tiny little eyes.” She coos at me, scrunching her face up.

I know exactly what she’s talking about.

It’s the only memory I can replay before a game that calms me down.

“The morning after mine and Nora’s eighth birthday,” I whisper, laughing a little. Catherine’s whole face lights up, fidgeting to get into a more comfortable position as if this is the best story she’s ever heard. If it makes her this happy, I’d tell her over a hundred times. “We went to the Cheesecake Factory like we did every year. Wes was busy giving Nora a Wet Willy, and she was screaming and squirming so badly that she fell off the chair and then Russell Wilson picked her up. I had recognised him from the TV and at that point I wasn’t that big of a fan. I only watched it when my dad said I could stay up late to watch the highlights. He looked at me when Nora got back to her feet. All he did was nod at me and...”

“And you haven’t been the same since,” she says, finishing my thought for me dramatically.

A laugh escapes me as I shake my head. “It was pathetic. I bought every magazine, used up all my pocket money to buy my first football and a Russell Wilson jersey. I begged Wes’s dad and my dad to run drills with us in the park while you guys watched from the swings.”

Her smile falters. “My mom loved watching you guys play. She would talk about it over dinner and how she secretly wished she had more kids, a boy.”

I nudge my foot against her knee playfully. “You could still play football.”

She barks out a laugh. “With my two left feet? Yeah, right.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I reply, laughing. “I don’t think it would be a good look for me either.”

Catherine tilts her head to the side, zeroing in her gaze on me. “Why’s that?”

“Because I think that if you tried hard enough, you could be great at anything, Cat and I mean that,” I admit. She sucks in a breath at my admission. “I’ve seen you through every awkward stage imaginable. Which also means that I saw you try out for every extracurricular in high school until you found your calling. Just because you didn’t stick with football on the first try, if you wanted to, you could try again, and you’d probably be better than me.”

She tightens the blanket around her again, shifting uncomfortably. “You have a lot of faith in me, huh?”

“Somebody has to.”

She lifts one perfectly shaped brow. “What does that mean?”

I sigh. “Nothing,” I say, shaking my head. She’s clearly not going to let this go. I shouldn’t have said anything anyway. “It’s just because your dad– I haven’t– Recently he’s just been–”

“A dick?” she finishes. I nod slowly. Eric has always been kind to us. Before Catherine’s mom passed, we’d have weekly dinners together in the Mackenzie’s backyard. He’d always help out at barbecues and play with us at the park, but since her mom passed, he’s not been to any get-togethers at all. “Yeah, I don’t know. He’s trying though. Sort of.”

“Well, I’ll always be your cheerleader, Kit-Cat,” I say, and she rolls her eyes at the nickname.

“You should take some of the faith you have in me and use it in yourself,” she whispers quietly. “I think you’re just too in your head about this, Connie. Trust me, with a bit more practice, you’ll be fine. You’re confident in every other way. This shouldn’t be any different.”

When she puts it like that, it actually seems possible. She makes it seem like I have some sort of potential. It’s been a while since someone has believed in me like that and I want to feel like that all the time.

TWELVE

CAT/CONNOR

KILL ME AND MY UTERUS NOW.

CAT

IT SEEMS to me that I can't go a week at school this year without something ridiculous happening. First being ambushed into doing the new project, then getting roped into helping Connor by the water fountain and now Wes is walking alongside me with Sam on the other side. I know Coach said they're like hyperactive puppies, but they have crippling attachment issues too.

"Hey, Cathy," Wes and Sam say in unison. They smell like ass which is helpful because I was supposed to meet Elle and Nora for lunch. Strangely, I don't see that happening anymore. Wes slings his arm around my shoulder, causing me to sway a little as he walks with me.

"Samuel, Wesley, to what do I owe this pleasure?" I ask.

"Since you've done the first round of interviews, Coach said we should invite you out and luckily for you, we've got our monthly painting session at Fired Arts today. Maybe you can put something together about how good I am at painting," Sam explains and Wes laughs.

"That's cute. Do you paint little daisies and roses with those giant man hands of yours?" I tease, pushing both of their hands off me.

"Very funny. You should know these man hands can do more than just paint," Wes says. I pretend to gag. "Redford's mom owns the store, so we get the pieces for free. It's an easy Mother's Day gift or stocking fillers. You should come. Could

be good for photo opps. Bring Elle and Nora too. I'm sure they'll enjoy it."

If I had one wish in life, it would be a picture of the exact moment I told Elle and Nora to come with me to paint pottery with the football team and have it framed and sent to my house with a bright red bow.

I wasn't surprised that they said yes. Elle minors in photography and is always taking pictures on her phone and her digital camera whenever she has the chance. She's also a budding influencer, but she is yet to go completely viral. Nora is here for the vibes and the vibes only.

After rushing around to make our way to the store, we're huddled together outside the door, ready to walk in when Archer Elliot, Wes and Connor's roommate, exits the store. If I thought Connor was tall, Archer is something else. He's like a Greek god – scarily tall, sharp cheekbones, hair so dark-brown that it's almost black, a compression shirt that just shows he's built on pure muscle and a tiny gift bag in his huge hands.

"Oh, hi," Elle says. Out of all of us, she sees him the most. The dance teacher she's had pretty much since she was born also happens to be Archer's mom. You wouldn't believe the amount of awkward run-ins they've had. One of those being a time where she bumped into him, and she told *him* thank you.

"Eleanor," he greets gruffly. I look between them as Archer's grey eyes zone in on Elle, she drops her gaze as her cheeks flush pink. Nora saves the day as always.

"Archer Elliot, I never thought I'd see you out in broad daylight," Nora quips. She's always going to try her best to ease awkward tension wherever she goes while the rest of us stand and watch painfully.

"Nora Bailey, I never thought I'd see you without that hideous green stuff on your face, but here we are," he replies, giving her a sarcastic smile.

She jabs a finger in his face. I don't think he even notices because he's that fucking tall. "It was a face mask, and you know it was."

“Are you joining the painting session?” Elle asks quietly. He clears his throat when she looks up at him, averting his eyes to a spot behind us where the main street bustles.

“No. I’m just picking up something,” he responds coolly.

Nora and I shimmy our shoulders at the same time. “For a girlfriend?” I tease. His face remains serious. Jesus. This guy needs to lighten up.

“No,” he says simply, “Goodbye.”

And then he’s just... gone.

“Goodbye?” Nora repeats angrily, pushing open the door. “Who the hell says *goodbye*? He’s a twenty-year-old man not a viscount from the nineteenth century. He might as well have said good morrow.”

“I think he’s cute,” Elle whispers, looking back as Archer’s huge body walks away from us. We all step into the warmth of the shop, the tiny doorway barely fitting all three of us in there.

“You think that six foot something giant man person is *cute*? Elle, respectfully, that man could easily break every bone in your body,” Nora retorts, shrugging off her coat.

The loud roars coming from the team messes up my senses and all I can hear for a second is the loud obnoxious chatter coming from the boys. I swear I hear Elle mumble ‘I think I’d let him,’ but it’s too loud to tell.

We walk into the small shop where eight of the team members sit on a low table in the middle of the room. Around the room holds smaller stations with two seats where other team members sit quietly. All the noise is coming from the table of eight as paintbrushes fly around, the pink aprons they’re supposed to be wearing in every place but the correct one – Wes is wearing his on his head like a chef hat and Connor has his on backward.

Not only are they arguing with each other, but there’s a small red-headed girl – probably Michael’s sister – who is bossing them around like it’s her job. Her little apron is covered in paint splatters, her hair an unruly mess as she

stands between Wes and Sam, peering down at what they're drawing.

When Connor's eyes land on mine, I swear the whole world stops. Suddenly it doesn't feel like the room is loud and chaotic, it feels like it's just us.

After seeing a more vulnerable and caring side to him the other day, looking at him now feels different. He brings this weird and overwhelming sense of peace over me. He might look ridiculous and huge at that table with his apron on backwards, but the shy smile he has on his lips when he sees me makes fireworks explode in my chest. Not the loud kind that you hear up-close, but the ones far in the distance that you only see and hardly hear.

I don't get a second to over analyse it before Wes sees me. "Cathy, Elle, Nor-Nor! Take a seat. We don't bite," he says, winking at us.

"I'm just going to stay near the window. I'll get better lighting that way," Eleanor says, taking her camera out of its case as she squeezes past me to the window area where two boys paint quietly.

"You two better take a seat before Eve here drags you by your ear," Connor grumbles. Eve shoots him a look, but when he sticks his tongue out at her, she bursts into giggles. There is something so undeniably hot seeing a man interact with a child.

It's truly sick and twisted.

Kill me and my uterus now.

We do as we're told and I take the empty seat next to Connor while Nora takes the seat next to me that is next to Wes and Sam. Elle gets comfortable across the room, lifting her camera and trying different lenses before she starts to walk around the room, looking for a good place to start taking pictures.

Once Nora and I settle on painting a heart shaped jewellery box, all I can focus on is Connor's leg against mine. We've

been close before. That closet was certainly something. But this?

I don't know what it is, but the light brush of his leg against my tights is driving me crazy and it really shouldn't. Especially not here.

He's been so careful and practiced with his painting. I still can't tell what it is. All I know is he selected a plain square and is not revealing what he's painting to anybody. But I'm curious as hell. He might be an awful painter, but he's doing *something*.

I nudge my leg into his. I might as well try, right? "Can you tell me what you're painting?"

"Nope," he says quietly, focusing on what he's doing.

"Why not?"

"Because it's a secret," he whispers.

"But you can tell me," I say back. I rub my thigh against his on purpose, trying to get a reaction out of him. I know what I'm doing, and I know how stupid it is because I'm selfishly doing it for myself too. He hisses, readjusting his paintbrush in his hand.

I don't have any logical reason for why I'm doing this other than it feels good, and I haven't felt good in a while. That's why I slip my hand under the table, gently resting it on his knee in the most subtle way I can. My hand and body instantly flare up at his proximity.

"Catherine," he bites out.

"Connor," I say back. I turn to look at him, but he's refusing to catch my eye. I bump my shoulder into his. "Just tell me what you're painting."

"It's for—"

"You're doing really well, Connor," Eve says, appearing out of thin air. She looks down at Connor's *something*, smiling at it. As much as the girl is adorable, she kind of ruined our moment. Was it even a moment, or did I make that up myself?

“Thank you, Eve,” he replies, smiling at her. From this position with us way down on the floor, they’re almost face to face but she just about towers over him. “I’m not as good as you though,” he says sweetly. This man really knows how to charm people because he’s even got this little girl almost as red as her hair. Connor’s shoulder bumps into mine. “You know the ones in the window? Eve painted those ones.”

“They’re not my best work,” she sighs wistfully like she’s a million years old. Small humans are strange. Funny, but strange.

“They’re still great. I think you’re my favourite artist, Eve,” Connor coos and she tries to hide her giddy smile before she walks away.

“You’re good with kids, Connie,” I say, pulling my hand away from his knee and back to my piece. He shrugs as if it’s not a big deal. It shouldn’t be a big deal, but I know if I write anything about this in my report, the girls at Drayton will go absolutely feral. And honestly, me too.

It’s not long before the boys are restless again and Wes at some point tackled Nora to the floor. They’re both covered in paint, somehow getting the acrylics from a drawer Mrs Redford and Eve told us not to go into. Nora’s face is almost completely yellow with purple streaks running down across her face while Wes’s face pretty much looks like a rainbow.

While they play-fight like kindergarteners, Elle uses the opportunity to take photos getting every possible angle she can of those two idiots.

“Can you paint inside the lines?” Eve asks, stepping behind Sam and looking at the turtle he’s painting. Connor and I snicker, knowing we haven’t got told off in a while.

“Yes, inside the lines, you idiot,” Oliver says from the other side of the table. He’s one to talk. He’s got told off twice by Eve in the last ten minutes and he’s had to restart his butterfly three times.

“That’s a bad word,” Eve points out, whispering.

“Boys say bad words *all* the time,” I say to her. Connor bumps his knee into mine, coughing into his hand as he says ‘liar’ and Eve giggles, sitting down in the seat Wes abandoned.

“I heard that girl over there say a bad word,” Eve whispers to us as she points down at the floor where Nora is very aggressively playing with Wes as he pins his knees on either side of her, not letting her get her paintbrush in his face. “She called the boy she’s fighting with a mother—”

“Fucker!” Wes shouts. Oh my god. We’re going to get kicked out of here even though they booked out the store. “You got paint in my ear,” he groans, sitting back on his heels as Nora tries to scoot out from underneath him but he keeps one hand on her stomach, the other in his ear. “How the hell did you get paint in my *ear*?”

“I look like a Minion, you imbecile,” Nora retorts, pushing his hand off her. I hear the click of Elle’s camera as she giggles from behind us. “How do you think I feel?”

“You look like a cute minion, though. Like the tiny one who doesn’t say anything, but has those cute little eyes,” Wes coos, adding a dot of black paint on her nose. She snatches the paint brush out of his hand, turning him around so she’s straddling him.

“I’m going to kill you,” she threatens.

These two, I swear.

Connor shakes his head at them like a disappointed dad as Eve turns back to us. “Mikey says that boys are only mean to girls that they really *really* like. Does that mean they’re going to get married?”

I look down at them who are still rolling around on the ground. “Nora and Wes?” I laugh.

Connor scoffs. “There’s a better chance of flying cars than that fu—” Eve’s innocent green eyes widen before Connor stops himself. “Fudging silly boy marrying my sister,” he says smoothly.

The second the words leave his mouth, everyone is looking down at them again. Wes has somehow managed to get on top of her *again* as he pins his knees on either side of her, holding her hands above her head as she writhes beneath him.

“Can’t paint me now, can you, Nor?” he asks playfully.

“You’re so annoying,” she says, laughing. If she wasn’t covered in paint, she would definitely be blushing right now. She can act tough all she wants, but I know that sometimes with the things Wes says or does, she clearly gets flustered over it. He’s the world’s biggest flirt, and she’s taken, but sometimes that line is on the brink of breaking.

“I’m annoying, huh?” he teases, and she nods, unable to stop laughing. He rubs his painted cheek against hers, causing the colours on their faces to merge together into a deep, dirty, green-purple colour. “Is this annoying? Is this annoying? Is this annoying?”

She’s still giggling as she says, “Yes. Oh my god, Wes. Stop!”

“That’s not usually what women say to me when they’re in this position,” Wes says.

Connor sighs beside me loudly. “Get off her, you animal,” he says to Wes and eventually he does. Not before covering her face with another blob of paint.

Yep.

Damn puppies.

All of them.

CONNOR

Maybe painting in silence while the rest of the team runs wild is my calling. I’m not exactly great at it, but every month, I try something new in hopes of getting better. I guess the trying part is what counts.

I’ve spent most of the day trying to pretend that Catherine’s proximity doesn’t make me want to curl up in her lap and let her hold me. Is that weird? Probably. Whatever. I

just don't understand how she can come in here, in that black skirt and tights and not expect me to lose my fucking mind.

Once Nora and Wes have cleaned up from their fight and we're all back around the small table again, I watch as Cat watches everybody else. I don't know if this is part of her process for getting to know us as a team, but she seems to be so lost in whatever bullshit Sam is feeding her. The team is a mess on and off the pitch which is understandable. But there are moments like these where we feel like a team in nearly every aspect of life.

"I bet this isn't what you thought you'd be getting into when you got told about this, huh?" Sam asks, not taking his eyes off his turtle. Cat shakes her head, laughing a little.

"No, but it's fun, though. It's better than being in that tiny classroom with you guys," she says before adding quietly, "You're like a little family."

I shrug. "Yeah, you could say that."

"Oh, that reminds me," she says, wiping her hands with a wet wipe before pulling up her phone. "That's a good question, actually. Who would you say are the parents of the group? People do that all the time for celebrity friendship groups. It could be a good segment for a poll of some sorts."

Wes and Sam exchange a mischievous look. "Well, we all know who the mom is," Wes says, doing a very bad job at trying to discreetly point his head in my direction.

That fucker.

"Oh, one hundred percent," Oliver chimes in. He turns to Catherine, pulling all of her attention on him. "You should have seen the day you came into the locker room. He was telling us all that we couldn't go anywhere near—"

"Okay," I say, cutting him off as Cat leans further into my side, only to get closer to him to listen to his story. Her scent throws me off a little and the memory of her hand on my knee. She does not need to know that I told them to stay away from her just because I secretly want her to myself. It's true, though. Catherine has always been my little secret. She had been my

first crush and has been the only reason I ever looked forward to my English class at the thought of bumping into her. She'd always been *my* Catherine before she ever knew it. "So, if I'm the mom then who is the dad?"

Cat studies me for a second, silently judging me as if she knows Oliver was about to say something stupid.

"Me, obviously," Sam says proudly.

"Just because you have a kink for people calling you 'daddy' does *not* make you the dad of the group," Wes says, pinning his arms across his chest, pouting.

"So, you can see who is so obviously the moody child," Nora says, ruffling Wes's hair like he's a puppy. The satisfied grin on his face shows that he loves every single second of attention my sister gives him.

"Yeah," I say quietly, laughing at the two of them. I look over at Cat, but she's already looking at me. "I guess you could call us a family."

Once everyone has finally settled down and ready to clean up, I offer to help clean the pallets and paint pots because I know Catherine is there. She was the first one up when Mrs Redford asked people to help her with the washing up.

When we're alone again, I don't know what to say so I stick to drying whilst she washes. She keeps glancing over at me, smirking a little before shaking her head as if she's about to say something before thinking better of it. I'm doing the same thing – stupidly opening my mouth just to close it again when the words don't come.

"You can relax, you know? I'm not going to ask you any questions," she says quietly. She passes me the last pot and I dry it off.

"I know," I reply, drying off my hands and leaning back against the counter as she drains the water from the sink. Once she's done, she dries off her hands too, studying me, those dark brown eyes figuring me out like a puzzle.

"Then why do you look so tense?" she asks, moving to stand in front of me. My heartbeat instantly picks up and I

have no idea why. She looks so much shorter like this even though I'm leaning back on my hands.

"I'm not," I breathe out, but it sounds and feels like a lie. I'm always a little tense, always wound a little too tight, but that's just the way I am. I'm only extra anxious now because she's in front of me, looking up at me like she...

I shake my head at the thought, dropping my gaze to the floor. "Connor," she presses, her voice sounding slightly desperate. She reaches out, latching her small hand over mine as she steps closer to me. I turn my hand around on the counter, my palm up, knowing it'll calm me. I don't even have to say anything before she starts to massage my palm. Her touch is so soft and gentle. So *her*. "Not tense, huh?" she asks, moving her thumbs around my palm. I shrug. "Be real with me."

I sigh, knowing I won't be able to cower and back away from this like I could try. "I'm just worried I won't be any good at the whole social media thing like you mentioned earlier. I like seeing other people do it and Wes and Sam are great at it, but I don't know... Maybe I'm not as good at it as them. It doesn't feel like me."

She nods but she doesn't stop working her fingers over my palm. "I saw that TikTok that was posted – the Love Story one. You were really good, Connie." My chest pinches at the compliment. "I said I'm going to help you, so I will. Your birthday is next weekend, just relax until then, okay? We'll figure it out."

My mouth tugs at the idea.

We.

"Are you suggesting that we're a team, Catherine?" I tease, catching her hand in mine so I can lock my fingers with hers.

"Something like that," she whispers.

It feels like time stops when she says that, when she looks up at me and for the first time in a while, I see a sense of wonder in her eyes. A sense of what-if. A slight sense of hope. Maybe it's nothing and it's my overly optimistic brain when it

comes to her, but I swear I feel the energy between us crackling. And for one of the first times, it doesn't feel like it's just me that feels it.

She keeps her eyes locked with mine as I drop our interlocked hands to the side, using my other hand to slip around her waist, pulling her into me. She gasps, her mouth parting desperately. The feel of her beneath my hand is maddening. It's wholly distracting, and I just want more of it.

“Connor,” she murmurs, a half-plea. The sound goes straight to my dick, my hand flexing in her hip that the only sound that comes out of me is a low hum of approval. “What are we—”

The door swings open as Mrs Redford comes rushing in. Catherine leaps apart from me as if I have the fucking plague. Her eyes fall to the floor as Mrs R walks over to us, her face lit up in child-like happiness as she looks around at the clean back-room.

“You two are lifesavers,” she exclaims. “You really make a good team.”

THIRTEEN

CONNOR/CAT

HAPPY FUCKING BIRTHDAY

CONNOR

CALL IT TWIN TELEPATHY, but I knew the second I let Nora choose the theme for our party, it was about to be something stupid.

Nora usually gets the last say in anything that we do together. Most of the time, I don't give a shit, but this right here, in my parents' house with two of my friends as we set up for the party is where I draw the line.

Wes is smiling like a loon, pleasantly happy with his costume choice. "You've got to lighten up man," he says to me, walking back into the kitchen after he opened the French doors to the backyard. He fiddles with his tail, sighing as he pushes it behind him. "It's a party, not a funeral."

"It might as well be," I grumble, pulling the packs of beers from the fridge and on to the kitchen island.

Archer turns then. He looks the most ridiculous out of all of us. It's been an hour since we all changed into our costumes, but Wes and I's laughter streams out of us as Archer scratches his nose behind the carrot nose he has attached to his face.

"I still don't know how you talked me into doing this," he groans.

"Well, the movie wouldn't be as good without trusty Olaf," Wes says, patting him on the back as he drifts past him.

Of course, this year's theme is Disney movies. We had to set up a list so no outfits would be repeated, and Wes begged Archer and I to go as the main characters from *Frozen*.

I don't just mean he asked us nicely with his puppy dog eyes, but I mean this man got on his hands and knees for us to do a group costume in exchange for him doing anything we asked for a week.

For me, that means uninterrupted training sessions, and I don't have to listen to him yap on. For Archer, it means he can also tell Wes to fuck off when he's in the dorm also pestering him for something stupid.

So Archer is dressed in an Olaf costume, looking as stupid as ever while I get to look somewhat normal dressed as Kristoff. I just hope to God that the rewards of this costume pay off in the end.

Archer takes a seat at the table, picking up one of the beers I just set out for us. "So, Connor," he says, twisting open the can. "What did you get for your birthday?"

"Are you actually going to have a conversation with me, or are you just going to make fun of me?" I ask, curiously. I'm surprised more than anyone that Archer agreed to come to the party. He very rarely comes to the parties we go to, but after I told him who Nora and I invited, he agreed. It's strange from him, but not as strange as the mysterious way he exits Fired Arts every month when we go in for our monthly painting sessions. He thinks I don't notice, but I do.

"Just trying to make conversation," he answers dryly. I raise my eyebrow, but he just rolls his eyes, taking a sip of the beer.

"Got the usual stuff from my parents – money, socks, underwear, you know, the boring stuff. Nora got me a photo album filled with pictures of us when we used to match every day right up until high school," I say, smiling a little at the gift. I got her a similar present, except it was just a box filled with the things we used to like growing up and pictures of the shows she would drag us to see at the local theatre.

As much as I hated it then, I secretly loved seeing that part of my sister's life – the flair in her eyes when she saw the lights go down on stage – it was truly insane watching her fall in love with something like that. I always wondered if she saw the same change in me.

“That’s not the only thing he got,” Wes chimes in. *That asshole*. Archer quirks his head curiously and before I can tell Wes to shut his huge mouth, he continues. “You should have seen what Cat got him. It was a little apron that said *Connie* on it with tiny little hearts and matching oven gloves,” he coos, his voice *extra* sweet.

“You’re an ass, you know that?” I mumble.

“Whatever,” he retorts, turning back to Archer with the biggest smile on his face. “He was looking at it with fucking tears in his eyes.”

“No, I wasn’t,” I bite out.

Okay, maybe I was a *tiny* bit emotional over a stupid gift with a stupid card and stupid oven mitts from the girl I can’t stop thinking about. It’s natural. I know that she was only doing it because she feels bad, and she gets me a gift every year.

“Dude, it’s okay,” Wes says quietly. “With a gift like that, she’s definitely into you.”

“Do you really think so?” I ask, trying to keep my voice as chilled as possible.

“Oh, definitely,” he says, nodding. “Girls only do cute shit like that when they’re thinking about you constantly.”

My chest expands at the sentiment. “You think she thinks about me?”

He shakes his head. “You didn’t hear me,” he replies. “I said *constantly*.”

CAT

If there’s one day of the year I love most of all, it’s Nora and Connor’s birthday.

I love a good party like the next person. I love the loud music, the people, the vibes. It never gets too out of control here at Drayton, which is what makes it more fun. There's never any crazy drugs, or any spikings. There's never any violence or bad energy between people, it just feels safe and comfortable. Especially at the Bailey's estate.

They lucked out with a luxury lake house only a twenty-minute drive away from campus, a few houses down from my dad's house. We used to spend every one of their birthdays here. We'd get sick on candy and the joy of being in each other's presence. But now, coming here as adults, our lives and our bond has changed tremendously.

What hasn't changed is the fact that each year the twins have to have a theme for their birthday and this year it's very on-brand for Nora.

The only logical answer for my character would be Tiana from *Princess and the Frog* which just so happens to be my favourite Disney movie. Elle is dressed as Moana, her tanned skin and curly hair making it a perfect match as Nora is matching with her boyfriend as Rapunzel and Flynn from *Tangled*. I haven't seen them together yet as Ryan is late as always, but Wes and Connor are making up for his tardiness.

"He'll show," Connor says quietly just to her as he pulls her into his side. Nora shrugs him off, painting on her best *I'm fine* face as she smiles.

"I know," she replies immediately. Wes rolls his eyes at the side of us, not making it discreet as he sips his beer from a red cup.

The party is in full swing now and despite the twins being the birthday people, they're stuck in a little huddle with us in the backyard next to the raging fire as we try to keep warm. Even as the loud music blares out from the kitchen speakers and people pass by to wish them a happy birthday, both Nora and Connor seem to be more comfortable with our little circle more than the groups of people that came here just for them.

"How's your birthday so far, Nor?" Wes asks, throwing away his cup into a bin bag. Her face lights up at the question.

In the kindest way possible, Nora loves to talk about herself. I've never seen it as a bad thing. I think it's downright adorable. Her whole face transforms as she talks about the things and people she loves. But as their conversation continues, my gaze snags on Connor as his eyes drop to the ground and then he swiftly turns away, excusing himself.

Weird.

"Your outfit looks really good," Wes says, and my attention is drawn back to the two of them. Nora holds eye contact with him as Elle bumps her shoulder into mine as if to say *are you seeing this*. And the fuck I am. Wes flirts with everyone, but this... This feels different. He seems nervous, which is unusual. "You look, uh, pretty, I meant."

"Thank you," Nora replies after what feels like an eternity of them just *looking* at each other.

"Give us a spin," I say, nodding to her. She really does pull off the brunette version of Rapunzel with her dark brown curls and bright green contacts. She turns, but as she stumbles a little, Wes's arm catches onto hers.

"What are you doing later?" he blurts out. She looks taken aback as she turns around and gestures at the party. "Do you wanna come over?"

"To your dorm?" Nora asks, her tone bored and slightly confused. He nods, blushing. "To do what?"

"I dunno," he answers, shrugging. "I could eat you out. Wait. No- Not eat you out. I mean, I would take you to *eat*. With me. Together. Me and you... Eating... Food..."

Oh my god what is happening?

Nora laughs, throwing her head back. Wes shoots me and Elle a look to help him, but I have no clue what's going on. He's clearly had too much to drink, and I highly doubt Nora will remember this in the morning.

"I'll come over," she says.

"You will?" Wes asks, his eyes hopeful.

“As long as I get to pick the activities,” Nora warns, pointing an accusing finger in his face. He takes her outstretched finger as a sign of a promise and weirdly interlocks his index finger with hers. “*And* I get to decide what we eat.”

Those two are the weirdest people I’ve ever met.

After tiring myself out dancing with Nora and Elle to Taylor Swift songs in a crowd full of sweaty twenty-somethings, I finally make my way back into the house. Somehow, it’s cooler here than it is outside. Nora and Connor always underestimate the amount of people that turn up to their parties and it ends up getting overwhelming sometimes.

As much as I love partying and dancing and doing stupid shit with my friends, it’s also exhausting. I always get this heavy feeling in my chest no matter how many times I go out where I have a sudden realisation that these kinds of moments won’t last forever. It’s pathetic and self-sabotaging but it’s also a very real possibility. If I ever lost the bond I have with these girls or our little family, I don’t think I could function as a real human ever again. That sounds dramatic, but it’s true. They are my lifeline.

That moment in the night comes a lot earlier than expected tonight. I try my best to ignore it. I’ve had a few too many drinks and I just need some water, that’s all.

I make my way into the kitchen, my head pounding from the music and the drinks when I spot Connor’s unforgettable silhouette by the sink. He’s ditched the thick sweater thing that Kristoff wears and is instead only wearing the pants and a thinner brown long sleeved top as he... washes the pots at his own party.

“What are you doing?” I ask, coming up behind him.

“What does it look like?” he retorts, looking back at me with a lazy smile before washing off a plate.

“It’s your birthday, Connor. You don’t need to worry about cleaning up. Especially not in the middle of *your* party,” I say,

looking at the neat pile of plates he's already staked up. He takes in a deep breath before shrugging. "Is the party that bad?"

He shrugs again. "Not as fun as I thought it would be."

"That's because you're in *here* and everyone is out *there*," I say, laughing a little. He finally switches off the tap, drying his hands before he turns to me. Instantly, I grip onto the counter, needing to steady myself as his dark eyes bore into mine.

"What I want isn't out there," he says, his tone laced with an emotion I can't place. The cold pizza I had earlier churns in my stomach as my eyes gloss over at his proximity. He steps in closer to me.

My voice sounds scratchy and breathy when I finally compose myself enough to speak. "And what is it that you want?"

He takes a very purposeful perusal of my outfit, stepping even closer to me. *If that's even possible*. The heat in his eyes matches the heavy want gathering in my lower stomach as he swiftly turns us so he's towering over me, caging me in with both of his hands on the sink as my ass backs up into the marble.

Every tension point in my body tenses before relaxing gently as I shudder. His whole demeanour changes when he looks down at me like this as I crane my neck to look up at him. His gaze is hungry and insatiable. He's looking at me like I'm the only thing in the fucking room. Like I'm the goal he needs to reach. Like I'm the only thing he sees.

He's looking at me like he wants me.

"You know exactly what it is that I want," he murmurs, his mouth so close to mine I can almost taste him. My tongue darts out, running across the seam between my lips as my heartbeat grows erratic.

He gives me what I want – no, what I *need* – as he presses his weight into me. *Holy fuck*. I can feel every part of him like this.

Every part.

Including the part that wants this the most.

“You’re going to have to spell it out for me,” I whisper, needing to know what he wants, needing to know what *I* want before we do something very stupid. “You know I’m a sucker for words, Connor.”

He lets out a sound between a groan and a chuckle as he moves his head to the side of my neck, his nose grazing my sensitive skin on the right side of my face. He brushes his knuckles against my cheek with his left hand causing tiny fires to break out everywhere.

“I want you,” he murmurs as he presses a kiss to my neck. I think I might pass out. Forget what I said about my social battery running out. I think I’ve come back to life just to die again. “To dance with me.”

“You want me to...” My breath gets caught when he kisses my neck again, his hand flexing against the side of my face, gently running down to grip onto my neck. He squeezes my neck carefully and I clamp my mouth shut, trying to take a deep breath. “You want me to dance with you?” He answers by kissing me in the same sensitive spot *again*.

I muster up the courage to push myself away from him, gaining a shit ton of confidence I never knew I had. I never make the first move with guys. Ever. I brace both of my hands on his chest, looking up at him as he looks down at me, grinning.

“Okay,” I say, pushing him slightly so he walks backwards, and I follow him, keeping my hands on him. “I’ll dance with you, Connie.”

FOURTEEN

CONNOR

“YOU LOOK LIKE A DEFORMED
ELEPHANT.”

OH FUCK.

Oh fuck.

Oh fuck.

I did not think this through. At all. Because Catherine Fables – apparently the only girl to ever exist to me – is walking me backwards onto the dance floor after I told her I wanted to dance with her. Not only does she look fucking stunning in that dress and her hair tied up in a bun, but the way she took control of me just then is fucking up my insides.

I needed a second away from the party and only in my wildest dreams did I imagine that I’d end up back on the dance floor wedged between sweaty bodies and the epitome of beauty as she stares up at me.

The noise coming from the party doesn’t seem to exist when she’s in my view. She’s all I see. All I feel. All I hear.

My Catherine.

She drops her hands from my chest finally when we’re deep enough into the crowd. She trails her hands down my arms, causing goosebumps to rise across them despite the scorching heat of the room. When her hands meet mine, she twists around, giving me her back instead and resting my hands on her hips.

“Just follow my lead, okay?”

I don't think I could respond if I tried. Her body instantly fits so perfectly with mine, her ass nestled into my lap as my hands find each other around her stomach. *Tonight, You Are Mine* by The Technicolours blares through the speakers and that mixed with the darkness of the room instantly gives us both the confidence to completely lose ourselves within each other.

We both move to the music and each time we sway, she presses herself further into me and I lose my mind more and more. Is this supposed to be painful? Because I'm having a hard time forming words or even thoughts right now.

Her head tilts back, resting on my chest as her eyes flutter closed, her hands locking behind my neck. She wants this just as much as I do and I fucking love it. She's not the bossy or wound-up Catherine that would smack me with a ruler if I said something mean to her. This is the Catherine that likes to party, the one that likes to dance like this whilst having no idea just what she's doing to me.

"Is this what I get for my birthday, Catherine?" I murmur into her skin, loving how hot and flushed it feels against my mouth. My own heartbeat is hammering against my ribs so loud I'm sure she can hear it.

"Only because you've been good," she says, her eyes opening slightly. Our gazes lock and burn, the world around us disappearing. My hands flex against her stomach at the lusty, hooded look her eyes give me.

"Yeah?" I tease. She nods, her teeth sinking into her bottom lip as she purposefully grinds herself against me and I hiss. "What if I was bad? What would you give me then?"

"A reasonable punishment," she whispers.

"You sure? This already feels like torture." I groan as her hands tighten around my neck, pulling at my hair. This woman is about to drive me fucking insane and I'm going to let her.

"Why?" she breathes out. There is no way she doesn't know just how badly I've wanted to be this close to her.

I lean over her, pressing another kiss to the spot behind her ear, claiming it as mine. “Because I want to do more than just dance with you, Catherine,” I admit. She sucks in a breath, her hand tightening on me once again. “Knowing how good you feel, feeling how good you fit with me... I don’t know how much more of this torture I can take.”

“What are you talking about?” she asks, her voice thick.

I’m about to tell her just how badly I want her, explain it to her in every single language since words are her speciality, but I’m hit in the head with something. Hard. Cat’s arms drop from mine as I wince, rubbing the back of my head. I already feel empty without her touch.

I turn around to find the culprits.

Sam and Wes.

I swear I’m going to murder them both one day. Wes is baring all of his teeth, grimacing as if he feels bad for throwing a football at my head, but Sam is snickering like a child. I don’t know what invite Sam was given, but he’s the only person in this joint wearing a costume that isn’t from a Disney film as he casually rocks a Shrek cosplay outfit.

“Sorry,” Wes shouts. “Olaf is having a wardrobe malfunction, and we need your help.”

“You need *three* people to help?” I ask, annoyed.

“Yeah, well, it’s not like you’re busy,” Sam says, gesturing to me and Cat as she crosses her arms against her chest.

“I *am* busy,” I groan, remembering the position I was in less than two minutes ago.

“That was a rhetorical question,” Sam argues.

I roll my eyes at him, turning back to Cat. I look down at her and she doesn’t seem pissed like I thought she would. Instead, she looks somewhat relieved. She gives me a weak smile.

“Somebody needs to tell him that is not what a rhetorical question is,” she murmurs, trying and failing to hide her grin. I

just want to kiss it off her, pester her face with my kisses until she's hot all over.

"I'm sorry. I'll come find you later, okay?" I whisper into the space between us. She nods, blinking up at me with her perfect eyes. "I want to finish what we started."

"Well, don't take too long because I can take care of myself, Connie."

"*This* is why you interrupted me?" I ask, exasperated when I finally make it up the stairs. I'm staring at a half-naked Archer while Wes and Sam look at me like I'm a fucking fairy godmother who is supposed to somehow fix their problem.

"We tried to do some DIY, and as you can see, it did not go to plan," Wes says, gesturing toward Archer's discarded Olaf costume which lays on the floor of my childhood bedroom.

"Yeah, it should be called DNDIY: Do Not Do It Yourself. This shit is ridiculous," Sam says, placing his hands on his hips as he looks down at the costume. Do I even want to ask? They must register the confusion on my face because more bullshit comes out of Sam's mouth. "You didn't tell us how hard it would be for him to take a leak in this thing. So, Archie Boy took it off and we had some fun with the scissors."

Archer holds up the costume which now has a huge hole in the crotch area and two on both sides. What kind of idiot cuts things like that? "See what they've done?"

"Oh, it's not that bad," Wes says. Archer scowls at him before fitting the piece over his head which has also apparently lost a few inches because he doesn't get the thing any further than his chest, his hands still in the air.

"You look like a deformed elephant," I mutter, turning back around. I can't believe he dragged me away from the best part of my night.

I meant what I said. I want to finish what we started.

By the time I get back to where I left Catherine, the party had grown tenfold. I don't know how people get invited to these

things without Nora and I saying, but knowing how she is, she probably invited everyone from her class, afraid of telling them no.

The music is still blaring in my ears, sweat trickling down my spine as people bump into me, drunkenly mumbling their happy birthdays as I try to find the one good part of my day.

When I finally find her, she's not where I left her. Instead, she's in the one room I never expected to find her.

My parents have a small office-like room with soft leather couches, a coffee table and a ton of board games which they've hoarded over the years. Catherine is sitting in one of the oversized chairs, curled up with her knees to her chest.

"Are you okay?" I ask into the room. It's quieter in here which is why she flinches at the sound of my voice. She turns to look at me as she nods, but I don't believe her. I kneel in front of her, tilting my head to the side as I rest my hand on her knee. This is not the Cat I had in my arms twenty minutes ago. "What's wrong?"

She sighs, laughing a little at herself. "My social battery is hanging on by a thread."

I nod in understanding. Cat's a party girl. She goes out more than I do. But sometimes I wonder if she goes out just to say she's been out, not because she actually cares about the stupid things that happen at parties.

"Do you want some water?" I ask and she nods. Luckily the room has a black mini fridge disguised as a cupboard, so I open it and pull out a crisp bottle of water, placing it into her hands. She smiles as she opens the cap, taking a sip.

"Thank you," she murmurs. My eyebrows pull together. She's *thanking* me? What did I do that needs a thank you from her? Does she not know that I'd lay at her feet all day if she asked me to? "No one's ever done that for me before."

"No one's ever gotten you some water when you needed it?" I ask curiously.

She shakes her head. "Not when I'm like this."

I run my hand against her knee again. “You can talk to me, Cat, you know that, right? You can tell me anything. You don’t have to hide from me.”

“It’s nothing,” she says, swallowing.

“I doubt it.”

She sighs, a little frustrated. “I just get these... moods.”

“Moods?” I repeat.

She nods slowly. “Sad moods. Like, very sad, dark, depressive moods.”

I wish I had more to offer her than, “Oh.”

She lets out a sharp laugh. “Yeah, oh.”

I rest my hand on her knee reassuringly, steadying her. “That’s okay,” I finally say.

“Is it? It gets annoying and tiring, even for me,” she whispers. I don’t say anything and just wait for her voice to gain momentum again. “I don’t know... I just get stuck in my head sometimes and I don’t know how to come out of it. It’s happened a lot since my mom died. I just kinda stay there? It’s happening a lot at parties recently which sucks because I want to have a good time. Then I realise I’ve been there for too long and I’ve probably had this boring, passive look on my face all night and I hate feeling like I’m not there when I am, but sometimes—”

I almost knock her completely out as I wrap my arms around her, holding her close to me. Her body doesn’t know how to respond at first as she stays in my arms before she slowly finds her hands around my back and nestles her head into the crook of my neck.

God, I just want to breathe her in. Stay here with her forever. Do anything she asked me. Listen to her talk for hours.

“Just breathe, Cat,” I murmur. She nods against my neck, and I watch her back rise and fall. “It’s okay to feel like that. And whoever has told you that it’s not, is fucking stupid.”

She holds on tighter to the words of encouragement and I let her mould into me. Nothing could have prepared me for what it feels like to finally have her in my arms. I've wished on nearly every star, prayed nearly every night for her to let me in like this and get me to see her. Now that I've got her, I'm afraid I won't ever be able to let go.

Still, after we've been attached to each other for a few minutes, I try to ease up off her. She doesn't budge. Instead, she pulls me closer.

"No," she whispers. "Don't let go yet."

I can't place how long Cat and I stayed there like that. She needed to be held as much as I needed it. I never realised or even thought about just how exhausting her life must be with a shitty dad and her almost biological need to be good at school.

After she collected herself, the party was still in full swing, and it only took another round of shots for Elle to completely lose it and was dancing against and possibly *with* Archer before Cat dragged her away from him. Elle is one of the sweetest people I know, but she doesn't go out much. When she does, it only takes a few drinks for her to get drunk, which is why I always take them back home after parties.

Nora disappeared at some point through the night and apparently Wes is with her. I know he'll take care of her, and I know I'll take care of them. Which is why I know to step out of Elle's way when we get to their dorm, and she rushes in to go to the bathroom.

"You should probably go check on her," I say to Catherine, nodding at the closed door of their dorm behind her. She glances back to the door and nods slowly before turning back to me. Her mouth twitches in a smile as a silent thank you for dropping her off, but when she's about to turn, I clasp my hand over her arm, pulling her back into me.

I tower over her, pressing her into the door as those chestnut brown doe eyes blink up at me, her lips parting. "Uh, hi?"

“I just wanted to say thank you for telling me what you did earlier,” I whisper.

“You had to push me against the door to do that?” she teases, tilting her head to the side, that beautiful smile popping out. I shrug. “It’s not a big deal. I don’t know why I made it into a big thing.”

I sigh, shaking my head. I know that people can get into those dark moods sometimes. It happens to people around me all the time. But vocalising that and acknowledging it is a big deal.

“Look,” I start, scratching my neck nervously. “I don’t know what happened to make you feel like you don’t deserve to be cared for when you get like that, but you deserve someone who’s going to want to be with you all the time. In the dark when you don’t have anything to do. In the silence when you don’t have the words to speak. In the sad moments where you can’t figure out what’s wrong. Not just when you’re happy.”

I watch carefully as her eyes light up a little, a golden swirl glimmering in the dull lighting of the hallway. “Thank you, Connie. That means a lot,” she replies, dropping her gaze to the ground. She nudges her foot into mine. “And you do too, you know.”

“What?”

Her eyes settle on mine again. “You deserve all that, too. Even though I’ve never seen you date anyone since high school. Why is that?”

She’s right. Since I started college, I’ve not gone out with anyone past the first date without thinking about the girl right in front of me. I tried to date people, but no one made my chest hurt like it does when I look at Catherine. No one made me laugh as hard as I did when I was with her. Nobody made me want to make them smile as much as I did when I saw her.

“No one has ever interested me,” I say, shrugging.

“That’s a lie,” she laughs. “Girls throw themselves at you like you’re the last tamale in the tray. You have *literal*

cheerleaders for your team.”

“Like I said, none of them interest me,” I press again. She’s never going to get it, is she?

She rolls her eyes. “But there’s got to be someone, right? Someone you’ve secretly had your eye on. Someone who you just *have* to get a second glance at in the hallway. We all have those crushes.”

“Yeah, there might be someone,” I murmur. I try to gauge her reaction, see if she’ll finally get what I’ve been hinting at for years, but I don’t want to push her.

My eyes drop to her lips – perfect, wet, plush. She inhales sharply, tilting her head up. My body is doing what it wants before consulting my brain as I lift my hand to her chin, finally touching her the way I’ve wanted to for fucking years. I run my thumb against her bottom lip, inwardly groaning, knowing I can’t do more than this. My heart roars in my ears, thrashing against my chest as I take one step away from her. “Goodnight, Catherine.”

She just blinks at me, not knowing what to do or say. “Goodnight. And, uh, happy birthday.”

I desperately need an ice-cold shower and a pint of ice cream so I can wallow in the post-birthday blues. I always feel this weird ache in my chest on my birthday. Not just because of everything to do with my parents and Nora, but the thought of getting older fucking terrifies me.

That’s why I’m grateful that I have my friends and family who will always make me feel young because when I opened the door to my dorm, the last thing I was expecting to see was right in front of me in the living room.

Let’s be honest, it’s very on brand for Wes and Nora.

Wes is sitting on the couch, his feet outstretched in front of him while my sister sits crossed legged on the floor as she paints his nails in a bright pink and blue colour.

He's grinning down at her like this is what he prefers women to be doing when they're on their knees in front of him.

My sister is also having a blast, humming along to whatever musical soundtrack she's playing on his phone.

What makes this better is the fact that they're both wearing face masks, he's wearing one of her headbands to pull back his hair and they're both wearing Drayton Titan's jerseys – Nora with my number fourteen on and Wes with his number twelve.

"I don't even want to ask," I mumble, locking the door behind me. When I turn back to them, they're both giggling like children.

Nora grins up at me, that green goo on her face making me roll my eyes. "Happy birthday, little bro."

He wiggles his toes in her face and she starts giggling. "Happy birthday to you too, sis."

When I get into my room, I completely ditch the idea of a shower and ice cream and face plant onto my bed.

FIFTEEN

CONNOR/CAT

HANGOVERS AND BRUNCH

CONNOR

EVERY YEAR, like clockwork, we have a brunch the morning after our birthday. When we were kids, we'd have massive blow-out parties per our parent's requests, and the morning-after brunch was a smaller get-together where we'd recoup. It was a way for my parents to cure their hangover while spending time with us and making sure we had a good birthday.

Now, it's the opposite way around. My parents usually leave the house up to us on our birthdays while they spend their night at our cabin in Aspen and Wes and Nora get shitfaced whilst I make sure they're under control. Since we turned seventeen, and alcohol became much more desirable *we've* become the ones with the hangovers whilst our parents spread out waffles, pancakes and French toast on the table as me, my sister, Cat, Elle, and Wes grunt and groan whilst basking in the rare November sunshine on the back porch.

Nora rubs her head as she attempts to sip the orange juice she has in front of her, wearing her oversized sunglasses. "I feel like death upon death upon *more* death."

"I second that," Elle murmurs, reaching for the tropical juice my mom put together. Cat groans beside her in agreement, dropping her head onto Elle's shoulder, also wearing a huge pair of sunglasses.

"You should all take a page out of my book," I say proudly around a mouthful of scrambled eggs. I smile to myself,

knowing I feel perfectly fine after not having more than one drink last night. They all moan at the same time, sounding like a pack of zombies.

“And what book is that? *How to be boring and sober?*” Wes asks and he shakes his head, answering himself. He runs a hand through his hair, his newly manicured nails glimmering in the sunlight before placing his Drayton Hills cap back on his head, shielding him from the sun as he slowly sinks his head into Nora’s lap. “I’m good,” he whispers snuggling into her lap.

Nora pats his head condescendingly. “I’m never drinking again.”

Cat laughs, the sound rushing right through me even though she’s not even laughing at or even with me. “You said that last time and the time before that,” she replies, giggling. “Plus, we all know that when *Ry-Ry’s* birthday comes up, you’re going to use it as another excuse to go out again.”

“That’s if you’re still together by then,” I mutter. I’m sure Nora shoots me a look behind her sunglasses, but it’s hard to tell. I don’t miss the way Cat leans up off Elle’s shoulder, pushing her glasses to her head and glares at me. “I mean, of course you’ll be together by then.”

“Yeah,” Nora responds quietly, resting her head against the back of the chair.

It still baffles me every day how she manages to put up with him. He’s good to her in all the ways that matter, – according to her – but he has a bad habit of not showing up when he needs to.

He always has some stupid excuse and lets her down. They’ve been together so long that I’m convinced she would let him break her heart piece by piece then let go of him. I’ve tried talking sense into her, as has everyone else, but she won’t give up on him. I’m terrified to find out what she’d let him do before she finally lets him go.

“That guy is a dick,” Wes mutters. I hum in agreement and Nora hits him on the top of his head. “Okay, ouch. I already

have a headache. No need to add salt to the wound.”

I finish off what’s on my plate, downing another glass of orange juice before I let out a long sigh. “Well, you’re going to have to look as picture perfect as you can, Wesley, because we have to meet coach later.”

“Oh, shit,” he curses, sitting up out of my sister’s lap. “And we’ve got that thing at Ollie’s today.”

Catherine’s eyebrow quirks. “What thing?”

Wes opens his mouth, but I stop him. “Nothing. Just post-game stuff,” I say to her, smiling as she narrows her eyes at me further. I turn back to Wes as he rubs at his temples. “Get your ass up, Mackenzie.”

“I’m coming. I’m coming,” he mutters, finally getting up out of his seat and stacking the plates on top of each other.

After we’ve cleaned up the kitchen, listened to thirty different songs and made it back to campus, Wes is still complaining about his hangover. I don’t know how many times I have to tell him to pace himself when he drinks, but he never listens to me. He usually ends up in some random girl’s bed after they give him *the look* and then complains about it to me for a week.

“Don’t even breathe on me, man,” he murmurs as we walk towards his dad’s office. “I swear my brain is about to fall out of my skull.”

“You just never learn, do you?” I ask, nudging my shoulder into his.

“I was fine when I left the party. It’s your sister who doesn’t know when to stop,” he retorts. I still have no idea what they were doing last night in my dorm, but she was gone by the morning, so I didn’t even bother to ask. “One more drink turns into five with her. Who knew drunk karaoke could be so much fun.”

So that’s what all the noise was last night. I thought a deer was being murdered.

“Besides, she’s just distracting herself because Ryan didn’t show,” I say. Just thinking about that jackass makes me feel sick. “Did she say anything to you about him?”

Wes shakes his head. “Nah. He called her a few times, but she put her phone on silent. I didn’t want to poke any wounds, so I kept my mouth shut.”

“Thank you for keeping quiet for once in your life,” I say, ruffling his curls.

“Yeah, yeah,” he mocks. “Anything for you, Connie boy.”

As weird as it is to say, Coach Mackenzie’s office is one of the most comforting places on earth. Despite the stench from the locker room a few doors down, his office always smells like Vanilla candles – courtesy of Wes’s mom May – and everything always looks clean. He has a fresh line of trophies that we’ve won as a team and that he’s won with previous teams. He has a million pictures of Wes as a baby doing some dumb shit. Everything about this place just feels perfect.

After coming in here at least once a week for the past year, I should’ve known that he’d be able to suss out Wes’s not so subtle hangover.

“Son,” Mackenzie chides after we’ve been engaging in small talk for the last five minutes. Wes’s eyes shoot up. “Please tell me you’re taking this season seriously.”

“As serious as the plague,” Wes replies, grinning. Coach’s frown deepens. “Dad, it was Connie and Nora’s twentieth. What did you expect me to do?”

“I expect you to be more responsible. Considering he’s the birthday boy, it’s weird how he doesn’t look as beat as you do,” Coach counters.

“That’s because he’s a party pooper,” Wes groans.

I flick him at the back of his head. “Why do you love to talk about me when I’m right here?” I ask, visibly annoyed as I cross my arms against my chest. “But don’t worry, Coach. We’re going to be on a better track this season. I swear I’ll keep little Wessy here in place.”

Coach nods, his frown softening a little. As much as we give him a hard time, he's always going to have a soft spot for us. I know I'm his favourite and Wes is close second.

"Good," Coach says, "Because you've got a lot riding on this season, boys. All of you do, but you two especially. I know how hard you work and how you want to be drafted, but it takes a lot more commitment than you realise."

"We know," I reply.

"Do you? Because you don't seem to be taking things seriously enough. I don't want to sound like a grump, but I want what's best for you and I hope you can pass on the message to the rest of the team at the briefing before tonight's game," Coach explains with a sigh. Wes and I both nod. "And this thing with Catherine is going to help you tons, so take that seriously too. She's a nice girl and I hope you are being good to her."

My mind instantly floods with thoughts of last night.

My hands all over her body.

Her ass nestled into my crotch.

The smoothness of her skin beneath mine.

The soft touch of her lips under my finger.

"Yeah, we are," Wes says, winking at me. "Some of us more than others."

My face heats up as Coach eyes me suspiciously. It's not like he told us *not* to fool around with her. In fact, *I'm* the one who made up that rule so no one could interfere with the very obvious crush I have on her.

"Right..." Coach says, dropping his gaze to his laptop. "Just look after yourself, boys. And listen to your bodies. I know it's uncomfortable to talk about, but it's true. Who knows what you guys get up to off the pitch, but I just want you to be in your best shape physically and mentally."

Wes rolls his head back. "Yes, dad, we're fine," he says before his eyes light up and his posture straightens. "In fact, that's why we're going to Oliver's house after the game later

to use the pool and the ice bath. There's going to be food and drinks—" Coach's eyebrows raise. "Of apple juice, obviously, because we never drink during the season."

Shitty save but it's a save nonetheless, and Coach seems to buy it. "Well, don't have too much fun," he says, pointing between the two of us. "And don't have too much *apple juice*."

Wes's mischievous grin grows tenfold as he turns to me, a knowing smirk forming across his face. "Oh, we won't."

I don't know what that means, but I'm fucking terrified to find out.

CAT

If I thought the first few rounds of interviewing were challenging, this is much worse.

I've not been to a football match in months and with the tons of homework I have piled up, I didn't get to go to my first game as being part of the team. Part of me wanted to go, to experience the atmosphere first hand, but the other part of me is glad I didn't because the aftermath is much worse.

I tried to do some research on how college football actually works, but it just gave me a headache. I scheduled time out of my studying timetable to catch the boys after the game that they just won. I wanted to get their first reactions, some comments on the tactics they used and the best parts of the game. Instead, I got ambushed by sweaty men all whooping and yelling about how good they played.

After I brushed them aside and the pitch and the stands were cleared, Wes and Sam somehow had some sort of energy left in them as they dragged me back to the pitch with them. I have no clue where Connor went, and I didn't want to ask. Distancing myself from him seems like the best option after last night.

I can still feel him *everywhere*. No matter how many drinks I had and how confident I suddenly got, I can still remember it all. There would be no way I'd be able to forget the way his hands felt on me. The way he kissed my neck. The

way his hands flexed on my hips each time I rolled my ass into him, feeling his hard length beneath me. I was hungry and downright desperate, which is not like me at all.

That's the only reason I agreed to watch Wes and Sam run laps as I finished up some of my notes from today's hectic session with the team. I'm starting to get a hang of it, finally. My ideas and layouts are starting to pull together in a more tangible way, and I can't wait to see how it's going to turn out when I go back to Rotford for a check-in.

It also helps with how beautiful the pitch looks at sunset. The sun is fading into a deep orange behind the mountains that envelop Drayton and the spotlights on the pitch glimmer down onto the track. The bleachers are still messy post-game, but it feels vibrant, nonetheless. This is one part of Drayton I've missed out on.

"I'm not doing this again," I say, shutting my laptop as I step down from the bleachers, reaching a very sweaty and stinky Sam and Wes.

"Thank you, Cathy," Wes coos sweetly. "You're a lifesaver."

"And you're both idiots," I say, walking past them. I don't know what sane person would want to run laps *for fun* after just playing a competitive game of football, but maybe it's some sort of hangover cure? I don't know.

Sam slings his sweaty arm around my shoulder as we exit the field. "You don't know how to have any fun," he says, swaying me to the side.

"I do. Watching you run laps just isn't exactly my idea of fun," I retort.

"What about being in a swimming pool with four football players?" Wes asks.

Weird question, but he's a weird guy. "Tempting, but no. I'm busy," I say, my automatic response.

"Come on, Cat. You said yourself that the only way to get to know us more is by hanging out with us. No offence, but

you're going to make a very shitty report if you don't know us outside of football," Wes argues.

"Yeah," Sam adds. "We wind down best by swimming at Oli's."

I think about it for a minute.

That doesn't sound *too* bad. I love swimming and I haven't been in a while. And he's right. I do need to get to know them better. After today's defeat with the excitement after the game, this could be a better opportunity to get to know them whilst having a little bit of fun.

A bit of fun can't hurt, right?

JoJo's voice rings in my head, which is the only reason I find myself saying, "Fine. I'll go."

SIXTEEN

CONNOR

BIKINIS AND HOT TUBS

IF YOU HAVE two lawyers for parents, you get a massive mansion just outside of Denver with an infinity pool, a hot tub, six bedrooms, three storeys, a private estate and a fridge and pantry constantly filled with snacks.

Oliver Nayman is one lucky bastard.

The second we heard about his pool; the team begged to use it. Luckily Oliver doesn't have many friends outside the team, so he was more than happy to let us use it, especially after a game.

Swimming is one of those relaxing things that doesn't feel like too much of a workout and it still feels comfortable. I can let the water take me to where I want to go, knowing I'm doing something without doing too much. It's a perfect sport to do alongside football and an ice bath is good for anyone. It took a while to get used to it, but now I've done it so many times it doesn't feel like anything.

Most of the team ditched Oliver's small get-together for a bigger party, despite the advice Coach relayed to the whole team at our meeting before our game today. Most of the guys scoffed and continued to talk about the parties they're hosting this weekend and how many times they're going to get laid. The playboy act is getting old and pathetic by now and it seems like me, Oli, Sam and Wes are the only people that have realised that.

After my fifteen minutes in the ice bath, I make my way into Oliver's huge kitchen, needing another snack. Those

freezing ice cubes make me so fucking hungry. Most of the time I just sit there, staring at the darkened night sky, silently waiting for whatever snack I'm going to find after my time is up.

I pull open a drawer full of every flavour of Oreo's known to man and pick up a packet of the birthday cake flavour – my favourite. I hear the soft click of the door open and the gentle thump of shoes moving across the wooden floor before they stop. I ignore it, hoping it's one of the guys that have realised that this kind of night in is much better than an overflowing bar full of men and their BO. I pull a carton of milk from the fridge, pouring some into a glass before downing it and pouring another one.

The footsteps finally pick up again, quieter and I give in to the curiosity.

No.

Fucking.

Way.

Catherine is standing before me in nothing but a purple bikini and a transparent cover-up. Her dark curly hair flows past her shoulders, glowing from the large French doors of Oli's backyard. The coverup falls past her knees where her ankles cross as she pins her hands behind her back, showcasing her toned stomach and perky tits.

I might pass out.

Is that insane? Probably. This woman has completely bewitched me body and soul. Or whatever that guy from the cheesy rom com says.

She's standing there, looking absolutely magnificent as she stares at me wide-eyed as if *I'm* the one in the wrong place. This is *my* friend's house. *My* post-game safe space. Not hers. She didn't even know Oliver until four weeks ago.

I forget about my precious Oreos and take three steps towards her as she still stares at me. When I reach her, she lifts her head up in challenge. "What are you doing?" she asks.

I almost scoff at her question. “What are *you* doing, Cat?”

She gestures to her outfit and now that I’m closer to her, I have to bite the inside of my cheek, curling my hands into fists at my side. I want to touch her. I *need* to touch her. She’s showing too much skin. Too much for me to see. Too much for me to want.

“What does it look like?” she teases. “I’m getting in the pool.”

“Not in that you’re not,” I say, the words leaving me in a gruff, deep tone.

“I am,” she relays. I wrap my hand around her waist, the skin to skin contact almost making me dizzy as I pull her away from the door where the guys could see her and press her against the wall in the kitchen.

She’s almost too much like this. She smells fucking fantastic – all sweet and fresh. Her skin is scorching despite the weather and part of me wants to believe it’s because of me. I don’t miss the way her eyes scan my naked torso right up to my eyes. I lean both of my hands above her head, caging her in.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I whisper again.

“Research,” she replies, and she has the fucking audacity to *smile* at me. She’s too cocky. She knows exactly what I mean, yet she wants to play with me.

I lean my head into the crook of her neck, dropping one of my hands to slowly slip off the shoulder of her cover up. When the soft mesh material falls, I pluck the strap of her bikini. A sharp gasp escapes her lips as the bikini strap slaps back against her skin.

“Research, huh?” I run my finger down her shoulder, revelling in the hungry feeling I get as I feel goosebumps arise across her skin. She nods, not replying. For someone who swears by words as if they’re the key to every problem, she doesn’t have much to say.

When my finger dips down her back, slightly tugging on the band of her bikini top, her back arches into mine. I have to

suppress my groan, feeling just how badly I want her in my shorts. I slip my hand under the back of her bikini, feeling her bare skin beneath my palm as my breathing matches her desperate breaths.

“Connor...” she whispers, my name passing through her lips in a breathy and almost unsure tone.

I ignore her plea.

“Do you understand what you’re doing to me, hm?” I swear I hear a soft whimper leave her mouth and I almost lose my balance. I respond by pressing further into her so she can feel just how badly I want her, how badly I want her *everything*. “I’m not a jealous person, Cat. I never have been. But with you, knowing you’re about to go out there in front of those fucking vultures, you could say I’m a little jealous.”

Her hands finally gain some purpose as she curls both of her palms on my waist, her nails digging into my flesh as she pulls me closer to her. “Why? We’re— We’re just friends.”

“*Friends*,” I bite the word out as if it has personally offended me in some way. “Is the very last thing on my mind when it comes to you, and you know that.”

She blinks up at me, those gorgeous brown deer eyes staring right into mine as her lips part. I watch her eyes dip to my lips, and I can’t help but run my tongue against the seam of my bottom lip before biting it. She’s about to say something, but I don’t bother to wait for a response.

“Just get in the pool, Catherine.”

If this is exactly what hell is like, I never want to die.

Every single thing about this is torture.

I walk behind her as she saunters in front of me to open the door to the backyard. Wes and Oliver are at one side of the pool while Sam is at the other, closest to the door. When they see the two of us, Sam and Wes’ faces light up with childlike joy.

“Catherine!” Sam calls when she gets to the edge of the pool. He holds out his hand for her as she walks down the steps, and she waits until the very last second to take off her cover up before she submerges her body under the water. “You came.”

I roll my eyes as I sink into the pool, putting some distance between us as she floats next to Sam against the edge of the pool where the water seems to overflow. “*You* invited her?”

Cat holds her head high, challenging me with those hypnotising eyes. “Yeah, they both did. Is that a problem?”

“No,” I say quickly, lying straight through my teeth.

“Really? Because it seems like your veins are going to pop out of your skull.”

Of course, my whole body might blow to smithereens because Catherine Fables is sitting two metres away from me in a pool in a purple bikini and I want to tear it off her. If it was anybody else, I wouldn’t care. But it’s not anybody else. It’s *her* and she’s all I want.

“So,” she says, looking at everyone but me. “Is this what you usually do after a game?”

“Pretty much,” Sam says. “We used to have a few more people and more drinks, but we’re trying to do better this season because *someone* is being such a grump.”

“Oh, I’m sorry I want us to get drafted,” I say sarcastically, rolling my eyes.

“You can relax sometimes, Connie boy,” Wes adds.

“This is literally me relaxing,” I say, spreading my arms against the back of the pool. I catch Catherine watching me again and I don’t think she notices that I can see her checking me out. She mutters something I don’t catch as she rolls her eyes tilting her head up to the sky.

“Right,” Wes says, clearly not convinced by my answer. “So, Catherine, is it time for your interrogation?”

“What?” she gawks, tilting her head back down.

“Yeah, you ask us questions, we ask you questions. It’s how we work, isn’t it?” Sam asks, grinning like a fool. They’re up to something. I don’t know what, but there is a strange and unsettling gleam in all three of their eyes and not the moonlight.

“Do you have a boyfriend?” Oliver asks.

I immediately tense up at the question, turning to her. The thought has never really crossed my mind. I know she likes to party, but she never goes home with anyone. Not since that breakup over a year ago. I can’t remember the last time I’ve seen her around any guys until she was assigned to work with us.

Catherine laughs and the sound instantly eases some of the tension in my body, but not completely. “That’s not exactly how this thing works,” she says.

“Maybe we’ll answer more of your questions if you answer some of ours,” are the words that leave my mouth. I don’t even know what I’m saying. Do I even *want* to know if she’s dating anyone or not? Probably not. For the sake of my own sanity.

She doesn’t even look at me when she starts talking. “Well, no, I don’t have a boyfriend.”

“Oh, yeah,” Wes says, dragging out the ‘yeah’ as he sighs. “He was the one who was crying outside your dorm that time, right? The video went viral.”

We all know what happened between Evan Branson and Catherine. No one knows the ins and outs other than the fact that his family is filthy rich, and his spoiled ass couldn’t deal with the breakup. Well, that’s what I heard anyway.

Their relationship was so public for the time it lasted; I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s been more cautious as to who she dates. It’s also known that we don’t bring it up. Especially after his family did everything they could to scrub the videos and pictures clean when he transferred to North University in Salt Lake only a few weeks into his first year at Drayton.

What an idiot.

She shifts uncomfortably at the memory, averting her gaze to the frosty backyard.

“What did you do to him?” Wes asks, his tone more serious. I don’t like this. I don’t like making her feel like that. I turn to her as I watch the light drain from her face. She bites her bottom lip, the dark flesh turning white.

“We grew apart,” she says quietly.

“That’s it? You just... Grew apart?” Sam asks, clearly not convinced.

“Yep, it’s that simple. Any other questions?”

The boys shake their heads and then Sam starts a rant about how the season is going so far and I welcome the distraction.

I try to keep my eyes on her, trying my hardest to see what she’s thinking but it’s hard to tell. I’m assuming she’s listening to what Sam is saying, storing the information to later add to her documents about the team, but I watch as her gaze slowly drops to the pool, to me and then back to Sam.

Everything she does is so fucking distracting. I can’t understand it. Before, I could crush on her from afar, dreaming of the what-ifs and the maybes, but now she’s right in front of me. The voice in my head quietens when I’m around her. She gives me something else to focus on. Something that is not my annoying ass brain or my overthinking.

I’m so caught up thinking about her and every glimmer of water on her skin, I don’t even realise the conversation topic has changed.

“Okay, let’s do two truths and a lie. It’s a good icebreaker,” Wes says. I have to blink a few times so my eyes don’t completely gloss over. “Connie, you first.”

I groan inwardly, knowing this is the very last thing I’m good at. I’m always comfortable with these guys more than anything, but there are still times where I don’t have the right words to say or the right way to say them.

“Uh,” I say, starting off *very* strong. “I have a cardboard cutout of Russell Wilson in my childhood bedroom, I’ve never peed in a pool, and I’ve not had sex in ten months.”

Fuck.

I was so nervous I had no idea what to say.

Wes snorts. “Well, that last one is definitely a lie.”

“There’s no way you’ve not had sex in *ten months*,” Sam adds.

Catherine shakes her head, trying to hide her smile. “Yeah, and you’ve definitely peed in a pool. Everyone does it.” I shrug, giving them my answer.

“*Ten months?*” Oli gawks, his jaw wide open. I nod stiffly. “How the hell are you coping?”

“That’s why you’ve been shit on your passes. I bet your wrist is locked up,” Wes says, shaking his head at me like a disappointed dad.

“At least I’m not a manwhore like you,” I retort, a pathetic low blow. They all laugh at that, including Cat.

“Yeah, well, at least I’m getting some,” Wes says, and I roll my eyes.

“Sure,” I mock. “What are your two truths and a lie, asshole?”

He grins at the nickname. “I give killer massages. I love it when my nails are painted and the last time *I* had sex was in Connor’s bed when he wasn’t home.”

Sam crosses his fingers, closing his eyes as if he’s wishing on a star. “Please tell me the last one is the truth.”

“Wesley, for both of our sakes, you better be lying,” I bite out through gritted teeth. That fucker is an animal. I wouldn’t put it past him. He holds my stare and I’m *this* close to strangling him before he finally bursts out laughing and I sigh.

“You should have seen your face!” he guffaws.

“Wait, so you can actually do good massages?” Catherine asks curiously.

Wes wiggles his manicured nails in the air. “The best.”

Cat nods in understanding, smirking at me and then back to Wes.

She wouldn't dare.

“What?” Wes asks when she doesn't drop her gaze from his. “Do you want me to show you?”

I close my eyes, taking in a deep breath. She's doing this on purpose, and I know for sure that she would not listen to me if I told her no.

She's enjoying making my life a living hell and all I want to do is kiss her for it. What does that say about me?

I'm an absolute fool.

She swims over to Wes and his eyes are a little panicked, not sure that she would have actually agreed. I bite the inside of my cheek as she settles between his open legs as Oli moves out of their way and swims towards Sam and I.

Tonight is just getting worse and worse by the second.

After what feels like forever, Wes finally lowers both of his hands on her shoulders and he starts to move his thumbs and palms over her collarbones and her shoulders. She sighs softly and I would do anything to be the one making her sound like that.

“Is it good?” I ask thickly. This feels wrong. So fucking wrong.

“Mm hm,” she murmurs, closing her eyes.

This is going to completely destroy me.

What's worse is that I know that she's not lying just to put on a show. Wes can be an absolute idiot ninety percent of the time, but he somehow managed to inherit the smoothest and softest hands I've ever seen a man have. He's given me a massage from time to time, mostly as a joke. And I would be lying if I didn't say he has some sort of magical touch.

As I watch her completely relax into him as he finds his rhythm, my mind goes from innocent to filthy in seconds.

What would she do if it was me making her feel that way? If it was me behind her, caging her in with my thighs, my hands roaming her body and wherever she wanted me to. If it was me making her eyes roll back and her eyelids flutter closed. If it was my body her back was nestling into perfect as I dipped my hand lower and lower until I...

“Okay, that’s enough, Wes. Stop,” I demand, pulling myself out of my fantasies as my gaze locks with hers again.

“What? Why?” Wes asks, slowing his movements. “She’s clearly enjoying it.”

“I can fucking *see* she’s enjoying it,” I groan, running my hand down my face as she has the guts to *smile* at me, knowing exactly how much it’s messing me up inside. “Everyone get out.”

“Uh, no,” Oliver says, a little unsure as to what I just demanded. Hell, I don’t even know what I just said either. All I know is that I need to be alone with her and she’s looking at me like she wants me to. “If you two want to be alone, go to the hot tub. Don’t try to kick us out of my own pool.”

“Yeah, good idea,” I say, standing in the water and making my way over to her. I hold out my hand as she blinks up at me. *What the fuck am I doing and why can’t I stop myself?* “Catherine?” She looks down at my hand and then back up at me, considering it. “Don’t make me beg.”

Her mouth lifts into a smirk and she finally clasps her hand in mine. “Now, that’s something I would like to see.”

This woman is going to kill me.

I’m surprised I lasted the two-minute walk around the side of the house to the secluded hot tub without bursting into flames. She walked in front of me, showing me her perfect ass in that bikini before she sunk down into the steaming water with a sigh, resting her head back against the tub. I lowered myself beside her, not wanting too much distance between us, but not too little that she was uncomfortable.

“Next time you want a massage, you ask me, okay?”

She lets out a light laugh, closing her eyes as she tilts her head up to the sky, giving me the most fantastic view of her throat and side profile. “Why would I do that?”

“Because I don’t like the thought of other people touching you,” I admit.

She sighs, lifting her head up and turning to me. The view of her here, beneath the moonlight and the fairy lights in Oli’s backyard she looks fucking stunning. A true goddess. Still, as much as looking at her excites me, I can’t ignore the disapproving look on her face.

“You’ve got to stop doing that, Connor,” she murmurs.

“Doing what?”

“Clearing the area any time another guy is near me and acting like you want me all to yourself,” she says.

“Who said I’m acting?” I challenge. She barks out a laugh, rolling her pretty eyes at me. I shift in the seat of the hot tub, spreading my legs open a little. “Come here, Catherine.”

“Why? So, you can tell me how much you want me?” she mocks, tucking her wet hair behind her ear. Still, I can see the tiny movements she’s making to get closer to me. Her body wants this just as much as her brain does.

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “I want you to *feel* what you’re doing to me, sweetheart. Then maybe you’ll see that none of this is for show.”

I shred the space between us, wrapping both of my hands around her waist and I pull her into me, settling her right on my lap. Now, *this* view is fucking fantastic.

Her pretty, perfect tits are in my face now, straining behind the tiny silky material of her purple bikini. Her brown skin glimmers with droplets of water as I push her closer to me and she can feel exactly how hard I am for her. I buck my hips slightly, knowing my length will hit her core just right.

“Connor.”

The desperate sound of my name leaving her lips as she looks down at me is a sight and sound I've been imagining for years. I run my hands from her hips up her back until I reach her shoulders, smoothing my hands over her collarbone instead as she braces her hands on my shoulders.

"You see, Catherine, the difference between you and me is, I have a lot more self-control than you do." I run my thumb over the material of her bikini, my thumb catches on her hard nipple and the sweetest moan leaves her lips. My dick twitches at the sound. "Do you think I'm wrong? Because I've spent weeks, months, fucking *years*, trying my hardest not to touch you and if I really wanted to, I could make you snap in an instant."

She lets out another needy whimper when I graze my thumb over her nipple again. "You don't know what you're talking about," she breathes out.

"Doesn't it get tiring, pretending that you don't want me?" I ask, lowering my mouth to her neck where her pulse is hammering. I'm so sick of this game – this back and forth.

I taste her, kissing across her neck as her body leans into mine, slowly shredding the pieces of control she has left.

Her grip on my shoulder tightens. "I'm not– I'm not pretending."

I bite the sensitive part of her neck, my teeth sinking into her slightly and she gives me another sweet sound. "No?"

"You're infuriating."

I chuckle into her skin. "Tell me you've not thought about this. About me touching you, kissing you, having you so close to me that you can feel exactly what you're doing to me."

"Connor, I—"

"...*Love you and that's all I really know. I talked to your dad and...*" We both freeze to see Wes who was loudly singing the Taylor Swift song he's been obsessed with since we made that TikTok. His voice trails off as he sees us. Cat is still in my lap, my head was buried into her neck seconds ago, but of

course, Wes has to ruin the moment. “Oh, my bad. I didn’t know you were—”

“Just leaving,” Cat says, climbing off my lap and stepping out of the water. I run my hands down my face, not knowing what to do or say.

“You’re coming to the game on Tuesday, right?” Wes asks and I’m grateful he can actually formulate words because all I think about is the woman leaving the tub.

“Of course,” she says before saying a quick goodbye and not giving me a second glance. Wes sighs loudly once the back door closes and slides in beside me.

“You’re playing a very dangerous game, Connie boy,” he says, shaking his head at me. “She’s your sister’s *best friend*. If she finds out, she’s going to freak the fuck out.”

“She’s not going to find out anything because nothing is happening,” I mutter.

“That’s not what it looked like to me just then. I’m not an idiot,” he says. Well, he is an idiot. “All I’m saying is to be careful with *whatever* it is that you’re doing because I will not be able to function if our system breaks down because of you.”

“What system?” I ask.

“You keep your hands off Cat and I stay away from Nora. It’s an unwritten rule.” *See?* He’s an idiot.

“Well, that’s bullshit because my sister has a boyfriend and Cat doesn’t,” I say, groaning.

“Right, so if Nora was single and I made a move on her you wouldn’t care?”

“She would never be single.”

“But if she was?”

“Then I’d be—”

“Pissed,” he finishes for me. I just blink at him, not knowing what to say. “Look, man. Obviously I’d never *actually* make a move on her, but I’m just saying she would

throw that in your face if she ever found out. I just think you should think about it first, you know?"

I am already royally fucked.

SEVENTEEN

CAT

IS THIS SUPPOSED TO TURN ME ON?

“LET’S GO, Titans, let’s go! Let’s go, Titans, let’s go!”

If there was any time to put my head inside a bowl of ice water, now it’s now.

Nora has been chanting like a crazy person all morning as we got ready for the football game today. I don’t think she’s ever missed a game in her whole time here at Drayton and each time, she just gets crazier with her outfit choices and her chants.

Today she’s wearing Connor’s jersey with green face paint and a number fourteen sticker on her cheek. She even convinced Elle to do face paint too, but hers looks a lot cuter with a few green dots in a crescent shape on the side of her head. I stuck to wearing a training jersey that I ordered from the school site last week that doesn’t have anybody’s number on it and added a green ribbon to my half-up and half down style my hair is in.

“Let’s *go*, Nora, let’s *go*,” I chant back to her, waiting outside the door of our dorm. She’s giggling now as she runs out the door, a bag full of snacks and extra face paint *just in case*. After she’s finally done doing her pre-game happy dance, I lock the door and we walk down the hallway.

“Is it only me who’s actually kind of excited?” Elle asks, peering at us in the line that we’re walking in. “Like, I’ve always thought football was an attractive sport, but there is something in the water here.”

“I still don’t get how the game works,” I admit. No matter how many times I watched our dads play with Wes and Connor, I could never get the hang of it. Even now with all the research I’ve done, my brain just hurts even more.

“You don’t have to know how it works to enjoy it,” Nora says beside me. “It’s the atmosphere that makes it fun – the chanting, the band, the cheerleaders, the music. It’s a little on the nose, but that’s what makes it better.”

“I’m sure,” I mock, and she elbows me before hooking her arm into mine and I hook mine through Elle’s.

When we get down to the pitch, the bleachers are bustling with people all dressed like us on one side and the opposing team from the other college sit on separate stands. Just like Nora said, the atmosphere is otherworldly.

It’s fucking freezing out here in the early November chill, but the glow of the headlights, the massive time board on one side of the pitch and the smell of soggy hot dogs from the concession stand makes me feel like I’m in a movie.

The games I went to in high school were nothing like this. People were definitely louder then, but at college level, they’re more serious. The crowd knows that the teams aren’t playing to win a participation trophy, but they need to win to be seriously considered to be drafted into the NFL. And from what my research tells me, it’s competitive as hell.

We take a seat not too far and not too close on the bleachers, snuggling close together to keep warm. We’ve got our huge jackets, gloves and scarves on, rubbing our palms together to keep some heat going. Nora whips off her outer layers, showcasing her jersey instead when the team start doing warm-ups on the pitch.

That woman is crazy.

I scan the field and the bleachers, looking back to the small tunnel where the boys walk through as I wait for something. I have no idea what. I’m getting antsy and impatient at the thought of seeing Connor again after what happened the other night.

Not only is it awkward as fuck sitting next to and inadvertently lying to Nora about where I was the other night, I hate that I did whatever it was I did with Connor just as much as I enjoyed it.

I let him touch me in the places I've only dreamt about him being. I never would have told him that out loud and I don't think I ever will. There's always been a tiny part of me that's had a crush on him. Of course, there has. It's the oldest trope in the book.

He's always been kind to me, especially after the way he looked after me at the party. He listens when I ramble and even when I don't. He looks at me like he sees me and not like he's judging me. It also helps that he has the deepest brown eyes I've ever seen. He has soft, slightly curly hair that I want to run my hands through, lips that look perfect for...

"You okay?" Elle asks. It's only then that I realise I've been twisting my scarf between my hands. I smooth it out easily, taking a deep breath. I cannot get caught up with thoughts about him already. That's just ridiculous. "Are you nervous to see them play?"

"No," I say, laughing as I turn to her. "Why would I be nervous? I'm here for research purposes only."

"Research?" Elle repeats, cocking her head to the side. That word has been fucking me up lately and I hate it. "I've seen you looking at Connor since we got here."

"No, I haven't. Why would I look at him?" I whisper, keeping my voice low as Nora chats with the girl beside us animatedly. That girl can make friends anywhere. I'm convinced it's her superpower.

"Look, I won't say anything, but I saw you dancing at the party. No matter how drunk I was, there was no way I missed that," she says to me. I swallow. Hard. I've been replaying that night over and over before I go to sleep each night. It's a sickness. "Unless I completely misread the situation," she adds when I don't say anything.

"No," I whisper, "No, you didn't."

“I fucking knew it,” she says triumphantly. “You like him, don’t you? I bet all that forced proximity is eating away at you.”

I shrug. “I don’t know yet, Elle-Belle,” I reply.

She smiles wide, her dimples sinking in. “Well, either way, that’s fucking adorable. You deserve to be happy, Cat. Just...” She turns back to Nora who is still talking. “Be careful.”

“I know,” I say, “I will.”

That felt like a lie the second the crowd roared when the team slowly made their way back onto the pitch because when I saw Connor lined up, helmet in hand, padded up and fucking massive, a piece of me died inside. He scanned the crowd, looking and searching until his hot gaze finally landed on me.

And then he smiled.

At me.

My stomach somersaulted at the movement, and I hope to God nobody noticed it. My whole face lit up with the sheer excitement of *what-if* which I haven’t felt for a while. What if I let myself have this? What if I let myself fall?

Being careful seems to be the very last thing on my mind right now.

Is this supposed to turn me on, or is that just me? I don’t think I took my eyes off the players the entire game. Did I understand what was going on? Not completely. Did I feel my heart fall right out of my chest whenever I watched one of the players sprint with the ball? Every. Fucking. Time.

I didn’t know how much it excited me until they started playing. The crowd was almost animalistic as they roared and cheered with the team, encouraging them to go on. Nora was waving her hands in the air like a mad woman, yelling at the opposing team while Elle and I couldn’t stop laughing. It was a new and thrilling experience and now I want to go to every single game and deal with the chaotic aftermath.

Once the boys had showered and changed, we waited for them in the parking lot on campus that sits between the sports arena and our dorms. We were invited to a wind-down session back at Oliver's house. No pool today, unfortunately, as it's being cleaned. I don't think I'd be able to look at his backyard without my thoughts turning feral.

Connor steps out of the doors to the arena, freshly showered and his brown hair a damp mess on his head as Sam, Wes and Oliver are in tow behind him but he's all I see. Nora runs towards them as excited as ever.

"Holy shit," she exclaims, looking up at Connor and Wes. "You were fucking amazing. And that second half? I almost shit myself."

Wes laughs, slinging his arm around her shoulder as they continue to walk towards us. Connor doesn't take his eyes off mine as he slowly walks towards me. I press my back further into his truck. "What did you think, Catherine?" he asks above Nora's excited chatter.

I shrug. "You were good. You were all good."

"Just good?" he asks, his voice low and scorching as he steps in closer to me. My heartbeat increases as my chest rises and falls while I look up at him. "We were better than good, and you know it."

"Do I?" I tease. He presses one hand on the hood of the car, caging me in. He just loves doing that, doesn't he? Even when people are around. He's going to get us into some very deep shit if he carries on and if I continue letting him.

He lowers his head to the side of my face, his breath hot and tantalising against my ear. "Guess I'll have to prove you wrong and turn that *good* into a *fucking fantastic*."

Before I can say anything, Nora comes behind him and pushes him off me. "Okay, leave her alone, big guy. We've got celebratory shots to do!"

I never got to get a good look at Oliver's house last week before I was pleasantly ambushed by Connor, but holy fuck... If I could be buried anywhere it would be here. Wooden floors, high ceilings, dark grey reflective refrigerators, a wine cellar, a fridge dedicated to alcoholic drinks only. It's a frat boy's wet dream. And mine too, apparently.

I spin in a circle before taking off my coat and hanging it by the door. Nora and Elle walk in front of me, taking off their outer layers too, dropping them onto an empty chair in the hallway. Wes and Sam rush past me, almost knocking me over as Oliver huffs.

"Just don't break anything, please," Oli says, running a nervous hand through his hair as we start down the long hallway. "My parents might be out of town, but they're not idiots."

I laugh a little, finally shredding off my scarf and gloves as I shove them into my coat pockets. When I turn, I almost collide straight into Connor's chest. Luckily for me and the huge chunk of a man, he steadies me instantly, holding on to my shoulders.

"How many times are you going to fall into me, Cat?" he murmurs before setting me straight. I brush off my shoulders as if he's left a mark there.

"How many times are you going to catch me?" I retort.

"As many times as it takes," he answers easily, smirking at me. He looks too good like this – fresh, happy, tall. I mean, he looks tall all the time. It's just a necessary description when it comes to him because it turns me inside out every time I have to look up at him.

"I walked right into that one, didn't I?" I rub my temples, shaking my head at my own stupidity. His gaze travels over my outfit, looking down at my shirt as his eyes squint.

"What are you wearing?"

"A jersey," I say, smiling, knowing it'll rile him up.

"Right. And whose number is on the back?"

“No ones,” I answer with a shrug. “But I was *considering* getting number eighty-two. That’s yours, right?”

His eyes darken and I take a step back, loving the way I’m messing with him. “That’s Sam’s and you know it is. Next time you’re *considering* wearing anyones jersey, you wear one with my number, okay?”

I nod in fake understanding. This man is already so possessive over me. I hate it nearly as much as I love it. “So, I have to come to you for massages and I have to wear your jersey. It seems to me like you’re trying to keep me already, Connie. I hate to break it to you, but I don’t come to these things for you.”

“Is that so?”

I swallow. “Yep. I’m here for the team, not you. You just happen to be a part of it.”

“Are you sure? Because from the way you were whining *my* name and sitting in *my* lap last week, tells me a very different story. It tells me that you want me, you want *this*, just as much as I do.”

The thickness in his voice causes a deep, heavy want in my lower stomach as he walks closer to me, pressing my back into the wall. My pulse grows erratic, my breathing becoming choppy.

Is he finally going to kiss me? I want him to, so badly. I want to feel the roughness of his mouth against mine, his weight pressing into me like it did last week. I tilt my mouth up to his as he brackets my jaw with his hand, the heat making me grow more desperate by the second.

He leans down.

Finally.

I’m going to quash this desire and get on with my day. Just a taste. Just the smallest amount I can get without going insane and I can continue to live my life just with the thought of *knowing* what he tastes like. Just a little.

“Cat! Where are you? You need to get your little tush here immediately,” Nora’s loud voice booms. “We can’t do shots without you.”

I sigh, closing my eyes. “I’m going to...” I nod down the hallway where the rest of the guys are.

“You don’t have to,” he murmurs, our lips aching close.

“But, Nora.... And, you know.” I trip over my words like an idiot and he just continues holding my jaw, smiling at me. That fucking smile. Those fucking *lips*.

“Right.” He does nothing to put any space between us. “You don’t want her to think anything is going on, do you?”

“No,” I breathe. “Nothing is going on.”

“Then why aren’t you moving, Catherine?” His lips ghost over mine and I swear I hear myself whimper at the slight contact.

“I’m moving,” I whisper, closing my eyes for a second. I shake my head a little, causing Connor’s hand to fall from my face.

“Yeah,” he teases, “I can see that.”

My legs stay rooted in the spot and for whatever reason, all I can do is stare up at him. *Why am I still here?* My chest is heaving now, suddenly out of breath. When I still don’t move, Connor makes his decision for me and he presses a quick kiss to my forehead.

My fucking forehead.

And then he has the audacity to say, “I’ll see you, sweetheart,” before leaving me still plastered to the wall.

Fuck. My. Life.

After a few drinks and avoiding Connor like the plague, Elle and I are already tipsy, wandering around Oliver’s house. It’s like a maze in here – a beautifully crafted, privileged maze that I never want to escape from. Of course, we weren’t

allowed to wander unattended because he's a control freak and insisted on giving us a tour instead.

I pick up a large picture frame on a random coffee table in the middle of one of the hallways on the second floor. There's nothing inside it, not even a stock photo. It's just a pure gold frame with sparkles on diamonds edged into it. "What's this?" I ask.

"Nothing. Put it back," he demands. The tone in his voice makes me giggle. Oliver is one of the sweetest guys on the team – he's usually quiet, a little reserved and has the most common sense out of all of them, next to Connor of course. "Eleanor! You can't touch that."

I turn to see Elle standing next to a teetering photo on the wall. It's fucking massive – at least twice the size of us. It's one of those weird oil paintings that you have to look at *really* hard to understand what it is. Elle has always had an eye for art and photography, so she's clearly interested.

Oliver rushes over to her, gently pushing the painting back into place.

Elle shrugs. "I was just looking," she mumbles.

"You look with your eyes, not your hands," he demands, and I swear I see him wipe sweat from his forehead.

I move in step beside them as we continue walking down the hallway, leading towards the stairs. "You need to chill out, Oli," I say, messing up his hair.

"That word has literally no place in my vocabulary," he mutters, trying to straighten out his hair again. "I should never have invited you over."

"Have some fun, Nayman. Let loose," Elle says, hooking her arm through his. Some of the boys on this team are wound too tight. They care too much about the little things. Like thousand-dollar paintings that hang casually on the walls.

"Yeah, Nayman," I mock, slinging my arm into the crook of his other arm. He just laughs, shaking his head as his olive cheeks turn a deeper red colour.

We take our time going down the floating steps, giggling as we almost fall through the small gaps. It takes us a lot longer than it should, but we're already a little light-headed and the night has only just begun.

Only it hasn't.

Because now, where the stairs usually end there's now a flood of people, dancing and moving around each other with drinks in their hands. When did this turn into a fully-fledged party? I register the horror on Oliver's face as he unhooks his arms from ours, almost tripping down the steps as he tries to get the party under control.

Elle steps in beside me and she frowns. "What?" I ask and then I follow her line of vision to where my eyes snag on Connor, standing near the French doors and he's staring right at me. "Oh."

"He's looking at you like he wants to eat you," Elle whispers out the side of her mouth. "Or eat you out. It's hard to tell."

The heat of Connor's gaze is like something I've never experienced before. He has this weird, rare talent where whenever I look at him, everything, everybody just fades away and it's just him. He makes me feel like there's no one else in the room other than us and my eyes can't be torn away from his. His face is so perfect to look at, so comforting yet so thrilling that it throws me off.

I have no idea what's happening between us. That kiss that we almost had earlier is enough to know how badly this could end if someone found out.

The face that obstructs my view gives me a second to breathe. "More drinks?" Nora asks, grinning, holding up two solo cups to me and Elle.

When my eyes connect with Connor's again, I know exactly what my decision is going to be. Looking at him trips me up more than it needs to. I just need another night to forget for a while. Forget about waiting on the next call from my dad.

Forget about the assignments that I know will make me sick to my stomach just thinking about them.

I grab the cup from Nora's hand, and she giggles like an excited child as she grabs a stray cup from the bannister, and we all clink our cups together.

Here's to forgetting.

EIGHTEEN

CONNOR

MY THOUGHTS ARE NOT VERY PG RIGHT
NOW

THE SECOND I watched Cat take that cup from my sister's hand, I should have known that tonight would end up like this.

Well, not exactly like this, but close to it.

“Shhhh,” she murmurs, swaying slightly as we stand outside her bedroom door. She presses her fingers to my lips that were not moving at all. “You’re being too loud.”

“That’s all you, Cat,” I say against her fingers, trying my hardest to suppress my laugh.

After cautiously watching all three of the girls drink and dance all night at Oli’s house, I knew I would be the one bringing them back to their dorm. Elle and Nora both crashed the second they got in, but Cat is making this extra difficult. I just wanted to take her back, make sure she got to her door and go back home.

Being the designated dad in the group is hard.

“When did you get so drunk?” I ask gently, attempting to put a finger on the exact moment she started going off the rails. All I know is she was tipsy going on a tour with Oli and then she gave me *a look* before disappearing. After that, I tried to discreetly follow her around and make sure she was okay as she avoided me like I was a fucking disease.

“You keeping tabs on me, Connie?” she asks, her tone playful and light.

“Always.”

We're just staring at each other, both of our shoulders leaning on her bedroom door. She licks her lips, still holding two fingers lazily against my mouth. I don't know what she's doing, but I would do just about anything for her at this point. If that means letting her stare at me while I look back at her, so be it.

I watch her carefully as her eyes travel across my face from my hair down to my chest. I would have never known just how much eye contact could mess me up inside before I met her. She has this gentle, caring nature in her eyes. It's like she's seen too much, knows too many things and has too many thoughts and feelings that she doesn't know what to do with them.

"You're really hot, you know that?" she whispers, the words passing through her lips in a soft whisper, crashing against the shore in my brain. I take in a sharp breath. "Like, just so fucking sexy."

"Okay, sweetheart," I say in a sigh, "it's time for bed."

She shakes her head at me, closing her eyes slightly and probably giving herself a headache in the process. "No, I'm being serious," she mumbles, slurring slightly. "You have really nice eyes." She runs a finger between my eyes and slowly moves it down the bridge of my nose as I keep my eyes locked with hers. "And your lips...." Her voice grows quiet as she runs a finger against my bottom lip. It takes all that I am to not stick my tongue out and finally taste her. "You don't want to know the places I've imagined your mouth being."

I try to be strong, but Catherine makes me feel fucking weak. She's staring up at me, her hand somehow finding its way to my neck as she winds her finger in my hair. I can't be with her like this. Not when I want her so badly and she's clearly still drunk. She needs to go to sleep, and I need to go home.

That's it.

She tilts her mouth up to mine, almost as close as we were at Oliver's house, but far away enough that she doesn't take up every thought in my brain like she usually does.

“I want you to come to bed with me,” she whispers, her lips dangerously close to mine now.

“Catherine,” I warn.

She blinks up at me, her eyebrows drawn in, those soft brown eyes pleading. I take the bait like the dumb bunny I am and push open her bedroom door.

As expected, everything is so neat and tidy here. Her white bedspread is made, no clothes spill out of her closet and her desk is organised with neat piles stacked up next to thick textbooks. The only thing that is a mess is her overflow of books in one corner of the room. She steps through the door properly and I shut it behind us.

“Listen, you’ve got to keep things PG, or I can’t stay,” I whisper.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she mumbles, sitting on the edge of the bed. I laugh a little as her eyes wander around the room. I stick my tongue in my cheek, trying my hardest not to laugh. She’s a cute drunk. Too fucking cute.

“Okay, where are your pyjamas?” I ask, placing my hands on my hips, not wanting to rifle through her clothes without warning.

“In there,” she says, her voice suddenly breathy. I follow her weak point to her bedside drawer and pull out shorts and a tank top, the soft material of them almost falling through my hands. I hold them out to her, waiting for her to nod slowly.

She’s not making any move to get dressed herself, so I kneel down in front of her, placing my hands on her thighs and she looks down at me, her eyes glossy. I don’t think I’ve seen her this quiet. She always has something to say. Something for me to listen intently to. I pull on the hem of her shirt, signalling that I’m wanting to help her get unready.

“Can I help you take this off?” I ask, my voice thick and heavy. She lets out a gentle sigh until she finally nods. I pull up the shirt slightly, but she still doesn’t move her arms. “Arms up, sweetheart.”

She blinks at me a few times, her eyes clearly heavy with sleep before she lifts her arms above her head slowly. I work her free of her shirt until she's sitting in front of me in nothing but a peach bra and jeans.

My breathing instantly grows erratic. I've seen her in nothing but that tiny bikini only a week ago, but this somehow feels different. The soft glow coming from her lamp shines across her skin, giving her an almost dreamlike look. She's still looking at me, studying me, waiting for some kind of reaction so I give her one.

"You're so beautiful, Catherine. Just so fucking pretty."

She doesn't react the way I thought she would. Especially after the way she was complimenting me a few minutes ago. Her lips part slightly, her eyes clearly etched onto my mouth that I end up sucking in a breath.

You don't want to know the places I've imagined your mouth being.

"Come on," I say, guiding her to stand up so I can work off her jeans after helping her into her tank top. She stumbles into me slightly and when she's upright again I kneel down in front of her. I've gotten too comfortable being on my knees in front of her, but fuck me if it doesn't turn me on. It feels like I'm worshipping her, and she needs to be worshipped.

I unbutton her jeans and slide them down her thighs in a smooth motion, keeping my eyes trained on her legs and nowhere else until she has to step out of them, causing her to hold onto my shoulder for support.

When I reach for her shorts, she still doesn't say anything until she silently slips into them. "Are you not going to talk?"

She shakes her head. "You're on your knees in front of me. My thoughts are not very PG right now."

Fuck me.

This was a really bad idea, knowing just how much I want her, how badly my body wants her. I ache just by being in her presence. I swear I fucking *yearn* for her. How pathetic is that?

Especially when she's only telling me how she feels when she's drunk and horny.

But drunk words are sober thoughts, right?

"What are you thinking, Cat?" I hear myself say.

She swallows, running her hands across my shoulders as she lowers herself onto the bed, sitting back down. My hands move on their own accord, lightly grazing her bare skin, the smoothness so foreign yet comforting. Her breath hitches. "I want to do more than just dance with you, too."

"Yeah?"

She nods, her teeth sinking into her bottom lip. "A *lot* more than that."

"I'd do anything you want me to. All you have to do is ask."

"Then kiss me."

"I'll kiss you," I confirm, "But not like this." I sigh, taking a step back and standing to my full height. "Come on. Let's get you in bed."

She sulks a little, but she listens to me, scooting back slightly until she pulls back the covers. I lean over her, moving around her pillows until she's comfortable and I wrap the covers over her, tucking her in tight and she lets me. As I'm about to pull away, she clasps her hand around my wrist.

"Stay with me. Please," she whispers. Her eyes soften, her tone pleading and vulnerable. It's the very last thing I should do, but I can feel my skin itching to stay with her longer.

"Okay," I sigh, rubbing my hand across my face. "Okay," I say again, kicking off my shoes. As she snuggles under the covers, I lay beside her on top of the covers, facing the ceiling.

"You're too good to me sometimes, Connie," she murmurs.

I don't turn to her. I don't think I could if I wanted to. Still, when her hand reaches out and finds mine, I don't let go. She

threads her fingers between mine, and I squeeze her hand softly. I stroke my thumb against the soft skin beneath me as she sighs, the sound rushing straight to my brain, making me want to curl up in a ball and settle right into her.

“That’s all I want to do, Cat. All the time,” I whisper,

I turn to her, ready to see her reaction. Her eyes are closed, her long lashes resting against her cheeks as she breathes heavily. I let out a sigh of relief, partly grateful knowing that she didn’t hear me.

Watching her sleep tugs a heavy, yet satisfying feeling over my whole body like a blanket, a safe and unknown emotion resting on my chest, knowing that she’s at peace. Her perfect lips are curved into a slight smile, a tiny tug on her eyebrows and I hope she’s having a happy dream.

When sleep starts to pull me under too, I don’t let go of her hand.

NINETEEN

CAT

“YOU’RE DOING MY BROTHER?”

I HAD the best night’s sleep of my life.

I always crash straight away after drinking, completely abandoning my hair care routine, but last night was different. I knew it was a bad idea drinking just to avoid reality, but my feelings for Connor had run deeper than I thought they could.

There was a new sense of comfort, of calm, that washed right over me when I was in his arms, meaning I didn’t need to come up with any pathetic scenarios or trick myself into going to sleep. Sleep came to me naturally and it was because of him.

At some point in the night, I ended up curled over him, straddling him like a koala before eventually finding myself on my back again, but then he rolled on top of *me*. His weight wasn’t something that I feared becoming too consuming. It felt welcoming. And for the first time in a while, I had *hoped*. I had hoped that it would happen again.

Not right now, though, as the sun shines through the blinds of my windows and my head throbs from the lack of medication after last night’s party. Connor’s head is resting in the middle of my chest, right on my boob as his hand slings around my waist, pulling us a lot closer than we need to be.

He looks so beautiful it hurts.

His hair is a mess, the brown shining a sort-of gold colour in the light, falling crazily across his forehead and on my tank top. There are the tiniest, faintest freckles that scatter along his nose that make butterflies swarm around my stomach. His

cheeks have remained in a permanent soft smile that I've wanted to kiss off him since I woke up.

"Connie," I murmur, gently stroking my hand over his forehead, brushing his hair back. He stirs slightly, not opening his eyes. "You need to get up."

"No," he groans, nestling his face further between my boobs. I watch the smirk form across his face because he knows exactly what he's doing as my nipples pebble at the attention. "Too comfy."

"Sorry to interrupt whatever you have going on with my boobs, but I'm being serious," I say, trying to sit up. I eventually manage to sit against my headboard, but he still rests his head in my lap, looking up at me with a dreamy, puppy-like look.

That feeling that I got in my chest when I watched him sleep just grew tenfold.

"How are you feeling?" he asks me, ignoring my plea. Fine. Maybe engaging in conversation will get him to leave my room quicker and get him out before anyone sees him.

"Better," I say. Last night was rough. I know better than that. It was either drinking until I could see stars or allowing myself to sit with my mind and my feelings. Both options were as overwhelming as the other, but the former felt less lonely. "Sober," I clarify.

He just nods at me before shifting out of my lap and sitting beside me, a little more awake than before. His huge, veiny hand finds its way on to my thigh, his thumb stroking circles on my inner thigh.

He always seems too comfortable when he's with me and I feel the same with him. As much as I've had crushes on him that came and went, I didn't think that I'd ever end up with him in my bed.

He's Connor Bailey, he could have anyone he wants to, but for some reason he's been stuck to me, tethered to me for a while and I'm afraid to get rid of him.

“Aren’t you worried that your sister will see you, or know that you spent the night?” I ask, needing some sort of excuse. I turn to him, but his eyes are already on me.

He shrugs. “Not really.”

“Really? I don’t even know what happened myself, she’s going to be more confused than me,” I say, shaking my head at the thought of what could happen if she saw him like this. How in the hell is he so calm? My pulse is racing for no reason other than the fact that he’s *this* close to me, and is in *my* bed.

“Has anyone ever told you how cute of a drunk you are?” he asks, his voice rough. I just blink at him, sucking in a breath so I don’t run out of air. His hand moves up my thigh, hardly even half an inch. “You were rambling, talking about things you would never say to me sober.”

“What was I saying?” I ask, half of me afraid to hear the answer. His hand moves higher again. The skin-to-skin contact combined with the size of his hand makes my stomach dip.

“I learned some very important things last night, Catherine,” he whispers, his hand moving higher. What’s worse is that he’s not looking at me. Instead, he’s looking right where his hand is while I watch it move up further, not wanting him to stop. He doesn’t have to see how much he’s affecting me. He can *feel* it.

“Connor,” I whisper, not sure what for. His hand slips under my shorts, the heat of his thumb coming dangerously close to my panties.

My heart might fall out of my chest.

Everything feels too good when it comes to him – so new. Nothing else is able to come out of my mouth as his hand reaches the apex of my thighs. I try my hardest not to clench my legs together, to keep holding out as long as I can, but the second his head falls to my neck, I know I’m a goner.

He presses a long kiss to my collarbone which is flushed with heat, silently begging for the sexual frustration to be worked out of me. My hands have nothing to do. They close

into fists before smoothing out again and I eventually grab his shirt, needing some sort of stability as his mouth works wonders on my sensitive skin.

“It confirmed to me what you were trying to deny in the hot tub,” Connor whispers, grazing his teeth against my neck. A soft whimper escapes my throat at the contact, causing shivers to spread all over my body. “You want me just as badly as I want you.”

I can't deny him. How could I?

My hand is literally twisted into his shirt right now, desperately trying to keep him close to me. It's been obvious since day one.

It was clear when I teased him on purpose during the first round of interviews. I knew that I wanted him when he was vulnerable with me and asked me for help. I knew it when he listened to me, took care of me and he let me do the same for him. I knew that I wanted to taste him, to feel him, when he pushed me against the wall at Oliver's house.

I think I knew it a long time ago and I was too afraid to admit it because Connor Bailey manages to be the sweetest, funniest, sexiest person I know without even trying and it pisses me off just as much as it intrigues me.

He's managed to trip me up more than once, leaving me speechless yet silently begging for more, which is why I get the confidence I need to surprise him for once, to make it clear that I want this, that I want *him*.

His voice is low and thick, every nerve in my body heightened as he presses his lips to the shell of my ear. “So, I'm going to give you one chance to tell me if you want me – if you want this – because I'm so sick of waiting, Cat.”

I turn to him, finally getting him exactly where I want him, his nose brushes against mine, his mouth only a breath away. I don't waste any more time before I press my hands onto his broad shoulders and climb into his lap, my body fitting perfectly with his just like it did in the hot tub. Except this time, I know exactly what I want.

A satisfied groan leaves him when my hips roll into his accidentally as I try to make myself comfortable. Instantly, his hands find my waist, gently squeezing. He cocks his head to the side playfully. “You going to tell me, or what?”

“How about I show you instead?”

He hums happily, crushing my chest to his. “That’s my girl.”

My chest warms at the praise, and I finally press my lips to his, stealing the taste I’ve been so desperate for. Connor tastes just as I expected. He tastes like he was made for me – fresh, soft, slightly like vanilla, yet wholly masculine and strong. His lips fight over mine, tasting, branding, claiming and I let him.

I tease my tongue through the seam of his lips, and he opens his mouth willingly, letting my tongue slip into his warmth. My whole body relaxes as I sigh into his mouth. A strangled groan passes through my mouth as the grip he has on my waist tightens, his nails digging into my flesh, causing heat to pool between my legs.

His mouth is so welcoming and inviting, I just want more. I’m hardly breathing anymore, just desperate and eager to get as much of him as I can. We easily become a mess of teeth, tongue, hands and mouths practically begging each other to keep going as we pant and writhe. I push my hands through his hair, greedily pulling like my life depends on this moment right here.

His kisses become harder, more focused as if he’s trying to pull a reaction out of me. When his determined hands roll me over him, my heat contacting the thickness in his jeans, a whiny moan leaves my mouth, straight into his.

He pulls apart from me at the sound, shaking his head, his lips slightly swollen as he rolls them in and then back out. His gaze roams over my face quickly before travelling down to my tank top that is falling off my shoulder.

“You’re so beautiful, Catherine,” he says, leaning back once more to admire me. “So, fucking pretty.”

A weird, familiar feeling washes over me. “I just got déjà vu,” I whisper.

“How? What other men do you kiss like this?” he asks seriously, narrowing his eyes at me.

“No,” I laugh, “It was because of what you just said.”

“That’s not the first time I’ve said that. I’ve been saying it in my head for years and I told you last night when you stripped for me,” he murmurs. My eyes widen in horror. *When did I strip for him?* His low chuckle instantly soothes me. “Not like that. I wished it was though.”

The pieces of last night slowly come back to me in hazy blurs.

“I want you to come to bed with me.”

“You don’t want to know the places I’ve imagined your mouth being.”

“I want to do more than just dance with you, too.”

“You’re on your knees in front of me. My thoughts are not very PG right now.”

I shove my hot face into my hands, shaking my head. “Oh god,” I muffle. “I’m so fucking embarrassed.”

Connor pries my hands away from my face, twisting them between his hands, holding them tight. “Don’t be,” he says gently. He presses a soft kiss to my lips, pulling back slightly as he bites my bottom lip. “You looked beautiful then and you look... fucking stunning right now.”

He knows exactly how to make me feel special. He knows me so well that it freaks me out a little. I kiss him again, pressing my chest right against his, rolling my hips a few times to feel his erection against my aching centre.

“Catherine,” he whines. His voice is so needy and deeply twisted with pleasure that it washes over me perfectly, reaching every corner of my body. The sound sends another wave of want down to where I’m aching for him. Satisfied and motivated to make him sound like that again, I repeat the move, kissing him with a smile still plastered on my face.

“Cat!”

Well, that’s a little dramatic.

It’s only when I realise that Connor isn’t kissing me back that the sound didn’t come from him and there’s a rapid knock on my door.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Nora is knocking on my door. And Connor is in my bed. Connor, my best friend’s twin brother, is underneath me, hard, panting, his hands up my shirt as I kiss him senseless.

She continues knocking as I slide off Connor as soundly as I can and he jumps to his feet, knocking over a book on my nightstand. His hand flies to his face, trying to smother his laugh.

“Cat, I know you’re awake. I can hear you.”

“What is it, Nor?” I ask. Connor’s eyes widen and the smile is wiped off his face. I hold my hands up in defeat. There is no way he thought I could just ignore her, did he? I gesture for him to move from my bed, *quietly* too. He tiptoes over the book he just dropped.

“I need some Tylenol. This hangover is the *worst*,” she groans.

“All your hangovers are the worst, Nor,” I say, trying my best to clean up my bed.

“You make it sound like I have a drinking problem,” she mumbles. Connor’s still staring at me, wide-eyed, patiently waiting for instructions. What the hell am I doing fooling around with my best friend’s brother whilst she’s home? She bangs on the door again. “Cat, just let me in. My head is about to explode.”

“Just *wait*, Nora,” I say, immediately feeling bad about being impatient with her when I’m the one who has messed

up. I notice Connor's shoes at the foot of the bed, and I quickly shove them under the bed.

I grab him by his shoulders, unsure what to do with him. He's too big to fit in my closet. He's *way* too big to fit under my bed. I press him against the wall, ready to open the door, knowing that from Nora's angle she should only be able to see me, my closet and my desk for what should be a very short conversation. "Stay there and be quiet," I mouth to Connor, and he nods.

"What are you doing?" she asks again, knocking.

"Your brother," I sigh, finally opening the door, inch by aching inch until only my head is in view. Connor's hand teases my waist, pulling at the band of my shorts. I'm going to kill him.

Nora looks exactly how she does every morning after a party – her medium length brown hair is a mess of knots, her mascara is smudged, and her lip gloss is smeared across her cheek as she rocks a Twilight shirt and sleep shorts.

"Excuse me? You're doing my brother?" she asks, rubbing at her temples as she closes her eyes. I take the opportunity to turn back to Connor who is grinning at me, dipping his hand up my shirt and across my back. 'Nice save,' he whispers the words so quietly I can hardly hear them.

I shake my head at him, biting my lip before turning back to her. "Yeah, I gave the rest to Connor last night. He said they had run out and Wes needed it. He asked me for some before he left."

She rolls her eyes. "He's such a dick."

"I know," I agree. As the words leave my mouth his hand travels into the waistband of my shorts, trailing along the seam of my panties and I push the door more closed until my body is fully out of view.

Nora narrows her eyes. "Why do you look like that?"

"Like what?" I breathe out, the heat of Connor's hand almost making me go dizzy as his hands trail across my stomach. Nora scans my face, her eyebrows pinched together.

“I dunno. You just look a little shaken up. Are you okay?” she asks, crossing her arms against her chest.

“Because you’ve woken me out of my slumber to search for your Tylenol that your dickhead brother took,” I retort, tilting my head to the side. Connor’s hand flexes against my stomach.

“Hm,” she hums. “That’s fair. I’ll ask Elle-Belle.”

I nod and finally shut the door, lock it, and sigh against it. Connor immediately comes into my view, smirking at me as he crowds over me. He has a habit of making me feel smaller than I actually am.

“You played that hating me part a little too well, Cat,” he whispers, his eyes darkening.

“Did you want me to tell her that I was straddling you in my bed two minutes ago? Because I can call her back and tell her,” I challenge, tugging on the bottom of his shirt, needing him closer to me.

“You wouldn’t dare,” he breathes.

I don’t need any more subtle hints to my lips before I stand on my tiptoes, curl his shirt in my hands as I press my mouth to his. Compared to the hard, desperate kiss he gave me earlier, this one is calmer, more paced.

It feels like we have all the time in the world as his fresh taste settles over me, becoming one with my mouth. He groans as he brings both of his hands to the side of my face, holding me tight. His hands tangle into my hair, pulling on my curls, his nails caressing my scalp. The physical contact puts my body on high alert.

I force myself to pull back from him, needing a second to breathe.

I can feel his smile against my lips, and I almost lose all composure.

“You’re right,” I murmur, “I wouldn’t say anything. But, if we do this, Connie – whatever this is – she can’t find out. Not until we’re both ready. We could royally fuck up everything.”

“I know,” he whispers, dropping his forehead to mine.

“Are you sure?” I tease, fiddling with the hem of his shirt. “Because you’ve been on a little rebellious streak lately.”

He shakes his head lightly, laughing a little. “Whatever happens, this is going to be worth it.”

“What makes you so sure of that?”

“Because it’s you, Catherine. Anything and everything you do is perfect. I don’t see why this would be any different,” he says with certainty. When I look up at him and catch his dark gaze, his hands still cupping my face, I kiss him back and I believe him.

I want to see where hoping can take me.

TWENTY

CONNOR

KIT-CAT

I'VE ALWAYS BEEN one to do things *before* thinking. I can't help it sometimes. Ideas, thoughts, words, all come to me spontaneously and without warning, so often and so strongly that I forget what I'm trying to say or do.

It was worse when I was a kid.

I put my poor parents through hell as they nervously watched me from the sidelines whilst I was fully convinced that I would become the best footballer in the world. I'd put myself through rigorous training sessions, encourage my family to go on a juice cleanse just to forget about it a few days after.

My mom and dad were good sports about it. They'd wake me up every day at four and we'd go for a run. I'd try to help cook breakfast and we'd go through more drills throughout the day.

Those phases would only last a few days – weeks if I was lucky – before I'd get back into doing the normal amount of exercise for a fourteen-year-old when the initial adrenaline wore off. There would be days where I'd doubt myself, feeling worthless for not doing the absolute most at all times and I'd go back and forth from giving my all to just doing my best.

I once spent all day in a library researching the different kinds of muscles I could pull whilst playing, making myself sick over recovery dates and survival rates. I'd get lost between websites and books that I wouldn't even know what

time it was. All that I knew was that I had to be careful in every way possible.

I wish I had a reason why I used to do stuff like that, where I'd get my heart set on something for a few days before abandoning it. There's always going to be that fear that still lingers, that worry of not being good enough or being strong enough, but I know that no matter what, football will always stay as a constant in my life even if I don't make it to a pro team.

Another constant? The way I feel about Catherine Fables.

You'd think she's an angel, fucking harps playing in the background and a halo on her head whenever she walks with the way I practically drop to my knees whenever she's around.

Even as I walk with her now, getting ready for another group interview of the team, she's trying to ignore the way she was all over me the other morning.

It's one of those things where I feel like my body knew before my brain did when it comes to her. Having her house across from mine growing up, our little friendship group formed from so young, I always tried extra hard for her to notice me.

At first, I didn't know why I was doing it. I just knew that I wanted to see her smile. She had no siblings, just two parents who loved and cared about her more than anyone in the world.

I remember how shy she was at first, so used to staying in a bubble with her mom and dad, and she was petrified when Wes tried to show her his pet worm he kept in his back pocket, famously named *Kangaroo the Worm*.

The sound of her hysterical screams was burned into my memory for weeks after that.

After Nora and Eleanor scolded Wes for scaring their new friend, I tried to talk to her for the first time. We sat on the sidewalk after she took a minute to calm down and I brought her a candy bar.

"Why does he have a pet worm called Kangaroo? That's so weird," she mumbled, rubbing her nose with her sleeve as she

pulled her knees to her chest. I watched the trees in the distance, almost too scared to look at her for too long so I didn't scare her off. I broke apart the Kit-Kat, holding out a piece of the wafer. She looked at it for a second before taking the piece.

"Wes is weird like that," I said, laughing at the thought of my friend as I took a bite out of the chocolate. She sighed in response, and I turned to her then, realising that this is probably not how she saw one of her first days interacting with her new neighbours going.

She looked at me, those huge brown eyes still glistening with the tears she had finished shedding as she chewed thoughtfully. I had wanted to touch her for the first time then. I just wanted to hold her the way I would want to be held if I were in her situation.

"Are *you* weird?" she asked. She looked like she really needed the answer. I shook my head and her eyes squinted. "I don't buy it. I think you're weird. Fun-weird, like me. Not worm-weird like Wes. You're quiet, too."

I shrugged. "I thought you were quiet like me. You didn't talk to me all day yesterday when we played in the sprinklers."

She shrugged. "My mom says I talk too much, sometimes. She calls me a chatterbox. I didn't want you all to call me that too, so I didn't say anything," she mumbled. I remember thinking to myself that she sounded way smarter than any of the other seven-year-olds I knew.

"I'm not going to call you that," I said, and her eyes lit up.

"You're not?" she asked, swiping the melted chocolate from the side of her mouth. I shook my head, grinning, knowing exactly what I was going to say.

"Nope. I've got my own nickname for you," I said, standing up from the sidewalk. I held out my hand, not knowing if I was doing the right thing or not, but she slipped her hand in mine and stood up. Our fingers were messy and sticky with chocolate, but neither of us seemed to care. "I'm going to call you Kit-Cat."

Her jaw dropped open, completely mortified. “You’re not,” she challenged.

“I am,” I replied, my mouth hurting from the smile it was plastered in. I stood there for a minute, waiting for her to freak out again, but she didn’t. She got used to the idea quickly as a smile formed on her lips and she soundlessly slipped her hand out of mine and started walking in front of me.

As we walked back up the lawn, she turned back and said, “Fine, *Connie*. Call me whatever you want.”

I thought she was the most fascinating person I have ever met.

I still do.

Especially now, as she walks beside me, clearly aware of the fact that I’ve not been able to stop looking at her since we walked from her dorm to the sports classrooms.

Sometime between our kiss and now, she got her hair braided and I’m losing my ever-loving mind. Not only does her hair frame her face perfectly with those small braids, but she also has streaks of bronze in her black hair that are so tempting to pull and wrap around my fist.

“Connor,” she presses angrily, pulling me away from my thoughts as if I spoke them out loud. I flicker my gaze from her face to the corridor, stylishly playing it off.

“Catherine,” I muse, my tone light. “How are you this fine morning?”

“We’ve been walking in silence for five minutes and you’ve stared at me the whole time,” she says, adjusting her bag on her shoulder. *Has it really been that long?* She shakes her head lightly, turning to me. “Why are you being weird?”

I scoff. “You look like *that*, and you expect me to be normal? And, not to mention, you had your tongue down my throat a mere three days ago. So, excuse me if I want to do more than just walk with you to this stupid interview.”

“Okay, I didn’t ask you to walk with me. You just turned up at my door and silently followed me here.” Now she makes

me sound like a stalker. Great. This was my only chance I'd get with her before the team pounces on her again. She sighs heavily, biting the inside of her cheek. "And, I look like this every day."

"That's exactly the problem."

"You've never said this before," she challenges, stopping in front of me. Somehow we've managed to get to our sports classroom where the rest of the team are rowdy behind the door.

"Yeah, and it's been fucking torture," I murmur, rubbing my hand down my face.

"Well, I'm sorry, but you've got to deal," she says easily, pushing her braids behind her shoulder. She holds her chin up high, but I don't miss the way her eyes dip to my lips before they meet my eyes. "I'm meant to be a professional today."

"It's a shame," I whisper, lowering my face so my mouth is hot against her cheek. I hear her take in a sharp inhale, and I press a soft kiss to the space behind her ear. "I want to be very, *very* unprofessional with you, sweetheart."

"Yeah, yeah," she says, pushing me off her, "You can give me a step by step run down of that later. But *now*, I've got a job to do."

Unfortunately for me, Catherine has a lot more self-control than I'll ever have. Since she got the team to quieten down and she assumed her position at the front of the small classroom, she's not looked at me since.

I honestly shouldn't be complaining. If she even glanced at me, I'd end up tipping over the table, shredding the distance between us and taking that pretty face between my hands and pressing my lips to hers.

She's been asking the team boring questions all morning and I am *this* close to dozing off. I should be paying more attention, seen as this is what it's going to be like in the real

world if I get drafted, but I can admit that I'm just a huge baby when I'm not getting the attention that I want.

Wes elbows me in the ribs. Hard. "What's the matter with you, Connie boy? I thought you'd be eating up these questions."

I shrug. "I'm fine. Sam's taking the lead."

We both glance over at Sam who talks excitedly as Cat asks him about his performance this season and how he was last year.

He cares about football as much as I do, he just shows it in other ways. Whilst I try to keep focused on the pitch and play the 'dad' of the group, keeping everyone in line, Sam likes to keep everyone motivated in other ways by partying and creating stupid chants that he texts to the cheerleaders. It's a mystery to me how he has such a good performance when he's out nearly every night with a new girl under his arm and a beer in the other hand.

"He's going to make us sound like we're a shit team," Wes mumbles angrily. "If Cat doesn't dial down his attitude in writing, my dad's gonna freak."

I turn to him, and I swear he's sweating at the thought of it. Wes can act as tough as he wants, bantering with his dad, but I know deep down he just wants to make him proud. I don't know what the protocol is for Cat's report and the newspaper, but I'm sure she's not going to narc on us.

"We're gonna be fine," I assure him. When I see Sam take a breath, sitting further back in his seat, Cat's gaze snags on me and I smile, using it as my chance to get involved. "Can you repeat your question, Miss Fables?"

She rolls her eyes at the formality in my voice and the guy's snicker. "I was saying," she bites out, trying her hardest not to laugh. "Did you always want to play football, or did you ever have other career ideas? Sam over here is saying that this was his one strike of rebellion as a teenager instead of following in his parents' footsteps."

Wes snorts. “Yeah, imagine Sam as a *doctor*? I’d rather try my luck healing my own injuries before ever going to him.”

“Yeah, yeah. Very funny,” Sam says, throwing a scrunched up sheet of paper at Wes, which ultimately ends up hitting me in the face. “You’re lucky your parents don’t care about what you do. You should have seen the look on my dad’s face when I told him I wasn’t going to med school.”

Wes laughs quietly at that. We’re both lucky in the parent department, so we’re extremely grateful to not having any pressure to play football or do anything else. My parent’s only priority is making sure that Nora and I are happy and healthy.

“So, that’s my question for you, Bailey,” Catherine begins, and my entire world focuses completely on her. On the way her mouth moves. The way her lips say my name. The way she grows slightly nervous when it’s only our eyes that are connecting. “Did you ever feel like you had any other options other than football? Did your parents ever make you feel like you had to do anything else – be like them, for example?”

I swallow, knowing exactly what my answer is going to be. It’s not a formal interview. I don’t have any real reason to be nervous, but the guys on the team look up to me for advice. I carry the weight of the team on my back as the quarterback, so I can’t fuck anything up. I’m perfect Connor Bailey on and off the pitch.

“It’s always been football for me,” I say. My body relaxes when Cat smiles at me, a dimple popping out on her cheek. “Growing up, I never really had anything that I wanted to be. I don’t think I ever thought about it, like ever. I kinda thought that I’d be a kid forever, that I’d live with my parents, and I’d watch my sister and my parents grow older. But at some point in middle school, I started to have aspirations. I never had a job in my head, it was always this thing that was separate to me. I knew that I would want to take care of my parents financially, you know, give back to them and all that. Then when I met Russell Wilson and I stayed up every night watching the games, I knew that I wanted to be a part of the Broncos. It was that or nothing for me.”

The words rush out of me and I'm not sure I'm even making sense. I don't know what reaction I was expecting from the team. That's probably the most I've ever spoken to them in one sitting. It freaks me out as much as it relaxes me.

I lock eyes with Catherine when I've finished my rant, her brown eyes soothing me. "That was a good answer, Connor. Thank you," she whispers before dropping her eyes to her laptop.

"You're a fucking poet, Bailey," Wes exclaims, clasping his hands on my shoulders, shaking me. "You, like, completely spoke to my soul just then. I'm in awe."

"Shut up," I mutter, pushing him off me.

He shakes his head. "Nah, I'm serious, bro. You'd probably have Cat drooling over you by now if you talked like that all the time. Or try sexting or something, you'd probably get more action that way."

"You're so fucking stupid. You know that?" I murmur. He grins at me, triumphant.

He shrugs. "I'm just saying. She's a journalism major. She probably gets wet over words alone."

"Don't use the word 'wet' when you're talking about my girl," I say, scrubbing my hands against my face. I swear I'm getting a headache just by being in his presence.

"Sorry," he laughs, clutching his chest. "Did you just say, '*my girl*'?" He continues laughing and I just blink at him. "You're down bad way more than I thought, Connie. You're in some deep shit."

I shake my head at him, turning away. As good as a friend he is, his morals are loose, and he has this I-don't-give-a-fuck attitude that is bound to cause him a lot of problems later on in life. His advice is always a little blurry, so he's never the first person I go to for advice.

Ever.

TWENTY-ONE

CONNOR/CAT

“DON'T GET SHY FOR ME NOW.”

CONNOR

AFTER THE SHORT interviews are done, I head back to my dorm instead of following the guys to the gym like I usually do. As much as I wanted Wes's words to completely evaporate from my brain, I can't help but think that I've been going about this whole Cat situation the wrong way. Would she really want me to sext her?

Do people still do that, or is that what people in those cheesy rom coms do at sleepovers? There's no way she'd enjoy that. Or maybe she would. I'm beginning to realise that I have no clue what she's into and how to find that out.

I slouch back in the chair at my desk in my room and call my dad for some rational advice. I know he's not busy today as Tuesdays are his usual days off from teaching, so he picks up on the third ring.

I hear his heavy breathing before his voice actually comes into play. “Son! What's up? Are you being attacked? You know what I've told you. Don't get into a white man's car just because he says he knows your mom and I from the New Parents group. You're two hundred and forty months old now. We don't go to NPG anymore.”

That happened one time. *One* fucking time. “I'm fine, dad. I was calling for some advice actually,” I say. He lets out a few sharp breaths. “What are you doing? I'll call you back if you're busy.”

He groans. “I’m just doing lunges. You’d think I’d be in better shape after carrying you and Nor in my stomach for a whole nine months, but they say postpartum catches you off guard.” His words cut off with another round of pants. I can only imagine that he’s swiping the sweat off his forehead. “Your mother is putting me through hell with these workouts. Anyway, what’s up, son?”

I shake my head with a laugh. I swear this man needs his own TV show. “I just wanted some advice on... Girls. Well, *a* girl. I know you and mom hit it off right away and I wanted to know how you, uh, managed to do that. I know times were different back then, you know, in the nineteenth century.”

My dad’s breathing starts to normalise as he scoffs. “Okay, watch it. We’re not forty for another two years. *Then* you can consider us old.”

“Dad,” I press, rolling my eyes. “I’m desperate.”

“Okay, okay,” he chides. I hear the clicking sound of the refrigerator over the phone and my dad sighs. “Who’s the girl, then? Does she know that you exist?”

“Yes, she knows that I exist, dad,” I groan. “I can’t tell you who she is, for the sake of anonymity. You run your mouth too much.”

“So, it’s Nora’s friend, then, huh?” *How the fuck did he....* “I’m not an idiot, Con. I’ve seen the way you’ve looked at her since you were kids. From what I’ve seen, she likes you too. She’s probably just nervous. Breaking those friends to more boundaries is scary.”

I let out a shaky exhale. He’s right. Of course, he’s right. I’ve never been in a relationship before, but I’ve watched enough romance movies with my sister growing up to know that what my dad is saying is true. As much as I’ve flirted with Cat over the years, we’ve never crossed the line that we’ve firmly put up. Until a few days ago.

“What did you do with mom? You were friends before you got together, right?” I ask.

“Yeah, but your mom was obsessed with me before I ever made a move,” he says easily. Something hard hits the screen, causing my dad’s phone to drop a few inches away from his ear and all I can hear is a muffled argument between him and my mom. Typical. It’s like I have teenagers for parents. “She’s violent too,” he mutters into the phone before clearing his throat. “Anyway. If my daddy senses are correct, she’s probably just waiting for you to make the first move.”

I shudder. “Don’t ever say the words ‘daddy senses’ ever again.”

“You’re right. Even *I* thought that was too far,” he admits before he takes a long sigh. “Anyway, be bold, Connor.”

“I will. Thanks, dad,” I say into the phone.

“Anytime, son,” he replies before ending the call.

I stare up at my ceiling, spinning around in my chair.

Be bold.

How the fuck do I do that? What am I supposed to do now? Just throw myself at her whenever she’s around? Am I supposed to leave letters in her locker or something? Do we even have lockers at Drayton? Fuck my life.

This shouldn’t be so hard. I made out with her a few days ago and I was so close to blowing my load right there. I don’t want her to think this is just a casual thing. I might not have much, or any experience with relationships, but I know enough to want her more than just fooling around for the fun of it. I want her all the time.

I pull out my phone, considering texting her first.

Be bold.

Girls are supposed to dig this shit according to Wes. Making the first move is supposed to be the easy part. Then why does it feel so difficult? I stare at her contact for at least ten minutes, no clue what to say. I even search up different conversation starters onto Google like the lovesick fool I am. All the responses are either too bold or too cringe. I want to make her swoon, not run away.

By the time I've eaten, showered, and slipped back into bed in my boxers, I still haven't texted her. I'll wait until tomorrow. Maybe all that talking in the interview today has worn my brain out. I need a good night's sleep. That's it.

I'm finally about to close my eyes when my phone lights up with a text. I'm planning to ignore it, but there's no way I was going to get to sleep anyway. I lean over to my bedside table, taking my phone off my charger.

KIT-CAT

U up?

I drop my phone as if it's burned straight through my skin. Fuck. Oh, fuckity fuck fuck.

What in the hell do I say to that? A *u up* text is fucking dangerous. It sends my thoughts completely filthy, imagining that she's thinking about me whilst she's in bed, hopefully wearing little clothing just like I am.

I pick up my phone with shaking hands, staring at our empty chat. She knows I've seen the message now and I can't hide from it. It's not like I want to. I just don't know what to say. The words blink back at me, begging me to say something.

I am now.

She replies instantly, like she was waiting for me.

KIT-CAT

Good.

Why's that good?

KIT-CAT

Idk. I'm just thinking abt u and I like knowing ur awake too.

What are you thinking about, sweetheart?

I think for a second that I've scared her off as the blue bubbles appear and then disappear again. Did I say something wrong? How can I be messing this up before anything has even happened? My fears are quashed when I finally see her respond.

KIT-CAT

I'm thinking about the way u kissed me. The way u touched me in the hot tub.

What else?

KIT-CAT

I'm thinking about what i would do if I was with u right now.

What would you do?

KIT-CAT

I'd kiss you softly first, press my lips right against yours until you relax for me. I'd run my tongue against the seam of your lips until i push my tongue into your mouth. I'd kiss you so hard that you'll go dizzy. So passionately that it'll feel like fucking.

Fuck. Is it true that you can come just by reading because holy fuck. The images she's painted makes my cock ache with need, with a desperation and eagerness to get off. I immediately shake off my boxers, fist my erection in one hand and reach for my phone with the other.

Answer the phone, Cat.

She doesn't waste any time to answer it and I don't waste any more time to speak. I adjust myself in my bed, making myself comfortable as I close my eyes, keeping my phone firmly pressed against my ear so I can hear everything that comes out of her mouth.

"Do you know what you're doing to me, Cat?" I murmur. She lets out a shuddery exhale at the harshness in my tone and I feel my dick twitch in my hand.

"Tell me," she breathes out. Her voice is low and quiet, just so extremely sexy.

"What?"

"Tell me what I'm doing to you. I want to hear you say it," she whispers, her voice a little stronger this time.

"I didn't expect you to like dirty talk, Catherine, I must admit," I muse. She lets out a sharp laugh, but it sounds more like a whimper. I stroke my length, unable to help myself.

"Connor," she murmurs, "Just talk."

Her voice is too desperate for me to question her any further. "I know you've got a strong imagination, sweetheart. I hope you can picture me naked in my bed, my cock in my hand as my body fucking aches for you. It aches for you to do something to help make me relax. Is that what you want me to say, sweetheart?"

"Y-Yes," she stutters. "Keep going."

"I will if you answer my question," I tease, knowing it's going to piss her off. I can hear her choppy breathing and the soft sound of sheets rustling. Just the thought of her possibly touching herself too causes my hand to milk myself even faster. "Are you touching yourself?"

"No."

"I'll end the call if you don't tell me the truth, Cat."

She groans. "Fine. Yes. I am. I'm desperate, Connor."

“You are?” I don’t even try to hide the surprise in my voice.

“I’ve been waiting for you to text me all day and you didn’t. I thought you were trying to blow me off and I didn’t want to bug you, but I couldn’t take it anymore, so I texted you.”

“I wasn’t trying to blow you off, Cat,” I whisper. “I wanted to text you. I just didn’t know what to say.”

“Okay,” she replies, her breathing shallow. “Glad that’s all cleared up. I hope you’ve found your words now, Connie, because I’m already close.”

CAT

I have no fucking idea what I’m doing.

I’ve been on edge all day and I was looking for a release. I wasn’t expecting Connor to actually text me back. I was planning on shoving my phone away, leaving it up to my fingers and my imagination to get myself off.

I’ve never been the kind of girl to instigate sex, or even hint at it over text. With him, my desire takes over my body and my brain so much that I don’t even think about it. His voice is quiet against my ear, and it feels like he’s in the room with me.

“You still with me, sweetheart?” he asks, his voice raspy and deep.

“Yes.”

“Good,” he whispers. “Touch your clit for me. Pretend it’s my fingers touching you.” I do as he says, my chest rising and falling rapidly at the ease in which the words fall out of his mouth. I don’t say anything when two of my fingers play with my swollen clit, my head falling back into the cushions, a whimper leaving my mouth. “That’s it.”

“Connor,” I breathe out, needing to say his name, needing to know it’s him that is getting me so worked up. God, I wish he was here right now. I wish it was his fingers instead of mine.

“Yes,” he replies.

“I want you to touch yourself, too. I don’t want to do this on my own,” I whisper, slightly embarrassed. A throaty groan leaves his mouth, and it sends shivers all across my body.

“Right ahead of you, baby,” he mutters. His breathing starts to pick up and I can hardly hear the soft sound of flesh moving against flesh on his side of the phone over my panting. He’s not even saying anything, but just the thought of him getting himself off whilst listening to me is enough for me. “Push two fingers inside of your pussy, Catherine. That’s how it’ll feel when one of my fingers is inside of you.”

I let out a soft moan at his words, grasping my bedsheets with my left hand, resting the phone between my shoulder and my ear. “Connor. I– I can’t.”

“You can take it,” he murmurs, “Try for me.”

I do as he says, running my fingers through my folds until I slowly push two fingers inside myself. It’s tight, but it feels fucking fantastic. I picture Connor between my legs instead, his tongue on my clit instead of my thumb.

“Does it feel good?” he asks. Does he seriously expect me to speak right now? I can hardly form coherent thoughts, never mind words. My head is spinning, my body is throbbing, desperate and needy. “Don’t get shy for me now, Catherine.”

“*Fuck*, Connor,” I moan, trying my hardest to keep quiet, knowing that both my roommates are home. I push my fingers in and out of my pussy faster, moving my hips too, desperate for friction.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” he chuckles, and I can’t even shout at him for it. There’s something so insanely sexy about the low roughness of a man’s laugh. Just imagining his laugh against my lips sends another wave of pleasure through my body. We’re both quiet again, nothing but heavy breathing and pants. I said I wanted him to talk, but I don’t think I would last longer than a minute if he did. “Faster, sweetheart. I want us to come at the same time.”

I don't even get to register the words before the desire rushes straight through me, my legs closing as my orgasm soars through me, eliciting a sharp gasp from my mouth. My whole body is on fire. My legs immediately go languid, my hand smoothing against my clit as I hear Connor's low groan through the phone.

"Fuck, Catherine," he mutters, panting. I can almost *hear* the smile in his voice as he says, "That was the hottest thing I've ever done."

"Me too," I reply, still trying to catch my breath. We're both quiet again, just listening to each other breathe, imagining what it would be like if we were in the same bed.

"Sweet dreams, Cat," he whispers as if he didn't just make me come without even touching me. No one has ever done that to me before, and he did it so easily it's baffling.

"Goodnight, Connor," I whisper back, shutting off my phone.

I just had phone-sex with my best friend's brother. What is life?

TWENTY-TWO

CAT/CONNOR

I MUST BE DELUSIONAL

CAT

We all have those people in our lives who just *know* things. You never ask them why or how they've somehow acquired the wisdom they have. They just have it and it's like a superpower you'll never understand. That's exactly how my grandma JoJo is.

The second I went to meet her today, she had one look at me and said, "You look like you've had sex."

"How do you even know these things, JoJo?" I ask, slouching in the chair across from her. Well, technically her judgement is off. I didn't have sex. I had extremely passionate phone-sex with the hottest man to ever exist, there's a very clear difference. When she raises an eyebrow, I shake my head. "Actually, I don't want to know."

She shrugs, tightening her electric blue cardigan around her. "Who's the lucky guy?"

"No one you'd know," I say, resetting the game of Go on the table between us. I know she doesn't buy my bullshit. Both Wes and Connor have met my grandma multiple times when she stayed with us during the summer, and she would spoil them rotten as if they were her own grandkids. She also knows the amount of crushes I had on Connor growing up.

"You look just like your mother when you lie, you know?" she teases, smiling at me.

The way I always get compared to my mom in looks always sends a weird pang of *something* through my body. It's not that I don't remember her. I have millions of pictures and videos of her on my phone, so it would be impossible to do so. I just feel guilty that people can see so much of her in me and she's not here anymore. That's why I want to do well in school so I can make something of myself, so her legacy isn't tarnished.

"Well, I'm not lying," I say, crossing my legs. JoJo holds eye contact with me, not dropping her defiant gaze from mine. She has a way of looking at me that makes me want to spill my deepest darkest secrets. Mostly because I know she'll keep them, and she's probably one of the only people who would care to listen. "Okay, fine."

"That's my girl," she says, cheering. Her cheer quickly turns into a chesty cough and I lean over, immediately pushing her herbal tea back into her hands.

"For your information, I didn't have sex. Not the conventional way you think, anyway," I murmur, twisting my fingers between the hole in my jeans.

"Glad to know you're being creative," she gets out around a cough. I frown. She has zero filter, this one. "As long as you're being safe, I'm happy to see you're moving on. You don't have to be so afraid of love, birdie."

My eyebrows pinch together. "I'm not afraid of love, Jo."

"No, you're afraid of what it does to a person," she says, seemingly having me all figured out. "Just because you think your mom didn't have much going on before she met your dad, doesn't mean the same thing is going to happen to you and it doesn't mean her life before him was insignificant. You can be your own person in and outside of a relationship."

I sigh, rolling my head back. "It feels like it's three separate timelines. The time before you're in love, the time when you're in love, and then there's the after. I don't want the person I am now to change just because I get into a relationship."

“The person you are before you meet your soulmate isn’t going to change just because you’re experiencing life differently. A new lens is good, Catherine. Rose tinted glasses aren’t always harmful,” JoJo explains before taking another sip of her tea. “You don’t change. You *grow*.”

“Yeah,” I sigh, “I guess.”

“What have I told you about guessing, Songbird? You don’t guess unless you are absolutely unsure. I’m telling you this because it’s true. Not for you to just guess, okay?”

I let her words settle over me. The idea doesn’t sound so bad when she puts it like that, but looking at the relationships around me, that kind of change frightens me more than it excites me.

I don’t want to be a different person just because I’m in a relationship. I don’t want to act differently or say things differently. I don’t want my past to be a time that I class as ‘before’ instead of yesterday. Change is a scary yet inevitable thing.

“Your dad loved your mom, Catherine,” my grandma says. My eyes start to prickle with tears at the mention of their love. “He loved her so much. So much so that I don’t think he knew what to do with it at the time. And now she’s gone, it feels like a piece of him is gone too. He’s submerging himself into his work to avoid that. Part of me thinks that he’s just trying to shield you from his hurt.”

“I don’t want him to do that,” I whisper. “We’re supposed to be helping each other, but all he’s done is push me away and I don’t feel like I can talk to him.”

“You’ll find a way, Birdie, I know you will,” she encourages. I reach out and clasp her hand between mine, needing her close to me. “I don’t know the ins and outs of whatever you’re doing with this new boy of yours, but keep him this time, Cat. Promise me you’ll do that. I just want you to be happy. To hope.”

I swallow. The desperation in her eyes throws me off. I’ve never seen her look so serious. She’s always laughing, always

down to make a dirty joke or poke fun at one of her friends. I can tell she needs this.

“I’ll try.”

For her and for my mom, I want to try.

CONNOR

“Oh, shit,” Wes exclaims, still upside down. “I have an even better idea.”

“It can’t get any worse than your last one, so hit me,” I say, giving him the floor. Usually, if I manage to get all of his bullshit out in one sitting, he’ll shut up for the rest of the day.

We’ve been in the gym all morning, preparing for our next away game. Wes has been doing more shit-talking than he has working out and he’s completely convinced that his best ideas come to him when he’s upside down.

So, he’s leaning against the wall, topless, his hands on the ground, his legs kicked up as he rattles on to me about how I’m supposed to get Cat to date me. I must be delusional if I think that any of Wes’s advice will actually work.

Okay, maybe the sexting thing did help, but still.

He doesn’t know about the way I fucked my fist to the sound of her fingering herself over the phone and I’m going to keep it that way. I was not planning on taking things that far the other night, but sometimes desire gets the best of us. I don’t know where exactly we stand, and I want to let her know that I’m in this for keeps.

“She’s into rom coms. Just watch one of those and bring it up casually in a conversation. She’ll be all over it,” he pants, his face completely red. That’s actually not a bad idea.

“Real question. Do you ever actually use these tactics, or are you just that repulsive that nobody wants to date you?” I ask, trying my hardest not to laugh.

“Nah, I’m saving these for the right girl. In the meantime, I’m happy being the best wingman to you, Connie boy. God knows you need it,” he replies, his voice strained. I don’t even argue with him on that.

“Dude, you’re going to pass out. Get down,” I say, scrubbing my hands across my face.

“I’m not. You see all the red on my face? That’s just my ideas, slowly falling down to my brain. It’s science. Don’t question it,” he says confidently.

“I really don’t think that’s how that works, Wes. You’re—”

I barely get my sentence out before he collapses right on top of me.

“Am I dreaming, or is there a really hot doctor in front of me right now?”

The guy has been passed out for the last ten minutes and of course the first that comes out of his mouth is something stupid. He blinks up at his ‘doctor’ who rushed here when I had no else to call and was happy to help us out.

He’s right. She is hot. Barely conscious or not, he shouldn’t be hitting on her.

“You *would* have a hot doctor if you called an ambulance like a normal person,” Cat says, helping me push Wes into a sitting position against one of the walls in the gym. “Why did you call me anyway? I’m hardly first aid trained.”

“Connie boy wanted an excuse to see you again, so he forced me into doing a handstand for an hour,” Wes mumbles, lying straight through his grin. That bastard.

“Is that true, *Connie boy*?” Cat mocks, tilting her head at me. She has the audacity to bash her lashes at me as if I haven’t been thinking about the way she moaned my name a few nights ago. As if I haven’t spent every night since then tossing and turning, hoping she’d call me again for round two. Or better yet, turn up outside my door.

“It’s not,” I mutter, standing to my feet. “Wesley is a liar.”

“Yeah, well, Wesley has a mild concussion, so maybe we should be nice to him.”

“He’s referring to himself in the third person. That’s not a good sign, is it, Doc?” I ask Cat, feigning concern. Her eyes light up, playing along with me.

“That isn’t a good sign. You’re right. Maybe he needs to go to a *real* doctor,” she says, tapping her chin. Wes shakes his head twice before wincing at the pain.

“No! Please. No real doctors, they creep me out,” he begs, his grey eyes pleading like a little puppy. Cat and I both laugh, and she stands to her feet.

“I’ll get you a drink. Stay here,” she says when her laughter dies down.

Like the dumb bunny I am, I follow after her, needing to be close to her again. She doesn’t say anything when she gets to the vending machine, and I don’t either. I wait for her to pick up the water before snaking my hand around her waist, crushing her chest to mine and capturing her lips.

She tastes exactly like home. Everything about her feels like it was made just for me. The soft dip in her hips as I hold her close to me. The faint gasp that escaped her lips in surprise before her body relaxed into mine. The sweet taste of her lip balm against my mouth and the fresh feel of her tongue that slips into my mouth when my hands find their way into her hair.

She pushes off me slightly, keeping her lips pressed to mine. “Connor,” she whispers against my lips. If I could bottle that sound and keep it forever, I would. There’s something so sacred about the way she says my name. Nobody says it like her.

“Hm?”

“Someone could see,” she whispers.

I open my eyes then to see she’s looking up at me with a worried expression. I look around us. The gym isn’t particularly full, but it’s not empty either. It’s the second one we have on campus that mostly sophomores and junior’s use, so there will definitely be people we know around.

For once in my life, I don't want to play it safe. I don't want to be the perfect Connor Bailey who is always on edge, waiting for the other shoe to drop. I want to be the kind of Connor Bailey who gets to kiss Catherine Fables in hallways whenever we want.

"I don't care," I say. I reach out for her, slipping my finger between the belt loop in her jeans. "If it takes touching you like this for everyone to know you're mine, I'll do it happily."

She hums. "Quite possessive over someone you've only made out with once."

"We've done more than make out, Cat," I whisper, dropping my mouth to the shell of her ear. She shivers. "I've wanted you for years. You've just been too blind to notice it."

"I have not been blind. I've just been in it for the long haul," she admits nonchalantly. She shrugs. "That's all."

My chest lights up with pride, my face cracking into a smile at her words. I knew it wasn't just me that felt this pull between us. "So, you're admitting that you've always had a crush on me?" I tease, tugging on the belt loop of her jeans.

"I'm not admitting anything, you—"

I silence her lie with a kiss. It's the kind of kiss you get lost in, where it's just all tongue and teeth and hands and strangled moans.

When I kiss Catherine, she gives me everything. Everything about her fits so perfectly with me that we don't even have to try to make each other feel good. Her whole body is in tune with mine.

I kiss across her jaw, her cheek, down her neck until she's writing beneath me. "Catherine likes me," I whisper into her neck, blowing a raspberry and she laughs, gasping for air. I plant more kisses across her face and neck until she's covered with me. "You like me. You like me. You like me."

"You're so annoying," she gets out through a laugh, pushing me off her.

She looks at me – like, *really* looks at me. Her beautiful eyes travel from my hair which she’s messed up, down to the curve of my lips and when her eyes snag on mine, I swear I almost drop right to my knees, ready to beg her for literally anything.

Once she’s had a good enough look, she steps into me, fists my shirt and pushes herself against me. The force of her grip and the hunger in her eyes sends a heavy feeling of want throughout my body. Knowing that she’s turned inside out as much as I am makes me want her even more. When her hand twists in my shirt and her lips are inches away from mine, I stop her, gripping onto her waist until her legs tighten around me. She gasps when I press her against the wall and she’s still gripping onto my shirt like her life depends on it.

“Who’s the possessive one now, huh?” I murmur against her lips. Her eyes flash when she presses herself into me again, feeling the hardness in my jeans.

“Feels like it’s still you,” she whispers before kissing me so hard I almost lose my balance.

I give her everything with my kiss. I tug on her bottom lip with my teeth, desperate and needy for more. It feels branding — as she says, possessive. It was absolute torture watching her in a relationship with somebody else and now that I finally have her, I want to show her exactly what it’s like to be mine. To be worshipped. To be cared for and looked after.

It feels like we’ve been making out in the corridor for hours, neither of us stepping apart to take a breath until someone walks past clearing their throat. We break apart and I drop her back to her feet. Her deep brown lips are swollen, her pupils dilated as she raises a shaky hand to touch her lips.

“When am I going to see you again?” I ask when we finally start walking back to Wes. I hope the poor guy hasn’t passed out again.

Her eyebrows scrunch as she turns to me. “Coach says I have to come with you to the away game, anyway. So, I’ll see you then.”

“That’s in a week, Cat. I need to see you before then,” I groan, sounding like a child. She stops, crossing her arms against her chest, challenging me with her eyes. “Just me and you,” I add.

“I need to study,” she mutters. Right. College. Work. Things that exist outside mine and Cat’s relationship.

“Then let me study with you,” I suggest, “I’m a good study buddy.”

She chews on her lip for a minute, glancing down at the floor and then back up at me. I know how hard she works. She’s always put in one hundred and ten percent into everything that she does and college work is no different. I used to think that all she did was study until a few years ago when she started to let loose – courtesy of my sister and Elle.

“Okay, fine. Meet me at Grand, tomorrow, at six,” she says, sticking a finger in my face. I grasp her small hand between mine, pulling it to my lips and kissing it. She rolls her eyes at me. “Don’t be late.”

TWENTY-THREE

CONNOR

GRAND LIBRARY

“ARE YOU CRYING RIGHT NOW?”

Wes turns to me, crumbs of popcorn falling down his chin. His face is completely red after rolling around for the last god knows how long as he pauses the credits to the fifth movie we’ve watched. I put one on as a treat since I managed to get through some more questions that Cat sent for me and I am strangely obsessed.

Since Wes’s advice with Cat last time somehow managed to work, I’ve decided to give him another chance. Which means sitting through a bunch of rom-coms back to back with a selection of candy, a blanket and popcorn spread around us. By the time the second movie finished, I couldn’t help it anymore and I told him everything from the night in the Manifestation Chamber to the day in the gym. As much as he’s a pain in my ass, he’s my best friend and if I kept our secret any longer, I think I would burst into flames.

I swipe my face with the back of my sweater. “We just watched one of the greatest movies to ever exist. Why *aren’t* you crying?”

Wes glances over at me, grinning ear to ear. “You’re a big baby, Connie boy. All this for Catherine Fables,” he says, gesturing to the mess we’ve made. He shakes his head with a disbelieving chuckle. “She’s one lucky girl.”

“I think I’d do anything for her,” I murmur, resting my head back against the couch. I don’t think I fully register the weight of my words until they’re out of my mouth. All I know

is that it's true. So true that it scares me a little how one person can take up every thought in my brain, make every song somehow feel like her and have my days jumbled because I feel like I exist solely for the purpose of waiting for her.

"Yeah?" Wes asks, pushing himself up against the couch next to me.

"I'd give her anything she wants. Every part of me. If she asked me to move the fucking world, I'd do it," I say, my chest aching just at the thought.

"Are you drunk?" I try to search for the joke in his question, but he sounds so serious. *Too* serious.

I shake my head. "Of course I'm not."

"You're that whipped, huh?"

"I'm fucking obsessed, Wes. Something's wrong with me, I swear," I admit, rubbing my hands across my face. If watching rom-coms back to back all day with your best friend just to impress a girl doesn't show how down I am for her, I don't know what will.

They say that when you know, you know. I think I've always known how much I cared for Catherine from the second I laid my eyes on her. There's never been anyone else for me. Even if it took her fucking years to notice me too, it's all worth it. If I just get to hold her, to listen to her, to talk to her even for a minute, I'll be the happiest man on the planet.

"The crazy thing is," Wes says. Just from the tone of his voice, I know he's about to talk shit. "You haven't even slept together and she's already got you this fucked up. I bet your wrist is sore, though."

I elbow him in the ribs. "You're disgusting," I mutter before reaching over to grab my phone. I've kept it silent whilst we watched the movie so I wouldn't get distracted. Retaining information hasn't exactly been my forte, but I'm trying.

When my eyes focus on my phone screen, I see over twenty texts for Cat and my heart drops straight through my ribs.

KIT-CAT

I'll be at the silent study in Grand.

Bring ur own snacks. I don't share.

Okay. I get it. That was kinda mean.

I'm going to stab myself in the eye with my pen. This shit is ridiculous.

I thought u were a great study buddy, connie???

I'm going to take a cat nap.

Get it?? Cuz my name...

Anyway. Wake me up when u get here.

I'm still waiting, Connor.

The messages start from six-thirty this morning until... How the fuck is it ten-thirty at night? Jesus. Sweat begins to gather at the back of my neck, my legs wobbling when I get to my feet, kicking over the popcorn bag that Wes and I shared.

I'm such an idiot.

"Fuck, Wes," I shout, pushing my hand through my messy hair. "I was meant to meet Cat two hours ago. Why didn't you tell me what time it was?"

Wes blinks at me, spluttering. "Woah, wait. How is this my fault? You have eyes and a brain too. There's literally a clock right there!"

He points at the brown broken clock hanging on one of the shelves in our lounge. "That clock has been broken since we

moved in, you imbecile,” I mutter, shoving as much shit into my bag as possible, zipping it up and swinging it over my shoulder.

“It has?” he asks. I just stare at him, wishing my eyes could somehow eliminate the sheer stupidity in his brain. “I thought I was just lucky that whenever I walked in here it was always one-thirty-two.”

“You’re an idiot,” I mutter before slamming the door.

I hightail it through campus, my heartbeat roaring in my ears as I try to get to her in record speed. I’m fast on the pitch, but with everyone now leaving ready to go out to a party, doors are swinging open in my way as sophomores rush past me like their life depends on it, it’s a fucking task.

I shouldn’t have gotten too caught up in those movies.

I shouldn’t have let Wes play more and more when I couldn’t get enough.

I should have checked my phone like a normal fucking person and got to her when she needed me, not hours later when she should have gone back to her dorm. Half of me is not even expecting her to still be there, but by the time I enter the dark and deserted library, she’s tucked away in a corner, her head dropped on the table, sheets spread out everywhere.

I rush over to her, tripping over myself as my heartbeat refuses to settle. I manage to make it to the seat next to her, pushing her bag onto the table as I kneel beside her. Her dark braids sweep down her back and in her face, fanning around her as she stirs, twisting her head to face me as I stroke my hand against her knee.

“Cat,” I whisper, not knowing why I’m trying to keep quiet when there’s no one in here. She doesn’t move, but her face twists slightly, nuzzling her cheek further into her forearm. I shake her forearm, trying to gently wake her, whispering her name again.

After a few more tries and when my breathing starts to finally settle, her eyes start fluttering open slightly. I let out a breath of relief. Her eyes are red, tired orbs that are being forced to stay open. She weakly lifts her head off the table, just enough to rest it back down on her forearms, blinking at me as I lean my head down to look at her properly.

I swipe one of her braids out of her eye, tucking it behind her ear. She's so fucking pretty it hurts. "Baby," I mutter, stroking my thumb on her cheek. She doesn't say anything other than a small intangible mumble that tugs at my heart. "Fuck, Cat. I'm so sorry."

She looks up at me then, her head stronger as I move my hand, smoothing it down her back. The glimmer in her eyes sends a wave of hurt straight through my body. A slight frown tugs at her lips as she looks up at me sleepily.

"You're late," she mumbles.

The two simple words almost knock the wind right out of me. "I know. I'm sorry," I say again, but the words don't seem to change the look in her eyes. She looks like one of those people who have heard those two words strung together too many times for it to mean anything. When I say them - which I vow to her from now on will be rare - it will mean something, because I never want her to get to the point with me where my apologies don't mean anything. "How long have you been waiting, sweetheart?"

She finally gains the strength to lean against the back of the chair, pushing her braids over her shoulder whilst I stay at her feet. "I've been up since six," she replies before yawning, rubbing her hand across her mouth. I stroke the inside of her thigh with my thumb again, waiting for her to give me more than that. "But I've been here since twelve."

"It's ten pm, Cat," I say shakily, knowing this is completely my fault. Her head lolls back on the seat, blinking up at the ceiling, avoiding me. I look around at the mess on the table — papers, an empty salad box, two water bottles, her laptop and an iPad. "Have you eaten anything? Or left this seat at all?"

She swallows. “I had lunch after I finished writing the section on the team’s training schedule. Since then, I’ve just been here.”

“Catherine, you can’t just survive off a salad from the cafeteria when you’re studying all day. You need breaks,” I say gently, squeezing her thigh, needing her to look at me better, needing her to listen to me.

“I thought you were coming, so I was going to wait until we had dinner,” she says. She finally looks down at me now and it feels like a punch straight to my gut. Her bottom lip quivers that it physically hurts to look at her. “You’re late, Connor. You forgot.”

I swallow back the emotion in my throat until I can feel it low in my stomach, feeling like an absolute prick. I stand to my feet and start collecting her papers into neat colour coordinated piles. “Come on. I’m going to get you some food, take you home and you’re going to get some real sleep, okay? No more studying.”

“No more studying,” she repeats, nodding at me, a loopy grin on her face.

I feel like even more of a dick the whole time I walk her to my car in the parking lot outside my dorm and drive her to the nearest Taco Bell. She doesn’t say anything the whole time. I ordered her usual, and she thanked me quietly and then ate in silence as we waited in the parking lot. Even when we walked back up to her dorm, she didn’t say anything to me as she kept her eyes on the ground, her fingers twisting inside the fabric of her sweater.

I don’t hear a word from her until I walk her to her bedroom, shut the door behind me and go to turn on the light.

“No, don’t turn on the light,” she mutters, moving closer to me next to the wall. She peers up at me, those gorgeous eyes blinking up at me, and I swear my heart stops and restarts again. I nod, listening and moving my hand from the switch.

“Come here, Catherine,” I murmur, tugging on her sweater and pulling her into me. “Can you look at me? Please.” She holds my gaze then, finally. “What’s wrong? Talk to me.”

She shakes her head immediately. “Nothing,” she whispers, “I just need to go to sleep. I’m tired, Connor.” I nod and she turns around, walking towards her bedside table. I stay glued to my spot, watching as she picks up her clothes from the drawer.

Before I can even turn around, she slowly pulls off her sweater, her back still to me as she drops the fabric to the floor.

Holy fuck. There’s too much skin – long expanses of smooth, dark brown skin and no bra to restrict her. Her braids fall down to her ass and I don’t get a second before she shimmy off her pants, seamlessly pulling on an oversized shirt and covering her panties with shorts.

When she moves to her bed, still staying silent, I clear my throat, needing to give myself an out. “I guess I’ll just…” I clear my throat, *again*, because she looks up at me with those innocent doe eyes the second she slips under the covers and I just want to shred the distance between us and take her in my arms. I can’t tell if she’s mad at me or not and I want to give her the space to figure that out. “I’ll go. I’m sorry again, Cat.”

I don’t wait for her response as I turn around, muttering to myself about how stupid I am to have messed up what was supposed to be an easy study date.

I can’t even have a normal conversation with someone, never mind trying to hold my fort in an official NFL interview. If I keep doing stupid shit like this I’m never going to make it. I’m going to flunk out of school, move back in with my parents, turn into one of those people who—

“Stay.”

I turn around and blink back at her in the darkness. Her covers are tucked under her armpits, her hands twisting together on top of her stomach. “What?”

“Don’t go yet. Stay with me until I fall asleep. I’ll sleep better if you’re with me. Please, Connie,” she murmurs.

The helplessness in her voice has my feet moving before my brain can fully process it. I take off my shoes, slide into the bed beside her as if it’s the most normal thing in the world. I curl my arms around her, pulling her close to me. The fresh smell of her immediately calms me. When my erratic heartbeat starts to settle, I notice that she’s relaxed into me completely and I think for a second that she’s fallen asleep until she twists in my arms, resting one hand beneath her head as she studies me.

“Can I ask you something?” she whispers.

“Of course,” I say, swallowing, “Anything.”

“Why did you forget me today?” she asks, her voice quiet and desperate.

“Jesus, Cat, don’t say it like that,” I mutter, stroking my thumb against her collarbone. She drops her gaze to the comforter between us. “I was watching a movie and I lost track of time.”

“I don’t believe you,” she mumbles.

“Well, you should.”

“Why?”

“Because I was watching it for you,” I admit, my face heating up just at the thought of it. I’ve never done that for another person before, but for some reason Wes’s advice seems to be working and there’s nothing that I want more than for Cat to see me as more than her best friend’s brother who has a painful crush on her. “I wanted to impress you, so we could have something more to talk about.”

A disbelieving laugh leaves her mouth, shaking her head as she continues staring at me, her eyes tracing patterns across my face. “We always have something to talk about, Connor.”

“I know, but I wanted something just for us, you know. Something special,” I say into the space between us. I inch closer to her, pushing her body closer to mine until her hands

find their way in my hair. I kiss the top of her nose and she scrunches it automatically, giggling as she pushes my face away from her.

“What movie did you watch?” she asks.

“I watched at least six. You could’ve told me how addicting they are, jeez,” I mutter, “Ten Things I Hate About You was my favourite, though.”

Her eyes light up, a child-like excitement taking over her whole face as her hands tighten at the nape of my neck. “That’s a good one,” she says through a giggle. The way her mind works, the way her mood changes from this happy sunshiny person to someone who looks like she’s lived an abundance of lives and is stuck in the one that wears her out the most, as if she’s simply existing. “My mom named me after Catherine Earnshaw. You know, the novel by Emily Bronte. She loved Virginia Woolf, too. She loved reading the letters between her and Vita Sackville-West. I think that’s what made her believe in love most.”

Her rambling is adorable. She gives me these little pockets of information, tiny pieces of herself that I just want to treasure forever. She doesn’t talk about her mom a lot. When she does, she gets this passive, longing look on her face and my soul aches to take away her pain. To take away the suffering she had from so young. I don’t even say anything for a while, taking in her quiet and sweet voice. “I know it’s a book,” I say through a laugh.

She pokes me in the cheek. “Then why didn’t you say anything?”

“Did you want me to?”

She shakes her head lightly. “I don’t know.” She shrugs. “Sometimes, I just like telling you things.”

“And I like listening.”

“Yeah?” Her tone is slightly apprehensive. I bring my hand to the side of her face, stroking my thumb over her cheek and she nestles into my palm, closing her eyes.

“I could listen to you talk all day, Cat, and I don’t think I’d ever get bored.”

“Do you really mean that?”

I swallow, my words shaky as I say, “I don’t think I’ve ever been more sure of anything in my life. When you talk to me, everything goes quiet. The noise in my head doesn’t exist anymore and it’s just... You.”

She scoffs, opening her eyes to meet my determined gaze. “You don’t mean that.”

“I do.”

“You don’t.”

“I do.”

“You—”

“We could do this all night, sweetheart,” I murmur, pressing a kiss to her forehead and she softens beneath me. “You’ve got to stop doing that thing where you don’t let good things happen to you because you’re scared.”

Her eyebrows pinch. “I’m not doing that,” she whispers. Her voice lacks the conviction I would need to see she’s telling the truth. She’s a shit liar.

“You’re not?” I mock. She shakes her head. “Then let me be good to you. Let me be good *for* you, Cat. I know I messed up today, but I won’t do anything like that again. I would never leave you alone like that.”

“Okay,” she says. I press my forehead to hers, taking in a deep breath. “I really like you, Connor, like... a lot. And I don’t ever want to feel like I did earlier. Like you forgot about me. Like I didn’t matter to you.”

“I like you too, Catherine,” I whisper, pressing my lips to her forehead, sealing the moment. “So fucking much. You mean more to me than either of us could ever comprehend.”

The small smile that forms on her lips at my words is all I need for the rest of my life. Even when she’s finally fast asleep and I force myself to slip out of her bed, I still have that warm,

fuzzy feeling weighing on my chest, just knowing that I have her through everything.

“Fuck!” I whisper-shout when I bump into my sister on my way out of their dorm. Shit. Shit. Shit. Nora rubs at her eye, her slippers with dog ears flopping on the floor as she squints at me.

“Connor? What are you doing here?” she asks, her voice heavy with sleep. Jesus, I don’t even know what time it is. I swear time just doesn’t exist when she’s around. It’s been that way since the day I met her.

“Uh, Cat passed out in the library, so I brought her back. She’s exhausted. I must have fallen asleep,” I explain, only half-lying.

Nora’s eyes soften. “Oh... Did she say anything to you? She was off this morning and I’m a little worried.”

My heart sinks. “No, she didn’t. Why?”

She glances back to Cat’s closed door and then to the bottle of water in her hands. “Her mom’s anniversary is coming up soon, so I know next week is going to be hard for her. So, if you see her around, just be nice, okay?”

“I’m always nice to her,” I mutter.

She lets out a scoff, shaking her head. “Yeah,” she laughs, but I’m not laughing. She rolls her eyes before pushing past me. “Okay. Whatever. Just go home.”

TWENTY-FOUR

CAT

“IS THAT AN EIGHT PACK?”

YOU’D THINK that college football players walk around with a halo around their head and have superhuman strength with the amount of special treatment they get.

I knew that they got flights covered by the school for their away games, but no one told me about the luxury suites, the fully catered meals, on-site spa and free transport to anywhere they need to go in Arizona.

Since we landed, the boys have been training like crazy and I’ve been working on my report and picking out new designs for the Titan’s Daily cover.

Whilst the boys trained with Coach Mackenzie, I spent the day with Olivia, the assistant coach, walking around a small town in Phoenix. It’s weird hanging out with someone who is considered faculty, but is only seven years older than me. She lets me in on all the inside gossip on the boys. She tells me about how she tore her ACL after she graduated from Drayton, which basically ruined all of her dreams of playing the sport she’s been coaching for the last three years.

It was fun hanging out with her. It felt like having an older sister who gossiped with you about boys and let you sneak your parents movies into your room for sleepovers. I’ve never had that kind of figure in my life before. As much as Elle and Nora are like my sisters, their advice usually causes me to freak out more than I need to. Since we’re all the same age, our experience is very limited with things in the wider world.

Since Olivia and I are sharing a hotel room, I get the joy of watching her get ready. As thrilling as the game was earlier, I am preferring this so much more. The boys won, – which was no surprise – so Coach and Olivia are going out to celebrate and the boys are allowed to stay up past their curfew in their suite down the hall.

The second the game was over, Connor tried to pull me into him whilst he was sweaty and gross, but now knowing that he's showered, I'm desperate to see him. I know the other night didn't go to plan for either of us. He has a habit of tucking me into bed and weirdly enough, I want that to happen every night. As much as forgetting about our study date sucked, the forehead kiss and the sweet words made up for it.

“So, what are your plans tonight?” Olivia asks, talking to me through the mirror whilst she does her makeup as I sit behind her on one of the beds.

“Nothing at all,” I say, sighing. “I'll see if I can get a few hundred words down. If not, I'll probably crash before you get back.”

She shakes her head, pouting. “You should see what the boys are up to. You never know. You could actually have fun.”

I audibly laugh at that. “I saw the videos Wes posted on Snapchat an hour ago. I am *not* stepping foot into that suite. It's already a mess and we've hardly been here a day.”

Olivia throws her head back. I love that she has a good bond with them. So good that they only call her by her first name. Mostly because her last name is Hardon and she coaches a team full of teenage boys who no doubt would make her life a living hell.

“That's fair,” she says through a laugh, applying a pink lipgloss which matches perfectly with the pink top she's wearing. “I shouldn't be back too late, but it just depends on how drunk Mackenzie gets.”

“Do you guys do this often at away games?” I ask, leaning back on my forearms as she packs away her makeup into her bag on the vanity.

“Not always,” she explains. Her eyes lock with mine in the mirror again. “It’s just nice to get out sometimes and feel pretty. We know the boys can take care of themselves and we’re only here for one night. Might as well make it memorable. This whole experience is for you to make memories as well, Cat.”

I end up taking Olivia’s advice and by the time she’s out the doors of the hotel, I pull out my phone and call Connor. He said that he and the guys don’t usually go out after away games after a fight broke out in Salt Lake once, so I know he can’t be too busy.

“Hey,” I say, holding the phone to my ear as I look through the same three outfits that I packed. All I can hear from his end is loud chattering which is the usual noise I’m greeted to whenever I have to meet the team on campus, so I’m not surprised.

“Can everyone be quiet! Jesus,” Connor exclaims over the phone. After a few seconds, it starts to quieten down. “Hi, baby.”

Oh, fuck.

How does that one word make my stomach dip? I’ve never cared much for words of endearment, but anything coming out of Connor’s mouth sounds so insanely hot that my knees almost go weak.

“Are you okay?” I ask when the team still talks over the phone.

“Yeah, the guys are just being annoying and loud as per usual,” he explains and I can imagine him shaking his head. He has this whole protective dad vibe about him that I happen to find sexy.

“Come to my room,” I say before I change my mind. I’ve got to make memories somehow. I want to be alone with Connor, awake, sober and in my right mind for once. “It’s a lot quieter here and it sounds like you could do with a break.”

“What?” he chokes out and it sounds muffled as if he’s covering the mic. “And do what, Cat?” he whispers.

“You were so desperate to hang out with me the other day, Connie. What’s wrong with right now?” I tease, playing with the hem of my shirt. Of course he has to make this difficult. “I’m bored and Olivia has gone out. I don’t know what else I need to say to convince you.”

I hear him groan slightly as he considers it. He worries too much — much like me — but I know when to break the rules sometimes. I know when to let loose and have a little fun. We’re basically alone in a hotel, the options are limitless and if the smutty romance books have taught me anything, I shouldn’t run out of any ideas.

“I’ll be there in twenty,” he says before ending the call.

Of course Connor does not spend his time reading romance books for fun. Instead, he watches old romantic comedies just because he knows I like them, which means he turns up to my room exactly twenty minutes later in the apron I got him for his birthday and a grocery bag in hand.

“This is not what I had in mind when I invited you over, Connie,” I say, looking him up and down after I’ve closed the door. He just grins at me, his cheeks pink and his brown hair a mess. His apron has ‘Connie’ scrawled across it in red handwriting. “Did you just pack that just in case?”

He steps closer to me, dropping a kiss to my lips. “You never know what can happen in a day, Cat.”

For the next twenty minutes, we organise the ingredients for our cheesecake, which we’re relying on the small fridge we have in the room for them to turn out properly. Even after he’s explained to me his very complicated recipe, I’m still unsure how he’s planning to whisk this without a stand mixer.

He managed to convince me that he’s strong enough as I drooled over his huge arms whisking a tiny bowl of cream.

There’s something insanely hot about a man who bakes. Yes, Connor might be god-awful at it, but it’s his

determination and the glow on his cheeks as he works around the tiny kitchen that makes him so fucking sexy.

He bakes, I watch. It's a good combination.

Once our semi-deformed cheesecake is in the fridge, I push myself up onto the counter wiping down the equipment we used that we are somehow going to have to hide from Olivia before she gets back.

“Can I ask you something?” Connor asks, stepping between my open legs on the counter, his hands running up my thighs under my shorts. I nod in response. “Is my baking actually good?”

I'm instantly reminded of the salty taste of the cupcakes he gave me and the lick of the spoon he fed me five minutes ago that wasn't any better. I paint my face in the most sympathetic smile I can muster up. “It's not the best, but you can improve.”

He frowns. “Why did you lie to me last time?”

“Because I didn't want to hurt your feelings,” I admit.

A smirk climbs across his face as he sets his palms on each side of me, caging me in. “Do you care about me, Catherine?” His tone is light, but I avert my eyes away from him, trying my absolute hardest not to smile. When my eyes connect with his again, his face is so serious I almost miss what he says. “Do you want me to take my top off? I can take my pants off too, if you want.”

“What?” I gawk, bursting out laughing. “Why in the world would I want that?”

He shrugs. “Because it's hot when a guy is wearing an apron and nothing else.”

“Yeah? According to who? The last porno you watched?” I manage to get out around a laugh.

Connor gasps, holding up a hand to his chest. “I've never heard such filthy words come out of your mouth. If I didn't know any better, I'd be starting to think you're not a good girl after all.”

“I think that phone call a few days ago says very, *very* differently,” I say, my voice shaking a little as I tug on his apron, pulling him as close to me as I can get him. If he doesn’t stop looking at me like that, I’m going to do something very stupid. I haven’t felt like myself for a long time, and Connor has brought that fire in me that I used to have.

“So confident now, aren’t we?” he muses, dropping his head to the side of my face. His hot breath tickles my ear, igniting an explosion inside of me.

“Only for you,” I whisper back.

When I go to kiss him, I don’t kiss him like I have the other times, I go in with a promise. *I’m going to make you feel good*, is what I’m telling him when I run my hands across his stomach and around to where the apron ties at his back. The second his apron is off, his shirt follows and I’m greeted to the absolute sight of Connor’s broad, sculpted chest that I want to run my hands all over. I want to cover him in oil and...

Oh, fuck.

Is that an eight pack?

“You finished ogling me yet, sweetheart?” he asks, tilting my head up with two fingers under my chin.

“Actually,” I tease, “Not yet.”

I wiggle my chin out of his grasp only to press my lips against the firmness of his chest. He hisses, his hands instantly finding themselves in my hair. I keep kissing across his chest, moving down until I get to the hard ridges of his abs. When I make my way back up, my tongue flat against his skin, drawing a line down the middle of his abs, his eyes roll back.

“Jesus,” he mutters, “You look fucking stunning.”

I kiss along his throat when he leans down to give me access. “And you taste so good. Why the hell do you taste so good?”

He pulls back. “Are you okay? I don’t think I’ve heard you compliment me that much in the space of ten minutes.”

“Shut up,” I mutter, slipping off the counter, kissing him hard as I walk us back to where the couch is in the open living room area of my suite.

When I manage to get him down, I climb into his lap, feeling his erection against my core. I pull back from the kiss, biting on his bottom lip as his hands roam around my lower back. My skin erupts with flames as his determined hands find a home on my body, branding me.

He smiles as he looks up at me, his cheeks almost as pink as his lips. His nails dig into my hips, pressing me closer into him as he rests against the couch. “My body fucking aches for you, Catherine. Every part of me.”

I roll myself over his erection on purpose, loving the deep groan I get out of him in response. “Every part of you, huh?” I tease, kissing along his jaw as I slip my hand between our bodies, reaching to where he’s hard and waiting for me. Fuck, he’s huge over his jeans. “What about this part?”

He lets out a low hiss. “Fuck, baby,” he mutters, his head dropping back onto the headrest. It’s the hottest thing I’ve ever seen – Connor Bailey unravelled and out of control for one of the first times in his life because of *me*. He’s a fucking sight. I stroke him again over his jeans, needing another reaction to know what the hell I’m doing. “You can’t– You can’t do that.”

“Do you want me to stop?”

“Yes,” he murmurs. I immediately stop what I’m doing, taking my hand away from jeans, feeling the embarrassment all over my body, but he latches onto my wrist, urging me to lock eyes with him. “No. Fuck... I haven’t done this in a while and I know that if you touch me, I’m going to lose my fucking mind, Cat.”

Is it bad that the way he looks like this is paining him is turning me on? I’ve hardly done anything and he already looks like he could finish just like this. Hell, I probably could if I found the right friction.

“Maybe I want that to happen. Maybe I want to see you unravel,” I murmur, kissing across his jaw again. He nods

enthusiastically. I let out a laugh. “You’ve got to *tell* me you want this, Connor. I’m not going to do anything unless you tell me.”

“Yes, Catherine. Please,” he whines, practically begging. Pleasure rumbles in my belly as I slowly sink to my knees in front of him, undoing his belt as I go down. He helps me work off his jeans and when his erection finally springs free, I gulp. He’s fucking massive. My mouth instantly dries when I spot the pre-cum dripping off the tip of his cock and I give it a timid stroke. “You can take it, sweetheart, don’t worry.”

I blink up at him and all the nervousness that he had two minutes ago has transferred into me. I’ve given blow-jobs before. This shouldn’t be a hard feat. But it’s Connor and I want to make him feel good. I *need* to make him feel good. He deserves this.

After a few pumps of his shaft, he patiently waits for me to fit him down my throat and allows me to get situated. I might have sucked dick before, but *this* is something different. Still, Connor’s hand on the back of my neck, helping me ease him down my throat helps me take him to the hilt as my lips stretch over him. My eyes instantly water, but the look on his face and the taste of him makes this feel a million times better.

I let myself get comfortable with the angle first before I started to pump his thick arousal, taking him as deep as I possibly can. When we both settle, his head lolls back and he groans out ‘fuck’ as his hand tightens around my neck. That combined with the way he feels in my mouth is like heaven. My thighs are already aching, slick and wet with need.

I take him out of my mouth for a second, only to circle my tongue around his tip, urging him to look down at me. The picture we’re painting is intensely arousing, just knowing that he’s looking down at me with his face twisted in pleasure as I get him off.

“Catherine,” he mutters, a tortured groan leaving his mouth as I slip him down my throat again making waves flush all across my body. “Fuck. Look at you. You’re doing such a good job, baby.”

His praise only makes me want this more. As his hands tangle in my hair, guiding me to take him deeper and faster, I don't know what to do with my hands. My clit throbs at the sloppy sounds my mouth is making mixed with his moans. Even with the drool dripping from the side of my mouth, instead of going to wipe it away, my hand slips inside my shorts, needing to give myself some sort of release.

“That’s it, sweetheart. Take every inch of me and make sure you come too,” he murmurs, a sexy grin across his face as I continue taking him down my throat as my fingers work over my clit. The second I get too in my head about it, thinking about the what-ifs to oblivion, I realise that all my motions have slowed down. When I find a rhythm grinding my wetness against his leg instead, I moan around his length. “Yeah, just like that.”

I’m going to make a mess of his pants, but he doesn’t seem to care. The satisfied smile on his face is driving me closer and closer to the edge that I move faster against him, trying to keep up with both of my movements. When his hips buck up, his hand around my neck flexing, I know he’s close.

“Fuck, Catherine,” he mutters, “Will you let me come in your mouth, baby? Or do you not like that?”

The way he asks if I’m okay with it makes my head spin. “Yes,” I muffle, “Please.”

I’m practically choking on him, trying my hardest to keep going and moving my hips at the same time, needing us to finish together.

And we do.

Stars burst behind my eyes the same time he comes down my throat, groaning whilst my thighs can no longer keep up and my orgasm soars right through me. His cum spills down my throat and I swallow all of it, loving the salty taste of him. When he takes his cock out of my mouth he tilts my chin up to him and I rise up on my knees as he leans in to me.

He wipes the side of my mouth, slipping the pad of his thumb into my mouth and I taste the last drop of him. “That

was fucking insane, sweetheart,” he murmurs, pressing his mouth to mine.

“Did you lose your mind like you said you would?” I ask, still trying to catch my breath.

“I don’t think I can even think straight,” he whispers, “You’ve ruined me, Cat.”

You’ve ruined me too, I think to myself.

This is way bigger than either of us would have imagined it would be. It’s not just a hallway crush that I’ve had on him for years. It’s a real, tangible, physical and emotional thing that I never want to escape from. I just want to be completely his.

But when I look into his eyes, still on my knees, I can’t help but think about the repercussions of this. The line we’ve crossed. I hate how fucking good it feels.

I don’t know how we end up spending the next twenty minutes fighting over the remote for the flatscreen, but we do and I eventually give up.

Connor is insisting on keep his shirt off, no matter how risky it is for him to be here in the first place, so that has been distracting me.

After mindlessly watching *Lilo & Stitch*, I finally have my turn to put a *good* movie on. I thought as I kissed his chest and ran my hands all over him when we sat in front of the screen, that he’d give up on trying to convince me to watch the movie. He ended up tackling me to the ground and tickling me like his life depended on it. Honestly, I don’t mind that much. It reminds me a lot of my childhood, but I enjoy annoying Connor more than any movie.

“Jesus, you’re lucky I like you,” I mutter, feeling as smug as ever as the opening credits to ‘*Set It Up*,’ play on the screen. It’s finally my turn and despite the low grunt of disapproval he gave me, he’s still holding me close to him, his arm slung around my shoulder.

“What?!”

“Yeah, you’ve *clearly* got a terrible taste in movies and someone has to educate you on what true cinema is,” I say, gesturing to the screen.

“And that someone is you, right?”

“Yup.”

“Well... What if I don’t like your movie taste,” he says, his fingers running down my arm.

“That’s quite literally impossible,” I say, turning to look up at him. “Sorry to break it to you, Connie, but I’m as good as you’re going to get. Everyone likes what I like and I’m confident enough to admit that.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes, it’s an absolute fact.”

His eyes narrow, jerking his head back from me to scrutinise me. “Right...”

“Don’t look at me like that!” I swat him on his arm.

“Like what?” he teases, pressing his lips together to hide his smile.

“Like you think I’m crazy,” I say, scooting out of his grip. You’d think after the stellar blow-job I just gave him that he’d be more appreciative of my fantastic taste in movies. I try to move further away on the couch, but my back hits the cushions and he’s over me in seconds, his hands on both sides of my head.

“Lucky for you, you’re my favourite kind of crazy,” he murmurs into the space between us, his hips pressing into mine.

“I didn’t know there were levels to crazy,” I breathe out, trying not to be affected by his weight. He shakes his head.

“Not levels. Categories,” he explains, “Crazy smart.” He presses a kiss to my forehead. “Crazy talented.” He presses a kiss to my temple before kissing my throat. “Crazy beautiful.”

My face feels like it's on fire at the sentiment and all I do is whisper, "Shut up."

"Make me."

I spend the next twenty minutes showing him how to shut up and by the time he's out of the room with a raging hard-on, I can't get rid of the smile that's plastered on my face. I feel like a champagne bottle — all fizzy and giggly.

That feeling lasts for a while until my brain goes into overdrive.

Having phone-sex with Connor is one thing. Flirting with him and kissing him is another thing. But giving him one of the best blowjobs I've ever given is a completely different thing. As much as I enjoyed it, I have no fucking clue how I'm supposed to keep my attraction to him at bay when we go back to Drayton. Nora is not an idiot. She'll figure it out eventually.

When Olivia comes stumbling into the room after one in the morning and I'm already snuggled up in bed, watching *Modern Family* reruns, she already looks so out of it I don't know how she managed to see the cheesecake in the fridge.

Fuck.

The cheesecake.

Connor and I's cheesecake.

"Catherine?" she whispers. Or, well, I think *she* thinks she's whispering, but she's so drunk she probably can't even tell. "Did you buy this?"

"Yeah, I went to the store," I reply, faking a yawn.

She gags. "You should really get a refund. This doesn't seem right to me."

Two seconds later, I'm up out of the bed, holding back her hair as she throws up in the mini kitchen sink.

I always said I wanted a sister, right?

TWENTY-FIVE

CONNOR

BAD HAIR DAY

I'VE BEEN FLOATING through all my classes today like a ghost, not really sure what I'm doing with myself. Thanksgiving weekend is coming up and it's the only thing I have to look forward to, and my surprise for Cat.

Sometimes I wish I could play football and do nothing else, but I know that's unrealistic.

Surprisingly, I don't hate my literature course. I actually enjoy it. Words and the meanings you can take from them have always spoken to me, sometimes more than watching movies has. Learning about older written texts and the context around them is cool, but Wes's constant questions puts me off going to class. Especially when the season is in full swing and all I want to do is go to the gym and prepare myself for the upcoming games.

When I see a text from Cat an hour into my lecture, I welcome the distraction.

KIT-CAT

U don't have to come over today.

Do you not want me to?

KIT-CAT

I do.

I just don't think you'll want to stay long. I'm taking out my braids and it's not very entertaining.

I could watch you watch paint dry, Cat. Everything you do is entertaining to me.

KIT-CAT

Fine, but you've been warned.

I know that's not the only reason she doesn't want me to come over. Today is the anniversary of her mom's death, making it five years without her. I could only imagine what it would be like losing someone so important to you so young. Her mom was everything to her. As much as her dad was great, Pauline is the one I have to thank for turning my Catherine into the person that she is today.

It's risky business deciding to go to her dorm in the middle of the afternoon when my sister or Elle could come home at any second, but I want to be there for her. I don't know what happened to make her believe that she doesn't need to be looked after sometimes and I want to prove her wrong, be that person for her. Everyone needs somebody sometimes and that's fine. I can push people away when I need them the most, but I've tried to get it into my thick skull that doing that makes my problems a shit ton worse than if I just let the people who care for me be there when I need them.

This is exactly what I was made for.

I was made to be ridiculed by my best friend as I left my dorm with a huge box filled with goodies for Cat and an oversized teddy bear. I've consumed enough romantic media in the last few days to know that I'm on the right track of some

sorts. My main goal is to be the comfort that I know she needs to do and make up for missing our library date.

After nearly tripping over several times as I made my way to her dorm, the door opened to the most beautiful sight.

My Catherine is wearing pink silk pyjamas, half of her hair is natural, curls flying everywhere whilst the other half is still braided, but it's been shortened from the length it was a few days ago. Her face is in complete surprise despite the back and forth messages where she told me not to come and I told her I was coming anyway.

I hold up the bear in my hand, needing to crack her frown. It's almost as big as her – big round eyes, a red bowtie on its neck and a tiny shirt.

“I come bearing gifts,” I say, moving into the dorm and she reluctantly lets me in. When the door shuts with a click, she turns to me, looking down at the box in my hands and then back to my eyes.

“I'm having a self-care day,” she says, a low edge to her voice that breaks my heart in two. She twists the necklace around her neck, a silver one that used to belong to her mom.

“Yeah, me too,” I reply, grinning. I walk past her to the living room where she's set up her laptop and has a bag with the used hair extensions, a bag full of hair products and a huge wide-toothed comb. I turn back to her and she's still blinking at me. “Come here, Cat.”

“Connie,” she murmurs, slowly taking a step towards me, her pretty mouth opening and closing before she takes a deep breath. “You don't want to be around me right now. I promise.”

I shake my head, setting down the stuffed bear on the couch. “Ask me where I want to be right now.”

She sighs. “Connor....”

“Ask me, Cat,” I press, stepping closer to her until she has to look up at me and she rolls her eyes lightly.

“Where do you want to be right now?”

“With you.”

I watch the second her eyes dim. Her chin wobbles and I immediately wrap my arms around her, letting her head rest on my chest. A sharp sob rips through her and she doesn't have to say anything to tell me how she's feeling because I can feel it.

I want to take away the pain from her, make it my own, carry the weight of the world on my back if it meant she could breathe for a second. I would take it all from her if I could, leave her with only the happiness and the light in the world.

I tighten my arms around her, resting my chin on the top of her head and she cries harder into my shirt as I rub my hand down her back.

“I miss her so much, Connor,” she says into my shirt, her voice cracking.

“I know,” I whisper, “I know.”

I let her take all the time she needs, holding her.

“I've got you, sweetheart,” I say shakily. “I've got you all the time, even when you don't want me to. I just wish you could see that.”

I feel her nod against my chest and she slowly relaxes into me more. I hold her against me for a few more minutes, or maybe it's hours. I don't know. All I know is that I won't let go until she tells me to.

When she eases up off me to look up at me, I wipe away the tears under her eye with my thumb, swallowing. I try my hardest to smile. “Get some bowls from the kitchen and I'll set up everything in here.”

“For what?” she asks, swiping at her face with the sleeve of her top.

“You'll see,” I whisper, pressing a kiss to her forehead. She smiles weakly before slipping away from me into the kitchen.

I rearranged her chaotic setup in the living room, taking down some of the pillows from the couch and placing them on the floor just in front of it, piling them on top of each other. I

shut off her laptop, pausing her episode of *Desperate Housewives* and instead switching on the flatscreen across from the couch and putting on my favourite Disney movie, *Frozen*.

When she emerges back into the living room, she doesn't say much when I place some candy and popcorn into the bowls she brought, pulling out a few soda cans to place onto the table. I rummage through the box, finding face masks and face massage rollers too, placing them in the corner. I'm satisfied with our spread. Maybe I brought too much food. But there's no such thing, right?

Cat looks down at the coffee table and then back up at me. "You got all this for me?"

I nod. "I got all this for *us*. I'm having a self-care day too, remember?" I tease, smirking. I finally get a laugh out of her and I sit down on the couch, above where I piled the cushions on the floor, spreading my legs. I tap the pillows. "Sit down here."

Her mouth twists to the side in suspicion, but she steps over the cushion and takes a seat between my legs. "What are you doing?"

"Can I help you take out your braids?" I ask, brushing the half of her hair that is still braided over one side of her shoulder. She tenses at the contact. "I mean, if you don't want me to, I can just watch. I like watching you. Wait. No. That sounds creepy. I just mean—"

"You can help if you want to, Connie," she says, cutting me off, turning to look up at me. "Thank you for asking."

My hands shake a little when she turns back around and she starts to explain to me how to help her. She's already cut off the ends of her braids, so all I have to do is unravel each one and then gently brush out her hair and clip it back with the other parts that have already been tended to. It's a lot less daunting than I thought it would be, but if this means that I can help her next time, I'll get used to it.

I find a rhythm, detangling her hair and letting the soft curly texture run through my fingers. We mostly stay quiet, watching the movie and eating the snacks as we continue tending to her hair. As I watch her relax into me, telling me her favourite parts of the movie, I realise that I want to know everything about her. I want to know her life so well that I know her better than I know myself.

“Can I ask you something,” I ask into the silence.

“Of course. Anything.”

“What actually happened last year, Cat? You know, with the breakup,” I ask. I still don’t know the ins and outs of what went down. All I know is that a few months later, she turned into a different version of herself, and watching that growth without the context had always confused me.

“We just weren’t cut out for each other,” she explains easily, giving me the same bullshit answer she gave the guys when we were in Oliver’s pool.

“Okay, now tell me the truth, Catherine,” I ask gently.

She shifts beneath me. “Why?”

“Because I like hearing you talk, so talk.”

I watch her shoulders rise and fall and I slowly sink beneath her, caging her in on the floor until she settles into my lap. She only has a few braids left and we could both do with a break. I catch her hand on her knee, turning her palm to face up as I start tracing the lines across the patterns on her palm.

“I realised that I’m not the perfect person to put up with when I’m going through a hard time. Sometimes, I don’t even know why. I’m just... sad. Which sucks because I have so many things to be grateful for and be happy about, but there are times where just existing feels like it’s a chore and I want to crawl up into a ball and sit in my room for a while. Some people don’t know how to deal with it, or they just ignore it and that’s what I felt like with Evan. He was kind and he was sweet. He never said a bad thing to me, ever, but the years after my mom passed were *hard*, Connor, and nothing helped. And I had those empty feelings more and more often and I

thought it was better to cut him off. It was a sudden and rash decision, but I needed to be my own person without him because I didn't feel like I was the best version of myself. I felt like a burden. And maybe that's just me overthinking everything, but I could tell that we weren't happy."

I digest her words, trying to think of a response. "It's okay to be sad, Cat. It doesn't make you hard to deal with or a difficult person to be around."

She shrugs. "I guess. I just felt like I was being tolerated or put up with by everyone around me. Even my dad. It didn't feel like anyone actually cared. People would say that they're here for me and then never speak to me when I actually needed them. It was like another thing that someone wanted to check off their bucket list just by checking in on me that first month." I'm about to say something, but she continues talking. "With the breakup, part of me did it because I felt guilty because that year, I forgot my mom's anniversary. I was too busy and caught up in a relationship that I forgot, Connor. I *forgot* about her. My dad was already caught up with work, JoJo had just been diagnosed and she was already too sick to remember herself. It was my fault. I had one thing to do, one thing I promised her, and I didn't even manage to do that."

I swallow, my eyes stinging at her words. I made her feel like that day at the library. I made it seem like I forgot about her even though that is the furthest thing from the truth. "I'm sorry, Cat."

"What are you apologising for? You haven't done anything wrong. It's just me and my stupid brain," she replies, laughing lightly.

"I'm sorry for not being there for you when I should have. You know, in the library," I say thickly. She interlocks her fingers in mine, squeezing my hand tight. "And for anytime before that when you felt like you couldn't talk to me because you could have, you know. I never want you to feel like you're alone. I'm always here for you."

"You're here now," she whispers, "That's all that matters."

"I'm here now and I'm here forever," I tell her.

“Yeah?”

“Yep. Until you get completely sick of me and my baking,” I say and she laughs, the sound rushing over me like a wave. “Until then, I’m yours, Catherine. All yours.”

We manage to get through both of the *Frozen* movies in the time it takes us to eat most of the snacks and for us to finish doing her hair. Once we’ve cleaned up, I stand with my hands on my hips, waiting for my next plan of action.

“What next?” I ask.

She tugs her bottom lip into her mouth. “I’ve got to tame this mane,” she says, running a hand through her hair. It’s so fucking long and dark and curly and just *beautiful*. I can’t stop staring at it. At *her*. “Which means shampoo, conditioner, detangling and protective styling.”

“Can I help?” I ask immediately, not even thinking about it.

She frowns. “You’ve helped enough already, Connie.”

“And I want to help some more,” I say.

She studies me for a minute before she realises that I will fight her on this. She closes her eyes before nodding, walking towards her bedroom.

When we get to her room, she shows me all the products she uses in her hair and fuck, it’s a lot. She tells me how her Grandma JoJo used to do her hair as a kid and how it would take all day whilst she listened to reggae songs and told stories about her mom growing up in Jamaica.

When she guides me on what to do when she’s leaning over the bathtub, my hands curl in her soapy hair, scratching her scalp, I realise just how badly I’ve fallen for her.

“You know you’re the first guy to ever do that for me,” she tells me whilst she’s sitting in front of her mirror in her room. Her hair has been washed and detangled now and she’s twisting it. I asked to help again, but she told me she’d prefer to do this herself.

I'm deep within the millions of pillows she has on her bed, but I sit up, my eyes meeting hers in the mirror. "Do what? Help with your hair?"

"Yeah," she whispers. "I dunno. I think people are scared to touch my hair. Which is fair enough, I'd rather you ask before you get all up in there. But no one I've dated has ever asked me what I'm okay with and what they could help me with. And honestly, it's tiring as fuck having to deal with this on my own."

There's something in her voice when she says the last sentence that makes me think it's not just her hair she's talking about. Boys my age are fucking stupid. If I had a girl as smart and beautiful as Catherine on my arm, I'd be doing everything in my power to help her. I'd carry any of the weight she needed and she wouldn't have to think twice.

"You know I've always got your back," I say, winking at her. She shakes her head, laughing. "And I think your hair is stunning. I'd never do anything to make you feel uncomfortable. All you have to do is say."

"Thank you. I appreciate that, Connor," she says, dropping her eyes to the set of combs she has in front of her. When her eyes meet mine again in the mirror, my chest almost explodes. "I appreciate you."

I smile at her before dropping back onto the bed, feeling absolutely content.

TWENTY-SIX

CAT

HONEYMOON STAGE

YOU KNOW how every rom-com has that time in the story where the main characters have finally broken that barrier that was keeping them apart and they're seemingly happy and everything is going right for them until it suddenly isn't. We all know it. We've seen it done a million times and you're left screaming at the screen because you know that phase is just that, a phase.

A few months ago, that would piss me off. I'd probably stop watching the film or reading the book all together, trying to save myself from the heartbreak. But experiencing that in real life, you can't do that. You have to follow it through and *hope*. You have to see where it goes.

And I can see why characters do that now. Why they ignore every single red flag or overthink what could go wrong. Because this stage is glorious. Mostly because Connor is just a green flag waving at me and I don't feel like it's even a stage. It already feels like forever.

After the way Connor looked after me the other day, I realised that he would do anything for me. I realised that he's going to continue to do things for me just because he wants to. Not because I ask him to, or he feels forced to, but *just because*.

The only slight, minor, teeny weeny problem is the fact that I'm his sister's best friend and roommate and I'm also an idiot for inviting him over and Nora is still at home. She's supposed to be going to rehearsals, but she's insisting she

wants to hang out instead. Out of every day in the week, she wants to choose right now.

Fuck my life.

“Nor,” I press, running my hands down my face as she packs and unpacks her bag on the kitchen counter. “Just go. I’ll be fine.”

“Catherine, we’ve not hung out in *days*,” she whines. “I feel like a part of me is fading away when you’re not around. It’s like half of my body doesn’t function when we’ve not had an intense gossip session filled with snacks and an episode of *New Girl* playing in the background. I miss you, Cat.”

A theatre major, this one. An absolute drama queen.

I’ve been trying to subtly hint at her to leave, but she isn’t taking the bait. She’s already late to rehearsal as it is, but this girl loves to talk.

The image that she paints of our hang out sessions does tug at my heart a little. I do miss both of my girls. Especially since Elle went back to her parents house early to help for Thanksgiving this Thursday.

“I miss hanging out with you too, Nora, but I don’t want to pull you away from your rehearsals. *Waitress*’ is one of your favourites.”

She sighs wistfully at the mention of her favourite musical and the one she is supposed to be rehearsing for right now. “You’re my best friend, Cat. I can miss out on one rehearsal for you.”

I feel the guilt swell in my stomach. That’s the thing about the Bailey’s. They’ll drop everything for their friends and I’m the one lying to her face, withdrawing the fact that I have been hooking up with her brother for the last few weeks.

“Fine,” I say, sighing and her eyes light up.

“Great! I’ll go to Raja’s and get us some snacks,” she suggests, slipping on her coat, referring to the convenience store just across from campus. It’s our go-to for snacks or any emergency essentials and it’s too close not to go to it just for

the fun of it. She opens the door, squealing, “I’ll be back in a few.”

I sigh, ready to pull out my phone to text Connor to not bother coming over, but the door opens again. “Did you forget something already, Nor?”

“Yeah, actually.”

I look up, blinking rapidly at the man in front of me. “Connor?”

He shuts the door, shredding the space between us, grabbing my face between his hands and before I can even process it he crushes his lips to mine, making me gasp. His tongue slips into my mouth easily and I almost fall right off the high stool, but it doesn’t matter anyway because the second my hands curl into his shirt, he drags me from the stool, placing me onto the counter, kissing me hard.

I get a second to breathe when he starts to kiss across my neck, his hands finding their way around my back. The skin to skin contact sends a rush of pleasure down to my sex.

“Hi,” he murmurs into my neck, biting me softly. “I missed you.”

“Hi,” I giggle when his stubble tickles my skin, his hands moving higher to the strap of my bra. “It’s been two days since I saw you, Connie.”

“And I’ve been missing you for two whole days,” he whispers. His fingers dance across the seam of my jeans, teasing and retreating as he dips his hands in and then back out again. “Can I take these off?”

I don’t know when I started panting, but I’m suddenly finding it hard to breathe again. “Nora’s going to be back in five minutes.”

“Five minutes?” he asks, pulling my bottom lip into his mouth before releasing it with a *pop*. My legs go weak at the hungry gaze in his eyes as they roam over my body before he looks up into my eyes again. “Funnily enough, that’s the perfect amount of time I’m going to need to have my way with you.”

I tilt my head to the side. “What do you mean?”

“I mean returning the favour for what you did for me the other day,” he murmurs, catching my chin between his hands as he lowers his mouth to the shell of my ear. “As hot as it was watching you getting off with my dick stuffed down your throat, it’s only fair that I get on my knees for you too, Catherine.”

“You mean– You want to–” I stumble over my words like a fool when my head rolls back as he kisses across the base of my throat.

“I love it when you’re lost for words,” he mutters between kisses on my skin, “I fucking love it. But as you said, we have five minutes, so maybe we can just skip to the part where I eat you out. How does that sound?”

Again, no words come.

“Get on the couch,” he demands.

I don’t waste any time doing exactly as he told me, scrambling over to the couch where the blinds are closed in the living room. I reach for the button of my jeans, lifting my hips to make it easier to take them off. Connor makes his way over to me, shaking his head at me.

“Did I tell you to do that?” he asks, tutting. The way he’s turning me inside out is completely embarrassing.

“You’re wasting time,” I groan, sounding as desperate as I feel. We probably only have four minutes now. Maybe an extra minute or two if she stops to talk with Mr. Raja for a while like she does sometimes.

“Don’t underestimate me, sweetheart. I could make you come in two minutes if I wanted to,” he murmurs. A needy moan leaves my mouth just at his words and he’s not even touched me yet as I look up at him. He chuckles. “Do you want this?”

“Yes.”

A satisfied hum comes from the back of his throat as he lowers to his knees in front of me, taking over and pulling my

jeans off me until I'm left in nothing but my blue panties. The desire in me only grows when he stares directly at the wet spot and just the heat of his gaze makes me wetter.

He runs his thumb on the inside of my thigh, too close to my heat. The slickness from my pussy coats his finger when he reaches high enough and my thighs tremble. "So fucking pretty and so wet for me, aren't you?"

My head falls back onto the headrest, unable to look at him. "You've got three minutes now, Bailey. Stop with the dirty talk."

"I'll stop when I want to stop," he groans, "Are you going to be good for me and let me do this for you? I know how much you like to be in control, but you don't have to do that with me."

He rips down my panties, causing me to gasp as the rush of cold air pushes against my clit when I'm bare in front of him. Just knowing that I'm this wet in front of him, my whole body starts to ache, needing attention.

"Fuck," he mutters. I'm about to tell him to get on with it, but his thumb presses against my entrance where I'm eagerly waiting for him, soaking wet, causing all rational thoughts to stop. He collects my arousal, pressing his thumb against my clit and I almost come on the spot.

He circles his thumb around me and it feels like my body is betraying me. Just from the simple touch, goosebumps arise across my chest and on my legs. My thighs quake, my hips instantly bucking upwards to gain more from him, but he doesn't do or even say anything.

"Connor, please," I beg, sounding as pathetic as I thought I would. "Don't- Don't tease me."

He listens immediately, penetrating me with one finger. A loud moan escapes my throat – so loud and sharp that I don't even recognise it came from me. He was right. Two of my fingers feel like what one of his fingers feel like inside me. He pushes in deeper and I have to turn my head onto the headrest, gripping aimlessly onto the cushions.

“Oh, *God*,” I cry out when he pumps into me faster.

“Is this what you wanted, hm? Did you want my fingers deep in your tight pussy for the first time while you try to rush me with this work of art?” he asks, his voice low and annoyingly sexy. I barely mumble an *mhm* when his thumb starts to pay intense attention to my clit and I almost burst into flames. “I want to hear you say it, Catherine. As pretty as your pussy looks, as good as it’s going to taste, I need you to say this what you want. What you need.”

His words cause my thoughts to fall right out of my head. No one has ever talked to me like this before. The way he switches from his adorable nervous self to this fucking sex God terrifies me as much as it turns me on.

“Connor,” I whine when the pleasure builds in my lower stomach. “I need...”

I don’t even know what I’m trying to say. Connor’s second finger starts to tease at my entrance and my mouth clamps shut, trying not to let out another moan. “I’ll give you whatever you want, pretty girl. I know you’re good with words, so don’t get shy with me now.”

“God,” I groan, my whole body feeling weaker by the second as I try to move my hips along with his fingers, but my brain and my body get confused with wanting to let him do his job or needing to help get myself to the edge quicker. I settle for the former. I relax into the couch as he continues to pump his fingers in and out of me so fast that I forget that he was talking.

“Are you speechless right now? I never thought I would see the day,” he muses, thinking this is the perfect time for jokes as he tries to push his second finger inside me. One of his fingers is already huge as it is, I don’t think I can take another.

I regain my voice. Sort of. “I can-t...” I whimper when he manages to get the tip of two of his fingers into my tight heat. “Connor, I can’t.”

I look down at him finally and he has the smuggest, sexiest look on his face that another shuddery moan leaves my mouth without permission. He still continues to tease his fingers and I open my legs wider, trying to help.

“You can take it, baby. Just breathe for me,” he murmurs, and I do exactly that. I relax so much so that all my senses come alive again and I grow wetter until he manages to fill me with two fingers to the hilt. *Fuck*. “That’s it,” he encourages and my head spins.

“Stop. Talking,” I bite out.

“Happily,” he murmurs and he finally presses his mouth to my clit, sucking it into his mouth.

I swear I’m dying.

My legs and arms go weak as he continues to move his tongue seamlessly in time with his fingers pushing mercifully in and out of my pussy. My whole body reacts to him, becoming suddenly sensitive. When his teeth graze against my clit, my stomach clenches, my thighs shake and I come all over his tongue, waves of pleasure pulsating throughout my entire body.

When I think I’ve settled, his fingers still deep inside me, he manages to pull out another orgasm from me and my reaction is so immediate I don’t even get to think about how loud I’m being. A huge part of me doesn’t care. I just want to feel good, and that’s exactly what Connor is doing.

He pulls his fingers out of me, sucking them into his mouth and my mouth parts, panting as he tastes me again, keeping his eyes locked with mine. I pull his shirt into me, capturing his lips to taste the saltiness of both of us together and he groans into my mouth.

“That’s my girl,” he murmurs against my lips. “Do you like how good you taste?”

“Yes,” I whisper when his tongue slips into my mouth. When I come back down to earth, my heartbeat doesn’t let up and I realise how long has passed. “You need to—“

“Go?”

“Yeah.”

He blinks at me. “I probably should, shouldn’t I?”

“Yeah,” I say again, because apparently I can’t form any more words than that.

“What if I don’t want to?” His voice is so desperate and whiny, my thighs start to clench again. He brushes his nose against my neck. “What if I wanted to stay with my head between your legs forever?”

“Then I’d tell you that you’re obsessed with me and you need to get help,” I say, trying to laugh, but I end up moaning when he nips at the skin on my neck.

“Already tried,” he says, “Want to know what the doctor prescribed?”

“Let me guess,” I muse, “Something to do with how the only cure is to get one last taste?”

“Exactly. Now can you put me out of my misery and let me? Doctors orders.”

“As good as that was, I doubt you could make me come in less than a minute,” I say, leaning down to pull on my panties and my jeans. He watches me carefully, not taking his eyes off me for a second. “Time to go, big guy.”

“Fine.” He rises off his knees, towering over me. He leans down, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. “You want me to wait? I’ll wait. But it’s you that’s going to suffer because your fingers will never be as good as mine and you’ll constantly be comparing the two.”

He leaves me stunned as he casually walks out the room, throwing a wink over his shoulder.

Even after Connor’s gone and I’m laying in my bed with Nora watching *New Girl*, I can feel him *everywhere*. I even consider coming clean for a second when we have a deep and long winded discussion about the last book we read together. When she looks at me and tells me excited she is for me to spend Thanksgiving with her family, I realise how royally fucked I am.

TWENTY-SEVEN

CONNOR

THE BAILEY LODGE

THANKSGIVING WEEKEND AT MY PARENTS' lodge in Aspen is one of the best times of year. There's something about the woody cabin vibe of our lodge, the warmth of the fireplace and the golden maple leaves that fall from the trees onto our path.

Every year without fail, we have a huge thanksgiving feast. Usually Cat, Wes, and Elle's parents and siblings would come over too, but this year only Catherine is staying over. Wes opted out the second that things were getting tense with his parents, which he's not explaining to me. His parents' relationship has always been complicated, and I know as much as his parents love him, it's not always easy to be around them during the holidays. Elle's moms have both been begging her to go back home to see them so she didn't come. I don't mind it just being my parents, Nora, and Cat.

We always spend the day prepping and reorganising the shelf of children books in the large living room before we get settled for dinner. Then we have the best dinner that I have no help in – for everyone's sake – and we talk about our New Year's resolutions early instead of saying exactly what it is we're thankful for and spend the rest of the weekend playing board games and eating leftovers.

The only thing I don't like is the Thanksgiving morning hikes that we always go on. I don't mind the work for the most part. I love a hike with the guys on the morning of our games, but my mom has been on a health kick recently, which means she's storming ahead of us, a huge backpack on her back as we

walk downhill on a trail we've walked a million times, overlooking the frosted hills and mountains in the distance.

"I hate this," Nora pants, almost tripping over as she latches onto Cat's arm for stability. "I don't get why we have to do this every year. I'm not getting anything out of it."

"What more do you need than the fresh outdoors!" my mom calls, still pushing forward. It amazes me how she has so much energy even though she's been up from four this morning to do her morning yoga. There's something magical about this place that brings out the best in us. Or, the worst in us in Nora's case.

"This feels like a punishment and I've not even done anything wrong," Nora whines, kicking the leaves in front of her. "You guys could have gone without me."

"Then it wouldn't be a tradition, you gremlin," I mutter, pushing her slightly and she stumbles. She turns back to me, glaring.

"Yeah, and we have a guest. It would be unfair to drag Cat along and let you stay at home," my mom says, walking backwards now, smiling at Cat. She winks at her and Cat laughs nervously, shoving her gloved hands into her jacket pockets. It's taken all that I am not to clasp my hand around hers, and guide her through the woods.

"That could be easily solved if you let us *both* stay at home," Nora says, tugging on Cat's arm and they both laugh.

My mom tuts, shaking her head before she turns back around. "Come *on*, Nor-Nor. I'll even let you put the star on the tree this year if you hurry your ass up."

"I'm not five anymore, mom," she groans, flicking her hair out of her face before speeding up her walk slightly, leaving Cat behind to fall into step beside me. "I still want to do it, though," she adds giggling, walking beside my mom.

I look down at Catherine as we step over a pile of twigs, stepping around a dent in the earth.

"You okay, sweetheart?" I ask, low enough for only us to hear. My dad is only a few steps behind us, whistling along to

whatever 80's song that stuck in his head today.

Cat looks up at me, the harsh brightness from the sunshine making her eyes glow. She's been quiet since we got here and I'm sure it has to do with the phone call she had from her dad earlier when she locked herself in the guest room to talk to him.

"Yep," she replies, popping the 'p' as she steps over a branch. "I'm already exhausted. Nora's idea actually doesn't seem too bad now that I think about it."

I tut at her, shaking my head. "That sounds like a loser attitude, Cat."

"If being a winner means having to wake up at seven in the morning to trek through the woods, I'll be a loser any day," she replies, sighing. I laugh with her and my dad joins in, stepping in the middle of us.

My dad's got one of those optimistic yet cheeky smiles on his face, like he's about to say or do something stupid. He's wearing a huge headband around his head, pushing his hair back as sweat drips down his forehead. I have no idea what he's been doing this whole time to get him so sweaty so easily.

"So, Cat, how come your dad couldn't make it this year?" my dad asks, huffing.

"Dad," I warn when I notice the small frown that etches across her mouth.

"No, it's okay," she assures us, dropping her gaze to the ground as we continue walking. "He's just been busy."

"Too busy to hang out with the Baileys?" he asks, nudging himself into her. He grins at me, hoping that I'd join in, but I don't. Instead, I shake my head.

"Mostly because there's more physical activities involved than anyone bargains for," I mutter.

"That's what makes us so special, Con," my dad replies. Cat scoffs. "You don't mind it, do you, Catherine? You used to love going on walks with us as a kid."

“I don’t mind it at all, Mark. It gives me something to do,” she replies, looking over at me across from my dad. “Your son over here has me working overtime trying to tame his team and writing about football is a lot harder than I thought it would be.”

My dad narrows his eyes at the both of us when our gazes snag on each other. “Well, I’m sure he’ll make it up to you one way or another.” My face heats at his insinuation and he has the audacity to wink at us and walk in front of us.

What is it with my parents and winking today?

Cat looks up at me, that loopy smile that makes me weak in the knees. She’s wrapped up in a beanie, a large scarf and a huge coat as she shoves her hands deeper in her pocket, standing on her tiptoes. “Do you talk to your dad about me, Connie?”

“Of course,” I murmur, and when I think that no one is looking, I quickly press a kiss to her lips and she stumbles slightly in surprise. She glances down the trail, everyone bustling ahead before she steps into me again, kissing me back.

When we start walking beside each other again, I bump my shoulder into hers. “Is everything okay with your dad? I know you didn’t really want to talk about him, but if you need to get anything off your chest or I don’t know... need a punching bag to hit, I’m free game.”

She barks out a laugh before narrowing her eyes at me. “What do you think my dad has done to me, Connor? He’s just busy and a bit distant. It’s fine.”

“Yeah, but it’s the holidays, Cat. He should try harder to be with his daughter,” I mutter angrily. “I mean, I get why you don’t want to talk to him. He’s been a bit of a dick recently and you deserve someone who’s going to treat you better than that. Someone who isn’t going to let you down because they find other things more important. Because there *aren’t* any things that are more important than you. I wish—”

I stop my rambling when I realise that Catherine hasn't responded to anything that I said or interjected. I turn and she's not next to me. Instead, she's a few steps behind, her mouth parted. I tilt my head at her, silently asking her what's wrong as the anger washes through my body towards her dad.

"You really care about me, huh?" she asks, holding my gaze.

"Of course I do," I whisper, shaking my head at the sad look in her eyes. Has that not been obvious? I hold out my hand, waiting until she steps into me, holding onto my hand. "Now let's catch up, so we can go back to the house."

Later, when the sun has set into a deep orange along the horizon, I wander back down stairs to where the fresh smell of my mom's famous gravy is brewing on the stove. I've always loved this part of Thanksgiving. The moment of momentary peace where everyone is doing their own thing before dinner.

Nora is off on the phone to Ryan in the living room. My dad is sorting out the wood for the fireplace, walking back and forth from the garage and into the living room.

When I walk back into the kitchen, my mom and Cat are laughing over something, passing each other as Cat cuts up vegetables on the counter. Everything about it just being my mom and Cat in here feels so right. So special. Like it was just meant to be. She fits in so perfectly here with my family. With me.

She's wearing the most gorgeous green dress I've ever seen in my life. It cuts off at her thighs, flowing out, the corset hugging her curves nicely, shaping her ass. She flicks her long curls over her shoulder as I continue to watch her from the doorway, completely mesmerised.

"You know what?" my mom starts, glancing over at me. "I prefer these quieter days with just us rather than when everyone else is here. Is that bad?"

"No, I think it's perfect," I answer before Cat can. She turns around, surprised to see me, but when she does her

whole face lights up as if she hasn't seen me all day. "Can I steal you for a minute?"

"Hopefully not for too long." My mom narrows her eyes at me and then turns to her. "I need my sous chef."

Cat wipes her hands on a tea towel, answering my question for me. She walks over to me, a giddy smile plastered across her face. When my hand extends to her, she takes it willingly.

TWENTY-EIGHT

CAT

GOOD DIFFERENT

MAYBE IT'S the fact that this is the second year in a row where I haven't spent Thanksgiving with my dad. Or maybe it's because I'm surrounded by people who care about me and are there for me no matter what, but this night feels extra special.

As soon as I took Connor's hand, I knew I should have asked where he was taking me, but part of me is wanting to see where just hoping for things to happen will get me. Which means blindly following him into the backyard of the Bailey's lodge until we reach a secluded bench tucked away between bunches and tall trees.

It's probably the only place we'd be able to get privacy this weekend. Stealing secret kisses on the hike was risky, but he has this weird ability to make me want to take those risks. To stop trying to be a picture-perfect girl and just do whatever I want. And doing whatever I want includes being curled up in Connor's lap on a dusty bench as we both look up at the clear night sky, constellations shining down on us.

I feel so completely safe and comfortable with him that I'm not concerned when we've been sitting down on the bench for almost ten minutes, neither of us saying anything, just enjoying the other's presence. It's weird when I think about it.

On paper, he's exactly the type of guy I would forbid myself from dating or even having a crush on. He's popular, he's handsome, he's annoying, he's cocky when he wants to be and he's sarcastic. But he's also sweet, caring and gentle and he makes me feel like he's always going to have my back as

long as I have his. When I started on my project, this was the very last thing I was anticipating would happen.

“I come here every year, but this year it feels different,” I whisper to him.

“Good, different?” he asks me, his voice thick with emotion.

“Yeah, a good different,” I say back.

I look up at him and he’s looking down at me like I’m the brightest star in the galaxy. The small tug of a smile on his lips makes me realise just how hard I’ve fallen for him.

As much as being with Connor feels like one of the best things to ever happen to me in a long time, he loves to torture me.

After helping Emma and Mark set up the dinner table with Nora, singing along to old R&B songs, we’re all sitting in the dining room and Connor’s large hand is resting on my thigh under my dress.

For the last ten minutes, the skin to skin contact has made me feel like my head has been spinning. No one has noticed or even cared to ask why his chair is so close to mine, but Nora’s chatter about *Waitress* fills up most awkward pauses.

The way she tells a story is so engaging that you have to keep your eyes on her at all times so you don’t miss anything. I’ve always wondered if people just have that natural ability of being able to tell a story in a way that leaves you wanting more.

Once she’s told everyone at length about her new year’s resolution – which is going to be trying to stop watching *Hamilton* three times a week and try to settle for two – Emma’s red-cheeked smile wanders over to Connor.

It’s probably the raging mommy issues I have, but there is something so special about Emma Bailey. She literally looks like an angel and she acts like one too. She’s always got something funny or sweet to say. She always has an abundance of good advice even though she’s not that old.

Most importantly, she's always there for Connor and Nora and the rest of us too. As much as all our parents got along, I always thought that the other parents resented Emma and Mark because they were so young raising the twins and they never seemed to complain. They got lucky in the kid department and Connor and Nora got lucky in the parent department. They act and they seem like a true, real family, which is why being here hurts as much as I love being included.

“What’s your resolution going to be, Connie?” Emma asks, resting both of her elbows on the table, dropping her head into her hands. Connor clears his throat beside me and I slip my hand under my dress to rest on top of his, squeezing his hand slightly.

“Good question,” he hedges, laughing nervously.

This is his family. He doesn’t need to be nervous around them. Or is it me he’s nervous around? I can’t tell.

I used to think that he was lying about needing help talking to people. An egotistical part of me even thought he was doing it just so he could hang out with me. But there’s something deeper underneath the Connor that I know that’s holding back something that could be bigger than the both of us.

“I’m going to try to work harder on and off the pitch to make sure my game is as good as it can be next season,” he explains. Emma’s face tilts, her mouth immediately forming into a frown. “What?”

She shrugs, shaking her head, but Mark answers for her. “How about we do it differently this year? There’s only five of us anyway. Let’s make resolutions that *aren’t* related to school or work. Can we do that?” We all nod in agreement and Nora lets out a long sigh. “Em, do you want to go first?”

She nods happily. “I am going to take better care of our garden. It’ll give me something to do when I’m not teaching,” she replies.

Mark slams his fist on the table, dramatically and all of our eyes widen. “Thank god for that!” he exclaims and we all

burst out laughing. I swear he's one of the most dramatic people I have ever met. "I've been pretending to digest these Brussel sprouts all night. They taste like shit, honey."

"Whatever," Emma says, pushing him away with one hand as he tries to kiss her on the cheek. "What about you, then? Because if your resolution isn't taking regular showers, I'll have to pull out the divorce papers. *Again.*"

"Touché," Mark mumbles, sliding back into his seat. I take a bite of my crispy potatoes as he thinks. Connor's hand rubs absentmindedly on my thigh, his thumb drawing circles on the apex of my thighs. "I'm going to finally start doing couples yoga."

"With me?" Emma beams, clasping her hands together as she blinks up at him. Nora snorts beside me.

"Who else?" Mark retorts.

"I don't know. You could have hoes," she responds, mumbling and we all burst out into hysterical laughter.

When we've all settled down, Nora puts up a fight about how her *Hamilton* obsession technically counts as her hobby and part of her degree, but her argument is too weak and her mom makes her change her resolution. Instead, she vows to volunteer more regularly at the animal shelter. Connor decides he wants to read more fiction books and I decide to take better care of my physical and mental health with more self-care days and less studying.

I love moments like these where everything just feels so *right*. There's no negative energy. No one is talking about oblivion or trying to sour the mood with sad memories. It feels like we're living in the present, trying to get somewhere that isn't where the bad memories have been held.

For so long, I've felt like I was being held back by my past and the grief, but now I finally feel like I've stepped out of the quagmire and I'm finally living again.

TWENTY-NINE

CAT

“I WANT TO SEE YOU. ALL OF YOU.”

THE DAY after Thanksgiving is always my favourite. It's the quiet in the air after a chaotic few days. It's the Bailey's lodge with an abundance of food that you know will never run out. It's the large fireplace in the living room that is always radiating warmth. It's the looks Connor keeps giving me from across the room as we pass each other in the house.

Today is a day for relaxing, stuffing ourselves with more food and cake and playing board games.

As mean as it is to admit, I'm glad my dad isn't here. It wouldn't feel right. Most times we've attempted to get together with the Bailey's, the night ends in some sort of argument that my dad usually starts. Since he tried to make me feel bad about not spending the day with him after *he* was the one who cancelled on me, I'm waiting until Christmas to have a real conversation with him. It's like having a moody teenager as a parent.

Speaking of moody teenagers....

After more complaining from Nora this morning as the soreness from the hike kicked in, we bundled up in our winter clothes and made huge mugs of hot chocolate, settling on the porch swing. The air is freezing, but being snuggled up next to my best friend and thick gloves around my hands, overlooking the leafy forest, it's one-hundred-percent worth it.

“Is it time?” Nora asks me, hauntingly, pulling her phone out of her pocket. She has a habit of making the tiniest things into blockbusters.

“It is time,” I reply, nudging her shoulder. She giggles, searching for Elle’s contact.

Living with the girls has given us some real attachment issues. When we’re separated for more than two days, I swear our bodies start to decompose. I’ve spent nearly every day of my life with them for the last eleven years, so it’s been hard having Elle away from us at her parents house. She’s been avoiding seeing them for months, and we know that being with her moms has probably stressed her out. Both of our signals are weak, so we tried to schedule a time where we could talk without the risk of the phone shutting off.

Elle picks up on the fourth ring, her tanned face filling the screen, her curly hair tied up into a ballet bun. Her cheeks are red, her lips a glossy pink colour and her dimples are popping out. Our Eleanor in a nutshell.

“Hi, guys! I miss you,” she says immediately, pouting. Nora already tries to fight me to fit us both on the screen, but I push her arm up and aim it a bit higher so she can see us both better.

“We miss you too,” I reply, glancing over at Nor as she nods. “How are things in Wonderland?”

Even though Elle’s moms only have two kids, Elle and her little brother Mason, they have the biggest house I have ever seen. It comprises of at least four separate buildings and three storeys. We got banned from catching the bus to their side of town as kids because we would spend all day up there playing hide and seek and one time we accidentally lost Mason when he was a toddler and Annie and Phoebe banned us. It was fun while it lasted.

Elle sighs, looking off behind her phone and then back to us. “It’s fine, I guess. Mason has a new bit this year since my mom got him an iPhone for his birthday. So, now whenever we’re out he films us and pretends we’re wild animals.”

Nora snorts. “That kid is so funny.”

“He’s a menace is what he is,” Elle mumbles, rolling her eyes. “How’s everything up there? I bet Emma’s been on

Connor's case again with the resolutions."

"How did you figure that one out," Nora replies, muttering angrily.

It's common knowledge that Connor has problems with talking about things that aren't to do with football, but he's working on it. I promised I would help him, and after this break, that's exactly what I'm going to do. He's improved a lot since the first disaster at my dorm, so the progress is slow, but still moving.

I nudge Nora in the arm. "Did you tell your moms about the Christmas recital?"

Elle shakes her head. "Not yet. I'm going to wait—" The sound of Annie and Phoebe's shrill voices take over Elle's voice and the screen too. Both of their eyes widen when they see Nora and I, smiling wide as they wave erratically.

"Hi girls! You look so grown up." Annie greets, still waving. Nora and I are laughing so hard at the fact that Elle has now momentarily disappeared from the screen as her moms take over. "I miss your wikkle faces."

"You're going to wait for what?" Phoebe asks Elle and I hardly get to hear the conversation before she quickly says goodbye and ends the call. That girl hides a lot from her parents, which I understand. They're extremely protective over her, especially after her accident last year which she's still technically in rehab for.

"Well," Nora says, getting up from the swing. "I guess that's our cue to get ready for dinner and board games."

"I guess it's time for you to get ready to get your ass beat," I retort, following her into the warm comfort of the house. She turns back to me, narrowing her eyes as she walks backwards.

"That was *one* time and I wasn't even paying attention," she argues.

"If I remember correctly, you were involved in a very heated conversation with your dad. Wes had to talk you down from a ledge when you were sulking all evening," I challenge. She just rolls her eyes at me and turns back around, walking

the right way. I giggle as I catch up with her, slinging my arm around her shoulder. “It’s okay, Nor-Nor. I promise I’ll go easy on you.”

“Whatever,” she groans through a laugh, pushing me away from her as we make our way into the kitchen. I move over to the window, placing our now empty hot cocoa mugs into the sink and I notice Connor sitting by himself on the bench at the side of the house.

What is he doing on his own? And how do I get to him without making it obvious. We’re supposed to be getting ready to eat and play board games in five minutes, but something is tugging at me to know what is going on in his brain right now.

“Don’t you think Connor’s been acting weird recently?” Nora’s voice startles me and I almost let the mug slip through my hands. I turn to her, resting my back against the sink.

“What do you mean?” I ask shakily. She shrugs, pulling open one of the drawers filled with snacks.

“I dunno. He’s always been uptight. We know that. But recently... I don’t know. Other than that slip up yesterday, he’s been more chill than usual,” she explains, sighing. “Maybe it was you.”

I almost choke on air. I clear my throat, trying to play it out. “What?”

“You know, with the thing you’re doing for the team,” she replies and I sigh. I need to work on keeping my cool around her whenever she talks about Connor. It’s not a good look. “Honestly, props to you. That team is a nightmare.”

“Tell me about it,” I mutter, although I know she’s only partly right.

As much as they irritate me and can be a handful, I love them all so much. They’re chaotic and loud, but the main thing is they care about each other and their sport. They’re dedicated regardless of the jokes they play and with the games I’ve watched them win, they’ve proved that more than once.

“This game is rigged. I’m not playing anymore,” Nora sighs, sulking back in her chair.

We’ve been huddled around the dining room table for the last hour after eating our dinner, and since we started playing Monopoly, we’ve had this back and forth with a certain drama queen.

“It’s not rigged, honey,” Emma coos, organising the fake money again. Nora peers beside her, looking over at the bank she’s set up and rolls her eyes.

“I think Cat’s cheating,” Mark says.

I gasp. “What!? I’m not even doing anything.”

“That’s the problem,” Connor says beside me, teaming up with his dad. He smiles at me, those brown eyes squinting as his cheeks turn the sweetest shade of pink. “You’re not even paying attention, yet you’re still ahead of us all.”

“Well, I keep getting distracted,” I mutter.

Connor tilts his head innocently. “Hm, by what?”

I’ve hardly been paying attention because all I’ve felt since I sat down has been Connor’s huge hand on my thigh. I’m wearing a long, light red dress with a slit along the side, which gives Connor the perfect opportunity to torture me. He’s had his hand there all night, silently squeezing, teasing me by dragging his hand higher up and then back down again. I’m not wearing anything under this dress and I’m terrified for when he figures that out.

I pretend to fiddle with my property piece in front of me. “Maybe I’ve just outsmarted you all,” I say coyly.

They all laugh and the game moves on around us. Connor squeezes my thigh again, not looking at me as he rubs his thumb up and down. If someone sees what he’s doing he’s going to get us both in big trouble.

“If Ryan was here, he definitely would’ve outsmarted you too, Cat,” Nora mentions, smiling at the thought of her boyfriend. Connor’s hand flexes on my thigh.

“Is that right?” I muse and she nods, sticking her tongue in her cheek.

“Yeah, how *is* Ry-Ry?” Emma asks, nudging Nora in the shoulder. “I’m surprised that was his first cameo of the night. How are things with you two?”

“Things are good. He’s just... busy,” she mumbles. We all narrow our eyes at her, but she doesn’t seem to notice, or care. They’ve kept their relationship private from us and we never question it. He’s good to her... Most of the time. And she’s probably the best girlfriend he will ever have.

“Right. So he’s ‘busy,’” Mark says with air quotes, rolling his eyes as he turns his attention to Connor. “If you need me to beat someone up, Nor, I’ll do it.”

“Mark,” Emma chides.

“You don’t need to do that, dad,” Nora murmurs, shaking her head.

“I’ll do it, Nor-Nor, and you know I will. No one messes with my little girl,” he mutters before painting on a smile. “What about you, Con? Are you dating anyone? How’d things go with the girl you asked me for advice on?”

I actually choke this time, spluttering like a complete fool. All the Bailey’s look at me like I’m crazy and I pull up a glass of water to my lips, trying to sip discreetly. “Sorry,” I mutter, turning to Connor. “You asked your dad for advice on a girl? How sweet.”

“She must be pretty special if you asked for his advice,” Emma mutters and Nora snorts.

Connor’s eyes hood as he tilts his head at me. “Yeah,” he drawls, his hand moving further up my thigh. My whole body comes alive from his touch as his hand reaches the apex of my thighs where I’m aching for him. “She’s pretty fucking perfect.”

He doesn’t stop the movement of his hands even when I squeeze my thighs together. My arousal is completely covering his hand now and I swear I almost moan just from the slight friction.

“As sweet as that was, no swearing at the dinner table,” Emma responds, narrowing her eyes at him. He nods obediently as if he isn’t two minutes away from finger-fucking me under the table.

I push out my chair so abruptly that everyone on the table turns to me. I smooth out my dress as Connor rests both of his hands in his lap. I clear my throat. “I’m going to get a drink. Does anyone want one?”

Emma frowns. “We have drinks here, sweetie. I can get you one from the cooler.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m just really craving... tap... water.”

I turn around before I can completely register the confusion on their faces and hightail it to the kitchen. My entire body feels like it’s on fire and it needs to be dunked in an ice bath.

Just from the light touches he’s given me over the past two days, the desire in my lower stomach has just been growing. I feel like I’m hungry for him.

I’m a simple girl. I’ve always enjoyed sex. But there’s something about the sheer thought of sleeping with Connor that turns me inside out.

He’s got this kind, gentle and caring nature on the outside, but from the way he’s spoken to me with his face between my legs and when I was on my knees for him, I know there’s another side to him that I’m dying to discover.

I should have known the second I got up from the table that he would follow me. Still, I can’t hide the shudder that runs through me when he sneaks up behind me, wraps his arms around my waist and starts kissing me along my neck.

I melt into him instantly, my ass nestling into his lap as he keeps himself pressed to me without saying anything. “Connor.”

“Hm?” he asks into my skin, softly biting my neck as I swallow back a moan.

“Your sister and your parents are in the other room,” I say, trying to give myself some reason to stop. His fingers dance across my stomach. He touches my body like he just *knows* what to do with me.

“My parents don’t care. And for Nora, she’s too caught up in her own shit to notice,” he replies easily, still kissing me along my neck. My head lolls back as he presses himself into me and I can feel his hard erection against my ass. “You want me to make you feel good, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I breathe out.

“Then let me.” He spins me around, pinning me to the counter with his hips as I look up at him. He wets his bottom lip, but he doesn’t kiss me. “Here’s what we’re going to do. I’m going to say I feel sick from dinner and I’m going to go to my room to lay down. You’re going to play two rounds of Uno with everybody and by the time they want to move on to charades, you say you’re heading up to your room. I’ll wait for you. Don’t change. Don’t do *anything* to your hair. You’re perfect just like this.”

His rough words light me up inside. I pull on the hem of his shirt, pulling him down to kiss him hard. He stumbles a little at the force before smiling back into the kiss. “Okay,” I murmur.

“Okay.”

After doing exactly what Connor told me, I stand next to the huge window at the other end of the guest room, looking out at the night sky and the frosted window, the pale moonlight shining through the transparent curtain.

I hear the door click open and then shut again, a lock turning. I freeze in place. I never wanted someone as much as I want him. Never craved anyone as much as I do him, and the slow taunt of his footsteps make this process that much more gruelling.

I hear the shuddery breath he takes when he’s behind me and he pushes my curls over my right shoulder. I turn to him

slightly, but my eyes close the second his mouth makes contact with my neck, setting me on fire.

I feel beautiful. Luminescent.

He brings his mouth to the shell of my ear, his other hand playing with the strap of my dress. “Take off your dress for me, Catherine. I want to see you. All of you.”

THIRTY

CONNOR/CAT

THERE'S AN INDENTATION IN THE SHAPE
OF YOU

CONNOR

SHE'S FUCKING MAGNIFICENT.

The second that dress pooled to the floor, I was greeted to the sight of long expanses of dark brown skin. She is glowing in the moonlight as if she's spent the entire day being bathed in sunlight for this specific moment. The curls that drape along her back that are so easy to wrap around my fist. That round ass of hers sculpted perfectly as she stands on one foot and then the other, not turning around to me, letting me take her in from this angle.

As forward as I've been, I still want to tease her.

"What did you do last night, Catherine?" I ask, biting softly on her shoulder before she tilts her head back, resting it on my chest with a shaky exhale.

"What do you mean? We were together the whole day," she says, not getting what I'm hinting at.

The walls between my room and hers are thin, and I heard every single time she softly moaned my name whilst she touched herself to the thought of me. It drove me insane all night and I was seconds away from running straight through the walls and eating her out just the way she deserves, showing her how much better I am than her fingers.

I wrap my warm hand around from her stomach to cup her breast, swiping my thumb against her nipple and she lets out a soft moan, shifting beneath me.

I hum into her neck. “Yeah, you sounded just like that.”

“You heard that?” she asks, her hand joining mine on her stomach.

“I heard everything, sweetheart,” I whisper. She starts to move our hands further down her stomach, desperate and eager to do more, but I stop her.

Using the last shred of self-control that I have, I spin her around, having no time to process her naked body in front of me before I press my lips to hers in a frenzied rush of desperation, groaning as she greedily pulls my hair.

“I want to see you exactly like you were last night.”

Her breath hitches as she pulls away from me. “I’ve never.... No one has ever asked me to do that before.”

I run my hand down the side of her face, my fingers resting possessively on her collarbone. “That’s the thing, Cat. Every person you have been with before me doesn’t matter. Because from now on, it’s just me and you.”

“Just me and you,” she repeats, kissing me back deeply.

I walk her to the edge of her double bed, unable to stop my hands from running across her wide hips, feeling her curves beneath my hands as we don’t break our kiss.

It’s unfair that she’s completely naked in front of me and I still have all my clothes on, so I reach for the hem of my shirt, tugging it off. Her eyes light up with excitement as her hands fumble for the button of my jeans. I let her work them off me until I’m only wearing my boxers.

She sits back on the bed, looking up at me with those innocent brown eyes, resting her arms back behind her as her whole body is on display for me.

She’s fucking stunning.

Each time I look at her, my whole body aches with how perfect she is. How each part of her is just as pretty as the last. She unknowingly captivates me just by breathing, by existing, in my presence. It should be a crime for someone to look so good all the fucking time.

I lean down into her until her elbows buckle beneath her, not catching her lips the way she wants me to. As much as it's going to be torture for the both of us, I want to know exactly what she was doing last night so I know how to make her feel good, which means not kissing her until she tells me.

When her back hits the bed, her body instantly arches into me, her lips parting.

“Show me what you do when you're alone,” I say into the space between us. Her eyebrows furrow, looking both angry and intrigued at the same time. “I want to know your body like the back of my hand, cherish every single sound that you make just for me, know every single way to make you feel good.”

“You already know how to make me feel good,” she whispers.

Even though that statement fills me with pride, it's not exactly what I want to hear right now. I push off the bed, leaving her staring up at me before I hook my hand around her ankles. She laughs through a gasp as I pull her to the end of the bed. She leans up, shaking her head at me with a smirk as I kneel at the end of the bed.

“Show me what makes you feel good, Catherine, or I won't touch you at all,” I explain. Her chest rises and falls at my words and her tongue sneaks out, wetting her bottom lip. Fuck. I'm definitely not going to last. “I'm pretty good at keeping my hands to myself when it comes to you.”

“Your hand was up my skirt the entire meal, Connie. That alone tells me very differently,” she muses.

“And I've been dying for a taste of you since I felt how wet you were,” I reply gruffly, circling my thumb around the soft spot of her ankle. She shudders at my words and goosebumps arise along her legs.

“For someone who has such trouble speaking in front of crowds, you have the dirtiest mouth,” she mutters. Then she has the fucking audacity to raise her hand to her breast, circling her nipple until it hardens and I bite back a groan.

“Show me, Catherine. I’m fucking dying here,” I get out through gritted teeth.

She finally listens to me then, laying back on the bed and spreading her legs wider, propping one leg up onto the mattress.

This is a fucking sight – her legs opened in front of me, her pretty pussy on display just for me. Every part of her, inside and out, is perfect to me.

She slides her hand down from her chest, across her stomach and then down towards her heat. Her head is still tilted to the ceiling and I watch every single one of her movements like it’s the best movie I’ve ever seen in my life. I can see just how wet she is and when her fingers contact her arousal, her body immediately contracts.

“Fuck,” she gasps. I don’t say anything. I try to keep as quiet as possible, only focusing on what she’s showing me. Two of her fingers play with her swollen clit, causing my eyes to roll to the back of my head. It’s fucking uncomfortable sitting here, my cock desperate for attention as she gets herself off. Her pace increases and I almost lose my mind. “*Connor*,” she moans. Is it possible to come from that sound alone? “I can’t– Fuck. I can’t.”

“You’re doing so good, baby. Keep going,” I encourage, palming my erection in my lap. She continues working her fingers over her clit, not penetrating herself with any of her fingers, but her whole body starts to spasm. Her legs open and close around her fingers, tiny gasps escaping her lips that make my dick throb in my hand. “That’s it.”

I don’t know why I decided to talk, because the second the words left my mouth, her thighs shook as she came hard, twisting her face into the side of the bedsheets, stifling her moan.

I still don’t touch her as her body settles, her chest heaving. Her fingers still aimlessly move around her sex, but I don’t think she even notices she’s doing it. She looks so fucking hot like this – all worked up and dishevelled just for me. My Catherine.

When her eyes connect with me, a lazy smile on her lips as she leans up on her elbows, I know now more than ever how badly I want her. How badly I want her to feel the rawest part of me.

“Kiss me now,” she whispers, almost begging, “Kiss me anywhere.”

CAT

Since Connor shucked off his boxers and towered over me on the bed, my whole body hasn't been able to stop shaking. He's made me come multiple times just by *looking* at me. I'm fucking terrified for the moment when he's inside me.

I'm about to have sex with Connor Bailey for the first time and my thoughts won't stop spinning. What are we doing? Are we just hooking up, or are we more than that? Is this just a fling for this semester until he gets bored of me, or when he starts to get sick of my sad moods?

As if he can read my thoughts, he tilts my face to him, cupping my cheek with one hand. “I've got you sweetheart. You can stop worrying,” he murmurs, pressing a kiss to my lips. I let him melt into me for a second before I push him back slightly.

“Connor, what are we doing? I can't do this unless I know what we are,” I explain, feeling completely embarrassed. But I need some clarity. I've never been good at just playing it cool. “Are you my boyfriend, or not? Are we going to go on dates and hold hands? Are we just fooling around? Is this just a one-time thing or... what?”

He laughs quietly, kissing the side of my mouth, but I'm still frowning. “You're my girlfriend, Catherine. I thought that was obvious. I'm yours and yours only. You're the reason I want to get up in the morning just so I can make you smile. I want to be around you all the time. I'll hold your hand if that's what you like. I'll take you on as many dates as you want. I'll be the best you've ever had.”

The words weigh on me, almost making me dizzy. “Just like that?”

“Just like that,” he replies, kissing me deeply. He brushes my sweaty curls from the side of my face. “Great. Glad that’s all cleared up. Can we have sex now?”

“Yes,” I reply through a giggle, unable to stop myself from laughing at the absurdity.

I really should have prepared myself more for this because the second he rolls on the condom, braces his hands on my hips and lines up his cock with my entrance, I know my life is going to be irrevocably changed.

I’m already panting, a wet mess, helplessly desperate for him. He keeps his eyes locked with mine when he slowly – so *slowly* – nudges the tip into me. It’s hardly anything, but my whole body instantly responds to him and a soft whimper leaves my mouth. Even when he pushes more of himself into me, filling me up so fucking well, my eyes can’t help but close with pleasure.

It feels like I’ve been set on fire from the inside out. Every pressure point in my body tightens with need as he slowly rocks himself into me.

“Is this good?” I nod frantically, gasping for air when his nails dig into my hips. “Talk to me, baby.” He leans down and kisses across my breasts as he continues slowly pushing himself into me. “Is this good for you?”

“Fuck, Connor,” I whine, my hand tightening on the sheets of the bed. He tilts his head playfully, that smug smirk on his mouth, knowing exactly what he’s doing to me. He pushes into me again, filling me to the hilt and a loud moan escapes my mouth at the euphoric sensation. “*God*. That feels so good.”

He laughs quietly, but he styles it out with a groan when I finally manage to move my hips slightly.

“You’ve got to be quiet, Catherine. Can you do that for me?” My head falls back just from the words that leave his lips, causing me to slap my hand around my mouth, trying to be as quiet as possible.

“I’m trying,” I muffle as he continues pushing in and out of me, the sloppy wet noises filling the room as his face twists

with pleasure. I look down to where we're connected. Big mistake. The second I look down, seeing how much I've stretched to fit his shaft inside me, he brings two of his fingers to my clit, teasing me gently. "Go faster," I pant, needing the release now more than ever. "Faster, please."

He responds with one of the sexiest groans I've heard in my life as he does exactly what I asked. He thrusts his cock in and out of me, causing the bed to shake as I still try to cover my moans. Connor continues playing with my clit, trying to draw out my orgasm, but I can tell he's close too.

"God, Catherine," he groans, shaking his head with a laugh. "I wish you could see yourself right now. You look so fucking pretty taking all of me so well."

My chest fills with warmth. "Yeah?"

"Fuck, yeah," he replies. He works himself in and out of me at just the right speed, hitting the spot that needs it the most and I can hardly keep my eyes open, overcome with pleasure. "You fit so well with me, Cat. So fucking good."

It feels like my entire body, my soul, was made to be and do exactly this for and with Connor. It never feels like a competition or like we *have* to be intimate. He understands my body and my wants in ways I can't fully comprehend myself. All I know is that I am a complete fool for him.

His voice brings me back to the conversation. "Hey, eyes on me, pretty girl." I manage to open my eyes again, just at the second he pinches my clit and my head spins. He runs his hands from my hips to cup my breasts, circling his thumb around my nipple and I moan. "That's my girl."

That's what does it.

From all the stimulation and the words that come out of his mouth, my whole body comes alive before the orgasm crashes through me, my thighs and stomach convulsing beneath him. From the low groan and the jerk of his cock inside me, I can tell he came too. Even with my body in sweats, I feel like I've reached the peak of my existence.

We both breathe heavily, realising the severity of what we've just done. Or maybe I'm the only one overthinking this. I try to let my anxieties soothe when Connor disposes of the condom and crawls back into the bed next to me.

I'm still naked, but he pulled back on his boxers. He quickly pulls up his shirt from the floor, slipping it over my head seamlessly as it swallows me whole. I pull out my curls from the neck of the shirt and sigh, staring back at him as he sits crossed legged on the bed, mirroring my position.

When he blinks at me, he shakes his head, his gorgeous face turning red. "What?" I ask. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

A short laugh escapes his throat before he drops his forehead to mine. He brushes a strand of my hair behind my ear and I rest my hand on his cheek, stroking my thumb under his eye.

His throat bobs. "I just can't believe that I have you now."

"I can't believe it either," I mutter into the space between us. He runs his hand up my thighs. "Are you going to sleep in here tonight?"

He shakes his head. My heart dips. "I can't. My parents always wake me up whenever I'm here just like they used to when me and Nor were younger."

I hate how much that statement fills me with sadness. It shouldn't. I'm happy that he has two people who care so much about him. Two people who would do anything for him. I just wish it wasn't *my* mom that had to go. As horrible as it is to even muse, I can't help but wonder what it would have been like if my dad had been the one who died instead.

I instantly feel guilty just by thinking about it. I shake my head to get rid of the thoughts.

"Okay," I whisper, running circles on his knee. "Do you... Do you think we should tell Nora soon?"

He tenses. "Do *you* want to?" I shrug. "It's completely your choice, Cat. It's your friendship that will change.

Anything that happens with me and Nora, I can handle. I won't do anything until you tell me first."

I nod. "I don't know. Not yet. I don't like lying to her, but I want you to myself for a little bit longer."

He laughs quietly, still keeping his forehead pressed to mine. "Very possessive, aren't you?" I rock my head forward, pushing him back a little.

"What can I say? I'm an only child. I'm not used to sharing my toys," I say, shrugging.

"Oh, so I'm an object to you now? Have you been using me this whole time just for my body." He gasps dramatically, holding his hand to his chest.

"Yes, that's definitely the reason why I'm with you," I mutter, rolling my eyes.

"Don't worry, sweetheart. The feeling's mutual. Since that day in the closet, I didn't want anyone else in your vicinity. We thought I was crazy."

I giggle. "You *are* crazy, Connie."

"Yeah, I'm crazy for you."

For whatever reason, when he says it, it doesn't make me want to curl up in a ball and die of cringe. It only makes me realise how much more I like him and his strange personality.

He's just *my Connor*. And I don't ever want to let him go.

THIRTY-ONE

CAT

“I’M SWOONING.”

Hey, wanna hang out?

I LOOK DOWN at the message lighting up my phone and I don’t know why I hesitate. Apart from hanging out with my girls and spending time with Connor, I’ve been holed up in my room trying my hardest to perfect this article.

Surprisingly, I care a *lot* more about this project than anything I’ve ever done for Rotford’s class. I never thought I would be this interested in sports, but for some reason, I find myself having the absolute time of my life. As much as it stresses me the fuck out and it takes me hours to string a sentence together, looking back on it makes me realise just how much fun I’ve had in the last few weeks.

But, I do miss being able to have a real conversation with George in our seminars and lectures. Even when I’m in class, my mind is wandering away from me, thinking about the assignments I need to complete and a brown haired football player who won’t leave my brain.

The thanksgiving break was a God-send, but settling back into the school routine has been torture. Luckily, I know just the person who can ease that transition.

It only took a few more messages exchanged between George and I before we ended up at one of the cafe’s on campus. It’s tucked away at the back of the humanities building – so small you’d probably miss it, but we’ve been coming here a regular amount since freshman year. Only now I

feel like a stranger sipping my hot cocoa across from him in the corner of the room.

“It feels like it’s been years since I’ve seen you,” George says, ruffling his blonde hair before unwrapping his sandwich.

“I *know*,” I agree, “But I was in class yesterday.”

“Yeah, but you weren’t really *there*,” he says, waving his hands around his head to explain what he means.

I shrug. “Maybe it’s because I was too busy trying to make sure Rotford didn’t catch you sleeping. *Again*.”

He barks out a laugh. “That’s not what I mean.”

I don’t know why I’m hiding this from him. Even if we don’t hang out much outside of class, George is one of the kindest people I know. We’ve both told each other things we thought we’d never say out loud and we spend half of our time together giggling over stupid things. He never takes things too seriously, but I know that he can when he needs to.

He must have gotten really good at reading my mind those days I spaced out in class because when I get stuck in my head again, he waves his hand in my face, snapping me out of the trance. “Hey, what’s going on with you? This isn’t your usual *I’m stressed about assignments* face.”

I take in a deep breath, quickly scanning the almost empty room. I can tell him about Connor, right? As fun as it is keeping our secret, it’s getting pretty fucking hard not telling anyone how happy I am. Which is why I’ve decided to keep quiet in classes to not arouse suspicion.

“Can you keep a secret?” I whisper.

His eyes widen, shuffling his chair closer to mine. “Of course I can,” he says, crossing his legs before a worried expression takes over his face. “Unless you’ve killed someone, then I don’t know about that. Well... I’d have your back and everything but—”

“I’m dating Connor Bailey,” I blurt out. “We’ve been seeing each other for a while now and I’m pretty sure he’s obsessed with me. I mean, I’m not complaining, but you know.

The sex is so fucking good, but I don't know how to control how I feel about him because he's Nora's brother, and Nora's my best friend and I'm still working with the football team and it's all a big *mess*."

Word vomit.

Woah.

That felt... Good.

But also slightly embarrassing given the look on George's face. I'm sure this is the last thing he expected to happen when he suggested having a productive hang out session. Honestly, if I kept that inside me for any longer, I think I would explode. I was half-expecting Connor to want to come clean at Thanksgiving, but he's letting me make the decision. As hard as it is keeping it from her, I'm too frightened of her reaction to tell her now. George is a step in that direction, though.

"George?" I nudge his knee with mine as he continues staring at me.

His eyes slowly soften, a mischievous smirk covering his face. "That's why you've been so distracted. You're dick-whipped."

"I am not," I chide, my face heating.

"You just said that the sex is, and I quote, *so fucking good*," he says, practically choking on laughter. The few people that are in here turn around and when I give them a tight smile they resume what they're doing. "Innocent my ass."

"I never said I was innocent," I say, crossing my arms against my chest, pouting like a baby.

"Well, you fucking acted like it," he replies. I give him a minute to compose himself. "So, how is it?"

I sigh, my mind instantly turning to the one person who makes me feel happy and safe. "It's good."

"It's good?" he repeats. "How is it just *good*? But the sex is *so fucking good*? You're dating the captain of the football

team. Everybody wants a piece of him and you just think it's good."

I shrug. "He's incredible. Is that what you want me to say? That he's so great that I don't believe he's real."

My own words catch me off guard. They'll never be enough words to describe how I feel about Connor and about the way he makes me feel. I never feel like I'm being walked over with him, or like my needs don't matter. He's just the kindest and most patient man I could ever ask to be with.

George's jaw drops. Again. "Oh my God. You're in love with him."

"Shut up."

Before he starts to ask me for more details, I swiftly change the subject so we can talk about our work. We only have one assignment that we really need to work on and it's the least interesting topic we've had since I started this course. I'd much prefer to write about animal testing than the history of Colorado. So when we both have our headphones on, deep into work, I don't feel too bad for checking my messages with Connor.

CONNIE

I have an idea.

Is this a Wes-inspired idea or a Connor original?

CONNIE

I'll have you know Wes is not the only one who can come up with ideas, sweetheart.

I'll believe it when I see it.

What's ur genius idea?

CONNIE

You know how you've been asking me questions.

Yeah...

CONNIE

As much as I'm enjoying learning, I feel like you're getting the better end of it.

Really?

CONNIE

Yup. So I think we need to change it up a little.

Every question I get right, you have to take off a piece of clothing.

What if you get it wrong?

CONNIE

Then I have to take something off.

Right...

CONNIE

Sounds good, right?

It sounds okay.

CONNIE

OKAY????

If I take my clothes off, ur just going to get distracted.

Connie

Yeah. Ur right. It was worth a shot.

The three dots appear then fade away multiple times before he finally responds.

Have a good day without on my hot and sexy body. Can't wait to stick my tongue down ur throat.

Ur such a romantic. I'm swooning. *heart-eyes emoji*

“I don't think I've ever seen you smile that much.”

My head snaps up at the sound of George's voice. I didn't even know my music stopped playing and I've been staring at my phone with the cheesiest grin on my face for the last ten minutes.

“Whatever,” I mutter. “I always smile.”

He shakes his head. “Not like that, you don't.”

“Like what?”

“Like you'd do anything for him,” he whispers. My chest pinches. “I know that look, Cat. I think you're forgetting I have a boyfriend of my own who I am equally as obsessed with.”

“I'm not obsessed,” I challenge.

“And that's not a purple highlighter,” he retorts, nodding to the purple highlighter in my hand. I roll my eyes and he

laughs. “Fine. I’ll drop it. For now.”

When I get back to my dorm building, I’m exhausted.

I usually prefer to do work in my room or at the library, but hanging out with George is fun. I’m not great with study partners, but we know where to draw the line. Still, my body feels heavy and in desperate need of a—

I’m screaming so loud before my brain can even comprehend it.

As I tried to slip into my bed in the darkness of my room, my body contacted with something very hot and very naked.

I jump out of my bed, almost knocking over my nightstand as Connor slides out, his eyes wide. From the look on his face, I must still be screaming.

“What are you doing!” I’m *still* screaming, but at least words are leaving my mouth this time. Connor’s wearing nothing but boxers as his tall body stalks towards me, pressing me against my closet, his hand over my mouth.

“Stop screaming, Catherine,” he whisper-shouts. I bite on his hand and his eyes widen before he drops them.

“I’m not screaming!” *I’m definitely screaming.* “What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to surprise you and—”

“Cat?” Nora’s voice makes both of our eyes widen. I hold a finger in front of my lips, signalling him to keep quiet as I move towards my door, sliding the lock in place. Connor follows me. “Is everything okay? Lots of screaming going on in there. And not the fun kind.”

Connor tilts his head at me playfully.

I clear my throat. “Everything’s fine,” I say, my voice an octave higher than usual.

“Are you sure?” she asks, her voice scarily close to the door. My whole body fills with panic. I might have told George already, but ticking Nora’s name off my list wasn’t

apart of today's plans. Connor doesn't seem to care, though, because he comes as close to me as possible, his hands resting possessively on my stomach under my shirt.

"Yeah, I just subbed my toe. Honestly, I'm—"

My mouth closes when Connor's soft lips press against the hammering pulse on my neck, sucking. Claiming. My eyes flash with a question: *what are you doing?* And because I have a sadist for a boyfriend, he just smirks at me, continuing to kiss across my collarbone.

My eyes close as his hands work on the button of my jeans. I'm a fucking mess. My body is betraying me and there's nothing I can do about it.

"Cat?"

"Yeah?" My voice is a breathy confirmation. I clear my throat for the second time.

"Are you sure you're okay? You don't usually scream like that over a stubbed toe," Nora explains. God, she knows me too well. Apparently, so does her brother, because he works my jeans off my hips and I step out of them. *What am I doing?* I don't know, but it feels too good to stop. He presses his hardness into me. I can feel myself almost crying out in pleasure, but he slaps his hands across my mouth in a silent warning. "I mean there was that one time when you thought there was a spider in your room, but it was just a piece of hair."

"Yeah," I try to make my voice sound normal when Connor releases his hand off my mouth, but he keeps rocking his hips into me at a punishingly slow pace and my panties are so soaked I'm going to leave a mark on his boxers. "It was just like that."

I sling my arms around Connor's neck, pulling him closer to me. His hand finds my mouth again, covering it completely as his other hand digs into the flesh on my hips. Everything about this feels so wrong, but so fucking good. I keep rubbing my core against him as he continues to leave soft kisses across my face.

“Oh my god! Do you remember that time when you—” Connor swivels his hips, his cock pushing against my clit and I moan against his hand. The fact that he’s managed to keep silent is a mystery, but all of his muscles are tensing and flexing, displaying his restraint. The sight of his broad chest and the way it feels under my fingers sends another wave of pleasure through me as he keeps rocking himself into me.

Holy fuck.

I’m going to come like this.

“Stop!” I end up shouting.

“What?” Nora cries from the other side of the door. I’ve been completely tuning her out and it’s not fair to let her talk to me whilst her brother is about to bring me to orgasm.

“I just don’t want to listen to one of your stories right now, Nor. I’ve had a really long day and I just want to go to bed,” I get out in one breath. The two sentences sound like one word at the speed I’m talking, but I can’t control myself anymore.

“Okay, jeez. Don’t get your panties in a twist,” she mutters. I can just imagine her rolling her eyes. “Goodnight, sweetpea!”

“Night,” I grumble. I pin Connor with a look, pushing my hand against his chest and walking him back to the bed. When his back hits my pillows, I immediately sit in his lap, needing the friction now more than ever. “Don’t ever put me in that position again.”

He cocks his head to the side. “What? You didn’t enjoy it?”

“That’s not the point,” I argue, swatting his hands off me as he tries to touch my thighs. “How would you like it if I was controlling you like that, huh? Doing things to you I know you couldn’t keep quiet for?”

His grin splits across his face. “That, Catherine, sounds like my idea of heaven.”

“You’re ridiculous,” I laugh, squeezing his face until it squishes together.

“Just say you missed my hot and sexy body so we can get on with our day,” he replies.

I shrug, wanting to roll my eyes. “Yeah, I guess I missed you a bit.”

I throw out every idea I had when I got him down on the bed and instead straddle him like I’m a koala hugging a tree, and hold onto him until we both fall asleep.

THIRTY-TWO

CAT

MERRY CHRISTMAS

I HAVE no fucking clue who decided to call Christmas the ‘most wonderful time of the year,’ because all it brings me is stress, depression, and a tummy ache. Nothing stresses me out more than the thought of small family gatherings and a faulty Christmas tree that my dad pulls out from the garage two days before Christmas.

Don’t get me wrong. I love Christmas movies, shopping, all the festivities and everything that comes with the joy of the cold weather. What I don’t like is the way time suddenly slows down and people now have the energy to start being nice to people they didn’t care about a few weeks ago. I don’t like that I’m supposed to act like everything is fine when it is very far from it.

Take my dad for example. The same man who cancelled Thanksgiving plans with me now wants to spend Christmas day together. Just the two of us, he said. We’re a week away from Christmas and I can’t wait to get it over with. I couldn’t think of anything worse than spending the day with him.

Before I can wallow and complain about that, I’ve got to finish off my final interview with the football team before the playoffs in January.

From what I’ve shown Coach Mackenzie, he says what I’ve pulled together is the best the newspaper has seen in years. The small comments he makes make my dream of writing a column for the New York Times seem somewhat achievable. I know I’m a long way from that, but it feels more tangible now.

Being recognised for being able to change something and giving it my own spin is the exact feeling I've been chasing since I started this degree, and to finally be appreciated that way feels fucking fantastic. Euphoric almost.

The only downside is trying to tame a portion of the team for their last interview. I finally got them to start listening to me without Connor's interference, but since we came back from Thanksgiving break they've been harder to tame than usual. This week especially. I want to get this over with, so I can spend the rest of the day doing last minute gift-shopping with the girls.

I decided to split the team into groups of three or four, so I'm able to round up their experience and find out what they want people to learn from them. Connor's progress has been insane. He might take a bit of time to really dig deep and give a better answer than usual, but he gets there in the end, which is what matters more than anything.

Luckily for me, Wes has absolutely no trouble talking in front of people, so when I tell his group to come to the front, he will not stop talking.

He leans back in his chair, Connor and Sam both sighing as he goes on his third rant of the day. "You know what, Cat? You're exactly what this team needed. You've been so good to us even when we give you a hard time and you're perfect eye candy for Connor and—"

He stops when Connor elbows him in the ribs, causing him to wince. I press my mouth into a line, trying not to laugh as I say, "That's very kind of you, Wesley, but I'm actually trying to ask Sam if—"

Wes's eyebrows furrow. "Wait. Can I just double check that you've actually not used the name Wesley on any of the reports, because you do know my name is—"

"She knows, Wes. Just shut up for two seconds," Connor mutters, saving me.

When I mouth the words 'thank you' to him, he shrugs as if it isn't a big deal, but I see the way he blushes slightly. He

looks fucking adorable – his hair is messy, his cheeks are puffy and each time Wes says something stupid, his nose scrunches slightly. I just want to tackle him to the ground and kiss him all over his face.

“Okay,” I say, punching in the last of Wes’s rant into my laptop before turning to Sam. “So, what did you think about this experience? Did you find it hard or challenging in any way? Is there something I could have done better?”

Sam sighs a little, running his hand through his hair. “I think it was okay. Sometimes I didn’t know what to say. You know, when you asked us what the most irrational superstition I have is. Mostly because my family are very superstitious and they’re *all* irrational,” he explains and we all laugh. I’ve added in a section to the blog where it’s just a ton of random questions followed by all the boys’ answers. It’s been one of my favourite things to work on so far. “So, the only thing you could have done better is–”

“Nothing,” Connor cuts in, shooting Sam a look before turning to me. “There’s nothing you could have done better, Cat. Everything you’ve done has been perfect and there is absolutely no criticism for you whatsoever.”

I can’t help but laugh at the seriousness on his face as he says that.

“None?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Zero.”

“I guess that answers my question I was going to ask you then,” I get out through my laughter and Wes and Sam snort.

Connor tuts, leaning in slightly. “No, you’re missing one thing,” he whispers. I tilt my head at him, silently asking him to continue. “I think you need to add something about how proud I am of you. I know it sucked a little at the start, but this is exactly the kind of thing that you needed and what you’ve managed to make out of some random kids from Colorado is incredible. You should be really proud of yourself.”

My eyes instantly welled up with tears. I always cry when people say nice things to me. It’s a part of me I’ve never been

able to change and sometimes I don't think I want to.

I always feel those kinds of words of encouragement right down to my core. It weighs on me and it becomes the only thing I can think about for hours – sometimes days. And when the words come out of Connor's mouth, that feeling increases tenfold.

“Yeah, that too,” Wes mumbles and then we're all laughing again.

CHRISTMAS DAY

Home.

Home.

Home.

I haven't been back to my old neighbourhood across from the Bailey's and the Mackenzie's house in months.

My dad is always at the office and never home. I know I have a spare key and if I ever wanted to feel closer to my mom, I could have gone back home. Since she's passed, nothing has ever felt right about coming into the house knowing she won't be in here.

For months after her death, I kept having the same recurring dream that one day I would turn up and she'd be back in the kitchen making her famous rum cake. I'd walk over to her, ready to steal a bite, but she'd swat my hand away and tell me to wash my hands. I'd turn back around towards the sink, wash my hands and when I turned back around she was gone. Again.

It was more of a nightmare. I would wake up in sweats, or I would scream so loud that my dad would come into my room and hold me until I fell back asleep. Then one day he just stopped doing that. I would scream and cry and wait for someone to hold me, but no one ever came. I'd somehow have to soothe myself back to sleep and pray that the nightmares wouldn't come.

When my dad answers the door, I don't know why he looks so surprised to see me. His black hair is slowly greying, his dark brown skin is ageing, and he isn't dressed up like he usually is. Frankly, he looks a little lost and messy. I can't tell if he's staring at me because it's been a while since he's seen me or if it's something else.

I quirk my head to the side. "Dad," I press and I wait for him to meet my eyes. "Are you going to let me in?"

He nods before shaking his head. He opens the door wider. "Yes, love. I'm sorry- I..." he stutters as I make my way through the door, undoing my layers, ready to hang them up behind the door. "You just... You look so much like your mom."

His words make me stop in my tracks. It's not what he said – I get that all the time, especially when I'm in the neighbourhood. I see her in me whenever I look in the mirror, I don't need people to tell me. But my dad only says that when he's really missing her. He is always put-together. Mostly because he has to be. He's the mayor. He has responsibilities. But it's extremely rare that he is that out of control with me.

I just smile at him, not sure what to say. "Is there anything I should help with for dinner?" I ask, walking into the kitchen. I hear his footsteps pause behind me before he slowly starts to make his way in here.

No matter how busy my dad got, he always loved to cook, so I'm not surprised that the oven is stuffed with food even though he's only cooking for us two and some to bring to JoJo.

"I think I've covered everything," my dad says, looking over me as I open the lid to the pot of steamed vegetables. "You can set the table."

We move around each other silently as we get the table prepared. It shouldn't be this hard or awkward trying to have a conversation with my dad. Over the phone, he would have the excuse of needing to do something with his assistant, but he can't do that now it's the holidays.

Once the table is set, neither of us have said anything until we're sitting across from each other, our plates full of food. I slice my fork through the mashed potato.

"How are things at work?" I ask quietly before stuffing my face with some of the food, whilst I wait for his answer. I avoid eye contact and continue pushing around my food.

Dad clears his throat. "Things are good. We're hoping to get through the new improvements to the school district in the new year, which is our main priority right now," he answers. Our gazes clash and I hold his stare. "Speaking of... How is college?"

I swallow, nodding. "It's good. If you remember one of the last times we spoke over the phone, I was telling you about this project I was doing with the football team." I brace myself for an interruption, but it doesn't come. He's actually listening to me... "Well, I'm still finishing it up. It's, like, this huge blog piece with the team and some explanations for people who don't know anything about football. It's been fun to do besides regular classes."

I could have continued, but I hate feeling like I'm talking too much so I stop and wait for my dad to say something. He nods once. Twice. "That sounds good. I'm glad you've got something fun to do."

There's a pause between the two of his sentences and again, I don't know how to respond. Something has changed in our relationship and I always knew there would be a time where I'd get older and we'd eventually grow apart. I've seen it done in a million films and in books, but when I saw the way Elle and Nora have such good relationships with their parents, I thought my dad and I would always be close.

I wish I knew if it was something I did that drove us apart. If there was something I could fix with my two bare hands and put us back together.

We both know why we've drifted apart and neither of us want to talk about it, but it's been *years*. I want us to go back to how it was.

I want us to have Christmas dinner like a normal family and open presents together and joke about how my mom would hide presents around the house. We'd spend all day searching and if we didn't find them, we'd have to wait until we actually found them for us to have them. Sometimes I wouldn't find one for months and it would end up being one of the best presents I've ever received.

A smile tugs at my lips just at the thought of it. "Do you remember when—"

"Look, Catherine, I don't—"

We both speak at the same time and I shake my head at whatever I was going to say. "No, you go," I whisper, stabbing my fork into some chicken, mumbling as I add, "it wasn't anything important."

"Okay," he replies, pushing his plate forward slightly as he crosses his arms against his chest. "Look, Cat." He repeats before sighing. "I apologise for not being in more contact with you and I know things are tough between us, but you should know that I don't want it to be like this."

I swallow the lump in my throat, my eyes immediately stinging at his words. "Then why is it?"

He runs his hand down his face. "Because..." He takes another deep breath and I wait for him. It's been five years since mom passed and we've been in this weird purgatory ever since. "Work has been busy and it's not like you've tried to reach out either."

"That's because whenever I do, you either cut me off, or we end up arguing," I retort, my face suddenly feeling hot.

"And why do you think that is?" I open my mouth, ready to respond, but nothing comes out. "I know you think I'm the bad guy, but things have been hard for me too. I didn't just lose your mom, I lost my *wife*, Cat. And I don't think you're fully understanding that."

I do understand that. I've spent months grieving my mom in different ways. The ones that hurt the most were where I

looked at it from the point of view of my nana who lost her daughter and my dad who had lost his wife.

“Do you seriously think I don’t think about that? I think about it all the time. Understanding your situation has nothing to do with our relationship,” I argue, tears fighting my eyes to fall.

“Then why are you making this so difficult?”

“Because you don’t care about me, dad. Not anymore. Sometimes it feels like you never did. Like it was some sort of show you put on for mom. Because if you did, you would have called me on her anniversary or texted me or *something*. You would have made more of an effort to see me on Thanksgiving, or try to have a conversation with me that isn’t about school or work.”

He kisses his teeth. “Of course I care about you. You’re my daughter.”

“No, you care about me *because* I’m your daughter. You care about me out of guilt, out of the fact that blood is the only thing tying us together, *not* because you are actually interested in how I am doing,” I challenge, my voice growing louder. I can see the annoyance on my dad’s face and I just blink back at him.

“Don’t you dare say that, Catherine. Just because I don’t call you doesn’t mean I don’t care. I do, I just—”

“Have things that are more important than me,” I finish for him, pushing out my chair and standing from the table. “Thank you for dinner. Call me when you feel like being a dad again.”

I get out of the house as quickly as my legs can carry me. Dad doesn’t say or do anything to stop me. He lets me leave.

When I’m practically sprinting towards the end of the estate, I stop, considering turning around and interrupting Connor’s family dinner. The Christmas tree in his front yard glistens and their living room light is on.

I could walk up to their door, knowing that they would answer, but that only makes me feel worse. They’ll just feel sorry for me, stuff me with food and beg me to stay the night.

When I make my way to the end of the road, accepting the fact that I'll have to walk the twenty minutes to campus, I pull out my phone and call Connor. He answers immediately.

"Hi," I say shakily, slowing down my walk. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Catherine," he replies, and for whatever reason I can just *hear* his smile. "I miss you."

"I miss you too," I say. *So much*, I want to add. There's so much I want to tell him. So much I want to let him know, but I bite my tongue. Today is supposed to be a happy day. A celebration. Not a day to complain about how broken my family is to a person who wouldn't understand.

"Hey, what's going on? You don't sound like yourself," he murmurs and it sounds like he's moving from one place to the next. "Talk to me."

I sigh, annoyed at how he can see right through me. Or, well, hear. "I just missed your voice. Christmas dinner with my dad wasn't... fun. I just want to go home."

"Home?" he repeats. "What do you mean? You're already at home, aren't you?"

I swallow, trying my hardest not to cry. "No. I mean, home with you. Wherever you are, that's where I'm home. That's where I want to be."

For a second I feel like I've said the wrong thing. Am I coming off too desperate? All I hear is the soft sound of his breathing as I walk through the cold winter air, pushing forward.

"Then come home to me, Cat," he says finally. My chest deflates with emotion.

"I can't," I whisper, my voice shaking.

"Why?"

"Because that's not fair on you," I admit.

"What isn't fair is the fact that you feel like you're not important to me and you're more important than anyone," he

replies.

“I don’t want to ruin your Christmas.”

“You’re not ruining anything. My family love you. You know they do. It can be like old times. We’ll play board games and—”

“You’ll all feel sorry for me,” I say, cutting him off. “I can’t do that today. I *can’t*.”

He lets out a frustrated breath. “You’re not listening to me. I’m telling you that it’ll be okay. They won’t ask any questions and—”

“You’re not listening to *me*, Connor,” I say, my temper rising. “You don’t get it, okay? You can say they won’t ask, but that doesn’t matter, because they’re all thinking it. They’ll wonder why I’m by myself and your dad will call my dad it’ll be a whole thing and I just can’t do that right now.”

I don’t even realise that I’m crying until the tears spill down my cheeks and dribble on my chin. I take in a sharp breath, stopping at the end of the road.

“Okay,” he says quietly and instantly feel bad for snapping at him. “Okay, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I say, running an annoyed hand across my face. “I don’t want to argue with you, I’m just having a hard time right now and... I don’t know. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” he says softly. “Just know that it’s not me that wants this. I want you with me all the time.”

“I know,” I whisper. I half expect him to respond with ‘Do you?’ but he doesn’t. I need to get in bed and reorganise my feelings before I start to go into overdrive.

“And Catherine?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re my home too. You always have been and you always will be,” he replies, his words soothing me, running right through me like water. “When you want to make a real home, a small house or a big one, make one with me. Please.”

“I’ll hold you to that, Connie,” I whisper, knowing that I can trust him, knowing that he’ll help me make my dreams come true. “Have a good Christmas. I lo—” My heart almost crashes straight through my ribs. Was I just about to say that I loved him for the first time over the phone? That’s crazy. There’s no way I’ve already fallen that hard for him.

“Cat?” he asks, his voice low as I try to collect myself.

“I love the weather,” I blurt out. “You know the crunchy leaves, the dark sky, the way I can see my breath in the air, I love it all. So much.”

He laughs a little, and I can imagine him throwing his head back. “I love the weather too, Cat. So much you don’t even know.” We both know what he’s talking about, but he just adds, “Bye, sweetheart,” and he ends the call.

Even when the cold nips at me, I know I’m going back to a quiet dorm and in a couple days, both the girls will be back and I’ll truly be home again.

THIRTY-THREE

CAT

JEALOUSY, JEALOUSY

YOU CAN ARGUE ALL you want about what the best day of the year is, but we all know there is something extremely magical about New Year's Eve. I'll have a load of anxiety throughout the day until the next morning, but that doesn't make it any less magical.

There's something so comforting about being surrounded by my friends in a random house as we sing and dance along to Christmas songs and old 2000's hits waiting for the ball to drop on the flatscreen in the living room. And this year, that feeling has grown tenfold because it's Connor's hand I have on my back as we move through the crowds.

I honestly didn't think I would have ended up back at Jason Basse's party after the way the last one ended, but it's given me a boyfriend, so I shouldn't really complain. Not only that, but it's given me the chance to hope again, to dream, to *want*.

We tried to time our arrivals so we would be the first two here out of everyone in our friendship group. Connor picked me up with Wes and apparently Archer has been on duty to pick up Elle and Nora twenty minutes from now. We got here over half-an-hour ago, so we'll have almost an hour to ourselves until they turn up.

Which is why I can't help myself and when we're deep into the crowded room, I lean up and kiss him deeply on his full lips. He stumbles slightly in surprise, but I tug on his shirt, keeping him close to me and he smiles against my mouth.

“What was that for?” he mumbles, pulling back from me, grinning. I absentmindedly run my hand through his thick hair, resting my hand on his neck.

“Just because,” I shrug, giving him another kiss before starting to walk beside him.

It’s not *just because*. Well, mostly it is, but it’s also the fact that the music is just right and I want him. There’s always that fear of someone catching us and I want to be a little reckless. Plus, he looks so fucking hot today. He always does, but today especially.

His hair is messy because the second he got to my door and I answered it, he pushed me against the closed door and kissed me like his life depended on it. He’s wearing dark pants and a white button down with his sleeves rolled up, showing off his huge tanned arms.

He’s got this new sense of confidence around him. Maybe it’s because I’ve stopped my weekly interrogations and the play-offs have been going incredibly well for the Titans. Either way, he looks happy and comfortable and I love that for him.

He slings his arm around my shoulder, tugging me into his side as we walk around. I’m surprised no one has said anything to us yet. Part of me has been waiting until we get caught and another part of me is too afraid to straight-out tell Nora what’s going on between us. Besides, Connor is one of the most popular guys on campus so I’m surprised people aren’t drooling at his feet right now.

It feels good having these secret moments between us and I’ve been resisting the urge to soft launch our relationship on Instagram. I know we have to wait a little longer until I’m fully comfortable with the idea of telling Nora.

“What would you do if I just blabbed and told every living soul that we’re together?” I ask when we get to a quieter corner of the house. We’re both leaning against the windowsill, using the warmth from the radiator beneath us. “Like, would you completely freak out, or what?”

He looks down at me, a lazy grin hanging off his lips. “If I could scream at the top of my lungs that you’re my girlfriend, I would do it in a heartbeat, you know that.”

“Do I?” I tease, unable to stop myself from curling my hands into the bottom of his shirt.

“Do you want me to prove it?” he argues, squinting his eyes at me. My heartbeat increases at the challenge in his voice and I nod, running my hand over his stomach, feeling him tense beneath me.

He steps away from me and I’m ready for him to do whatever he’s suggesting to prove it to me, but a brunette I have only spoken to in passing steps in beside us.

Hailey Dermont is known across campus as a playgirl. I never talk down on women, but this one makes me see red. If she was all up over someone else’s man I would have questioned her from afar, but having her *this* close to Connor makes my blood boil when there’s nothing I can do.

Hailey is a gossip, and if I tried to tell her to stay away from him, she would blab to every single sophomore at Drayton and that is not the kind of attention I need right now. I’ve had a public relationship before, and I know how easily they can blow up in your face. The last thing I want is to put us in the spotlight.

Just as I expected, she completely ignores my existence as she steps closer to Connor with her back to me, but I can still hear her whispering. “So, Con, it’s been a long time.” Just the sound of her voice makes acid pool in my stomach.

“Not really,” he replies, his tone clearly bored. “I saw you at the game. You know, when you had Oli’s number on your cheek.”

She laughs so loud I swear my eardrums almost burst. I know my man is funny, but he’s not *that* funny. Connor looks over at me, eyes wide and clearly apologetic.

“Oh, yeah. Don’t worry. You’re still my favourite player. Oliver is such a prude. You’d think he would want some of

this—” She gestures to herself and her tiny dress. “But apparently not.”

Connor just blinks at her as I try to burn holes through her back, hoping she’d just disappear. Should I say something? I mean, what’s the worst that could happen. If she wants to blab, it would give me an excuse to tell Nora.

“Okay?” Connor says, his eyebrows scrunched. He’s clearly confused and doesn’t want to talk to her, but he can’t ask her to leave. “Look, Hailey, I’m kinda in the middle of—”

“I said you can call me Hails, last time, remember?” she teases. My temper goes from mild to fucking unbearable when she starts to trail her finger on his arm. I smile, holding my ground as I try to wait her out.

“Well, *Hailey*,” he bites out with more force and I watch her flinch back. *That’s my boy*. “I’m trying to tell you that I’m busy and I don’t—”

She cuts him off. “So, who are you kissing at midnight?”

He looks down at her. “Not you,” he replies. He looks at me and his eyes shine before he looks back down at her. “If you could open your eyes, you would have been able to tell we were in the middle of a conversation.”

He manoeuvres away from her to stand beside me, immediately wrapping his arm around me as she spins around and her mouth hangs open. “I’m sorry,” she says with disbelief. “You’re blowing me off for... her?”

My stomach twists. This is exactly what I didn’t want to happen. I’ve always been pretty confident with my looks, but it took some time to get there. Growing up, I’ve always felt like I wasn’t as pretty as everybody else because I’m not white, blonde and skinny, but that should have never been my thought process. Having darker skin and slight curves makes me beautiful and I’ve learned to love myself in every way that counts.

When I see the way Connor looks at me and compliments me, I feel even more special, so I should not be feeling insecure around her. She’s pretty, undeniably, but I can’t tell if

she's Connor's type or not. It shouldn't matter. His type shouldn't matter to me, since I'm the one he's chosen. I'm the one he wants. Sometimes I need to get that in my stupid brain.

His arm around my shoulder tightens. "Yes, is that a problem?"

Her eyes widen. "I- I mean.... You could have anyone you want, Con, and you're with her?"

He lets out a nervous laugh. "I don't remember saying you could call me 'Con,' Hailey. Let's stick to first names only to make you understand this easier," he says sternly. His face hardens and I have to hide my grin. I like this side of him a little too much. "When I'm talking to someone else – looking at them like they're the only girl in the entire room – that should be enough of an indicator that I'm not interested in anything else. In case that isn't clear, I don't want to talk to you. Especially after you mentioned how you tried to sleep with my teammate and my friend whilst trying to make a move on me. I hope for all of our sakes that you find something better to do in your spare time, Hailey, because I really don't think you can put this on your CV. And for God's sake, leave Oli alone. The poor guy is probably frightened of you."

Holy shit.

I can't tell what is better: the look of pure horror and embarrassment on her face, or the fact that that is the most I've heard Connor talk to another person in months. I just want to jump into his arms and tell him how proud I am of him for sticking up for me when I lost the words.

"Okay, chill," she scoffs, "that was not needed at all."

"It was," he replies. She just blinks at him, her head cocked and eyes still wide. "Come on. Don't act like this is the first time you've tried it. You're just annoyed that I've turned you down more than once and you've had your fun with everyone else on the team. Which, by the way, I'm not shaming you for. You do you, you know? Whatever. But when I try to get out of a conversation with you, that doesn't give you the opportunity to be rude to my girl. I don't ever want to hear you say a single thing about Cat ever again. Got it?"

My chest blooms with pride. As much as I know I can usually stand my ground, I like the feeling of Connor protecting me like this. I like the way he talks about me and defends me. It makes me feel like I could drop all of my trust into the palm of his hand and never have to worry about it ever again.

“Good to go?” I ask him as her mouth twists in disgust. Connor nods at me and we walk away, faster than we’d both admit, to the other side of the room.

When I turn to lean against the wall, Connor’s body coming closer into mine, I can’t help but laugh. Tears are springing to my eyes by the time he starts to laugh too. “That was insane. I mean, I knew you were popular, but I didn’t know people were that desperate for you.”

His face suddenly turns serious. “You know it’s only you for me, don’t you?”

“I know,” I reply. His eyebrow crunches as if he doesn’t believe me. “I know, Connor.”

“Good,” he says, leaning down to press a kiss to the side of my mouth. “What I said was true, too. You’re the only person I see when I walk into a room and you’re there. I mean that. The whole world falls silent when you’re near me, Cat. Do you know how distractingly beautiful you are? Like, I feel light-headed whenever I’m around you. Can you even comprehend how insanely maddening it is to just be in your presence?”

I suck in a breath. “All this talking practice has turned you into a poet, Bailey,” I tease to cover up the intense feeling I have running throughout my entire body.

“Tell me you understand that, Cat, or I’m going to start to feel like I’m going crazy,” he murmurs, his voice so low it makes my stomach summersault.

“I understand,” I murmur and I kiss him on his lips, letting his mouth linger for a second before pulling away. “Are you going to be my midnight kiss, Connie?”

“Yes, Catherine, I’ll be your midnight kiss and every kiss you ever have after that,” he responds, kissing my nose. I immediately scrunch it in response, shaking my head. “I’ll kiss you again at midnight on January first, the second, the third, the fourth, the fifth, the sixth.” He smiles wide. “Stop me, or I’ll keep going,” he murmurs and I shake my head. “Then a big, long one on your birthday, January seventh. Then the eighth, the ninth, the tenth....”

When he continues to list every day of the month until March, I’ve finally gotten sick of listening to him say numbers. We’re still against the wall and I look up into his brown eyes and I swear I see a future in them.

Our future.

Because there is no future I want to be a part of where Connor Bailey doesn’t recite days of the month to me, vowing he’s going to give me a kiss on every one of those days. *That’s* the future I want. With him.

“New year’s resolution, go!”

It’s a minute to midnight and Connor and I have managed to pull ourselves into the back of a crowd so we’re slightly hidden from the rest of our friends. It’s freezing out here, but Connor’s arms around my shoulder, pulling my back into his chest is all the warmth I need.

“I already told you my resolution,” I say, turning in his arms. His hands now find their way on my hips, rocking me into him as I sling my arms around his neck.

“You can have more than one,” he whispers, “Do you want to know what mine is?”

“Okay.”

“It’s to make you the happiest girl on the planet,” he says seriously. My chest pinches at his words. “I’ll wait for you, I’ll listen to you, I’ll take care of you. I’ll do anything for you, Cat. Anything you want, I’ll do it. Anything you need, I’ll give to you.”

“I’ll do the same for you,” I whisper, my voice shaking.
“That’s how this works, isn’t it?”

“That’s exactly how this works.”

He holds my gaze when the fifteen second countdown starts around us.

I’m not afraid of falling, or jumping straight into this anymore because I know he’ll catch me. I know he’ll tell me that I’m okay and talk me out of my mind, or hold me when I want to stay there. He’s exactly the kind of man girls dream about being with.

And he’s mine.

Always.

Fireworks explode above us and his lips meet mine.
“Happy New Year, sweetheart,” he murmurs against my mouth.

“Happy New Year, Connor.”

THIRTY-FOUR

CAT

“FICTIONAL MEN.”

I'M COMPLETELY CONVINCED that it is a universal experience, as a woman, to wake up crying on your birthday.

I don't know why it happens, but it happens every year without fail. Even when I was a kid and my parents would wish me a happy birthday, the second I opened my eyes and I'd just start sobbing. I've never known why, so I've just accepted my fate as a Cancer moon that I will wake up having an existential crisis on my birthday.

Elle and Nora know these antics, which is why we've all managed to fit onto my small double bed in my room and eat waffles whilst an episode of *New Girl* plays in the background.

For all of our birthdays, breakfast in bed is an unspoken tradition, so I wasn't surprised when they came barrelling in here at nine-am this morning with trays of assorted breakfast foods. It's been a while since we've all sat in the same room and it feels good.

I don't have any plans for the day other than hanging out with these two. I would usually go to a party or something, but this year I've been out of my bed more than I'd like and I want to stay in with my girls for once.

I try not to make a big deal out of my birthday, even though I'm pretty sure turning twenty is a big deal, but I can't bring myself to care. The thought of getting older is mortifying and I know I won't always look this good forever, so I might as well cherish it whilst I can.

“Oh my god, I love this episode,” Elle exclaims, shoving strawberries into her mouth as she snuggles beside me, her dark brown hair tied neatly into a ponytail. “This is the one where Nick thinks he’s going to die when he gets that ultrasound.”

I sigh, knowing exactly what this episode entails. We’ve probably watched it over a hundred times between the three of us and it never gets boring. It’s one of those episodes in a sitcom where it touches on serious topics whilst still being hilarious. I swear I had to just stare at a wall for a while after it ended.

“Bit of a touchy subject since *someone* is getting on in years,” Nora mumbles, bumping her arm into mine. She puts on one of her Southern accents. I guess we’re doing this today. Great.

“Okay, calm down. You also just turned twenty, so you’re not that much older than me,” I argue.

Nora rolls her eyes. “Well, I actually *enjoy* my birthday, and you don’t. I can’t wait to get old and be a grandma. I don’t know if Ryan and I will even have kids, but I want to be *someone’s* grandma.”

She sighs wistfully and leans over me to look at Elle. “Don’t look at me,” she replies, eyes wide as she holds her hands up. “We all know I’ve not dated anyone since Toby Fisher in the fifth grade and that barely lasted a week.”

It’s true. For reasons none of us can understand, Elle has never dated anyone. She’s been on dates here and there, but nothing ever serious. She loves to joke about how she’s still a virgin at almost age twenty, but I can tell it gets to her sometimes. It shouldn’t matter though. The right person for her will come along when they’re ready.

Nora rolls her eyes before looking at me. “Don’t look at me, either. Children are heathens. As much as seeing men with children is hot as fuck, I don’t want one *inside* me and I *definitely* don’t want one screaming and crying all day.”

Elle hums in agreement. “Mason is an absolute menace. Everyone says they want a brother until they actually have one, and trust me you don’t want one of him.”

Nora blows a raspberry. “You guys are no fun. Connor’s too shy to get a girlfriend, Wes would make some poor girl happy by impregnating her and marrying her immediately because he’d feel bad and Archer... I don’t have a good read on him yet. He either fucks girls religiously and has a set of strict rules, or he’s a virgin.”

I can’t help the laugh that escapes my throat at her reading of the boys. “He looks like a Viking, there’s no way he’s not slept with someone.”

“Yeah, there’s no way,” Elle mumbles in the agreement.

“I guess I’ll have to take one for the team,” Nora concedes, shoving some fruit into her mouth. “Anyway,” she says, turning back to me. “Don’t be scared of getting older, Cat, be scared of death.”

“That is precisely what I am afraid of, Nor, thank you.”

“Oh,” she whispers.

We just stare at each other, neither of us saying anything. Not because of the morbid conversation, but because when we both start to laugh at how stupid that interaction was, I realise that she is probably the only person besides Elle that I can laugh like that with.

I want to tell her about Connor. I don’t want to lie to her.

I’m going to tell her.

Yep. That’s officially my birthday wish. I’m going to tell my best friend that I’m dating her brother.

I’m going to tell her.

Here goes nothing.

“Nor—”

A loud knock at the door pierces through her laughter and we both freeze, our eyes widening. No one ever comes to visit us unless we accidentally leave something behind in class. We

never get our deliveries sent to our door because it's a service some people only use when they want to pay for it instead of going to the dorm post room.

Plus, it's more embarrassing for our student delivery guy. Can you imagine being someone's lab partner and having to turn up to their door the next day because they ordered a vibrator that they can see the packaging of when they pick up the box?

We all get up, using the distraction to place the dirty dishes in the sink whilst I go to answer the door. As expected, Chris stands at the door holding.... A massive bouquet of purple roses in a marble vase. What the hell...

"Catherine Fables?" he asks, his face completely blank as if he doesn't have the world's most gorgeous set of roses under his nose.

"That's me," I whisper. He shoves the roses into my hand and I almost stumbled backwards. "Who are these from?"

"I am not at liberty to say, but there's a note somewhere," he mumbles, peeking into the bush and pointing at a white folded card in the middle of them. "Merry Christmas, or happy Valentine's Day, or something."

I laugh. "It's January 7th."

He doesn't say anything else, probably realising it's above his pay grade to engage in small talk with the students. He turns and walks away as I'm left to look at this gorgeous sight before me. No one has ever sent my flowers before – except from the one time Elle and Nora picked me up some from the grocery store when I had Mono.

I gently move the roses aside so I can pick out the note that rests in the middle of them. It is written in his handwriting, a tiny heart dotted on the 'I' in my name.

To my Catherine.

Twenty roses for your twentieth.

*I am so proud of you everyday.
You're my favourite person ever.
Love from, Connie.*

I hear Nora and Elle's voices coming from around the corner. Before I can comprehend the sentiment in the note, I shove it into my pyjama pocket.

Nora comes into view first. "Who was... Ohmigod!" Her screech is so loud I move back into the kitchen with them to rest the flowers onto the counter and her mouth doesn't close. "They're gorgeous, Cat!"

"Holy shit!" Elle screams, bouncing up and down as she sits on the stool, staring up at them, her head in her hands. "Who sent these to you?"

Since the last game that we all went to, Elle has known something has been going on with Connor and I before I was ready to realise it myself. So, now, as she looks at me with her honey coloured eyes, I can tell she wants me to tell the truth, but I bite the inside of my cheek.

I shrug. "I don't know. Chris said he couldn't say."

Elle frowns as Nora fuses over them. "There wasn't a note, or something?"

"Nope," I say, popping the 'p.' Elle's frown deepens and I feel the guilt churn in my stomach. I hate lying, but I'm also terrified as to what is going to change between us when Nora eventually finds out.

"Well, it must be someone from Drayton, because they're the only people who have access to the Post-To-Dorm system," Nora explains, still thoroughly inspecting the flowers. She squeals when she looks up at me. "You've got a secret admirer, Cat."

"Apparently," I mumble, twisting the note Connor left in my pocket.

She squeals again. “This is amazing! We need to figure out who it is immediately and then Elle needs to start dating. Imagine all of us on a triple date.”

“That would be terrifying,” I mutter.

“Definitely,” Elle adds, “You and Ryan are disgusting around each other.”

“Oh, I’m sorry that I love my boyfriend,” Nora retorts. This is an argument that no one will win. We all know this, but Elle likes to try. I use the opportunity to pull out my phone to text Connor about the flowers only to see there’s already a message from him.

CONNIE

Do you like the flowers?

They’re gorgeous, Connie. Thank u so much.

CONNIE

Only the best for you.

I’ll take you out on a proper date this weekend. Be prepared.

Prepared for what....?

CONNIE

It’s a surprise.

Happy Birthday, Cat. I really, really, REALLY like you. Like so much.

Thank you.

I really, really, REALLY, like you too, you idiot.

When I shove my phone back into my pocket, I can't help the huge smile that is plastered across my face, my heartbeat unable to settle.

For once on my birthday, I don't feel like the world is going to crash and burn, or that I'm out of place. I'm always going to feel a little lost, that's just a natural part of growing up, but I don't feel entirely alone. I know I have the girls and a boyfriend who will always have my back.

"Who do you think sent them?" Nora asks, snapping me out of my daydream as she continues admiring the flowers.

"I've got no clue," I lie, shrugging.

"This is crazy. Someone is clearly head over heels for you and you've got no clue. It's a perfect premise for a book," she replies, her cheeks turning pink just at the idea. She seems more excited than I am and I know it's going to crush her when she finds out that it was her brother that sent these to me. "And *purple* roses. Do you know how rare they are?"

"I mean, those things only happen in books, right?" Elle says, enabling her delusions. "One of the last books I read, the guy filled her whole room with flowers just because he was five minutes late to her birthday dinner. I'm not settling for anything less than that when I eventually start dating."

"As you should," Nora agrees and I nod. Elle deserves nothing short of perfect. Nora turns back to me, squinting her eyes. "So, what's the plan for the rest of the day? Are we going to hunt down this secret admirer?"

I laugh and shake my head. "No, I'm not really interested in finding out who it is. I'll wait it out and see if they send anything else. As for the rest of the day, I really don't mind what we do. We can just watch movies all day and pick up a cake from the store."

Nora frowns. “Are you sure? I’m sure we could put together a party if you wanted.”

“I’m sure,” I say. “A night in with you guys is what I need before we start back at school again. I’m already anticipating another semester of torture.”

“Sounds good,” she replies, turning back to Elle. “You’ve not got training today, do you?”

Elle looks up at us, eyes wide as if she hasn’t been listening. “Guys, don’t think I’m crazy, but I completely zoned out during half of that conversation.”

Nora squints her eyes. “What are you thinking about?”

She sighs wistfully, shaking her head. “Fictional men.”

When we all burst out laughing, I know there is no one else I’d want to spend my birthday with. I might not have got a text from my dad at all today, but I know my mom is looking down at me and I know she’s proud of me.

The call from JoJo at 12 AM solidified the fact that the people that care about me will show up and make an effort, no matter how small the occasion. They are the kind of people who I will dedicate my life to be surrounded by.

My real family.

THIRTY-FIVE

CAT/CONNOR

FIRST DATE

CAT

I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN something was up when Connor texted me last night and told me to go to sleep early. I should have known when I heard the click of the dorm door opening at midnight and the soft footsteps walking back towards Elle's room. I should have known when I heard my bedroom door open five hours later, but I had convinced myself that it was one of the girls. But it's hard to miss *his* smell.

I turn over in bed, trying not to open my eyes. It's way too early for this.

"Baby, wake up," he urges, his voice soft and quiet. I just want to curl up into him. I open one of my eyes, peeking to see him kneeling at the side of my bed, smiling at me.

"What are you doing?" I ask sleepily.

"It's our date today."

I glance over at the clock on my bedside table, and as expected, it's a ridiculous time in the morning. "It's five in the morning, Connor. Let me go back to sleep," I groan, snuggling my face into my pillow. He just continues smiling at me and then the thought occurs to me. "Did Elle leave the door open for you to sneak in?"

He shakes his head, but the grin on his face is answer enough. "Never mind that. I have an idea for today, so you've got to get your cute ass up." He presses a kiss to my forehead

before he brings up a mug to my bedside table, smiling wide. “I made you some hot cocoa.”

I match the grin on his face. “That’s not going to help wake me up, Connie.”

“I know, but you don’t drink coffee, so this is the next best thing.”

He’s right. Coffee makes me too shaky and it gives me a stomach ache whenever I have it, but the fact that he remembers that about me makes me lean down and kiss him slowly, sweetly. I pull back when I realise that I’ve only just woken up.

I press my fingers to my lips. “Oh my god. I’m sorry. I probably have really bad morning breath.”

“Don’t care.” He shakes his head, pulling my fingers from my face and wraps his hand around my neck, pressing our lips together again. “Kiss me whenever you want, baby.”

I wish Connor had given me more of an indicator as to what today is going to be like because now I have no clue what I’m doing. Once I’ve gotten dressed into a thick burgundy sweater, black jeans and some Uggs, Connor just stares at me quietly as we stand in my bedroom.

I place my hands on my hips. “What’s the plan?”

“I’m glad you asked,” he says, clasping his hands together. “We can spend the first half of the day outside or at my house because my parents are working all day. Archer and Wes are sick and I don’t want to be around them in the dorm. So, the first half of the day is up to you.”

“Connor,” I whisper, twisting my thumb in my sleeves. “You want me to plan a morning date with five minutes notice?”

“You’ll figure something out, sweetheart,” he replies, tugging on my arm and pulling me into him. “I’ve already told you that everything you do is perfect.”

Perfect.

I've lost count of the amount of times Connor has used that word when he's spoken to me. I've never felt like what I do, or what I say is perfect. I've struggled with perfection in everything for years, but Connor throws that word around so easily.

"How do you feel about walking to your parents house?" I ask, knowing how far it is from here. The walk there is a trail people take in Colorado. It takes you through the forests and winding roads that lead to a stop just behind their estate that overlooks the mountains. We're in the dead of winter, so I know it's going to be freezing, but the sight will be worth it. "If we leave now, we could catch the sunrise, but it's a long walk."

"I'll walk for days if it's you I'm walking with," he replies, kissing me softly.

After sneaking out of my dorm, we picked up some snacks from the grocery store and got on our way.

It feels like it's been months since I've been outside in the fresh air, and whenever I'm with Connor everything feels better. It's as if all my senses and every single thought I've ever had become louder. He makes me giddy, makes me feel like there's a tiny fire bubbling in my stomach whenever he says something sweet to me.

He holds onto my hand just as he said he would and doesn't let go until we're closer to the edge of the forest that overlooks the top of our old estate.

Connor's warmth radiates from behind me, locking his arms around my shoulders as we both take in the view. We've both wrapped up warm, but when Connor's body is pressed behind mine I don't have to worry about getting cold anytime soon.

I knew just how pretty it would look, but my breath is completely knocked out of me when I truly take it in. The sky has faded into a pink-orange colour, the snow on the tips of the mountains is slowly melting and the air is still thin and chilly.

We're both quiet as we watch the sun grow brighter. We don't have to speak. Just existing in his presence is more than enough for me. Just breathing the same air as him, looking at the same sky, knowing that we have each other's back is all I need.

When his arms tighten around me and my gloved palms reach his forearms, I know that he's going to continue taking care of me when I don't feel like looking after myself and I'll do the same for him.

I hear him sigh behind me, his face nuzzled into the side of my face between the folds of my scarf.

"It's gorgeous, isn't it?" I murmur, unable to tear my eyes away from the scene.

"You are," he responds quietly and I can feel his eyes on me.

"You've become such a softie, Connie," I say, laughing. I turn around to him, hooking my arms around his neck as he looks at me intensely.

"So have you," he argues, "If I said that to you months ago, you probably would've punched me in the balls. Now, you have a much better relationship with my balls so I'm sure you wouldn't want to punch them."

I scoff. "Pretty full of yourself now, huh?"

"Not really, but you could be full of me if you wan't. It felt so fucking good last time," he whispers. It amazes me how he can have such a filthy mouth with the cutest smile on his face as he's wrapped up in a puffer coat, a beanie and a scarf. He leans in to me, our lips only millimetres apart, but I don't let him kiss me.

"If we start now, we're never going to stop, and you owe me the rest of today as a date," I reply, the excitement I had in my stomach earlier bubbling again.

"Fine. I'll take you to the next destination," he says, as chipper as ever.

And we do exactly that.

He doesn't let go of my hand the entire way to his parents' house. He wanted to go for a pit stop and I didn't mind. Even when he makes us both a cup of hot cocoa and he sits right next to me, he just tells me all of his new tactics for the next few games coming up and doesn't tell me at all where the second part of our day is going to be spent.

Still, now, I don't even know how to react as we stand hand-in-hand outside one of the largest bookstores in our town and I look at the displays in the window. It's still early in the day and the store only opened a few minutes ago and there is nothing that beats the fresh smell of a bookstore when it opens.

"Can you repeat yourself one more time, because I don't believe this," I say to Connor, basically bouncing on my heels. I sink my teeth into my bottom lip, desperately trying to contain my excitement.

He laughs quietly. "We're going to go in there and you can pick out a book from every floor and something from the cafe and I'll buy it for you. If you want special editions, I'll get those too, no matter how much they cost, and I know how expensive they can be."

"Are you sure? I don't want you to feel like you have to spend money on me," I whisper.

"Yes, I'm sure," he responds, "I want you to spend my money, Cat. What's that saying? What's mine is yours, right?"

I squint my eyes. "Yeah, but we're not married."

He rolls his eyes and slings his arm around my shoulder instead. "Not yet," he whispers and my whole body tenses. "Come on. Let's get you these books and fill your room up even more."

The bell chimes above the door as we push through into the warm store. It smells so inherently like books that my stomach swarms with butterflies just at the thought of what I would be able to find.

I always get that extreme sense of adventure just by walking into a bookstore. I never go looking for something in

particular. Mostly because I wouldn't be able to handle the disappointment of finding out that it's not there and because it gives me the opportunity to explore different genres and books I never would have imagined having in between my hands.

One day I hope to have compiled enough journal articles into a book that will be on these shelves. I'll get to do a book signing of some sorts and have all my friends line up to take photos with me and maybe some strangers too. I want that kind of recognition. Not fame or celebrity status. Just the thought of being known is enough.

CONNOR

If I knew a bookstore could make my girl this happy, I would have taken her a long time ago.

I've never really been on a date before and I don't understand the exact rules for them, so I tried to come up with something fun to do today.

The hike was unexpected, but totally worth it. Watching Cat watch the sunrise is going to be an image I'll burn into my memory forever.

She looked so peaceful and content beneath me. It's been a while since I've felt that way. With the season now in full swing and the semi-finals coming up soon, this date couldn't have come at a better time.

The best part of having a girlfriend is by far holding hands. Yes, I might have one hand occupied with a basket full of books as we make our way through the shelves, but my other hand is completely tethered to hers. I've never truly enjoyed these small acts of intimacy until I met her.

She makes the simplest of touches feel like my whole body is about to erupt. Her kisses are soft and smooth. Her hand-holding is God-like and it makes me want to curl up into a ball and snuggle into her forever. Her hugs make me want to die and come back to life and I can barely fathom the sex.

She tugs on my arm a little tighter as we make our way through another fiction aisle, this one has a lot more cartoon

covers than before. Is this a kids' aisle? My mind tries to make sense of it as I stare at them.

"What are you thinking about?" Cat asks me when we get to a table of books. She looks up at me, tilting her head to the side as she twists a paperback in her hands.

"I'm wondering why all these books have cartoon covers, but they don't look like kid's books," I say, turning one over and reading the blurb. A teacher and student romance novel. Interesting. "I don't get it."

She laughs as if this is the funniest joke she's ever heard in her life. I just blink at her dumbfounded. "Do you really not know what these are?" I shake my head. She places her book back down and steps in closer to me. "So, a lot of author's make cute book covers with illustrations on them, but they actually just have a lot of sex in them."

I blink at her again. "Sorry, didn't get the end of that, sweetheart."

She sighs, rolling her eyes. "I *said*, they just have a lot of sex in them."

They have a lot of....

Oh.

Oh.

I gasp dramatically, looking inside the basket which has two books with cartoon covers. "Do you secretly have a porn addiction?" I whisper, leaning our faces so close that I could taste her.

"It's *book* porn," she corrects me, unable to stop smiling. My eyes lighten with surprise. Well, I shouldn't be surprised. She can act as proper as she wants in person, but I've seen what she's like when she's a wreck beneath me, moaning my name. "What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Nothing," I say, shaking my head. "I'm just thinking about how I'm going to prove to you that I'm better than all those men that you read about."

“It’s not a competition, Connor,” she replies. I let out a short laugh, removing the distance between us as she backs up onto the small table, her hands dropping to either side of her and I let the basket hit the ground.

I lean into her, breathing in her vanilla scent until it feels like it’s all I’m going to become. My nose brushes against her neck and I inhale. “Tell me, Cat, have you ever read about a guy finger fucking his girlfriend in a bookstore?”

Her breath hitches. “N-No. Not yet.”

“Want to make that into a reality?” My hands find themselves unbuttoning her coat and she helps me button it down until my hand finds her warm skin under her sweater.

“We could get kicked out,” she whispers, tilting her head away from me as I press kisses across her neck, feeling the heat of her skin beneath my mouth.

“Since when don’t you want to break a few rules?” I whisper, biting her neck slightly.

“Since my dad is the mayor and if we get caught I will be in a lot of shit,” she challenges. Oh, shit. I almost forgot.

Catherine has done a public relationship before and that didn’t end well for either of them. More for him than her, but still.

I pull away from her. “Yeah.... You’re right. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have tried to do that, that’s completely my fault,” I mutter, scrubbing my hand across my face. When my hand drops, she locks her fingers with mine and looks up at me. She leans up on her tiptoes, her pretty lips coming dangerously close to my ear and I swear I almost combust.

“That doesn’t mean you can’t finger-fuck your girlfriend somewhere else,” she murmurs, biting on my ear. Fuck. This woman has cast a spell on me, or something, I swear.

I grip onto her hand, pick up the basket and buy all of her books so quickly that I don’t even check the price. She tries to walk beside me innocently as we trudge back up to my parents’ empty house, but all I can think about are her filthy

words and the very filthy things I want to do to her when we're inside the house.

After taking off our layers at the door, she walks straight to the kitchen, not even looking at me as she opens the fridge. I watch her do so, my cock already hard and waiting for her as she insists on teasing me, edging me until I can get what I want. She spins on her heels, tilting her head as she holds up a carton of apple juice.

"Thirsty?" she asks. I eliminate the space between us, grabbing the carton from her hand and pulling her up onto the kitchen island instead. "What's wrong? Do you not want a drink?"

"That's not what I want, and you know it," I mutter, tugging on the hem of her sweater. She helps me pull it over her head, throwing it to the side. "What I want is going to taste a fuck lot better than apple juice."

"Yeah?" she teases in that breathy voice of hers as she leans both of her arms back on the island, arching her back for me.

"Yes," I reply, my fingers playing with the button of her jeans. "Can I take these off and eat you out before I lose my fucking mind?"

She giggles before telling me I can. I waste no time ripping her jeans off her until she's in nothing but blue panties. I took off her bra the second I could see her nipples beneath the thin material.

My eyes burn over every single inch of her body before I focus in on her needy tits, hard and waiting for me. I lean forward, pulling one of her nipples into my mouth and she moans so loud I almost lose my balance.

Her hands twist in my hair, gripping onto my curls as if her life depends on it and I let her. I savour every part of her, loving the fresh taste of her skin in my mouth. My eyes connect with hers and I suddenly feel like an animal, needing to touch and taste every part of her.

I kiss between her breasts until I get down to her stomach before I spread her thighs apart. My cock aches with need when I see the wet spot on her panties, showing me just how badly she wants this. Wants me.

“Are you always this wet for me, sweetheart?” I ask, my voice gruff and hoarse.

“Are *you* always this slow?” she groans. Just for that comment, I press my fingers to her clit over the fabric of her panties, gaining a whiny moan in response. *That’s what I thought.* “Connor, please.”

“Please, what?” I tease, still edging her with my fingers against her panties, her arousal coating my fingers so much I want to taste her. “I thought you liked it slow, Catherine. If you want me to go faster, you have to use your words.”

She doesn’t respond. Instead, I curl my fingers inside her panties, pulling them off her legs, leaving her a bare, wet, mess on the island. Fuck.

She looks fucking stunning like this. Her whole body is on display to me – her legs apart, her hands on the marble, her head slightly tilted back as her hard nipples are right in my face. I want this exact sight to be forever burned behind my eyelids.

I push her further back on the counter until both of her feet lay flat on the rock. “As pretty as this sight is, I’m not going to let you come unless you ask me.”

“Please, just...” Her breath catches when I edge my middle finger at her entrance, collecting her arousal. “Just touch me. I don’t care what you do, or how you do it, just make me come.”

“That’s exactly what I needed to hear,” I murmur.

I do just as she asked. When my mouth connects with her needy pussy, I curse myself for not wearing less restrictive clothing. My whole body throbs when my tongue is on her clit, tasting and sucking as if it’s the only thing keeping me sane. She tastes so fucking good.

Each small whimper that leaves her mouth only drives me to go faster, pushing my tongue into her until her body shakes.

I press my palms against her slick thighs, pushing her legs further apart to give me better access to her cunt.

From what she's shown me, penetration doesn't do much for her so I stick to paying as close attention as I can to her clit. I roll it through my mouth, my teeth lightly grazing her flesh and her thighs clamped around my face.

"Keep your legs open, pretty girl," I demand, opening her legs once again. As soon as I get back to work, her legs close again and I groan. "It'll feel better I promise."

"I know," she pants. "It just— You just feel so... Good."

"Do you like this, hm? Do you like being tongue-fucked over the kitchen counter like the good girl that you are?" I murmur into her skin.

"Yes," she cries, her head flying backwards.

"So fucking needy, aren't you, baby?" I tease her again, sucking her swollen clit into my mouth. Her thighs shake. Small sharp breaths leave her lips and my head spins.

"Yes," she whimpers.

She's lost all control and I fucking love it. As much as Proper Catherine turns me on, In The Middle of an Orgasm Catherine is something else. Her voice changes when she moans and her whole body responds to every small move of mine. She makes me want to memorise every muscle that moves in her body and to study for hours on what will make her feel good.

After our little show-and-tell session back in my dorm, I know that when my tongue moves faster and her hips start to move that she's close. I hold tighter onto her open legs, pressing them apart as my tongue works seamlessly over her clit, my head shaking as I flick the small bud in and out of my mouth.

Her orgasm is so sudden that I barely have time to process it when her body shakes and she moans my name so loud I'm

sure the neighbours would be able to hear.

Eating her out on the counter was not in the itinerary for today. But fuck me if it isn't the best meal I've had in my life. As she catches her breath, I help her slip back on her clothes until she looks somewhat decent.

I press my lips to hers, letting her taste how good she is and she moans into my mouth.

"You," she whispers against my lips. I don't even have to think about what she means, because I feel it too. Right down to my core.

"You," I whisper back.

THIRTY-SIX

CONNOR/CAT

SICK DAYS

CONNOR

THE SECOND I started to get too full of myself with how the games have been going, I knew something would bite me in the ass. I just didn't know it would be this.

I've tried my absolute hardest to take care of my health so I would never miss a game. I'd spend hours researching the easiest sickness I could get and possibly spread to my team and make sure that I knew all the ways to prevent it rather than cure it. Maybe I did that to be smart and cautious, or maybe because I've spent so many years being riddled with anxiety and the thought of not playing.

I've only missed a game twice. Once because I had to go to a funeral and the second time was when I was so sick I could barely open my eyes. This time, we've already managed to win one semi-final game and our next one is supposed to be today, but both my coach and my parents said I'm not in a state to play and it could only make my health worse, which means not playing in the finals if we get in.

I don't know how I could have let this happen to me. I tried my best to stay away from Archer and Wes when they were sick. I wiped down everything in our dorm so they wouldn't pass off anything to me. I steered clear from Wes in classes and anyone else he could have been around and I've still managed to get myself sick.

"These things just happen, bro," Wes says, packing his bag full of snacks at the counter as I lay on the couch. I feel a pang

of anger and annoyance through my core, knowing that he's going to be training all day for the game later and I can barely move without feeling like I'm going to throw up. "Once you've rested up, I'll come back from the game as chipper as ever and then all you have to worry about is carrying us through the finals."

"That's the thing, you idiot," I mutter. "I want to get us *to* the finals, not *through* them. In the nicest way possible, I'm one of the most vital members on the team and I don't know how much this Hayes Cohen kid is going to be a good fill-in."

Wes scoffs. "His dad is a legend, he'll be fine."

"Talent isn't transferred through genes, you moron."

"Being sick makes you more grumpy than usual," Wes coos, standing beside me on the couch. I look up at him and roll my eyes.

"I'm not grumpy, you just piss me off," I argue, sounding as moody as ever.

Wes leans down to ruffle my hair. "It's okay, Connie-Wonnie. You'll be back on your feet in no time." His annoying voice moves up two octaves before he throws me a sarcastic smile and heads out the door.

I scrub my hands across my face, ready to spend the rest of the day sulking, knowing I can't talk to Cat since she has classes for most of the morning.

This is going to be torture.

Instead, I spend most of the morning watching episodes of Family Guy and questioning the God's why I deserve this.

I've done everything right. I've stayed on track with what I eat and where I go. I don't drink. I don't smoke. I train nearly every day of the week. I give my all in every training session and at every game and there's still something uncontrollable that I can't help.

I've not always been like this – so in my head and full of anxiety. I can't even pin-point the exact moment when things changed for me. I never used to take anything this seriously. I

always just let things happen and I went with the flow. I wanted to explore and discover and create. But the second I started taking football seriously, I couldn't go back. My brain immediately went into fixing and providing mode. I saw a goal and I've never looked back.

I groan, turning over on my side. These thoughts are dangerous during the daytime. I could spend hours sitting here and not even realise that I've been spiralling from the same spot and get to no real conclusion.

I don't know how long it has been when I hear a knock at the dorm door. I don't even have the energy to tell the possible stranger not to come in as I curl up further onto the couch.

I swear I can feel her presence before I can see her.

Catherine stands at the edge of the couch, the bag that she uses for classes slung over her shoulder and a thermal bottle in her hand. Her face is etched with sadness and confusion as if she's disappointed in me. This is the one time I didn't want to see her when I'm like this. I try to sit up further on the couch and she leans down in front of me.

"What are you doing here, Cat?" I ask, my voice not sounding like my own.

"Wes has been calling me all day and I finished classes early and I wanted to come see you," she replies, her voice soft and quiet.

"I'm sick. You don't want to be around me right now," I urge. The last thing I want is for me to get her sick too. She doesn't seem to listen to me because she lifts up the blanket I have over me and slides underneath it, sitting beside me on the couch.

"I got you some soup. Drink this and I can make you some more later if it helps," she whispers, bringing the warm bottle to my hands. She leans down and pulls out two DVD's from her bag, showing me *Ten Things I Hate About You* and *The Proposal* as well as her Nintendo Switch. "We can watch these so you're not thinking about the game all day and then we can play Mario Kart before we inevitably fall asleep."

My chest pinches at the thoughtfulness, but I shake my head. “Cat, you don’t have to do this. You’re going to get yourself sick.”

She turns to me, those gorgeous brown eyes staring straight into mine. “Ask me where I want to be right now, Connor.”

I frown, knowing exactly what she’s doing. “Where do you want to be right now?”

“With you.”

I try my hardest to swallow back the emotion in my throat as I look at her, but just being with her makes me want to cry with how lucky I am.

I don’t deserve this. Her. Everything that she gives me. Every vulnerable piece of herself that she’s kept hidden for so long.

“What should we watch first?”

CAT

I’ve never felt like this before.

Maybe this is truly what love feels like. The second I heard that Connor was sick, the first thing I wanted to do was to run out of class and be there for him. I was lucky that I finished early and was able to make some of my mom’s favourite soup to bring to him. And being here with him, snuggled under the blanket whilst we watch *our* movie, I couldn’t think of anything better.

It feels like we were always meant to end up here. As if every single glance that we gave each other over the years, every time we bumped into each other at parties, we would always be tied together by some invisible string that would lead us right to this moment.

I’m so caught up in the movie that I don’t even notice that he’s gone quiet. I turn to him and his eyes are on the floor, not the screen. I nudge him with my shoulder, trying to draw him back. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

He shakes his head slightly before he leans back, resting his head on the back of the couch. “I feel like this is more than just sickness, Cat,” he mumbles. Here he is with his dramatic-ass statements. I swear he’s a real drama queen sometimes.

“What do you mean?” I say, laughing. He seems better than when I first came. The colour has slowly returned to his cheeks, courtesy of the soup, and he’s managed to hold it down without throwing up. I lean my head back against the headrest too, our gazes clashing.

“I don’t know...” he murmurs quietly as if he’s telling me a secret. “I think it’s just something in my head. With the final coming up and all the schoolwork I’m going to be behind on.... I feel like I’m going crazy.”

My stomach twists. As much as we joke around with how uptight he can be, he’s never spoken to me like this before. Never vocalised exactly how it is that he’s feeling. I’ve done that before. I’ve bottled up everything and shoved it to a corner of my mind and never opened it again just to save myself from spiralling, but it only ends up getting worse.

I bring my palm to the side of his face, stroking his cheek softly. “Talk to me, baby.”

“I feel like I can’t breathe sometimes, Cat. I don’t know how to explain it, but I just can’t do it sometimes.” His voice is hoarse and strangled as he nuzzles his cheek into my palm.

“Try for me, Connie. Talk to me.”

I watch him take a deep breath and I wait for him. I would wait for him all day if he wanted me to.

“I just feel like I have this overwhelming sense of responsibility to do good and to be great at all times and I don’t know how to get rid of it. No one has told me these things. No one has ever *made* me do what I do, but I can just feel it. When I first started playing, I never expected to be a quarterback. I never expected to be considered that good that I would need that responsibility and to carry the weight of the team on my back. As I started to settle into it and realise how

important my position was, my brain couldn't stop telling me the worst possible things that could happen on the pitch."

The words flow out of him before he takes a deep breath. "I vowed to never get involved in any excessive drinking or do anything to put myself in harm's way, and part of me regrets it. It's a weird thing because I don't want to do the things I'm missing out on, but I still want to be included, you know? I don't *want* to be uptight and in charge all the time. I don't *want* to be the person to tell everyone off, but I just am. I feel like I spend so much time trying to make sure the team is perfect and make sure I'm training enough that when I get time to think for a few seconds, or answer questions, nothing comes because I'm so hyper-focused on trying to be good in my performance. It doesn't stop sometimes, Cat and I don't know how to make it stop."

My heart tears in two at his words. My eyes sting with tears wanting to flow down my face. Did I ever make him feel like he couldn't tell me this? Did I not make our relationship a safe enough place where he could tell me anything?

"Make what stop? What do you need, Connor?" I ask gently, desperate to help him. He places his hand over mine on his cheek before he slowly brings it down to his chest where his heart is racing.

"The tightening in my chest. The weight. The pressure. I need it to go away."

"Just breathe, Connie. Let me take some of that weight. Let me help you. Just... Just let me in," I whisper.

The second the words leave my mouth the dam breaks. His face crumbles and he starts to cry. I immediately pull his head into me, resting him on my chest, holding him close to me as I wrap my arms around him tightly. His cries are soft and weak and I just want to take them away from him. He settles into me and I let him take the time he needs to stop crying.

"It's okay, baby," I murmur, "I've got you."

I smooth my hand through his hair, holding him as tightly as I can, knowing that will help. When his breathing starts to

slow again, I try to get him to face me. I grip both my hands on the side of his cheeks, urging him to look up at me, but he doesn't. He keeps his eyes on the space between us.

"I'm so proud of you, Connor. Do you know that?" I whisper, tears of my own threatening to fall. "You genuinely amaze me every single day. On and off the pitch. You're kind and compassionate and you always put everyone else before yourself. Your overthinking isn't a weakness, it just means that you care." I swipe my thumbs under his eyes and he finally meets my gaze. "You have this thing where you make everyone else around you feel loved and that is a gift not many people have. You're so talented and you've done so much for other people and you never do anything just for you. You need something just for yourself."

"You," he whispers.

My eyes narrow. "What?"

"Me and you. That's just mine. The way I feel about you, Cat, is just for us. You're the only person I want to talk to sometimes. The only person I want to know how deeply I feel about you is just you. As much as I want to tell everyone you're mine, there's so many moments that I want to keep just for us. Our secret."

"Our secret," I repeat.

I like the sound of that.

CONNOR

For the rest of the day, I stay as close to her as possible. She holds me and understands me and doesn't try to fix my problems. She doesn't try to lecture me, or tell me what to do. She just lets me feel my feelings and I appreciate her for it.

When Cat leaves after her dad calls her, I feel like I can breathe again.

She's managed to calm the storm of my life so easily and I love her more than I did a few days ago, if that's even possible. I want to tell her that I'm in love with her so badly. I want to tell her that she's all I ever want and that the love I have for her is infinite, but it's not right just yet. We still don't

know when we're going to tell Nora, but after the finals seems like a perfect time.

We'll get our happily ever after, Cat and I. We have to.

The quiet doesn't last long because it's well into the night when I hear the dorm door open followed by a very drunk Wes singing at the top of his lungs. I'm not surprised. Whenever he gets shit-faced, he turns into a full musical major and sings every song off the *Hamilton* soundtrack at full volume. But what is unusual is the fact that the guys vowed not to have a party tonight if they won the game.

Coach has been watching us like a hawk and he's finally put enough fear into them that I've been trying to do for years and they actually listened. Well, everyone except his son.

I get up from the couch and turn on the light in the living room. "Wes?" I ask and he comes into view. He's wearing the same training uniform he left in this morning, a beer in his hand and his hair is a sweaty mess. "Dude, what are you doing?"

He lets out a drunken laugh and when I step closer to him, his eyes are bloodshot, tears staining his cheeks. What the fuck is going on? My heartbeat grows erratic, the sound roaring in my ears.

"Wes, what is going on?" I ask again as he sways towards the kitchen.

"She's gone, Con," he slurs, dropping his gaze to the ground.

"Who? Who's gone?"

He shakes his head, finally looking up at me. I've seen every version of Wes in my lifetime, but this one? This one is different. Broken.

"My mom... She left... She left my dad," he says, sniffing. Jesus, how drunk is he?

"What are you talking about?"

He groans, throwing his head back. "He cheated, Con. He said he loved my mom and he's been cheating on her for years.

With Olivia.”

Anger boils in my stomach. “Olivia? Who the fuck is Olivia?”

His eyes lock with mine, and everything comes back to me. I don’t know many people called Olivia, but when he looks at me, I know exactly who he’s talking about.

Olivia Hardon. Our Assistant Coach.

Fuck. Our. Lives.

THIRTY-SEVEN

CONNOR

WINNER-WINNER CHICKEN DINNER

EVER SINCE WE started playing football, before the start of our final game, we'd all have breakfast with our parents in one of the empty classrooms at the school. When we were in little leagues, we'd have a pep talk in the locker room whilst our parents tied up our laces and told us that it didn't matter if we lost.

It got better when we grew up and winning actually mattered. We could tie our own laces and the pep talks would last a little longer. The same thing happened last year before our first college final and it paid off.

This time, everything feels wrong.

The tension between Wes and Coach Mackenzie is lethal. Olivia called in 'sick' though only Wes and I know what happened. We've all been so caught up with our own shit that we would have noticed the signs a lot earlier. I always thought it was weird how their relationship seemed to be a little too friendly. It makes sense now that she went out when we were at one of the away games and I spent the evening in the hotel room she shared with Cat.

I can't even look at him without feeling sick to my stomach.

Wes has always kept his relationship with his dad to himself, but there have been times where they'd have arguments and he'd never tell me why. He'd just turn up to my house one day, spend the night and go back the next morning like everything was fine.

Coach never made it seem like anything was wrong, either. He'd coach the team the next day and not act like he kicked his son out the night before. He's not a violent or angry person by any means, there's just some parts to his and Wes's dynamic that I don't think I'll ever be able to understand.

Like right now as he talks to Wes with one hand on his shoulder in the corner of the room whilst Wes's eyes face the ground. I can't hear what he's saying, but it looks like some sort of lecture whilst my parents yap on in front of me.

My mom nervously nibbles on a scone whilst my dad sips on the coffee that he's been nursing since they got here. It's a good and sweet tradition for the most part. As we've all got used to playing under the pressure, the parent's all seem to have gotten more anxious over the years.

"You know what you've got to do if you get tackled to the ground, don't you? You just get right back up and show the other team what you're made of," my mom says, sounding as serious as ever. I shake my head at her, knowing what she's like.

"I know, mom," I repeat for what feels like the hundredth time.

"Yes, *mom*," my dad mocks, bumping his shoulder into hers, "he knows." I nod, holding my chin high. "We know you've got this, Con. You're incredible on and off the pitch. This isn't going to be any different."

"Win or lose, we'll all be cheering for you in the stands," my mom adds, her smile bright and triumphant.

She manages to put this insane amount of faith in me that I just want to bottle it up and carry it around forever. When my parents look at me it feels I'm a star they're wishing upon. As if I'm something magical and out-of-this-world that they need to pray and wish on for it to soar.

Months ago, that would have completely frightened me at the thought of the weight of the team resting all on me, but now, I've become comfortable with the idea of just doing my best. I've done all I can prepping and training. I've tried to

keep the team in line as best as I can, but it isn't up to just me how we perform. It's how we, as a team, can work together and kick the other team's asses.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I pull it out and Catherine's contact name flashes across the screen. I pull out my chair, excusing myself from the conversation with my parents and my dad gives me a wink. That man knows too much about my love-life without me saying a word.

Just the sound of Cat's voice soothes me as we exchange hello's.

"How are you feeling? I heard there'll be a reporter from the Fort Morgan's Times at the game and some scouts too," she says in a teasing tone.

"I'll be fine. I've done more than enough prep with you to know how to deal with a few questions," I say easily. "Speaking of, when can I see the final report?"

She tuts. "Not yet. It needs some revisions and I need to bring it to my professor for some proofreading, but soon." I hum in response, impatiently wanting to know more than just the snippets she's shown the team over the last few months. "Good luck. You're going to kill it."

"Thank you. I'll be looking in the stands for you. I'll help us win just for you," I whisper, making my voice sound extra sweet and I swear I can *hear* her rolling her eyes.

"Win for yourself, Connie, not me," she replies. There's a brief moment of complete silence on her end as if the phone is being cut off before she speaks again. "Ugh. My dad has been calling me all day. I'm going to have to answer it."

"What's been going on?"

"I don't know. We didn't speak much after Christmas, but he's been weird since he called that day at your dorm when I left. He's saying that we need to talk, but I don't know what about," she explains, sounding tired at just the thought of having a conversation with him.

"Huh," I murmur. "I hope everything is okay. I'll see you soon."

“I’ll see you. When you see a crazy lady in the stands with your jersey on screaming like a lunatic, you’ll know it’s me,” she says. I laugh at the image she creates. I’ve been wanting to see her in my jersey for fucking years now and hopefully when I have her in my arms after the game, we will have won and she’ll be cheering my name. “And, Connor?”

“Hm?”

“Just breathe, baby. I’ve got your back, always. You’re going to do great.”

After the call ends and I’m lined up on the pitch, helmet in hand, staring up at the full stadium, I realise this is exactly what I was made to do. Being here, under the spotlights, the fresh smell of the pitch, the roar of the crowd, is something I could spend forever in. And when I see my family and my chosen family in the stands, banners in hand, I know that we’ve got this.

The team played better than we’ve ever played before. I don’t know what was said by the parents at this morning’s meeting, but everyone is on fire. Every pass is smooth. Every tackle is effortless. Every interference from the referee is taken with a pinch of salt and we completely smash the other team in a score almost too good to fathom.

When I’m running with the ball, seconds left on the clock, I feel victorious. Nothing comes in my way. I keep my eyes completely focused on the end of the field. Victory is so close I can almost taste it. Scoring a touchdown is expected, but there is nothing quite like the feeling of being able to cross that line, knowing that your team is right behind you cheering you along the way.

When the moment comes and I’m met with wild cheers from the crowd, my adrenaline high as fuck, I know that I’ve done this for myself. I know that I’ve put in the work and the effort and there’s only one person I want to see.

My heartbeat roars in my ears, the crowd silencing in my mind as I look up to see her. My Catherine. I search for her in the crowd, finding Elle and Nora first, cheering like crazy

women. When my eyes focus on them, the one person I wanted to see isn't there anymore.

I haven't been able to stop moving since the game ended. I barely made it past the sidelines before the people in the stands came rushing down. My vision blurs as more and more people try to talk to the team, pushing past us and shoving flashlights and cameras in our faces. My stomach twists when I see the reporter, James Nyguen, from the Fort Morgan Times make direct eye contact with me. Nora and Elle are on his heels, following behind him, huge grins on their faces.

I need to get out of here.

I don't get far before a different reporter from the same magazine shoves his camera and microphone in my face. "I'm sorry. I just need to—"

"I'm here with Connor Bailey. Twenty-year old quarterback for the Drayton Titans and an absolute machine on the pitch. What a game it was today. How are you feeling?" The shrillness of his voice catches me off guard and I stumble a little, looking over his short frame to find my girl. Still, I don't see her.

"Yeah... It was a good game," I mumble in response. Jesus. The team is going to give me so much shit for this. All that training and practice for nothing.

The reporter lets out a nervous chuckle. "Your team just won the college cup and that's all you have to say?"

I groan, desperate to roll my eyes as I take in a deep breath. "I'm trying to look for her."

"For who? Your mom? A girlfriend, perhaps?" he questions, shoving both the microphone and the camera in my face. Do they both have to be so close to me? I grip them and shove them a bit further away from me as I stare straight into the camera.

"Yes, my girlfriend," I bite out. I lower my voice when I look back at the slightly petrified man beneath me. "Now, can

you get out of my way?” He blinks at me. “Please?”

When he’s finally gone to the side, I go to my next resort: my sister. She and Elle are talking excitedly with Sam and Wes, pulling on their arms and congratulating them. I should be enjoying that right now, but I can’t. I need to find her. Who knows what could have happened? She wouldn’t just disappear like that.

“Where’s Catherine?”

Nora turns to me at the sound of my gruff voice, her eyes widening in surprise. “Oh my god! Congrats, bro. I knew you guys would win. You were insane today. Seriously, I don’t think I’ve enjoyed watching you play that much in so long.”

I store her compliments for later. Now is not the time, so I ask again. “Where’s Catherine?”

Her eyebrows scrunch together. “What? Why do you want to—”

“Where. Is. She.”

Her eyes soften as she rests her hand on my forearm. I’m not annoyed at her, I’m annoyed at the situation. I just want to know that she’s safe and that I didn’t do anything wrong to upset her, or if someone else did then I’d be spending my post-game celebrations in a very different way.

“Okay, okay,” Nora says softly. “Calm down. She left ten minutes into the second half. Her dad called her. She said it was some sort of emergency.”

Fuck. I run my hands across my face. “And you didn’t want to tell me?”

“You were in the middle of playing the most important game of your college career with hundreds of scouts here and you expected me to tell you where *my* friend was?” Her question is a valid one. For a second I consider telling her everything. Telling her that I’ve been head-over-heels for Catherine since the second I met her, but I want her to do that on her terms.

I shake my head as if that will take away the tightness in my chest. “No, you’re right. But, do you know where she had to go? Maybe we can meet her or something before the party?”

Nora rolls her eyes. “Connor, why does it matter to you so much that she’s there? If she wants to come, she will. You’ve never cared before, so I don’t know why you do now. She had to go. You won. Let’s just go to celebrate.”

I mull over her point when everyone starts to leave the pitch. I somehow manage to salvage another interview with a different reporter, hopefully covering up the damage I made with the first one. I call Cat a million times, but she never answers. At one point it started to go to voicemail and I succumbed to going to the party miserable and feeling alone. Even when I get back to my room, leaving the party early, I still haven’t heard from her.

I stare up at the ceiling and hope for both of our sakes that she’s okay.

THIRTY-EIGHT

CAT

DADDY DEAREST

I'VE ALWAYS KNOWN that coming back home would make me uncomfortable. It's not been the same since mom passed away, and I don't think it ever will be. Since Christmas, I've been avoiding it like the plague. I never wanted to go around there anyway, but confronting my dad like that was new. As much as he gets under my skin, I never raise my voice or get angry like that. It's an unwritten rule, no matter how rocky our relationship can get.

Which is why I'm surprised he's been trying to call me for the past week. Most conversations last a few minutes and he asks me how I am before interrupting me to tell me about how hard his job is. Maybe this is his pathetic attempt at trying to establish a relationship with me.

The call I got at the game earlier was different. There was an edge in his voice. Not the usual flare of annoyance that surrounds each of our conversations, but something deeper and angrier.

He told me to get to the house as soon as possible and I did. As much as I knew missing the last half of Connor's game is going to break his heart, I'd never forgive myself if I did something without knowing and hurt my dad even more.

I'm trying to give him the benefit of the doubt.

He can irritate me and make me wonder what I've done wrong, but at the end of the day, he's still my dad and I should listen to him. It's the least I can do after the way I acted at Christmas.

I push open the door to the house, my hands shaking for a reason I can't find. Maybe it's the anticipation of the moment, or the fact that my body knows that something isn't right before my brain does.

The house smells of its usual spices, something that hasn't changed since mom died, but something else lingers in the air as I step through the hallway. I call out for my dad, but he doesn't answer. Instead I hear his voice soft but taunting in the dining room, another female voice talking with him.

I inch closer, trying to keep myself out of view.

JoJo.

She's allowed home visits whenever she wants to, but she usually lets me know in advance so we can have the house to ourselves. I doubt she would want to have a conversation with my dad just on her own. Hell, even I don't sometimes and I'm the one who is actually related to him.

He must have called me over to see her, or is this some sort of intervention?

"You can't keep going on like this, Eric," JoJo whispers. I can hear the soft sound of the small metal spoon I can imagine she's using to mix her tea. "You two need to fix this. Is she on her way?"

"Yes, she's on her way," my dad mumbles, his voice hoarse. I step closer against the wall, trying my hardest to stay quiet. My gut churns at his next words. "This isn't my problem to fix. Can't you see that? I've always been busy and caught up with work. That has never changed, *she* has."

I swallow, my stomach turning into pure acid. "Eric, come on, now. You know that's not true. I just want the best for my grandbaby."

He lets out a loud sigh, bordering on a groan. "No one has ever tried to look at my side of it. I lost my *wife*. The love of my life. And I'm left with a campaign to run and a daughter who looks at me like she hates me. What am I supposed to do with that, Joanne?"

I can *see* the temper rising on my dad just by listening to his voice. He's never violent and would never do anything to hurt anyone, he's just... passionate. Still, JoJo is not getting any better and she doesn't need this kind of stress on her.

I decide to slowly move into the dining room, catching my dad with his hands pressed onto the table, JoJo at the head of the table, her silk head scarf wrapped around her hair and her hands shaking around her mug.

"Birdie, you're here," JoJo calls, her eyes bright. I smile tightly, turning to my dad. "We need to talk. All of us."

"Yes, we do," my dad bites out. This would all be great if he could chill the fuck out for two seconds. Instead, he grunts as he turns from the table when something catches his eye behind where JoJo is sitting.

In every Jamaican household, the dining room is usually dimly lit with a ton of random artwork my parents have acquired over the years. Some they get from markets and others they've passed down from their parents. We have a framed photo of the lyrics to the national anthem, a Bob Marley painting and my mom's favourite piece.

It's a woven sheet with the words '*What you do here, what you see here, what you hear here, let it stay here, or don't come back here.*' It used to freak me out as a kid before I realised that my parents only had it up there as a joke. I'd walk past it and laugh, thinking it was the weirdest thing I've ever seen inside a house. But for some reason, my dad's awfully interested in it right now.

I move towards JoJo, placing my hand behind her chair as she turns to see what my dad's doing. "Dad, what are you doing?"

"I'm moving it."

"Don't move it, Eric," JoJo warns.

"If we're moving on, if we're going to have a grown up conversation, things need to change around here. Starting with this." The edge of anger in his voice catches me off guard.

“That can stay where it is,” I whisper. He turns to me, his reddened eyes narrowed. “Moving that is not going to change what’s going on. We need to talk.”

“It’s not a big deal,” he says, looking between the two of us. JoJo stumbles, trying to get to her feet and I help her up. She holds onto the back of the chair, giving herself stability. She tries to talk, no doubt to tell my dad to stop, but no words come out.

“It *is* a big deal. Mom left that there. She didn’t move it, so it needs to stay where it is,” I demand, trying to get in his way, but JoJo’s soft hand rests on my forearm, urging me back. “Dad, just leave it. Please.”

He ignores me and leans up to take it down anyway. Like he said, it isn’t a big deal. But for some reason, it feels like it is. I always thought there was something unspoken between the two of us that whatever my mom left would stay the way it was. We wouldn’t move things because it is a part of her. But when he takes down the embroidery a piece of me shatters, another piece of her being stripped away from me. Before I can tell myself to calm down and stop, the tears rush to me, hot and angry.

“Why do you have to do these things?”

“Do what, Catherine?” My dad’s voice booms in the small room, making JoJo flinch from where she’s standing.

“Make things worse! You don’t talk to me for months, suddenly you want to fix things and you start by taking that down and you bring me here for... What? An intervention? To tell me to get over it whilst you can continue to ignore me?”

He scrubs his hands down his face. “We need to move on.”

“Move on?” I repeat incredulously, my hands flailing as more tears stream down my face. “We’ve barely had time to grieve, dad!”

“Catherine. Sit down,” JoJo warns, bringing both of her hands to her face. I try to blink back the tears, but it only makes it worse. My heart rattles in my chest, my hands shaking.

“I have, Catherine. I’m trying to move on, but you keep punishing me,” he shouts.

“Eric.”

“What are you talking about?” I ask, my hands doing most of the talking.

“We don’t work anymore because you’re pushing me away for your friends. If you stayed home, maybe this wouldn’t have gotten this bad, but you decided to leave. You left, Catherine. And you’re expecting me to carry the weight of our relationship when I have a serious and important job to do,” he argues. JoJo shakes her head, muttering a curse word as she holds both of her hands to her temples.

“We don’t work because you don’t try, dad. You never had. And now you’re finally realising that it’s never going to be the same, so you interrupt my day when I was busy just so you could shout at me,” I retort, trying to smooth my hands over my jersey.

Connor’s jersey.

He’s probably thinking I abandoned him. My chest squeezes at the thought and I’m crying harder for a whole other reason. I miss my person. I *need* my person.

My dad gestures to my shirt, only just realising that I’ve been wearing a Drayton Titan’s jersey with ‘Bailey’ on the back and Connor’s number on my sleeve. “See, you don’t get it. You don’t understand what it’s like to be in my position, Catherine. If you did, you would have been here instead of with that boyfriend of yours.”

“Eric. Stop it, now. You’re upsetting her.” JoJo manages to speak through a cough, but my dad doesn’t listen as he stalks closer to me, pushing past her.

I’m not going to let him make me feel guilty for spending time with the people who actually care about me. The people who treat me as a human and love me for me. The people who don’t expect anything from me and just let me exist.

“Connor has nothing to do with this,” I shout.

“He has everything to do with this! You’re forgetting who you real family are, Catherine, and your mother would be so disappointed if she knew you were-”

“Don’t you *dare* talk about how my daughter would feel about Catherine.” JoJo’s voice is weak, but it holds the weight of the world in her words. Tensions are running high and we all need to take a deep breath.

“What? It’s true. Family is supposed to be first, always. You know that, Joanne,” my dad says, his voice rising again.

“Jo, are you okay?” I ask, stepping beside my dad.

“She’s fine.” Just the sound of his voice makes me tense up.

“I don’t... I don’t think I’m feeling so good,” she murmurs, her eyelids closing. My heart thrashes against my chest as her hands clasp mine. They’re cold. Too cold. I look back to my dad, but he doesn’t say or do anything.

“JoJo,” I say softly, “Come on. You need to sit down. All this standing can’t be good for you.”

Before I can guide her to the chair, her knees buckle and she hits the ground.

I’ve always hated hospitals.

I mean, who *enjoys* going to a hospital? Exactly. No one.

When JoJo first got sick, I didn’t like going to visit her in the hospital. There was always something unsettling in the air. I hate the helplessness I feel when I’m here, knowing that all I can offer are words of encouragement. The second she was moved into a care home instead of a hospital, I made it my mission to see her more.

I was there for her when no one else was. I was there when my dad refused to let her live in our empty house. I was the one the nurse called when she was having trouble remembering or just needed to hear a familiar voice.

We got closer to the point where it felt like she could read my mind. She told me things about my mom I never thought I would find out. She restored the faith and belief in me that I thought I'd never get back. She believed in *me*.

Now, as I sit alone next to her hospital bed whilst she's hooked up to multiple machines, I try to use some of her constant strength to stay strong.

"This is exactly why I don't do home visits."

I lean up in my seat, a sigh leaving me when JoJo leans her head on her pillow, her eyes slowly opening. I knew the doctors said it wasn't anything major, but the fact that she's here made me panic like crazy. My dad, on the other hand, is seeing this as an inconvenience as always. Such a hypocrite.

"JoJo," I whisper softly. "How are you feeling?"

She shakes her head. Shit. Do I need to call a doctor, or something? I stand to my feet immediately, but her hand reaches out, trying to reach me, but it lands back onto the sheets. I sit back down, scooting my chair closer to her bed.

"Where is your dad?" she croaks, staring up at me.

"He's down the hall. He said he was getting coffee," I reply.

She hums, swallowing. "Listen to me, songbird," she instructs. Immediately, I'm focused on her, knowing that she's got something important to say. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. "What's going on with your dad needs to be fixed. I know it's not your fault, and I know it's not completely your problem to fix, but you're both too stubborn to admit that you need each other. You both lost a lot that day, and you're comparing your hurt, not helping each other. I know it feels like a piece of him died along with your mom, but it doesn't mean you don't get to love the part of him that's still here. And when something happens to me and I'm not here anymore—"

I cut her off immediately, my chest pinching. "Nothing is going to happen to you."

She lets out a weak laugh. “I’m not going to be here forever, Catherine. I just want to go knowing you two have each other’s back, because that’s all I need. I need to know that my songbird is okay.” My eyes twitch at her words, tears fighting their hardest not to fall. “It shouldn’t take me collapsing in the kitchen for you two to realise that you both need each other. He needs you too.”

When her words settle on me, I know I have to do better to establish a better relationship with him. As hard as it’s going to be, and as frustrating it will be at times, I know for certain now that I need my real family too, not just my chosen one. And when my dad walks back in the room with two coffees and a hot chocolate for me, I know that we can’t keep going on like this.

THIRTY-NINE

CONNOR/CAT

HOME COMING

CONNOR

AT SOME POINT, I will eventually learn how to tell my sister no. And maybe she'll also know when to listen to me.

After the game, I let her rope me into a stupid party at Oliver's house. I don't understand how she managed to find out before I did. Hell, even Archer was there and got an invite before I knew. She had a party outfit under the jersey she was wearing and she and Elle were ready to go the second we came back out of the changing rooms.

I let her give me more and more drinks until I couldn't take it anymore. I couldn't focus on anything other than Catherine before I had the drinks and drinking only made it worse. I always knew I would never be one of those people who can drink loads and either not feel a thing or end up bouncing off the walls. I'm not Wes, for God's sake.

No.

I'm a sad drunk.

Which means leaving the party early, downing as many waters as I can to sober up and sitting in my dorm alone as I repeatedly call Cat's phone. The girls didn't tell me where she went. Not like they could anyway, they're both off their faces. I'm not expecting her to answer, whatever she's doing, but I like knowing that she knows that I've tried to contact her in some way or another.

As much as I have every right to be annoyed with her, I just can't. So what if she missed the end of one of the greatest games I've ever played? I might not have had her there, but I was surrounded by the love of my family and my other friends. I worked well with the team and we managed to pull off a great game. That should be enough for me.

I pace around the empty dorm, needing to do something with myself. All the alcohol has worn off and all I'm left with is a heavy pit in my stomach, longing for her. Fuck. I really am a sappy shit, aren't I?

Whatever's going on, I can't just storm over to her dorm all the way across campus and expect her to be there. She might not even want to talk to me.

Oh, god.

What if she doesn't want to talk to me? What then?

She's quite literally the only person I want to talk to sometimes. I want to live in a bubble with her, play house in a place where no one can hurt us. She feels like half of my soul. She's not the part of me I thought was missing or needed fixing. She's the part of me that's always been with me and she brought me back to life.

So if I need to wait, I'll wait.

CAT

By the time I get back to my dorm, it's early hours in the morning.

I've spent the last five hours hanging out with JoJo and finally having a grown up conversation with my dad. I had no distractions. No phone to pull out to use as an excuse. I didn't try to pull out my journal and back out of the inevitable conversation. Instead, I sat through it and I bade it welcome home.

I didn't realise how much we needed to have that conversation until tonight. Like JoJo said, it shouldn't take her almost dying in front of us to realise we had to fix up our act. We've been misunderstanding each other for years and pushing each other away instead of being there for each other

in our moments of need. She was right. We were both too stubborn to admit how much we needed each other.

Of course she is.

When I finally push open my bedroom door, the first thing I do is plug my phone onto charge and fall face first on my bed.

Just having regular emotions is exhausting enough. My brain is still struggling to keep up with the events of the day, but the second my phone restarts and my messages and miscalls start to pop up, I'm thinking of one person and one person only.

Connor.

I sit up in the bed, pulling the covers right to my chin as I lean over, picking up my phone still connected to the wire. All my messages and miscalls are from him.

CONNIE

Baby, where did you go?

Is everything okay?

Are you okay?

Call me when you can.

Please let me know that you're okay.

Are you mad at me?

I don't care if you were screaming in my face and telling me to leave, I still need to know you're okay.

I'll stay up until I know you're okay. Just text.

My hands shake as I press the call button, trying to see if his last message is actually true. Part of me doesn't want him to answer. I don't want him to have missed out on sleep because of me. If I was smart enough to buy a charger whilst I was out or brought my own, I wouldn't have to be calling him at two in the morning.

He answers on the second ring.

"Catherine? Are you okay? Please tell me you're at home," he says, breathing heavily.

"I'm in my dorm," I whisper, turning on my side. The weight of the day crashes onto my chest and I don't have the energy to explain what happened today. "Something happened with my dad and JoJo today, but I don't want to talk about it. Is that... Is that okay?"

"Of course it is, sweetheart." His voice is so soft and gentle I just want it to put me right to sleep. Well, there's an idea.

"Do you think you could stay with me on the phone until I go to sleep?" I ask, twisting one of my hands in the comforting fabric of my bedsheets.

"Of course," he replies instantly.

Comfortable silence washes over us for a few beats. "I'm sorry for missing the game. I know how important it was for you, but I know the first half was amazing. *You* were amazing."

He sighs. "You don't have to apologise."

"But, I do. I hate that I left you. You know how important it is to me for people to show up and I didn't show up for you, and I'm sorry. I really am," I whisper.

"I was annoyed, but you mean so much more to me than any game could, whether you're in the stands or not. Your family needed you. As long as you're safe, that's all that matters to me."

I bite my bottom lip. "Are you sure? You're allowed to be mad at me, Connor."

“I know, but I’m not. It was hard, but we’re both okay now, right?” I close my eyes at the sound of his voice.

“Yeah,” I sigh, wanting him closer to me now more than ever. “Too bad you live on the other side of campus, huh?” I try to add some sort of humour to my voice, but it just sounds sad and weak, much like how I feel right now.

“Yeah, it’s too bad,” he replies. “Do you want me to distract you until you fall asleep?”

“Yes, please.”

He shuffles on the end of the phone, but I can’t tell exactly what he’s doing. Maybe he’s getting comfortable in bed. “Okay, imagine that I’m with you. What would you want me to do?”

I don’t even have to think about my response. It’s all I’ve thought about since my dad dropped me off outside of campus. “I’d lay on my back, you’d lay on my chest, where you’d be able to keep me down, keep me calm... keeping me safe.”

“I’d like that,” he says, his voice hoarse and rough. “What else?”

“I’d stretch my arm out and you’d put your arm over mine and you’d lock your fingers with mine. We’d stay like that for a few minutes until I start to feel you everywhere.”

“That sounds really good,” he says, his breathing suddenly heavier. Weird. “Keep going.” I open my mouth to speak, but when I hear a groan on his side, I stop, frowning even though he can’t see me.

“Are you jerking off right now?” I ask, laughing quietly.

“No,” he pants.

“Are you lying to me?”

“Also, no.”

“Then what are you doing?” I get out through another laugh. I sit up further in bed, still hearing his heavy breathing on the other end of the phone.

“Open your door, Catherine.”

“What?” I gawk, a little too loud. “Is this your version of phone sex where I have to open the door because you get off on knowing that someone could walk in? Because if it is, I’m really not in the mood to—”

He groans. “Just open your door.”

I do as I’m told and walk through my bedroom door towards the door to my dorm. The wind is basically knocked out of me when I see Connor. I don’t know why it feels like it’s been years since I’ve seen him. Years since I’ve felt him, or heard his voice.

He doesn’t make a move to come in. Instead, he looks down at me, his smile bright and soft. “Spin for me.”

“What?” I laugh, a real smile spreading across my face.

“You heard me, sweetheart. The last time I saw you in a jersey, it wasn’t my number you had on your back. I want to see you.”

He lifts one of my hands above my head and urges me to spin around. I stumble slightly as I do, but he catches me, laughing. He tries to spin me again the other way and I end up tripping over again and now we’re both laughing.

“You’ve got to be quiet, baby,” he manages through a chuckle, shaking his head at me.

“Then stop making me laugh,” I whisper-shout, hitting him in the arm. He catches my wrist, circling his huge hand around it easily.

“Why would I? It’s my favourite thing to do,” he mutters, pulling me further into him until his back presses against the door. He leans down to me, and we both know what we need without saying it.

I wrap my arms around his middle, snuggling my head into his chest. He holds me there, his steady heartbeat soft against my ear. He doesn’t pester me, or ask me what happened today and I don’t ask him anything either. We just exist together. *Feel* together. He feels like coming home.

FORTY

CAT/CONNOR

“YOU’RE PERFECT.”

CAT

THE BEST PART about the football season being over is that I get to see Connor a lot more than before. It feels like he’s been tethered to me since the final and now, weeks later, I still can’t get enough of him.

The only small tiny problem? We still haven’t told Nora yet and she’s *this* close to figuring it out. I’ve had to hide him behind my door more than once and I’m sure she must be able to hear us some nights because we’re not always quiet.

I’ve been preparing myself to tell her next week after her boyfriend’s birthday party. She’s planned this whole surprise party for him at his house and she’s invited our friend group to come along. I swear I’ll tell her then.

First, I’ve got to sit through the process of letting my professor read my official finished report for the Drayton Titans. I’ve put my blood, sweat and tears into organising this magazine and I hope it paid off. I’d be lying if I didn’t say I’ve had the most fun of my life writing it. It’s brought me closer to people I never thought I would even be friends with. And it’s given me Connor.

I’ve spent nearly every waking moment when I’m not in class in front of a computer, trying out new fonts and new designs all by myself. I tried to get in contact with one of the design students, but they’re always too busy. If the paper wasn’t taken up for the last five years, I would have to be stupid to think they’d spare some time to help me out.

Although it's taken most of the school year to get it going, once this has been finalised, I'll be able to start doing monthly instalments every semester after this and hopefully recruit a little team when they see how much fun it is.

I didn't mind it, though. I've never been able to be creative in that way before and having free range has been amazing. I just hope I've managed to pull it off. The writing and the different sections I've added in, I'm not so worried about. But sitting in front of professor Rotford always brings me an annoying amount of discomfort.

She's read and skim read the paper three times and she hasn't said a word. Her office isn't much to look at either, so there's not even that I can focus on. She lets out a soft hum. I can't tell if that was a *hm this is extraordinary* or *hm who let this girl ever pick up a pen as a kid*. Either way, the anticipation is eating away at me.

I told Connor I'd meet him at his dorm since his roommates are out and I don't want to go there in tears. I want to be able to go and show him what I've managed to make out of the newspaper. George has tried to reassure me more than once, but he's too kind for his own good, so I don't know if his comments are completely legitimate.

"What do you think? I'm still playing with the headers, but I think it's okay," I mutter, nervously fidgeting with the loose material of my skirt.

She looks up at me and... Oh. My. God.

She's smiling.

At me.

I've always craved academic validation, but getting a smile from a teacher who I could have sworn has never smiled a day in her life is fucking incredible. I resist the urge to smile back and wait for her to say something instead. This could be a pity smile for all I know.

"Catherine, I'll be completely honest," she hedges, pushing up her glasses onto her forehead as she leans on to the table. "I wasn't sure how well you would manage to pull

through with this. I know I dropped this on you, but I wanted to test you. To push you. And... Well, this is one of the greatest things I've read in a long time."

My chest expands with utter pride at her words. "Really?"

She nods, flicking through it again. "I mean, it has everything an article needs. It tackles the subject of football in an enjoyable and accessible way. It's serious in some parts, talking about the injuries and the anxieties on the team. It's funny... I mean, it has everything you'd need. You've done a really good job with this, Catherine."

"Thank you so much," I breathe out as if I just received the world's greatest compliment. Well, I kind of just did. For me anyway.

"Seriously," she says, shaking her head with disbelief. "I am really impressed. I feel extremely proud to be your teacher. If a company gets a whiff of this, you could be working for the New York Times. I'm really proud of you."

Oh shit. Here comes the waterworks. My eyes start to water immediately at her words and my throat pinches. I can't help the tears of joy that stream down my face.

"Oh, God," she mutters, fiddling for a tissue on her desk and hands it to me. "Please don't cry. *Again.*"

"I'm not crying," I sob, clearly crying harder now. She just shakes her head at me as I stand from my seat, my legs shaking. *Pull yourself together, woman. It's not a big deal.*

When I manage to get out of the room, I twist my mom's necklace around my neck and I know she's with me, guiding me, knowing that she lives on in me. Her love for books and literature will always be in me and this article is living proof of that.

CONNOR

I don't think she's stopped moving since she got here.

This is by far the happiest I've ever seen her, and without the pressures of football on my back, I can completely bathe in

this moment with her. I'm so fucking proud of her I feel like I might explode. Well, if I don't pass out with dizziness first.

She's been pacing the living room for the last half an hour rambling about the project. I've been waiting all day to hear back from her and now I can hardly get a word in. Her gorgeous black hair is flowing down her back, the white summer dress she's wearing distracting me as she walks back and forth, talking with her hands.

She's fucking adorable.

"She said I could work for NYT! Do you understand how big of a deal that is?" she asks, her voice an octave higher than usual. "I mean, I don't think it could actually happen. It's just a school paper, but you never know. It *could* happen. Imagine if it did. How crazy would that be? I need to update my CV. Oh my God! Do you get how crazy that would be?"

I laugh, throwing my head back as she continues moving around. "I get it. I get it. Now can you sit down so I can read it?"

I try to reach for her when she walks my way again, but her hands fly up into her hair, tugging on the ends of her curls. "Ah! I'm too nervous! I'm going to close my eyes. Actually, no. I'm going to go into your room. Wait. No. I'll stay here."

"Sweetheart," I urge and her panicked gaze set on mine. "Just sit down and let me read it. I'm going to love it. I know I will."

She takes in a deep breath, closing her eyes. "Okay," she whispers. She moves to sit next to me on the couch before changing her mind and sitting across from me instead. "I'll sit here. It's less torture if I'm here."

"You're going to freak out either way," I mutter, leaning over to pick up the paper from the coffee table. I watch as she curls up into the chair as I slowly let my eyes linger to the sheet in front of me.

The design is already perfect. It's a pale green colour with darker greens on the outlines, resembling a real traditional magazine. The front page is a faded photo of the team, one of

the first team pictures we've ever taken. I smile to myself, knowing just how much we've changed since then.

I open the newspaper and I'm instantly in awe with the way she writes. She crafts every sentence perfectly. Every joke is executed with ease. Every fact about football is thrown in so casually that you wouldn't need to be an expert to read it.

I read through all the profiles she's made on every single player on the team. She accurately describes Wes as a 'thunder on the pitch and a ball of sunshine off the pitch.' I laugh when I get to the part where she writes about our day in Fired Arts and the family dynamic of our team. She writes carefully at length about the atmosphere being around us in social settings and when we're training. My eyes linger over a few words when I look over my profile.

Connor Bailey is a sweetheart. And I don't mean that in the way a granny would call her grandson a sweetheart. I mean, he is genuinely sweet on the inside and the outside. You could often find the team joking about how he takes things too seriously, or how he always tries to keep them in check, but I see someone who cares for his team like they're his family. Someone who would give the shirt off his back for anyone on the team and open up his home for any of them. There's not a mean bone in his body and it amazes me how he manages to get through each match unscathed and with a smile on his face, win or lose. You'll know that just by having one conversation with him. You know exactly the kind of person he is instantly and you'll have a toothache from just how sweet he is.

Something catches in my throat when I read the rest of the paper. Every line is sculptured to perfection. Every word she writes speaks to me in a way nothing has ever done before. When I look up at her and she's still watching me read, I try to speak, but nothing comes out. I'm in complete and utter awe of her.

"What do you think? Is it good? I know what Rotford said, but maybe it was a little too much. You know... all of your part. People are going to think that we're—"

“It’s perfect, Cat,” I say, cutting her off as I set the paper back down on the table. She’s too far away from me. I stand up from the couch and it takes me two steps until I’m in front of her. She looks up at me, those chestnut eyes filled with worry and self-doubt. “It’s fucking perfect. *You’re* perfect.”

I can’t help myself anymore, so I grab her from her seat as she squeals. I fall back into the chair, pulling her with me as she wraps her arms and legs around me. The sappy smile on her face makes me pepper her with kisses across her face and her chest as she giggles in my arms.

“Do you really think so, or are you just saying that?” she manages to ask through her contagious laughter.

“You make me sound so smart,” I say, pressing a soft kiss to her lips, “like I actually know what I’m talking about. Like you just get me.”

“I *do* get you,” she replies, smiling against my mouth as she pulls back. “It’s you that has done this, not me. You have the biggest heart out of everyone that I know, and you love and care for things so easily, so effortlessly and so selflessly. You give so much of yourself to others, to help others, and I just want to squeeze you sometimes and tell you how amazing you are because you don’t hear it enough. I know it might not seem like much coming from me, but seriously, Connie, you’re the best at everything you do. Well... maybe not baking, but you’re trying and that’s what matters.”

Her words settle on my chest and it pinches when I look up to see the serious look on her face. “You were doing so well until that last part, baby,” I murmur, leaning up to steal the smile off her lips, pressing my lips to hers.

It feels like we’re kissing for the first time. Everything about her – about *us* — feels fresh. It’s like we’re trying something new. I thought that feeling would fade after the first few weeks, but it hasn’t. If anything, it’s just grown tenfold.

She laughs against my mouth, pulling away from me. She sighs heavily, glancing out the window into the spring afternoon before looking back down at me.

Her eyes soften and my chest rises and falls, suddenly out of breath just by looking at her. “I love you, Connor. I have so much love for you that it drives me crazy. I’m in love with everything about you, everything you believe in, everything that you are. I’m in love with all of you. Wholly. Completely. Everything all at once.”

Her words take me back to the first time I really *saw* her when I was seven years old and I just *knew* she was it for me. It takes me back to the first time she let me hug her when she scraped her knee after she fell off her bike. It takes me back to the time we walked along the path back to our estate, barefoot as we held melted popsicles in our hands. They take me right back to the very first time I kissed her and she kissed me back.

“I love you too, Catherine. You’ve got the most brilliant mind I’ve ever known. You make my world tilt on its axis whenever you’re around. I’ve loved you for as long as I can remember. I’ve been in love with you before I even knew it myself,” I say. She takes in a deep breath as I wrap my hands around her waist, pulling her as close to me as possible. I kiss the top of her chest that’s poking out of her dress. “Sometimes, when I think about you too much, I get dizzy. It’s like my body doesn’t know what to do with all the love that I have for you. It’s maddening.”

She responds by pressing her lips to mine. She starts off slow and I let her take the lead. Her lips work over mine seamlessly, her hands curling in my hair. The pace picks up when she pushes her chest closer to mine, causing my back to fall against the chair. She starts to trail kisses across my jaw, gently grinding in my lap.

“I love you,” she murmurs against my skin. “I love you so fucking much, Connor.”

A low groan escapes my throat when she moves against me again, still kissing my jaw. I don’t think I could move, or guide her in any way even if I wanted to. Her hands delve deeper into my hair, her hips moving on their own accord against the soft fabric of my plaid pyjama pants.

She reaches down between us to tug the hem of my shirt, still kissing me. “I want this off.”

Fuck. I love it when she’s in control.

“Yes, ma’am,” I mutter and she smiles. I waste no time pulling it over my head and her hands are all over me instantly.

I love this side of her, when she’s completely caught up in the lust that she forgets to be her proper and poised self. She’s just *her*. She rolls her hips against me again and a soft whimper leaves her mouth when her core contacts my hard cock.

“Fuck, baby,” I mutter. My hands slide higher up her thighs, her wetness immediately covering my fingers. Just as I expected, she’s not wearing any panties. “Is this all for me?”

She nods, and I elicit a gasp from her throat when my fingers work closer towards her heat.

“I want you so badly,” she murmurs in my ear, biting softly on the lobe as she withdraws. Both of her arms rest on my shoulders as she leans back a little, displaying to me her gorgeous chest, her tits pressing through the thin material. “Do you want me?”

“Yes, Catherine,” I breathe. “I want you all the time.”

“Great,” she chirps, that sexy smile doubling as she presses another kiss on the side of my mouth. “Now take me to your bed and fuck me.”

I tut, shaking my head at her dirty talk. “Why? Are you opposed to couch sex?”

“I’m not opposed to anything when it comes to you,” she replies, shrugging. “I do, however, want to remain with some dignity if your roommates were to walk in on us.”

I press my forehead to hers. “Right. Good call.”

She yelps as I stand up and she keeps her legs locked around my waist, still peppering me with kisses as I knead her soft ass with my palms.

When I get us through the door of my bedroom, I quickly lock it before throwing her on to my bed. I slowly make my way over her, pressing my hands into the mattress until her back falls.

“Have I told you how fucking pretty you are, Cat?” My voice doesn’t sound like my own when I speak. She’s still covered by her dress, but there’s something else that shines off her when she’s beneath me like this. Confidence. Strength. I don’t think I’ve ever found anything more attractive. “I want the image of you burned into my eyelids. I want to see you all the time. I want to have you all the time.”

She shifts beneath me. “You do have me.”

A greedy and possessive hum ripples through me when I lean over her. I tug on the hem of her dress and she helps me take it off her.

She’s fucking perfect. Every single inch of her. Every part of her makes my body ache for more.

My eyes roam over her body, committing every part of her that I can to my memory. She’s all I want to see. Even when I’m not supposed to. *Especially* when I’m not supposed to. She’s all I want.

My Catherine.

My *love*.

“Are you going to touch me?” she asks, her back arching, trying her hardest for our bare chests to touch. “You’re looking at me like I’m going to disappear.”

“No, I’m looking at you like I love you,” I murmur, pressing a hard kiss to her lips. She grabs the hair at the back of my neck, urging me down to her until our bodies are flush against each other.

I reach a hand between us, my fingers finding her wet cunt and she gasps, her hips instantly bucking up. I watch the way her face contorts when I tease two fingers into her and a satisfied smirk spreads across my face.

“Connor,” she moans. I pull my fingers out of her only to tease her clit with my thumb. Her hips jerk again. “Don’t stop.”

“Never.”

CAT

This is not how I saw today going. We hook up most of the times we hang out, but something shifted today. I told him I loved him for the first time and he said he loves me back. He’s shown me he loves me too.

He’s showing me again now after he just gave me a mind-shattering orgasm. He switched our positions seamlessly and I let him. He’s now on his back, both of his hands digging into my hips as I straddle him.

I rub my pussy against his condom-covered dick and I swear I almost see stars. He’s so big and thick beneath me, and the more I move, the tighter his grip on my hips get. I’m going to be bruised in the morning, but I don’t care.

“Fuck,” he groans when my clit presses into his skin again. “That feels so fucking good, baby.”

“Yeah?” I tease, grinding down on him again. “How good?”

His hands flex on my hips. “Too good.”

“Fuck,” I mutter when the friction starts to get too much. “I want to feel you inside of me like this.”

“You sure you can take it?” he teases, panting as he continues moving me over him. His face twists in pleasure and I press my lips together so I don’t moan, not giving him the satisfaction he wants.

“You sure *you* can take it?”

“You’re right,” he agrees.

I get used to the rhythm, getting wetter by the second, but he moves me further up so I’m resting on his stomach. My hands fall to both sides of his head as I lean down. “What are you doing?”

“Sit on my face, Catherine.” His tone is so sharp I almost do exactly as he asks before I really think about it.

I’ve never done that before and no matter how turned on I am right now, there’s no way people actually enjoy their face being ridden.

“I– I can’t,” I stutter when he smacks my ass.

“You can,” he urges. I stare up at the ceiling when he pushes my pussy closer to his face.

“It won’t feel good for you.”

“Sit the fuck down and I’ll show you just how good it feels for me,” he demands. I’m about to tell him that I’ll do it, but he beats me to it. He swiftly lifts my hips up and slides down the bed slightly and I lower myself onto his mouth.

Holy, fuck.

My hands fly to the headboard, needing stability when his tongue slides inside my pussy. This feels way too good. I can’t believe I was shitting on this two seconds ago because this sensation is godly. He pushes his tongue in and out of me as I try to move my hips. My clit throbs as my core tightens with need, desperate for a release.

“God, Connor,” I groan, muffling my moan in the crook of my arm as I continue to move my hips as fast as I possibly can.

“That’s it, baby. Just like that,” he encourages, panting from beneath me. “Ride my face like you fucking own it because I’m all yours, Catherine. All yours.”

“All mine?” I whimper when his teeth gently nip at my clit.

“All yours.”

His words work me up even more until I’m panting and I can hardly move. He guides me with his hands and his mouth, doing most of the work for me until stars burst behind my eyes and my entire body convulses. The orgasm soars through me until I feel like putty and I roll onto my back.

Connor's glistening face comes into my view and he immediately captures my mouth, both of our tastes swirling together. It's glorious. *He's* glorious.

When both of his knees settle on each side of me, I press my arms around his shoulder blades and push his chest down onto mine until he collapses.

I gasp slightly at how heavy he is. His weight is comforting, though. Safe. He settles for a minute before he leans up on his hands, using one hand to brush a sweaty curl from my face. "Wait. I don't want to hurt you. I'm heavy."

I shake my head, pulling him back down to me. "Stay with me like this. I like it."

We both settled after a while, our naked bodies pressed together so comfortably that I almost fell asleep. The only thing keeping me awake is the fact that Connor stretched our arms out together and has been circling his thumb over my hand.

"You're the best thing that I've ever had, Connie," I murmur into the silence. I swallow the lump in my throat, wanting to make this moment a happy one and not ruin it by my over emotional tendencies. "I don't think I'd ever be able to let you go."

"I wouldn't let you, anyway," he replies, his voice heavy with sleep. "You're the best secret I've ever had to keep. The best thing that's ever been mine."

With Connor's weight on my chest and the steady thrum of our heartbeats, I know that all my dreams are going to be happy ones now that I'm with him. I just know he's going to continue to make me feel like I'm the most extraordinary thing he's seen in his life forever. I'm not hoping or guessing anymore.

I know.

FORTY-ONE

CAT/CONNOR

SPIN THE BOTTLE

CAT

I'M USUALLY PRETTY good at following through with my word. When I say I'm going to do something, nine times out of ten, I actually do it. Like with my dad, I've managed to sit through more than one conversation with him since the day at the hospital. We've come to some sort of normal and when he calls me, my stomach doesn't drop anymore.

The situation with Nora is a whole other thing. Something is telling me that she purposely tried to busy herself so she wouldn't see me today. After we had breakfast together this morning, she was in the happiest mood I've ever seen before she slipped through the door to set up her boyfriend's party. I swear this girl falls more and more in love with him every day and I love it for her. I just hope that she'll understand where I'm coming from when I tell her.

That's if I can find her again.

One thing about Nora Bailey? She will never stay in one place for long.

Connor and I met at the party and he's not left my side since. We've scanned every room in the giant house, walking in on more than one person fooling around and getting hit in the face with the gross smell of vapes.

When we push open another door to a group of twenty-somethings and still don't see her, I turn back down the corridor, frustrated. Connor's hot behind me, jogging to keep up with me. I brush my hair out of my face in defeat.

“I’m going to tell her,” I mutter to myself. Saying it aloud means I can’t chicken out, right?

“You’re going to tell her,” he repeats back to me, slinging his arm around my shoulder as we continue walking down the corridor. My hands are shaking just from the anticipation. It shouldn’t be a big deal. It *isn’t* a big deal.

“Yep. Me... You... We are going to tell her.”

He leans down, his mouth hovering over my ear. “Are you sure?” he asks.

“Yeah, I can’t keep hiding this from her.”

“Okay,” he murmurs, “As long as it’s soon, because I want to PDA all over you. You look fucking stunning tonight.”

I don’t think I’ll ever get used to the way Connor talks about me. I don’t think I want to. With every word that comes out of his mouth, I feel like I’m melting. He says the sweetest things so casually, validates my feelings without doubt and he’s just *there*.

“You’re not too bad, yourself,” I mutter, looking up at him. He shakes his head before pressing a kiss to my temple. We continue walking and I still can’t spot her. “Do you have any idea where she could be?”

He shakes his head. “No clue. She’s been here all morning, so she should be around here somewhere. Maybe she went back to your dorm to change.”

I bark out a laugh. “I think you’re forgetting she’s a theatre major. She can pull off a good outfit change wherever she is. She wouldn’t need to go home to do that.”

He hums. “True.” When we walk back into the living room where most of our friends are, he leans down to whisper. “Hey, just relax, okay? When we see her, we’ll talk. For now, just have fun.”

CONNOR

There is nothing sexier than Catherine rolling her eyes at me. She’s going to start to stress me out if she doesn’t stop

worrying about Nora. We're meant to be here having a good time since neither of us are busy.

I'm not necessarily here to celebrate the birthday boy. He's good enough to Nora as far as I'm aware, but he's not my favourite guy on the planet. He's not made any effort to be a part of our friend group and I've never pushed him either. I'm perfectly fine with the distance between us.

My friends are the ones who argue on the floor in the living room aggressively arguing over whatever game they're playing. Wes, Sam, Oli and some other guys from the team are sitting in a circle, an empty beer bottle in the middle as a few girls sit between the guys. I slip my hand from around Cat's shoulder as we walk further in, trying to see what's going on.

"What are you guys playing?" I ask.

Wes's smile doubles as he looks up. "I honestly don't know. We're just spinning the bottle and picking up a card from this pack Sam has."

I hum in response. "Sounds fun. Can we join?"

"Of *course* you can," Wes coo's. When I take a seat next to him, I flick him in the head as Cat settles beside me. "There's spare spots anyway. Archer's away brooding because he had to kiss Elle, but she said no."

Catherine chokes next to me. "She said no? Why would she say no? I mean, respectfully, Archer is gorgeous."

Everyone in the circle laughs. As much as he's a broody motherfucker who doesn't like to talk to anyone, everyone knows he's model-level good looking. He's built like a giant, too. I've tried to convince him to try out for the football team, or even the hockey team, but he sticks to his history books and one-liners.

"You hear that, Connie boy?" Wes mocks, leaning into me. "She said he's *gorgeous*. How do you feel about that?"

"I don't feel anything, Wesley," I mutter. Catherine shuffles beside me, bringing her hand to my back where no one else can see it.

“He’s got nothing on you, Connor. Don’t worry,” she mutters, pressing a kiss to my shoulder.

I lean back into her, keeping my voice as quiet as possible whilst everyone around us talks loud. “I know, baby. He’s not the one who can make you scream the way I do.” Her breath hitches and I shuffle forward away from her, linking my hands together. “Alright. Let’s play.”

For the most part, the game is a good distraction. Instead of worrying about what my sister is going to say when she finds out, we’re too caught up with the way Wes changes the rules of the game every few minutes for his own benefit.

I have to painfully watch Oliver awkwardly make out with some girl called Chelsea. I’m getting the idea that he’s never made out with anyone before because each time someone has to make out with another person his whole body cringes. I can’t wait for the day some girl changes his life and he stops getting so uneasy at the idea.

When it’s Cat’s turn to spin the bottle, I should have known something ridiculous would be about to happen since Wes is suspiciously shuffling the cards. And of course, the bottle points right at me. She looks up at me, a mischievous smirk hanging on her lips.

“Oh, fun,” Wes chirps, beaming at the two of us as he reads the card in his hand. “You two have to recreate a sex position. Cowgirl.”

“Perfect,” Cat mutters, easily moving in front of me until she presses her hands to my shoulder, my back pressing into the edge of the sofa. She climbs into my lap, no questions asked, subconsciously rubbing herself against me. I bite the inside of my cheek to suppress my groan. “How long do we have to do this for?”

Wes lets out a cough when she moves again in my lap, her hands tightening around my neck. “Two minutes.”

She meets my gaze, a challenge and a fire in her eyes. “Shouldn’t be too hard, should it, sweetheart?” I murmur, bringing my mouth as close to hers without kissing her. She

wets her bottom lip, the motion so simple and sexy my cock throbs.

“Are you sure you should be thinking about anything hard whilst your dick is pressing into me,” she mutters back. She rolls her hips slowly. So fucking slow. Everything else in the room disappears and she becomes all that I see. There’s something so erotic about the fact they have no idea about the two of us and we’re doing this more than just for the sake of the game. Her body moulds with mine perfectly.

“Don’t act like you’re not enjoying it,” I argue, dropping my head back to get a better look at her. Her beautiful curls are framing her face, the purple corset top she’s wearing begging me to see what’s underneath.

She’s good at pretending that I don’t affect her, but sometimes the pleasure takes over and she can’t help it anymore. I grip onto her hips and pull her into me again, her core contacting my dick.

Her head falls to the crook of my neck when my nails dig into her hips, rolling her over me once more. “Connor...” She whimpers and I swear I almost lose my fucking mind. Her voice is so quiet, but if someone tried hard enough, they could hear her.

“Shh, baby,” I whisper. “You don’t want people to hear how sweetly you say my name, do you?”

I don’t get to see her reaction before Wes’s shrill voice brings us both back to the moment. We’re in a room full of people, basically dry humping like it’s a completely normal thing to do. Well, at parties like these, I guess it is. What’s not normal is my sister suddenly appearing in the middle of the circle.

Wait.

What?

Cat stumbles out of my lap, quickly jumping to her feet when she sees Nora staring at the two of us and at Wes. Her eyebrows are knitted with confusion, her cheeks red. Not a

sweet red that she gets from watching her favourite movie, but one filled with anger.

“Nora, hi,” Cat says, her voice way too high pitched. Nora doesn’t look at her, though, she’s looking right at me. Twin telepathy has never worked for us, but with the way she’s looking straight through me right now I’m having second thoughts. “We were just—”

“Playing the game, right?” Her voice is sharp as her gaze snags on Wes who is shuffling the cards, whistling like a fucking idiot as if he can’t see what’s happening. She nudges him with her foot, completely ignoring my existence. “Hey, I need you.”

What the fuck is going on?

Wes peers up at her before looking around him. He points to himself. “Me? What for?”

My sister rolls her eyes. “Does it matter?” She reaches out a hand to him. “Just get up.”

He slips his hand in hers. “Yes, boss,” he mutters, standing to his feet. He lets her pull him out of the circle, but Cat goes after them and I do too.

“Nora, can we talk for a sec?” she chokes out, gripping onto Nora’s arm.

“About what? I’m kinda busy, Cat. You know, with the party and Ryan and everything,” she whispers. My sister’s smile softens and I can tell how much it’s killing Cat not to say anything. There’s a time and place for everything. Cat lets go of her arm and Nora and Wes walk away.

The rest of the party is as boring as ever. I don’t mean to talk down my sister’s party-making skills, but since she disappeared, we haven’t been enjoying ourselves. Elle has stuck with me and Catherine for most of the night, but by the time it gets to midnight, we’re all ready to go home.

As we walk to the door, I spot Wes standing in the middle of the kitchen, his fingers hovering over his mouth. What has this idiot done now? Cat and Elle follow behind me as I make

my way over to him, already knowing something stupid is going to come out of his mouth.

“Hey, Wes. Where did you and Nora go?” Cat asks, leaning against the counter. He doesn’t say anything, he just keeps his fingers pressed to his lips.

I shake his shoulders. I swear he should have majored in theatre instead of football because this guy is the most dramatic person I’ve ever met. He knows how to create suspense when none is needed. We’re in a sweaty house with shitty music playing and we want to leave, but of course he has to give an Oscar-worthy performance before telling us where my sister went.

“Wesley,” I press. He blinks, snapping out of his trance. His eyes connect with mine and he looks like he’s seen a ghost. “Where’s my sister?” I ask. He opens his mouth and before he can say something stupid, I stop him. “If she’s having sex with her boyfriend, please don’t tell me. You can just say she’s gone to the bathroom.”

He swallows. “She went back to her dorm. I think— I think something just happened. I can hardly think straight.”

“How long ago did she leave? Did she take a car, or what?” I quiz. There’s always been unwritten rules in our friend group that we don’t just disappear when we go to a party together. We always need to know where each other are if it’s late. “She can’t walk alone in the dark.”

“Yeah,” Elle agrees, “Didn’t Ryan go with her?”

“No.”

“Okay, well, we’re going to see if we can catch up with her. She’s been off all night,” Cat says, linking her arm in Elle’s. Before I can tell them both to be safe and to call me if they need anything, they’re already walking out the door.

I turn back to face Wes who is still as slack jawed as he was when we first came in here. “What have you done?”

He gasps. “Me? I’ve not done anything. It’s her boyfriend you should be worried about.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” He shrugs. I run my hands across my face, tilting my head up to the ceiling. “Come on. Get your jacket. We’re going.”

“Going where?”

“Where do you think?”

She can try to run away from her problems all she wants and she can hate me for all I care, but I’m not going to leave her alone to sulk whilst the party she planned goes on without her.

FORTY-TWO

CAT

RUNAWAY SISTER

I'VE NEVER SEEN Nora go to the gym a day in my life, but she's somehow managing to outrun me *and* Elle. I'm not exactly fit either, but jeez she's fast. Ryan's house is only a ten minute walk from campus and we're almost back to our dorm building. We've tried calling her, but she won't answer. From what Wes said, she can't be that far in front of us, but it's dark and she's not making any effort to contact either of us.

"How the hell is she so fast?" Elle pants when we push open the main doors to our building.

"I've got no clue," I say, sighing when we get in from the chill. "It's not like she's got far to run now."

We trudge up the stairs and my stomach churns. Does she already know about me and Connor? Is that why she's running away? Did something else happen at the party that I can't remember? Nora is the most sociable person I've ever met and she would not turn down a party – especially one that she planned – without a good enough reason.

I push open the door to our apartment and she's standing there, headphones dangling from her phone and her keys in one hand. Her dark brown hair swishes as Elle and I step closer to her.

"Nor," I say softly, resting my hand on her shoulder. Her eyes don't lock with mine and she stares at the ground instead. "Talk to us. What's going on?"

She takes a deep breath, staring up at the ceiling. "Nothing. It doesn't matter. I'm fine."

Elle steps in front of her, urging her to look at one of us. “You’re not fine.”

I peer over at her phone to see the song she’s been playing. “Seriously? *Dear Theodosia* from *Hamilton*? Babe, what’s going on?”

She sighs again and we move to the other side of the counter, Nora standing in front of the two of us. She finally meets our gaze and my stomach turns at the thought of me, or anyone, hurting her. She’s my lifeline. My best friend. One of the only people who *gets* me.

“He cheated on me.” She whispers the four words so quietly that I almost don’t hear her. My heart breaks in two for her. “He’s *been* cheating on me. I found out at the party. It’s why our chemistry has been so off on stage.”

“Oh, baby,” I murmur. Elle and I immediately wrap our arms around our friend, holding her tight to us. These are the kind of hugs that could last forever. The kind of hugs that hold the weight of a thousand ones, letting her know that we’ve always got her back. “He doesn’t deserve you, Nora. You’re too good for this world.”

“Am I?” she breathes, her voice muffled between the three of us. “Because sometimes, I feel like I’m barely scratching the surface of what it means to be ‘good.’ I’m just constantly missing that mark and he realised that and he doesn’t want me anymore.”

“You’re so much more than that, Nor,” Elle says. “Anyone would be crazy to think you’re not the brightest star in their galaxy. You shine so bright, always. Ryan’s just got his head too far up his ass to notice that.”

“Exactly,” I whisper. “You’re *our* star, Nora. You don’t need to be that for anyone else. You’re more than enough for us.”

She sniffles. “You guys get really poetic when I’m sad, you know that?”

We laugh and squeeze her tighter before we let go. “We know,” I sigh. “Now, what do you need from us? We kinda

panicked about where you are, so the boys will probably be here any minute.”

“Perfect,” she says, wiping at her face before showing me a bright smile. There’s my girl. “How about we just watch a movie? I’ll get our blankets, Elle can get the snacks and you can choose the movie. The boys can suck it up.”

“Sounds good,” Elle chirps, already on her way to the kitchen.

I do just that. I know she doesn’t want to talk in detail about what happened, but I want her to process it however she needs to. Being cheated on is the worst feeling ever and I’ll do anything to make her feel better, which means ignoring the huge elephant in the room.

As I wait for the TV to load up, I pull out my phone ready to tell Connor that she’s safe and that he doesn’t need to worry, but my gaze snags on Nora as I look up.

She’s standing in the door of my bedroom, my weighted blanket in one hand and something else I can’t see in her other. Her chin wobbles as she looks at me. My chest tightens. “What’s this?”

I swallow even when my throat goes dry. “What’s what?” I step closer to her as the microwave stops beeping and the entire room falls silent. A white paper is in her hand, face-up in Connor’s handwriting. “Oh.”

Her chestnut eyes connect with mine, a fire swarming within them. “Have you been sleeping with my brother?”

“Nora, wait—”

She reads the note aloud. “*To, My Catherine. Twenty roses for your twentieth. I’m so proud of you every day. You’re my favourite person ever. Love from, Connie.*” My stomach twists. Elle lets out a sigh from the side of the room, slowly inching towards this very awkward confrontation. This is not how it was supposed to go. Not at all. “Your birthday was *months* ago. What does this mean, Cat?”

“That’s what I was trying to tell you earlier and then everything happened and I—”

The door swings open and three men come rushing into the room. Well, Wes and Connor make their way right over to Nora, almost knocking me over in the process, while Archer stands awkwardly in the corner, not sure if he should intervene or not.

Connor holds onto Nora's shoulders as her icy eyes don't leave mine. He grips her cheeks, trying to check her for injuries or any harm, but what she's feeling now must be rooted deep inside her. "Nora, you can't just run off like that. What were you thinking?"

She pushes at his chest and he stumbles back into me. "I can't run off, but you can sleep with my best friend behind my back?"

Connor looks down at me and I have no words or thoughts to offer him.

Wes speaks for the both of us. "Oh, shit."

Nora shoots him a look. "Yeah, oh shit," she replies, rolling her eyes at him. "When were you going to tell me?"

"T-Today... Tonight, I promise," I stutter, trying to comfort her in some way as I reach out my hands, but she crosses her arms against her chest.

"Oh, that's fucking convenient, isn't it?"

"Calm down, Sunshine," Wes says, moving closer to her, but she pushes him back.

"Do *not* call me sunshine and do *not* tell me to calm down, you fool!" My head spins at the amount of force in her tone and the grin on Wes's face. I don't think I will ever be able to understand these two.

"How am I a fool?" Wes retorts. She just stares up at him, throwing her hands in the air as if she physically has no energy for a comeback as her chest rises and falls. The energy between them crackles as we all look between them. Something's going on there. I don't know what, but it's something.

“You two have been weird all night. What’s going on?” Connor asks, pointing a finger between them.

“Since we’re all spilling secrets...” Nora says, looking around the room. She drops her gaze to the ground as she mumbles, “I kissed Wes.”

It’s so quiet you could hear a hairpin drop. The moment is brief before everyone starts to scream and shout and question the weirdest thing I could have ever imagined to come out of Nora’s mouth. As much as he can flirt with her, Wes has never actually crossed that line with her.

“You kissed Wes?” I repeat, eyes wide.

“Yes.”

“The real question is why *wouldn’t* you kiss Wes,” Elle says, instigating as per usual. She shrugs when we both shoot her a death stare. “What? You two act like you’re madly in love with each other.”

Wes starts laughing, throwing his head back as Connor stays silent, clearly in shock. Nora groans loudly. “I am *not* in love with him. He’s my best friend and I’ve been dating Ryan for five years.”

Archer lets out a nervous laugh, holding his hands up. “Look, guys, I’m so honoured you wanted me to be apart of this conversation, but now I know Nora’s safe, I’m just going to—”

“No!” Elle bursts out. As quiet and as sneaky as she is, that was an awfully loud outburst from her. Archer turns towards her, crossing his arms against his chest, tilting his head. “I just mean, I don’t want to be the only one who’s watching this from the sidelines. You could get some real good entertainment out of this, Arch.”

“Don’t call me that,” he mumbles, but he walks next to her and mirrors her position, watching the chaos unfold.

I flap my hands around, trying to focus again on Nora. “That brings me back to my first question. You kissed Wes?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I was trying to make Ryan jealous,” she admits, her face flushing with embarrassment.

“Why were you trying to make him jealous?” Connor asks, still oblivious to what’s going on.

“Because he cheated on me! Is everyone aware of that now? He was fucking another girl at the party I organised for him and because I have the worst luck in the world, I walked in on it and Wes was with me, so I kissed him to make him mad. The end.”

Connor’s face hardens as he stalks over to Wes, backing him up into the wall. “You kissed my sister?”

“Did you not hear anything she just said? *She* kissed *me*. Not the other way around,” Wes argues, clearly trying his hardest not to laugh. “Great kiss, though. Lots of tongue.” Connor growls in his face, his fist tightening in his shirt. “What did you want me to do? I offered to beat him up, but she told me not to. I even settled for keying his car and she said no. It was the next best thing.”

Connor releases him and runs his hands down his face. “Seriously, Wes? Are you being fucking serious right now? We’ve had this exact conversation before.”

“And I knew you’d react exactly like this,” he says. “Dude, can you hear yourself right now? You’re getting mad at *me* for consensually making out with your sister after *she* asked me, when you’ve been fucking Cat’s brains out for months.”

Nora’s eyes go so wide I swear they almost fall out of her head. I’m getting too dizzy for this. “You knew?!”

“Sort of...” Wes mumbles, running his hand through his hair.

She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. She points at me and then at Elle. “We need to talk.”

After leaving the boys up to their own devices, we settled on sitting on the hood of Connor’s car to have the very important

conversation I've been avoiding for months. Nora's reaction and the chaos that followed was expected. I've known these guys long enough to know that when one thing happens, a whole load of shit is bound to follow.

The three of us stare up at the sky in the late spring night and words are failing us all. I ruined my chance at trying to explain myself in a justified way and ended up rambling. Nora's been sitting on that piece of information for a while as Elle listens to both sides of our stories.

"I would never do that to either of you. You guys know that, right?" Nora whispers, looking between the both of us, her eyes lined with tears.

"I mean, Cat doesn't have any siblings. And I'd hope you wouldn't do that to me because that's a felony," Elle murmurs. A short laugh escapes my throat and Nora shakes her head.

"You know what I mean," she replies.

"Are you mad at me? It's okay if you are. I should never have lied to you, Nora. I'm seriously so sorry," I say. Great. Word vomit again. My anxieties are soothed partially as she rests her hand over mine, squeezing it gently.

She sighs a little. "I'm more annoyed that you didn't tell me. If you had told me from the beginning, I would have had more time to process it, but... I've just been broken up with and I want you to be here as my friend, no matter what you and my brother are doing."

"You're always going to be first, Nor, always. And I'm sorry for not making you feel like you were. I just got so caught up in everything and I-"

"I get it," she says, cutting me off. She bites her bottom lip, thinking about it and I let her take the time she needs. "I think I knew something was going on a few weeks ago and I just didn't want to admit it. I've seen the way he looks at you, the way he worries about you when you're not there. He was worried sick that day you left the game. I don't think he's ever been that concerned about another person in his life. It'll take

some getting used to, for sure, but I want you both to be happy.”

My chest pinches at her words. The way Connor cares about me frightens me, but not that I want to back out, but I want to keep seeing where this goes. Something is telling me we’re only going to get stronger after this and I can’t wait to see what our future is going to look like.

“Don’t think you’ve gotten out of this either,” Elle murmurs, bumping my shoulder. “You look at him like he hung the fucking moon. You’re so in love with each other, it’s hard to digest, honestly.” She sighs wistfully before panic sets over her features. “Wait. You do love him, right?”

“Yeah,” I whisper. “I do.”

Nora barks out a disbelieving laugh. “It makes sense. He needs someone like you and you need someone like him.”

“So, we have your blessing?” I ask, nudging her shoulder.

She shrugs. “I don’t *love* this, but I don’t hate it, either. I just want you to be happy, Cat.”

“I want you to be happy too,” I whisper.

“I will be.”

As we all continue watching the stars, I know now more than ever that no matter what life throws at us, no matter what the disagreement, me and these girls are going to find our way back to each other. They’ve always been my family when I felt like I didn’t have one and that is never going to change.

FORTY-THREE

CONNOR/CAT

“JUST LIKE THAT.”

CONNOR

I CLOSE my eyes and start to focus on my breathing when she tugs my arm. “Why are you nervous? You’ve met before.”

As much as she’s trying to calm me and settle the rapid pulse in my body, her words are not helping. I grip harder onto the flowers in my hand, trying my best not to crush them as we walk through the hallway. “I know, but I just want to make a good impression.”

Cat snorts, swaying into me slightly. “Your first impression was adorable.”

The first time I met JoJo, I was around eight or nine and I was completely obsessed with her. I went through a phase where I would spend every waking minute at Cat’s house when she was visiting just so I could listen to her talk. I was fascinated by her accent and I loved the stories she would tell. She had a way of entrancing all of us and we could sit and listen to her for hours. She easily became one of the most interesting people I’d ever met in my life to the point where I wanted to move in with them.

“Besides,” Cat starts, “A lot has changed since then. She’s either forgotten you, or you’re one of the very few things she can remember in detail. Unfortunately for us, there’s never any in between.”

“Let’s hope for the latter, sweetheart,” I murmur, leaning down slightly to press a kiss to her temple. “I want her to know just how madly I’m in love with you.”

Even as Cat squirms away from me, rolling her eyes at my comment, I knew the second we walked into the communal room that I was one of the lucky ones.

JoJo is just as intriguing as the last time I saw her. She radiates this warm energy that feels like you're being hugged without actually being in her arms. And when she sees me and her smile doubles, I know she remembers me.

"Ah, there's my favourite white boy," JoJo sings when we sit down across from her.

"So, we're doing this today?" Cat mutters, leaning over to give her a hug. JoJo kisses her teeth, waving her off when she sits back down in her seat. "I'm guessing you remember Connor then."

"Is this the boy you were having unconventional sex with?"

I choke on air, my face burning red. I've never met any of my girlfriend's family before. Mostly because I've never had a serious relationship. But I'm sure their grandparents don't usually know what goes on in their sexual lives. Especially the unconventional ones.

"You told her about that?" I mutter to Cat and she shrugs.

"She just knows these things, Con. I swear it's her superpower," she replies, shaking her head at her grandma. She hasn't stopped smiling since we sat down and I get this warm feeling in my chest. *The* warm feeling.

"It *is* my superpower," she confirms, nodding. Her gaze snags on the roses I've nervously been holding and I hold them out to her. Her hands shake as she picks them up, winking at me. "These are gorgeous, *Conna*. Thank you." I nod and Cat rubs her hand on my thigh reassuringly. JoJo turns to her. "Why don't you ask the reception for a vase and some water, Birdie. If they try to tell you no, just tell them I'm having a stroke."

"I'm not going to say that." Cat laughs a little, scooting out her chair. "I'll be back in a minute."

When she's gone, I try to make small talk with JoJo. I mean, what are you supposed to say to an elderly lady who you've not seen in years, but the last time you did you were attached to her hip? She asks me about how college is going and when I ask how it is living here all she says is 'it smells like dog shit.' So, we're off to a great start.

I don't know what's taking Cat so long, but the more time I spend with JoJo, the closer I feel to her. I see so much of her in Cat. They're both smart, funny, and can make a casual innuendo without making a big deal over it. The one thing they both have in common the most? Confidence.

"You know, I might not have the best memory, right now, but my eyesight has never changed," she whispers, glancing to the door and then back to me. My head tilts in curiosity. "I see the way you look at my songbird."

"How do I look at her?"

"Like you've never seen anything like her. Like she put up every star in the galaxy." She sighs, shaking her head with a laugh. Her words are true. Catherine is the brightest thing in my life. Sometimes she feels like the *only* thing in my life. "As sweet as it is, you've got to promise me you're never going to break that girl's heart. She's suffered enough in the last few years, and I'm not letting all of her hard work to pull herself out of the darkness to be ruined."

I swallow. Hard. "I'm never going to break her heart. I'd never do anything to hurt her. Ever."

Her eyes narrow before they soften. She leans forward slightly, bringing her hands to mine that rest on my knees. "Good, because there is something I want to give you." It feels exactly how it did as a kid. The way she speaks so softly, the way her words have a level of mystery and adventure in them. She twists a ring off her finger and slides it into my palm, closing my hand around it. "When you're ready, I want you to marry her. This is her mother's engagement ring and I wanted to be here to give it to whoever was lucky enough to want to spend the rest of their life with my grand-baby, and you,

Conna, you're it for her. I see it in your eyes, in your heart. And I see it in hers too."

The tightening in my chest grips onto my heart. Not out of anxiety, but out of pure love and anticipation for the day I'll be able to slip this ring on Catherine's finger. I think part of me has been waiting to marry her since the day we first met and we ate melted Kit-Kat's on the sidewalk.

I sigh heavily, a weight falling right off my chest just at the thought. "She's just it for me, JoJo. There's no one else I could ever imagine myself with. I want to grow old with her, not next to or beside her, but *with* her."

JoJo's eyes gloss over at my words. "Grow with her," she repeats. "I like the sound of that."

When Catherine emerges back in the room, a slightly confused and suspicious look on her face, her tightly curled hair framing her gorgeous face, I know she's the one I want to marry. The one I want to spend the rest of my life with. The one I want to wake up next to and spend every spare minute with. The person I want to grow my family with and never let her feel like she's alone again.

Sometimes I wonder how we've all managed to stay friends over the course of our lives. As kids, we were all forced to spend time together given how close our parents were, but when we got older, I thought that would fade. I thought we'd all eventually get sick of each other and wake up one day and realise that we're no longer friends.

But that has never happened.

As much as Wes can get on my nerves and Archer can confuse the fuck out of me, moving in with these two has to be the best decision I've ever made. Archer might still be pretending he doesn't enjoy our company, but he didn't back down when I suggested going ice skating in the middle of April for the fun of it.

It's the middle of the week and we've all got a day off from lectures and seminars, so I suggested we could do

something fun together. After arguing in the groupchat back and forth for the most of the day, we finally managed to book a slot at the rink for the last hour it's open.

"This is great family bonding," Wes mumbles, gripping onto my arm for dear life as we skate around the rink. He's a fucking mess on the ice, but I'm getting a kick out of watching the fear in his eyes whenever he thinks he's going to fall. He leans over me to look at Cat. "How's it feel? You're going to officially be a football girlfriend next season, Cat. Are you ready for it?"

She squeezes my hand. "As I'll ever be."

"Wait, isn't there a Taylor Swift song about a football player?" I ask and then I do the worst thing I could do, and start singing. "*She wears short skirts and you wear T-shirts. She's the cheer captain and I'm on the bleachers.*" They both blink at me as if I've said the most ridiculous thing ever. I'm sure those lyrics are somewhat accurate. I bump my shoulder into Cat's. "That's going to be us, baby."

She snorts, shaking her head. "That's not what the song is about."

"Really? I thought it was about football?" I ask.

"You're going to have to educate him, Cat. Trust me, I've tried," Nora shouts. I ignore her and let Catherine's laugh soothe my annoyance. The Taylor Swift universe is too complex for me to understand right now.

"I'm enjoying this way more than I should," Archer admits. His voice is low and quiet, but we all hear him.

Cat barks out another laugh beside me, trying to tug me forward, but Wes keeps pulling me back. She's a fantastic skater. Of course she is.

We didn't go to this rink much as kids because our parents thought it was too dangerous. Being the perfect child she is, she managed to convince her parents to do a summer of skating lessons since Elle was taking them. Nora was too caught up with theatre camp, so she's also stumbling alongside Wes.

Elle speeds past us in the nearly empty rink, skating backwards. “Is Archer Elliot finally admitting that he can have fun?”

“I can have fun, Harper,” he murmurs. She smiles, shrugging as she spins away. Archer stares at her, completely taken away with her talent as she glides and turns on the ice. We’ve been to enough of her recitals over the years to know she’s a good dancer, but I swear we all almost lose our breath as we watch her. It’s fucking insane.

Wes bumps his shoulder into mine, but he’s the one who stumbles more than I do. “Did you see that?”

“See what?” I ask, letting Cat guide me so I can skate better. Wes turns around and I follow his gaze as Archer skates at the slowest pace known to man whilst Elle and Nora spin around. Well, Elle’s the one who can spin properly, Nora is just doing her own thing. “Oh, that.”

Wes shakes his head. “The guy hardly says a word to us for two years, but whenever Elle’s around he’s suddenly Mr Popular. It’s fucking weird.”

I scoff. “Speak for yourself. Me and Archer can have a conversation.”

“You mean the two minute one you had on your birthday, *six* months ago?” he retorts, laughing at his own joke. I roll my eyes and Cat laughs beside me. The sound of her laugh is the only thing that stops me from pushing Wes into the wall. I finally shrug him off and he teeters slightly as he floats away. “Wait! You know I can’t skate well.” He’s shouting as if we’re not the only few people left on the rink. “Connor!”

“You’ll figure it out,” I shout back to him as she pulls me towards the exit of the rink.

He calls my name again and I ignore him, tightening my hand around Catherine’s gloved one. She looks up at me, her brown eyes shining as she laughs at Wes’s wailing. I love these moments with her. When she doesn’t have to say anything. Where I know exactly how she’s feeling without needing her to say the words.

CAT

“Where are you taking me?”

Connor’s shoelaces are not fully tied as he runs alongside me. *I don’t even know what I’m doing. I’m high on the energy he radiates, drunk on the love that he shows me and completely captivated by just being in his presence.*

The huge building is deserted as we run through the hallway. His hand clasps in mine as I loosen the scarf I haphazardly wrapped around my neck in an attempt to keep warm in the freezing temperature of the rink.

Our run slows as we get closer towards the end of the hallway, the automatic lights turn on. It feels like we’re in a moment captured in time. Everything about us feels infinite without even trying. A vending machine lights up and whirs at the end of the hallway when we get to it, panting.

“You know we don’t have to hide anymore, right?” Connor says, placing his hands on his hips as he takes a deep breath. “I mean, I love a good workout, but I don’t get what that was for.”

“I just wanted to know if you’d really follow me anywhere just because I told you so,” I say, shrugging as I lean down to type the pin in on the vending machine.

“Of course I would. I’d be a fool not to.”

“I’m starting to think you’re obsessed with me, Connor,” I whisper, turning to him as the machine works its magic.

“We are way beyond obsessed, sweetheart.” His voice is so deep and meaningful that I feel it low in my stomach. It sits there, waits, and erupts as I hold his stare. When I hear the soft packet of the chips falling in the machine, I reach down to grab them and hand them to him. He turns it over in his hands. “What’s this for?” he laughs.

“I was meant to get you celebratory chips that time and I didn’t get to,” I whisper, pointing at them. His eyebrows screw together. “What?” I ask. His curiosity is going to kill me. I try to do a nice thing for him and I can tell he just wants to mess with me.

“That was months ago, Cat. You’ve given me a lot better things than a bag of chips since then,” he says, his voice filled with humour.

“Yeah, and I’m giving you these now.”

“Why?” His signature smirk is etched onto his face.

I roll my eyes. “Why, what?”

“Why are you giving me these chips? Why now?”

“Because we’ve had a good week and I’m happy and I want to do something for you,” I mutter angrily. I prod him in the chest and he shakes his head at me. Is he really wanting me to spell it out to him?

“That still doesn’t explain anything, Catherine.”

I roll my head back, groaning. “Can’t you see? It doesn’t matter what we do, or where we go, or what happens, I want to celebrate the small things with you. Because every single moment we share means something to me. Even the small things. *Especially* the small things. When you hold my hand I just want to kiss you for it. When you offer to help me with my hair, I want to spend a whole day curled up in your lap. When you tell me I’m beautiful, or that I’m smart, or that you think I’m perfect in your eyes, I want to shower you with a million gifts and live inside your brain.”

His lips find mine so quickly I hardly get to register it. Our bodies fit together, our hearts beating, our fingers curled in each other’s hair. Our tongues meet and I instantly feel lightheaded. He holds onto my face like he doesn’t want to break me. He holds me so tight that I’m not afraid of falling. I’ll keep falling forever if it’s him who catches me.

I pull back. “Did you hear what I said?”

“Every word,” he whispers against my lips, smiling.

“And?”

“And I’m going to continue to prove to you over and over again that I’m exactly the kind of man that deserves someone like you.” He presses his forehead to mine, the chip packet

crushed between us. My heartbeat refuses to settle as we bathe in this moment together. “I’m yours forever, Catherine.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

EPILOGUE

5 MONTHS LATER

CONNOR

MY HANDS SHAKE, but I force them to keep moving. “I’m going to give up. It’s not working,” I mutter angrily. This really shouldn’t be so hard. Nothing should be this hard. Ever.

Catherine smooths her hand down my back gently. “You need to calm down, Connie. Just do it gently.”

I suppress the groan that is dying to escape my throat. “I am doing it gently, but it still isn’t working.”

Nora’s voice booms as she walks into the kitchen of our new house off-campus. As soon as sophomore year ended, Wes, Archer and I had an adult conversation about moving out into a bigger house. We’ve all managed to save up enough money to get a decent sized three bedroom not too far from campus. The girls are still living their best lives on campus, but they can’t resist coming over to our new place.

She closes her eyes and covers them with her hand as she uses one hand to search around her. “I swear if you guys are fooling around in here when I open my eyes—”

“Oh my god,” Cat groans, pinning her arms against her chest. “That was one time, and it wasn’t anything that bad.”

“Exactly,” I agree. Nora walked in on us a few weeks ago making out on the countertop. It was just some old-school making out... without much clothes on. “Open your eyes, you weirdo.”

She holds her hands to her eyes for a few more seconds before she gives in. Her jaw drops open when she sees what's going on. She slowly makes her way to our side of the counter, looking at the mess in front of us. "Oh, this might be worse."

I sigh, throwing the icing bag onto the counter. "They're fine."

Maybe I'm in denial. Cat has been extra patient trying to teach me how to ice these cupcakes. She's managed to do it perfectly, of course, whilst I've been struggling to hold the icing bag right. Every time I try to make one look decent enough, I end up squeezing out too much and I have to smooth it over with a spoon.

"Fine?" Nora gawks, eyes wide as she stares down at them.

"You haven't even tried them yet," Cat says, laughing as she licks some of the frosting off the one in front of her. She swallows it easily without making a face. "Put a little faith in him."

I smile down at her as she looks up at me. She's wearing an apron matching the one she got me for my birthday, but hers has her name on it. I turn to Nora and pout. "Yeah, put some faith in me."

She gags, wagging a finger between the two of us. "See. I don't like this anymore. You two dating is just giving you an excuse to gang up on me when I will not stand for something as terrible as Connor's baking."

Before I can say something to her extremely rude comment, Wes waltzes in, shirtless as usual. He's become too comfortable with the idea of having the house to himself, which means I've seen him shirtless and his football butt more times than I want to admit.

He immediately sling his arm around Nora's shoulder. "What's cooking, sunshine?"

She rolls her eyes and moves out of his grip. "Nothing, and stop calling me that."

“Can’t,” he says easily. He leans down and picks up one of the cupcakes. Before any of us can warn him on how they could possibly taste, he bites into it and we all stare at him, time stopping as he chews. My heart thrashes against my chest as we wait for him to swallow it. “This is good. Did you make these, Cat?”

Her mouth drops open as she shakes her head. No words can come to my mind right now. I can’t tell if he’s fucking with me, or not. “Are you being serious?”

He takes another bite. “Don’t get so offended, man. If your girl can bake better than you, it’s a win.”

“I didn’t make them,” Cat whispers. Both Nora and Wes’s faces go blank before the colour slowly returns back in their cheeks. Cat turns to me, those big beautiful eyes wide with joy as she looks up at me. “Do you know what this means?”

“I did it,” I murmur. She nods and I swear I see tears starting to spring to her eyes. “I did it!”

I let out a loud whoop and I pick one up. My hands shake with anticipation as I peel back the wrapper. I take a moderate bite and when there’s not an initial shock of pure pain and disgust, I take a bigger bite. Fuck. These are....good.

When Cat watches me eat one without dying, she picks one up too, her perfect mouth contracting as she starts to chew it. I wait for her to swallow it, all eyes on her. She’s gotten better at being honest with me when I could improve on something, and baking is one of the things we’ve been working on together. Her reaction is the ultimate test.

Her eyes shine when she’s swallowed. “They’re amazing, Connie.”

“Yeah?”

“Fuck, yeah,” she replies, swiping some icing from the corner of her mouth with her tongue. The movement is so slight and minuscule, but it makes my heart ache when I look at her.

She watches me like I’m the best movie she’s ever seen in her life. She looks at me like she has an unlimited amount of

faith in me when I don't have any in myself.

Without thinking about the show we're going to give my sister and my best friend, I lean forward and press my lips to hers. She doesn't pull back. She lets me hold her and melts into me for a second and I don't think I could ever let go. I want to spend the rest of my days on this earth in moments exactly like these.

Without thinking, I mutter into her mouth, "Jesus, just marry me already."

Her head jerks back. "What?"

I keep us locked in this moment, not bothering to look up and around us as the ring I've been carrying in my pocket screams at me. "Not right now, obviously, but you should know that I want to marry you. I want to be yours forever. I want you to know that I'll always have you no matter what. That I'll always be there for you and that you'll never have to worry about me leaving. I want to grow old with you, Cat. I want to watch us grow into the people we've always wanted to be."

Nora and Wes stay silent. Cat's soft, heavy breathing is the only thing I can hear when my heart stops racing. "Okay," she breathes out.

"Okay?" I repeat. She nods.

"When you ask me for real, I'm going to say yes." Her hand curls around my neck, her soft fingers twisting in my hair. "There's no one else I want to spend the rest of my life with. It's always going to be you, Connie." My chest deflates at her words. She lets out a small laugh. "But maybe we should start with small steps first."

"Of course. Anything you want."

She pulls back slightly, tilting her head at me. We keep ourselves locked in the moment for a few more seconds before Wes clears his throat. We turn to them, and the disgust I expected to see on Nora's face isn't there. She's got a slight frown on her face, but for the most part, she looks proud.

Wes shakes his head at us. “If you keep saying that, one day she’s going to ask for something really stupid and you’re going to be stupid enough to say yes,” he says, picking up another cupcake.

When I turn down to Catherine and she smiles at me, I feel like I can’t breathe. There are no words truer than the ones he just spoke. If she asked me for anything, it’s hers. All of me, everything that I am, it’s all hers as long as she’s mine.

I twist the ring in my pocket, itching to give it to her, but I don’t. Instead, I settle for the smile on her face, knowing that the day I do ask her for real will be the happiest day of my life.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Janisha Boswell is an eighteen-year-old author who loves romance and sickly-sweet stories that make her feel welcomed and comforted. Her first series of books is the 'North University' series, following three college students navigating the truths of what their future careers may hold and the love and hate that comes along with it. Her sophomore series is set at another college in Colorado, which will consist of four interconnected stand-alones. Books hold a special place in her life, and they always will as she writes heart-warming romantic and steamy books.

To keep up with Janisha and her book progress, you can follow her on these sites and check out her Website. janishaboswell.com and janboswellauthor.com

